



## SPOTLIGHT ON YL TEACHER EDUCATION

### Reflections on how to be a highly effective primary language teacher

Carol Read

This article presents a personal view of what it takes to be a highly effective primary language teacher. Rather than focussing on the technical side of teaching skills and procedures, it explores the more intangible personal capacities, attitudes and beliefs that make for highly effective teachers who have a profound influence and make a long-lasting difference to the lives of their learners.

My eight essential ingredients for highly effective primary language teaching can be seen in the *Reflective teacher wheel* below. These ingredients derive from grounded theory rooted in many years of classroom practice and experience. They also aim to reassert the value of the primary language teacher's role in a world where the status of the profession is often low.

### Reflective teacher wheel



#### Mindset

This relates both to ourselves as teachers and to our learners. For teachers, mindset relates to the conscious development of metacognitive skills, attitudes and awareness that help us to continually reflect on our classroom behaviour and improve our performance. By exercising choice and thinking 'on purpose' about the way we see our role and the influence we have on children, we can make a positive difference. Hattie (2012) argues that the most successful teachers believe that they are 'agents of change' and that they have the qualities and skills that can make a difference to their children's lives. Hattie also maintains that the belief of teachers that the outcomes for children are not fixed, and that we can change and influence them, is crucial to successful teaching.

For our learners, mindset relates to the development of critical thinking, creative thinking, values education and life skills, as an integral part of our teaching. It also crucially relates to the development of a 'growth mindset' rather than a 'fixed mindset' (Dweck, 2006). This helps to equip children with a belief that their intelligence and achievements are the result of effort and hard work and encourages a willingness to persevere in the face of challenges or setbacks. A 'growth mindset' is frequently communicated by the kind of praise we give children. This is most constructive when it is descriptive, rather than evaluative, and focuses not only on content or performance but also on the process, strategies, effort and persistence in carrying out a task.

## Rapport

Rapport is a state of having trust and mutual responsiveness with others. Rapport means that you respond to children and give them the experience of being understood. All teachers have their own individual, unique 'teaching persona' and so we need to create rapport in a way which comes naturally to our own individual personalities as well as using specific strategies and techniques.

An important factor in achieving rapport is to have a sense of what children value in a teacher. In a survey of 300 state primary school children aged 6-12, 'What makes a teacher special for you?' (Read, 2000), children reported that they wanted a teacher who is 'kind, caring, funny, listens to you, makes you work, tells you off if necessary, doesn't get angry or shout'. Older children also valued a teacher who 'explains things well, is patient, treats children equally, has no favourites, and doesn't go on and on.' As well as building rapport with individual children, it is important to establish whole group rapport, for example, through activities which involve collective responses and synchronising breathing and movement, such as action songs.

As has been said, 'Children don't care how much you know until they know how much you care' (de Andrés, 1999, p.99). Creating rapport is arguably one of the most significant ingredients, but also one of the most intangible and difficult to measure, in highly effective primary language teaching.

## Engagement

Engagement is the starting point of highly effective teaching, as illustrated by the traditional proverb: 'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'. Engagement involves making children 'thirsty' for learning. Key factors in engagement include:

**Curiosity** – stimulating children's curiosity e.g. through questions, images, riddles, prediction.

**Relevance** – ensuring that learning is worthwhile and children can see 'what's in it' for them.

**Goals** – ensuring these are clear and attainable, and children can relate to them.

**Challenge** – providing an appropriate level of cognitive and linguistic challenge, neither too easy nor too difficult.

**Competence** – ensuring that children have the necessary skills and strategies to be able to carry out activities successfully.

**Feedback** – giving constructive and encouraging feedback as an integral part of the teaching-learning process.

**Choice** – allowing children to choose, e.g. how they present a project, in order to promote autonomy and increase their sense of ownership and responsibility for learning (see also Bilsborough, pp. 70-75).

**Enjoyment** – building in an element of humour and having a sense of fun as this tends to increase engagement.

**Passion** – communicating your own passion for language as this is infectious and can motivate children to learn with greater enthusiasm.

## Support

Scaffolding is the metaphorical concept often used to describe the verbal, interactive support provided by teachers to lead children to carry out tasks and activities independently. As the metaphor implies, scaffolding is temporary and can be put in place, strengthened, taken down piece by piece or taken away completely, as children develop knowledge and skills and are increasingly able to act competently and independently.

Originally developed by Bruner (1978) in the context of first language and cognitive development in very young children, others (e.g. van Lier, 1996) have argued that the processes involved in scaffolding may operate in foreign language learning as well.

van Lier (1996) sees pedagogical scaffolding as a three-stage process which goes from 'global to local' or 'macro to micro' (van Lier, 1996, p.198).

- **Global level** – this refers to the overall learning aims and outcomes.
- **Activity level** – this refers to the planning, sequencing and design of tasks and activities.
- **Local interactional level** – this refers to a part planned, part improvised process which involves the teacher in deciding from moment to moment when and how to prompt, help, encourage, praise, ask questions (e.g. open, closed, based on higher or lower order thinking skills), repeat, re-cast, use redundancy, translate, use the first language, or modify the steps in order to ensure the most effective learning.

The skill in scaffolding children's foreign language learning, particularly at the local, interactional level, demands quick thinking as well as a high level of sensitivity and awareness of individual children's abilities, personalities and needs, and is a crucial ingredient in highly effective primary language teaching.

## Impact

The only real value of our teaching is the impact that it has on our children. In order to assess this impact, we need to engage in a constant process of self-evaluation and be willing to make adjustments that will help us to improve our teaching on a daily basis. The call to 'know thy impact' (Hattie, 2012, p. 8) is the strongest message to teachers about what will make the greatest difference to children's learning in terms of both immediate, short-term outcomes (the learning they achieve by the end of each lesson) and future, longer-term outcomes (the results of tests or external exams).

Feedback is key to assessing the impact of teaching. From the teacher's perspective, learning needs to be structured to get, and give, frequent feedback on children's learning. From the learner's perspective, children need to be helped to develop metacognitive skills which increasingly enable them to reflect on the quality of their work and to use strategies, such as measuring their work against success criteria, to improve it.

Assessment of (and for) learning is also key in this process and provides feedback on children's progress as well as on the impact of teaching. In order to maximise impact, the way we give feedback to children needs to be motivating, frequent, constructive and honest. We also need to remember that our role is not just about receiving and giving feedback to children but systematically seeking it out and acting on it ourselves in terms of ongoing improvements and changes to our classroom practice as well.

## Language of learning

As teachers, we often use language to describe and talk about learning but don't necessarily share this with the children we teach or, if we do, use their first language for this. Examples of language of learning include words such as *effort, goals, practice, feedback, strategy, research, develop, collaborate, challenge, reflect, review*. By introducing and sharing this kind of language in English, particularly in the upper-primary years, we help children to become aware of the process of learning and to increasingly talk about their own views and experience of learning. This also helps them to take more ownership and responsibility for their learning and become more self-managing and self-aware.

Teaching language for learning helps to make learning processes transparent and, as Hattie (2012) asserts, there is ample evidence that this can help children make better progress and become more successful and motivated learners. It can also feel empowering for children, as for example, when a 10-year-old child can confidently tell you: *I'm going to do some research on rainforests.*

## Expectations

The expectations we have of our classes and the children we teach are often a self-fulfilling prophecy: if we expect children to behave badly, the chances are they will; if we expect them to be low-achievers, they're unlikely to disappoint.

One of the most significant ingredients in highly effective primary language teaching is to communicate high expectations to individual children and classes. For example, if you treat your class of 6-year-olds as if you expect them to behave and learn as mature, responsible, little people, they are likely to do just that. Setting high expectations for the children, and for yourself, also involves a refusal to accept failure as an option. If learning isn't going well, try not to blame yourself, or the children, or their families, or the coursebook, or your institution (easier said than done at times, I know) but be willing to adopt the kind of mindset and willingness to assess your impact and adjust or change what you're doing in the classroom until things improve.

As a rule of thumb, it is generally worth remembering that:

- children usually know more than we give them credit for;
- they are usually capable of achieving more than we ask of them;
- they are often surprisingly mature when given added responsibility.

By creating a class culture in which both you and the children have high expectations of learning, it is likely to prove a self-fulfilling prophesy and also achieve highly effective results.

## Collaboration

Collaboration relates to collaboration with other teachers and colleagues for our own continuing professional development (CPD) and to collaboration in our classes between children in order to establish positive relationships, a healthy learning environment and achieve maximum progress.

As teachers, we become more effective through sharing ideas, resources, problems and strategies for dealing with them, and through giving each other constructive help and moral support. Collaboration through social media and personal learning networks (PLN) also helps us to keep pace with technology and other developments in a volatile and rapidly changing educational world.

For children, learning to collaborate is important in creating a positive classroom community in which children feel valued and supported, free to ask questions, able to take risks, and learn from each other. This has significant benefits in terms of learning outcomes, behaviour, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as fostering important values such as sharing, turn-taking, tolerance and respect.

In conclusion, I hope my *Reflective teacher wheel* provides food for thought about some of the most significant, but also often less tangible, aspects of highly effective primary language teaching. You might also like to think of all the areas that feel most important to you in your teaching and make your own personalised *Reflective teacher wheel*.



**Carol Read** has over 30 years' experience in ELT as a teacher, teacher trainer, academic manager, materials writer and educational consultant. Carol's main specialisation is in primary language teaching and she has published extensively in this area including the award-winning title *500 Activities in the Primary Classroom*. Carol's latest publication is a six-level primary course, *Tiger Time*, with integrated digital resources for teachers and children published by Macmillan Education. Carol was President & Vice President of IATEFL from 2012-2016. You can find out more about Carol by visiting her website [www.carolread.com](http://www.carolread.com)

Join Carol's talk at the SIG's first Web Conference, 'Pearls experience from life in the classroom', 24-26 February 2017.

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## YLTSIG Pre Conference Event 3 April 2017, Crowne Plaza, Glasgow

### 21st Century Values Education in Teaching English to Young Learners

The importance of Values Education in YL ELT reflects a growing global concern to better equip children and teenagers with life skills and positive attitudes to enable them to navigate our complex and diverse world. The YLTSIG PCE will provide a day-long exploration of Values Education including age-appropriate approaches, tasks and activities to help teachers to incorporate values in their English language lessons. Practical ideas and inspiration for a values focus in YL classrooms, staffrooms, online learning spaces and teacher education will be key priorities for the PCE.

**Carol Read is our opening plenary speaker.**

**She will focus on *Integrating values education into everyday classroom practice.***

**In this session we will explore the complex and controversial notion of values education and why it is important. The main focus will be on helping children to internalize values through the holistic development of cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions in classroom activities such as storytelling, drama, games and songs.**

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