

A CONVERSATION WITH PAULA GARRETT-RUCKS

Creative, kinesthetic activities to motivate young learners to communicate

Kelly Davidson Devall: How do creativity and kinesthetics motivate young language learners?

Paula Garrett-Rucks: From a proficiency-oriented perspective, our goal as world language educators is to encourage learners to use the target language to communicate meaningfully in spontaneous interactions in an acceptable and appropriate manner to native speakers of the language, regardless of the learner's age. For educators to encourage learners to use the language, we must consider the age-appropriate personal interests and developmental levels of our learners. Most young learners, especially under the age of 12, struggle to apply concepts to anything that cannot be physically manipulated or seen. Yet, even very young children can represent events and objects and engage in symbolic play. For these reasons, creativity and kinesthetic activities are at the core of my Pre-K to Grade 8 teaching methods course.

Kelly: When preparing a lesson with these principles, what type of characteristics might you

consider for different age groups?

Paula: There are several theoretical positions and descriptions of learners' characteristics across age groups. Among the more popular theorists, Piaget's cognitive development theory describes children ages 2-7 to be in the Pre-operational Stage and ages 7-11 in the Concrete operational stage. The younger Pre-operational stage learners exist in an egocentric phase where they cannot understand concrete logic nor mentally manipulate information without a physical representation. For example, a child sees two peas and knows when one more is present that there are three. However, the child does not understand what $2 + 1$ equals. Another example would be how a

child may know the word for red and the word for shirt in Spanish, but the child might still struggle with saying "a red shirt" without practice. In this stage, symbolic play and pretending are essential for the child to make sense of the world around them and they begin to stabilize understanding of the world, as well as their magical beliefs. For these reasons, language instructors must engage young learners in this pretend, imagina-

tive world in their lessons. As children progress into the Concrete operational stage, children can think more logically, but they are still somewhat limited to what they can physically manipulate. In this stage, learners' classification skills and interest increase drastically, thus instructors should tap into this classification interest when presenting material. For example, when presenting animals, have learners classify them within parameters—domestic versus wild, omnivores versus carnivores, etc.—to tap into the child's interests and thinking habits.

Equally important to the child's cognitive development is an understanding of how children explore and learn about the

world in different developmental levels. Egan proposes a classification of young learners, of approximately ages 4-10, to be in the Mythic Layer and learners approximately ages 8-15 to be in the Romantic Layer. According to Egan, the younger learners in the Mythic Layer learn best from story, metaphors and binary elements. He believes these learners rely strongly on their emotions in perceiving the world and thus want to know how to feel about what they are learning. They make sense of things through emotional and moral categories (usually extremes and opposites). For example, they want to know who is the good guy and who is the bad guy in a story. This makes for great vocabulary building and lessons when presenting opposites that captivate the attention of these learners. As children progress into the Romantic layer, they like to go deeper into the extremes, explore that which is strange and learn lots of facts. They become more interested in the transcending qualities of people in stories rather than binary characteristics. Although these learners are still quite emotional, they begin to separate the world around them from their internal world. They see the world as both fascinating and frightening. Similar to Piaget's cognitive developmental description, Egan also finds these learners to be collectors of information who enjoy researching their own topics and memorizing information.

In addition to these developmental theorists, I emphasize to my Pre-K to Grade 8 Methods students to consider the description of learners as Pre-literate, Newly Literate, and Developed Reading learners when choosing materials for lesson plans. For example, in choosing an interpretive task for a unit on clothing at an elementary school, teachers must consider that for Kindergartners, they need to use images of the clothing the students hear rather than words since the children are just learning to read in their own language. Curtain and Dahlberg have a fantastic representation of these various learner characteristics in their book, *Language and Children: Making the Match*. In addition to theoretical descriptions of children across different age levels, they include multiple teacher testimonies of descriptions of the children they work with and the interests of children across

various age groups. It is a wonderful read.

Kelly: Movement and creativity connect with many disciplines. How do you view our goal as world language teachers for young learners? What are some basic principles for early world language pedagogy and content-based instruction?

Paula: Interdisciplinary efforts are essential to optimal early language learning, and perhaps learning at any age, although elementary school teachers, in my opinion, are true masters of this practice. The most effective teaching and learning I have seen in the world language classroom infuses and reiterates information and activities from the sciences (earth and social), math, language arts, music, all of the classes really. In content-based instruction that draws from material being taught in other courses, the content material is fresh in the learner's mind and the instructor can start scaffolding on the learner's shared knowledge in the target language. Learners not only gain a sense of pride in their mastery of the content material, but they also gain self-efficacy in their language abilities.

Building on the content material from additional classes, I direct learners to present the material in a "story form" in their daily lesson plan and across a unit plan. The story form starts with a clear Beginning—the teacher motivating and engaging the learner's interest, then Middle—learners performing an activity toward a goal, and End—the lesson concluding with an outcome, product, solution, or resolution due to the achievement of the learning goal by the learners. To give a basic example, in a Kindergarten class where young learners are studying "The People in Your Community" in their Language Arts or Social Science classes, I suggest the language instructor design a unit plan around a story. For example, the unit could start by meeting a puppet, Policeman Bob, who is tired of working with bad guys and wants to do something else to help make people happy. Policeman Bob needs to learn about new career options. This is our beginning. Next, for the Middle, students use picture files to learn the names of professions in Spanish and then play Bingo with cards that have images of the professions to use this new knowledge and have dress up clothes to say what

they are. Students could then have a manipulative where they put different hats on a cut out figure based on what the profession is (see Figure 1 below), while starting to learn some Spanish words for the profession.

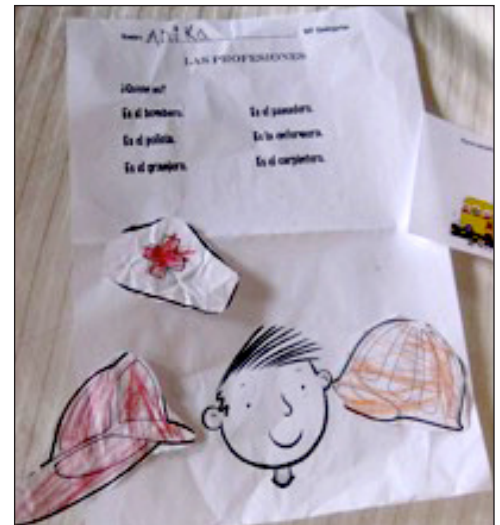


FIGURE 1: DRESSING A PROFESSION

Students put the different hat on the profession based on what the teacher says. The words above the head are a word bank to support the development of the learners' Language Arts skills, although the learner is not expected to know how to read these words yet.

Then students then start to learn actions for what the professions do. To make a long lesson short, at the end of the lesson, the puppet, Policeman Bob, will discover more about the profession of being a singer! He has always wanted to sing and now he knows he can be a mariachi singer. (This is our end). It is thanks to the students' ability to use the language and describe what each profession does that Policeman Bob learned about professions and can be happy with a career change. Perhaps a "career change" is not a fascinating topic to a 5-year-old, but we are discussing topics that they are learning about in their other classes. We also have the binary—good versus bad, happy versus sad, and we have a story form unit plan in which the problem is only resolved with the help of the students explaining, in the target language, career options available to Policeman Bob.

Kelly: What would a typical class session look like when teaching early language learners using these principles?

Paula: The younger the learner, the more need for consistent routines and procedures they can expect. In fact, we

recommend that learners in grades pre-Kindergarten through third start each lesson with an opening routine. The opening routine typically consists of the following elements:

1. A welcoming song. This can be used to transition into target language use instruction in a way that makes learners comfortable since they can quickly memorize it. Here is an example of a French song I start with, sung to the tune of Frère Jacques; each verse is repeated:

SONG: Bonjour les amis
 Bonjour les amis [Hello friends]
 Bonjour les amis [Hello friends]
 Comment allez-vous? [How are you ?]
 Comment allez-vous? [How are you ?]
 Très bien, merci [Very well, Thank you]
 Très bien, merci [Very well, Thank you]
 On est prêt! [We are ready (to learn)]
 Très bien, merci [Very well, Thank you]
 José-Luis Orozco offers a fantastic Spanish opening song, among his many other wonderful songs for

children found on YouTube.

2. Presentation of the calendar and weather. I suggest this be a manipulative that requires the involvement of a few volunteer learners to come up and hold the calendar board, select the date, and select the weather before the whole class responds to questions about the date and weather in a choral response. Here (left) are examples of a 2-sided weather (Figure 2) and calendar (Figure 3) poster.

3. A “Total

Physical Response” activity to recall vocabulary taught in a previous lesson or to introduce new material. A TPR activity simply means that learners act out a motion that the instructor has taught them that embodies the word. For example, the motion for “fireman” could be having the students pretend to blow out a fire.

4. The core of the lesson is typically the Present-Practice-Produce form of the lesson with new material introduced, practiced and then informally assessed with pair work.

5. Lastly, there is a closing song to establish a routine with learners. For example my closing song is:

SONG: Au revoir les amis
 Au revoir, Au revoir [Good bye, Good bye]
 On a bien chanté [We all sang well]
 Au revoir, Au revoir [Good bye, Good bye]
 On s’est bien amusé [We all had a good time]
 Au revoir, Au revoir [Good bye, Good bye]
 On rechantera

bientôt [We will sing again soon]

Kelly: Could you give some examples of how you might infuse creativity and kinesthetic activities to introduce a new topic to early language learners?

Paula: Yes, this is my favorite part of creatively engaging learners. We may start by introducing new vocabulary by pulling items out of a “Mystery Box” (Figure 4) that could be in the form of a suitcase (Figure 5) depending on the thematic unit. For example, if the thematic unit were “Animals,” I would pull stuffed animals out of the Mystery Box. If it were “Clothing,” I would take clothes out of a suitcase to demonstrate what I would need to prepare for my secret destination that they would have to figure out. Another way to introduce a new unit is to introduce the aforementioned story form with the use of a “Flannel Board” (Figure 6) or a “Big Book.” It is also sometimes just interesting to use a story that is famil-



FIGURE 2
 Weather poster where students place the Velcro-backed nice or bad weather image on the top pane of the window, then the more specific Velcro-backed image of whether it is hot, cold, windy, or rainy in the bottom window pane.



FIGURE 3
 Calendar where students take the Velcro-backed month and date of the calendar and place it in the saying above. Note: The moveable pieces are made out of cut-up cardboard “laminated” with packing tape and a strip of Velcro glued to the back.



FIGURE 4: MYSTERY BOX



FIGURE 5: SUITCASE FOR SECRET TRAVEL DESTINATION

iar to learners that demonstrates the vocabulary or structures they will encounter. For maximum learning with a familiar story, it is important to choose a



FIGURE 6 & CAPTION: FLANNEL (OR FELT) BOARD

What Do You See?), (3) lends to dramatization or pantomime, (4) lends to heavy use of visuals for content and progression).

Kelly: What types of manipulatives do you use in your instruction?

Paula: To continue with the ideal story notion I just mentioned in the previous question, I like to use manipulatives with stories. For example, when reading Brown Bear, Brown Bear in French, I have stuffed animals or plastic figurines for each of the characters mentioned. After reading the story, I practice the animal names with students listening and repeating while looking at each animal toy that I take from my Mystery Box. Then, I pull them out one by one and the first person who names it gets to hold the animal up while I read the story again. I also use counting manipulatives in stories. For example, when reading

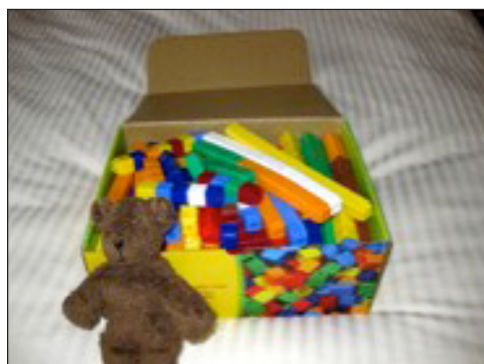


FIGURE 7
Linking blocks serve as manipulatives to represent each item the hungry caterpillar eats in La Oruga Muy Hambrienta.

blocks (Figure 7), like in the image below, and they need to put together the same number of each color fruit they hear from the story. A student volunteer who can name everything the caterpillar ate in the story—scaffolded by the linking blocks he or she put together while listening to the story—gets to wear

a story that is (1) predictable, or familiar, (2) has repetitive structures (such as Brown Bear, Brown Bear,

the butterfly wings I have hanging in my class.

In addition to manipulatives for interpretive storytelling tasks, I also have students in my foreign language teaching methods course do a paper plate assignment to show that you do not need to invest a lot of money to make manipulatives. Furthermore, advanced elementary learners could possibly make these manipulatives in their art class for the language teacher to use in subsequent lessons. The paper plate examples shown below are for spontaneously describing clothing (Figure 8), sports activities (Figure 9) or describing facial characteristics (Figure 10).

Another activity young learners enjoy when learning clothing items is “Dress the Bear (Figure 11). Students can color and cut out clothing options for “the bear” that I like to have laminated for them to use, but they could cut out their own bear as well. Templates for Dress the Bear are readily available with an Internet search. Once the clothing options and the bears are ready, this works as a partner activity where one partner tells the other how to dress the bear.

A favorite class activity is to find where something is hiding in a manipulative. For example, in the “Where in the House” activity in Figure 12, there are flaps that lift up and the teacher can put post-its under each flap for the object that is hidden. Students can guess either the number on the flap, the color of the flap or tell me the row and column they want to look in to find a missing object. Perhaps the story line could be, “where is Santa Claus?” Students would guess which floor he is on, which room he is in, etc. Figure 13 shows the back of the “House.” Here I taped the flaps to the back of the board after inserting them



FIGURE 8: DESCRIBING CLOTHING



FIGURE 9: DESCRIBING FACES



FIGURE 10: DESCRIBING ACTIVITIES



FIGURE 11: DRESS THE BEAR

through slits.

Another manipulative activity we create for the whole class to do a floor activity together is a “Shower Curtain” activity.

This could be a city drawn out with a Sharpie on a Shower Curtain and learners can take turns driving their cars around the city based on their partners’ instructions.

Over-the-door clear plastic shoe organizers make for wonderful manipulative holders where students need to move objects up or down, to the right or left...the possibilities are endless

with activities one can do with a cheap shower curtain or shoe organizer from a dollar store. In fact, one of the activities students do in my Pre-K to Grade 8 Methods class is to go to a dollar store and come up with a manipulative activity that learners can do to make them produce the language with an items under five dollars. For such a small financial investment, the learning gains can be quite large in a well designed activity that allows learners

to manipulate materials while authentically producing the language.

Kelly: Do you have any tips for keeping the classroom in the L2 during these types of innovative activities?

Some general rules for making our language instruction comprehensible are to (1) use caretaker speech, meaning simple, direct language use; (2) break down directions and new information into small, incremental steps or just skip directions and MODEL what you want your learners to do; (3) make lavish use of concrete materials, visuals, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movement, and most importantly, (4) model, model, model—model what you want the learners to do, what their pair work should look like, what the activity should look like, what the end product should look like. Rather than explaining everything in English or target language use that is too complicated for the learners, just MODEL, MODEL, MODEL. Furthermore, continual and constant target language use is essential. I advise Methods students to try to keep any English they need to learn between 5-30 seconds maximum. I also have students in my Methods classes create a 2-sided flag that they keep up in the target language side (with a flag from a target culture), but pick up and flip to the U.S. flag on the opposite side when they need to speak English. This creates a clear visual for learners that the target language is spoken inside the classroom except under extreme situations where a flag must be changed. The younger the learner, the

less resistance they typically have to target language use. If learners start complaining about target language use, it likely means that the instructor needs to find more ways to make his or her language use more comprehensible to the learners with more visuals or more modeling.

We know from second language acquisition research that the best age to learn a language is the youngest possible. This does not mean that older learners will not be successful. However, I firmly believe that teachers who get to implement creative and kinesthetic activities into their classroom are the luckiest language teachers because they will likely see learning gains occur more quickly than working with older students, and they are also likely to have more fun! If ever a teacher is feeling tired or losing inspiration, I always recommend going to <http://learner.org/resources/series185.html> to see best teaching practices in actual classrooms.

Lastly, I would like thank all the students who have shared their ideas and, especially, the retired teachers who have brought their materials to my institution for use in my Methods courses. Your creativity, materials and best-teaching practices now extend beyond our institution and to the NNELL readership! Thank you!

WORK CITED

Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C. (2010). *Languages and Children, Making the Match*, 4th edition, Boston: Pearson Education, Inc

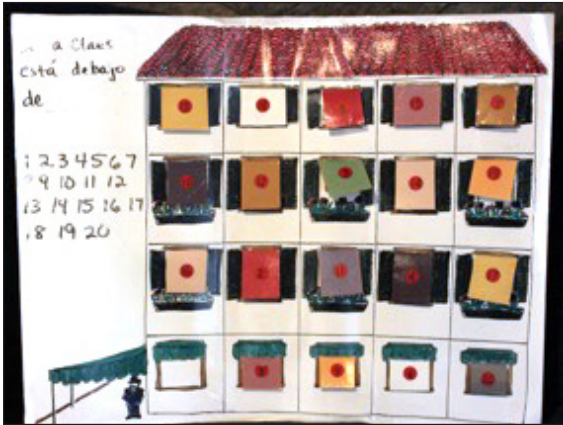


FIGURE 12: WHERE IN THE HOUSE ACTIVITY



FIGURE 13: SLITS IN THE BACK OF THE HOUSE