

These days teachers of adults are frequently being expected to teach classes of children without any specialised training. For many people the prospect can be daunting. The aim of this article is to look at some of the main ways in which teachers may need to adapt their approach when working with children,

doing things in ways they can relate to and understand. Don't assume they will have the social skills or attitudes we take for granted with adult learners.

'Stay serene'

Just as a teacher's raised, agitated voice tends to heighten the level of excitement and noise, outward calm

The challenge of teaching children

Teachers of adults may need to re-think their approach when teaching children. Carol Read gives some guidelines.

primarily in order to survive, but also hopefully to thrive!

I still remember vividly an incident from my early days of teaching children – many years ago now. I had a class of 36 nine- and ten-year-olds in a school where the desks were nailed to the floor. Recently qualified and eager to try out new techniques, I got the children to do an information gap activity which required them to mingle and exchange information with others in their row.

Although the activity started well and the children seemed motivated, what would have been a standard procedure with adult groups turned into chaos. The more I asked the children to sit down, the more they moved about. The more I raised my voice asking them to be quiet, the louder the noise level grew. The more agitated I began to feel, the more boisterous they became.

I had fallen unwittingly into the classic trap of allowing my behaviour as a teacher to contribute to, rather than solve, the problem. I found myself imposing an emergency dictation in order to settle the children down again and re-establish control.

From the lessons of this early experience, I developed two personal maxims for teaching children which have stood me in good stead ever since:

'Softly softly'

When introducing children to unfamiliar techniques and ways of working, it is important to proceed slowly and gradually. Give reasons for

and a quiet voice finds reflection in the children's behaviour and is more likely to allow you to manage positively and teach effectively.

The first few lessons with a new group provide a 'honeymoon' period in which you not only build up a positive relationship with the children, but also have a golden opportunity to establish a clear understanding of how you expect and want things to be. Although the details will depend on the age of the children and will vary from teacher to teacher and culture to culture, the 3Rs (usually reading, writing and 'rithmetic!') can provide a useful framework for thinking about the parameters you would like to establish in your children's classes. In this case they stand for: 'Rules', 'Routines' and 'Responsibilities'.

Rules

Rules establish clear boundaries for children, whether they are imposed or negotiated. While it is usually wise to have as few rules as possible, make them explicit, state them clearly, and be sure that you always apply them fairly and consistently.

Routines

Routines establish patterns of familiar, expected behaviour which help children feel secure. Once established, they provide a convenient short cut to giving lengthy instructions. Routines may include procedures such as sitting on the floor in a semi-circle for story time, starting lessons with a physical warm-up, stopping activities at a given signal, giving out materials, or clearing up.

Responsibilities

Responsibilities may be explicit, with class rotas for things like giving out materials or cleaning the board. They may also include things you want to encourage children to do independently, such as remembering their books and homework, sharing crayons and other materials, speaking English in pair and group work, taking turns in games and listening without talking when you or another child is speaking.

General guidelines

Paradoxically, the easiest way to create a relaxed, happy, child-centred teaching/learning environment is by working systematically and persistently towards establishing clear parameters for behaviour. Although this sometimes requires a great deal of patience and perseverance, particularly in the early stages, it is always worthwhile. The following are useful guidelines:

Treating children as individuals

However large the class, it is vital that children feel you know and care about them as individuals rather than as a group to be controlled. This may involve adopting specific strategies, such as start-of-class routines where you ask different children a few questions about personal things you know about them.

Valuing children and their work

By doing things such as listening to what children have to say, responding to the content of what they say (rather than just the language) and decorating the classroom with displays of work, you help to enhance children's self-esteem, and contribute towards feelings of success. This has a positive influence on their motivation and levels of achievement, as well as on their willingness to co-operate and make an effort in class.

Catching them Being Good (CBG)

As well as showing approval for work and effort, it is important to find opportunities to praise children for good behaviour too. This gives the message that you value the way children do things in class and avoids the impression that they can only get your attention in a negative way, through reprimands when they behave badly.

Keeping expectations high

Your expectations of children's behaviour and their potential to achieve

are often self-fulfilling prophecies. Keep your expectations high (although not too high!) as children will inevitably live up to these.

Classroom activities

So far, we have focused on establishing a positive working environment with children. However, this is also inextricably linked to the way classroom activities are selected and organised. Although many techniques familiar to teachers of adults can be adapted successfully to children's classes, a number of factors need to be kept in mind when deciding on their suitability, or ways in which they can be modified:

Process v product

Adult learners can recognise the value of the process involved in a language activity and are willing to 'suspend belief'. Children are not so generous. They tend to short-cut the process in order to arrive at the product or outcome as quickly as possible.

I found myself imposing an emergency dictation

Activity v task

Although these terms are often used interchangeably, when working with children it can be useful to make a distinction. In an activity, the reason and pleasure are inherent in the activity itself. In a task, the reason and pleasure are often based on a deferred outcome. With younger children in particular, activities which are intrinsically motivating and pleasurable, focusing on the here and now, are likely to be more successful than tasks leading to distant outcomes and postponed gratification.

Teacher-centred v teacher-led

Being teacher-centred generally has a bad name in English language teaching. However, in the context of working with children, this should not be confused with activities or lessons which are teacher-led. It is often vital that the teacher gives a clear lead with lots of modelling, in order to encourage the whole class to participate in activities in English.

Competition v co-operation

Although children can appear motivated by competitive activities, they are often difficult for the teacher to manage and can be divisive (or even upsetting for young children), especially when the same children always seem to win or lose. If you do want to organise competitive activities such as team games, it is usually more useful to see these as an opportunity to develop social skills and co-operation within the teams, rather than to emphasise the competition between them.

Stir v settle

When selecting activities, you need to anticipate their likely effect on the children's behaviour. Although it is vital to include activities involving physical movement, these are likely to be 'stirrers' which raise the level of noise and excitement, so it is important to plan 'settlers' to calm them down again.

Involve v occupy

Activities that occupy the children and keep them 'busy' without engaging their interest or developing their thinking skills have a limited value and quickly lead to children being 'off-task' or disrupting the class. It is important to select and organise activities which involve the children and present them with an appropriate level of challenge, rather than ones which simply occupy their time.

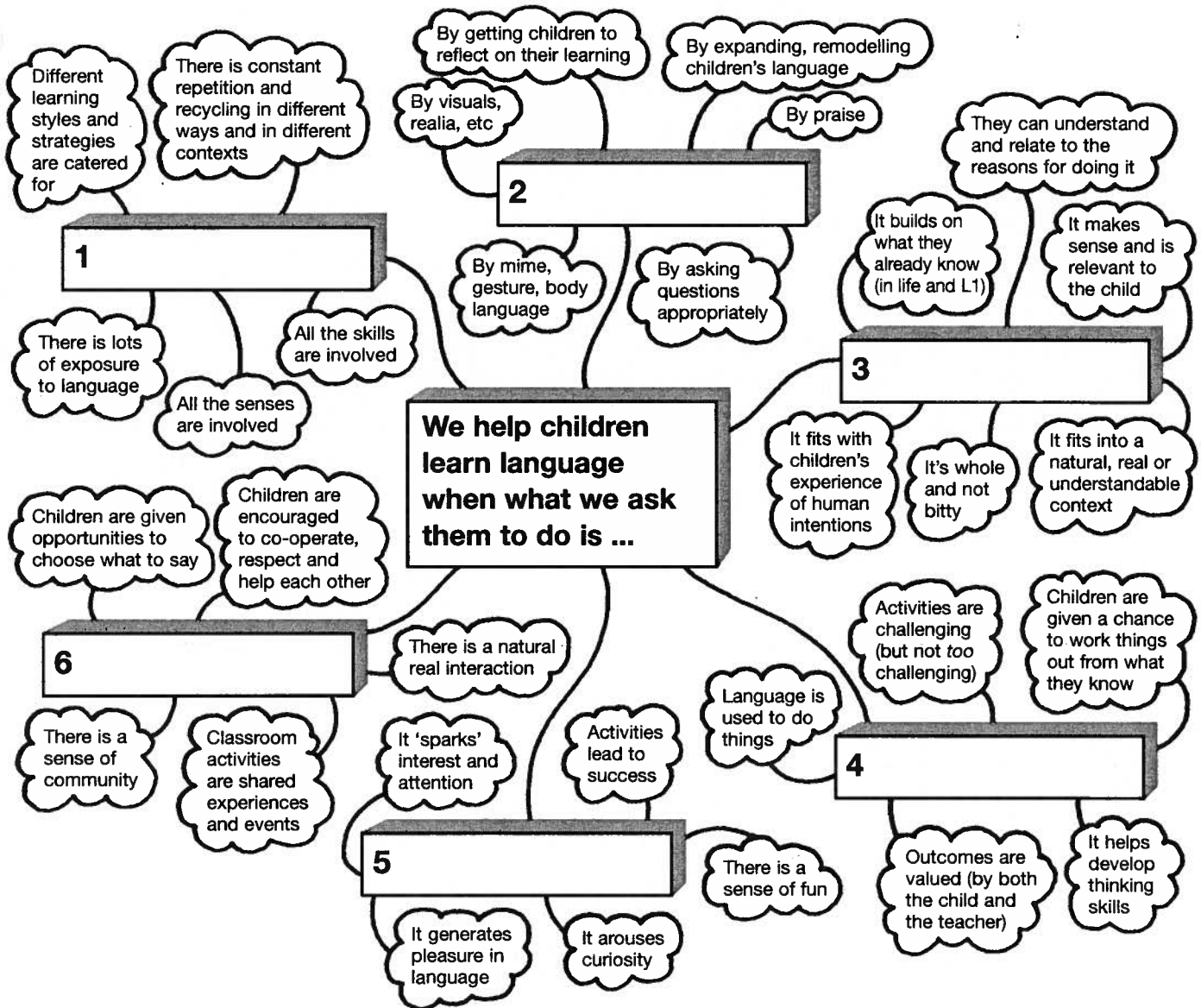
Language development v whole development

Whether children are learning English at school or as an extra-curricular activity, the process of learning a foreign language forms part of their general education and whole development. Classroom activities and procedures therefore need to take account not only of children's language development (in L1 and L2), but also of factors in their current stage of social, psychological, emotional and cognitive development. They also need to link English to children's reality and experience, as well as to other areas of learning both at home and at school.

Effective learning

Bearing in mind the above points, the most effective way to help children learn a language is through engaging them in activities which are appropriately supported, meaningful,

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▶▶▶ purposeful, enjoyable, social and full of practice. The brain map summarises my understanding, based on my own reading and experience as a classroom teacher of children. You may like to consider which word or phrase should go in each space.

Survival and success

In conclusion, although there are a number of formidable challenges for teachers of adults who 'convert' to teaching children, many existing skills can be adapted and built on to help ensure both survival (!) and success. When you become a teacher of children, you are no longer just a

language teacher, you are also an educator. It is largely through your own investigation and exploration of the implications and responsibilities of this expanded role, both for you and the children, that you will become most effective in the classroom. Knowledge about good educational practice and children's thinking and learning can be picked up from books. Skills for teaching children can be learnt and improved through practice. However, there is one fundamental requisite that underpins everything that has been said here, and that is your own attitude towards children and whether you genuinely enjoy being with them, caring for them and helping them learn.

Key to brain map 1 Full of practice 2 Supported 3 Meaningful 4 Purposeful 5 Enjoyable 6 Social



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