

Theme-based instruction for very young learners

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Very young learners are defined as being between three and six years of age. These learners have their own characteristics and learning styles. They are imaginative and creative (Ersöz 2010) and learn through storytelling, art and craft, and creative drama. TPR, games and other physical activities cater for their high energy levels and hold their interest. Relevant and simple repetition via theme-based instruction in meaningful contexts makes recalling easy for their short memories. Furthermore, working in groups or pairs keeps them actively involved.

Why is thematic language instruction important?

Thematic unit design, based on storytelling and other activities, offers meaningful and contextualised input with which to engage children in communicative situations (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). Oxford (2001) states that it integrates the four skills through authentic and challenging language, which helps children communicate naturally and encourages children's choices during the

language acquisition process (Ersöz 2010; Shin 2007). Shin and Crandall (2014) suggest five steps for a thematic unit designed over four to five lessons:

- 1 Choose topics that are relevant to the national curriculum standards of your context.
- 2 Select themes that appeal to the children in order to encourage meaningful and authentic interaction.
- 3 Employ subject content that is related to the children's experiences and based on the subjects they enjoy studying, for example, social sciences or on specific social situations.
- 4 Arrange the order of the activities to mirror real life language that is useful to the children. The skills practised should be sequenced from receptive to productive and progress from simple repetition to scaffolded learning.
- 5 Integrate a project into the unit to foster student-centred learning, cooperation and communicative use of the target language.

The sample lesson below represents the first lesson of a unit of five interconnected thematic lessons. The theme is farm life and it is studied in other subjects throughout the week. The first lesson is about farm animals, the second about food processed directly or indirectly from farm animals (milk, cheese, egg, chicken, yoghurt), the third about vegetables grown on the farm, the fourth about fruit, and the fifth about actions on the farm (picking apples, milking the cow, watering and so on).

Sample thematic unit for very young learners

Story title: 'Jimmy and the Grandmother' (taken from Ersöz, 2010)

Story plot: The grandmother asks Jimmy to get eggs from the farm for breakfast. Jimmy visits all the animals in the farmyard and asks each in turn if he can have some eggs. They all answer that they haven't got any eggs until he asks the hen, who has got some, and he thanks her and goes home to breakfast.

Age and level: Five-year-olds, starter

Vocabulary: farm animals (horse, cow, sheep, cat, dog, hen)

Grammar: Have/has got

Language function: requests ('Can I have some ... please?', 'No, sorry ...', 'Yes, ...')

Language skills: Listening and speaking

Duration: 40 minutes

Objectives: By the end of the lesson, the learners will be able to ...

- request something,
- name and count the six farm animals,
- say what they have or haven't got.

Warm-up

Each child receives a mask depicting the face of a farm animal in the story—see Picture A. They cut out the holes and the masks are tied loosely around their necks with string. Then the teacher asks 'who are you?' and each child answers 'I am a cow/horse/cat/dog/hen/sheep' in their mother tongue. The teacher asks the children to listen to the sound of each animal and name it in English.

Presentation

Storytelling to contextualise the visual and linguistic items of the theme is an important component of the unit and consists of three steps. In this story, a story box is used—see Picture B. Alternatively, puppets, cartoons, or a shadow theatre (Ersöz 2010) can be employed:



Picture A

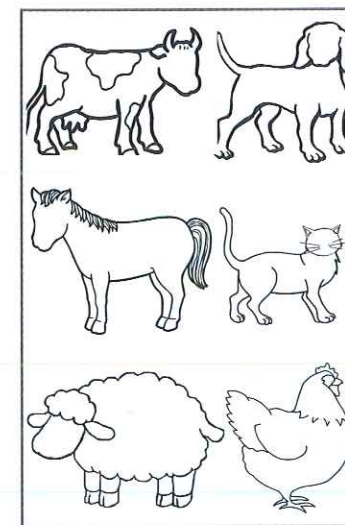


Picture B

- 1 The teacher starts by telling the story while the children watch and listen.
- 2 The children participate in the second telling in their masks with the teacher helping them to perform the necessary actions.
- 3 The teacher leaves the stage to the children who act out the story. Where necessary, the teacher helps with gestures.

Practice

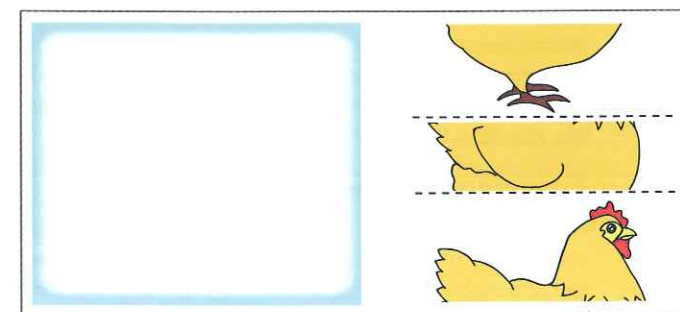
The teacher hands out the animal sheet—see Picture C. The children personalise the activity by drawing faces on the animals and colouring them. When the teacher calls out the name of each animal, the children point to the animals they have drawn on and coloured.



Picture C

Follow-up

The teacher hands out the animal parts sheet—see Picture D. The children cut out the three parts and paste them in the right order to make each animal.



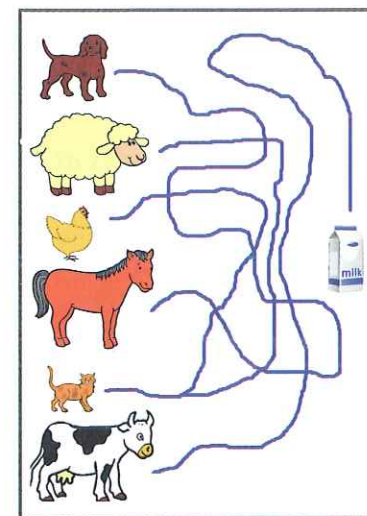
Picture D

Evaluation

- 1 The children find which animal gives milk by tracing the correct line on the maze—see Picture E.
- 2 They tell another version of the story with the help of their teacher. Here is a sample alternative story version by the children:

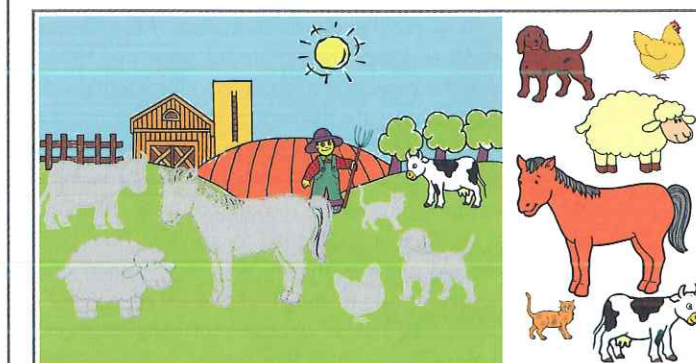
Jimmy is on grandma's farm. Grandma says: 'Jimmy, go and find some milk please.'

And Jimmy goes to the horse and asks: 'Can I have some milk, please?' And the horse answers: 'No, sorry. I haven't got any milk. I am a horse (neigh, neigh). No milk here!' ... and the story goes on like this.



Picture E

- 3 In groups, the children match the animals and their shadows on the poster—see Picture F. They then take each animal picture and stick it to the correct place on the poster, creating 'their' farm. The teacher asks the children to say the name and mimic the sound of each animal.



Picture F

To sum up, stories provide meaningful contexts for very young learners (Shin 2007). As language teachers we can exploit them effectively via various activities in thematic unit design.

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