Teaching Young Learners to Think

Herbert Puchta and Marion Williams
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See page 88 for details

Cor blimey! was my initial reaction, do we have to teach them to think as well now? Long gone are the days when we just had to teach the language! Nevertheless, teaching thinking does seem to be a trending topic in ELT.

This photocopiable resource has as its sub-title ELT activities for young learners aged 6-12, so it’s more a book of practical English language learning activities, which makes the title a bit misleading.

On his website, one of the authors, Herbert Puchta, lists the three key elements that characterise his approach to language teaching: enthusiasm, engaging young learners in meaningful communicative activities, and developing students’ cognitive skills. It is this third element in Puchta’s teaching philosophy that I was least aware of. He is a Master Practitioner in Neuro Linguistic Programming and has carried out considerable research into the practical application of cognitive psychology to ELT.

It is obviously this element that comes to the fore in Teaching Young Learners to Think. Language tasks fail to offer a challenge if they are below the student’s cognitive potential, he argues. It is Howard Gardner’s concept of Multiple Intelligences that has led him to believe that a child’s cognitive skills can be developed at the same time as they learn a foreign language. Gardner convinced him, as he has me, that we are not born with a fixed IQ which decides our possibilities of success or failure in life. Intelligence is in fact a range of seven-eight-nine different cognitive capabilities.

So this is what ‘teaching thinking’ is in the context of the book and it immediately makes sense. Not only can learners actually develop their intelligences; as teachers of young learners we have a responsibility to help them to develop their cognitive skills. Says Puchta. So to teach thinking is really to encourage, develop, promote, improve thinking in any way we can. That this is part of our role as teachers can, in my opinion, not be argued with.

Children will face the challenges of a changing and unpredictable world, it says in the Introduction. To deal with them they will need a range of problem-solving and decision-making skills. So here they are: 80 photocopiable activities divided into 13 categories of thinking, ordered in a sequence from basic to higher order thinking skills. Now, to make you think, try to place these five categories in the right place in the sequence: Categorising; Cause and effect; Creating associations; Memorising; and Sequencing. (See below for the answers.)

1 Making comparisons
2
3
4 Focusing attention
5
6 Exploring space
7 Exploring time
8 Exploring numbers
9
10
11 Making decisions
12 Solving problems
13 Creative thinking

A quick-reference guide helps the teacher find a suitable activity under the appropriate cognitive skill, together with the length of the activity, level and focus, suitable age, and a summary of additional thinking skills involved.

I had the opportunity to test a couple of the activities in a small class of 8-9 year olds. I chose an activity from the Creating Associations category and another labelled as a Cause and Effect activity, really an exercise in deductive thinking. Both dealt with thematic and vocabulary areas that had been covered in class the week before.

In the first activity, the task was to classify a number of given words according to whether the child associated them with ‘hot’ or ‘cold’. Ice-cream, for example, could be associated with cold, because it is, or with hot, because when it is, you want one. Children in the class were invited to associate more words with one of the two concepts and to explain the connection. Thus, creative imaginative thinking was encouraged and the children were challenged to explain their reasoning.

I soon realised we were on quite a low rung of the hierarchical order of thinking skills. The more expressive and communicative kids spontaneously showed they were not very tolerant of ambiguity. What did I mean? Fire was hot, so how could it be listed under ‘cold’? Yet a bikini was readily classified under ‘hot’, even though it would have been cold to wear on that January day. Less confident children yearned for certainty, too:

Teacher: Icicle?
Child: Hot?
Teacher: Hot?
Child: Cold!

One child, however, showed she had got the hang of ambiguity, proposing air conditioner as a word that could be associated with both concepts.

In the following week the dichotomy hot-cold/summer-winter was used to teach and practise clothes vocabulary. Here again, one precocious thinker in the class demonstrated her mental flexibility when shown the picture of a rather flimsy-looking short skirt.
Summer. Or winter if worn with leggings, she cleverly observed.

In the second activity, there was a challenging thinking task, credited to Gunter Gerngross, which was to name six fictive children and work out their birthday month from visual clues given. The children enjoyed doing this puzzle and later personalising the activity to give clues about themselves. Like drawing themselves in a swimming pool, or in the clothes they were wearing that day.

If 21st Century children need to develop their problem-solving and decision-making skills, aren’t these skills somewhat under-represented in this resource book, coming in at 11 and 12 in the 13 categories of thinking? Taking categories 1-8 as more basic thinking skills and 9-13 as higher-order, there are 45 activities which could be regarded as basic and 35 as higher-order. This is a reasonable ratio, I would say, for younger learners, for – Puchta makes this point – higher-order complex thinking skills suppose a degree of mastery of the simpler skills. And judging from my observed class of 8-9 year olds, we are setting out on a long journey to the destination of free creative thinking.

Finally, a word on the use of the mother tongue. If our students’ cognitive potential is notably higher than their L2 ability, as Puchta notes, won’t their limited L2 hold them back? To what extent should their thinking be done in their mother tongue rather than in English? ‘As little as possible, but as often as necessary, as long as it facilitates learning’ is Puchta’s somewhat over-easy answer. But then he goes on to say that the activities in the book have been designed carefully in order to require ‘just occasional’ use of L1. My limited classroom trials tend to confirm the author’s claim.

Overall, if you teach 6-12 year olds I definitely think you will get a great deal from this book.