

Playful Activities to Teach English to Very Young Children

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Elaine Delage

Very young children have a short attention span and we see them learn faster when the class is presented in the form of playful activities. Through games, songs, acting and dancing, children absorb a great deal of expressions and structures. This article will present a number of entertaining devices to make the pupils hear or speak English, each of these activities lasting between 5 to 15 minutes, depending on how interested the little ones are.

Games

1. Pictures

Each new word should be illustrated as clearly as possible. One can use ready made pictures or one can make them. The book entitled *1000 Pictures for Teachers to Copy* is very useful in this respect. A series of games are based on pictures, such as the classic one 'What's missing?'. For instance:

- Teach the words 'cat', 'dog' and 'mouse' showing three different pictures.
- Put the pictures on a felt or magnetic board.
- Ask the children to close their eyes.
- Remove one of the pictures.
- Ask the pupils to open their eyes and to say what's missing.

This game can be done with other word categories and the number of pictures is always adapted to the level of the class.

2. Picture card games

Numerous picture card games are useful to teach vocabulary and are listed in the bibliography.

3. *Drawing, painting and colouring*

The teacher can draw on the board to illustrate the words he is presenting. The same can be done with painting. For example, he paints lines and children have to say whether they are thick, thin, curved, straight, etc...

Youngsters enjoy drawing or colouring pictures and they will do so while listening to a song or a story in English. If there are too many pupils in class, a part of them can do some colouring while the others receive more individual attention. This activity often calms down the kids when they are very excited.

4. *Props*

As in a play, props are useful tools in language class. Children are fond of playing with different toys and objects. Here is a game which may last a whole period for it leads to different activities.

Coloured Hats

- Give each child one coloured piece of cardboard paper.
- Teach the children how to make a hat.
- Collect the hats.
- Teach them the colours while showing the hats.
- Do a series of little games such as 'pick up a blue hat' or 'pink hat, stand up!'

This can lead to a song such as 'The Hat Song' from *Go*.

The bag game is another successful activity with youngsters. The teacher selects a number of items, and, once s/he is sure that the pupils know the vocabulary for them, s/he puts the things in a bag and the children have to name each object as it's pulled out of the bag:

- 'One, two three, what can you see?'
- 'I can see a tower, etc...'

This game can also be present as magic.

5. *Magic*

The various items once taught to the pupils can come out of a top-hat, mysteriously.

In *English by Magic*, you can find quite a few good tricks, easy to perform, which enable you to teach many words and sentences. My pupils (aged between 4 and 9) are particularly fond of the vanishing pen trick.

6. Dolls, cardboard men, puppets and masks

Children love toy creatures and they can learn a lot of words while playing with them. Here is a game that can be done with a doll, teddy-bear or any other object.

- The children stand in a circle, the teacher stands in the middle.
- The teacher throws the doll to a child who must say a word belonging to a category chosen as the beginning of the game, i.e. furniture, parts of the body, animals, etc...
- If a pupil fails to answer, or makes a mistake, s/he must sit down. This last rule can be omitted if it breaks the youngster's confidence.

Dolls can also be used to teach the various parts of the body. The cardboard man of the REMI method is a very appropriate tool too. Puppets are very much appreciated by children. One can make puppets with a sock and two buttons for the eyes, for example, or use ready-made puppets like 'Blacky' and 'Mousy' of the REMI method. In the excitement of playing with puppets, shy children will often forget their timidity. They'll speak to puppets and will answer them more readily than to teachers. In the same way, hiding behind a mask removes one's self-consciousness and provides a lot of fun.

7. SIP and SIPS

Little ones are delighted with stories and illustrated pictures (SIP). Stories illustrated by pictures and songs (SIPS) are being developed more and more. For instance, *Toy Toy Land* is a musical tale beautifully illustrated.

8. Audio-video material

Talking directly to the pupils is a lively method which can be interrupted sometimes by the playing of a tape. It introduces variety and is particularly useful when the tapes contain songs or noises that can't be made easily in the class. Slides, filmstrips and videos are also entertaining educational means in the language class. Among the videos, *Muzzy in Gonderland* is a very valuable cartoon designed to teach basic English to primary school children.

The various groups of activities which have been mentioned above are only a few of the numerous ways of entertaining very young children in the English class. Many more devices can be exploited such as English through handicrafts, English through cooking or English through the computer.

Singing, acting and dancing

1. Singing

Class motivation

In the secondary school, some difficulties might arise regarding class motivation. This is much less frequent in the primary school where the children are less inhibited. However, some pupils don't like singing. If they are forced to, they won't enjoy the class and they won't learn. Those who don't wish to sing can just listen, for the listening aspect of the exercise is also very educational.

Often pupils who refuse to sing at first are pulled along by the others and end up by singing themselves. Some children sometimes don't join in because they sing off key. A solution for that is to use rapping songs in which everybody can easily participate.

Chants

With chants, there is no music, and the only difficulty is to keep the beat and, of course, to pronounce the words. Carolyn Graham, an American EFL teacher, has written many chants which children love repeating over and over again. Here is an example:

Where's Jack?

He's not here.

Where did he go?

I don't know.

Where's Mary?

She's not here.

Where did she go?

Chants are easy to make and there is no need to be musical. You just need to write a simple poem with a few repetitions and you say it in rhythm, clapping your hands or using a tambourine.

Nursery rhymes

Nursery rhymes ought to be carefully selected. One should let aside difficult rhymes which the pupils might not understand. Nursery rhymes in which many words or structures are repeated are easy to remember. If the children act them, the meaning gets home faster.

Songs from ESL methods

These songs for children are short and repetitive. The REMI method contains concise and facile songs which consolidate the language acquired in each lesson. For example:

*I smell with my nose
I eat with my mouth
I hear with my ears
I touch with my hands
I see with my eyes.*

There is greater and greater emphasis on songs in the numerous methods for children that are coming out, some of which are listed in the bibliography.

Songs created by teachers or pupils

One can use familiar tunes and put one's own words to them. The same tune can be used several times with different words. In *Sesame Street*, there are a few traditional songs adapted for the lessons. This one uses the melody of 'Clementine':

*I have a headache
I have a headache
I have a headache right now
Right now my head hurts
And I have to see a nurse
I have an earache...
I have a toothache...
I have a sore throat...*

If you are a little musical, you can create simple tunes to set a few words to music.

2. Acting and miming

Most of the language activities ought to be mimed or acted. I insist on this, because there is a very great danger, particularly with young pupils, which is to believe that they have acquired some vocabulary when they know a rhyme or a song by heart. Unfortunately, children often repeat automatically, without trying to understand what the text is about. Miming games are efficacious to test the children's comprehension: the teacher or a pupil gives orders and the class has to mime the actions. The children often copy each other. It does not matter. They soon learn the words.

'Simon says...' is a favourite with children who never get tired of this game. My pupils enjoy doing miming dances. The class sings:

Someone's dancing Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's dancing Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's dancing Lord, Kumbaya

O Lord, Kumbaya

3. Dancing

Very young children need to move about a lot, so when they get restless, make them jump, dance or move around the classroom. You can make them do rounds while singing, or do action songs like the following one which comes from Jump into the Ring:

Clap those hands!

Stamp those feet!

Turn around and take a seat!

Children like dancing, and with a little patience, one can make them do a square dance while they sing a song like: 'She'll be coming round the mountain'. And why not do aerobics in the English class, It's a very tonic way to teach vocabulary or conjugations..

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