

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH ACTION TECHNIQUES

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We read, study, write, go to conferences and all in all develop our knowledge, but when we find ourselves in certain situations, new situations, our know-how will only be part of what we need. Our skills will be the instrument that our senses will guide to proper use. Experience forms us and with a certain touch of inspiration we can advance in our field with an attitude that will bring us into the reciprocal cycle of teaching. Let us have a closer look at how inspiration helped an English-as-a-second-language teacher develop her own personal style. We will see how English can be taught in English to young learners through actions and activities such as songs, stories, routines, gestures, funny voices and lots of surprises.

Key words: foreign language learning, young learners, teaching techniques and activities.

1. Introduction

The *Colegio Internacional Alminar* in *Dos Hermanas*, Seville, Spain started a bilingual programme for their preschool and primary students in the year 1998. Students started their second language, English, at the age of three. The preschoolers received ten classes a week, two a day, of roughly forty-

five minutes a session depending on the module. The primary students received six classes a week of about fifty minutes a session. The following study is based on the preschool programme. The number of children in each class was rather small, with an average of fifteen students; although now, in the year 2004, there are from twenty to twenty-three children in the classes. *Colegio Internacional Alminar* is a private school. There is absolutely no government funding. The children are mostly from upper middle-class families. The English teachers in the bilingual programme are all native speakers. The preschool children learn the same material in English that they learn in Spanish. But teaching that material in a language they are not familiar with is quite different from teaching it in their mother tongue.

When you work with young children, especially children from three to five years of age, it is necessary to use inspiration technology. No institution will completely prepare you nor will any book absolutely inform you. In any field there will always be a difference between theory and practice, but with young children that difference is especially acute because they do not follow the rules of society. They will challenge you. They will not necessarily do what you want them to. They will keep you aware of your surroundings; of what could be delicate, dirty or dangerous in the classroom. They will not only express themselves through language, but also through their bodies. They are demanding and affectionate. They fluctuate from dealing with their minds (they love to learn), their bodies (we must help them when they struggle to unbutton their trousers so that they can run to the bathroom), and their feelings (they have the tendency to express their tears, anger and laughter freely).

I have found that the best teachers I have had are the children themselves. They know what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. They want to know everything they can: at one of my first classes with a group of four year olds, I told the children, in their mother tongue, that not everyone speaks Spanish, that in different parts of the world people speak different languages and I showed them a globe of the world and pointed out where people speak English. A little boy raised his hand and asked me why. Why do they speak English? Why? Try to come up with an answer that a

four year old can grasp in a few seconds. They will throw you off balance. I do not know if any older students have asked their teachers that question or if any books on teaching a second language to preschoolers have mentioned it, but I assure you that the children I work with have helped me look at teaching from their point of view. So prepare yourselves to enter into another world – their world. In their world you will find daily routines, songs, physical activities, funny voices, stories and lots of surprises.

2. Daily Routines

A child's world is based on routines. They do not know how to tell the time. But they do know what happens when they get up, what happens after lunch, and what happens at bedtime. With one group of four-year olds we had computer science on Thursdays. I remember a child trying to figure that out and saying "*o sea, cuando me despierto y vengo al colegio ¿no tenemos informática? ¿Entonces cuándo? ¿Pasado pasado mañana? Ofu!*" Vanessa Reilly, states that "young children need the security of a clear and predictable routine in which they know the rules and know what is expected of them." (Reilly, 1997). Using routines in the classroom gives children a sense of security and they respond well and behave best when they know what they are going to do. I use daily routines to start the class, introduce an activity and then end the class. Some routines are our greetings, the weather, the day of the week, the season and basic vocabulary reviews. For example:

Teacher: Good morning, children.

Children: Good morning, Catherine

Teacher: How are you?

Children: I'm fine, thank you, and you?

Teacher: I'm fine thank you.

Teacher: What's the weather like?

Children: It's sunny. It's hot.

Teacher: What day is today?

Children: It's Monday.

Teacher: It's autumn. The leaves are falling.

Children: It's autumn. The leaves are falling.

Teacher: (Holding up cut outs of clothes) What's this?

Children: It's a dress.

Teacher: What's this?

Children: It's a shirt.

Although I stress the daily routine, the key to success is not what we do but how we do it. Vanessa Reilly also claims that "these routines have to be very flexible, since there will be times when you have to change plans at a moment's notice, depending on the time of day that you have class, the children's mood, or even the weather." (Reilly, 1997). One routine is a vocabulary review and how we go about that depends on how the children are. If they have been sitting down and doing worksheets with their Spanish teacher, I'll get them up and have them do a warm-up review.

- Point to different parts of their bodies.
- Go to different places in the classroom.
- Obey a command. Action verbs. Jump, clap, swim, etc.
- Put on faces – happy, sad, angry or even scared.
- Put an object on, next to or under their chairs.
- Mime an activity they do in different rooms in a house: e.g. eat in the kitchen, sleep in the bedroom, wash our hands in the bathroom or read in the living room.

If the children have just come in from recess and have been moving around I might have them sit on the floor, we will go through our vocabulary review by using flashcards or by holding up objects they have learned.

3. Songs

Children need to move around and use their voices. They learn with all of their senses and it is only natural for them to immerse themselves into an activity. Comenius, a renowned educator of young foreign-language learners, stated that “the senses are the primary and constant guide to knowledge.”

Singing appeals to the child’s senses. It is a wonderful way for everyone to participate and to learn new vocabulary. As soon as the music starts they start to smile and you can feel a change in the atmosphere, the excitement begins to grow. They all join together in a circle and some look at each other and shout out the name of the song “The Wheels on the Bus”!!! They hold their arms out on an imaginary steering wheel and start to drive the bus. Everyone is doing something on the bus. The students wiggle their bottoms like the children, read their newspaper like dad, shake their finger and say “don’t do that” like mom, and cry like the babies. Every now and then their tiny hands turn into fists and they honk the horn of their bus. They are listening and understanding English. The students are responding with a physical action. They are learning new vocabulary and experiencing a different culture through music and they are improving their pronunciation. As a teacher, I take all of those things into account but they just want to have fun and will most likely say “Can we sing it again?”

The Wheels on the Bus

The wheels on the bus go round and round,
Round and round, round and round

The wheels on the bus go round and round,
All day long.

The children on the bus go wriggle, wriggle, wriggle,
Wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle,
The children on the bus go wriggle, wriggle, wriggle,
All day long.

The mummies on the bus say don't do that,
Don't do that, don't do that,
The mummies on the bus say don't do that,
All day long.

The daddies on the bus go read, read, read,
Read, read, read,
Read, read, read,
The daddies on the bus go read, read, read,
All day long.

The babies on the bus go "Wah, wah, wah,
Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah, wah,
The babies on the bus go wah, wah, wah,
All day long.

4. Physical Activities

There are lots of different ways of learning. When we look at the neurolinguistic programming which Lynn Durrant and Derrin Kent claim “refers to the five senses and categorises learning styles, according to which of them we, as individuals, most prefer to make use of” (Durrant and Kent, 2002: 4) we see there are visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles. As teachers, we must include a variety of activities that give each individual learner the opportunity to excel at their strengths and improve in the areas they are weak at.

TPR, Total Physical Response, provides a variety of sensory stimulus for different learning styles. If, for example, we are working on fruit and vegetable vocabulary, we can put flashcards or big hand-made posters, or even real food in different places in the classroom. The visual learner feels comfortable because he/she can see it. The auditory learner can hear me say the word whereas the kinaesthetic learner is happy to be hopping across the room like a rabbit until he/she reaches the carrot!!!

Understanding is the first step to learning another language, and children demonstrate their comprehension through a physical response. They will do any action verb (walk, hop, go slowly, point, etc.) repeatedly. Trinity University, London, emphasises this skill and the children who prepare the first grade of the Trinity Oral Exams are evaluated on their comprehension.

James Asher (Asher, 2000), in his studies on Total Physical Response, explains that when a word and action are associated, language, rather than being learned through a process of memorization, is learned through association, and this process tends to remain in the brain.

Sarah Phillips states that “children, especially very young ones, are able to understand much, much more than they can produce, and this technique builds on that capacity.” (Phillips, 1993: 19)

Anyone who has travelled to a foreign country and has been immersed in a language they do not understand knows the importance of

gestures. We can use these experiences to share what is going on inside the children's world. From the child's point of view, physical response activities are great fun and they are decoding the mystery of language by themselves which gives them a sense of value and capability. It is a wonderful opportunity for them to develop their listening skills and it keeps them moving in an organized fashion.

5. Their World

Lots of things happen during a class, things that have nothing to do with anything you have prepared at home in your lesson plans. Some little one might hurt a classmate. Some little one may start playing with a toy they have brought into school. Some little one might have to go to the bathroom. Sometimes someone feels sick. These natural situations should not be taken as interruptions but rather as enlightening moments. Let's have a closer look at these situations.

Some children hit. It is a reaction they have developed and use in certain situations. "When they lack the ability to express what's wrong in words, hitting and other types of aggression sometimes result." (Nelson, Erwin and Duffy, 1995: 116). Children are learning and discipline is all about loving guidance. When something like this happens, I stop the class and say "No hitting." The whole class repeats no hitting and then the one who hit usually apologises by saying sorry. As the school year went on we ended up creating a little mental list and now when someone hurts someone else I say: In this classroom, no hitting. The children repeat: no hitting. We continue with our routine of my saying and their repeating: No kicking. No pulling hair. No spitting. No shouting. No pinching. All of these phrases are accompanied by a gesture. "Patient repetition and guidance will help children learn more quickly the pleasures of getting along; it *won't* turn them into angels." (Nelson, Erwin and Duffy, 1995: 117)

Children live in a world of toys and prizes. They will eat a bag of potato chips and win a spinner. Somehow these toys end up in their schoolbags and pockets and they just can not wait to pull out their latest

acquisition and show someone. Do not be surprised or annoyed. Ask them to show it to the class and then perhaps ask the children questions about the spinners. "What colour is it?" "How many have you got?" With this year's *in* spinners we had great fun spinning them and counting until the spinner stopped. As we say in English, if *you can't beat them, join them*. It is their turn to invite you into their world and there is nothing they like more than sharing . . . their experiences (not necessarily their spinners!)

Four-year olds learn to say complete sentences like *May I go to the bathroom, please?* When something upsets them I usually ask *what's the matter?* Sometimes, at the end of a lesson, I think we spent more time on *No hitting, Can I go to the bathroom, please?*, counting with their spinners and little bits and bops like saying *bless you* after a sneeze or *oh dear* when something drops on the floor. I wonder who is teaching whom. I wonder who decides what to learn.. If everything is going well it should be reciprocal. As long as it is in English, both the teacher and the students can come up with fun things to learn.

6. Funny Voices

Children have a great sense of humour and they love to laugh. A fantastic way of introducing new vocabulary: by using funny voices. If we are learning the seasons, I will say *spring* like an old lady and they will repeat it exactly the same way. Some of my favourite voices are a rock star, an opera singer, a cry-baby, an angry person, a sad person and a shy person. They love to hear the way the words can be said. They have heard all of these intonations in their mother tongue. They know what grandma's voice sounds like. They know how daddy sounds when he gets angry. They have been in situations where they are obliged to speak and they feel rather shy about it. Now they are role-playing those familiar situations without feeling the emotion, and they think that it is really funny. They start to add on their own gestures and then I end up laughing. I only spend a few minutes on each new word and they learn right away. They can learn two or three new words a day. As long as you revise the vocabulary in their daily routine, they will remember.

7. Getting Their Attention

Children are easily distracted. “Most teachers would probably prefer children with a long attention span and high persistence; they’re much easier to teach and entertain. However, few children fit this ideal description.” (Nelson, Erwin and Duffy, 1995: 68)

While you are getting on with your lesson plan lots of things happen that will capture their attention. This could be anything from another teacher interrupting the class for a moment to the sound of an airplane outside. Distractibility is “the way in which an outside stimulus interferes with a child’s present behaviour and his willingness (or unwillingness) to be diverted.” (Nelson, Erwin and Duffy, 1995: 67) You could possibly invoke the authority figure in you and demand attention through a command accompanied by a certain tone of voice. The message you are conveying is that you can make them do it, and that they had better respond or else. This will work while they are young but when they are older the authoritarian teaching method might backfire on their secondary teachers who are now faced with children who will not respond because they can now say *you can’t make me do that anymore*, and then go on to developing a rebellious attitude towards anyone representing authority. So, perhaps, before falling back on the authority which will only affect their external behaviour, we could use other sources of getting their attention.

We could be the ones that distract them from the external stimulus that pulled their attention away from the activity. Curiosity motivates them. A good resource is to surprise them. Pull something out of a bag. Use something relating to the topic. I have used real food, toy animals, clothes and pictures. Bring in lots of things that they can see and touch. Just about anything will please them. Fall. They do not expect their teacher to trip. If you are teaching them the numbers they can write them by tipping their fingers in water and writing on the blackboard, they can write in the sand in their playgrounds, they can write in the air or on a classmate’s back. Guess. They love to discover the world by themselves. We can start to draw a picture on the board and stop after each line to give them a chance to guess

what it is. Hide things. You have to be just a step or two ahead of them and you have to constantly come up with new ideas to motivate and inspire them. Their excitement is always a reward.

8. Stories

It is quiet time. Children do have lots of energy, but they also get tired. Quite a number of schools in Spain have afternoon sessions and children who stay at school for lunch end up exhausted. Tired children can create discipline problems, however, we can teach them how to relax. A story is a moment for them to rest at the same time that they are learning. They can sit on their cushions or lie down, and while their bodies are still, their minds are drawn to the magical world of stories. I am fascinated by the way a group of foreign preschoolers are in absolute silence while they listen to a story in another language. They love to hear the same story over and over again, which is perfect for learning. They end up memorizing the story and as they hear it for the umpteenth time they will tell you what is coming up next before you can even turn the page. Fran Combs Gamboa says that “books with large, simple, colourful illustrations and repetitive language are best. We can give meaning to the words by changing our voice from character to character.” (Gamboa, 1997).

9. Conclusion

How far can you take a preschooler in another language? You can take them as far as you believe they can go. Comenius states that “the teacher should teach not as much as he himself can teach, but as much as the learner can grasp.” When I started teaching preschoolers I followed the syllabus of the books and basically taught young learners vocabulary. At the same time, being in a Catholic environment, we were asked to pray with the children at the start of the school day. I would recite the *Our Father* in English. I would stop after each line to give the children a moment to repeat. After several months, when I paused so that they could repeat, the four-year olds would repeat the last line I had said and then quickly say the following sentence.

They had learned the Lord's Prayer – in English!!! That was quite a lesson in my underestimating their abilities. We now learn vocabulary with complete sentences. *It's a dog. It's a dress. I can jump. I've got two brothers. I like pizza.* Children are eager to learn and quick to laugh and hug. They have been one of my main sources of inspiration.

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