

## Designing Classroom Activities for Teaching English to Children

Emma Malia  
LBPP-LIA Bandung

**Abstract:** This paper discusses some ideas on activities teachers of young learners make young learners do by way of materials. The paper also gives a number of suggested analyses of selecting or designing an activity to use with young learners. The suggested analyses of the activity deal with goals, input, procedures, outcome, teacher role, learner role and organization. The idea is not only to help young learners understand the language they hear but also to encourage young learners, who developmentally have shorter attention span composed to adults, to learn English naturally.

**Key words:** young learners, classroom activities

### TEACHING ENGLISH TO CHILDREN

Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Young Learners (TEFL-YL) involves learners of three main groups : the four to six year-olds, the seven to nine year-olds, and the ten to twelve year-olds. Obviously children do not all fit neatly into those categories and their development depend, on their personality, maturity and previous learning experiences. I am assuming that four to six year-olds are all at the beginner stage. The seven to nine year-olds may be also beginners, or they may have been learning the foreign language (EFL) for some time, and the ten to twelve year-olds may be elementary school students learning English as a local-content subject at their schools.

Many the techniques and attitudes are essential for the teacher of young learners. Therefore, the teacher of young learners should consider integrating or using an activity-based approach within their language classroom since such an approach seems to have much to offer in terms of the overall needs of the learners. For example:

- children carry out activities which have practical educational value;
- children are motivated and interested in what they are studying;
- children are introduced to a wide range of natural English, which is meaningful and understandable because the activities are meaningful and understandable;
- children are taught in English;
- children are not introduced to English in an artificially pre-determined sequence of grammatical structures or functions;
- children can be taught in mixed ability groups: learners with more English will speak more about the activity they are doing, and help lower-level classmates at the same time;
- the learning focuses on the individual child: each child is encouraged to acquire language at his or her own pace and own manner (TDW, 2003)

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

If teachers want to create their own activities, it is helpful to have a way of analysing the activities. This step enables teachers to consider how and why the activities are constructed in the way they are. Figure 1 is a system by Moon (2002) that has been adapted from David Nunan.

#### Goal

The teachers' purpose or aim in using the activity, i.e. what he or she wants to achieve through the activity. The children's purpose in carrying out the activity.

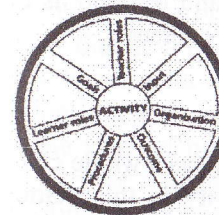


Figure 1. Classroom Activity

**Input**

The material that children will work on, e.g. text, oral instructions, etc.

**Procedures**

What children actually do with the input, e.g. they read it or talk about it, etc.

**Outcome**

What children produce as a result of the activity, e.g. a story book, an answer to a problem, a picture, etc. The outcome might vary from child to child or group to group. We distinguish between *product* outcomes, i.e. something tangible like a set of answers, a complete crossword, a drawing and *process* outcomes, i.e. skills, attitudes, which develop during the learning process, e.g. increased confidence, ability to work together.

**Teacher Roles**

The roles that the teacher will need to perform, which are implied or suggested by the activity. For example, a drill will require the teacher to direct and control the children, whereas a communicative game will require the teacher to set up the task and then step back and monitor.

**Learner Roles**

The roles that the activity will require learners to perform. For example, some activities may require learners just to listen and respond as directed; others may require learners to make decisions or choices.

**Organization**

The way the learners are organized for learning, e.g. as a whole class, in pairs, etc. It is quite suggested to analyse an activity in this matter. Among other things, it allows teachers:

- to decide whether the activity is appropriate for their own learners'

need

- to analyse how teacher-controlled it is
- to see how much learner participation is involved
- to identify aspects which could be adapted or modified
- to change the procedure of the activity to be more challenging
- to remember that they are only considering the potential of the activity at a certain stage. Whether this potential is realized depends on the way the teacher implement it in the classroom and the way children respond to it.

To set classroom activities, teachers can do the following steps (Scott: 1990).

(1) **Choose a Topic.** The teacher will usually decide which topic to work on, but if the children are not interested in a particular subject, and he or she thinks they can do it in English, then try to work it into his or her timetable. If a teacher is working in a primary school, he/she can look at what the children are doing in other classes. For example, if they are doing 'growing' in Nature Study, then he or she could do some of the activities in English – measuring and comparing, for example.

(2) **Plan Time.** a) Ideally, the teacher should decide at the long term planning stage which topics he or she is going to work on and how long the teacher plans to spend on each topic. Sometimes topic work will simply crop up while the teacher is working on the textbook – he or she may come across a text which the children are particularly interested in or enthusiastic about. In this case, the teacher may only want to spend one or two lessons on the particular topic, and this would be decided almost on the spur of the moment. b) If you have not done topic-based teaching before, then it is probably best to start off on a very small scale. Taking just one lesson on a topic which the children are particularly interested in and which may or may be not based on the textbook will give the teacher some ideas of possibilities which this kind of teaching opens up. For example, let's say that the textbook is doing 'pets' and has some guided writing activities on these structures:

'Do you have a pet?' Yes, I do. No, I don't.

Does he/she have a pet? Yes, he/she does. No, he/she doesn't.  
What pet does Susan have?

Since the teacher knows that several of the children have pets, and that they like animals, the teacher can expand the guided written exercises like the following:

Everyone tells the class about a pet they know. 'I have a cat. It is white. Her name is Snowy.' or 'Vina has a fish. It is a clown fish. It is orange. His name is Nemo.' Children can also write and/or illustrate what they have said. The teacher can then make a collage by pasting all the children's contributions on a big piece of paper or putting them all on the teacher's notice board under the heading 'Pets'. Afterwards the teacher can go back to the textbook and continue with the exercises there.

**(3) Collect Materials:** Once the teacher has some ideas of possible topics, he or she should start looking for materials all sorts of written and spoken texts, pictures, objects, cards, ideas. When the teacher finds something, he or she makes a note of it at once or she can write on the back of material or write on a piece of paper, label it and then put it into the ring binder or cardboard box the teacher usually keeps for that topic. We always think we'll remember our brilliant ideas, but we don't unless we make a note of them. Similarly, once the teacher has finished with a topic, all the materials he or she used go back into the relevant files and boxes – even the material which didn't work well. Next time in other sessions the teacher may have a different use for it. The teacher will do most of the collecting and all the filing but the children can often help to find pictures and objects in connection with a particular topic.

**(4) Functions and Situations:** Once the teacher has the topic and a collection of connected materials, he or she works out which situations and functions of the language the teacher want to concentrate on. If, then, 'pets' is the topic, and the teacher want to spend two weeks on it, he and she might want to take up: playing with a pet, visiting a pet shop, favourite pets, asking parents for a pet, zoos, feeding a pet, etc. Some useful functions of the language might be: describing, expressing likes and dislike, asking for something, future wishes. The point is that the topic decides which situations and functions the teacher take up, and the teacher

has to make a selection as to which ones the teacher wants to concentrate on. The teacher may find this difficult, but when in doubt, he or she should choose situation first. If the teacher concentrate on the function, he or she may well lose sight of the content material. Of course, children will cover a far wider range of language in their work, but it is useful to know what the teacher wants them to be able to do by the end of the topic period.

**(5) Methods and Activities:** Familiarity nurtures security, so the teacher should make use of the full range of what is already familiar to the children as well as activities which are in the textbook. However, the teacher may find that stepping outside the textbook can lead much more creative thinking on the part of teachers and children alike. Topic-based work opens up all sorts of possibilities. The temptation in doing topic-based teaching is to let the free activities take over, but the input and the guided activities have to be there too, just as the simple activities have to be there alongside the more challenging ones.

Some suggested activities can be done in the classroom are vocabulary work which provides cards – pictures to present the vocabulary, dialogues and role play to look at the progression in oral work, free activities to complete oral or written work.

**(6) Assessment:** Since topic-based work is complete in itself, it gives the teacher and the children a good opportunity to assess what they have been doing. The teacher can ask the children what they liked/didn't like doing. What they would have liked to spend more/less time on? Which stories did they like? Do they think another class would like the same topic? Ask them what they think they have learnt and use the opportunity to repeat what's been gone through in class: 'Yes, now you know how to .....', and you can talk about.....', and you know all about.....' (Those are done in the mother tongue)

Although small children find this type of assessment very difficult to begin with, it is well worth starting in a very casual way with the five to seven year-olds. Young learners take tremendous pride in being taken seriously, and we could perhaps spend a little more time finding out and taking into considerations our young learners' reactions and opinions. For

school.

## DESIGNING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

One of the exciting things about working with topics is that the teachers can adapt the topics to their own class, their interests in terms of applying various activities done in the classroom, and their own teaching styles. This experience gives a great opportunity to teachers to examine their teaching activities as a very good starting place for the teachers who are interested in adapting or designing their own classroom activities. To adapt or design an activity would not take up too much of a teacher's time, but done on a regular basis could gradually develop his or her confidence. This could lead on to the design of several linked activities for a lesson, and later to the creation of a series of lessons to form larger units of teaching materials.

Before teachers either design or select an activity for use with the class, they will probably have number of questions or criteria in their mind which guide their decisions whether to use the particular activity, to avoid it or to adapt it. (See Figure 2) This activity helps the teachers to make those criteria explicit. These questions might come to the teachers' mind to identify criteria for selecting activities (Moon: 2000).

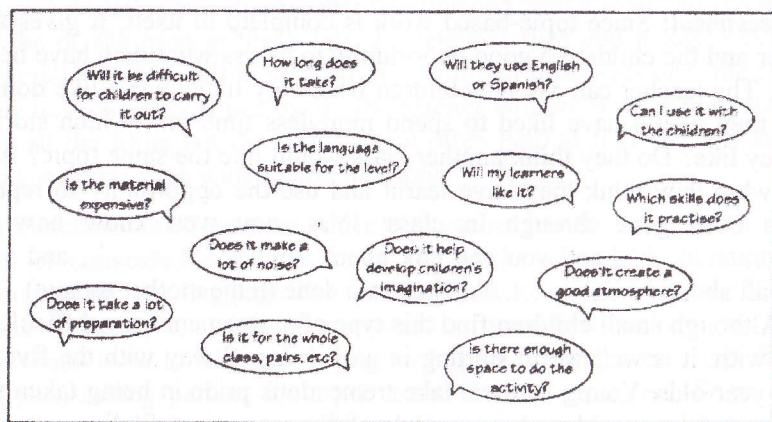


Figure 2. Teachers' Questions

Teachers may not be aware of asking themselves or having questions in their mind when choosing activities, because usually teachers do not need to make those questions explicit. But it can be helpful to bring the questions into the open from time to time so that the teacher can reconsider the design of the classroom activities. Even the teachers' questions show that they are concerned with many different aspects of an activity: the purpose of using the activity, its suitability for the given children, its management and whether it reflects appropriate language-learning principles, - but there are at least five points to keep in mind related to designing classroom activities (Moon:2002). They are the need to:

- provide a clear and meaningful purpose for using language which capitalizes on young learners' desire to communicate, e.g. activities which involve a game, or puzzling something out or getting missing information from another person;
- challenge learners and make them think, so that they are more engaged and so process language more deeply;
- provide activities which are enjoyable and interesting and which make children want to continue doing the activity so they get more practice, e.g. creating monsters, guessing, games with a winner or prize, 'hands on' or 'doing' activities like making masks;
- provide activities which create a need or pressure for children to use English; and
- provide activities which allow children to be creative with language, experiment and notice language.

The checklist in figure 3 provides a summary of the main points to remember.

We may find the checklist above particularly useful:

- when teachers want to choose an activity from a book;
- when teachers want to decide whether to buy a particular textbook
- when teachers want to decide whether to use some activities they have found in a magazine or been given by another teacher; and
- when teachers want to design their own activity

When choosing or designing activities, we usually have a specific purpose in mind. For example, we want an activity to revise some vocabulary or to get the children to use the language they have learnt for communicative purposes or to practice independent reading skills. Therefore, teachers

should have an opportunity to apply the checklist as a way of deciding whether some activities are suitable for their teaching purposes.

Checklist for selecting or creating language-learning activities

	Activity A	Activity B
<b>Learning purpose</b>		
relevance to language learning/learning		
all language skills included? (receptive and productive?)		
<b>Learners</b>		
difficulty level language level enjoyment/interest		
<b>Management</b>		
organization amount of noise type of material needed length of activity amount of preparation needed space needed pressure to use English suitability for age group		
<b>Learning principles: Does it develop ...</b>		
... a positive atmosphere? ... language creativity, opportunities to experiment and notice language? ... imagination? ... purposeful and varied language use? ... thinking skills?		

Figure 3. Checklist for selecting or creating language-learning activities

## DESIGNING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR TEFL-YL

When adapting or designing classroom activities for a suitable language learning, teachers have to create their own activities or are encouraged to do so. If this is the case, the criteria above mentioned may provide teachers of young learners with a way of looking at their own activities from a different perspective. However if the teachers have had no experience of creating their own materials, a good way of beginning is to adapt those they find in textbooks or in magazines for teachers. This helps to give the teachers confidence to get started. But whether the teachers create their own activities or adapt them, the process of adapting or creating an activity to meet a need, the process of trying them out in the classroom and reflecting on how they work is a helpful way of gaining fresh perspectives on the teachers of young learners' teaching.

Table 1a. 4 – 6 year olds

Characteristics	Implications	Need
Pre-school or just beginning school	Not used to classroom conventions	Training in class routines e.g. listening to teachers
Limited motor skills	Clumsy control of pen/scissors etc.	To develop motor control e.g. colouring, copying
Learn holistically	Whole child needs stimulation	Opportunities to move, sing, play, explore, touch, etc
Cannot distinguish between different parts of languages	Cannot analyse language	Exposure to chunks* of language e.g. chants, stories, classroom language
Limited reading/writing skills in L1	Introducing reading/writing in English	Lots of listening, speaking activities. Fun introduction to English letters and words
See no need to communicate in English	Students use L1 exclusively	Reasons to speak English e.g. games, chants
Love stories, fantasy	Bored with many topics	Stories, fantasy, fun

\*chunks of language = words that naturally come together e.g. "thank you very much", "glass of water", "have a nice day" – that are easily learnt, repeated and do not need analysis.

Children between four and twelve years old are very different as language learners. Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c are to see how children learn at different stages of development and how activities in the classroom need to address their cognitive, motor, language and social development. The age groups will be grouped as: 4 to 6 year-olds, 7 to 9 year-olds, and 10 to 12 year-olds.

**Table 1b. 7 - 9 year olds**

Characteristics	Implications	Need
Beginning to be logical and analytical	Can see patterns, aware of language	Opportunities to experiment e.g. making up own chants
Asking questions	Need answer	Freedom to express themselves and learn more than language
Reading and writing still minimal in LI	Still need support and help	Practice and success oriented activities
Still have problems sharing	Group activities not always successful	Teacher to guide them and chances to work alone
Developing confidence to express themselves	Students will have views on what they want to do/talk about	Chance to state opinions
Developing knowledge of the world around them	Know more than we often give them credit for	Chances to use what they know

**Table 1c. 10 - 12 year olds**

Characteristics	Implications	Need
Longer attention span	Greater range of activities possible in class	Opportunities to engage in tasks that require focus and commitment
Knowledge of the world growing	More topics can be addressed	Stimulation e.g. Information from internet and cross-curricular

Taking learning more seriously	Can be given responsibility	Chances to be independent
Still children	Have need for security and pleasure	Teacher sensitive to their needs and moods
More cooperative with peers	Can do more group work	Variety of grouping in class i.e. work on own, in pairs, in group, as class
Intellectual, motor and social skills developing	Can be challenged more	Activities that challenge them
Developing own learning strategies	Children won't all react in the same way to the same task/topic	Chance to personalise their learning experience

## ACTIVITIES BASED ON AGE GROUPS

### TOPICS: ANIMALS

#### Activities suitable for 4 - 6 year olds

##### Chants:

Chants are great as children

- learn to work together
- pick up chunks
- get to listen to lots of meaningful language
- have a reason to use English
- find them funny
- move their body
- enjoy repeating them

Chants are easy to make up. The following is a chant for 5 - 6 year-olds. They have already begun learning animals. The teacher and the children chant it together and do actions for different animals. (pretending to splash water, etc)

My name's Fred and I'm a frog – jump, jump, jump

My name's Kate and I'm a cat – miaow, miaow, miaow

My name's Fergie and I'm a fish – splash, splash, splash

My name's Mickey and I'm a mouse – squeak, squeak, squeak

My name's Benny and I'm a bird – flap, flap, flap

This is a lovely chant with rhythm that children enjoy. They can stretch their arms out to show 'big' and bring their hands close together to show 'little'. It also helps to develop: Motor skills – children will enjoy colouring in the pictures that come with the chant. Colouring demands concentration, eye & hand coordination and hand control – all important pre-writing skills. Word recognition – when beginning word recognition they can draw a line between the animal words – cat, mouse, etc. and the pictures.

### Songs

Classic songs like *Old Macdonald had a farm* are very popular with young children. Farms are pretty universal. Young students enjoy making the animal noises and farm animals are a nice lexical set. To create a nice wall display, get children to draw their favourite farm animal and the teacher (or a child who draws quickly and finishes their animals) can draw a big farm to paste the animals onto. More animals can be added later as well as a farmer, etc. Once they begin writing, students can label the different animals.

### Stories

There are many story books based on animals. Children love listening to stories about animals especially if there are colourful, child-friendly visuals to help them follow the story. Teachers can also use cuddly animal toys while story-telling to get and hold the children's attention.

### Games

Children love games. Four to six year-olds have still to develop co-operative skills, so introducing games that involve turn-taking helps to develop these skills. Do not despair if they get impatient or want to take each other's turns – they are still learning to be less egocentric and need lots of opportunities to all these skills to develop.

### Cutting and Colouring

The students get to create a herd of elephants by cutting out an elephant and naming him/her. They can also colour it in. They can practice the 'What's your elephant called?' He's/She's called .....

### Activities Suitable for 7 – 9 Year Olds

#### Chants

Children at this age group still love chants, but can add their own verses too. Take the **Big, Little** chant above – encourage students to write their own versions incorporating other animals they know. This stimulates their creative skills and gives them a sense of achievement when they can produce their own. The quiz at the bottom of the page requires not just linguistic knowledge, but also knowledge about animals. By now many children are developing their writing skills and becoming proficient drawers. They also get a great sense of achievement from seeing what they have created. A mini-project on animals is easy to set up. Each child chooses an animal they like. They draw a picture of the animal and write sentences based on a model provided by the teacher. The pictures are neatly mounted on the classroom walls.

Model:

..... is a big/small animal  
 ..... lives in the jungle / on a farm / in my house  
 ..... eats leaves / other animals / .....  
 ..... can fly / run / swim etc.....

#### Fun Games

Games are popular with all ages and it is a shame to push children into formal book-based learning early. They will become de-motivated and maybe even stressed. A really fun game can wake them up and bring laughter back into the classroom. In this game children create funny composite animals e.g. one with a tiger's head, a bear's tummy and an elephant's legs. This fun game works on many levels. Children can enjoy it purely visually and can also practice their English through it. It is very good for the possessive 's.

**Activities suitable for 10 – 12 year olds****Projects**

By now it is clear that students have very different approaches to learning and have distinct preferences and interests. A project on animals can ensure all are satisfied.

- Students can choose to work independently or with a partner(s)
- Students choose animal, or the creative ones can create a new one
- Students choose whether to create a wall display, a book or a presentation on their animal
- Their work can include illustrations, their own or ones they find
- Their project can be a factual description about the animal including information found in books, the internet, etc or it can be a story about the animal. It could also be a poster calling for conservation of a particular species.
- Students are give a time limit – say 2 or 3 lessons to prepare their work. Then it can either be displayed, shared or presented
- (This is especially good in a mixed ability class.) Students who are not so keen on writing can create something more visual and very enthusiastic students have more scope for their imagination and language skills.

**Games**

A lovely mingling game to practice knowledge about animals and language items such as: 'Can it fly?' 'Is it dangerous?' etc.

**CONCLUSION**

- Teaching English to Children holds on the understanding of Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to Young Learners (TEFL-YL) that divide the children as learners into three main groups: 4 – 6 year olds, 7 – 9 year olds, and 10 – 12 year olds. Each development of the three main groups depends on their personality, maturity, and previous learning experiences
- To analyse an activity into components include: teacher and learner goals, outcomes, input, procedures, teacher and learner roles, organi-

zation. Analysing activities into their components give teachers a way of deciding on activities' usefulness and a way of adapting them to suit their purposes better.

- No one activity could satisfy all criteria for selecting, creating, adapting and evaluating activities for young learners. simultaneously and teachers would need to decide on their priorities, depending on their goals and the needs of their learners on any particular occasion.
- The process of adapting or designing activities, trying them out in the classroom and assessing their effectiveness is a way of reflecting on teachers' teaching. This process enables teachers to stand back from the routine of their daily teaching and consider it from a different perspective, which may give them new insights into their teaching.

**REFERENCES**

- Moon, Jayne. 2000. *Children Learning English*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Musthafa, Bachrudin. 2002. *EFL for Young Learners*. Bandung: CREST
- Nunan, David. 1989. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, Wendy A. 1990. *Teaching English to Children*. New York: Longman
- Teacher Development Workshop. 2003. *Teaching English to Children*. Bandung: TBI <http://www.onestopenglish.com> <http://www.longman.com>