

# Channeling Children's Energy through Vocabulary Activities

**T**eaching children is a challenge. They fidget. They mumble. They squirm. They wander off. They babble. They play. Well, of course they do! They're children! Let their energy and enthusiasm work *for* you, instead of against you. In this article, I will describe several of my favorite supplementary vocabulary development activities for young learners that harness the exuberance of youth while delivering both enjoyable and powerful learning opportunities for children of all ages. But first, I'd like to share a few general thoughts about teaching children.

## **Make a lasting first impression**

A child's first English teacher bears a heavy responsibility. The goal of all early language education should be to hook students when they're young and keep them interested in learning English for the rest of their lives. If their first experience of learning English is unpleasant, they may grow up with powerfully negative feelings towards the language.

Over and over, I've seen people scarred by their earlier learning expe-

riences in English classrooms. Many teachers forget the importance of developing students' self-esteem and self-confidence as language learners and users (Macintyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels 1988). It is imperative that teachers make the learning experience both enjoyable and educational. Affect plays a large role in learning a second language, and when children are made to feel incompetent, they certainly don't feel close to the L2 or the L2's culture (Brown 2001). One important part of language development is vocabulary development, and fun vocabulary activities can be used to develop a positive affect in the young learner English language classroom.

The goals of English instruction for young learners should be to:

- make students feel competent and confident while learning English;
- provide a safe, entertaining, and educational environment;
- create life-long learners of English.

Remember—if your students are laughing with you, they are paying attention; they are probably learning something; and they most likely feel pretty

good about themselves. The next section will describe several activities to help teachers achieve these goals.

### **Entertaining and educational activities**

One of the hardest things about working with young learners is that often they are pre-literate, that is, they have not yet learned how to read in their home or native languages. When, as a teacher, you are working with pre-literate students, you can't just write letters and words on the board and expect them to be able to read what you have written. However, pre-literate students can orally learn a large amount of language before they learn to read and write. This is the order in which we learn our first language (Krashen 1981), so it makes sense to structure language classes in ways that take advantage of our natural learning inclinations. Described below are activities that work well with preliterate learners as well as with learners who have developed literacy skills in their native language and English.

It's important to mention that for the following activities to work well, the teacher has to be lively and enthusiastic! You need to put fun and energy in your voice (in English, of course) to get the students in the right frame of mind to participate. If you are excited about the activity, they will be excited, too.

### **What's Missing?**

#### *Purpose*

This activity is designed to give students practice recalling the names of items in a specific category of vocabulary. Before doing this activity, students should have already been exposed to categories of vocabulary in real and/or pictorial form, such as food items, colors, classroom objects, seasons of the year, etc. Now, they can have some fun while practicing their new knowledge.

#### *Preparation*

You will need large pictures of the vocabulary items in the category or the actual items themselves, if they can fit on the chalkboard tray or be taped to the chalkboard. If the chalkboard does not have a tray, you will need tape to fasten the pictures or items to the board.

#### *Procedure*

Line up eight or more large pictures of one category of items, such as colors, on the chalk-

board's tray. If your chalkboard doesn't have a tray, tape the pictures to the board. Tell students to study the pictures, looking carefully at each one and saying the word to themselves. Then, have students put their heads down on their desks to block their view of the board. "Heads down! Heads down!" you cry, imitating the correct posture. Once every little head is on the desk, you remove one picture, rearrange the others, and then yell: "What's missing?" Students look up and then guess which item has been removed. The first student to guess correctly scores a point and gets to hold the item. Continue until there are only two items left. The student with the most items wins.

#### *Spin-offs*

You may want to put students into pairs or groups of three and do this activity cooperatively. Also, you could have students take turns performing the teacher's role. This makes the activity extremely student-centered, which is always motivating.

### **Erase!**

#### *Purpose*

This activity is mainly for beginning level students who are at the word recognition level. It allows students to practice their word recognition skills, using vocabulary items in a specific category. As students become able to recognize words, they can practice their reading skills at the word level. (Note: It is important to initially teach students words that represent a category of vocabulary that they have *already learned* in realia/picture form. That way, there is a clear relationship between what they know orally and what they learn in written form.)

This is a high-energy activity that includes short bursts of running and some light-hearted play. I've used this with a variety of age groups and nationalities, and it has always been a great success. However, the teacher (and her supervisor) must be able to tolerate noise and high spirits in order for this activity to succeed. By combining a vocabulary review activity with physical exertion, students are both reinforcing new vocabulary AND burning off excess energy in a lively way. After this activity, they will be ready to sit and concentrate (and so will you).

### *Preparation*

All you need for this activity is a chalkboard, chalk, two erasers, and the ability to move desks out of the way. On the board, randomly write, in big letters, a dozen or more vocabulary words from the same category. Divide students into two teams. Line them up at the back of the classroom. Move the furniture out of the way to create an open space between the students and the chalkboard. Give the first person in each team an eraser. Tell students that during this activity they will be asked to erase a particular word.

### *Procedure*

After you've written the words on the board, pushed the furniture to the side, lined up the students in two teams, and given the first student in each team an eraser, stand back. Yell out one of the vocabulary words listed on the board. The two students race to the board to erase the word. The first student to correctly erase the word wins a point for the team. Line up the next two students and repeat. This is an exciting physical activity that lets children blow off steam and practice word recognition at the same time. The team that correctly erases the most words (and thus earns the most points) wins.

### *Spin-offs*

You could have students take turns facilitating the activity. Also, if you have multiple chalkboards, you could divide your class into two sections and run two games at the same time.

To use this activity with preliterate students, you can draw simple line drawings of vocabulary items on the board instead of writing the words. Make sure that students have already learned—either in realia or picture form—the words represented by the drawings. During the game, students will erase the picture that corresponds to the word you yell out.

### **Smack!**

#### *Purpose*

The word *smack* means to hit quickly and with a loud noise, and that is what students will do in this activity, which is similar to *Erase!* Here the students are able to review a category of vocabulary while playing a simple, fast-paced game.

#### *Preparation*

You will need large cards with pictures or words in a specific category and two plastic

*flyswatters*. A flyswatter is a long piece of plastic with a square, mesh-like part at the end that is used for killing insects. It makes a very satisfying sound when smacked on a bug, or here, on a word or picture. You can use a rolled up newspaper if flyswatters are not available.

#### *Procedure*

Divide the students into two teams. Line them up one behind the other in front of a large table. On the table, spread out all the pictures or words from the same category in random order. Give a flyswatter to one student from each team. Have the two students hold up the flyswatters as you say, "Elbows up! Elbows up!" Call out one of the items on the table. The first student to smack the item with the flyswatter wins a point for the team. Remove the item and give it to the team that won the point. Then line up the next two students, and repeat. The team with the most smacked items wins.

#### *Spin-offs*

Like the other activities, if you have a large class, you could divide it in half and run two sections. You could also have students take turns facilitating this activity.

### **TPR Verb Game**

#### *Purpose*

In the method called Total Physical Response (Asher 1977), students act out commands given by the teacher (or another student). This is a great way to teach and practice classroom vocabulary and verbs. It does not require any verbal production. It also encourages physical movement, which children who have been seated for any length of time will surely appreciate. In addition, the physical action of carrying out a command is often very helpful for learning, especially for those students who learn by actually *doing*.

#### *Preparation*

Decide what vocabulary and verbs you want to review. You can pre-teach the verbs right before you start by acting them out and having the students imitate you.

#### *Procedure*

Have students stand up. Demonstrate the verb *touch* by touching things and saying, "Touch the door, touch the window, touch the desk," while modeling these actions. Give a command and have students actually do it. "Touch the desk! Touch the floor! Touch the

window!” I encourage the students to run to the item and touch it. “Touch the door!” You get little bodies hurtling through space to obey your commands with much hilarity and energy. This works great with fidgety students who want to move. Let them!

As students get more advanced, you can give more complex commands, such as “Touch the door, touch your shoes, and then touch the window!” Depending on your tolerance for noise and controlled chaos (or your supervisor’s, more likely), this works great, even with very young children. You can use all kinds of verbs, such as *open, shut, tie, untie, throw away, pick up*. This activity burns a lot of energy, is great fun, and is educational, too!

### *Spin-offs*

Students can take turns facilitating this activity. In addition, you can put students in groups of two or three to do this activity and have them take turns facilitating the small groups.

## **Listen and Draw**

### *Purpose*

This activity is for a more advanced group that can produce speech, unlike the other activities that require little or no verbal production. This activity allows meaningful practice of prepositions of place and categories of vocabulary. In addition, students must competently communicate with each other in a realistic manner, which always increases motivation. The novelty of drawing pictures in the English class is also interesting for students, and the action of drawing often aids learning.

### *Preparation*

This activity takes a little bit more preparation on your part than the previous activities. First, you need to choose a category of vocabulary that the students already know.

Second, get 25 or more large index cards. On each card, draw a different set of pictures using the category of vocabulary. For example, to make a card illustrating the category *fruit*, in the middle of the card draw an apple. Above and to the right, draw a banana. Below and to the left, draw some grapes. And so on. Use your imagination!

### *Procedure*

On the day of the lesson, teach or review the words *top, bottom, right, left, above, below, next to*. Write the prepositions on the board and

leave them there as a prompt. Put students in pairs. Give student A the card and model how to shield it from student B. Have student A describe the card bit by bit to student B, who draws it on a piece of paper according to student A’s instructions. Student A can only use verbal language (no gestures!) to communicate the message. When student B is finished, have the students compare the card to the drawing. Then have students switch roles with a new card and repeat the activity. This is an engrossing activity and will hook students of all ages. It works particularly well with shapes (circle, square, triangle, etc.).

### *Spin-offs*

For homework, students can make the cards for the next round of this activity with a different category of vocabulary. On the day of the activity, collect a card from each student and then redistribute one card to each pair. This kind of student ownership of an activity is always exciting for students.

## **Lexical Sets**

### *Purpose*

This is another student-centered activity that allows students to review and critically evaluate vocabulary in categories. Students must analyze the relationship between items, thus using critical thinking skills while reviewing vocabulary items. Again, this takes some preparation on your part.

### *Preparation*

First, pick a category of vocabulary, such as things found in a school. Next, make a list of 25 to 30 words from this group. Then, arrange the words into subgroups, such as furniture (chair, desk, table), things you write with (pen, pencil, crayons), etc. You should make four to eight different subgroups of vocabulary. You can organize the subcategories any way you want, but make sure there is some logic! Now, make sets of little cards with each word on one card. Make 12 to 15 sets of the 25 to 30 words, depending upon how many students you have.

### *Procedure*

Divide the students into pairs or groups of three. Give each pair a lexical set. Tell them that they have to put the pile of words into categories. That’s all. After they’ve worked for a bit, tell them the number of categories.

They will moan and then rework their groups. After another bit, tell them exactly how many items are in each different category. They will groan and then reanalyze their subcategories yet again. This activity focuses their attention on the vocabulary and makes them critically think about hierarchy and grouping, which are higher order thinking skills than mindless, decontextualized memorization. This activity will engage your class until you put an end to it. Remember, more time-on-task equals more learning!

### *Spin-offs*

With preliterate young learners, you can use pictures of items already learned instead of words. With advanced young learners, you could have pairs of students create the lexical sets and then use a different pair's set each time you run the activity. Again, a sense of being a stakeholder, a part-owner of the learning process, is incredibly motivating for students.

### **Conclusion**

All of the supplementary activities listed above aim to channel the boundless energy of young learners towards enjoyable and educational learning experiences. Laughter, movement, and noise are fine in the classroom! It's completely unrealistic to expect young learners to always sit in chairs in rows and silently, individually complete worksheets. It's much more effective to incorporate their inexhaustible supply of enthusiasm into activities rather than try to stifle it. When young learners are laughing, moving, and playing while learning, chances are good that they will have positive feelings toward the L2 and will look forward to English class in the years ahead.

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