

# Teaching Young Learners

**T**EACHING YOUNG LEARNERS IS DIFFERENT FROM TEACHING ADULTS. YOUNG children tend to change their mood every other minute, and they find it extremely difficult to sit still. On the other hand, they show a greater motivation than adults to do things that appeal to them. Since it is almost impossible to cater to the interests of about 25 young individuals, the teacher has to be inventive in selecting interesting activities, and must provide a great variety of them.

My teaching approach is neither purely communicative nor audiolingual (AL); it also involves features of total physical response (TPR), which is particularly appropriate for young children. I do not consider any of the abovementioned approaches sufficient of itself to bring about a high degree of language proficiency in the learner. The goal is to achieve communicative competence, but the manner of teaching includes audiolingual features, such as choral/single drills, and activities deriving from TPR.

The lesson I will describe is designed for eight- to ten-year-olds at the beginning level. The topic of the unit is Everyday Life. The learners must describe their day and what is going on at home at certain times. The grammatical focus is on the present tenses (simple and continuous). As the present continuous does not exist as a tense form in the students' native language (German), the teacher must make the time reference very clear to them. The present continuous has several functions, but, since the new form is challenging enough, we will stick to the present time reference and will focus only on action in process. The structural pattern of the verb is also new. In order to automatise it several drills are necessary.

Having set up the lesson plan as shown on the next page, we can now discuss it step by step. The discussion follows the order of the lesson plan.

#### *Warm-up*

This step is essential in preparing the learners for the lesson. Imagine that their previous lesson was mathematics or history, and how far away their thoughts may be from English. My experience shows that children respond enthusiastically to songs and welcome them as a warm-up activity. Using songs in the classroom has a whole range of advantages. Some of them are listed by Garcia-Saez (1984), e.g., creating a positive feeling for language learning, awakening interest during the lesson, stimulating students to greater oral participation, and breaking the monotony of the day. The song chosen for this lesson ("Are you sleeping, are you sleeping...") has an additional function: when singing the song, the learners are using the new tense form subconsciously; thus, it breaks the ice in introducing difficult and strange grammar.

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of the next step is to familiarize the students with the topic. Although to the learners switching to the picture (we chose one with a boy reading a book and dreaming of being the leading character) seems to be coincidental and only topic-related, the teacher has two other purposes: (1) to introduce the idea of describing a picture, and (2) to have the learners continue using the new grammatical form subconsciously. This step consists of informal teacher-learner talk (t-l talk) and leads directly to the following stage.

#### *Goal Setting*

"There is an old rule in theatre that, when the house lights go down, the audience is never to be left in the dark for more than a brief moment. A ray of light is shown on the curtain even before it opens." These metaphoric words are used by Meyer and Sugg (1980, 33) to explain the need of clear goal setting in a lesson. Students should always, at all stages, know *what* they are doing and *why* they are doing it. This is necessary not only so they will feel a certain satisfaction about their achievement at the end of the lesson, but also for good motivation throughout the lesson. Research has also shown that students are more attentive to their work if the teacher explains the goals of the lesson. The goal for this lesson is skill oriented, whereas the new grammar feature serves only as a means to achieve this goal. This communicative goal setting derived from my personal experience, as will be seen in the following stage.

#### *Presentation of the New Grammatical Item in Context*

I still remember vividly my English teacher in high school destroying any motivation and enthusiasm I had by opening the lesson with the unforgettable phrase "Today we are dealing with grammar." The same unpleasant feeling came over me years later, when, as a young, inexperienced teacher, I was approached by one of my pupils, who shyly asked me "Machen wir heute etwa Grammatik?" ("Are we dealing with grammar today?"). It took a while to get rid of that feeling—not by making students get used to such phrases but by showing them a different, more integrated and communicative approach to grammar.

I try to make the learner conscious of what s/he is already able to use sub/unconsciously. That means that the grammatical structures have already been used by the students (sometimes only in repeating the teacher's words) before they are explained. In the lesson I am describing, the learners had used the present continuous in the song and in the t-l talk about the picture. For elicitation the teacher could use either his/her questions to the students (e.g., *What is he reading?*) or the students' (correct) answers. Of course, the teacher should always provide more than one or two examples.

#### *Explanation*

In the explanation phase students are forced to think about the elicited sentences and analyse

LESSON PLAN			
time	stage	teacher's activity	learners' activity
2 min.	warm-up	Sing the song "Are you sleeping. . . ." (teacher and learners)	
4 min.	introduction	Presents a picture, e.g., showing a boy reading a book, asks simple questions, e.g., Now John is not sleeping anymore. He is reading. What is he reading?	Reply to the questions. Repeat answers in chorus and individually
2 min.	goal setting	Using a second picture, s/he provides the goal for this lesson, e.g., Look, here is another funny picture. At the end of this lesson we'll come back to this and we'll see what's going on there.	Listen and comprehend. Perhaps make some remarks about the picture or ask questions about it.
6 min.	presentation	Asks questions about picture 1 and writes some answers on the blackboard.	Answer the questions. Repeat answers.
	explanation	Asks students to read and translate elicited phrases, questions related to the use and structure of the verb. Switches to L <sub>1</sub> for explanation.	Read / translate. Answer. Try to explain the rules.
5 min.	formal drill	Introduces jazz chant, conducts the chorus.	Speak and perform the chant.
6 min.	less formal drill	Tells some students to do various things and then asks others about it, e.g., Go to the door. What is s/he doing? Is s/he going to the door or to the window? Where are you going?	Do the actions. Answer. Repeat answers.
4 min.	pair work	Sets task, gives examples, monitors the work.	Work in pairs. Ask and answer using flash cards (showing people doing different things).
6 min.	group work	Sets task, gives examples, monitors the work.	Use different cards. Discuss order of cards, find the appropriate phrase, write them down, one pupil writes on OHP foil.
2 min.	evaluation	Provides feedback.	Read and check work (use OHP foil).
10 min.	writing		
	1st	Sets task, reintroduces picture 2.	Comment on or talk about it.
	2nd	Asks students to describe only one part, e.g., one person.	Describe orally, then in writing.
	3rd	Asks to describe the whole picture orally/ in writing, puts some relevant words or phrases on the blackboard.	Describe it orally (1 or more students). Write it down (with the help of words on the blackboard).
2 min.		(Finish and evaluate the description of the picture in the next lesson.)	

them for themselves. The teacher's questions serve as hints or clues to point the learner in the right direction. I always prefer a cognitive, inductive approach, which involves the learners in analysing and explaining the use and form of a structure, because this supports their understanding of it. In this lesson, at this early stage of language learning, the teacher might be justified in switching to the mother tongue both to save time and to keep things from getting too complicated. The Natural Approach to language learning holds that only acquired (in contrast to learned) knowledge is effective in use, while knowledge of rules applies only to monitoring the language output (see e.g., Krashen and Terrell 1983); nevertheless, it is thought that familiarity with language rules and their automatization will facilitate the language-learning process. In my experience, students do not hesitate to make use of structures they have learned once and automatized to such a degree that they

are able to use them subconsciously.

In learning the present continuous, German students are faced with an item that does not exist in their mother tongue. Contrastive Analysis would predict difficulty in acquiring and using this structure. In fact, I have never had problems in introducing the students to this tense form; it causes only minor difficulty as compared to other structures. Moreover, they tend to overuse it.

We will now switch to the practice stage of the lesson. The view of practice I prefer can be adapted from the traditional one:

PRESENT ⇒ CONTROLLED PRACTICE ⇒  
FREE PRACTICE (cf. Brumfit 1979)

into:

SUBCONSCIOUS USE ⇒ ELICITATION ⇒  
CONTROLLED PRACTICE ⇒ FREE PRACTICE

Littlewood (1981) divides activities into pre-communicative and communicative activ-

ities. Using his terminology we will start with purely pre-communicative activities.

### **Formal Drill**

The controlled-practice phase of the lesson starts with a simple repetition of the new language feature in different variations. In order to distract the young learners from the “grammar” point, a jazz-chant variation is used as a first drill:

I'm saying: Hsh, Hsh. Tom<sup>1</sup> is sleeping.

What are you saying?

I'm saying: Hsh, hsh. Tom is sleeping.

Who is sleeping?

Tom is sleeping, he is sleeping.

Is he sleeping?

Yes, he is. Aaaaa...not any more.

Based on the work of Graham (1978), this short jazz chant reinforces the present-continuous structure. As Graham (1978, ix) points out, jazz chants are highly motivating because of their rhythms and humour. In addition, the young learners need not patiently remain in their seats. They can move, clap their hands, snap their fingers, or tap their feet; they are involved both mentally and physically. Songs, poems, chants, and similar activities reduce anxiety and increase the personal involvement of second-language learners. This kind of practice is certainly not a “formal drill” of the traditional stimulus-response kind.

### **Less-Formal Drill**

This part of the lesson is based on an idea from TPR. Although TPR has some obvious limitations, it can facilitate the language-learning process by enhancing memory, by providing variety through physical movement, and by the fun it creates (cf. Tomscha 1986). The learners' movements are used as a kind of “visual aid” (instead of pictures, etc.) for describing actions that are going on at the time. Learners can talk about an action that they are involved with at the very moment of speaking.

Thus, the combination of form and function is emphasised. The teacher's stimuli and students' responses can progress along a line of increasing difficulty. Depending on the students' level of proficiency, the questions can, after a time, be asked by the students themselves, and/or they can describe more than one action that is taking place. Hence, it is possi-

ble to link such actions as going to the blackboard, writing a word (sentence, question) on it, reading it aloud, erasing it, etc.

### **Pair Work**

So far, the learners have, for the most part, only had to respond to the teacher's stimuli. Now the mode is changing from teacher-centred to learner-centred. The learners depend more on each other and engage in interactive tasks. Certainly, the pair-work activity at this stage belongs to the pre-communicative activities in Littlewood's taxonomy. But even this kind of mini-dialogue can support the learners' speaking proficiency. The pattern that the teacher may introduce as a model to guide the students can, for example, have the following structure using appropriate flash cards:

*What's going on here? They are speaking.*

*What is she doing? She is singing.*

or by adding adverbs (if they are already known):

*How is he singing? He is singing loudly.*

or using yes/no questions:

*Is the sun shining? Yes, it's shining. / No it's raining.*

Some of the phrases have already been practiced in the jazz chant and the previous exercise. The illustrations on the flash cards serve two purposes. First of all, they “can be quite helpful in creating the motivating, game-like atmosphere so conducive to learning” (Meyer and Sugg 1980, 33), and secondly, they provide visual support for the speaking activity.

Learners are expected to create a certain level of awareness when they perform, i.e., they have to consciously make use of the new structure, but they also have to focus on meaning and probably shift from “focus on form” to “focus on meaning” during the practice period. In exchanging the flash cards and performing (for instance) dialogues with more than one exchange learners also get involved with such features of conversation as turn-taking.

Because pair work is learner-centred, the teacher's role is less dominant. The teacher must monitor the learners' performance in order to provide feedback and help where necessary. S/he can also take part in the conversation as a participant.

### **Group Work**

The next stage of the lesson switches from oral activities to writing. For developing writ-

ing skills we use the process approach. This group activity presents the learners with a task that becomes gradually less difficult, preparing them for the more challenging goal at the end of the lesson.

A cooperative (in contrast to competitive and individualistic) goal structure helps students achieve greater success in group-work activities (Jacobs 1988), as well as educating children to be more cooperative. In our lesson the group must first discuss the appropriate time for each action and then write up the activities. Each group is given a different set of pictures and times, so that the ultimate success of the story depends on the participation of each group. As an outcome of the group work they write their sentences on an OHP foil, which makes the evaluation phase far easier and visible to the whole class. Following the subprocesses of writing, this stage belongs to the prewriting phase. Several structural drills are demanded as a prewriting activity. The actual writing task at the lesson end is subdivided, too, as we will see.

### Writing

The first step is to re-introduce the picture. This re-introduction should achieve familiarity with the subject, i.e., the description of the picture. (We chose a picture showing a typical German family at the Sunday morning breakfast table.) The teacher should not use a formal expression like "Let's describe the picture now," but should use words that call attention to the content more than the form, e.g., "Look, what is going on one Sunday morning in this family? What can you see? First, let's find some names for the people...." Thus, the learners will focus more on the content of the picture. They may use words that don't go in the direction the teacher wants to lead them, but a friendly teacher-learner / learner-teacher talk can inspire motivation and the enthusiasm to communicate. For the prewriting phase many activities, such as exchange of experiences, thinking, remembering, talking, reading, or noting, are required. The students will not stick to using only the present continuous, but remember, it is only *one* means to achieve the goal.

The next step in this process could be the description of just one person, e.g., the boy. The learners have to do this in writing. One pupil could, for instance, write on the blackboard as an example for discussion afterwards.

The teacher could then change the mode again and ask the students to describe orally either one more person or the whole picture, using their written notes as a beginning. Another possibility is to start with the beginning sentences from the blackboard and carry on, involving different students in a sequence. The teacher can collect catchwords from the students and note them on the blackboard in a kind of brainstorming activity.

There are several ways to continue this activity, depending on classroom circumstances and the particular learners. In any case it might be supportive for the learners to find some words or phrases to help them write it up.

As we cannot expect, in a 45–50 minute lesson, to finish this work, the teacher should have the students complete it as homework. It might be a good start for the next lesson to compare the different stories that the pupils come up with. S/he can then go ahead with more authentic situations for using the present continuous, either in the form of dialogues or simply in describing different actions, e.g., "Look out of the window and tell me what's going on in the street."

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