

Learning activities close to the children's world: games, songs, stories and drama

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1. The game and multisensory involvement

Introduction

Fun activities based on 'learning through doing' and involving the development and use of all of our senses can have a long-term effect on the language learning process and the child's general growth.

Here we must consider the various types of games together with the Total Physical Response¹ approach, as well as how and when these can be used as real tools for early language learning.

1.1 The game

There are several types of games, each one with its own value for the student's lesson:

- Individual games, in pairs, in groups and in teams against each other, against the teacher and against the game itself
- there are speaking games, reading games and writing games
- games inside or outside the classroom, and games based on different "recreational principles"²: "ability, possibility, cooperation and uncertainty"
- Total Physical Response Games (TPR), word games, guessing games
- Board games, card games, games based on drawing, musical games

Using games in class requires time for preparing materials, organizing and executing them. It is therefore important to evaluate the time as well as the real communicative "pay off". The games must have clear objectives and must be placed within a didactic path which offers real linguistic opportunities; also, it must not be considered merely a fun activity. Games are a flexible activity that can be adapted to the linguistic objectives and to the different phases of the lesson.

¹ the Total Physical Response or TPR method was developed by Dr James Asher, following the developmental phases of the child's first language. It involves, for example, listening to and following a sequence of instructions that involve the child's different senses. *Asher, J. (1965). Learning Another Language through Actions: The complete Teacher's Guide*, Los Angeles.

² Khan, J.(1991). *Using games in teaching English to young learners*, Teaching English to Children. Hammersmith, Harper Collins Publisher

They can be used as a "warm up" or "wind down", activities used to begin or end the lesson in a pleasant way. They can be used as "emergency activities" to speed up the rhythm of the lesson, to reawaken the students who have "fallen asleep" after lunch. Games are also useful for ending a negative situation in the class and refocusing the children's attention on learning rather than on the behavioral dynamics.

Some games are linked to precise linguistic structures and can attain an optimal linguistic result. Many have the clear advantage of offering true and proper "drills", where *chunks of language*³ are repeated several times with the correct intonation and accent. These games include: "What's the time, Mr. Wolf?" "Who's got the ring?" or "Please, Mr Crocodile". Also, the language is reproduced in an authentic context with the real goal of participating in the game.

Other games are particularly adaptable and can be varied to address different linguistic objectives. "Simon says", for example, can be used to reinforce learning not only action verbs, but also different types of lexical items: emotions, types of food, transportation means, animals, etc. In order to make it more stimulating from a cognitive point of view, the children themselves can give commands, even with the use of flashcards.

On the other hand, more creative and less repetitive games linked to linguistic pronunciation include those that involve the so-called *information gap*⁴ activities. Here it is important for children to have the linguistic abilities needed to respond to the assignment; otherwise, the excitement to finish the activity can lead to the use of L1.

To ensure success in every activity (especially for the games), the instructions must be simple and clear; one must incorporate 'step by step' commands in L2 in the lesson plan. Precise instructions offer adequate and accessible linguistic input as well as the opportunity to listen with a real purpose. It is often easier to give instructions in L1 but this robs the students of important examples of authentic communication, which limits the learning process.

Even the class space, its set-up and the formation of groups contribute to the game's success. The choice of available space (for example, the gym) should be considered an important criterion for particular games, as important as the choice of groups or pairs. A careful choice can prevent children who are hyperactive and display inappropriate behaviors from playing together. This attention to the class dynamics allows the teacher to give attention to children with different cognitive and linguistic abilities

³ word strings perceived as a whole and not analyzed in their single components.

⁴ this could involve an activity in which the children look for differences between similar drawings and exchange information to complete the assignment.

and to give them the possibility to learn to work with all members of the class, encouraging cooperation. Organizing different types of groups for the different activities can also become a ritual of the game and a variety of parameters could be used to form the groups or pairs. It can be done with letters, numbers, colors, connecting cards, birthdays, eye color or length of shoelaces. These are also fun and less discriminating ways of forming groups compared to simply pointing to the students or (even worse) having them choose the teams themselves. They also have the double function of adding five minutes of language practice before each activity, like for example, "What letter have you got?" or "When's your birthday?", questions necessary for the students to be able to organize the groups.

Another aspect to remember are the rules underlying the game and these must be defined clearly from the beginning so that the game does not degenerate into arguments and anger. The children must understand the objectives (which are not limited to winning or finishing first), the penalties (for who cheats or does not use the L2) and if necessary, the scoring system, which the teacher should also control.

The use of expressions such as: "Whose turn is it?", "Go on!", "One point for us", "He's cheating", "Try again", can be considered an important moment of the discussion and of the bargaining abilities that take place during every game.

Finally, we can conclude that the games in ELT are an authentic, motivating and fun way to produce and reinforce the language learned. These are mostly based on tasks and focused on the student; they offer a natural exposure to the language and encourage a real interaction, developing in children a social ability of cooperation and turn-taking as well as a competence capacity without fears or aggressiveness. Finally, they have the clear advantage of being what children love to do most and elicit involvement, enthusiasm and the gratification which promote efficient learning.

1.2 Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response (or TPR) was developed by Dr James Asher⁵, following the developmental phases of the child's first language. It is based on the idea of giving a comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982)⁶

⁵Asher, J. (1965). Learning Another Language through Actions: The complete Teacher's Guide, Los Angeles.

⁶"Comprehensible input" (Krashen 1982) means being exposed to appropriate linguistic elements to efficiently allow acquisition: in fact, the language must be comprehensible, interesting and must offer structures which are slightly superior to those already possessed by the student; it must not follow a grammatical sequence and must not be focused on form but on content.

through commands which the student responds to with physical actions rather than verbal phrases. It also involves a silent period, in which the students are not pushed to speak until they feel sure they are able to give each other orders. TPR belongs to a more humanistic approach to teaching. It does not inhibit children and does not make linguistic demands which are too high; instead, it considers "high and low affective filters" (Krashen, 1982)⁷ in the learning process, minimizing the level of stress and promoting a relaxed and pleasant environment.

TPR also has the advantage of working on the right cerebral hemisphere, which dominates learning during the early years, while focusing on the processes of body language such as intonation, rhythm of speech and visual imagery. Learning occurs through physical activities, helping the development of psychomotor coordination. This approach develops comprehension abilities, focusing attention on meaning rather than on form. Finally, it addresses the needs of the different learning styles.

A common misunderstanding of TPR is that it is useful only for teaching imperatives or action verbs; this is actually an efficient way to expand the vocabulary of the different arguments, times and phrase structures. There are paths and textbooks entirely based on TPR. The majority of teachers, however, tend to use this activity only as a part of their didactic repertoire for small children. This approach, on the other hand, uses in a simple, efficient and motivational way, pedagogic elements which are valuable for different types of learners, based on the process of L1 acquisition.

TPR can be used in the various phases of the lesson. In fact, it can be used for an efficient presentation of the language, for practice and reinforcement, and can become a natural means of "recycling" the language, especially in moments at the beginning and end of the lesson and in the general management of the class.

Finally, this can be extended to *storytelling*, songs, drama and to more creative tasks.

TPR storytelling (or TPRS) is when children learn a story through a series of preparatory activities – preparation of the lexicon using figures and actions, common structures through the TPR method – and after the true and proper storytelling, with the teacher telling the story through the actions the children must mimic and then, when they are ready, try to reproduce in small groups using the actions once again and miming. A story which lends itself to this approach is "Going on a Bear Hunt" by

⁷ According to Krashen (1982), "High affective filters" like stress, anxiety, "interferences" of different types can negatively affect the learning process. On the other hand, "low affective filters", which result from feelings and a good experience in the class, can promote the efficiency of the learning process.

Rosen, M and H. Oxenbury, or "The Frog Family", illustrated by Philips. S. in "Young Learners" (Phillips 1993).

TPR is also good for songs. A typical example of a song used by TPR is "The Hokey Cokey". Instead of insisting on immediate reproduction and repetition, the teacher should follow the commands of the lessons with actions and make the children simply repeat the numerous physical actions used for other lessons. The children will begin to sing when they are ready. This is much more fun and efficient than breaking up the songs into "verbal chunks", which the students must then learn by heart.

Any simple drawing or creative activity can be included in the TPR techniques. For example, one can create a mask, while the teacher illustrates and gives orders in L2. The command is repeated several times during the execution of the command itself:

"Take the paper in your hands"
"Fold the paper"
"Cut out two eyes"
"Cut out a nose"
"Cut out the mouth"
"Colour the mask blue".

Even Lego is an often forgotten resource: children can build in pairs or groups while the teacher gives instructions indicating color, size and sequence of bricks.

In short, the TPR method is certainly important in the student's ELT activity, since it gives him/her the opportunity to learn a language in the same way he/she learned the native language, with much natural input in a spontaneous relationship with the environment. TPR allows the child to learn by doing, and develops both linguistic abilities and psychomotor coordination.

It is a multisensory approach which respects different learning styles in a fun and motivating way.

2. Songs

Introduction

It is important to remember that there are both linguistic and affective factors which require the use of music in the class. From a linguistic point of view, it is possible to cover many aspects and functions of the language, just as it is possible to develop listening and speech. It is fun, motivating and easy to learn; music can also help long-term memory.

2.1 Behind the songs

Music and songs – even more so than the narration of a story – are a source of input in learning one’s own language, a tool often used for calming or distracting the child. Songs are usually the first presented form of relatively complex and rich language, which the child is capable of producing. The same occurs in the L2 class: through songs, children are able to produce a wide array of structures and a rich variety of words in a natural and spontaneous context.

Music also has the advantage of helping memory, teaching the use of both brain hemispheres and adapting to children with different learning styles⁸ (visual, verbal and kinesthetic, etc.). Music can also help create a welcoming atmosphere and allows the expression of emotions and the sense of belonging to the group, through every student’s participation in the activity.

It is known that songs also have the ability to communicate positive energy, a sense of harmony and serenity, which promotes a positive learning environment. Songs can also be used in class as a source of comprehensible input, offering a pleasant model of presentation and of practice of the language, especially if the song involves actions and commands.

Songs can help reinforce language, consolidate lexicon and structures, favor practicing listening abilities and teaching sounds and rhythm, as well as offer an introduction to the traditions and folklore of a foreign language. Songs are also useful for activities that propose a ritual for beginning or ending the lesson in a pleasant way. As with games, songs can be used to vary the pace of the lesson or activity or to grant the children a pause.

It is important to choose songs with phrases which are relatively short and many repeated words for the ELT activity in class; otherwise it will take a lot of time to memorize and eventually produce. This can rob motivation from both the teacher and the student. Older children can be encouraged to learn pop songs, publicity jingles or songs they listen to on the radio or television or at home with their parents. Don’t think that only five-year-old children have fun with *nursery rhymes* or with traditional songs!

Many songs can be a starting point for discussions and interdisciplinary activities. The careful choice of a song can also be a way of organizing a path for younger students. There are many songs for teaching numbers,

⁸See Gardner, H. (1993), *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. HarperCollins Publishers.

letters, spelling, animals, family, food, musical instruments, time and holidays, to mention just a few.

A song can best be used through a sequence of activities for songs related to a topic, to the lexicon and structures. It is important to use all the material to the fullest and not simply offer the translation of the song (although in some cases the translation of single difficult words might be needed). Taking the time to teach the song and plan the activity for more than one lesson can make the song even more memorable and fun.

TPR songs offer a natural sequence of activities and are perhaps the best for use with smaller children. In fact, they aren't very problematic in terms of meaning; they can be represented with mimicry and actions and learned following the TPR method, offering children much input to internalize the activity, practicing the commands before producing the words. It can often be a good idea to allow the children to listen a few times and clap their hands to the rhythm before the teacher gives the commands.

No one questions the fact that songs are a fundamental instrument for teaching an L2 to children, for many pedagogical, linguistic and emotional reasons. What often happens, however, is that they are considered simply a reward to a highly entertaining activity, for example, translating into L1, ignoring the need for a careful sequence of integrated activities for the presentation and teaching of the song itself.

2.2 Rhymes and chants

Rhymes and *chants* offer brief and repetitive phrases that can be used to reinforce many structures and arguments; inserted into each phase of the lesson, they give the possibility of spontaneous and fun work on the English words, the accent and rhythm, for which the children have a natural predisposition. Children use *rhymes* and *chants* with their peers in a spontaneous way, with expressions such as "I'm better than you", "You can't catch me"; as well as in the more common games in the schoolyard.

The characteristics of repetition and the presence of actions favor the weaker students or those with learning difficulties; these activities are less discriminating for the weaker students, respect the different learning styles, encourage the positive dynamics of the group and cooperative learning, since the students must work together in the production phases. Both *chants* and *rhymes* are used also with the smallest children to help them develop oral comprehension and production abilities. At this age, the students cannot yet produce much autonomously: through the use of *chants* and *rhymes*, they develop some *fluency* and through it, a sense of satisfaction.

Nursery rhymes in particular are like repetitive exercises of the language, but are made more vivacious through the rhyming, actions and fun contexts; also, they can be repeated in many different ways: slowly, quickly, angrily or sadly, expressing several emotions.

English is a language based on rhythm: with *rhymes* and *chants* the student must apply the accents correctly and respect their weak and strong forms.

Traditional *nursery rhymes* have a typical well-known melody, while in the *chants* any rhythm can be used to accompany the words. Some *rhymes* can naturally be changed for didactic reasons.

Both *rhymes* and *chants* can be used to reinforce linguistic structures. *Jazz chants* are particularly flexible and every lexical element or linguistic structure can be paired with a rhythm. They can help teach about types of transportation, frequency adverbs, questions with "does" and "why"; in sum, a vast array of linguistic elements. The lexical elements can be slowly united in the course of a *chant*, often through stimuli born from images or from what the students decide on their own.

Chants and *rhymes* can even be used in story-telling, in role-playing and in drama activities. The teacher can whisper the words (like a stage whisper at the theater), to allow the students to concentrate on the expression of feelings and personalities through body language and gestures.

Nursery rhymes are clearly less versatile than *chants* from the linguistic point of view, even though they can play an important role in communicating traditions and culture.

See, for example, the *rhyme* "Polly put the kettle on"

Polly put the kettle on
Polly put the kettle on
Polly put the kettle on
We'll all have tea.

Sukey take it off again
Sukey take it off again
Sukey take it off again
They've all gone home (traditional)

The text can introduce a cultural lesson about tea and its role in the discourse of the English, perhaps also teaching children how to prepare a cup of tea.

Chants and *rhymes* will surely be inefficient if there are no activities created around them geared towards making the student understand the

sense of what he/she is doing. One must pay attention when presenting the language, familiarizing the student with the rhythm and providing different chances to repeat. It is surely not recommended to try to do everything in the space of a single lesson, but perhaps to gradually build a path with phases carefully organized by level.

Follow up activities should not be left behind and could include *puzzles*, *labyrinths*, *matching games*, *drawing*, *role-playing*, writing activities or also recording the child's performance. These types of activities give the students the possibility to think and consolidate; they also give them the great satisfaction of producing something concrete.

Rhymes and *chants* are perfect tools for developing the language needed in the class. In sum, although presented in the shadow of games and songs, *rhymes* and *chants* are full of great potential, unfortunately not fully used and often excluded from the teacher's repertoire. It is surely fair to start experimenting with simple *chants* and slowly build lists of thematic *chants* and *rhymes* to be introduced during the most appropriate moments of the lesson.

3. Storytelling

Introduction

Storytelling activities play a role of primary importance both in children's educational process and in the early teaching of English as a foreign language. Narration plays a central role in the growth and education of children, for it is a motivating and fun activity in addition to being a socially shared exercise. It stimulates a positive attitude towards the foreign language, which is perceived as a real and complete experience. Finally, it develops listening and concentration; it stimulates fantasy and allows children to make predictions about possible future events.

3.1 Presenting the stories

The choice of stories can be made based on several criteria:

- the variety of contents, created to stimulate interest, entertainment and the desire to 're-read' the story presented;
- the stylistic characteristics such as the use of rhyme, repetition, humorous aspects, the possibility for interaction;
- the length of the stories, narrative clarity, captivating illustrations.

There are psychological, cultural⁹ and linguistic criteria that can be used to choose among the many stories available. In terms of linguistic criteria, the language used during narration should present models similar to the spoken language, rhymes, onomatopoeic sounds, a correct intonation, lexical repetitions, opportunities for imitation to encourage the use of memory and to stimulate the children to make predictions in order to improve the trust in themselves and in their own abilities.

As a first didactic phase, we identify the story presentation. The introduction should incite the children's curiosity and capture their attention, providing the motivation to listen. The pre-reading activities should present a reading of the illustrations and/or drawing or miming activities which will help present or review the key vocabulary and linguistic structures.

Next will be the story narration: the presentation activities are followed by a first narration targeting oral listening and production abilities. Children can be encouraged to participate, mimicking or reproducing the sound dialogues or choruses.

The activities that can follow the reading of a story are of two types:

- multisensory: drawings, manual activities, dance, games, *storytelling*, representations; these help in developing self-esteem and the desire to learn;
- based on the language or on the text: *matching, labeling, drills, gap-filling or sequencing exercises*

All of these activities can be completed in pairs or in groups.

When a story is presented, one must follow key criteria such as the careful choice of arguments (both in terms of variety and significance), the analysis of the narrative aspects (linguistic as well as stylistic) and the importance of the graphic aspects.

A captivating introduction and linguistic and/or TPR-based activities (see for example Gerngross and Puchta, 1996¹⁰) are the elements that make *story-telling* efficient and captivating.

3.2 From listening to production

There is a great variety of possible exercises to use during *storytelling* activities, which connect the receptive listening phase to the interaction

⁹ Ellis, Brewster (1991), *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers*, Harlow, Longman.

¹⁰ Gerngross, G. & H.Puchta. (1996). *Do and Understand: 50 action stories for young learners*, Harlow, Longman. The text offers a number of TPR activities where the target language is presented together with movements to be followed.

and reproduction elements of the main linguistic aspects presented with narration. Next we propose some examples of these activities.

Listen and Repeat: exercises used with the stories that contain lexical repetitions and choruses. Listening to words repeated several times allows the children to predict and increase trust in their own comprehension abilities.

Listen and Discriminate: exercises presented with stories that have rhymes, onomatopoeic sounds or very structured choruses. The listening activities are focused on the presentation of similar sounds: the students must discriminate them and establish if they are similar or different. These last ones are very useful if referring to sounds which are very frequent in English but unusual in Italian.

Listen and Do: the children listen to be able to follow simple and brief instructions with TPR exercises like, for example, 'Simon says'. Other similar exercises are, for example, listening and then drawing or coloring elements in a story (working on color, form and dimension); listening to guess the identity of one of the characters; listening to match the oral word to an image.

Look, Listen and Repeat: in this type of exercise, the teacher points to an image that illustrates a new lexical element saying "Look! It's a...." . The children then repeat in chorus in order to practice the word's pronunciation. The teacher verifies the comprehension and then the pronunciation with a new question: "What's this?"

Listen and participate: the children participate in the narration of the story by repeating key words suggested by the teacher while the story is told once again. The teacher will pay special attention to the pauses, the intonation, the use of visual stimuli, facial expressions and the possibility of actively involving the children in the narration.

Storytelling activities offer opportunities to stimulate receptive and productive abilities. Thanks to narration, one accustoms the ear to listening new sounds, words and phrases, in addition to reviewing and consolidating other linguistic elements. The children react to what they've heard through actions, instructions, identifications and repetitions. After that, comprehension activities can involve even written materials.

3.3 Puppets and visual aids

Puppets, images and gestures are very important for making the storytelling activities efficient, especially when the children begin studying a foreign language at an early age. The children remember the words as

though they were images; stories accompanied by vivacious and colorful images and by non-verbal stimuli facilitate the memorization process.

Puppets are particularly efficient in the phase of lexicon presentation, during narration and in the activities that follow, in creating interest and motivation, helping children establish a relation with the story (feel personally identified with the characters and the situations) and facilitating concentration and memorization.

Finally, puppets are very versatile and the children themselves are able to build them using new or recycled materials; the dolls can play the role of the presenter, of the partner that speaks with the teacher or the part of an animated representation. The variety of possibilities offered by the puppets favors a multisensory approach that stimulates the acquisition of new linguistic input.

The manual activities for images present one of the most important phases of storytelling. The images drawn or painted by the children can be used to re-narrate the story visually and eventually make a book. Posters, images and various illustrations can be cut and assembled into thematic collages connected to the story. Visual aids such as the blackboard, posters, images, *flashcards*, *realia*, internet, CD ROMs, and audio-visual aids provide visual stimuli which help the children understand what they have heard. Visual aids clarify the meaning of words used in the narration and can be used to encourage the children to remember and re-narrate the story. The video images that accompany the narration or that present the story itself provide important visual support and encourage the prediction of a series of events. The choice of video is crucial as long as it is linguistically efficient: it should be adapted to the children's age, to their linguistic "I", it should be close to their interests and should assure the possibility of seeing it several times.

All types of visual aids – from puppets to audiovisual ones – help the imagination and address the child directly, as well as his/her way of interpreting the world. They should therefore be taken advantage of during all the various phases of the *storytelling* activities in order to promote active participation, clarify and consolidate the linguistic elements, involve all the senses.

4. Drama

Introduction

Drama activities are adaptable to younger children for several reasons. Surely it is very motivating for the student to see a product at the end of the process. Children are already familiar with playing "pretend": even the calmest of students can trust and lose inhibitions. Drama develops the cooperation of the group and satisfies the different learning styles. It can

also be used for cross-curricular¹¹ arguments, offering a rich variety of linguistic models and communicative practice and is often an efficient means for getting to know new cultures.

4.1 Role-playing

Pretending to be teachers, moms, shopkeepers, imitating and copying the adults around them, i.e., taking on roles, is a natural part of children's games. It is therefore important to introduce role-playing in the teaching of English, not simply to repeat dialogues, but to make children take on roles, using, adapting and extending situations and linguistic tools taken from textbooks or from other materials and teaching activities.

With respect to familiarity with role-playing, very often children feel inhibited and insecure in the L2 and find difficulty in transferring the rituals of emotional expression to the learning environment of the new language. Finally, it is suggested to introduce the idea of drama and role-playing with simple gestures, small "acting" tasks and various TPR activities, for example, "Mirrors"¹² and "Statues"¹³ or even let the children invent body movements to express emotional states: happiness, sadness, anger, boredom, hunger, tiredness, being cold and hot.

The younger students often find it difficult to work in pairs and groups and often in role-playing it is necessary to work with the whole class under the teacher's guidance. The books for the first level of the series "Ladybird Books"¹⁴ are ideal for children who start expressing themselves with role-playing. Reading "Just Pretending"¹⁵, for example, allows children to experiment with different roles. Children can be shown figures or other stimuli to guess the character; they can be encouraged to take on different roles and repeat the phrases with the actions and adapted tones of voice.

Chants are a fundamental introduction to role-playing, using words and actions through rhythm, and often render the linguistic aspect less difficult thanks to the use of intonation, accent and other prosodic elements. It also allows practicing "blocks" of language instead of single words. Chants can be presented to the class following precise sequences planned by the teacher, after which the children can take on the various roles, dividing the class into two groups, with the teacher working as conductor.

¹¹ for other references and contents of a cross-curricular course: Girard Denis.1991 *English Teacher Guide*, New Edition Harlow: Penguin. (Chapter 9, *English across the curriculum*).

¹² Student A mimes an action: taking a shower; playing soccer; getting dressed; eating an apple; Student B reproduces the actions as in a mirror that reflects them.

¹³ children must reproduce the forms of objects with their bodies, while the others try to guess them.

¹⁴ Ladybird Books, see <http://www.ladybird.co.uk/>

¹⁵ "Just Pretending" (Macgregor C., *Off to Schools* - Level 1 Start reading: Ladybird)

"Mess? What a mess"¹⁶ is a great reading/chant to begin a role-playing activity.

Even songs and *nursery rhymes* can be a useful introduction to role-playing. The children pretend to be the characters they find in the *rhymes*, for example "The Grand Old Duke of York" or "Jack and Jill". This is often more motivating than trying to make them learn language fragments which are somewhat difficult and archaic. The song "There's a hole in my bucket" can be useful with older children to learn facial mimicry and body gestures and therefore to understand the dialogue in the song.

Puppets can be a useful tool in role-playing activities; they can be used to introduce, present or practice the dialogues. Also, they can allow simplified role-playing with the whole class, while reducing the linguistic elements that must be learned.

Even masks are appreciated by children and help them enter into the role, as well as allow the shyer children to overcome feelings of embarrassment and of inhibition.

Dialogues and situations can be created easily around the language and the topics used in class. The situation and roles can be chosen from everyday life, at the supermarket, at the doctor's, at school or at home, as well as from the world of the child's imagination, with roles like princes, princesses, dragons and knights.

As a consequence, a careful sequence of activities is essential for success and the improvement of the learning process.

The first step is making sure the children possess the linguistic tools to be able to do role-playing. Language can be presented through actions, flashcards and clarification techniques or through dialogues to be reorganized or connections between characters (particularly with older students). If the language has already been presented, it may be necessary to present it once again with warm up activities.

The second phase is to set the situation and reinforce the language presented. This can be done through a guided activity which explains ideas, describing the scene, characters and what they say to each other or simply through images, puppets or actions.

Once the dialogue is defined, this can be repeated together as a class, before assigning the kids their roles. With the youngest children it is preferable to conduct role-playing as a guided activity in class.

The second to last phase is the real and proper role-playing. Obviously, this last part needs to be repeated as many times as possible. In order to avoid boredom, a good idea is for the children to change partners, yet

¹⁶"Mess? What a mess" (Macgregor C. ,*Tiger Clouds* Level 1 Start reading: Ladybird)

always maintaining the same role. With more advanced classes one can introduce more effortful activities like *information gap role plays*¹⁷ and *role cards*, as illustrated below.

STUDENT A

You have one pound to spend. How many sweets can you buy?

STUDENT B

You are the shop assistant. These are the sweets and prices.

Bubble gum 50 pence Chocolate bar 66 pence Jelly Babies 45 pence Toffee bar 20 pence Green Lollipops 10 pence Red and yellow lollipops 15 pence
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The final step is obviously feedback, applicable in the form of performance or video or posters with dialogues; these are the efficient ways of carrying out the activity to completion.

Role playing is an activity that can be adapted to many language learning situations; it is a great tool for speaking and practicing a more controlled communicative production. It is through role-playing that language learning becomes more creative, communicative and expressive, often at a subconscious level¹⁸.

¹⁷ these are activities that require an information exchange. The students have different pieces of information and interact to find the part they need to complete the task. It is important that the information be linked to the child's world, to his/her experiences.

¹⁸ One of the most significant aspects of work with drama is surely learning in a natural and not artificial way.

4.2 Sketches

A sketch is by definition a small part of a fun show. The sketch is one step closer to role-playing and is simpler than the representation of an entire comedy with all its acts and scenes. It has numerous characters, but tends to rotate around a particular event such as a birthday or a day of vacation. The fun part comes from funny material which is entertaining for children and also from their natural ability to entertain adults.

Drama in the class can be a new element for children and they can initially show some sort of inhibition. As with the introduction to role-playing, here it is also essential to divide the drama activities into levels and allow the children to use their bodies, facial mimicry and gestures as a communication instrument. Short miming activities can be adapted for use in different linguistic contexts and inserted into the different phases of the lesson.

Sketches can be invented by the teacher or even in collaboration with the children; they can be adapted from dialogues from the textbooks or from simple stories using some of the EFL sketches for children illustrated in *Drama with children*, by S Phillips¹⁹.

Most of the time is not dedicated to jokes or to the representation of scenes, but to the presentation of story dialogues in comprehensible and manipulable fragments. Dividing the story or dialogue and its contents into more than one lesson is perhaps the best way to complete a complex task.

The teacher needs to closely examine the linguistic contents of the texts chosen and decide which elements need to be taught. It may be necessary to establish a basic lexicon. For example, to adapt the series *Meg and Mog*²⁰ for sketches, one must include teaching the characters and other important objects and events. This can often be done efficiently through images, miming activities and images of Total Physical Response. Once the linguistic aspect has been covered, the teacher must present the situation and the characters, through images, dolls and explicit meaning techniques, making students practice 'predictive skills' and asking them specific questions:

"What's this?"

"Who's this?"

"What's his/her name?"

"Where are they?"

"What's happening?"

"What are they doing?"

"Where are they?"

"What are they doing?"

¹⁹ Phillips, S. (1993), *Drama with Children*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

²⁰ H. Nicoll, J. Pienkowski, *Meg and Mog* (Picture Puffins).

Therefore, part of the text that is being prepared can be read using various techniques. For example, the teacher can use puppets to pronounce the dialogue or say the jokes and let the children decide to which character they belong: this adds the advantage of verifying comprehension. The teacher can also narrate and mime the actions and/or explain what has been said. With the older children it is possible for the teacher to provide the jokes and ask the students to arrange them in logical order.

The next moment of this path is production. With younger children it is a good idea to respect the "silent period" and grant them time to internalize the language used. The teacher can read the dialogues again and let the children mime them in silence or put the jokes into *chant* form, helping the children avoid stumbling over the words and in memorization.

The procedure is repeated until all the linguistic elements have been treated and the whole story or sketch has been studied and practiced. In the beginning of each new section, children must be asked to act out what happened until then. The teacher can present the jokes until the children are ready to produce them autonomously. Most children will want to try to produce the sounds together with the actions, which facilitates the memorization of the jokes. If individual roles are necessary, the best solution is obviously to involve all children; therefore it can be necessary to divide the class into two groups or invent more characters whenever possible. The children can also be used as speaking props²¹ or narrators. Older children are asked to learn the jokes in groups or in pairs; the younger children can only be expected to mime the dialogues. Ages and fundamental linguistic abilities should be considered when determining the final goals of the sketch.

Using sketches in class with the younger students may require a large time investment, also in terms of the linguistic contents and the final product requested. A sketch can be used to review and consolidate linguistic elements already presented or for introducing new ones, through a tool other than the textbook. It is a technique that focuses on linguistic communication and on meaning rather than on language form itself.

²¹ The students could be trees or flowers that speak or make comments during the production.