The Playful Approach – reusing an innate teaching skill

Opal Dunn suggests that by using a skill we all have, teachers can get children to become engaged and enthusiastic learners.

Young children are innate language learners and users of languages. If they are given varied types of input opportunities right for their developmental level, they can pick up language, even in deprived circumstances, and achieve remarkably easily. However, very young and young learners can be roughly divided into two main categories: those learning English within the family and/or society who, after a mini-silence period, can soon use English at their developmental level; and those learning within classroom situations, who mostly lack the confidence and ability to communicate on even a basic level after weeks and sometimes years of learning.

In the minds of most children who have successfully acquired L1, English is not a formally taught subject, despite appearing on classroom timetables with other subjects like Maths or Science and being taught by specialist English teachers. Children depend on the quality and quantity of the input to pick up English easily. It is from listening to input that they work out how to reuse and refine their already-developed personal language-learning strategies to absorb and later use the English content. Without familiar styles of input, similar to those listened to in L1, but now adjusted to their present developmental level, they find it more difficult to begin to pick up English successfully.

If very young and young children are to reach their language learning potential within the limited exposure in classroom lessons, the teacher’s input must be sufficiently planned to focus on learning needs, whilst ‘tuning in’ supportively to children’s suggestions.

Today most English teaching programmes accept that young children need a range of enabling activities and games from which they can learn English. However, success depends not only on the choice of the activity but, more importantly, on the quality, quantity and style of input. Has the accompanying input been planned to fit a young child’s typical learning strategies? Do they start from the child’s level and scaffold up, gradually introducing more language? Do the input opportunities reflect children’s love of playing with the sounds of language, similar to ways they may play in L1? Tongue twisters, jokes and simple rhymes are part of English literacy, too. Learning colour names in English, even if hidden in a song, is not what children expect learning English to be; colour words don’t start off a natural conversation!

The teacher’s task is to continually activate and reactivate young children’s innate skills as they come to their first English lessons, eager to learn to talk. Young children expect and want immediate results. First impressions are lasting and many expect to do in English the same sort of reading and writing that they do in their L1 classes. They know nothing about a mini-silence period, as they listen intensively whilst their brain works out how to make English sounds and prepares to use the words or phrases they have picked up to start off or take part in a dialogue. A skilful teacher knows how to break this silent period by introducing short, easy-to-pick-up rhymes so children can go home and show how they can speak some English, even after the first lesson. They have an answer to their parent’s question: What did you learn in English today? … and they can reply: One two three, Listen to me. One two three. Do this like me (copying an action).

Children can enjoy taking part in an activity. Visual results give some degree of satisfaction to children and their parents, and can brighten up the classroom walls. However, concentrating on doing the visual activity might have given little opportunity for language input or natural dialogue. Silences, as children are engrossed in an activity, may not give opportunities to learn and use English! If language input has not been planned, children’s opportunities to absorb English unconsciously and begin to use it are being wasted. Classroom exposure time is limited and teachers need to maximize exposure to English. Children are self-educators and know how to ‘turn off’ listening to input when they feel overloaded.
Within a lesson, teachers, like parents informally teaching L1 at home, can use various types of input following a hidden syllabus. Where lessons follow the same organizational plan, picking up language is easier as children can anticipate what to expect next. This feeling of security and ‘well being’ frees them to focus on listening to input and beginning to respond, especially if the activities are routine or already known.

To facilitate planning and monitoring language input, as well as children’s spoken output, within each lesson, it is easier to divide input language (‘Teacher Talk’) into the following general categories, although sometimes there may be an overlap.

Teacher Talk, sometimes referred to as ‘Teacherese’, is a form of upgraded ‘Parentese’ language (an enabling, endearing form of language), which parents use naturally in teaching their children to speak L1. Although it does not simplify language structures, it includes more repetition and reflection back of children’s output to facilitate learning. It also includes skilful use of the tone of voice, and stress and intonation, to show support, facilitate understanding, add interest and enable ways to encourage children to try to use more spoken language.

**Teacher Talk**
The following categories serve as guides to classifying types of Teacher Talk:

**Management language** – for organizing the smooth running of a classroom programme and individual activities within a programme. Organizing games and regular more formal activities like a Spelling Quiz can gradually be teacher–child shared and eventually organized by children themselves, who are keen to develop autonomy.

**Modelling language** – for introducing new language, taking care that children can observe the different mouth movements to enable them to make English sounds. It includes natural-style repetition, as hearing a new word or phrase once is generally not sufficient for most children to work out how to pronounce or use it.

**Mediating language** – for explaining and introducing unknown language to go with a new activity, game, story or rhyme. This often includes more body language and natural repetition than usual, to facilitate understanding.

**Motivating language** – for acknowledging success, but also encouraging effort to try again and succeed even better.

**Continuous commentary** – The above broad categories can be couched within a general ‘Continuous commentary’ on all activity as it takes place within the classroom, thus exposing children to continuous English input. Young children are familiar with this technique as parents use it regularly as a form of gentle continuous instruction, shepherding rather than giving direct commands: *Look at Marie. She is putting the books back in the Library. Good, now Sergio is helping her.*

**Self-Talk** – Periodically teachers can also use a technique of thinking aloud referred to as Self-Talk. This is also used by parents. Self-Talk uses a softer voice to talk about personal emotions and projects. It can also be used to describe ways of thinking that lead on to modelling critical thinking and explaining how to make decisions.

Children value the bonding that these more intimate discussions create. They also need this type of modelling exposure to discover how to think about thinking, and acquire the necessary specialist vocabulary: *My teacher thinks we can … Do I do this or that? I have decided the best way is …*

**Tutor-Talk** – These quick, focused sessions are planned for direct teaching of a new point or revision of misunderstood points. They are linked to a hidden syllabus or problems that teachers have noticed in monitoring output.

Children understand more than they can say and adults imagine. They soon find out how to transfer and reuse the same style of gist understanding in an all-English classroom as they use in L1. This enables them to get the gist meaning of a few words and, together with other clues, work out meaning, as a teacher gradually extends the phrases used in routine language.

However, these planned ways of introducing and using English may not be sufficient to sustain the ‘feel good’ factor, especially amongst boys, once the initial burst of enthusiasm for English has passed. Research shows that without emotional, and also physical well-being, children are unable to focus, enjoy and self-create a positive growth mindset, basic for all progress. ‘Well-being’ is fundamental for all learning and particularly learning language, which, at this age, is still unconsciously self-taught using innate personal language learning strategies.
The Playful Approach

Parents were their children’s first language teachers and innately know how and when to sensitively insert a Playful Approach using playful language, often including body language, to reset a tone, to turn a routine or task into a positive, bonding, fun activity. Even Mary Poppins confirmed that this was the way to sustain interest and have fun at the same time!

The Playful Approach is not an activity or even the playing of a game. It is a planned intervention to immediately respond to the flagging interest in an activity or game by the insertion of some relevant playful language to change the mode or tone in order to sustain children’s interest in the activity or task. The language may be supported by relevant, often exaggerated, body gestures to create surprise or add fun. Children’s response to the surprise insertion of a Playful Approach is usually immediate and the activity happily continues as planned to an acceptable ending.

The Playful Approach:

- motivates by inserting suspense, surprise and mystery: Oh dear! What next?
- re-motivates when focus is lost: Whose turn is it? Get a six. Oh no, only a two!
- extends short attention spans: I can see it! Look on the left!
- arouses curiosity by inserting wonder, and challenges with What if? and I wonder if/how …?
- encourages: Try again, I know you can do it.
- challenges: Can you …? Are you sure you can?
- projects enthusiasm: Wow! I like that? Let’s do it again.
- supports exploring: Look at the size of this sunflower plant? Is it the biggest?

The Playful Approach helps the teacher to:

- sustain interest within games by inserting suspense, to speed up formal games: Whose turn is next? It isn’t mine!
- insert a game-like atmosphere: Let me try. Quickly, we want to see …
- sum up progress amusingly: You’ve got five cards, I’ve only got one!
- predict (sometimes incorrectly) to amuse and engage: This time I’m going to get a six. Wait and see … Oh no, no, no! It’s a two!
- insert fun when winning or losing: You played well. You nearly won, and what about me!

Teachers can use the voice to create a playful atmosphere in class and make children curious. Surprise changes in intonation include:

- volume – unexpected change to a whisper
- stress – added to important words
- silences – sudden, no use of language
- repetition – playfully repeating with rise in pitch and a smile: No, no, no, NO!
- blinking in an exaggerated way, to express surprise or shock!

The skills of the Playful Approach are innate, but teachers may not have the confidence to use them as they feel that it is not an accepted method to teach languages. Teachers may feel that children will interpret it as ‘only playing’, which parents or other teachers might not understand or expect to take place within an English lesson. Parents’ involvement and understanding has a positive impact on children’s attitudes and learning. Parents need to understand that a young child’s way of learning to communicate in English is basically the same as how they successfully taught them to speak in L1, and they can help with the acquisition of English. Parents need to be helped to understand that their children are not sufficiently mature to learn in a way that perhaps they learned in Secondary School, through a teacher instructed, analytical Grammar Method.

Young children’s enthusiasm for English lessons and proof of their success is sufficient to show that the spontaneous Playful Approach has a role in all beginners’ English lessons, including more formal activities introducing reading and creative writing. The inclusion of the Playful Approach gives teachers a special way to bond and sustain enthusiasm for learning English. Lifelong attitudes are known to be formed early. No wonder some adults can fondly recall the name of their first English teacher!

The Playful Approach is not a language-learning scheme or an imposed method of instruction. It is an innate playful skill, common to many child cultures, and frequently used by adults to insert, where and when needed, some playful language which will engage and captivate the child. Although many teachers may have to dig deep to find or re-find their Playful Approach, the resulting, sustained enthusiasm for English from the children in the class will be their reward. Plus est en vous!

Award-winning author Opal Dunn has many years of experience in teaching children aged up to eight years, and has trained teachers all over the world. She has also authored picture books for nursery and young primary children, organised Bunko (mini-libraries) for bilingual, multilingual and double children (children growing up with two languages and two cultures) and has written information books and articles for parents. Her books include Introducing English to Young Children: Spoken Language (Collins, 2013): http://bit.ly/IEYCSpoken and Introducing English to Young Children: Reading and Writing (Collins, 2014): http://bit.ly/IEYCReading