

A–Z of teaching young learners: English and the mother tongue

What and why?

Knowing when to use the mother tongue and when to use English in a classroom is one of the hardest decisions to make. In the past, many writers have recommended that teachers should only use English – that the mother tongue, in other words, should not be allowed. This is not a view we take, especially for young learners. Firstly, it is impossible to learn anything unless you relate it to what you already know. This means that children will always translate even if we tell them not to. It is important, then, that we make sure they have the correct translation. The old argument about ‘encouraging them to think in English’ is only really feasible when they have enough language in which to think. For primary school children, this is unlikely to be the case with a foreign language for a very long time. Secondly, it is important that the children have a sense of security in the classroom, that they feel they can ask for help, explain problems, say how they feel, and so on. They will only do this in the mother tongue. Thirdly, using the mother tongue means that it is possible to do more interesting work and more complex types of activities.

There is, of course, a danger in this – that the children will hear very little English. Every situation is unique, but a general principle might be to try to use English as much as possible – without producing confused, worried or bored learners.

Practical ideas

- Give instructions in English, but repeat them in the mother tongue. After a while, you could give an English instruction and get the children to say it in the mother tongue, so that you know they have understood.
- Give instructions in English, but try to use as much gesture as possible to make the meaning clear. In the craft activities, for example, the children can hear an instruction in English and see what it means.
- Give instructions in English, but allow time for the children to ‘process’ the language before you give another instruction. Comprehension is improved by giving the children time between statements, not by speaking more slowly.
- Only use the mother tongue at certain times. For example, when you are previewing or when you are helping the children to understand something new.
- Try to use the same language again and again. The ‘Classroom language’ section in the teaching notes for each unit gives examples.
- Teach the children the meaning of classroom language that you will use a lot. For example: Work in pairs. Open your book. Listen and follow. You could put a poster on the wall with common phrases that you use, and their meanings. When you give an instruction, you can then point to the poster at the same time.
- Teach the children some phrases that they can use. For example: I don’t understand. Please say it again. I can’t hear. What’s the English for...?