



English as a Second Language

Activities for very young learners
in early childhood education and
early primary education



Some important points

On entry to pre-school or the early years of primary education, children whose mother tongue is not English do not differ greatly from their English-speaking peers.

They may suffer from shyness and some fear at being removed from the safety of the home environment. Like other small children experiencing these feelings, they will require plenty of support.

Most language learning at this stage will take place through play and interaction with peers and teacher.

Their 'formal' language learning needs will not differ greatly from those of English-speaking peers. At this stage they must develop the repertoire of language required for socialisation and engagement with classroom learning and activities.

The *Language Proficiency Benchmarks* (IILT) at A1 level provide clear guidance for early second language development.

Young children, when immersed in an unfamiliar language, may go through a *Silent Period*. This period:

- does not indicate a learning disability
- will come to an end when the child is ready
- is always accompanied by significant learning which is only revealed when the child begins to speak

See *Checklist for observing progress* (IILT)

For further information about materials for second language learning from Integrate Ireland Language and Training contact: info@iilt.ie

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Basing English language development on the Language Proficiency Benchmarks.

It is important that all language learning in the more formal environment of the early childhood classroom should be guided towards the real needs that children will have as they progress in education.

The early language learning **targets** for young children are indicated under the headings **Listening, Spoken Interaction, and Spoken Production** at **A1 level**.

The 'can do' statements in the Benchmarks, suggest **activities** which will develop these particular learning targets.

This booklet presents a range of typical or model classroom activities designed to support the development of the necessary language, learning and socialisation skills. Many of the activities can be repeated for different themes.

Important themes for very young learners

	Page in Benchmarks		Page in Benchmarks
Myself	10	Our school	11
Food and clothes	12	Colours, shapes and opposites	13
Weather	15	Seasons, holidays and festivals	17
Time	19	Animals and plants	21

Several of these themes may be included in a single learning activity, for example Clothes and Weather. The same themes also appear in the book for very young learners, *My first English book* (IILT, 2005).

Useful classroom resources for very young language learners

- Crayons, paper etc. for drawing
- Age-appropriate storybooks
- Dressing-up box
- Finger or glove puppets
- Camera (disposable if necessary, digital for preference)
- Picture dictionary for children
- Real or toy objects such as doll's tea set, model cars etc., soft ball, plastic fruits, vegetables, food items etc.
- Visually-based educational games
- Tape recorder
- Songs and rhymes
- Charts, for example those associated with English and Irish reading schemes nature, seasons etc.
- Picture cards for sequencing, matching Phonics schemes
- Big cardboard boxes for making TV set, puppet theatre etc.
- Packs of cards - pairs of pictures (and/or words) can be stuck on the cards to make *Snap* game
- File of pictures from magazines, catalogues etc.
- Big classroom scrapbooks for making up class story books etc.

Myself

NOTE: The theme *Myself* will be fundamental for many other areas of language development as this is the most concrete basis upon which young children can understand their learning environment. In addition to activities under the heading *Myself*, further examples include *what I like to eat, what I did yesterday, news, my favourite clothes, what I wear for different weather, the animals I like etc.*

1

Objective: Learning to answer 'What is your name?'

This game can be used as a 'warm up' to review any vocabulary that has been previously learnt, e.g. clothes, food, weather etc.

Method:

- Children stand around teacher so that they can catch a soft ball
- Teacher throws ball slowly to each child asking 'What is your name?'
- Child replies with name only or may say 'my name is ...'

If reviewing vocabulary, teacher holds up a picture/flashcard/object then throws the soft ball saying, 'What is this?' Child replies, 'It's a ...' For older children, they can throw the ball to one another and ask the question; if reviewing vocabulary, put the cards in the centre of the circle and each child chooses a card to hold up before throwing the ball.

2

Objective: Learning to describe the family with the vocabulary for different members of the family

Method:

- Each child draws a picture of his/her family group
- Introduce idea of size and opposites 'big and small' - Mummy/Daddy is big and _____ is small.
- Teacher labels the people in the picture with Me, sister, brother, Mummy, Daddy etc.
- Teacher counts, with the child, the number of people in the family

3

Objective: Learning the parts of the body, some items of clothing and colours, counting one and two

Method:

- Each child lies on 'butcher's paper' and teacher draws an outline of the child on the paper.
- Child (with teacher's help) draws in and colours hair, eyes, nose, mouth, clothing and shoes
- Child learns words for colours - *my eyes are brown*, clothing - *my trousers are blue*, numbers - *I have two arms/shoes* (It may be helpful to have a mirror in the classroom!)

4

Objective: Getting children to talk about one another, using all the vocabulary that they have learnt about the family, food, activities etc.

Method:

- Take a picture of each child and put these pictures on a poster with the child's name written below
- For older children, put them on a map of the world with a tape or ribbon connecting the child to the country of origin of the family.
- Get each child to describe another in the group. *This is _____ her/his family comes from _____. He/she has brown hair and blue eyes, he/she has one brother and one sister, he/she likes going to the shops etc.*
- Children can prompt one another and correct the information.

5

Objective: To introduce the concept of common celebration when a child in the group has a birthday.

This process involves:

- Learning some days of the week,
- Counting up to the age of the child,
- Specifying colours to make a card,
- Talking about food for a party,
- Reading a story about a birthday,
- Talking about how different children celebrate in their families



The preparation for a birthday, or any other festival such as Halloween, Christmas, Easter etc. takes several classes and becomes more like a project. This model can also be used for *Seasons, holidays and festivals*.

The parts of the project:

- Introduce the days of the week - teacher writes these on a chart and marks the day of the birthday.
- Each day the children must count how many days remain before the party and recite the days of the week
- Children learn, and practise singing, 'Happy birthday'
- Children learn to count up to the age of the child and say 'name will be age on day'
- Children draw and/or colour birthday card
- Talk about the food we like for parties, using pictures for support, children can draw pictures of cakes, candles etc.
- If possible, have a little party on the child's birthday so creating an authentic purpose for using all the language that has been learnt in games, conversation, story reading, and singing.

6

Objective: Getting children to talk and interact, using language that they have already learnt.

When children speak as 'somebody else' they tend to lose their inhibitions or insecurities and take more risks in using language. The basic activity of 'role-play' is excellent for this purpose and may be suitable for the older children in this category. For younger children, creating a 'drama' setting will allow them to speak through another voice. Dressing up as a character, speaking as a puppet or animal, or making a mask and speaking behind this, are all good methods.

Method:

- Taking the theme of *Animals*, including *Time* and *Weather*
- Make masks for the children using the templates on pages 11-15
- Children colour their masks and name the parts of the 'faces'
- Learn and practise the song '*Old MacDonald had a farm*' using the animals that are portrayed on the masks
- Read a story that features one or some of the animals that are being studied
- Talk about the different animals and where they live, what they eat etc.
- The children put on their masks and tell the other children about themselves as the animals that they are portraying. *I am a _____, I live in _____, The weather is _____ there. I like to eat _____, I make this sound _____. At night I sleep in _____.*

NOTE: Masks can be made by sticking the outline of the animal (or any other picture) onto a piece of flexible card or heavy paper, making holes for the child's eyes and putting elastic bands at either side.

Extension:

A similar activity can be done using finger or glove puppets to represent people, objects or animals.

Example:

Learning about what happens in the classroom

- Children make finger puppets and speak through them
- One child represents teacher and gives the instructions that are typically used in the classroom to other children who must follow them. *Sit down on your chairs. Put your heads down and have a rest. Now sit up and draw a picture of a house etc.*

Extension:

Using a finger or glove puppet for imaginary conversations

Example:

Talking about people

- Two children face each other with their puppets
- One child asks questions about the other 'person' and the other child replies - e.g. *What is your name? Where do you live? Do you have a brother or a sister? Do you walk to school? Do you like bananas etc.*

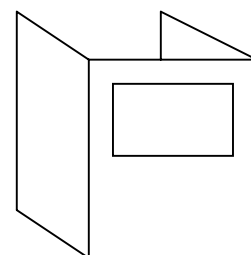
Making a sponge puppet

Method:

- 1 Buy a number of sponges - not too big or heavy for small fingers.
- 2 Cut slits in the back of the sponge for fingers and thumb to fit into
- 3 Draw eyes, eyebrows, a nose and mouth on the narrow end of the sponge
- 4 The child puts fingers and thumb into the slits and bends the sponge over so that the face appears

Making a puppet theatre

Children will speak with even greater confidence through the 'voice' of the puppet if they are hidden behind the 'theatre' which can be made with a cardboard box.



7

Objective: Making a 'feely' bag to develop descriptive language and work on the concept of opposites.

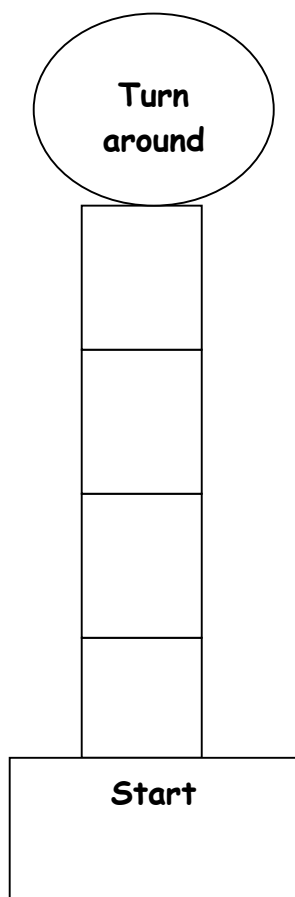
Method:

- Collect as many objects as possible that are of tactile interest.
- Spread the objects on the table in a random way
- Get the children to pick up and feel the objects and ask if they like that feeling or not
- Now begin to arrange the objects on the table according to category, with the help of the children (soft/hard, rough/smooth, heavy/light etc.)
- Work on the words that describe the feel of the objects - soft, hard, rough, smooth, knobbly, scratchy, tickly,
NOTE: with very young children it will be necessary to introduce the different descriptions gradually. Start with soft and hard or rough and smooth etc., then gradually add more over time
- Put the objects in a large bag or old pillowcase
- Each child puts a hand in the bag, feels an object and describes the feeling, says whether he/she likes it, then takes the object out for the others to see.

Possible objects: fur, sandpaper, glass (e.g. very small bottle), sponge, plastic, elastic band, piece of lego™, feather, lead weight (e.g. fishing weight), cotton wool, piece of candle, blue-tak™ etc. The bag will grow over time.

NOTE: For very young children it is not necessary to teach the words for the objects as the emphasis is on describing how they feel. Older children, however, may learn the additional vocabulary.

GAMES



1 Word hopscotch

Method:

- Draw a simple hopscotch outline on the floor with chalk
- Children take turns to hop (walk or jump) from square to square
- On each square they say a word that they know. These may be words in general, or words associated with a particular topic or theme, counting etc.
- When they run out of words they must 'give up'

Variation:

- Teacher puts pictures /flashcards of familiar objects on each square
- Children must name the objects as they hop onto the square

More difficult:

- Children must say something about the object in the picture

2 Play shop

Children have always loved playing shop. This provides a good opportunity to work on a range of vocabulary. The shop can include all sorts of items, those seen in the home and supermarket as well as objects typical of the classroom.

Method:

- Bring in a wide range of objects
- Introduce the objects and teach the relevant vocabulary and language - e.g. *This is toothpaste and we brush our teeth with it.*
- With the help of the children, organise the goods into categories - e.g. toiletries, food, school items, fruit and vegetables etc.
- Set up a 'department store' with the objects on different tables. This ensures that all children are engaged in the activity at the same time.
- Write price labels using a small range of numbers and show this to the children - the labels could have pictures of coins on them with the number - e.g. 1 cent for some goods, 2 cent for others, up to five cent.
- Children are given relevant coins or pieces of paper with a picture of the coin
- Children take up their positions either as sellers or buyers
- The buyers must pick up and ask for the goods that they want

- The sellers must say 'Hello', tell the price, and thank the buyer
- Children must go to the teacher and tell him/her what they have bought and what it is for

Extension:

Older children can

- Conduct more sustained conversations in accordance with the language that they have already learnt
- Add up the price of the goods bought and sold

3

Sit down when you hear it!

This game is intended to get children to listen carefully for the words that they already know.

Method:

- Draw up a list of words that are probably unknown to the children
- Beside this put a list of words that they have learnt recently. They should relate to a particular theme, for example words to do with the family, words for colours, words for numbers etc.
- Tell the children to listen only for the thematic words - *e.g. Listen out carefully for any 'colour' word.*
- The children move around slowly or stand still
- When they hear one of the words they do not say anything but must sit down quietly
- If the group is small, they may tend to copy one another. In this case make them stand in a circle with their backs to one another so that they cannot see what the others are doing.

4

Moving on the spot!

In this game children follow instructions which use the vocabulary for parts of the body. They do not need to move around the classroom although, if this is possible, teacher can add more instructions.

Method:

- Children stand in front of teacher and follow the teacher's verbal instructions and actions
- Instructions include:
 - Shake one hand (two hands), your head
 - Close your eyes
 - Touch - your head, nose, hand, feet, leg
 - Sit down
 - Put your hands up/down
 - Open your eyes

