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Making **APPLE** pie out of **PINEAPPLE**

Learning a second language can be fun and exciting, but it can also be frustrating, exhausting, and if it's English, very complex! **Michael Jones** writing from the UK explains



Students are particularly excited by the Handa rag doll and the finger puppet animals.

Adults learning a second language generally agree that the only way to become a competent speaker is to practice, practice, practice.

I recently asked a group of adult students learning English how they thought their tutors could help them learn the language more effectively. One response was: "By involving us in interesting lessons that are at the right level for the learners." By "interesting", students meant

using the artificial scenarios contained in typical lessons. It's better if teachers put the conversation into a day-to-day life context.

If that's what adults think, what about young school children? Not surprisingly, their ideas were the same, though they used the word "fun" much more often!

Injecting fun

So if those are some of the essential ingredients of good teaching and learning, how can we inject fun into children's language learning? Whenever anyone asks me that question, I talk about babies, because the ingredients of effective language learning for toddlers are exactly the same as for older children.

Babies need someone to talk with and something to talk about. Studies of very young children who have rapid language development show that there are two key factors in what their adult teachers do. First, they listen to the child. That provides encouragement for her to practice. Secondly, and this is crucial, the adults talk about what the child is doing.

Conversation about what the child is doing provides the context that makes whatever the adult says more understandable, and thus a more enjoyable experience. Knowing this, we can now plan interesting activities that will engage children and help them practice and remember the words, phrases and grammar they need to communicate in their new language. These steps will also help children to read.

Getting sacked

Story sacks are at the top of my list of fun activities to encourage children's language development. Quite simply this is a bag with a storybook and some toys that represent elements in the story.

Take for example the ever-popular *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. The key elements of this story are a little green caterpillar that on each day of the week eats his way through various foods such as a cup cake, a sausage, a piece of cheese and some strawberries. Eventually he makes a cocoon, and finally becomes a butterfly.

To bring this classic story alive for young children I applied the principles of baby language development. We looked at caterpillars and butterflies, acted out the story, and collected and ate the food items mentioned in the story.

This was enough to kindle the children's interest, but we needed to continue with the theme to encourage them to practice speaking. It is important for children to remember and retell the sequence of a story.

To accomplish that, we focused the children on the story as often as possible. I made some soft toys to represent the foods and got some caterpillar and butterfly puppets. The puppets looked realistic, but have you ever tried to sew a piece of Swiss cheese, complete with holes!

I was confident that the props, while not perfect, would enhance my storytelling efforts and make the lessons more exciting and entertaining. The children were encouraged to use the toys while acting out the story with each other, and by doing so, they were using the vocabulary from the story. This technique encouraged them to look at the book regularly, and it soon became a class favorite that children later learned to read.

As easy as apple pie

Having hit on a winning formula to help children learn English quickly, I wanted to make more story sacks; but the lack of time and my lack of sewing skills prevented me from doing more. Enter Neil Griffiths and his Storysack Co. Neil was a head teacher in the UK for many years, and left the profession to commercially develop a series of story sacks that would encourage children to more easily development language, reading and writing skills.

The successful company makes over 40 story sacks that illustrate classic titles and some of Neil's own children's books. *Handa's Surprise* by Eileen Browne is one of Neil's best-selling sacks. The story is about a young Kenyan girl who fills a basket with fruit, puts it on her head and sets off to see her friend in the next village. On the way, and without Handa knowing, her fruit is stolen piece by piece by a variety of animals, only to be mysteriously replaced by some tangerines.

I brought Handa's story to Topsy Turvy International School in Bangkok on Sukhumvit Soi 4, and it was an instant hit with children from three to seven years old. They reacted with recognition, interest and excitement to the real fruit that we examined, named and talked about. Jessica was very excited to be able to name the pineapple: ``Look!" she exclaimed, ``Apple pie!"

Next, we matched the real fruit with the soft toy fruit from the sack to reinforce the vocabulary and pronunciation. They were particularly excited by the Handa rag doll and the finger puppet animals. I read from the book, and as I read I chose children to act out the story, using the toys.

As expected, the children were enthralled, and after the story session they were eager to act out the story among themselves and to read the book.

Teachers could use the other contents of the sack to extend the children's knowledge, including a non-fiction book about Kenya and a story CD. If I had had time, I would have taught the children to play Mancala, a Kenyan game that also came in the sack. Mancala helps to develop maths skills, as well as English language skills.

I left Topsy Turvy satisfied that the children had enjoyed themselves, and the teachers were confident that the children had learned new vocabulary and English speaking skills in an exciting and stimulating way.

For more information about Story sacks, visit www.storysack.com and for more information on mancala games, visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mancala> . Topsy Turvy International

School, has a website at www.bsbangkok.ac/geninfo.html .

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