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# Activities for Very Young Learners



Herbert Puchta and Karen Elliott

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Herbert Puchta and Karen Elliott

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Consultant and editor: Scott Thornbury



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## Introduction

### About this book

#### **Why did we write this book?**

There is a growing trend – almost global – towards lowering the starting age for children learning English as a second or foreign language. It is now not uncommon for three and four year-olds to attend English classes, and although such tuition is more often found in private institutions, state kindergartens may also provide English classes to children from the age of five or younger.

As writers, teacher trainers and teachers involved in teaching English to the very young, we felt inspired to write a book dedicated to this intriguing age group. The educational needs of these learners are different from those of older children, and our aim is to encourage teachers to reflect on these needs and understand more fully the role they play when educating the whole child. We feel that providing quality language tuition is about creating naturally meaningful experiences that encourage very young children to view themselves positively and become enthusiastic about learning the new language.

#### **Who is it for?**

This book is for teachers and teaching assistants working with three- to seven year-olds who are learning English as a foreign or second language. It is for teachers in kindergarten or the first year of primary school, for those teaching in extra-curricular programmes in institutes or academies and for those teaching privately. The book is also for those studying to become teachers of very young learners who are looking for ideas and activities to engage their future pupils in meaningful and imaginative ways.

*If you are an experienced teacher of very young children* who is looking for new ideas and activities, you may want to skip this Introduction. If you know what kind of activity you are looking for, check the Contents page for the relevant category, and find the activities which seem suitable for your class. By browsing through the information at the beginning of each activity you should be able to decide if it is appropriate, before continuing to read the instructions in more detail.

Alternatively, you might prefer to start by scanning through each chapter, making notes of the activities you wish to use with your class. With most of the activities, you will find suggestions for variations or extensions. Of course, you may then come up with your own ideas on how to change, extend or adapt an activity to the specific needs of your group of learners.

*If you are a novice teacher or a teacher trainee*, or have previously taught English to older learners, you might like to develop your understanding of very young learners and find out about some of the important principles behind teaching this age group.

In this Introduction, we aim to provide information on the learning characteristics of this age group, how to create an optimal learning atmosphere in the classroom, and the qualities of classroom interaction that support children's learning processes in a natural way. You will find an outline of our educational vision, including the reasons why we believe that learning a foreign language early in life – with the proper help – can make a significant contribution to the overall development of young children.

Our views on teaching very young learners are based not only on some crucial research findings, but on our own classroom experiences, classroom observations and discussions with colleagues from a variety of countries. We encourage teachers to become conscious of their own educational vision through understanding child language development and child development in general.

### **How is this book structured?**

The book starts with a series of practical tips and suggestions for the very young learner's classroom called *Tips for teaching very young learners*. The tips are organized into topics such as lesson planning, classroom management and observation techniques. They include practical ideas on how best to handle the challenges that typically arise in the young learners' classroom.

The main part of the book consists of a wide range of practical activities for use in the classroom. The majority do not require much preparation, and where drawings or handouts are needed, you can usually find them as illustrations or on separate photocopiable pages. The handouts and other materials can also be downloaded from the dedicated website. Material which is available to download is marked with the symbol .

The activities are organized into eight chapters:

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Class routines and classroom management | 5 Arts, crafts and displays         |
| 2 Movement and games                      | 6 Exploring the world               |
| 3 Songs, chants and rhymes for topics     | 7 Thinking-based activities         |
| 4 Stories and storytelling                | 8 Pronunciation and early literacy. |

## **About very young learners**

### **What is a very young learner?**

Our term 'very young learners' refers to children between the ages of three and seven, who are just setting out on their educational journey. They are still making the transition towards being part of a group and understanding the meaning and structure of their educational life. They may or may not attend school daily and many of them have not learned to read in their own language yet.

Human beings start learning from the moment they are born and are naturally inclined to pursue activities which help them make sense of their world and their place in it. Play is central to this process, in that a child's desire to be doing things and choice of tasks is directly linked to how and what they need to learn. Learning at this age includes developing fine motor skills (for example, picking things up, colouring and cutting) and gross motor skills (for example, running, throwing and catching). For children in their early years, the huge task of understanding the natural and social world can be overwhelming, without adult guidance. We can enhance their play / learning to help them develop their confidence, co-ordination, understanding of logical sequences and thought processes by setting developmentally appropriate tasks.

### **How do very young children start using language?**

The psychologist Jean Piaget stresses the idea that very young children are active learners. They interact with the world around them, and learning occurs because they want to solve problems posed by the environment. This is how a child's thinking is formed, and this is how a need to use language develops. The theories of the developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky go further: they stress the important role of social interaction and language in the child's development. When a child says 'apple', for example, this one word represents a whole sentence. It is through the interaction with an adult or older sibling – through the child listening to a fluent speaker's response to their utterance 'apple' that the child is learning language. This is illustrated in an authentic example of child-caregiver language quoted in Peccei (1999, p. 100):

**Child:** (*picks up red bean bag in shape of a frog*) Santa Claus.

**Mum:** Santa Claus? That's a frog, honey. That's not Santa Claus. That's a frog. A red frog.

**Child:** Frog (*points to frog on car*). Sits.

**Mum:** Yes, he's sitting down. That's right.

What we can see from the example above is how the adult almost 'speaks for the child', thus modelling important language. The mother says what the child might say if she could express herself more fully. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) call the support the child gets through such intervention 'scaffolding', and we will see below how the experienced language teacher can use a similar technique in the language classroom to extend what the child is able to say.

A key quality in child development is the intimate relationship between thinking and talking. Whereas older children have learned to think *before* they talk, very young children form their ideas *through* talking. For them, speech is a way to actually work out what is in their minds, and helps them to learn to understand it.

Another feature of the way very young learners start using language is that they are at an early stage of literacy development. Some may recognize a few letters – those found in their name or the first letter in some familiar words. Some may also have learned to read a few words in a holistic way – words they frequently see in their surroundings, such as the name of their favourite breakfast cereal. Although some very young children's reading skills may be more developed, they are still only just embarking on the exciting journey of making sense of the written word. This means that reading and writing are not central to the learning process in the way they will be in later years.

### **How do very young learners develop cognitively?**

According to educational philosopher Kieran Egan (1997), a person's intellectual growth happens naturally, through certain developments deeply rooted in our cultural history. In order for a child's intellect to grow appropriately, the development of certain 'cognitive tools' is essential. It is obvious that if we want to cut a wooden board in half we need a saw – a physical tool. Likewise, if we want to solve complex problems we need 'tools of the mind'. But the fundamental difference between physical tools and tools of the mind is that the former help us to manipulate the world around us, while the latter are about controlling ourselves, our body, our thinking and our emotions. The ability to use tools of the mind is an important step on the way towards learning socially acceptable behaviour.

## *Activities for Very Young Learners*

Below are a few of the building blocks of language that form important cognitive tools in early child development and that – as we will see later – are important teaching tools in the English language classroom too:

### *Rhythm and rhyme*

In pre-literate days people had the ability to remember texts of sometimes epic length. Rhythm and rhyme were important mnemonic devices in this process of remembering. In our modern age it is still through rhythm and rhyme that children start remembering chunks of language. They also experience enormous joy through repeatedly hearing (and later joining in with) the rhythms and rhymes of language. Exposure to and playing with rhythm and rhyme help children develop an understanding of the patterns of language (sound patterns first) and also form cognitive tools they will later need for the understanding of structures.

### *Images and imaginative thinking*

For young children, there is often no borderline between reality and imagination. For example, if the teacher uses a hand puppet in class, a four year-old recognizes that it is a puppet, and yet as soon as the puppet starts ‘talking’ (with the help of the teacher), the child reacts to it as if it were alive.

Such imaginative processes lead to the creation of images in the child’s mind. Understanding oral language not only requires the knowledge of words, but also the ability to create and use mental images. There is clear evidence that learners who are at ease with creating lots of images while listening to a story, for example, remember more language from it.

### *Storytelling*

Stories play an essential role in the cognitive development of children. The story form is something people enjoy in all cultures. However, telling stories in class, as well as entertaining children, helps them develop an understanding of the world and their own life experiences. Stories communicate information and at the same time help us to understand how we feel about it. That’s why they are such a powerful form of language. Engaging very young children with stories is a time-honoured tradition which holds a central place in their language learning.

### *Small talk*

For the very young, learning to engage in small talk is not just about getting used to an exchange of linguistic formalities. It is an important building block of cognitive development, and it has a key social function for the child. Learning to participate successfully in small talk strengthens the child’s self-concept and gives him / her a feeling of security and acceptance in society. Being accepted by their teacher and classmates is an extremely important experience for the child, and at the same time it is a precondition for developing social relationships and friendships.

### **What is the best age for learning another language?**

Folk wisdom has it that the earlier a child starts learning a new language the better, and often, from their own personal experience, parents can see the advantages of learning a language from a very young age. There is the perception that children’s brains are more elastic and open, since they appear to be able to pick up languages from birth onwards.

## 1.5 The Hello, how are you? chant

<b>Outline</b>	Children perform a 'hello' chant.
<b>Focus</b>	<i>Hello, how are you today? I'm fine, thank you.</i>
<b>Age</b>	4-7
<b>Time</b>	5 minutes
<b>Materials</b>	Optional: <i>Hello, how are you?</i> chant flashcard (see page 37 or print from the website).
<b>Preparation</b>	Listen to the chant on the website.

### Procedure

- 1 Say *Let's make a circle. It's time to say 'hello'*. The children stand in a circle.
- 2 Say the following chant. The children join in with the actions (in brackets). In time, children may also join in with the words.

Teacher:	<i>Hello, hello, hello!</i>	(wave)
Children:	<i>Hello, hello, hello!</i>	(wave)
Teacher:	<i>How are you today?</i>	(question gesture)
Children:	<i>I'm fine, thank you!</i>	(hold thumbs up)
Teacher:	<i>And I'm great, too!</i>	(hold hands up in the air)
Teacher:	<i>Are you ready for English?</i>	
Children:	<i>Yes!</i>	
All:	<i>Hooray!</i>	(everyone claps)

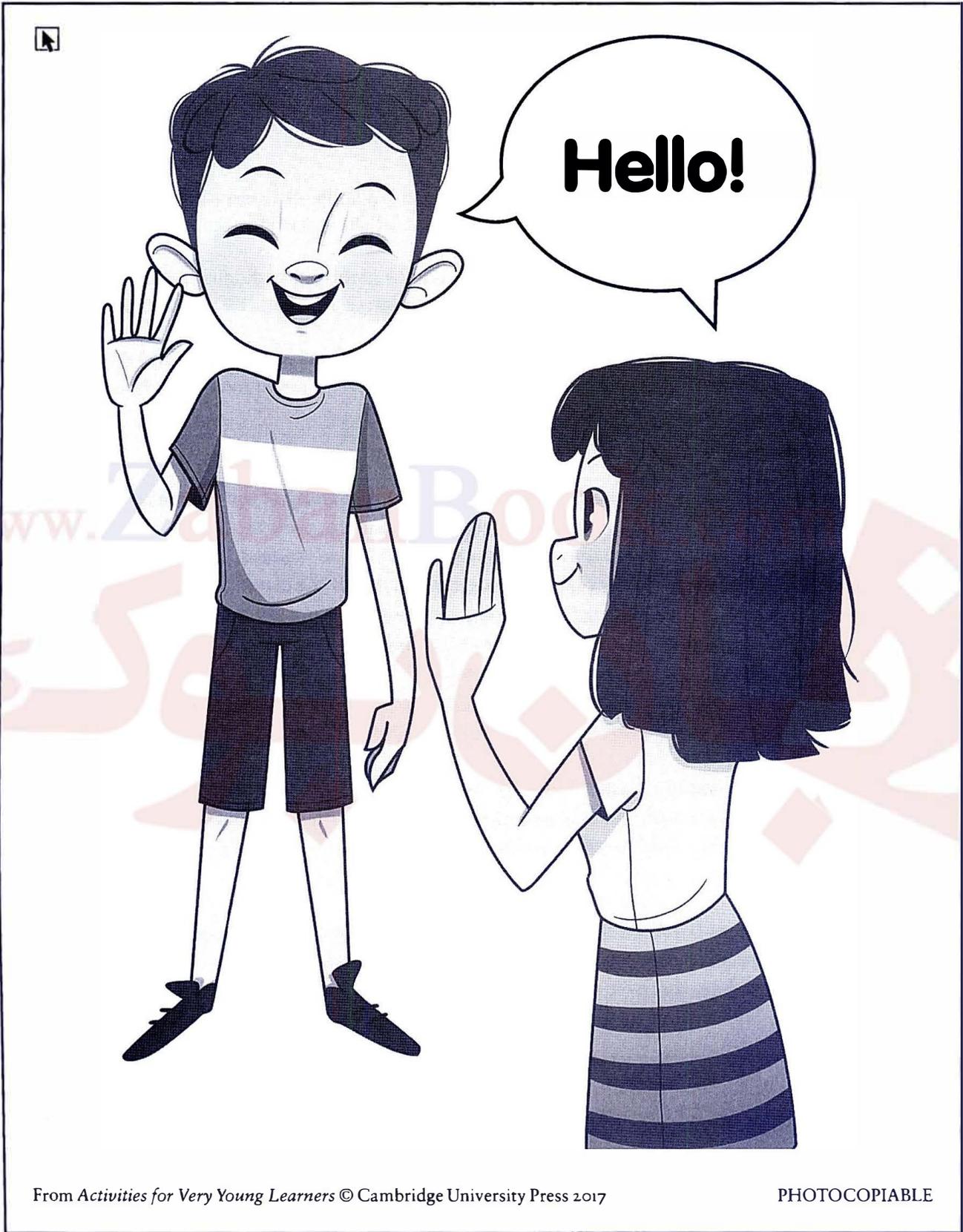
### Variation

With very young children, change the words to:

Teacher:	<i>Hello, hello, hello!</i>
Children:	<i>Hello, hello, hello!</i>
Teacher:	<i>Are you ready for English?</i>
Children:	<i>Yes!</i>
All:	<i>Hooray!</i>

### Tip

Photocopy the flashcard on the next page, write the words of the chant on the back and laminate it. Hold up the flashcard to signal this stage in the lesson. Read the words from the back of the flashcard instead of reading from the book.



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## 1.6 Celebrating birthdays

<b>Outline</b>	The class celebrates a child's birthday.
<b>Focus</b>	Days of the week, months, numbers, <i>cake, candle, How old are you? Happy birthday! Make a wish!</i>
<b>Age</b>	4-7
<b>Time</b>	5 minutes
<b>Materials</b>	A picture of a cake (or draw a cake on the board), a candle (real, electric or homemade, e.g. from a straw and a yellow feather), a cardboard crown or party hat, a CD with birthday music. Optional: A 'birthday poster' showing the months of the year in English with the names of children whose birthdays fall in each month written on it, together with the dates; a birthday storybook.
<b>Preparation</b>	Write the date of each child's birthday on a poster or in your diary at the start of the year. At the beginning of each week, check if anyone has a birthday coming up and plan the celebration for the lesson on the nearest day.

### Procedure

- 1 If you have a birthday poster on the wall, point to it at the beginning of the week and ask *Are there any birthdays this week?* Children are usually very excited about their birthdays, but some may not remember or will be too shy to tell you. Say, e.g. *Look! What's today? It's Tuesday and it's Irem's birthday.* Invite the birthday child to come to the front of the class.
- 2 Switch on your birthday music. If you have a birthday story, this is a good time to read it to create an atmosphere of celebration. Put the cardboard birthday crown or hat on the child's head and say *Happy birthday (Irem)!* The rest of the class repeat.
- 3 Hold up your picture of a cake and the candle or draw a cake with a candle on the board. Say *Make a wish! Blow the candle out!* Close your eyes as if you are making a wish then mime blowing the candle out.
- 4 The child closes their eyes and mimes blowing out the candle. Encourage the class to cheer *Hooray!* If you don't have a picture of a cake, erase the candles on the cake you have drawn on the board, when the birthday child pretends to blow them out.

### Note

Everyone likes to be remembered on their birthday, but very young children become extremely excited about theirs, perhaps because they have celebrated so few and for them a year seems a long time. It is therefore a good idea to have a simple pre-prepared routine which allows you to make each child feel special on their birthday, without turning birthday celebrations into whole-lesson affairs.

#### Tip

Celebrate with all the children who have birthdays in the holidays in one of the classes at the end of the term / year to make sure they don't miss out.

## 1.7 The circle time chant

<b>Outline</b>	Children perform a chant to get ready for sitting in a circle in class.
<b>Focus</b>	<i>Sit down! Hands up! Circle time, please.</i>
<b>Age</b>	3–7
<b>Time</b>	5 minutes
<b>Materials</b>	Optional: <i>Circle time</i> chant flashcard (see page 40 or print from the website).
<b>Preparation</b>	None

### Procedure

- 1 Say *It's circle time*. Gesture for children to move to the circle time area, if you have one in your classroom. Move to your chair and make sure you have any materials you need for circle time.
- 2 Say the following chant. The children join in with the actions (in brackets). In time, children may also join in with the words.

<i>Sit down, sit down,</i>	(hold hands with palms flat facing the floor, pushing downwards)
<i>Sit down, please.</i>	(all sit down)
<i>Hands up! Hands up!</i>	(hold hands up in the air)
<i>Hands up with me!</i>	(repeat hands up action)
<i>It's circle time.</i>	(make a circle with your index finger, pointing downwards)
<i>It's circle time.</i>	(repeat the circle action)
<i>So listen carefully!</i>	(speak slowly and quietly, pointing to your ears)

### Variations

- 1 If you have a big class and it takes a long time to get them settled, say *So sit down, please!* instead of *So listen carefully!* the first time you say the chant. Repeat the chant until everyone is sitting and then finish the last time with *So listen carefully!* Encourage a calm atmosphere by repeating the chant, more and more quietly. You could even whisper it the last time.
- 2 Children can take turns to start circle time by leading the chant, once the class has learned it.

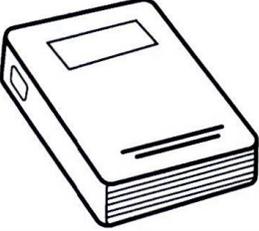
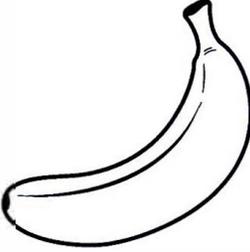
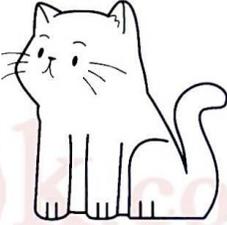
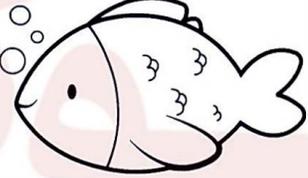
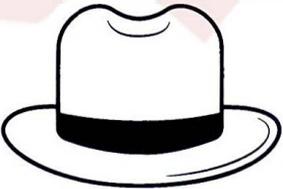
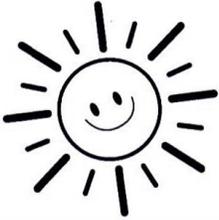
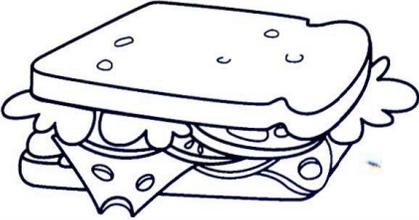
### Tip

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## 8.4 New phonemes: a rhyming finger play

<b>Outline</b>	Children practise phonemes not found in their own language using a well-known rhyme.
<b>Focus</b>	The sound /h/, <i>Hickory dickory dock, mouse, mice, run up, clock, run down</i>
<b>Age</b>	3–7
<b>Time</b>	5 minutes
<b>Materials</b>	None
<b>Preparation</b>	Practise saying the rhyme and doing the actions.

### Procedure

- 1 Hold your left hand up, bent at the elbow so that your palm is flat and facing the children. Say *Can you see the clock?* Point to a real clock. Then make a circle in the middle of your palm with your right hand to show that your hand is representing a clock. Say *This is the clock.*
- 2 Hold up the three middle fingers on your right hand. Say *These are the mice.* Point to and move each finger in turn and say *Mouse one. Squeak! Squeak! Mouse two. Squeak! Squeak! Mouse three. Squeak! Squeak!*
- 3 Say *This is the story 'Hickory, dickory, dock!'* Break the name down so children can practise it. Say *H – h – h – hickory.* The children repeat. *Dickory* (children repeat) *dock* (children repeat). Say the whole phrase *Hickory, dickory, dock!* (children repeat).
- 4 Teach the rhyme line by line, with the actions (shown in brackets). The children first copy the actions, then join in with the words.

*Hickory, dickory, dock,  
The mice run up the clock,*

(wiggle your three 'mouse' fingers)  
(run your three fingers up your forearm to the 'clock face' – your palm)

*The clock strikes one – bong!*

(with the mice still at the clock face, drop your fingers onto the palm of your hand as you say *Bong!*)

*And down they run,*

(move your fingers down the other side of your forearm as if the mice are running away)

*Hickory, dickory, dock!*

(move your hands back to the starting position)

- 5 Repeat the rhyme over a few classes. If you hear children mispronouncing /h/, practise the sound on its own and at the beginning of the word *Hickory*.

### Variations

- 1 Practise the sound /r/ with the following rhyme:

*Rain, rain! Go away!*

(wiggle your fingers to show rain and make a gesture for 'Go away!')

*Come again another day!*

(make a 'Come here!' gesture)

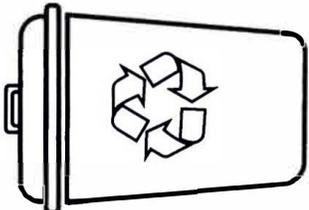
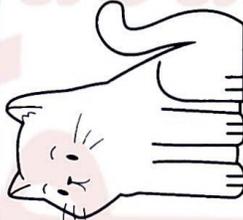
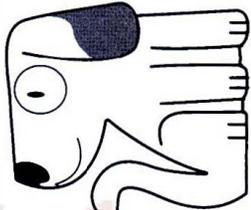
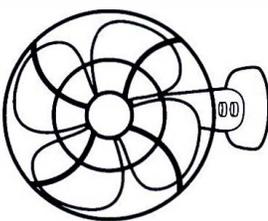
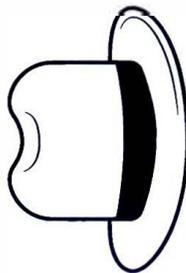
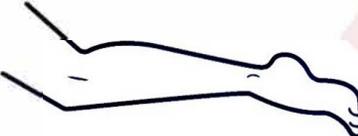
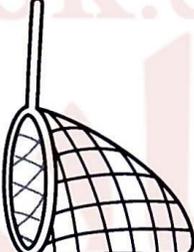
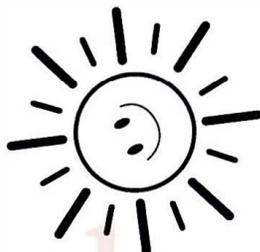
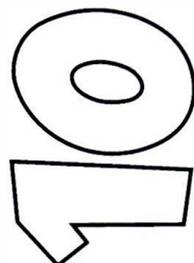
*Can you see we want to play?*

(make a questioning gesture and jump up and down)

*Rain, rain! Go away!*

(repeat the actions for the first line)

bus	cat	hat
dog	leg	bin
bin	fan	hat
sun	bus	net
bus	fan	dog
leg	sun	ten

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## 8.9 Early writing: back drawing and other ideas

<b>Outline</b>	Children play a game to practise forming and saying the letter sounds or numbers.
<b>Focus</b>	Letters of the alphabet, letter-sound correspondences, numbers 1–10
<b>Age</b>	4–6
<b>Time</b>	5–10 minutes
<b>Materials</b>	A whiteboard and marker or letter sound flashcards.
<b>Preparation</b>	None

### Procedure

- 1 Demonstrate the activity by asking two children to come to the front. The children stand back to back. Tell one child that they are going to write. The other child closes their eyes.
- 2 Say *Don't say the letter sound*. Write a letter on the board, e.g. *n* and show the letter card to the child who is going to write. The child 'writes' the letter on the other child's back. The child who has their eyes closed guesses the letter by saying the letter sound (e.g. *nnnnn*). Ask the class to confirm the answer.
- 3 Children sit in two rows, facing in the same direction.
- 4 Get the children who are sitting in the second row to hold up their writing finger. Tell the children in the first row to close their eyes.
- 5 On the board, draw a letter for the children who are writing to copy. Say *Shhh! Don't say, draw!*
- 6 Children draw the letter on their partner's back. The children in the front row guess by making the sound. Ask *Is that right? What letter sound is it?* Confirm by saying, e.g. *Yes, it's b! Say b – b – b, everyone*. The whole class says the sound.
- 7 When all or most of the children have guessed the letter sound, draw another letter on the board.
- 8 After you've done four or five letters, ask the children to swap places, so that those who were drawing now have their eyes closed. Repeat the game with different letters.

### Variation

Use this activity to practise writing numbers. Write numbers 1–10 on the board instead of letters, as children write on each other's backs. This is a fun, no-preparation activity, suitable for a Warmer at the start of the lesson.

### Extension ideas

- Write the letters in the air. Stand with your back to the children and draw the letter shapes (using your magic wand, if you like). The children copy your movements.
- The children can practise writing letters in sand or shaving foam. You will need some plastic trays or paper plates. Sprinkle sand or spray foam on each tray / plate. Say the letter sound correspondences. Children take turns writing the letter in the sand or foam with their fingers. Hold up letter cards or write the letters on the board so they can check.
- Children make the letters out of plasticine as you say the letter sounds.
- Use mini-whiteboards. Say letter sounds for older children to practise writing.

# Activities for Very Young Learners

*Activities for Very Young Learners* is an essential resource for practising and trainee language teachers of three- to seven-year-olds.

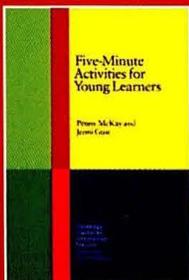
This handbook contains over 90 easy-to-use activities for the very young learner classroom, and is ideal for teachers who are looking for ideas to engage their learners in meaningful and imaginative ways. Based on their vast experience, the authors present a clear and compelling educational vision in the introduction, along with information on the learning characteristics of this age group and on how to create an optimal learning atmosphere. There are helpful tips for teaching very young learners and suggestions for how to best handle the challenges of teaching this age group.

The activities are organised into eight chapters: class routines and classroom management; movement and games; songs, chants and rhymes for topics; stories and storytelling; arts, crafts and displays; exploring the world; thinking-based activities; pronunciation and early literacy.

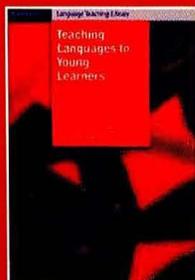
- Activities are easy to prepare and most of them have photocopiable material for classroom use.
- Activities are child-friendly and engaging with a strong emphasis on stories, rhymes, chants, games, arts and crafts.
- Suggestions are provided for variation or extension so that activities can be easily adapted to meet your pupils' needs.
- The book contains tips on topics such as lesson planning, involving parents and assessing learning, which all contribute to successful learning.

Additional resources, including chant recordings and photocopiable materials, are available on our website.

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