



# “Playful English”

Based on an article of the Award-winning author **Opal Dunn**

Young children are natural language learners and users of languages. If they are given varied types of input opportunities right for their developmental level, they can pick up language, even when they are very young, and achieve remarkably easily.

Depending on the quality and quantity of the input, Young children pick up English easily. It is from listening that they absorb and work out how to reuse the English content.

**Without familiar styles of input, like play and copying behaviour, they find it more difficult to begin to pick up English successfully (and typical classroom teaching is not yet their familiar input style).**

If very young and young children are to reach their language learning potential within the limited classroom exposure, the teacher’s input must be well planned, and focused on the children’s age and interest.

Today most English teaching programs accept that young children need a range of activities and games from which they can learn English. However, success depends more importantly, on the quality, quantity and style of input.

Has the input been planned to fit a young child’s typical learning abilities? Do they start from the child’s level and scaffold up, gradually introducing more language?

Does the input reflect children’s love of playing with the sounds of language, similar to ways they learn their mother tongue and the way they play? Tongue twisters, jokes and simple rhymes are part of English literacy, too.

**Learning colour names in English, even if hidden in a song, is not how children learn nor are words that fit their natural conversation!**

The teacher’s task is to continually activate and reactivate young children’s natural skills as they come to their first English lessons, eager to learn to talk.

Young children expect and want immediate results.

First impressions are lasting. Skilful teachers know how to break into the children’s interest zone with easy-to-pick-up rhymes so children can go home and show how they can speak some English, even after the first lesson. They have an answer to their parent’s question: What did you learn in English today? ... and they can reply: One two three, Listen to me. One-two-three. Do this like me (copying an action).

Of course children can enjoy taking part in an activity and visual results give some degree of satisfaction to children and their parents, and can brighten up the classroom.

However, concentrating on doing an activity might be giving little opportunity for language input or natural dialogue. Silences, as children are busy in an activity, may not give opportunities to learn and use English!

If language input has not been planned, children’s opportunities to absorb English unconsciously and begin to use it are being wasted. Classroom exposure time is limited and teachers need to maximize exposure to

English. Teachers need to “TUNE IN” as children are self-educators and know how to ‘turn off’ listening to input when they feel overloaded or bored.

Within a lesson, teachers can use various types of input following a hidden syllabus. Where lessons follow a plan, picking up language is easier as children can anticipate what to expect next. This feeling of security frees them to focus on listening to input and beginning to respond, especially if the activities are routine or already known. Input language (‘Teacher Talk’) includes more repetition and putting in words about what the children do. It also includes skilful use of tone of voice, stress and intonation, showing support, facilitate understanding, adds interest and enable ways to encourage children to try to speak in English.

## The “Playful” Approach

The Playful Approach is NOT an activity or even the playing of a game. It is a planned intervention to immediately respond to the flagging interest in an activity or game by the insertion of some relevant playful language to change the mode or tone in order to sustain children’s interest in the activity or task.

The language may be supported by relevant, often exaggerated, body gestures to create surprise or add fun. Children’s response to the surprise insertion of a Playful Approach is usually immediate and the activity happily continues as planned to an acceptable ending.

### The Playful Approach:

- motivates by inserting suspense, surprise and mystery: *Oh dear! What next?*
- re-motivates when focus is lost: *Whose turn is it? Get a six. Oh no, only a two!*
- extends short attention spans: *I can see it! Look on the left!*
- arouses curiosity by inserting wonder, and challenges

- encourages: *Try again, I know you can do it.*
- challenges: *Can you ...? Are you sure you can?*
- projects enthusiasm: *Wow! I like that? Let's do it again.*
- supports exploring: *Look at the size of this sunflower plant? Is it the biggest?*

#### The Playful Approach helps the teacher to:

- sustain interest within games by inserting suspense, to speed up formal games: *Whose turn is next? It isn't mine!*
- insert a game-like atmosphere: *Let me try. Quickly, we want to see...*
- sum up progress amusingly: *You've got five cards, I've only got one!*
- predict (sometimes incorrectly) to amuse and engage: *This time I'm going to get a six. Wait and see... Oh no, no, no! It's a two!*
- insert fun when winning or losing: *You played well. You nearly won, and what about me!*

Teachers can use the voice to create a playful atmosphere in class and make children curious. Surprise changes in intonation include:

- volume – unexpected change to a whisper
- stress – added to important words
- silences – sudden, no use of language
- repetition – playfully repeating with rise in pitch and a smile: No, no, no, NO!

Teachers can also use facial 'language' to create a playful atmosphere in class. This can include:

- a fun glare to show surprise
- a smile to encourage or show enthusiasm
- blinking in an exaggerated way, to express surprise or

The skills of the Playful Approach are natural, but teachers may not have the confidence to use them as they are trained and feel that it is not an accepted method to teach. Teachers may feel that children will interpret it as 'only playing', which parents might not understand or expect to take place within an English lesson.

Parents need to understand that a young child's way of learning to communicate in English is basically the same as how they successfully taught them to speak their mother tongue.

Parents need to be helped to understand that their children are not sufficiently mature to learn in a way that perhaps they learned English in Secondary School, through a teacher instructed, analytical Grammar Method.

Young children's enthusiasm for English lessons and proof of their success is sufficient to show that the spontaneous Playful Approach has a role in all beginners' English lessons, including more formal activities introducing reading and creative writing. The inclusion of the Playful Approach gives teachers a special way to bond and sustain enthusiasm for learning English. Lifelong attitudes are known to be formed early. No wonder some adults can fondly recall the name of their first English teacher!

The Playful Approach is not a language-learning scheme or an imposed method of instruction. It is an inborn playful skill, common to many child cultures, and frequently used by adults to insert, where and when needed, some playful language which will engage and captivate the child. Although many teachers may have to dig deep to find or re-find their Playful Approach, the resulting, sustained enthusiasm for English from the children in the class will be their reward.



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