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*** Forum ***

Teaching EFL to Children: The Delight of Being Constantly Challenged

When I started teaching in a small language school back in the late 1980s, I always thought that teaching younger students was very simple. Maybe this is the right time to apologize to them for such a mistake. At that time, I thought that teaching was little more than teaching colors and singing songs. As that time has passed, I have now realized how difficult it is to get the students' attention, to able to communicate, and to become an input facilitator. Thus, now I admire kindergarten teachers for their patience and unrecognized work. Today, I believe that many of them have made the miracle of language learning possible with their effort, extra hours, smiles, care, and many other positive features of their teaching. Teachers of young students also need to be motivated by the challenge of seeing their students improve day by day. This Forum is dedicated to those who make it possible for children to learn every day.

I enjoyed reading the thoughts of the instructors who contributed to this column, as they evoked a number of memories. In this column, you will find contributions from many different parts of the world--from Iran to Argentina--and topics--from teaching the first day of class to classroom tips from Slovenia. I hope the reader will enjoy this Forum as much as I did preparing it.

If any reader want to express an opinion, please do not hesitate to do so. We always look forward to new contributions.

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Motivating Young Learners: Ten Teaching Tips

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An important difference between teaching EFL to adults and to young learners is motivation. Very young children have an intrinsic love for learning. Their pleasure is obvious when their first words are understood or when they are able to get their favourite toy after taking those first steps. However, as what children are learning

becomes less tangible and more abstract, maintaining motivation, especially in the classroom, becomes more of a problem. As teachers, we need to facilitate a learning atmosphere that nurtures motivation. Classroom activities could be intrinsically motivating because students are interested in the subject, or extrinsically motivating because learners want to please significant others (parents, teachers, etc.) by getting good marks, for example, and they don't want to be punished for misbehaving. With this in mind, here are ten of my teaching tips, most of which are simply articulated common sense.

1. Show an interest in your learner's lives and tell them about yours.
If you notice that one of your students has a new pair of trainers, ask them where they bought them. This might even spark an impromptu discussion on shopping preferences. Similarly, if you notice a student is quieter than usual, take him or her aside and ask why. Students are also interested in us, so tell them something about yourself!

2. Find out what your learners are interested in.
If your class is interested in music, start a music project. Every week, a different class member has to bring in their favourite song with a worksheet for his or her peers to complete whilst listening. The worksheet could simply be a copy of the lyrics with the first word of each line removed. By asking the learners to bring in the music and lyrics, not only are you encouraging learner autonomy but also removing the onus on you to find music that your students will like.

3. Use appropriate material and personalise wherever possible.
Very good coursebooks have been written for young learners that provide relevant topics, for example, sports, school, music, famous people etc. However, if a topic is not going to interest your class, you may need to adapt it. For example, instead of asking a class if they have ever met a brain surgeon, ask them to imagine they are going to meet a brain surgeon and think about the questions they would like to ask.

4. Treat your learners like adults, don't patronise.
Drop the silly sing–song voice. By treating learners like adults, you set the tone--I expect you to behave like adults, too.

5. Fun doesn't always mean games, videos, and songs (but they can help).
Young learners like "fun" classes but what is fun? Fun doesn't mean songs and games, but classes where the students are fully engaged and take an active part. That doesn't rule out a song to reward hard work, though.

6. Pace in a class can be maintained by varying the...

- *Activity*. Find the balance between too few and too many activities. Consider the activity type. Sixty minutes of "stirring" activities, such as board races and running dictations, could overexcite the class and have a disastrous effect. "Settling" activities, such as copying from the board or listening to a cassette will calm a class down, but once again too much could deaden the classroom atmosphere completely.
- *Student Focus*. Make use of the classroom. Ask the students to focus on the board, at a later point use flashcards on the floor, and then the course book, etc.

- *Interaction*. Too much teacher interacting with the whole class could lead to blank faces. Also use groupwork, pairwork and individual work.

7. Take into account attention spans.
Research suggests that after an initial settling down period of about 3 minutes, student attention is at a peak for the first 15-20 minutes of any class. Take advantage of this moment to present new language. Use short "wake-up" activities to spark attention, such as *repeat this sentence after me*-- "She sells sea shells on the seashore"--or a quick round of "hangman."

8. Find out about school policy. Establish the class rules with your learners and stick to them.
Go though the class rules on the first day and repeat this at intervals throughout the school year. Let your learners know what will happen if they "break" these rules and make sure you impose the penalty if the rules are broken.

9. Praise and encourage (but where due).
Young learners like to know when they are doing well, so tell them. However, praising a student who has done something ridiculously easy is patronising. Be aware of how much attention you give to those who deserve to be praised and those who misbehave.

10. Avoid confronting and/or humiliating learners in front of their peers.
In front of their peers, many troublemakers become braver. It's much easier to confront your teacher in front of your friends. Ask the "offender" to stay behind after class.

The First Day of English Class for Young Learners (and Their Parents)

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I have been teaching to young learners age 6 to 13 for 16 years now. In the beginning years, I didn't have much to share with friends and colleagues. Now that I have more experience I would like to state that the first session is very important. Over the years, I have built up a repertoire of what I should say and do to orient the course to the students and their parents. I am also able to anticipate the types of encounters that will come about and the types of questions that will be asked. Therefore, these are some of the things I do in the first session.

It is important to note that what is introduced here in the form of some guidelines for the first day of English class for young learners and their parents is very culture- and context-bound to the country in which I teach, Iran. Therefore, some modifications will be natural in other contexts and situations.

I introduce myself using a title (Miss/Ms./Mr.). I usually don't like to be called by my first name because it is not very usual in our culture--although it has become popular. So you can ask your students to call you by your first name if it's appropriate.

I try to learn my students' names starting with the first session. It is important not to forget any of the students' names. There will be names that are hard to recall. If there is enough time, I will go around the class trying to relate faces to names. When I have a large number of students, I make name cards on pieces of cardboard and have them either hang them around their necks or place them on their desks in the form of stand-up cards.

I ask my students to take out the books and materials they are to use during the whole term. I introduce the books one by one by holding them up and presenting their titles. For instance, for a workbook I would say: " Look, this is your workbook," and have them repeat the word "workbook" after hearing it a couple of times. This activity goes on until all the books are introduced and can be recognized by all the students. So, when I say, "Take out your textbook," they know which book they will be working on.

I also have them write their names and last names on their belongings, particularly their books and notebooks. If they are literate in English (usually the older students), I move around the class to ensure they aren't making any mistakes and are doing what they are told to do. In my students' native language (Persian), writing is from right to left, and there is no capitalization. This may even cause some novice writers to prefer to write their name on the back cover of their books, especially their notebooks. So I pay attention to how novice writers write. But, if they are not writing-literate, I go around the class writing their names in their books for them. In such a case, the number of students, the time available, the gender of the students (boys are usually harder to control in our society--most probably due to culture-bound social characteristics attributed to boys) will be a determining factor on how to go about this task.

If the class is large, I prepare nametags (stickers) that include the first names and last names of the students beforehand . Then, in class I help them stick the name stickers on their books.

I tell them how we do the roll call and that each student should say "present" once s/he hears his/ her name. I ask the students to say "absent" when a student I call is not present.

I introduce and/or review some classroom objects and classroom language (clichés , set phrases, or sentences) that will make classroom routines flow smoothly. Some usual classroom objects are:

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book, pen, ruler, board, notebook, eraser, pencil case, door,
sharpener, desk, window, chalk, marker
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Some other useful terms are:

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teacher, quiz, student, report card, homework
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Classroom language may include some of the following:

Listen.	Answer.
Repeat.	Write.
Come to the board.	Read.
Go to your seat.	May I go out?
Be quiet.	May I come in?
Stand up, please.	Please sit down.

Depending on the maturity of the students, I explain the course objectives and what I expect of them. They will be informed about the following issues. (Note that some issues may not be relevant in some contexts).

- how long each class and course may be
- what they will need to bring to class
- what they will need to do at home (on their own)
- what they should do when they are absent
- how they will be assessed/tested
- how to review for quizzes and tests
- how many quizzes or tests they will have to take and when

Another responsibility incumbent on teachers of young learners is the interaction they have to have with the parents of their students . Thus, although it may seem that parents are always in the background, this is not the case. Parents are the ever-existing, and sometimes invisible, sources of power and inspiration that sometimes aid and sometimes hinder your attempts. It is a good idea to meet with the parents of your students at the beginning of the course, if not in the first session (of course, this may not be possible for all teachers). It would appropriate to recommend that your school, institute, or center make an initial meeting with parents possible for you. In this session, it is beneficial to inform parents about the following:

- what you expect your students to know now that they have enrolled in class (entry behavior)
- what they are to gain from the course (exit behavior)
- what general perspective you will take in how you want to teach or manage the class and course
- what type of materials and supplementary materials you will be using
- how their children will be assessed, tested, or evaluated
- what they can do to help their children at home and what they shouldn't do
- how to monitor their children's success or to be aware of slow or no progress
- how you will report whether their children are progressing or in need of special help

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The ESOL Teaching Adventure in Elementary Grades

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My journey to the United States rewarded me with one of the most interesting experiences both in my professional and personal life. I could have never imagined how much self learning and experimentation through an array of methodological methods I was about to encounter and practice when I was hired as an ESOL "pull-out" teacher for a rural school in South Carolina. Though I was provided with plenty of curricular materials, I have always had a zeal for investigating and practicing new ideas. My student population was varied according to different and sometimes opposite parameters: from students who knew no English to others performing at advanced levels. This is in addition to the scheduling inconveniencies of a pull-out program. All my colleagues were positive and collaborative, but negotiation was a must when I needed to adjust not only to time but to many different levels. Soon I realized that grade level and age level were not necessarily matched, so I had to design beginners' activities for children in fourth and fifth grades, since they had little or no knowledge of English. Very detailed tasks, easy directions, and scaffolding related to these students' needs were to be handled carefully so they didn't feel either overwhelmed or hurt in the learning process.

When you introduce upper grade students to essential vocabulary, picture dictionaries, and foreign language phonetics, they might think, "This teacher, who I know can speak perfect Spanish, is mean. Why is she speaking to me in a language that I cannot understand?" Here is where the magic of communicative methods and TPR techniques is put into action.

As I stated at the beginning of this article, self learning, research, and mainstream teachers' observations were an essential part of my developing ESOL backpack or collection of materials that I kept in folders for the coming years. Technology and ESOL Internet websites opened in front of me as incredible and fruitful teaching sources. We all know how attractive and acquisition-enhancing they are, especially for vocabulary activities and phonetic drills with visual and kinesthetic learners; most of my ESL students fell into either one of these learning styles. ESL students need to "feel and see" what the instructor is trying to convey so they can supplement their L2 level. This first group of students are third graders now, and it is so rewarding and exciting to see how they can manage themselves in their L2 with confidence and eagerness to learn more. Some of them are now on the Honor Roll or have received a "Proficient in Science" assessment on the PACT (the South Carolina state test held at the end of each school year).

With lower grade students (Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and first and second grades), I experimented what ESOL teachers call "the sponge phenomenon." Children either born in the USA or with an early exposure to English language (Pre-K or Kindergarteners) tend to learn faster than the older students. This factor is optimal to use in a natural learning approach, and makes activities in the classroom setting very attractive for the teacher. I used a lot of learning through playing and reciting. I would highly recommend a curriculum that promotes rhymes, sight reading, TPR, singing, and shared reading. The children loved this, and so did I!

I also organized informative meetings for Latino parents, so they could understand the developmental factors that may occur when their children adopt the L2 as the

dominant language. Parental reading--also in Spanish--is very important in vocabulary acquisition, especially at early stages, so the students are able to build upon concepts and realia.

I am not in favor of rote memory techniques, so I always try to use flashcards and posters. I understand that some students may work better learning long paragraphs or units, but not in the language learning process. (That was my personal experience as an au pair in England when I had to learn the names of kitchen utensils. Whenever I had to grab a ladle or open a cupboard and say the name of what my landlady requested, that concept stuck in my memory.)

I feel very fortunate to be given this wonderful opportunity to work at these early stages of language learning and observe the development of both social and academic language in children. I hope many other teachers can share this feeling and continue to discover the wonderful world of ESOL in elementary school in another country.

My special thanks to all the staff at Lady's Island Elementary in Beaufort County School District in South Carolina and to my beloved group of ESL students.

A Few Tips from Slovenia: Effective Communication

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To learn to listen and speak first forms a part of the natural language learning process for any child. Children like communicating and should be encouraged to use the language they are learning as much as possible. In class, this can be achieved by creating situations through activities that enable them to use their imagination and build up their confidence, and outside it, by encouraging them to use English whenever they can, also when speaking with their friends.
No doubt, particularly in the first years, developing communicative ability should come before developing grammatical accuracy. It is equally important, however, that pupils' willingness to speak in a foreign language is not hindered by (and when) taking tests. On the contrary, their first experience of language testing should be an enjoyable one and tests should, therefore, provide such activities that could be viewed as games, so that children would not only learn from them but also enjoy them.

Good examples of such tests are international tests for young learners. They exist in several languages and have already been taken by many pupils in various language and mainstream schools. They are visually attractive and they sample relevant and meaningful language use. Moreover, they promote effective language learning and teaching and therefore represent a solid stepping stone towards effective communication.

It Works in Practice: A Puppet, a Ball or a Bottle?

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What kind of communication skills can we develop with five- to eight-year-old children? Most adults are sceptical about this idea, despite a teacher's effort to prove how good children can be at speaking. I once heard someone joke about it: "What do you talk about? Science? Ha, ha!" I did not hesitate to ask him in return: "What did you talk to your son about when he was six years old?"

At this age, pupils are supposed to be able to function in useful, daily situations, responding to questions such as:

- *What's your name?*
- *How old are you?*
- *How many people are in your family?*
- *How old is your sister? What's her name?*
- *What's your favourite colour?*
- *Have you got a pet? name? colour? favourite food?*
- *Are you hungry? What would you like to eat? etc.*

And, how do we teach them? In my opinion, children learn best through playing games. Games hold children's interest and motivate them to speak. Here are three ways of challenging young learners to start talking about themselve:

a. *a puppet* – Use a puppet to ask children simple questions. Children's imaginations help them to communicate with puppets easily.
b. *a ball* – Ask a question, throw a ball to a child, and he or she catches it, he or she answers the question.
c. *a bottle* – Ask a question, spin a bottle, and when it stops, it points to a child who answers the question.

An important element of teaching young learners is repetition. I usually spend five minutes on speaking at the beginning of the lesson. Before I start playing these games, I usually show them a lot of pictures, photos, toys, etc. so that they are familiar with the vocabulary before the game.

Example: When you talk about family, they should bring some photos of their family to school and name the people in it. When you talk about food, bring some fruit, for instance, and taste it.

Drawing Dictation

I have attended several IATEFL conferences, and the workshops I choose are often a source of my creativity in the classroom. At first, I am aware of the origin of some activity but eventually I forget where it comes from and adapt it to suit my pupils' needs. Below you will find one of these activities. The aim of this activity is to teach the children how to speak about themselves. It is a drawing dictation.

The teacher's instructions:

Draw:

- a circle. This is your head.
- two eyes. The eyes are open if you live in a town and closed if you live in a village.
- a big nose if you have a brother, a small nose if you have a sister, and a nose covered with freckles if you are an only child.
- a smiling mouth if you are 11 years old and a sad mouth if you are older.
- short hair if you can speak more than one language and long hair if you speak only one language.
- a t-shirt if you can ski (skate, roller-blade, ride a skateboard, etc.) and a sweater if you can't.
- shorts if you live in a house and blue jeans if you live in a flat.
- yourself barefoot if you have a pet but wearing trainers if you don't have a pet.

Now, look at the picture and tell me something about yourself. Look at your partner's picture and tell me about his or her life.

Experiences from Argentina, Teaching English to Young Learners: Successful Learning

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Teaching children is one of the most rewarding experiences a teacher can ever have. Why is this so? Young learners learn naturally. The world is opened up to them, which they find fascinating if they can make sense of it. This sense of achievement results in them being highly motivated and open to more learning. One of the key elements for this to take place is the teachers' commitment to what they're doing, and a strong belief that anybody can learn. We teachers should remember that we are educators who educate children through English. This means attending to the human being as a whole and not to the cognitive aspect only. Educator Jerome Bruner says that teachers should take the "three h's" into account: head-thinking, hand-doing, and heart-feeling, and not just educate from the neck up. For this to happen, we have to start where learners are; we should be able to empathise with them, to see the world from their perspective. It is only when we see the world "with our children's eyes" that we can really help children make sense. It may take longer, but it's worth it. This may sound difficult to achieve because there are many constraints--the number of students in a group, time constraints, a syllabus to cover--to name but a few. However, it is feasible. I am working in a project with primary school children in some state schools in the city of Buenos Aires. Classes are large, with at least 30 children per group. The children at these schools come from poor backgrounds with very little access to what middle class people enjoy. Learning English on a private basis, which is what most middle class learners do, is impossible for them. There is also the assumption, well established in society--and held by many educators and administrators--that school is not the place to learn English, unless the school is a private bilingual one, and that these poor children cannot learn as well as others.

Despite all this, the results we are getting are amazing.

The project started in 2001 in six schools located in the outskirts of the Buenos Aires. To this day, I remember the first time we showed textbooks to children. Many were amazed, for it was the first time they held a colourful book in their hands. Some even said the pages felt like flowers, as they were glossy. We could not but thank the opportunity we had to show these children and society how much you can do if you are a true educator. We organise our syllabi based on the belief that language is a means to convey and understand meanings, and not a collection of grammar and vocabulary areas. There is a grammatical syllabus that we follow, but we make it a point that grammar is not the starting point. There's also a syllabus for cross-curricular objectives, which offer us the possibility to show language in a different context. Children also see English as part of other activities they do at school, and not as an isolated subject. There is a third syllabus for language skills and one for educational objectives such as development of autonomy, literacy, organisation skills and thinking skills.

The syllabi are interwoven into one so that teachers should see the process as a whole and not as a number of independent activities to be carried out. There's another element in the syllabus which helps in this respect, as it integrates English and educational objectives naturally. This element is *routines*. There are moments for routines in every lesson, which give us an opportunity to use language meaningfully. This is not unplanned or non-graded, incidental teaching. On the contrary, routines are well planned and integrated into the syllabus. Routines help kids see the organisation of every class, which saves time and helps them become autonomous. They also provide a permanent source of learning. With the youngest ones, typical routines include songs and language related to the weather, the seasons, the days of the week, and much more. As children grow older, they are in charge of organising routines, asking questions to complete the calendar, writing the date and the day planner. The simple past tense is introduced in a natural way with first grade children when they know their way around the calendar. We start with something very simple like, *"Today is Tuesday, what about yesterday?*" (with a gesture). Children say, "*Monday*," so we show them they were right by saying, *"Yes, yesterday was Monday."* Then we add a comment on the weather yesterday, such as, *"It was cold and rainy."* Before the end of the year, we play a game with children to see how much they remember about the weather. For instance, we ask them, *"What was the weather like last Monday?"* They answer our questions, and many start producing sentences on their own without our prompting them when we start our work on the calendar.

With second graders, as part of the routine, we include the children's activities over the weekend. We first tell them where we went and who we visited. They take over immediately. Then we add what they played. They know exactly what they want to say and they manage to say it. We then include *ate, saw, drank,* and any other verb they may find necessary to talk about their own lives. We also ask questions using the Simple Past Tense and they answer "*Yes*" or "*No*." If a child tells us he/she went to the cinema, we immediately ask. *"Did you like the film?"* The child will say, "*Yes*" or "*No"* spontaneously. We also ask Wh-questions related to what they're telling us. In the same situation, we might ask, *"When did you go?"* The children answer, *"On Saturday."* Some tend to say just "Saturday," and we provide corrective feedback by saying, *"Ah, on Saturday."* Other questions related to the situation can be: *"What*

cinema did you go to? Where did you go after the cinema?" Children find no trouble in answering them. Of course, they would tend to say only what the new information is, that is, *"The Odeon,"* or *"Multiplex,"* which is what we would say in a natural conversation. Only seldom do we use full answers in the flow of conversation. By the time we have to focus the learners' attention on the Simple Past Tense, they know it and use it already, though they are unaware of the difference between regular and irregular verbs. Some children may have already started using *didn't* in negative utterances without knowing that *did* is an auxiliary that carries tense and that therefore, the main verb has to take the infinitive form. We never focus on explaining how English works. We help learners become aware, which is much more powerful for they come to conclusions themselves. Our role is transformed from experts at giving answers into experts at asking questions to guide learners in their learning process.

The main purpose of our job is to educate children. Going beyond English when we teach them is easier to achieve if you are a true educator. Information can be obtained almost everywhere today. A true educator goes beyond information. A true educator is the person who will help children transform information into knowledge by using the head, hands and heart.
