

LTE: Learning Through English

by Stephen McAtamney

Two years ago, the company employing me as an elementary school teacher decided to make a fundamental change to its English teaching methodology. At first, their English programme used a teaching method that was named ‘English through learning’ (ETL). The emphasis was on learning English as a subject. The fundamental change involved a reversal of ideas. ‘ETL’ was changed to ‘LTE’: Learning through English. By doing this, the idea was to take the emphasis away from learning *English*, and place it on *learning*. Both methods of course have the goal of learning the English language, but now rather than teaching English for its own sake, i.e., ‘Let’s learn English’, the approach is more like; ‘Let’s learn about an interesting topic and incidentally, we’re going to do it in English.’

The main task for the teacher then, when teaching LTE, is to map out a curriculum with an interesting range of topics that will inspire and motivate children. Children are always curious, so if the content attracts their attention, they will want to learn. Howard Gardner, an American psychologist and educator, makes this point when discussing motivation. He states that if a text is amusing and inspires the child, they will want to understand it, not because of its structures but because of its contents. Thus, the foreign language becomes a reality. If the child is interested in the content, they will involve themselves more actively in the comprehension process (Gardner, 1991). Also, the teacher will no doubt notice fewer problems regarding classroom management. The more children are interested in the content, the easier it is for the teacher to get them to concentrate.

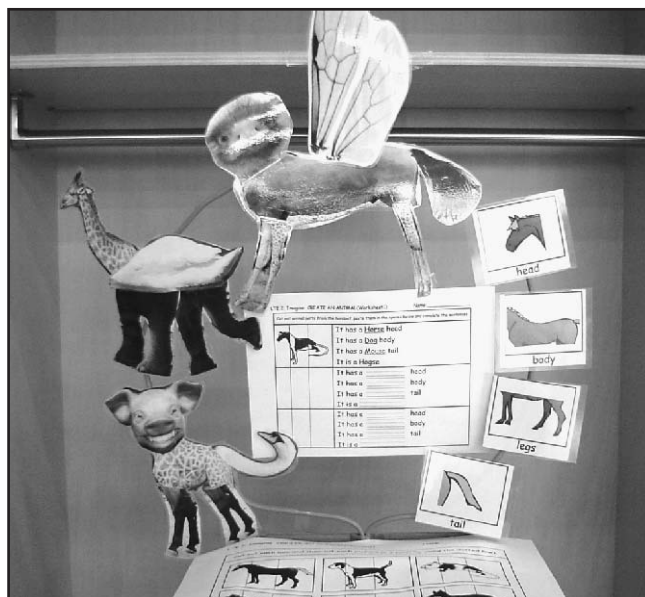
It is a very good idea to have some kind of connection between topics, perhaps relating all to one major theme. By doing this, children will have the opportunity for revision and should gain confidence in their expanding knowledge of the topic, and understanding of English. All too often with traditional lessons, topics emerge but only for a brief time. Often a variety of topics are used to emphasize a grammar point, but may have little relevance to the student’s real life. Without real meaning, ‘English’ by itself may only inspire a small minority of students.

In order to map out a curriculum that will motivate children it is important for the teacher to observe children in their daily activities, their other classes if possible, and in their activities and conversations with other classmates and peers. Observation will give insight into the things that interest, entertain and occupy the child’s mind. Observation will expose the child’s world.

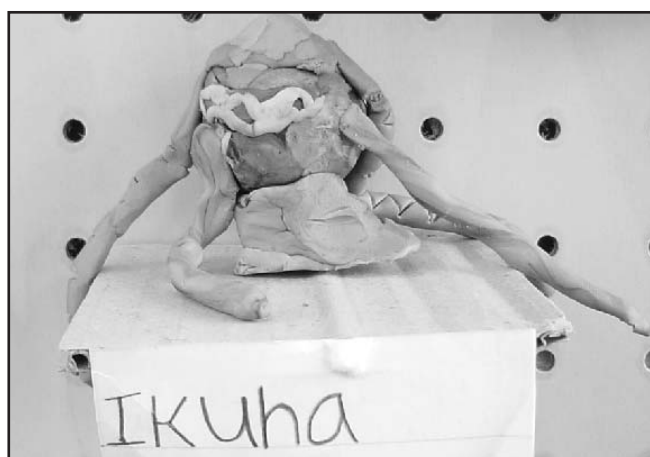
In the second grade of elementary school, most children we observed seemed to have a fascination with animation—both TV cartoon and comic book characters. Quite a number of children were spending time drawing these characters, perfecting the character’s detail. Teachers developing our LTE programme

agreed that developing this topic, centered around one or more of these characters could be fun, so we started a third term second grade curriculum based around the main theme ‘IMAGINE’.

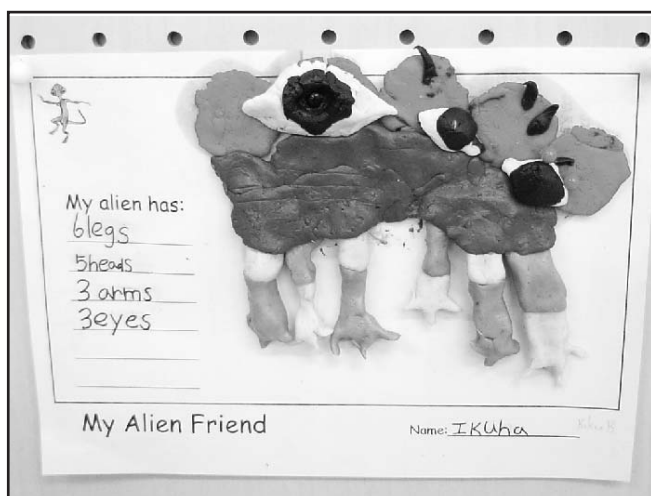
To spark the children’s imagination at first, it was important to give them a task that let them know we were prepared to accept anything they could imagine with no limits. As a starter we gave them a worksheet with five different animals that they could cut into three parts; the head, body and tail end. They were able to imagine a very different type of animal, combining the head, body and tail of three different types. If, for example, they took the head from an **elephant**, the body from a **dog** and the tail from **dolphin**, then by taking the beginning, middle and end letters from each word respectively, they created a whole new species...the **ELEPHION**. Children were very excited by their new found creative powers and *by the way* were also learning quite a lot



How to make an ELEPHION.



What kind of animal is it?



Ikuna's alien friend.

about phonics, breaking words down, sounding out syllables and noting which letters are easy to combine with others. *By the way* they were learning English.

The next topic ventured into 'ALIEN' territory and the following one to 'SUPERHEROES'. After making modeling clay aliens and acting out all the capabilities of your everyday superhero, we then mixed these first three topics to come up with the title for the fourth topic, 'MY ANIMAL ALIEN SUPERHERO'. Yes, the imagination had now gone completely wild and I too was fully immersed in a crazy kids' world of what seemed to be limitless imagination. With the development of this new strange superhero we had a good base for future lessons. Every child made his or her own storybook describing the superhero's character, physical capabilities, home, planet and transport and then to liven things up, a villain was introduced to the story. At the end of this unit the children were able to recognize their superhero's special powers and how they managed to use them to conquer the villain. Coming back to the real world, the next task was to take a look at their own special abilities under the topic heading 'SUPERHERO ME'. Children were asked to think of one thing that they considered their own special ability, and came up with ideas in English, such as; 'I can cook', 'I can swim well', etc.

John Chaffee (1990) makes a point similar to Gardner's in recognizing the effect that content has on the student. He acknowledges that if the children are interested in understanding the topic or text, they will involve themselves more actively in the process of comprehension. They are therefore more likely to have a feeling of success and to develop a positive image of their own language learning capabilities. Positive early language learning experiences can have an enormous influence on the child's eagerness to learn and this in turn can be beneficial to their learning in general.

As older students progress through this programme, perhaps the best way to ensure that the theme and content are interesting is for the teacher to collaborate with the students in the decision making process. The subject matter and the activities can then be decided on by the students while the teacher ensures that skills are practiced. The students



"Superhero me".

become committed through their own interest and as the teacher takes a less authoritative role, relationships build and learning becomes voluntary (Wachs, 1994).

When developing a curriculum such as this, it is important to plan ahead and try to discover the connections between the topics. Depending also on your teaching situation, it may be possible to find others to coordinate with and link themes. That could be other classes within your school, or even an outside group, speaker, exhibition or natural phenomenon that links to your topic. It is also important to keep the theme at a manageable size. With a theme such as 'IMAGINE', topics were almost limitless, so they needed to be contained. At the same time however, flexibility was important. Occasionally what I thought would work, wasn't as appealing as what the children had in mind. It is important to recognize where the students' interest lies and to respond to it.

The turnaround from ETL to LTE has proven to offer a much more enjoyable way in which to learn and teach English. As the children's interest in the topic increases, so too does their understanding of English. Although in my situation I usually only see each class once or twice a week for 45 minutes each time, I have been surprised at the effectiveness of the LTE method, how much the children are retaining and their enthusiasm for the topics.

References

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