

A Teacher's Toolkit for Primary & Teenage Young Learners

I remember when I started my teaching career in South Korea where I was shown the classroom and was told “*You are the teacher, so teach*”. I was given very little advice by Korean management and fellow teachers were often quite hostile to assisting me with any queries that I had – oh the joys of being a ‘*backpacker teacher*’. After completing various qualifications and gaining more YL experience, I now find myself more comfortable and confident preparing lessons for young learner classes. So what is it that helps improve confidence and success in YL lessons?

The Classroom

When we look at the young learner classroom, I suppose the best place to start is with the physical surroundings. It is the first place the learners will experience when entering, so you must try to make the environment as relaxed as possible. To help create a classroom suitable for young learners, it is important to ask yourself the following questions:

- i. Can seating be moved?
- ii. Where is the teacher normally in the classroom?
- iii. Is there space for students to sit down for a separate activity (such as a ‘*reading circle*’, etc)?
- iv. Am I allowed to pin up student work on the wall?

These questions are what I normally ask myself or management even before I allow learners into the classroom. If you are working for an organisation which provides language teaching for the same number of learners over a period of time, you are in the fortunate position to get the learners to make their classroom their own and you are able to pin up student work on various areas of the room. However, if you are working in the

UK with closed groups of young learners for a short period, you could be able to develop learner work, which could then be shown to future groups.

Nevertheless, it is probably best to develop areas of the YL Classroom for different activities: arts and craft in the project area, reading and writing practice at their desks, vocabulary time at the front of the classroom, etc. As Sally Murphy (2013) mentioned in the previous C&TS journal, “very young children feel more secure if they have a well established routine” (p.15, in Slattery & Willis 2001) and designating different areas of the classroom for differing activities can assist in the establishment of routine and security with young learners.

If you have limited space in the classroom, you could organise desks into a horseshoe, or at the edge of the classroom, and then place the chairs inside the horseshoe, with the learners facing the teacher, whilst having their desks behind them. The learners could then be facing the teacher at the start of the lesson and I have found that they are more engaged and less likely to hide behind their desks. If there is an activity set during the lesson, learners could just turn round and then complete tasks on their desk. The space created in a small classroom can work wonders. You will then be able to bring the students forward to the centre of the classroom to sit down on the floor for reading time or the introduction of vocabulary. Teachers will still have space to walk around the classroom, still maintain control, and allow learners to pin up their work on the walls of the classroom.

Young Learner Material

Other than the classroom being an important role for young learners, the materials that we bring into the classroom can be just as important. So what sort of materials should a young learner teacher include in their toolkit for the classroom? If you are anything like me, I look around at anything that could be incorporated in the YL classroom. These have included menus, pictures, postcards, etc to supplement and introduce learners to additional materials other than their coursebook or workbook. When I was based in Romania, the local supermarket was handing out sea creature trump cards, so I

collected a number of these cards and brought these into class one day and the children were very keen to share their cards with me during the lesson. The “Ugly Duckling” lesson was shelved and we looked at the various sea creatures whilst translating the names of these and getting learners to discuss what they thought was the most powerful, dangerous, etc and ended the lesson with question tags. In all respects a Dogme-esque (Meddings & Thornbury 2009) lesson which focused more on the learners and their input rather than the coursebook and accompanying workbook. The children were keen to share their cards with each other at that time and negotiate the English. Other than sea creature cards, what else can we bring into the classroom to maintain learner interest during lessons? Some of the most popular materials that I include in my toolkit for the YL classroom could include the following suggestions.

- a. **Photographs** – Young learners are usually kinaesthetic learners and as such react very well to any pictures introduced during the lesson. With photographs, students could discuss the pictures, whether it was taken in their home country or abroad, etc.
- b. **Flashcards** – Flashcards are very important, as are pictures, to introduce vocabulary, drill pronunciation, check spelling, etc. The flashcards could be used for games, so they are very much an invaluable tool for any YL teacher.
- c. **Blutack** – I will be lost without this and it is a necessary to stick up laminated pictures, words, etc on the whiteboard or on the wall, so get some Blutack to help. Sellotape is not recommended as it could stick to the whiteboard or peel the paint on the wall.
- d. **Folders** – These are used to develop YL portfolios which could then be handed out on the last day of term or student work could be contributed towards a school magazine showcasing all work produced during the year.
- e. **Coloured Pencils/Crayons** – If you are anything like me, I love to incorporate project work or arts and craft in the classroom and for anything creative, coloured pencils or crayons are a must.
- f. **Toilet Roll** – When teaching kids, you need a healthy quota of toilet roll with the amount of crafts they produce during the lesson. Before throwing away that tube, put it in a plastic bag and they can be put to good use to create various things (http://www.dltk-kids.com/type/tp_roll.htm).

- g. Scissors, Glue & Glitter** – When incorporating any form of arts and craft in the classroom, it is best to have a collection of safety scissors, glue sticks and glitter. With most schools that I have worked with, there is usually a huge battle among the scissors, glue and glitter so I would recommend any teacher new to the YL classroom to get your own and add to your toolkit.
- h. Dice & Counters** – If you are anything like me, a board game is included in a coursebook, which focuses on a particular grammar form, without the necessary dice or counters. It is probably best to buy your own and these could also be used for student created games.
- i. Coloured Card** – I have found the use of coloured card very useful for gluing pictures on to and then laminating, which are a bit more pleasing on the eye. The card could also be used to write words on and added to weekly vocabulary list.

Conclusion

Teachers that are prepared and have a range of resources and materials at their disposal are more likely to succeed with various projects such as arts and craft. Unfortunately, some teachers still have difficulty organising resources for lessons and it can be very difficult to ensure young learners complete projects successfully if the teacher is continuously popping in or out of the classroom to source additional material which was assumed was available. At the end of the day, teachers should try to have fun during the day, as learners and other teachers are likely to notice.

Bibliography

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