

# Learning Through Play:

## *Language Teaching Techniques for Very Young Learners*

by Tania MacDonell

As more parents have come to realise the positive benefits of encouraging their children to learn English during the pre-school years, more teachers are finding themselves at a perplexing crossroads between language teaching and playing.

At some language schools, learners are starting as young as 9 months old. A prominent Early Childhood learning theorist and psychologist, Jean Piaget, described the child during the first 2 years of life as being in the sensorimotor stage. This is the age when children are chiefly concerned with mastering their own innate physical reflexes and extending them from reflex motor actions into goal-directed activity. They begin to coordinate actions, to retrieve hidden objects and eventually to represent information mentally. During the second pre-operational stage from about 2 to 7 years of age, the child experiences the growth of language and mental imagery and learns to focus on single

perceptual dimensions such as colour and size. An understanding of these stages and adaptation of the curriculum will bring about a positive nurturing learning environment for these young learners.

The first two years are when children learn best through discovery and exploration. Children discover their body, their family, smells, tastes, sounds, feelings, simple language and objects. Their teacher is their friend. They treat play as work and are egocentric. Their large motor skills increase rapidly as they develop control over their bodies. They learn through imitation, follow intonation more than words, sing rather than speak. Children at this age are pre-logical and only interested in the world of real objects.

### **Why teach babies English?**

The acquisition of language begins in the womb before the child is born,

and continues to be an important part of the child's experience in the first months and years. Sound perception develops first and fastest. Infants can remember the sounds of words almost a year before realizing their meaning (Jusczyk). Aural skills become developed before speaking, and the quality of the child's spoken language is determined by the quality of the language listened to and absorbed during this time. At this age children show an uncanny ability to absorb language in all its complexity, and not just one language! Some experiments suggest that infants learn language by first storing familiar sound patterns and then attaching meanings at around 18 months, when language skills begin to blossom. For second languages the same synaptic connections occur. This theory supports the idea that second language acquisition can start before native language utterances begin.

Pre-school age is the 'taking in time,' the most powerfully absorbent stage of language development. This is the time when humans learn the concept of communication through language. A large cornerstone in the early childhood learning of a second language is the participation of the parents. At this young age the child's perspective of the world is through the parents' or primary caregiver's reactions to any given situation. Therefore if the parent comes to sessions and chooses not to participate and to speak in his/her native language to others, the child's production and enthusiasm for the learning situation and language will be greatly diminished. It is fundamental to a child's language development to hear his or her parents attempting to speak English.

*'Children in these early years literally absorb the life around them. We*



*The indepth study of bubbles.*

*can never be too kind, too respectful, too wise, to be their role models.* — Montessori, 1949

### **The Environment**

Dr Maria Montessori was a prominent theorist of children's learning styles. She created what she called the 'prepared environment.' Montessori observed that when children are allowed freedom in an environment suited to their needs, they blossom. In order to achieve the best environment, she recommends that you imagine you are welcoming adult friends into your own comfortable home. Welcome each individual with warmth and a personal greeting. Offer some specially prepared interesting activities to stimulate the children.

In the ESL pre-school environment, the facilitator should make the atmosphere inviting and comfortable so the children feel at ease and a sense of belonging. Take care to create an environment which is developmentally appropriate and encourages the children to respond. Provide and organise the materials so that the children are free to choose what they would like to work at next. Working with materials that fully engage their interest, children always appear to be relaxed and contented. They are engaged in their chosen play and simultaneously being stimulated by the spoken language around them. The English speaker is playing alongside the children, discussing what is happening in the activity. This way the children have the enjoyment of free play, but subconsciously they are learning sound discrimination, vocabulary, intonation and sentence structure.

Children feel good about themselves when they master the challenges of everyday life, and especially good when caregivers acknowledge these accomplishments with praise.

### **The role of the teacher**

While not seemingly 'teaching,' the role of the English-speaking assistants is to guide the children's play in

English and make them feel comfortable with speakers of the non-native language. They provide the language necessary in order for children to hear and discriminate between the sounds of English. Keep in mind the image of a triangle: the student, the parent or teacher, and the environment. It is the role of the adult to prepare and continue to prepare the environment, to link the child to it through well-thought out introductions to projects, or lessons, and to facilitate the child's exploration and creativity. The moth-

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ers hold very special roles in Early Childhood learning groups because they are the secondary teachers of the language. The more the parents of our children speak to them in English, the more the children will learn.

Preparing the environment and offering stimulating play and language experiences are the primary focuses for the facilitator of an ESL learning through play group. Supporting and encouraging the mothers and building self-confidence in the children will result in harmonious relationships in the class, the perfect way to foster language learning. The learning through play environment described by Montessori in her work has been shown to provide children during their earliest and most impressionable years with a sense of security, habits of concentration and creativity, a positive self-image, excel-

lent social skills, and a level of cognitive development higher than others learning in a different style. Letting the play dictate the language gives children more opportunity for self-expression than letting the language dictate the play. Adapted effectively into the ESL classroom this style can only bring positive, beneficial results.

*'I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.'* —Einstein

### **Routines**

Repeated positive experiences form strong connections in the brain and give a child a sense of security. Children are reassured when daily routines and rituals are established and associated with pleasurable feelings. Singing special songs, following the same simple routines and activities, saying the same comforting words—all these help children learn what to expect from their environment and how to understand the world around them.

To ensure a sense of belonging in the group, choose a routine mothers and children enjoy. This could start with a greeting routine, then a mat circle where children and mothers can sit together and sing familiar songs in English. You could include 'book time,' when the children gather and listen to a story or maybe a puppet show which introduces and reinforces new vocabulary. All participants should be encouraged to enjoy music and movement time within the lesson.

### **Some recommended activities**

#### **Play - doh!**

This is primarily a manipulative and creative exercise but in the ESL-based environment it is a good way to introduce and repeat new vocabulary and grammar. Words commonly used are of a descriptive nature, for example, "Have you made a red cow?" The children become concentrated and focused on their creations and their language learning is more receptive than productive. With slightly older



Parents are an important part of Early Childhood English education.

children (3 and 4 years old), the play scenario moves from solitary play to more involved levels of cooperative play. For example, the child makes a blue cake then cuts it in half and shares it with a friend. At this stage, phrases such as "Can I have some?" "Here you are" "Thank you" "You're welcome" are becoming more meaningful.

### Books

Reading to children familiarizes them with foreign language pronunciation and intonation and reinforces vocabulary through repetition. Children will often pick a favoured book over and over again. Through the reader they absorb the language and meaning of the story.

### Collage

This is an activity where the children are passively absorbing language that they are hearing around them while focusing on creative expression. This activity is good for supporting the needs of the individual child, because each creation is unique and needs different language structures and vocabulary. Positively praising all works will ensure the children feel

supported and will create a sense of belonging. Small motor manipulation techniques and mental imagery projection (i.e. being able to envisage what they are going to make) are needed for the child to feel accomplishment in this kind of work. 3-5 year olds are moving into this stage so making a collage is an ideal activity for them. For the very young learners collage-making will still be primarily a sensorimotor exploration. Don't be surprised if they want to eat the pasta and play in the glue!

### Mixing Bowls

This kind of activity helps the children build a bridge between activities that happen at home and things that happen at the care institution (Piaget described this as "assimilation"). A child mixing with a spoon in a bowl will make the association with kitchens and cooking and doing things children see their Mums and Dads do but which they are not yet able to do for themselves. This helps them achieve a sense of belonging and is the first step into imaginary play. The language learned through this type of play can be repeated in their own home environment by their

parents and reinforced in the child's learning mind.

### Puzzles

This is a more structured manipulative exercise. The children learn that the puzzle demands a correct answer for completion. They begin to develop an understanding of task completion and perseverance. If the puzzles are self-correcting, then no adult intervention is required, which fosters the development of the child's independence. The language that occurs is as varied as the puzzles used, but when a child chooses this kind of activity it would seem he or she is moving away from the interactive atmosphere to work alone. This choice should be respected.

### Blocks and Building

Being indoors for long periods of time creates restlessness in children. However, outdoor environments are often costly to create and difficult to maintain. If the group cannot be taken to the park on a regular basis, the play facilitator needs to recognise that some large motor exercise activities should be available. Blocks and building equipment involve the children in physical activity and create valuable learning opportunities. Cardboard boxes fashioned by children into cars and tunnels and peek-a-boo houses also generate cheap, effective play equipment. •

### Recommended Reading

*Birth to Three: Parenting* extracts from 'The Joyful Child': Michael Olaf's *Essential Montessori for Birth to Three* available online at: <http://montessori.edu/0-3parentingtext.html>

*Genetic Epistemology* available online at: <http://tip.psychology.org/piaget.html>  
Jusczyk, P.W. *Babies don't forget what they hear* available online at: <http://www.apnet.com/inscight/09261997/grapha.htm>

Montessori, M. (1949) *The Absorbent Mind*. Henry Holt

*The 'Prepared Environment,' the Montessori materials, and 'Normalization'* available online at: <http://www.montessorinamta.org/generalinfo/terms.html>