

Teaching Foreign Language to Young Learners? 7 Tips for Lessons They'll Love

[fluentu.com/blog/educator/teaching-foreign-language-to-young-learners/](https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator/teaching-foreign-language-to-young-learners/)

susanverner

May 10, 2018



A box of stuffed animals lies in a corner.

Crayon and marker drawings paper the walls.

A beach ball lies to the side of the teacher's desk ready for the morning hello ritual.

Where are you?

In a classroom of young language learners, of course! And while some might say the room looks more like a toy box than a classroom, each of these objects is there for a reason.

Teaching foreign language to young learners looks much different from teaching it to adults. Here we'll look at seven ways to take advantage of your young learners' unique qualities instead of fighting against them as you teach your foreign language class.

What Does a Young Language Learner Classroom Look Like?

A young learner classroom isn't all about bright colors on the walls and small chairs at little desks, though you'll see that. The best classrooms for young language learners are different **because of what the students and teacher do**, not just how the space is

decorated.

In an effective classroom for young learners, you'll see a lot of **movement**, hear a lot of **repetition** and see lessons that **look a lot like play**. Kids are moving, engaging their senses and perhaps making more mistakes than their adult counterparts would. As with the classroom we described above, you can count on props, crafts and games not simply to create a fun, friendly environment, but also to **get kids interacting with the target language**.

You can take a peek into [this classroom to see one that's working the way it should](#). The teacher is using repetition in an effective way, engaging the students' whole bodies and using a song to reinforce what he's teaching. The kids are engaged, the teacher is meeting them at their level and everyone is having fun.

7 Need-to-know Tips for Teaching Foreign Language to Young Learners

So how does a language teacher specifically gear their class toward young learners? As we've just seen, it's not only about what they stick on the walls but also what they do. Here are seven tips to help you engage young learners and set up a classroom that's made just for them.

Want to work from home? Maintain flexible hours? Make a positive impact? Be part of an empowering and collaborative community?

[Click here to join our team!](#)

1. Prepare Extra Activities to Hold Their Attention

My five-year-old son's favorite board game takes all of five minutes to play. I might feel fleeced if it weren't for how much he absolutely loves it. (It's called [Dinosaur Escape](#) if you're interested.) But love it he does, and the playing length is just right for him because **kids lose interest quickly**.

Since the average child's attention span is two to three minutes for every year of age, you probably won't get a five-year-old to work at a project for 20 minutes. While you may be perfectly content to review past, present and future tenses all at the same time, that doesn't mean your young learners can sit through a lesson long enough to cover it all.

So what's a language teacher to do? Keep things moving.

I've learned the hard way to **always have fillers and backup activities ready to go** at a moment's notice. My lessons often took much less time than I'd planned for them. But when you teach young learners, you have to plan to move quickly from one activity to the next. It's not crazy to have a different activity ready for every five minutes you'll be in class with your students.

But don't be intimidated. Kids love repetition, so it's perfectly fine to repeat activities each day of the week or even in the morning and then again before going home. Here are some easy ideas to incorporate into your daily lesson planning:

Include target language songs and chants throughout your day. These are great for quick warmups, cool downs and breaks in between larger activities.

Tell or read target language stories that engage their imaginations. To up the engagement level even further, try TPRS stories that teach meaning through student responses and interaction.

Play games in the target language. This is a tried-and-true technique to get kids building their language skills while having fun!

Go outside and teach movement vocabulary or nature vocabulary. Sometimes a change of scene and fresh air is all kids need to stay on track.

You won't end up using every activity you've planned on any given day, but if you have them then you'll be sure to keep your kids engaged and you won't find them staring out the window lost in daydreams.

2. Total Physical Response Is Your Friend

Kids have energy! Anyone who's ever raised one, been on an airplane with one or had one in the classroom knows how true this is.

Of course, each individual child is unique and has their own balance of activity and energy, but if you're teaching young learners you can generally expect your students to outlast you every day of the week. In fact, requiring kids to sit for long periods of time actually makes them less able to learn. So **working with this characteristic rather than against it** is key in your language classroom.

That's where Total Physical Response comes into play. This teaching method is built on the idea of students using their bodies in response to foreign language instruction. The teacher gives an instruction in the target language and the students perform the action.

A simple way to get started with TPR is to share action-focused sentences with your class and demonstrate what they mean. Then have students repeat the same. Have your kids walk around and associate body movements with the language structures you're teaching.

Not only will your students start to build vocabulary associations in a natural way, TPR will also keep you on your toes as you teach!

There are tons of excellent writings on TPR, so we won't go through all the details here, but if you aren't very familiar with this great teaching technique [here's a thorough explanation](#) and [here are great resources to access TPR training](#).

3. Fuel the Courage Your Kids Already Have

Do you remember the very first time you tried to ride a bicycle without training wheels? Were you excited? Scared? I'll never forget when I felt the rush of freedom that came with that first ride without two extra wheels.

Not every kid is so ready to take risks on a crazy balancing machine, but they're pretty much all ready to take risks when it comes to language. Unlike many teen or adult students, kids are willing to give something a try even if they don't entirely understand it. They may not know a word, but they'll [get information from the context](#), facial expressions and body language. They may not be able to say a word correctly, but they'll say something as close as they can get it.

To take advantage of this in the classroom, be willing to **ask more of your students than you think they can do**. Most likely, they'll rise to the challenge.

To make sure your classroom is a safe place for taking risks, encourage a culture where failure is just a part of learning. Show students it's okay to laugh at themselves and be willing to laugh at yourself too. Make your classroom a place where there's freedom to make mistakes.

When students don't feel shame for making mistakes and if they can laugh at themselves, you'll stoke the fire of their bravery. They'll take chances, and even though it'll be okay if they fail, they might surprise both you and themselves by succeeding.

4. Aim for Longterm Success Through Repetition

You've probably heard a kid say something along the lines of, "I can't do it. It's too hard." While kids are willing to take risks, they often lack a stick-to-it attitude when faced with something difficult. This means that though they may jump right in and use the vocabulary you reviewed just a few minutes ago, it's also possible that they'll give up halfway through an assignment because they don't have the energy to stick it out.

What this means for your classroom is your kids will fare better when you plan for longterm success instead of immediate results. Plan on **repeating the same language at many times and in many different ways** in class.

Can your kids name two or three colors they're using to draw a picture? Great! **Celebrate that victory** rather than forcing them to cover every inch of the page and recite the other eight colors in the crayon box. But later, use the same color vocabulary when you bring out

game pieces, when you toss a ball around and when kids bring out their paper bag lunches.

The more times you can bring the same content into your classroom, the more likely your students are to remember it and learn to use it successfully, without feeling overwhelmed.

5. Keep Lessons Concrete by Engaging Their Senses

Kids are concrete thinkers. They can't use language to talk about language. They have to feel it, hear it, smell it, touch it and taste it. Trying to use linguistic concepts to explain grammar rules just isn't going to cut it in the young student classroom.

Personally, I see that as an invitation to have fun in class! Teaching language in concrete ways means doing things like playing games, making cookies and running around outside.

You'll have to decide specifically what works for your classroom, but as long as you're engaging the senses when you teach, your kids are going to get it. How do you do this in a language classroom? Here are some ideas you can jump off from:

Use props when you teach that kids can hold, feel and move. For example, when teaching prepositions, use a box and a stuffed animal and have kids move them around to illustrate each preposition.

Instead of listening to a recorded dialogue, **act it out yourself with the use of puppets** that seem real to your students. That gives them context they can see and hear. Bonus points if you let your students make their own puppets and act out that or other dialogues.

Give them scavenger hunt-style instructions in the target language. Give them directions to find classroom objects and move around the classroom. Or give them a recipe for a tasty dish for the class to share. In other words, make your lessons action-oriented.

6. Create Learning Stations for Student Exploration

Kids are natural investigators. They want to pick up every rock, look in every box and talk to anyone you happen to be on the phone with. They like to explore their worlds.

You can use this to your advantage by creating a classroom worth exploring. And when you're strategic about what kids will be exploring, you'll also be making a way for your students to learn independently from you.

One of my favorite ways of making an interactive classroom is by **creating learning stations for my students to use independently**. You can create a learning station to teach just about anything you like with a little thought and creativity.

Some of my favorites, which don't take a ton of setup work, are creating a reading nook and classroom library, tossing all my extra worksheets into a basket and letting kids do them at their leisure, setting up a computer with tabs for language games and videos that kids can play or having language games kids can play together.

7. Prioritize Listening and Speaking

Kids by nature are in the process of learning how to communicate through written language. If a child's unable to write clearly and concisely in their first language, how can we as language teachers expect them to write proficiently in a second language?

What this means is that when we teach young learners, we have to change our focus from written language (reading and writing) to spoken language (listening and speaking). This **works with the natural development of the child** and doesn't put undue pressure on them to perform in their second language what they can't even do in their first language.

What does it look like in the language classroom? It's **reading books out loud to the class** and reciting poems. It's **singing songs** and letting kids work together. It's play and laughs and not getting out dictionaries and textbooks on a daily basis.

When you're focused on the spoken language, you may not be passing as many papers in and back as other language classrooms are, but that's okay. You can be sure your students will be learning what you teach and using it in communicative ways.

If you're considering teaching young learners or if you already have a classroom full, put those posters on the walls. Sit in those tiny seats. But take things to the next level by doing and not just decorating. By working with rather than against the great qualities your students already have, you'll be amazed at how quickly and how well they learn.