

# Young learners in language schools

## Karmen Feher offers some tips on keeping young learners interested and involved.

We have entered a period of swift changes. That is a fact. The modern technologies which have flooded the market and our lives have had their consequences: physical borders are narrower, communication and information exchange more effective, language and intercultural awareness growing. And yet, in spite of a number of articles written on the topic, conferences conducted to make teachers aware of these changes and an immense effort shown on the part of language teachers to adapt to these changes in mainstream schools, little has been said about language schools and their experiences.

Language schools have always had a unique role and position. They mainly choose their own materials and their own teaching methods. Quite an advantage, especially for those offering courses for children because they need to meet not only their learners' but especially their parents' expectations. Being restricted to using a certain set of materials would definitely make their job more difficult. Furthermore, the primary goal of language schools is to offer more than the school can, so freedom in selecting their materials does not only contribute to the quality of language learning but also enables them to make it possible for their learners to reach a higher level of knowledge at a considerably earlier age.

However, the advances in language teaching have triggered off a rise in the quality of language teaching and learning in regular schools as well. This has led to higher expectations and new challenges. Basically, the market has changed and language schools have to adapt to it. Therefore, having a certain flexibility in teaching is no longer enough and more work needs to be put into conducting adequate programmes, motivating potential and/or existing learners to tackle or continue their extra-curricular study of a language, and finally into offering a certain external valuation and recognition of their effort.

### Programmes

The publishing industry is flourishing and the market packed with teaching materials. It would be hard not to find at least one thing for every taste. And yet, what is the best choice?

Undoubtedly, the modern language learner can no longer follow the path of the traditional learning of grammatical structures and rigidly selected vocabulary and learn them perfectly well and by heart, thinking that would do the trick. We are now in an age marked with words like the Internet, globalisation, the Digital Age, so effective communication has become the key word. There is no place for perfection here: a language is too complex to master completely and the amount of information too great to

consume in one go. Learning is a never-ending story. What we are striving for now, therefore, is to supply the language learner with certain strategies of how to read, write, listen and speak well enough to successfully function in a given everyday situation. Teaching programmes and materials should be selected according to the four basic language skills, i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking, and also according to the ways in which the strategies of how to use language in communication activities are presented.

### Motivation

'Earlier means better' seems to be another modern and widely-accepted notion in the teaching world. Its fairly successful implantation in state schools has already had and will definitely continue to have knock-on effects in the teaching of courses for children. Motivation has always played an important role, but what we will have to face now is how to motivate children to continue learning for more than ten years. No doubt, this means a heavy burden for language schools especially those that start teaching children at the age of four and five and whose policy is in any case long-term language learning.

The following might be worth considering:

#### The first time

The first experience is usually the most important one in everything we do. When it is a pleasant one, our enthusiasm normally grows, and when it is not, we might even consider not doing it at all. With young children, the first encounter with a foreign language is crucial. Children are sensitive, not used to processing their experiences in the same way as adults, and they need a lot of guidance in order to get through the first years of their learning successfully. Children should have a positive and a successful learning experience.

#### Why?

Children should be able to find or have explained the reasons for their learning a foreign language. They need to know the purpose and what they will gain from learning or they might lose interest. With very young children parents also play an important role here, so teachers should co-operate with them, inform the parents about the child's progress and then together try to find appropriate solutions for each individual child.

#### Can I do it?

Some children who already think they cannot succeed in language learning need to be re-motivated. This is particularly the case with children who have already had a negative experience with it. They will need even more



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