

Teaching children English in a dynamic, fun and effective way

An interview with Caroline Nixon and Michael Tomlinson: co-authors of *Kid's Box*, a six-level course for young learners, and the six *Primary Box* titles in the *Cambridge Copy Collection*.

Working with young learners presents a unique set of challenges, and we talked to Caroline Nixon and Michael Tomlinson about ways in which they feel these challenges can best be met in the language teaching classroom.

In the introduction to *Primary Activity Box* they write, 'We have intended to write a book with which to teach children English in a dynamic, fun, and effective way.'

Q: Young children having fun are inevitably noisy. What suggestions can you give to teachers for keeping the noise at a manageable level when teaching English at primary level?

CN +MT: Although it can take a bit of getting used to at first, noise in the classroom is tolerable if it is recognised as the natural expression of children's excitement and enthusiasm for an activity or task in hand. If the noise is disruptive, or has nothing to do with the lesson then it should be controlled. This can sometimes be best achieved by changing the 'tempo' of the lesson. Ask pupils to sit down quietly to a reading, writing or colouring-in activity immediately after doing a task that involves moving around or talking. For example, most of the activities in *Primary Activity Box* include a calming follow-up to a more active task. If the task in question is a game, points can be deducted for rowdiness or calling out. If this does not work, simply stop playing until pupils show, through their hard work or good behaviour, that they deserve to play again.

Q: And at the opposite end of the spectrum, what can be done to encourage shyer pupils to participate fully?

A: Plenty of praise and encouragement should always be given to more reserved pupils. Help them to identify the areas that they are good at. Grouping or pairing these pupils carefully is very important. Wherever possible place them with confident and outgoing partners or group members who will co-operate sympathetically with them. Avoid putting shy pupils with conflictive ones. Very often shy pupils are better at science than language so they may sometimes feel more confident working with 'quieter' activities, ones that involve reading and reasoning. Some of the cognitive puzzles included in *Primary Activity Box* are maths-based problem-solving tasks, which are usually very appealing.

Q: Competition can be a controversial area in teaching. Do you feel that there is a useful role for competition in a class of young learners?

CN + MT: An element of competition can make many children try harder. However, before playing a competitive game it may be useful to explain to children that this is only a means of learning. Although they may not win the game, all pupils are 'winners' if they know more English at the end than they knew at the beginning. Help pupils to see that when they play a game they can practise and learn more English, so they each win a prize, and that prize is knowledge. Nonetheless, it is always a good idea to balance competitions with other activities to be able to reward or praise individuals according to their needs and performances.

Q: What other means do you use to motivate your young pupils?

CN + MT: Children very rarely have a problem with 'motivation' as such. What children have is limitless energy combined with a very limited attention span. Sometimes keeping interest levels high in the classroom is a question of juggling with these two factors. Identify what your pupils like doing (playing games, singing, colouring-in) and try to incorporate these elements into the lesson and use them as teaching tools. Do different activities in short 'bursts' of ten to fifteen minutes while keeping the same teaching objective. By changing the task and varying the 'tempo' of the lesson, children's attention will be held more easily. Try to channel your pupils' natural energy flow and use it to your teaching advantage, go with it rather than against it.

Q: What is the balance between accuracy and creativity that you are aiming to achieve with young learners?

CN + MT: Making mistakes is a necessary part of learning so pupils should be given enough freedom to practise and learn from their mistakes. The learning process should be as unconscious as possible. If correction intrudes too much on this, it can interrupt children's spontaneity and natural enthusiasm for a task and become demotivating. On the other hand, it is necessary to correct, otherwise pupils will produce inaccurate work and it will be much harder to eradicate ingrained mistakes in the long term. We have found that it is more effective to prompt pupils into discovering their own mistakes and helping them to find the right solution for themselves. You can do this by drawing their attention to certain parts of their work and asking them to check it again. Whole class correction, self or peer correction are all effective ways of correcting your pupils' work without inhibiting them. Children also learn through repeated practice so, wherever possible, repeat a game or task so that they can do it more proficiently the second time around. A second chance to better their performance gives pupils the opportunity to see their own progress and measure how much they have learnt.

Q: What has been your most rewarding experience when working with young learners?

CN + MT: It is impossible to limit ourselves to one single rewarding experience after so many years teaching, as there have been so many and for so many different reasons. Perhaps teaching children effectively, and seeing them learn and grow on a daily basis is its own reward (on a bad day we have to remind ourselves of this!). Or, perhaps the fact that the young adults that were our child pupils twelve years ago greet us with genuine delight and have fond memories of learning English with us.