

Encouraging Young Learners to Speak and Write

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Abstract

Language production is not easy for beginners, because their vocabulary, grammar and general knowledge about the language is very limited. Especially for children it can be a great challenge. They still have problems expressing themselves in their mother tongue and have only started to learn how to read and write. In German primary schools, the children learn English mainly by imitation and repetition. English is only taught two or three lessons per week. Therefore, the progress is very slow and independent production is unlikely. Toys can be helpful material to encourage speaking and writing and to give room for creative language use. They are emotionally appealing to children and playing with them creates a relaxed and fun atmosphere.

The first part of this paper consists of theoretical considerations on language production in the English as a foreign language classroom and the use of toys as teaching material. In the second part, practical applications are shown from a project which has been carried out in primary schools in Germany.

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1 Introduction

Speaking in a foreign language isn't always easy for children who have only just started to learn it. Some quickly use English whenever possible, whereas some are very shy at the beginning and don't want to speak alone in front of the class. However, what they can say at the beginning is limited due to the lack of word knowledge, grammar and practice.

Writing in English can be even harder for children, because they have only started to learn how to write in their mother tongue. Empty lines in front of them can be frightful, especially for those who have problems with writing in general.

Teachers are role models and can demonstrate how to speak and write in English, but eventually, the children only learn how to produce the language by doing it themselves. They are responsible for giving them a variety of opportunities to develop further. When doing this, they need to make sure that the children are motivated. The following section shows examples of approaches to encourage speaking and writing.

2 How is Speaking Taught to Young Learners?

In the beginning, English lessons are often teacher-centred. The teacher has to give input, so that the children get used to the sound of English and learn through listening. At the same time, opportunities need to be provided for speaking. Some children might not want to use the foreign language right away. Therefore, speaking might often happen in a chorus. Some children will already feel confident enough to speak English alone, however, their speaking needs to be supported by the teacher. "The first building blocks that allow children to move from listening to speaking and to begin to participate in interactions with others are so-called 'unanalysed chunks'. This means that children can remember phrases from previously heard input and use them without conscious analysis" (Pinter, 2006, p. 56). At first, children imitate and repeat chunks used by the teacher. This can be for example a greeting such as "Good morning!", a sentence that is used during a game like "Close your eyes!" or simply words that indicate what can be seen on a flashcard, such as "black cat". Chunks help the children to produce the foreign language faster without having to think of every individual word (cf. *ibid*, p. 56). Thornbury (2009, p. 38) talks about "assisted-performance". The teacher provides a supportive framework within which the learners can extend their proficiency. Most common in the early stages of language learning are conversations in which the teacher asks a question, the children answer it and the teacher evaluates the response. This pattern is called IRE (Initiation – Response – Evaluation) (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006, p. 112). An example of this could be the questions "Which colour is the apple?", the answer of the child "Red" and the reaction of the teacher "Yes".

At some point, the teacher has to "proceed from activities that prepare communication to communicative activities" (Legutke et al., 2009, p. 55). It is necessary to guide children to independence and help them to construct their own utterances. Repetition and imitation neither require free and creative production nor the transfer of what the children have learned to a new context (cf. Mindt & Schlüter, 2007, p. 29). They are dependent on their role model and probably can't react without it in unfamiliar and authentic conversations. It is important to keep in mind that not only chunks help the

children to become proficient speakers. “In order to make a foreign language really work for learners, we have to go beyond lists of vocabulary (nouns, adjectives, etc.) or lists of structures or functions. We have to teach the language as a dynamic system, one that enables the learner to create language rather than reproduce it and provide a learning context which is congenial to risk-taking, uncertainty, problematic situations and a real sense of purpose” (Hurrell, 1999, p. 75). A convenient activity is to ask learners to use a certain word in a whole sentence with the words they already know. This can of course only be done when they know basic vocabulary, including some adjectives, nouns and verbs. Simple sentences such as “The apple is big” or “The tiger is angry” can make them clear that they can say something without the teacher’s help.

Some children might start to bring in spontaneous utterances and try to speak English with the teacher when they want to say something personal or react to statements of the teacher. To give an example, the teacher could say “I can’t find the magnets” and a child might want to help by showing where they are and comment this by saying “Here”. It is important to give room for these spontaneous contributions and show the children that they are welcome to do that. Teachers should provide an appropriate support in situations in which children express something that is relevant and meaningful to them, and in which they might mix the foreign language and the mother tongue (Legutke et al., 2009, p. 56). Teachers can tell the children the words which they need in English, because the children often lack the language which is necessary to express what they want to say.

Current research from Germany shows that more possibilities should be provided for creative language production. Within the EVENING study (*Evaluation Englisch in der Grundschule – Evaluation English in Primary School*), only a quarter of the tested children came up with own utterances in dialogues. The majority used chunks only (Groot-Wilken & Paulick, 2009, p. 173). Another study called TAPS (*Testing and Assessing Spoken English in Primary School*) showed that when the teacher prepared the children to tell a story intensively within the lessons, they were able produce more complex sentences, not only utterances consisting of one or two words (Diehr et al., 2007, pp. 99-100). To sum up, teachers should enable more situations in which the children get the chance to develop their fluency.

It is important for the teacher to create a classroom atmosphere in which the children feel comfortable. Activities need to be chosen in which the children don’t feel too self-conscious about speaking, feel less under pressure and are willing to try things out (Scrivener, 2011, p. 213). “Children will speak up and contribute to the lesson if they feel happy and secure. It is also crucial that children understand that they can speak up even when they are not sure about their contributions or have only a fragmented answer or idea to offer. This principle has important implications for careful error corrections and plenty of encouragement” (Pinter, 2006, p. 60).

3 How is Writing Taught to Young Learners?

When children start writing in a foreign language, they copy single words and simple sentences from the blackboard or textbook. They do different easy exercises, such as cloze activities or matching words with pictures. These exercises slowly introduce them to the written English language, so that they become familiar with its characteristics and differences to their mother tongue. After a while, short texts can be

produced. “At lower levels, we may give them clear models to follow, and they will write something that looks very much like the original. Such **guided writing** will help students produce appropriate texts even with fairly limited English” (Harmer, 2008, p. 113, emphasis in original). An example for a text can be provided which the children can then adapt to their liking. They might choose from different words to change the model text, or simply choose what they would like to say. To give an example, a text with a short biography of a fictive child can animate the children to write about themselves, using the structures provided, such as “I live in...” and “My hobby is...”.

When the children reach a higher level, activities are important that slowly lead them to writing which is more creative and enables them to communicate personal meanings (cf. Gerngross, 2007; as cited by Legutke et al., 2009, p. 60). When encouraging writing without a model as an orientation, it is best to start with single sentences and then move towards short texts, consisting of only a couple of sentences, rather than asking them to write a half or whole page. The tasks should always be relevant to the learners. They should write for a purpose and not only to please the teacher (cf. Scrivener, 2011, p. 243). It is necessary to provide a stimulus for writing, such as pictures or a collection of objects (Hadfield & Hadfield, 2008, p. 119). For children who have a limited vocabulary, it is important to make sure that they can say something with the vocabulary they have already learned. In addition, words and structures can be collected together beforehand through a brainstorming session. Furthermore, they should write for an audience. The audience is crucial, so the children are not just writing for themselves, but can actually show the results to others. The idea behind that is to achieve a “product pride” (Harmer, 2007, p. 328), which motivates the children to write again and maybe even write more when they see that others have written a longer text or were more creative. To encourage extended writing and to sustain the motivation, it is recommended not to correct the texts all the time. This is to ensure that the children aren’t worried about correct spelling and grammar (Cameron, 2001, p. 155). However, writing cannot provide an opportunity to work on your fluency, but also to practice the use of a certain aspect, such as a tense or personal pronouns.

4 What are Reasons for Using Toys?

It has been shown that children “are interested in the meaning and function of new language [...] holistically, in order to play a game, sing a song, or act out a story” (Pinter, 2006, p. 84). A research project by Biricik and Özkan (2001) highlights exactly that point. In addition, they note that young learners like hands-on and physical activities. Another project by Bechler (2014, p. 217) demonstrates that children remembered aspects of lessons best that they enjoyed. Again, mostly hands-on activities were named. These findings can be explained by the fact that children learn by seeing, hearing, touching and interacting (cf. Harmer, 2007, p. 82). Toys enable this and are also ideal for holistic learning because they are emotionally appealing to children. They allow children to play while using their minds and hands, and can be used in several ways, giving children opportunities to speak and write. Young children might not be motivated to learn English, because they haven’t got any purpose for it yet. “Children may not see the point of English. But they do see the point of doing interesting tasks, games and activities” (Scrivener, 2011, p. 321). As playing with toys always makes sense for the children and are connected with fun, they are perfect as teaching material.

In English lessons, learners collect experiences through trying out, so that they can later on, in their real life, act with native speakers or use English as a lingua franca with other non-native speakers. This procedure of transferring what they have acquired from a practice-situation to another actual situation, even though not conscious, is familiar to children through playing and the use of toys. "Certain types of games (such as: role playing [...]) make for excellent training for participating in situations that are complex and that the children will come across in everyday life. [...] When they play, children do what they have not done before, they take the risk consisting of trials and experimentation under different roles and actions [...]. Therefore, playing is a dialogue between reality and imagination" (Šagud & Petrović Sočo, 2014, p. 281). What they learn through play is important. Maybe it is not relevant at the time, but will definitely be in the future. "[...] the skills needed for survival in adult life [...] are perhaps learnt best in a game where they are broken down into manageable components and can be perfected without damaging consequences" (Cook, 2000, p. 43). When enabling playing time with toys in English lessons, children can do the same as they do at home in their mother tongue: they can try out and learn something in a secure framework without being afraid of making mistakes or someone laughing at them. The only differences are that the playing is directed by the teacher and the language is English.

Interesting, surprising, unusual, exaggerated and funny contents are important for young learners to activate and motivate them to get involved (Legutke et al. 2009, p. 51). Toys and playing enable that, because they leave room for imagination and creation. Every new setting can be different from the last, so there are numerous activities which can be done and topics that can be dealt with. Funny contexts with special characters can be given. A playing situation is something created by the children and therefore something of their own. This can motivate them a lot. Furthermore, the foreign language should be introduced in a real context and should be lifelike (ibid, p. 52). To play with toy figures and to let them speak is a common situation for children and takes place in their mother tongue on a daily basis. Therefore, a close link is drawn to their life. For example, a dialogue with a shop assistant is something that the children come across in their life, although to some extent supported or handled by adults. Toys cannot only be used for actual play, but also to introduce and learn vocabulary. They can provide a concrete context which supports the teacher's input and provide motivation to write about them.

It is not only toys and playing that can motivate children to speak and write English. "Success in the task" (Fisher, 1990) is important for learning in general. When we do something well, we are more likely to do it again and put in more effort (Littlejohn, 2001, p. 6). The task doesn't have to be very easy, as long as the children feel pleasure. "[...] if students perceive that a task is difficult but experience feelings of joy, relief or pride while doing it, they tend to adjust their perceptions and become willing to try new activities [...]" (Méndez López, 2011, p. 44). Although the children might not have many experiences in writing and speaking, they can be confronted with it quite early. Scaffolding is of great importance. Teachers can help their learners to communicate by encouraging them and providing possible elements of the conversation as well as support them to create own utterances (Scrivener, 2011, p. 227). Language structures can be given to the children in advance so they can use them during play and quickly get the feeling they can contribute actively. Especially

for incommunicative and cautious learners, toys can help to overcome fears. For more advanced and courageous children, there is a chance given to react and interact spontaneously, for example in an open-ended role-play. When playing, children focus on the toys and learn English by using it. Nevertheless it needs to be made clear to young learners that playing with toys is about reaching an aim, for example to use the foreign language in a dialogue. Within English lessons, children not only play for fun, they “play with a purpose” (Mateos Rodilla, 2012, p. 40).

5 Which Toys can be used?

Playmobil and *Sylvanian Families* are ideal toys. Children love them and playing with them sets no limits to imagination and creativity. Whereas *Playmobil* can often be bought as a whole set with figures and equipment, e.g. a hotel or police station, the animal figures of *Sylvanian Families* can be bought separately, e.g. a cat mother, father, sister, and brother. Other things available include e.g. houses, shops, cars, furniture and little objects (e.g. food and clothes).

All of the below described activities have been attempted with learners between seven and ten years old (grade 2 until grade 4) within a project carried out in primary schools. They had started to learn English in the first grade; the written language, however, was introduced in the second half of the second school year. They all knew *Playmobil* beforehand. *Sylvanian Families* were only familiar to some children.

6 Which Speaking Activities can be done?

The children cannot only carry out dialogues and role-plays when acting themselves, but also by using toy figures. When playing with the figures, they can practice interacting with others.

6.1 Making a Date

After the teacher has introduced how to make a date and what to do in your free time, the children can carry out dialogues with *Sylvanian* figures. Two figures, played by two children, can meet and talk about what they want to do together in their free time. The dialogue can include suggesting what to do, reacting to the suggestion and asking for the date and time. A worksheet should be provided which helps the children to structure their dialogue and supports them in case they don't know what to say. This activity works best when the children sit in a circle on the floor or around a table so that everybody can see.



Monkey: "Hello! Let's go cycling."
 Kangaroo: "No, I don't like cycling. Let's play tennis."

6.2 At the Animal Clinic

To practice dialogues, a *Playmobil* set such as the *Animal Clinic* can be used. The teacher first of all introduces dialogues which are usually carried out between a vet or receptionist and the owner of a pet. Important aspects are e.g. making an appointment, telling the vet about what's wrong with the pet (e.g. leg hurts, doesn't eat), and the treatment (e.g. putting on a bandage, giving medicine). Then the children act out a role-play with the *Playmobil* figures. The teacher can support them by narrating what happens and the children play according to what is told and add direct speech to it. For example, the teacher can say "The farmer goes to the clinic with his horse. He tells the vet about the problem". The farmer can say something like "Good morning. My horse is ill. He doesn't eat" and the vet can say "I will examine him".



6.3 Bringing Down the Moon

In the story *Bringing down the moon* by Emmett (2009) the mole is fascinated by the moon and tries to get it down, e.g. by jumping up or throwing a stone at it. He meets the rabbit, the squirrel and the hedgehog who tell him that the moon is not as near as it looks, but he keeps trying. At the end, he falls from a tree and lands in a puddle. He

sees the moon blurring in it and starts to cry because he thinks he has broken the moon. The other animals come by and show him that the beautiful moon is still in the sky.

After the story has been told to the children (and maybe watched as a film), the children first learn the dialogue and later act it out with the *Sylvanian* figures. Requisites such as the tree and the moon can be created by the children. Like in the other examples, the children should have access to a worksheet which helps them to speak if they don't know the dialogue by heart yet. Again, it is recommendable to sit in a circle.



Rabbit: "What's wrong?"
Mole: "I've broken the moon!"

6.4 In the City

A big map with streets allows practice with giving directions, naming shops (e.g. toy shop, clothes shop) and products available in the shops (e.g. teddy bear, T-shirt). While cycling with a *Sylvanian* figure on a bicycle through the streets of the map, the children can collect items from different shops. The shops can either be drawn on the map or empty (shoe) boxes can be used as houses. One child gets a figure, a bicycle and a shopping list (which can be written by the child) and asks the group members which way to go, for example: "I would like to buy carrots. How can I get to the supermarket?" The other group members then give directions on how to get to the shop, using the expressions "Go straight on/ go across the bridge, turn around/ turn left/ turn right into Main street...". The shopkeepers can also be played by children, and a shopping dialogue can be practiced. At the end, roles are switched. This activity needs a lot of preparation through the teacher so that the children know in advance the products on the list, what to say when buying something and how to ask for and give directions.



6.5 Moving into a New House

A *Playmobil* take along *Doll House* can be set up by a group of children according to their wishes, and used to practice describing. Afterwards, they present the family, the house and the family life, using the vocabulary for rooms, furniture and hobbies. They can say sentences such as “Dad is in the bathroom. He takes a bath”. Alternatively, a child can give instructions to another child who then sets up the situation according to what has been said, e.g. “Mum is in the living room. She sits on the armchair and gives milk to the baby”. In addition, questions can be practiced, e.g. “Is the dog on the table?”. The other children then have to answer with “Yes, it is” or “No, it isn’t/ it is in the basket.” Another option could be to use imperatives when playing that the family moves in the new house. For example, the father could give instructions to the mother, such as “Put the baby bed in the bedroom”.

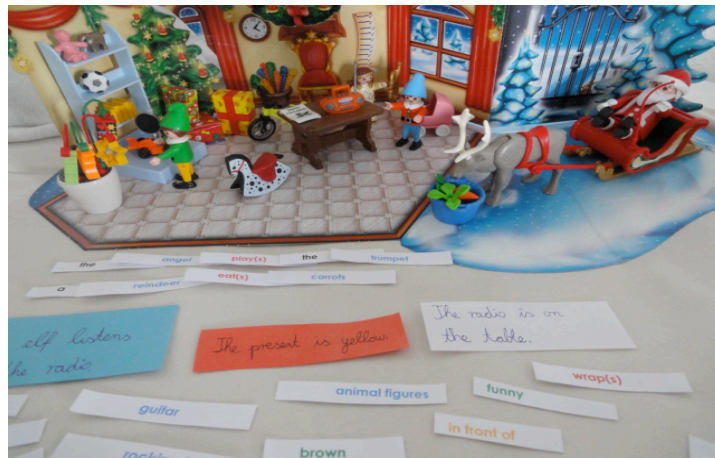


7 Which Writing Activities can be done?

For writing situations, it makes sense to let the children set up a quiescent scene, write something about it and to take a photo of it to hang up in the classroom or to put in their English folders.

7.1 Santa's Grotto

Sentences can be constructed matching a *Playmobil* set such as Santa's Grotto (originally a Christmas advent calendar). A group of children can place all items of the set to their liking. Beginners can then create sentences with given word cards according to their setting. As a support, the word cards can show a translation in the mother tongue on the back. At the end, they write down the sentences in their exercise book and they can put a photo of Santa's Grotto next to it. Advanced learners can write down their own sentences after necessary vocabulary has been introduced. Another option is to take several photos and print them out. Afterwards the children add speech bubbles. An alternative could be to write a description of the picture using there is and there are.



7.2 Family Life

For this task, the children freely chose a setting and arrange a family and items. Then they write sentences about their setting, using the most common prepositions such as on, in, and under. The text is either photographed with the setting, so that the children can write in groups, or the photo of the setting can first be printed out and the children write down a text alone. Stronger learners might want to create a little story out of it and add other details, e.g. "The baby is funny. She is under the table".



7.3 On the Weekend

To practice the present continuous, the children can choose some figures and items and set up a scene. Then they write a sentence that gives information matching the setting. Afterwards, they add more sentences to give details. The teacher can provide different requisites or material from which the children can make own objects. A collection of different photos can tell a whole story (photo story). They can also practice using the personal pronouns *he*, *she*, *it* and *they*, instead of writing the names of the animals.



8 What can be Expected?

The children showed a lot of interest in the toys, and so were highly motivated to speak and write English. Even those children who usually don't want to speak or contribute in role-plays began participating excitedly. The children stuck to the structures suggested by the teacher, but also often creatively phrased their own sentences without fear. In writing, the children overcame their concerns that they wouldn't be able to write and started without hesitation. They asked for words which they didn't know and were proud of their results. They were eager to create more sentences, some being longer than before. Several children even took photos of settings they had created and wrote sentences about them at home on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, the children wanted to bring their own toys to the lessons to be used. The toys the teacher brought were shown to other children at school to explain how English can be learned with them.

Ideally, the long term effect is that when the playing led by the teacher ends, the children continue to play freely (at home or at school) and go on to use the learned language (cf. Mourão, 2014, p. 115). It has been observed by other teachers that when the children played alone with the *Sylvanian Families*, they spoke in English.

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Toys

Playmobil: www.playmobil.com

Sylvanian Families: www.sylvanianfamilies.com