

## Surviving young learners

**Young learners is a growing area in the TEFL industry. Many teachers start teaching young learners with little or no previous experience of the age group, and it can often be a 'sink or swim' experience – with a fair bit of treading water in order not to drown.**



### Tips for teaching young learners

**When referring to young learners, we are generally talking about five- to 12-year-olds, but many schools include teenage learners in their young learner offer. These tips are relevant for teachers of both children and teenage learners.**

#### 1 Establishing routines

Children need classroom routines, and they will need to learn the language involved in the routines early on. Instructions such as *sit in a circle*, *stand in a line*, *hands on heads*, and *stop and listen* need to be taught as early as possible and used in every class so students remember them. If you want your learners to come into the room, hang up their coats and bags and sit in a circle on the floor to do the register, you must get them used to this system from day one. By the third or fourth class they will do it automatically and you will always get the class off to a good start. Teenagers need routines too and often like to know what they're going to do in the class, so writing a 'class menu' of activities will give them a

focal point to guide them through the lesson. By saving the lighter activities such as video work or project work to the end, they will clearly see what they have to get through in order to get to the nicer bits of the class!

#### 2 Establishing the ground rules

It is vital to establish what you consider to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour at an early stage in the course. Children and teenagers need to know where the boundaries lie and what will happen if they step over them. Don't wait until you're a month into the course to establish some ground rules. Talk about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour in the very first class. It's much easier to start off on the right foot than to try and back-track when things start to go wrong! It is usually more effective to negotiate the rules of the class with the students rather than simply imposing them yourself. With very young children, a simple smiley face and sad face in two columns on the board and some miming can work. With older children, you can ask them what they think should go in the two columns. With teenagers, get them to make a poster or a class contract with the rules on for all students to sign. Keep the contract displayed on the wall so you can refer to them when you need to.

#### 3 Early finishers

In all language classes you will have students finishing tasks at different times. With young learners, it's vital to have activities ready for the early finishers to keep them busy before moving the whole class on to the next activity together. It can be a good idea to keep a box of activities in the class for early finishers – things like memory games, word searches, crosswords, puzzles and story books are great for this. If you have a small class, a library of graded readers or magazines can be a good option for early finishers too, or if they have laptops or mobile devices they could spend the extra minutes on a language learning site. It's sometimes tricky to get the whole group back on track when some of them have started early finisher tasks. So think carefully about this and work it into your plan. You may decide it's easier to get the early finishers to help other students to

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finish, so you can keep everyone on task for the following activity.

### 4 Lesson planning

When you're planning your lessons for young learner classes, it can be a good idea to try to run through the class in your mind and anticipate potential problems. Think through the activities and make notes of which students may need extra help or who will find certain activities easy. Think about which students would work well together for any pair or group activities. It's often best not to leave grouping up to the learners and after a few weeks with a new group you'll know how to mix the groups so as to get the best out of everyone. Don't forget that the lesson plan is only a guide – if students are getting a lot out of an activity, then be flexible and let it go on longer, and if you see that something is just not working, then cut it short and move on.

### 5 Giving instructions and changing activities

Keep instructions as simple as possible. Think about how you're going to explain a task when you're planning the class. Demonstrations can often be much more effective than wordy explanations. Changing activities efficiently is crucial to the smooth running of the class. Establish a system that works for you. A round of 'Simon Says' or some simple instructions like *If you're listening to me, point to the door*, etc., should get everyone's attention before you deliver the next set of instructions. With teenagers you could try using the timer on an IWB if you have one, or use the stopwatch function on your phone. When the alarm bell rings you can round up the task and move on. This often keeps students on track and focused and will wake up any sleepy teenagers when the bell rings!

### 6 Personalizing

Find out as much as you can about what your students are interested in. If you don't usually have much contact with young people of the age of your learners, you should take time to discover what is going on in their lives and what is important to them. Very young learners will want to tell you all about their friends, their school and if they have

just lost a tooth! Take time to listen to them and try to use their comments to create opportunities for real communication. Teenagers really appreciate it if you tailor your classes to their interests and use topics which are naturally motivating for them. Talk to your students and find out what music, films, magazines, sports, websites and games they are into; then, try to incorporate these interests into your classes.

### 7 Disciplinary procedures

When the established rules are broken, you need to be consistent with how you deal with the students involved. Most schools have disciplinary procedures in place and you should be informed of them before you start work. One in-class system to deal with minor behavioural problems is to write the names of the misbehaving students up on the board. If a student's name gets written up three times in one class you move on to the next stage of the procedure, which is normally referring them to a senior teacher or director, or contacting their parents.

### 8 Motivation

Motivation is essential for all learning experiences, and it's no less important with young learners. Teenagers can be potentially challenging to motivate, so talk to them about why English may be important to them in the future and try to create activities where they need to use English to communicate. Internet-based activities are great for this and so are songs. Even reluctant language learners can see that knowing some English will be useful for them to be able to understand the lyrics of their favourite songs and to use the internet effectively, so it's worth tapping into this to help raise levels of motivation.

### 9 Use of L1

It is widely agreed that use of the students' mother tongue should be kept to a minimum in the EFL classroom. However, it is impossible to eliminate it completely, so don't try to fight a losing battle and aim for 0% L1 usage. Establish exactly when in the class you expect the students to speak only in English. If you speak the students' mother tongue, use it to your advantage and have fun with translation activities and realistic role-plays.

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With very young learners it can be an advantage at the beginning of a course to explain procedures and rules to them in their language and for them to air any worries they have about this new learning environment, which will seem rather alien to them at the beginning.

### 10 Dealing with parents

When working with children it is inevitable that you will be in contact with their parents. Establishing a good relationship with the parents can be a real advantage, and having the parents on your side can be crucial with tricky classes. Be ready to answer questions from parents of six- or seven-year-olds such as, *When will Pablo be ready to take the First Certificate?* or *When I speak to Ana at home in English she doesn't reply in English. Shouldn't she be fluent after a year in your classes?!* Make sure both you and the parents understand the objectives of the course and that their expectations are realistic. Meeting students' parents often helps you to understand the bigger picture of an individual learner. Sometimes a phone call or a quick meeting with the parents can iron out a small problem, which in the long run may help towards the smooth running of the class.



## Activities for young learners

The following activities have been divided into three categories: movement, music and drawing. The age range of the learners is specified in each case, along with variations for older or younger learners where appropriate.

## Activities with movement

### Jump the line (all ages):

Using either a piece of chalk or some tape, make a line down the centre of the classroom that's long enough so everybody can stand on it. When all the students are standing on the line, designate one side true and one side false. Call out a sentence (e.g. *There are two teachers in the classroom*). Students have to jump to the appropriate side.

**Variations:** Use this for simple reading comprehension questions, sound distinction (one side is /v/ the other side is /b/) or correct / incorrect sentences).

### Back-writing (ages six to 12):

Organize the class so that the students are all standing in a line facing the board, the student at the front of the line being closest to the board and the one at the back being the farthest. Give the student at the front of the line a marker or piece of chalk. Go to the back of the line and give the last student a piece of paper with a secret word on it. That student must not show or tell anyone the secret word.

The student at the back of the line now writes the first letter of the secret word on the back of the student in front of him with his finger. When the letter is finished, that student writes the letter on the back of the student in front of her and so on. When the student at the front of the line knows the letter, he writes it on the board. Continue this way until the secret word is spelt out.

**Variation:** Once students get used to this, you can make it faster. You can organize two or more lines and have a race (use two different secret words so there is no copying at the board!).

### Race for it! (ages nine to 12):

Write a series of words with their opposites on different cards or pieces of paper. The cards should be big enough so you can see them from the far end of the classroom. Stick some of the words on the board and keep their opposites in your hand.



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Move out all the chairs so that students can run from the far end of the classroom to the board. Position yourself at the far end with your words. Call two students to come and collect a word. They must run to the board and find its opposite and run back to give it to you. The first one back wins! Continue with other words and other students.

**Variation:** For younger learners, use pictures that go together. When they come back from the board, they must say the word pair.

### Activities with drawing

#### ■ Circle drawings (all ages):

Arrange the students so that they are sitting in groups of four or five. Instruct students to start drawing a picture of a city. After two minutes, tell them to change places around the circle. Each student should now be in front of a different picture. They continue drawing on the new picture. Students continue drawing and changing places until they return to their original drawing. The group then has to talk about what was drawn. At the end, review city vocabulary with the class. You can do the same activity with different topics to revise different vocabulary sets, e.g. at the beach, in the countryside, etc.



#### ■ Draw me the story (all ages):

For this activity, you need a picture book with a simple story. The following books are excellent for this activity: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *The Very Busy Spider* by Eric Carle; *Brown Bear Brown Bear* by Bill Martin Jr.

Bring in a story with a simple plot and good pictures. Organize the students so they are all sitting comfortably and read them the story, showing them the pictures. Highlight new words by pointing to the picture. When you have finished, give one student a board marker or piece of chalk and re-read the first part of the story without showing the pictures. The student must reproduce the picture on the board. Pass the marker or chalk to another student and continue.

#### ■ Three things to draw (ages six to 12):

**1. Special occasion cards.** Whenever a special occasion comes up (Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Easter, etc.) have students make greeting cards for their friends or family members. You can help them with what to write inside. For more interesting texts than the standard 'Happy Mother's Day', look at some of the many websites devoted to greetings (just type the words *greeting cards* or *e-cards* into any search engine).

**2. Coupons.** Students can make a series of coupons into a little coupon book. They then give the booklet to their parents as a present. Some ideas for coupons include: *Good for doing the washing-up*, *Good for making the bed*, *Good for cleaning my room*, *Good for cleaning the windows*, and *Good for help in the kitchen*. Students could even make a class coupon book for the teacher!

**3. DIY memory game.** Every time you teach a new vocabulary set, ask students to make their own cards for a memory game (also called *Pelmanism*). Write the word on one card and draw the picture on the other. When you have a set of around 20 or 30 cards, play the memory game in which students must find the picture and word pairs.

### Activities with music

#### ■ Musical response (all ages):

Find an evocative piece of music for the class. Tell students to lie with their heads on their desks. Play the music for a minute. Then stop the music and tell students to take out a paper and pen. Play the music again and tell them to draw what the music makes them think of. They then work in pairs to explain their drawings. Try this activity with different types of music and you, and your students, may be surprised by the results. Reggae music tends to generate beach scenes whilst dance music tends to get city scenes. Music is a great tool for changing the class dynamics.



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### ■ Classroom management through music (all ages):

At the beginning of the school year, choose three or four different pieces of music to mark different types of activities in your classroom. Play the music when you do the activity.

For example: classical music for quiet time, a lively song for games, a special loud song for when you have some important information (like announcing a test, or a class party, etc.), a special song for getting into pairs (the 'find your partner' song), and a song for the beginning and / or end of the class.

### ■ Invent your own dance (ages nine to 12):

Divide students into groups in the previous class. Each group chooses an English pop song and brings it to the next class in a format you can play. Together they choreograph a series of dance moves for the song (or part of the song). When they have the moves down (this might take more than one class), go over the language they need to teach it to another group (e.g. *put your hand on your hip, turn around, put your hands in the air, wiggle, etc.*). Groups then present their new dances to the music and teach the others the moves.

**Note:** The popularity of singers who use heavily choreographed dance moves means that students of this age can find this a motivating activity (they are probably doing it already in the playground!).

**Variation:** Have them lip-synch the song as they do the dance!

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