

English Clubs

Introducing English to Young Learners

Worldwide there has been an enormous push to introduce English as a foreign language to children in primary school classrooms. Parents as well as political and educational leaders see English and early English education as a necessary prerequisite for children's later success. English is being recognized as a world language, and many people believe that the earlier children start learning English, the better. The underlying assumption, held by many, is that learners will be more successful if they begin studying English at an early age.

The challenge is how to create quality programs for young learners. Research has shown that except for pronunciation, young learners are NOT better equipped to learn foreign languages than older learners are (Marinova-Todd, S., B. Marshall, and C. Snow 2000). Such findings do not dissuade governments and ministries of education from introducing English language programs for young learners.

Like many other countries, Tunisia has decided to embark on English education in the primary grades. The

Tunisian Ministry of Education and Training has considered many different issues and has created a program focused on English clubs. The English clubs have been designed to provide primary school age learners with a positive initial exposure to the English language before they begin formal academic study of the language in middle school. Other countries can learn from the Tunisian model when implementing their own young learner English programs.

The context

Tunisia is in an interesting position because it has a well-established second language curriculum in place in the schools, which ensures that learners are bilingual in Arabic and French. Children enter school and learn to read and write Arabic. (It should be noted that Arabic has a writing system with a script and spatial orientation of script that differs from the Latin letters and the Latin orientation.) When children enter third grade, they begin learning French as a second language. They are introduced to the aural/oral French language as well as the French writing system, which is based on the Latin alphabet.

The Tunisian Ministry of Education and Training took into account the academic and linguistic context prior to developing and implementing English language instruction in the classrooms for primary school children. Rather than merely adopting curricula used in other countries to introduce English to young learners, Tunisian officials decided to create a program that would build on pupils' previous experiences learning a second language with Latin letters. The officials also felt that it was important to create a program that would not overwhelm learners who were still developing skills in their first and second languages.

The aim of the program

Tunisian officials were careful to formulate clear goals for English language instruction in the primary schools, based on the local context. After careful scrutiny, the officials in charge decided to introduce English at the fifth grade as a club activity rather than as a formal class and to develop a program based on young learners' social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development and the Tunisian context.

The aim of the program is to help children develop a positive attitude towards the English language and to be sensitized to the sound system of the language. The aim of helping learners develop a positive attitude towards the English language is in keeping with Krashen's (1986) affective filter hypothesis. According to Krashen, learners can have a "mental block" towards a language caused by affective factors. The Tunisian program has strived to help learners avoid the mental block by engaging in fun club-style activities in English.

Another aim of the program has been to help children develop pronunciation skills in English. As mentioned above, one of the real advantages to having children start learning English at an early age is that they are better equipped to develop English language pronunciation (Birdsong 1999). With this in mind, the program features songs, poems, chants, and finger-plays that young learners sing and chant.

In addition, the English clubs are designed to help learners become accustomed to the language so that when they begin formal instruction in middle school, they are ready. Through English clubs, learners develop an

awareness of the English language sound system, classroom instructions, and basic vocabulary. This awareness is designed to facilitate the acquisition of English language skills when learners begin formal instruction.

An English club

An English club is a group experience that occurs three times a week for eleven-year-old children. It is less formal than a regular course at the primary school level. The emphasis of the English club is on exposure to the English language rather than the development of a strict set of English language skills. The types of activities found in an English club are more like the types of hands-on activities found in a Girl Guide or Boy Scout meeting than the teacher-centered activities found in a regular fifth or sixth grade class. If you were to visit an English club, you would notice learners making things, singing songs, and doing other enjoyable activities in English.

During English club time, children are engaged in hands-on fun activities in keeping with the overall spirit and aim of the Club. Children do word snake puzzles, linking words together. Learners also make things, such as puppets or pictures, related to the topics they are learning about in English.

Children are also encouraged to have fun singing songs during English club time. English club teachers are trained to lead singing activities that encourage children to be actively involved by clapping hands to the rhythm of the song, using body actions, or singing in rounds.

Materials used in English clubs

By law, Tunisian schoolbooks must be produced locally. This means that educators can develop their own materials that are in keeping with the local needs and goals. Educators created their own student books for English clubs. These materials could be considered resource books more than textbooks. The student books provide learners with vocabulary and the context of the vocabulary and are used as a resource for the songs and hands-on activities that students engage in during English club.

Additional materials for the English clubs were donated by the American Cultural Center and the British Council. All of the English clubs were provided with picture dictionaries

and a cassette and CD of favorite children's songs. Some of the English clubs were given supplementary commercial textbooks that included picture cards.

Staffing English clubs

Worldwide it is very difficult to implement young learner English language teaching (ELT) programs because there are not adequate numbers of teachers who (1) have the necessary skills to work with young learners and (2) are proficient in the English language. The decision was made in Tunisia to staff the English clubs with primary school teachers who received focused English language instruction. Prior to the widespread introduction of the English clubs, primary school regular education teachers underwent a two-year program of language improvement. Primary school teachers attended courses, in their regions, led by the best secondary school English language specialists. These courses provided primary school teachers with the basic English language skills required to conduct the English clubs.

Training for English club leaders/teachers

In order to create state of the art programs, the Tunisian Ministry of Education put together a teacher training program with two components. Primary school teachers received English language improvement classes (described above) as well as training in teaching English as a foreign language. Appropriate methodologies for use in the English clubs were modeled as part of the English language improvement classes. In addition, at regular intervals the teachers received methodology training. The methodology seminars were held in regional teacher training centers during the academic year and also in national English Language Villages held in summer.

English Language Villages provide an innovative way to expose primary school teachers to the English language. English Language Villages were set up as six-day camps for primary school teachers. Everything about the camp, from food service to evening activities, was conducted in English. All of the signs of the camp were in English. The music played during breaks was all in English. Primary school teachers attended language improvement sessions as well as methodology workshops as part of the camp.

Recommendations for young learner ELT programs

Other countries wishing to embark on English language study in the primary schools could learn from the Tunisian program. Listed below are specific recommendations for others considering the development and implementation of young learner programs.

1. Consider the context

Although it may be easy to merely adopt a textbook and curriculum being used in a neighboring country, it is important that the Ministry of Education and regional authorities determine what is most appropriate for a particular group of young learners. The entire context should be considered, including the primary language of learners, the level of literacy of learners, their exposure to one or more than one language, learners' exposure to the Latin writing system, and, finally, the resources available to implement a young learner program. Local education officials shouldn't bow to pressures from international agencies and international publishers to merely adopt what has been created for another country or even another region within the same country.

2. Develop goals

It is important to have clear and realistic goals. It is impossible to create and implement a quality program without knowing the aim of the program. It is also necessary to have realistic goals that can be met with the available resources. For example, the top officials may want every child in every school to become completely bilingual within a period of three years, but if there are not enough teachers who can speak English and are trained to work with young learners, this goal cannot be met.

3. Create a comprehensive multi-year plan

A quality young learner ELT program cannot be implemented overnight. Quality programs should be developed and implemented over a number of years. The comprehensive plan should address every aspect of program implementation, including teacher training, resources, and the impact on the total primary curriculum. For example, if English is of-

ferred for 100 minutes a week, the number of minutes available for other subjects or activities may have to be decreased, and this cannot be done without careful planning and involvement of individuals from different departments within the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion

The Tunisian English program for young learners has been extremely successful for several reasons. First of all, it was developed based on local needs and conditions. Second, realistic goals were formulated that could be met with available resources. Based on the conditions and resources in Tunisia, the goals of the young learner program are to sensitize children to the English language and also to help children develop a positive attitude towards the English language. The best way to achieve the goals was by establishing English clubs instead of traditional English language classes. Third, the program was not developed and implemented overnight but rather over several years.

Other countries wishing to develop or modify English language instruction for young learners might want to consider setting up English clubs in place of formal classes. English clubs are an alternative to traditional classes that focus on paper and pencil tasks. If the focus of the first or first two years of English language instruction of a young learner program is on providing children with an enjoyable, stress-free exposure to English, then it is worth considering instituting English clubs.

References

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