Teaching the very young learners:  
An alternative to kindergarten textbooks  
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**Introduction**

Teaching English to very young learners (TEVYL) is rapidly spreading around the world, with some countries introducing it as early as in preschool or nursery school. For details see Rixon (2013), Ghosn (2013a) and Enever (2011) for early language learning policies and practice. In the wake of this trend, publishers are producing textbooks for nursery and kindergarten children. In a 2012 language teachers’ conference, an international publisher was promoting textbooks for 2- and 3-year-olds. Yet, teaching 3-year-olds using a structured textbook is not necessarily the ideal approach.

Although it is widely believed that ‘younger is better’ when it comes to learning a new language, brain mapping studies suggest that optimal age for second language learning is between the ages of six and 15 (Thompson et al., 2000). The early introduction of English in formal school settings raises some concerns about instructional materials and pedagogical approaches, for young children do not readily take to formal, teacher-fronted and coursebook-based instruction implied by the currently available internationally marketed materials. This paper argues against formal, coursebook-based instruction in very young learner classes and, drawing on whole language philosophy, proposes some practical alternatives that are developmentally more appropriate.

**Review of Two Coursebooks**

Several young learner courses are currently available on the market. (See Hughes, 2014 for a review of five British VYL courses.) This study reviewed the first level of two current coursebooks aimed at children between the ages of 3 and 5: *Pockets* (Herrera & Hojel, 2009) and *Get Ready!* (Bailey, 2010).

The texts were reviewed within the framework of principles of instructed L2 learning, drawn from Ellis (2008), developmentally appropriate practice when teaching young learners, based on recommendations of NAYEC and ASCD, and what is known about young children as learners. The books were analyzed for scope and sequence, and three units in each were examined in detail, one from the beginning, one
from the middle and one from the end of each book. Teachers’ books were examined for suggested approaches and strategies.

Findings

Figures 1 and 2 summarize the main findings. While the themes and topics are fairly appropriate in primary school, one must question the topics of ordering food in a restaurant and ways of communicating at the airport for 3-4 year-old children who will not need to use English in these contexts. Also, the expectation of having children talk about honest, creativity and ways of communication without being able to draw on their L1 is very high and likely to cause frustration in many children.

In both courses, the focus is more on form than on meaning, and the expectation of complete sentences (even when repeating after the teacher) is not aligned with developmentally appropriate practice.

Neither course shows any evidence of play, with the exception of some role-play activities in Get Ready! emerging from the listening and retelling of simple story scripts. There is no mention of children practicing English during pretend play in centers, such as kitchen, shop, dress-up and puppets, or while exploring in math and science centers, which form a typical part of nursery and pre-primary class environment. Yet, such activities would provide the teacher with a natural context within which to engage children with English. This would also offer an opportunity for some more individualized instruction than the whole-class approach promoted by the two courses, which reflects the assumption that all children will progress at the same rate through the course material.

If the findings reflect the reality in other similar coursebooks, they raise some concerns about the coursebook-based approach in nursery and kindergarten classes.

Alternatives

Nursery rhymes, songs and chants, and picture books are more age appropriate media in the pre-primary language classroom than a coursebook. Many nursery rhymes can be adapted to introduce English vocabulary and meaningful chunks of language in a motivating and enjoyable way. For example, the familiar Baa, baa, black sheep can be used to teach not only the color black and the word sheep, in addition to have you any, but also other colors, as well as other animals and their special offerings:
Cluck, cluck, red hen, do you have some eggs?
Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Two baskets full.
One for you, one for me, etc.

Similarly one can introduce cow, milk, bucket/pail; bee, honey, hive (Ghosn, 2013b). Nursery rhymes lend themselves also well to dramatic play with minimal props.

Just like nursery rhymes, popular chants and songs present useful vocabulary as well as chunks of language and are highly enjoyable. They provide opportunities for physical movement, which is very important in the VYL classroom. *The Wheels of the Bus*, *Hokey Pokey*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, and *This is the Way* are just some examples. The last one is particularly useful as it can be adapted to introduce a variety of topics and vocabulary.

Finally, picture books are a perfect medium in the VYL classroom, as children are naturally drawn to stories. Many good picture books are now also available in over-sized easel books with large print, helping develop children’s sight vocabulary and providing a link to emerging literacy. Dramatizing stories is engaging and helps children process the language to their long term memory. Moving away from the rigidity of a coursebook will also enable teachers to better differentiate learning and ensure everyone can succeed (Ghosn, 2013c). Classic folktales can be re-told to adapt to specific cultural contexts and made into easel books with simple illustrations.

In conclusion, as TEVYL spreads, educators are advised to keep in mind David Elkind’s cautionary note:

*Young children learn in a different manner from that of older children and adults, yet we can teach them many things if we adapt our materials and mode of instruction to their level of ability. But we miseducate young children when we assume that their learning abilities are comparable to those of older children and that they can be taught with materials and with the same instructional procedures appropriate to school-age children* (Elkind, 1988, p. 59).

References


### Figure 1. Pockets, Units 1, 5 and 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>My Classroom, My Body, My Toys, My Family, Our Pets, My Clothes, Party Food, Around My Home, Nature Around Us</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit</strong></td>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 My Classroom</td>
<td>Vocabulary presented in isolation with pictures; e.g. This is glue. Show me glue. Say, This is glue.; Look at the pets! The pets are in the house. (See Figure 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Our Pets</td>
<td>Children find and point at objects in the books and repeat words and sentences after teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Nature Around Us</td>
<td>Children find and point to objects in the book; repeat teacher sentences and answer teacher questions. Full sentences are expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34 vocabulary items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23 vocabulary items + 13 recycled words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 vocabulary items + 18 recycled words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
<td>Introduce oneself and exchange greetings. Name classroom objects/shapes. Follow commands. Make polite requests and respond to requests. Use pictures to re-tell a story with a simple script. Understand expressions in the present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Name pets. Identify animal actions and sounds. Talk about how people care for animals. Express wants and ownership. Talk about a toy pet. Sizes big and little; prepositions; possessive my. Review of colors and shapes, and the present tense. Use pictures to re-tell a simple story in pairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Identify things in nature. Make polite requests. Express wants and ownership. Review colors, shapes and prepositions. Follow commands. Re-tell a story in pairs and role play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>In addition to pointing at pictures and objects, the sampled units have games, songs and chants, arts and crafts, math &amp; science connections, and tracing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Objectives are presented as they are listed in the book; some are phrased as learning outcomes while some are listed as instructional topics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Fun at School, Fun with Birthdays, Fun in Our Neighborhood, Fun with Food, Fun with Animal Friends, Fun with Plants, Fun with Transportation, Fun with Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit 1 Fun at School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>New vocabulary presented with pictures and with simple story scripts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Alphabet sounds and numbers. Identify classroom objects, school supplies, colors and shapes, musical instruments, school staff and places at school. Talk about honesty (see Figure 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Tracing, counting matching. Listening to and re-telling stories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Get Ready! (Levant Edition) Units 1, 4 and 8

Figure 3. Pockets Unit 1, Lesson 1