

English in the classroom

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For many years now, teaching a foreign language has been about teaching in the language, from the very first beginners' lesson onwards. Primary school English teachers are no exception to this rule, no matter whether English is a second language for them, as for their pupils, or whether they are English native speakers.

Students need to feel from the start that they are not learning another living language just to add a further field of knowledge and an extra academic subject to their studies. They primarily set out to be proficient in the use of an alternative means of communication, in order to be able to take part in linguistic exchanges with people who speak the language. This is a very powerful initial motivation and is founded on the presupposition that anything can be said in this other language, not just what is to be found within the confines of more or less artificial formal exercises.

As English is the language of the English class then the opportunity to learn English, and to hear and speak it, are considerably increased when teachers in particular are careful to ensure the communicative authenticity of the exchanges they find themselves supervising.

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH

Respecting social conventions

1. Greeting people

Good morning, Hello, Hi.

2. Introducing oneself

I'm your English teacher

3. Introducing somebody else

This is Mary and this is Juliet.

4. Asking somebody's health

How are you today? I'm very well, thank you. And how are you?

5. Giving and thanking

This is a present for you.

Thank you.

6. Apologizing

I'm sorry

I apologize...

Giving and receiving information

1. Identity

Are you Henry Steward? No, I'm his brother.

2. Profession

Is he a musician? Yes, and he's an actor.

3. Nature of an object

Is it a dog or a cat?

4. Dimension, height, distance

How big is your bag? It's not very big.

5. Colour

What colour is your book?

6. Possession

Whose pen is this?

7. Quantity

How many books are there?

8. Reason and cause

Why are you late?

ENGLISH FOR VARIOUS CLASSROOM OCCASIONS AND ACTIVITIES

WARMING UP AT THE START OF A LESSON

Hello, children.

Good morning, teacher.

How are you? Fine, thank you.

REVIEWING THE PREVIOUS LESSON

Now, listen everybody. Do you remember the last lesson? What do you remember? The bad boy and the nice dog. Yes, the bad boy lost his bag and the dog...

THE CONTENT OF THE DAY'S LESSON

Listen to me, please. The new lesson is about Betty going to the zoo with their parents. We're going to learn the name of six animals at the zoo. Do you know what a zoo is?

STARTING OFF AN ACTIVITY

Listen everybody. Are you ready? Then we can start.

Look at this picture.

Listen to the tape.

Say this word with me.

Open your books at page eight.

Look at the pictures and listen again.

Take your copybooks and your pens or pencils.

Draw an elephant and a giraffe.

INDIVIDUAL HELP DURING AN ACTIVITY

Is everything all right?

Can you answer the question?

Good! But be careful

What's this?

Are you sure? Say it again.

Look at the board everyone.

ENDING AN ACTIVITY

Have you finished?

Stop writing.

Is everything clear?

Remember the new words.

Now we're going to learn.

CORRECTING MISTAKES

Good, but you can say it better.

Will you repeat?

Susan, can you say it now?

ENDING A LESSON

Well, that's enough for today. It's time to finish.

Time is up.

You've been very good.

Have you all finished?

Shut your books; it's time to clear up.

Hurry up!

WHICH METALANGUAGE TO USE?

According to the great linguist, Roman Jakobson, one of the six basic functions of language is metalinguistic. The purpose of this function is to make it possible to analyze the code which is used, if only to be able to make better use of it.

Nowadays, it is accepted that infants, who start acquiring language from birth onwards, already have an unconscious appreciation of metalanguage. They do not ask themselves about the function of this language but the mere fact that they very quickly know how to attract attention using appropriate noises and how to make it understood that they are hungry, thirsty or want to move, indicates that the essential phenomena of linguistic interaction are being developed.

In English classes at primary school, it is usually possible to count on the presence of this unconscious metalinguistic activity, which has been developed in the mother tongue. However, there are two reasons for suggesting it is beneficial if this activity is encouraged to happen consciously through short periods of reflection:

1. The children are accustomed to this happening at school were they are encouraged to consolidate and develop what they have acquired naturally in other areas through the teaching they receive.
2. As there will be differences between the way English and their mother tongue function, it is helpful for them to be aware of the differences.

Starting this process at the beginning of their first year will mean working in their mother tongue. However, it will quite rapidly become evident to the teacher that the basic terminology needed can equally well be given in English. In this way, the pupils will gradually learn to use these parts of metalanguage for themselves.

A guide to the English terms which most closely approximate to those in Spanish and which might be of use is given in the following list.

SPOKEN ENGLISH (PRONUNCIATION)

Sounds

Diphthongs, consonants, stress, stressed, unstressed

Syllables

Rhythm

Intonation

VOCABULARY

Content words

Nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs

GRAMMAR

Grammatical words

Auxiliary verbs, Modals, Articles, Possessives, Demonstratives, Nouns, Pronouns, Prepositions, Conjunctions, Pronouns, Prepositions, Conjunctions, relatives, sentences, subject, object

Grammatical endings

Tenses: simple present, present continuous, simple past, past participle.

4. ENSURING THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE ENGLISH LEARNT

For a long time now, the pedagogy of language teaching has placed great importance on using real texts and documents in the classroom, rather than the sorts of texts which are expressly drawn up or recorded for pedagogical purposes.

The choice of texts and documents to ensure the authenticity of the English learnt must keep to texts drawn up by native speakers, collect examples of texts published for English native speakers such as newspaper articles, books, magazines, catalogues and all kinds of brochures, choose a coursebook and complementary material which guarantee completely the authenticity of the language used.

The quality of the English spoken by the teachers obviously involves all the components of language: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and, indeed, what may be referred to as “ability to communicate”. Preparations of lessons should include preliminary practice of what is to be said in class, including what the pupils will be asked to say. Teachers should also check their knowledge of the different language components which will be relevant to the lesson by reference to the coursebook, the teacher’s books, and various works of reference, such as. A good grammar book, a good monolingual dictionary and a good bilingual dictionary, a good dictionary of pronunciation.

Taking care to ensure authenticity and communication means saying and having the pupils say what would be said by native speakers in similar situations, for the purposes of greeting each other, asking questions, expressing astonishment, offering congratulations, excusing themselves, etc.

The reason why pronunciation occupies a position of particular importance in English teaching with reference to the other language components is well known. It is often considered, with reason, to be the biggest block for Spanish native speakers because the two phonologies are completely different.

The English used in classroom exchanges may be compared to that of the parents of young children in the natural acquisition process. Teachers have to be careful not to allow exchanges containing inaccurate utterances to go uncorrected, otherwise such utterances may be wrongly assumed to be perfectly admissible, given the teacher's silence. However, any correction made by the teacher or another pupil need not to involve the whole class. It can be gone over with the pupil who made the mistake whenever the teacher consider best.

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