

ON THE NET

Lets Go to the Zoo! Sites for Young Language Learners

Jean W. LeLoup

SUNY Cortland

Robert Ponterio

SUNY Cortland

While the debate over the optimal age for second language (L2) acquisition continues into the 21st century -- that is, whether or not there is a clearly established critical period beyond which L2 learning cannot take place -- most people believe (rightly or wrongly) that "earlier is better" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000). It is not the purpose of this article to review the age acquisition research nor even to take a stand one way or another. Presumably other articles in this volume will address this issue. We will simply begin with the premise that early language learning can be beneficial, if one follows some commonly accepted precepts of second language acquisition (SLA).

Most research shows that L2 learning is facilitated by pedagogically sound instruction that involves meaningful input and intake of the target language (TL). The L2 should be presented in a contextualized manner and should, in some way, make a personal connection to the learner (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). Much of the literature suggests that the use of thematic units with younger learners fits the bill: The themes are of high interest to the learners, the L2 is presented in a contextualized manner, and -- when chosen properly -- the subject matter is meaningful to the young learner because a cognitive frame of reference already exists (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Shrum & Glisan, 2005). In other words, L2 learning is facilitated because the young learner is already familiar with the topic or content in the first language (L1) context. Meaningful learning takes place when the new material to be learned is related to something already known (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978).

Presentation of language in context seems to argue for the use of authentic materials in L2 instruction, even at an early stage. Using authentic texts to teach reading and listening skills provides language learners with real-life opportunities to use the TL (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). If the aim is to enable learners to manipulate the TL in real-life circumstances, then they must practice with real-life examples. The goal, of course, is to select the authentic texts carefully, not edit them, and construct an age- and level-appropriate task for the learner to perform (Shrum & Glisan, 2005). In the instance of young learners, use of authentic language, in context, of high interest, and of familiar nature to the learner would seem to be the best bet for success. With this in mind, FL instructors might do well to consider a trip to the zoo -- a virtual zoo. There are a good number of virtual zoo sites

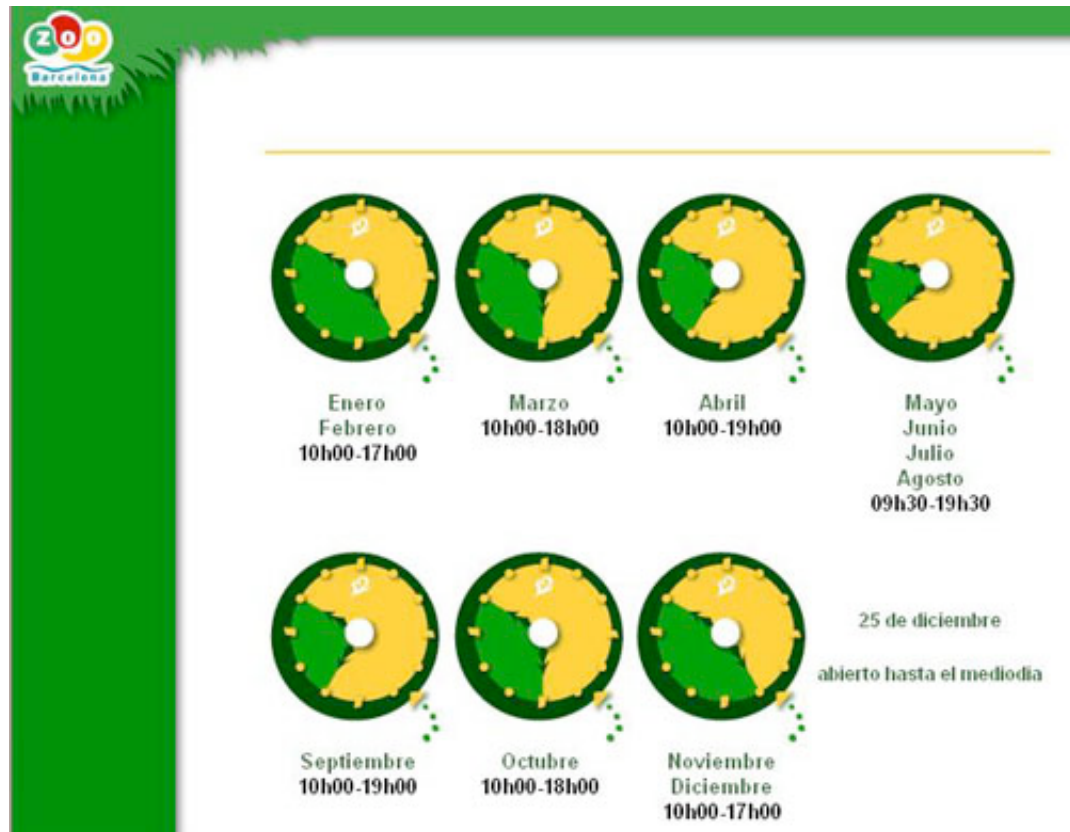
VIRTUAL ZOOS ON THE NET

Virtual zoos on the Net are fruitful places for young language learners to explore. These sites are of high interest to youngsters, offer familiar content, and frequently have sections designed with educational activities for children. We will examine three sites below in some depth and will also explore a third site where young learners can create their own animals and write about them.

El Parque Zoológico de Barcelona



The homepage of the Barcelona zoo contains links to many different pages offering a plethora of zoo resources. Information is available on zoo hours, entrance fees, zoo services, and the general makeup and philosophy of the zoo itself. The zoo schedule page is illustrated below.







In addition, realtime webcams exist for select animals at the zoo: chimpanzees, penguins, and Copito, the albino gorilla that has lived at the zoo since 1966. Quite a few links deal with Copito, who is a local celebrity. In addition to the webcam, there is a video, several magazine articles about him from his early days until his arrival at the Barcelona zoo, and a family tree depicting his lineage and offspring.



Also accessible are virtual "index cards," *fichas*, that provide information about the different species of mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Each *ficha* gives a brief description of the animal, its geographic origin and habitat, social customs, and primary food source (carnivore, herbivore, etc.). A world map illustrates the precise location of the animals range.



The *ficha* also offers a list of identifying data including weight, length, gestation period, usual number of offspring, and longevity.

	Hábitat: Agua dulce
	Reproducción: Vivípara
	Alimentación: Herbívora
	Vida social: Gregaria
peso	2500 - 3200 kg
longitud	450 - 540 cm
peso al nacer	45 - 55 kg
gestación	225 - 257 días
número de crías	1
longevidad	más de 50 años en cautividad

For those young learners who are more advanced, a detailed description of the animal is provided at the bottom of the *ficha*.

El hipopótamo es, junto con el elefante y el rinoceronte, uno de los gigantes de África. La forma de su cuerpo, de color gris con tonalidades rosadas, permite a este animal de vida anfibia moverse con facilidad por el medio acuático. Las orejas, los ojos y los orificios nasales, que puede cerrar y abrir a voluntad, están situados en la parte superior de la cabeza de manera que, con solo asomarla un poco, puede vigilar su entorno mientras el resto del cuerpo se mantiene sumergido.

De costumbres gregarias y sedentarias, suele pasar la mayor parte del día en el agua para protegerse de la elevada temperatura ambiental. Generalmente se encuentra en ríos, lagos y lagunas de lodo en grupos de hembras y jóvenes, más o menos compactos, con los machos —que son muy agresivos y, por tanto, de comportamiento más individual— situados a su alrededor. Las peleas, extremadamente violentas, forman parte de la vida cotidiana de este animal, y es normal que los machos presenten cicatrices espectaculares producidas por los enormes colmillos de los contrincantes.

Cuando al atardecer baja la temperatura salen del agua, por rutas prefijadas, y se dirigen hacia los territorios de alimentación, donde ingieren grandes cantidades de hierba y otros vegetales.

Many of these zoo pages contain simple language that would be accessible to young learners. Numbers and cognates make the TL even more understandable to learners in the beginning stages of language study.

Zoológico de Barranquilla, Colombia



The zoo in Barranquilla, Colombia is another interesting site worthy of investigation. In addition to offerings similar to those of the Barcelona Zoo (general information, inhabitants and their descriptions, etc.), this zoo site has a specific site where youngsters can send in questions. The recipient of the questions is a cartoon figure, Zofa. Questions are submitted electronically on the form provided and answered on the Web site.



Another example of an activity specifically for young learners is the contest for "queen of the zoo" that the Baranquilla zoo just completed. This competition included 10 contestants from the animal world. Each contestant had a campaign *ficha*, containing her description and vital statistics. In addition, responses to personal questions such as "What famous personality would you most like to talk with?" The winner, Costeña the Jaguar, chose the Spectacled Bear as her conversation target!



Reinado en el Zoológico

Costeña Jaguar



Medidas: 1,83 metros.
 Peso: 62,2 Kg.
 Edad: 12 años
 Ecosistema de procedencia: Selva Húmeda
 Pasatiempo: Correr a gran velocidad

¿Qué poder le gustaría tener?
 Me gusta mucho la velocidad así que me encantaría poder volar para ir a los lugares que quisiera.

¿Con que personalidad le gustaría sentarse hablar?
 Con el emblemático Oso de anteojos que vive en los Bosques de Niebla.

¿Cuál es la parte de su cuerpo que menos le gusta?
 Mi panza creo que es muy rellena.

¿Qué es lo que mejor sabe hacer?
 Cazar, saltar, de allí viene nuestro nombre.

Cerrar

Zoo de la Palmyre, France

The Zoo de la Palmyre in south-west France is another great zoo site including a good variety of useful information (zoo hours, location, animal names, etc.) for the the sorts of activities already mentioned. Most of this site uses Macromedia Flash for display and interaction. Moving animals make the site more visually attractive.

Maps with driving instructions provide for a nice way to make geography more meaningful. By examining a zoo outside of a major urban center, in the Charente Maritime department in this case, we help reduce the all too common impression that France means Paris.



Information about animals on the site can be accessed by animal names or by location in the zoo. The first is quicker but the second gives the impression of visiting the zoo in its actual layout. There is also a search engine for looking up a *fiche technique* by the animal's name directly. Here below we see the listing of mammals.



The *fiche technique* for the polar bear includes information about the animal's class, order, and family. We see biological data about individual animals as well as information about how they live and what environmental threats they face. Students learn about their habitat and their eating habits.

L'ours polaire

(Ursus maritimus)

Jamais froid sur la banquise.

Les poils blancs de sa magnifique fourrure sont creux, comme de minuscules tubes. Ils absorbent les rayons du soleil et conduisent la chaleur jusqu'à sa peau noire. Sous ce manteau, une épaisse couche de graisse protège l'ours contre le froid polaire.



Classe : mammifères
Ordre : carnivores
Famille : ursidès



Taille : 2m à 2,60m
Poids : Jusqu'à 600 kg pour les mâles
Gestation : 8 mois
Naissance : de 1 à 4 petits
Longévité : 40 ans

L'homme est la plus grande menace pour l'ours polaire dont le territoire diminue à cause de la prospection pétrolière. Le réchauffement de la planète est également un danger pour l'espèce. L'ours est un animal solitaire. Sous son aspect débonnaire, c'est un fauve redoutable.



 **Repartition géographique :**
rivages de l'océan arctique



 **Habitat**
côtes, banquises

 **Regime alimentaire:**
omnivore (phoques à 90 %, poissons, algues, herbes, baies, oies et canards)

 **espèce protégée**



www.zoo-palmyre.fr

The interactive zoo visit uses Flash to let the visitor move a monkey around a map of the zoo. Touching the *borne* or post for each animal enclosure brings up a photo of the animal and a quiz.

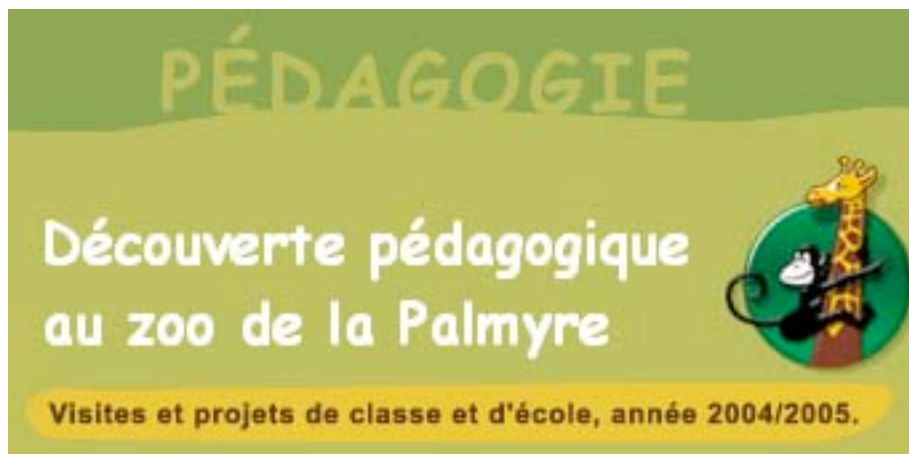


The giraffe quiz sample seen here uses humor to review information about the animal.

To transport a giraffe one

- walks him
- uses a trailer with telescoping roof
- puts roller skates on him
- puts him in a big box and mails it at the post office

Another section presents the zoo's pedagogical programs for school classes and projects.



The Palmyre zoo has a history of communicating with young people about animals in the world and the importance of conservation of the environment. In fact, the founder of the zoo began his career by bringing his animals to schools all over France to teach children about them. Now we can bring the children to the zoo through the Internet.

OTHER SAMPLE ZOO SITES

A [Google](#) search using the key words *zoo* and *virtual* in the TL will yield many possibilities for language teachers to explore. A few are offered below to get you started:

Portuguese: Zoologicovirtual.com



Italian: Parco faunistico Le Cornelle



German: Zoo Hannover

Seitenübersicht | Kontakt | Download | English

Suchwort

Zoofix

- ☛ Tiere & Attraktionen
- ☛ Besucherservice
- ☛ Unternehmen Zoo
- ☛ Feste feiern
- ☛ Spiel & Spaß

Da sieht die Welt schon anders aus.

Herzlich willkommen im Erlebnis-Zoo Hannover.
Einzigartig in Europa!

Fury im Zoo
Die Rockgruppe Fury in the Slaughterhouse hatte viel Spaß im Zoo!
» mehr

Geschenkideen? Hier!

Babysitter gesucht!

Diego der Nasenbär

Making Your Own Zoo

A final site worth mentioning is the [Switch Zoo](#) site.

Zoo News & Reviews | Visitors' Comments | Educators' Resources | About Us | FAQ | Site Map

Welcome, Schools!
[Lesson Plans](#)
[Animal Drawings](#)
[Animal Poems](#)
[Animal Stories](#)

MAK E YOUR OWN NEW ANIMALS

Created by TUBEHEAD™

Giris

Welcome to Switch Zoo!
Switch the animals' heads, legs and tails to make new creatures at this surrealistic virtual zoo.

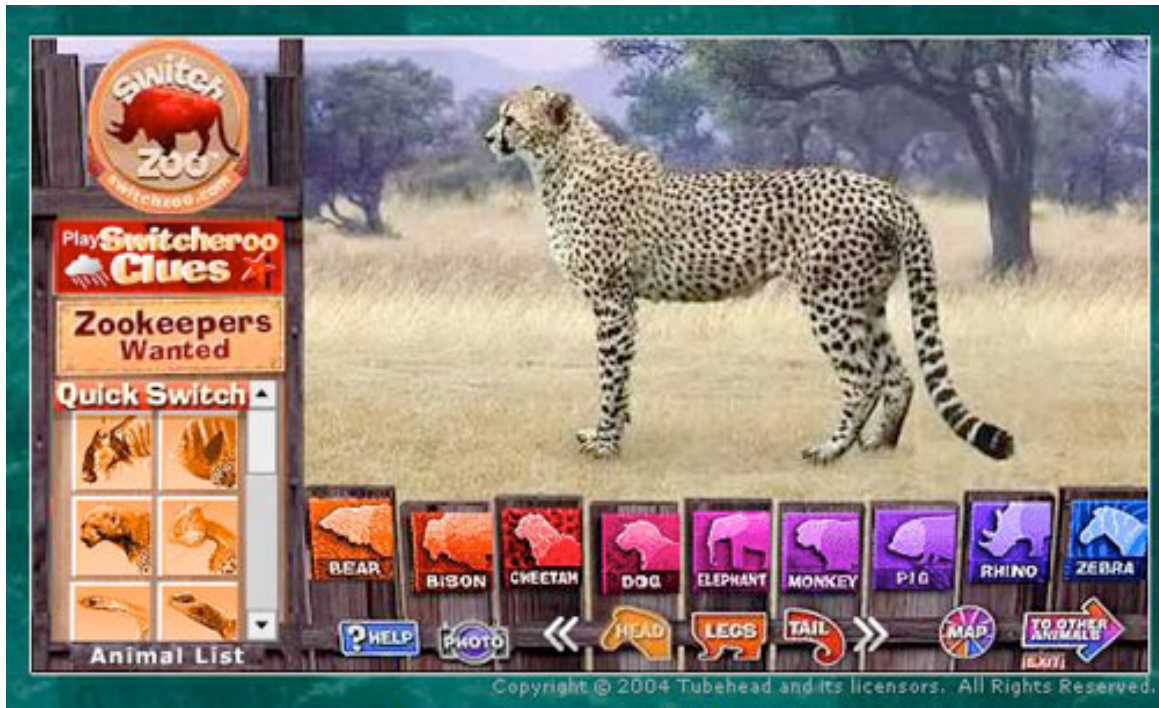
[Click here](#) to add Switch Zoo to your favorites!

Visitors with dial-up connections [please click here](#)

Switch Zoo Deluxe
Coming soon on CD-ROM
[Details](#)

[How to Play](#) | [Animal List](#) | Macromedia Flash Player 6 is required
If you can't see the flashing Enter button above, you must install Flash Player 6 (or greater) before you can enter the zoo. Please go to www.macromedia.com/go/getflashplayer for a free, fast download and installation of the current Flash Player. [Troubleshooting](#)

This site is specifically meant to be used for educational purposes, as the "Welcome, schools!" banner attests. This site is loaded (pardon the pun) with animation that will delight young learners as they "monkey" around with different animal heads, legs, and tails to create new and unique creatures. For example, they can take a cheetah...



...and convert it into a completely new animal of their own creation:



They can then write about their creations and title their stories in the TL. (Diacritics are supported in this environment.)



Érase una vez un animalito bien raro.

A helpful FAQ file is available to instruct young learners how to operate the site and design their animals. While they are creating, animal facts pop up everywhere. In addition, there are other animal games to be played that require critical thinking on the part of the learner. While these are all in English, these features do add to the educational nature of the site.

CONCLUSION

When searching for authentic materials on the Web that are age appropriate and exciting for young learners, we need to look for the sites where native speakers target the same age level in the countries where the target language is spoken. School Web sites, magazines for kids, special interest sites, and collections of children's literature, songs, and rhymes, are among the valuable locations where language teachers can look to see what native speaker children are doing online. Zoo sites are a special case because of the high level of interest and affection that animals generate in children. In all, the variety of activities and approaches, the focus on presenting engaging material for young people, and the interdisciplinary value of this subject matter, including the ecological and conservation messages that are so prevalent, make these zoos a visit that is worth the trip.

REFERENCES

- Ausubel, D.P., Novak, J.D., & Hanesian, H. (1978). *Educational psychology: A cognitive view* (2nd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Curtain, H., & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004). *Languages and children: Making the match* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Lightbown, P.M., & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Marinova-Todd, S., Marshall, D., & Snow, C. (2000) Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 34, 9-34.
- Omaggio Hadley, A. (2001). *Teaching language in context*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Shrum, J.L., & Glisan, E.W. (2005). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Thompson Heinle.