

## A Complete Didactic and Methodological Approach to Early Foreign Language Learning

The greatest challenge in my many years of teaching English to young children has been to find a workbook that would be ‘the right one’ for the young learner. No matter how many books I tried, none of them did justice to the task. Not that there was anything wrong with the books; on the contrary, they were good quality and well structured. It is simply that the young learner becomes bored too quickly with a workbook, and the teacher needs to be in constant readiness to change the activity in order to maintain the children’s attention and motivation. The lack of other materials that would support and enrich the workbook, as well as the ‘obligation’ to cover the book entirely, was somehow an obstacle to me.

I have found that the workbook is simply not enough in itself. What is needed is a kind of wider base of a variety of worksheets (preferably doodles for the young) and didactic accessories that can support topics from different angles and in different ways. Only then does the teacher have enough material to enable her/him to quickly adapt to a situation and choose the right material for the specific need.

Throughout the last 22 years, I have been gradually preparing and collecting different kinds of material. The collection is now broad enough to cover the basic needs of any teacher who teaches the young, regardless of the workbook selected. I have also made a kind of ‘Dictionary for the Young’, which consists of two ‘Cool Houses’ (registered under Registered Community Design Numbers 002369595-0001 and 002369595-0002) and the ‘Cool Tool’ (Community Design Registration Proceedings Numbers 002376012-0001, 002376012-0002 and 002376012-0003). Together, they function as a Picture Dictionary for the young, made up of 600 of the most frequently used words, covering the topics usually found in workbooks for the young. Each word has its own card (a word and a picture) in three different versions. They enable a range of social games and are very handy for different types of cooperative learning. Moreover, the same ‘Dictionary’ enables children to learn how to read and write at an early age through play activities.

All of the materials can be very effectively used in the classroom as vital accessories in a teaching process that is based on:

- Projects;
- Communication:
  - Storytelling, drama;
  - Social games based on cooperative learning;
  - The target language as a means of communication.
- Developing reading and pre-writing skills based on convergent pedagogy (global and structural approach).

I have named the approach ‘Cool Pool’ (AAS, 15. 4. 2013, R-67/13).

## A practical approach to teaching young learners (age 4 to 9)

At the beginning of the school year, the name of the ‘cover project’ should be chosen, regardless of the workbook selected. The workbook is, in truth, unnecessary; however, some teachers may choose to use a workbook because it provides them with a framework of topics.

Let us say, for the sake of a more vivid illustration, that the ‘cover project’ is named ‘It’s a Jungle out There!’ and binds the first few grades together (grades 1 to 4; in my country, Slovenia, that would be the age group 6 to 9). The name of the project covers ‘animals’, on the one hand, and ‘chaos among people, children ...’, on the other.

## Projects

Those who have chosen to use a workbook already have the topics laid out for them, and would therefore stick to them. For others, their own enthusiasm is their guide.

Sub-projects are then chosen from the topics to be covered. Let us say that the workbook *Magic Adventure 1*<sup>1</sup> is used in the first grade. The topics covered are: (1) Let’s meet, (2) Family, (3) Colours, (4) Pets, (5) My Body, (6) My Toys, and (7) Christmas, Birthdays, Easter.

The entire book should be covered in the school year, which means that the names for the sub-projects should be found in such a way as to cover all of the topics. If we decide to use the Cool Pool approach, stories and songs forming the context for every topic should be chosen. Therefore, the stories or songs selected can be the names of the sub-projects. In other words, every topic in the workbook is opened with a story or song.

As there is an abundance of stories and songs available, those should be selected that would be introduced to support the cover project ‘It’s a Jungle Out There!’, while at the same time introducing the topics in the textbook *Magic Adventure 1*. For example, one may choose: (1) *You Can Be My Friend* by Lauren Child for the topic ‘Let’s Meet’, (2) *Quiet!* by Paul Bright for the topic ‘Family’, (3) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle for the topic ‘Colours’, (4) *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr for the topic ‘Pets’, (5) *Giraffes Can’t Dance* by Giles Andreae for the topic ‘My Body’, (6) *I Would Actually Like to Keep It* by Lauren Child for the topic My Toys, and (7) Workshops for the topics Christmas, Birthdays and Easter.

For those who decide not to use a workbook, the choice of books and songs is open to a selection based on their imagination and personal taste, within the framework of the curriculum.

## Storytelling, drama, social games and cooperative learning as part of the lesson

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<sup>1</sup> Mol H. (2010). *Magic Adventure 1*. Ljubljana: RokusKlett

I have found that the most important thing for a child's first contact with a foreign language in the classroom environment, irrespective of the age, is that at the beginning the language should be the only new (unfamiliar) parameter. Firstly, therefore, the teacher should introduce her/himself prior to the actual scheduled lessons (alternatively, the first lesson should be carried out in the children's mother tongue). Secondly, the first few lessons should not follow a workbook but rather focus on children's familiar activities (well known and well accepted) carried out in the target language. This way, it is easier for children to become familiar with the target language, while they are, at the same time, given ample opportunities to grasp the new approach by focusing on the non-verbal communication that is used by the teacher in order to convey the message to them.

Once 'the ice is broken', stories are a 'language' any child would accept. Picture books should be used in the young-children classroom; that is, books in which the whole story is illustrated in such a way that merely looking at the illustrations in the correct order would give the general idea of the plot. Therefore, the additional support provided by narration is merely a contribution that children would not consider as being 'a lesson', but rather as an interesting and enjoyable event at school. Once one manages to create a relaxing atmosphere in the classroom, any additional work is considered as an enjoyable and well accepted event.

Let us imagine the introduction to the new topic – 'PETS' – in the classroom.

*Step one: The story 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea'*

The story is told with the support of the illustrations. The first goal to be achieved is a general understanding of the plot. Children need to become familiar with the idea of the story. In order to assess their comprehension, one could use randomly ordered illustrations that the children would put in the correct order, or the children could simply act the story out, non-verbally, of course.

*Step two: (A bridge to the workbook)*

The main character in the story is the tiger ... a tiger is a big cat ... in the workbook there is another story that talks about a cat...

*Further steps:* those who have chosen to use the workbook may follow the activities in the workbook supported by activities that include the use of the 'Picture Dictionary'.

As for the rest, any activity can be chosen that would upgrade the story 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea'. Some doodles are available for this, such as: 'Who is hiding in the jungle?', 'What would animals have for tea?', 'Who would you invite to tea?', etc. The use of the 'Picture Dictionary' in these doodles is very handy and convenient.

Some of the activities with the 'Picture Dictionary' (Cool Tool and Cool Houses) are, for example:

- In pairs:
  - Ask and answer – the names of the chosen animals;

- Memory game (two options: with pictures, or a combination of a picture and a word);
- Find the animal (cards are hidden in the classroom), etc.
- Individually:
  - Write the names next to the animals (upgrading the doodles);
  - Gap filling (after the written story has been introduced);

The 'Picture Dictionary' can also be used even if the workbook is the teacher's only framework, regardless of the workbook selected.

### Developing reading and pre-writing skills based on convergent pedagogy (global and structural approach)

In my opinion, the most important thing one has to bear in mind is that all of the reading and pre-writing activities should be carried out in a context that is already familiar to the child. Therefore, upgrading the stories with such activities is very appropriate.

#### Finding the correct word

Younger children who are still in the process of learning how to read and write firstly need to become familiar with the use of the 'Picture Dictionary'. This is a set of two flat houses made of textile, with the windows turned into pockets where the cards (Cool Tool) are kept. One house is called the 'Cool Theme House', where the 'illustrated words' on cards are kept in theme groups (such as 'family', 'weather' etc.), while the other is called the 'Cool Alphabet House', where the 'illustrated words' on cards are kept alphabetically (for example, an alligator and an apple are kept in 'the window' under the letter 'A').

In order for children to start using the library correctly, some exercises should be provided, such as:

- Children need to find the correct card of the characters who appear in the story (a grandmother, a girl, etc.);
- When writing the names of the objects on doodles, children need to find the correct card and copy the word from it;
- When choosing their own word to be used in a brain-gym-like activity, the children themselves need to find the correct card with the chosen word and picture on it, etc.

#### Story writing

Once a topic is covered up to a certain level, an introduction to story writing is recommended. The text is written on a poster by the teacher, with the children helping her/him with ideas and words. It is the teacher who makes sure that the text is written and structured correctly.

The activity that follows the actual writing, and for which the cards are used, is finding a correct word in the text (the searched word is written on a card).

## Gap filling

This type of exercise is rather challenging for the young; however, it is very well accepted and executed by children aged eight. Once again, it needs to be stressed that the topic for such an exercise has to be covered and understood rather well. The words that are missing in the text could be found in either of the 'Houses'; it is up to a child to decide whether to search for it in the 'Theme House' or the 'Alphabet House'.

## Conclusion

To sum up the Cool Pool approach, I may simply say that, in my 22 years of practice, none of the approaches I have employed has been more appreciated and better accepted by the children (as well as by parents, as the children present their knowledge to their parents at the end of each school year in a 'cooperative manner'). Consequently, the children's enthusiasm has given me an enormous amount of energy to push further, in the sense of searching for the limits. I, however, have found none. Once a teacher is truly a teacher with her/his whole heart devoted to her/his profession and her/his belief in children's abilities, she/he soon realises that limits are only created by the lack of knowledge or belief constructed in their own heads. Children are, in this sense, unspoiled.