

The magic of fun and play

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When I was asked to write an article about 'how to get a good balance between serious language teaching and fun in the primary classroom', my reaction was (and is) that there is only a very limited place for formal 'serious language teaching' in any successful English lesson for very young learners – I am thinking of the 6 to 10 age-range. Why does language teaching have to be something 'serious', especially with young children? Fun and progressive acquisition of English can go hand in hand in lessons for children, I believe. I favour a 'seriously fun' approach to English lessons.

Here's why:

Every year, in primary classrooms all over the world, children plant beans or sweetcorn seeds in pots, and they watch the plants grow as part of their early Science studies. They learn that plants need the right amount of sunlight and water – their two foods – to help them grow taller and stronger, as nature intended. They learn that plants absorb sunlight and water into their systems by the botanical 'magic' of

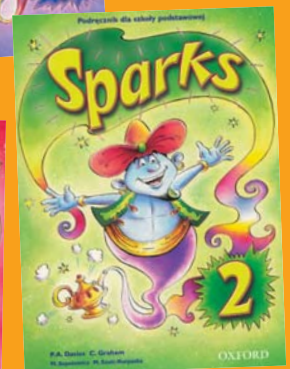
photosynthesis in their leaves, and *osmosis* in their roots.

As they learn about plants and other interesting subjects – about other countries and people and languages, for example – the children themselves are growing daily, just like the seedlings they are watering and watching on their classroom window-sills. In their English lessons, therefore, it is our job as English teachers to provide these growing children with the right linguistic 'foods', in regular controlled amounts, so that the conditions for absorbing language are as favourable as possible for their steady growth in English.

The great linguist, Noam Chomsky, argued that all normal children have a built-in, instinctive power to absorb and then use language. Children do not need to be formally *taught* their first language – they will naturally, at their own pace, 'pick up' languages without conscious study and learning, just like their classroom seedlings absorb water and minerals from the soil they are growing in, by *osmosis*. My own experience of childhood and of growing children tells

Sparks

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS



- ★ Kurs powiązany z kształceniem zintegrowanym
- ★ Polskie autorki – znane specjalistki w dziedzinie nauczania dzieci
- ★ Jasny podział materiału na lekcje
- ★ Bohaterowie, z którymi dzieci mogą się utożsamiać
- ★ Wartości bliskie dzieciom, rodzicom i nauczycielom
- ★ Magia, która oczaruje wszystkich

me that Chomsky is right: we do not need to *teach* English (or other languages) to young children, but we do need to feed them a steady, well-balanced diet of new words and patterns and skills, so that they grow healthily in their communicative understanding and use of English.

What does this mean for me, the busy teacher with a class of 20 or 30 active and receptive eight year-olds every day of the week? you ask. I suggest it means that we need to be clear about the most basic, practical aspects of our work:

- About the natural characteristics of the pupil-‘seedlings’ we regularly ‘feed’ and help to grow in their use of English. To what daily activities do children most naturally turn their energies and imaginations? Therefore, how can we harness and direct those energies into ‘picking up’ English enjoyably, naturally, too?
- About what a well-balanced diet of linguistic ‘foods’ should be for these growing individual children and groups. What do we want them eventually to be able to do in English? Therefore, what are the aims and approaches of the various materials available to us, and will they effectively harness children’s natural energies and direct them into communicating more and more confidently in English?
- And – most practically for busy teachers – about where we can find the reliable advice and daily guidance that we need, in the form of ready-made lesson-plans of well-aimed activities, confident that a healthy diet of language ‘foods’ is being steadily absorbed by our children’s built-in, instinctive powers to acquire English informally, as they ‘play’.

Forgive me for probably stating the obvious in my own thoughts on the above questions:

- Children are naturally inquisitive and playful, as just five minutes watching your own school playground at break-time will confirm. They have an endless capacity for fantasy and creative inventiveness in their play. All kids have a natural drive to discover and to play, and those are the driving forces that I suggest we need to harness in our English lessons.
- You should therefore choose course materials that obviously provide a controlled, balanced diet of playful and intriguing communicative activities in Listening, Speaking, Reading and, later, Writing, based on topics that will obviously appeal to the age-group, and on a well-designed ‘diet-plan’ (syllabus) for the presentation and practice of new words and sentence patterns. The Pupil’s Book, the CD and the Activity Book, used together as they are intended, should provide such appealing topics and attractive activities, in which

the language we present to, and practise with, our children is ‘fed’ to them almost unnoticed as they enjoy a rap or song, for example, a cartoon story episode, a group or class game, a photographic culture-based page about Britain, or a simple language puzzle they try to solve, later maybe, for guided Writing practice.

Effective course materials should offer you all the English ‘foods’ that you need to satisfy children’s natural hunger for discovery and play. But how do you best use them to steer those natural energies into steady growth?

- That is the job of your Teacher’s Book. Teacher’s Books are designed and developed by ‘Hidden Teachers’ like me and my editors – we are with you in every lesson through our books and recordings for you and your children. The Teacher’s Book is your step-by-step guide for using the different course materials successfully with your classes. That is why, rather than describing yet more lesson-level suggestions to you here, my main practical advice is at a more general level of the classroom process: make good use of your Teacher’s Book! That is where the team of Hidden Teachers – ‘hidden’ in all our materials – have set out a full sequence of ready-made lesson plans that contain a wide range of language- and lesson-specific activities, with suggestions for adjusting lessons up- or downwards in level, and constant advice on how to steer children effectively in their language play.

Introductions to most Teacher’s Books usually also offer simple in-service training in the classroom methods used in the course, and on how to keep lessons interesting and fun. Extra worksheets, language listings, graded tests, etc. are on offer in the Teacher’s Book too – aspects of ‘serious teaching’, if you like. We Hidden Teachers (writers and editors) have therefore already done the ‘serious teaching’ part for you – it is built into every unit and page of the pupils’ materials, and is described clearly for you in the Teacher’s Book. Your job is to ‘feed’ this complete, healthy English ‘diet’ to your classes, harnessing their natural urges to discover and play...to laugh at simple humour, to sing lively songs or play engaging games, all in English.

I have used the word ‘children’ 22 times – it is the key word of this article. It is the children who drive our lessons with their natural energies in discovery and play, I suggest, not us adults. Attractive, openly playful course materials for the pupils, and a Teacher’s Book full of lively ideas for ‘serious fun’ in every lesson, are therefore what we need to capture and direct their drive, not ‘serious language teaching’ – not for young children. Let them play with English first. ■