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Editor's Foreword

Dear readers,

As we reach the end of another successful school year, we would like to congratulate all teachers on successfully reaching the finish line. We hope you can now take a moment to reflect on your accomplishments and enjoy a well-deserved break.

This issue brings a variety of articles and practical ideas for teachers working with learners of all ages, from young learners to high school students. Inside, you will find inspiring ideas and engaging topics; the power of storytelling in language learning, effective approaches to teaching grammar, writing, and speaking skills, as well as the use of rubrics for assessing students' written and oral production.

We also explore the role of music and poetry in the classroom, an interview with language learner, and innovative ideas for integrating avatars into teaching. To help keep students energized and focused, we have included a selection of brain breaks that can easily be adapted to different teaching contexts.

Whether you are looking for fresh ideas, practical classroom strategies, or simply a bit of inspiration, we hope you will find something in these pages that resonates with you and supports your professional journey.

Thank you for your dedication and enthusiasm throughout the year. We wish you a relaxing summer and look forward to learning and growing together in the year ahead.

Happy reading!

The HUPE Team

Impressum

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Bringing Language to Life: Practical Ways to Use Avatars in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This article examines the use of avatars in the EFL classroom as tools for communication, creativity, and digital literacy. It presents practical classroom applications, including character descriptions, storytelling, speaking activities, role-plays, assessment, and reflective learning. Popular avatar creation tools are introduced, along with practical considerations for classroom implementation. The article argues that avatars can enhance student engagement, confidence, and language development in digitally enriched learning environments.

What Are Avatars and Why Use Them in the EFL Classroom

In today's digital world, the way students learn and communicate is increasingly visual and interactive. One of the most engaging digital tools available to teachers is the avatar — a graphical representation of a person or character used in online environments. In computing, an avatar represents a user's digital identity, but in the classroom, it can be so much more: a creative, expressive, and motivating way for students to learn and practise English language in meaningful ways.

Avatars can be simple cartoon-style images, detailed graphic characters, or even animated figures capable of speaking and moving. Their flexibility makes them especially valuable in education, where they provide students with a safe, imaginative space to experiment with language. For many learners, using an avatar reduces the pressure of performing in front of peers and encourages participation, especially in speaking tasks. By personalizing their avatars, students engage in authentic communication, develop digital literacy skills, and build confidence in expressing themselves.

For teachers, avatars can be used to support a wide range of activities — from writing and speaking to storytelling, vocabulary practice, and even classroom management. Thoughtfully integrated, they enhance learner motivation, support comprehension through visual cues, and bring a sense of play and imagination that enriches the language-learning experience.

Character Descriptions and Persona Work

One of the simplest ways to introduce avatars into the EFL classroom is through character description activities. Students create an avatar using tools such as Avatar Maker, Bitmoji, or Superherotar and then use English to describe its appearance, personality, interests, and background.

For younger learners, this might involve writing a few simple sentences about the character. More advanced students can develop detailed profiles or write autobiographical texts from the avatar's perspective. For example, students may introduce themselves as their avatars, describing where they live, what they enjoy doing, and what makes them unique.

These activities provide meaningful practice with descriptive adjectives, personality vocabulary, present simple structures, and first-person narration. Because students are speaking or writing as a character rather than themselves, they often feel more comfortable taking risks with language and expressing creative ideas.

Storytelling Through Comics and Cartoons

Avatars naturally lend themselves to storytelling activities. Digital tools such as Pixton, Bitmoji, and Canva enable students to place their avatars in different settings, create dialogues, and develop complete narratives through comic strips and visual stories.

Students can create a comic titled "A Day in My Avatar's Life," design an adventure story, or retell a familiar fairy

tale from a different perspective. These tasks encourage learners to organise events logically, use narrative tenses, and practise sequencing language such as first, then, after that, and finally.

For younger learners or mixed-ability groups, ChatterPix offers an engaging alternative. Students animate their avatars by recording their voices, transforming static images into talking characters. These speaking avatars can introduce themselves, tell stories, describe pictures, or participate in simple conversations, providing valuable opportunities for oral language practice.

Speaking Practice Through Animated Avatars

Speaking is often one of the most challenging skills for language learners due to anxiety and the fear of making mistakes. Avatars can help reduce these barriers by allowing students to communicate through a digital character.

Tools such as Voki enable learners to create customised speaking avatars that can deliver recorded or text-to-speech messages. Teachers can assign oral presentations, interviews, pronunciation practice tasks, or digital storytelling projects where students rehearse and record their speech before sharing it with classmates.

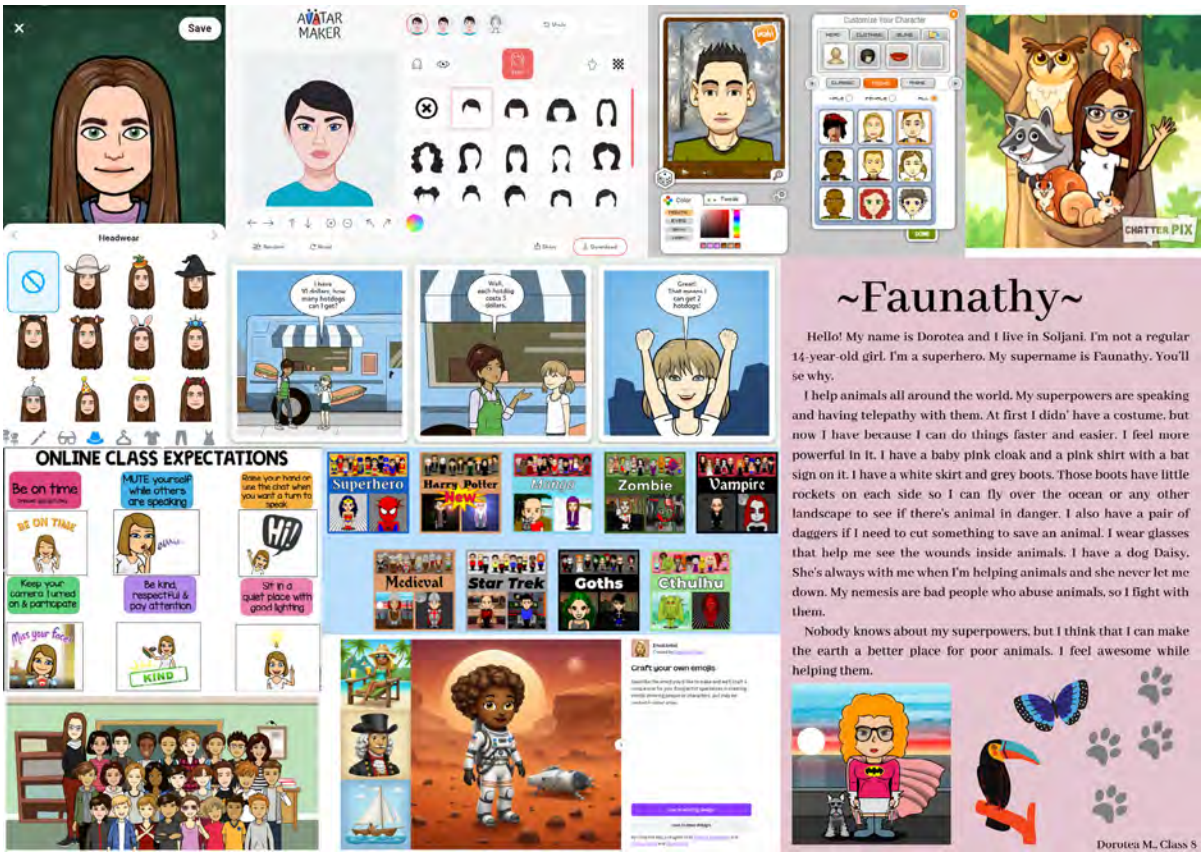
Because the focus shifts from the learner to the avatar, students frequently feel more confident speaking in English. The ability to replay and revise recordings also encourages self-reflection and supports pronunciation development.

Role-Play, Debates, and Classroom Community Building

Role-play has long been recognised as an effective language-learning strategy, and avatars provide a modern digital twist on this traditional technique. Students can assume the identities of different characters and participate in simulated situations such as restaurant conversations, travel scenarios, interviews, or problem-solving discussions.

Avatars can also support structured debates. Learners create characters with specific viewpoints and argue from their assigned perspectives. Speaking in character often helps students express ideas more freely and develop persuasive language skills.

Beyond language practice, avatars can contribute to classroom community building. A virtual class photo created with Bitmoji, Pixton, or Canva allows students to represent themselves visually and become part of a shared digital classroom space. Similarly, students can collaborate on classroom rules posters featuring avatars demonstrating positive behaviours, combining language learning with classroom management and social responsibility.



Creative Identity Projects and Themed Units

One of the most motivating uses of avatars is the creation of imaginative identity projects. Superherotar, for example, allows students to design original superheroes complete with names, powers, weapons, weaknesses, and backstories.

A superhero project can generate extensive language production. Students write character profiles, create comic adventures, present their heroes orally, or collaborate to solve fictional challenges. Such activities reinforce vocabulary related to personality, abilities, appearance, and emotions while promoting creativity and critical thinking.

Seasonal and cultural themes provide additional opportunities. During Halloween, students can create vampire, zombie, pirate, or wizard avatars and write spooky stories. During holiday celebrations, they might design festive avatars and create digital greeting cards or cultural presentations. These projects integrate language learning with cultural awareness and imaginative expression.

Assessment, Digital Portfolios, and Reflection

Avatars can also play a valuable role in assessment. Rather than relying solely on traditional tests, teachers can invite students to demonstrate their learning through avatar-based projects such as recorded presentations, digital comics, video diaries, or storytelling assignments.

These artefacts provide authentic evidence of students' speaking, writing, and communication skills while encouraging creativity and personal expression. Because avatar projects can be stored digitally, they are particularly suitable for e-portfolios that document learners' progress over time.

Reflection can be incorporated through self-assessment activities where students evaluate their work and identify areas for improvement. Teachers may also use emoji-based reflection scales alongside avatar projects to encourage learners to think critically about their performance and learning process.

Popular Avatar Tools and Apps for the EFL Classroom

The growing popularity of avatars has led to the development of numerous user-friendly tools and apps suitable for educational settings.

Tool	Best use	Website
Bitmoji	Personal avatars, virtual classrooms, class photos	https://www.bitmoji.com
Avatar Maker	Quick avatar creation and character descriptions	https://avatarmaker.com
Superherotar	Superhero and themed identity projects	https://superherotar.framiq.com
Pixton	Comics, storytelling, and visual narratives	https://www.pixton.com
Voki	Speaking avatars and oral presentations	https://www.voki.com
ChatterPix	Animated talking pictures and speaking tasks	https://www.duckduckmoose.com
Canva (avatar apps)	Posters, collages, presentations, and avatar design	https://www.canva.com
Avatoon	Personalised cartoon avatars	https://avatoon.net

Each tool is easy to use with students in the classroom and offers different strengths. Pixton excels in storytelling and comic creation, Voki and ChatterPix are particularly useful for speaking activities, while Bitmoji and Canva avatar apps support classroom design, identity work, and collaborative projects.

Practical and Ethical Considerations

While avatars offer many educational benefits, thoughtful implementation is essential. Teachers should select age-appropriate tools that comply with school policies and respect student privacy. Whenever possible, learners should be allowed to use fictional identities rather than personal information, and parental consent should be obtained where necessary.

Accessibility should also be considered. Alternative options should be available for students who may not be able to use voice recording or certain digital platforms. The goal is to ensure that avatar-based activities remain inclusive and accessible to all learners.

The growing availability of AI-powered avatar tools opens up exciting new possibilities for language learning. Some platforms can generate speaking avatars, simulate conversations, provide language practice opportunities, or help students create digital content more efficiently. When used appropriately, these tools can support creativity, communication, and learner autonomy. However, their use should always be guided by clear educational objectives and appropriate teacher supervision. Teachers play a crucial role in helping students use AI responsibly, critically evaluate AI-generated content, and understand the limitations of these technologies.

Conclusion

Avatars offer EFL teachers a creative and practical way to bring language learning to life. They can be used to support a wide range of classroom activities, from character descriptions and storytelling to speaking practice, role-plays, assessment, and reflection. By allowing students to communicate through a digital character, avatars can help build confidence, encourage participation, and make language learning more engaging and enjoyable.

In addition to developing language skills, avatar-based activities promote creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy — skills that are increasingly important in today's world. With a wide variety of user-friendly tools available, teachers can easily adapt avatar projects to different ages, proficiency levels, and learning goals.

As with any educational technology, avatars are most effective when used purposefully and in line with clear learning objectives. When thoughtfully integrated into classroom practice, they can create meaningful opportunities for communication and self-expression while helping students connect language learning with the digital environments they use every day.

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My English Learning Journey – An Interview with Lara

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Abstract

This article showcases the English learning journey of a high school student from the Technical School Šibenik, explored through a structured question by question conversation. It focuses on how English is learned both in and outside the classroom, with attention to personal motivation, reading habits, and everyday exposure to the language. The student reflects on the strong influence of teachers, particularly their role in creating a supportive and interactive learning environment that encourages confidence and participation. It also highlights how informal learning through media and personal interests contributes to developing fluency. Overall, it presents students' experience of learning English and emphasizes the importance of teachers in shaping engagement, motivation, and progress in English as a foreign language.

Interviewer's Note

A few months ago, my students were assigned the task of writing an essay on a specific topic. Many submitted well-written and engaging pieces, but one of the essays particularly stood out to me. I was impressed by how naturally this student handled English, as well as by her ability to express complex ideas with ease and natural fluency. That is how I came up with the idea of interviewing her, as I believe her responses show a student's perspective on learning English both in school and beyond the classroom, helping teachers better understand their learners. In this interview, she reflects on her journey with English, how she learned it, what motivates her, and what advice she has for both students and teachers.

For starters, could you briefly introduce yourself to our readers? Tell us your name, the school you attend, your grade, and anything else you think people should know about you. In other words, who is Lara?

There's a lot I could expand on here. My name is Lara Protrka, and I'm a junior in the architectural technician course at Tehnička škola here in Šibenik, Croatia. I like to say I'm a Jack of all trades – not because I am good at everything, but because I love and participate in so many different activities that adjectives like sporty or nerdy don't ever seem like enough.

Lara, as someone from a generation that has grown up exposed to English from an early age, do you remember the first time you realized there was a language other than your own? What was that moment like?

I don't think I ever gave it much thought until my first-ever English class. I remember, as a child, I'd always try to imagine how people in other parts of the world talked to their parents, but at the time, my brain could only comprehend the idea that they translated it into Croatian in their heads. 7-year-old me was shocked to find out my maternal language wasn't the main language in the world.

What kinds of English content did you encounter at that time? What did you enjoy most when engaging with the language?

Growing up, I was part of that first generation that was truly exposed to the wonders of the Internet. My father used to enjoy gaming; hence we had a PC and a laptop

in the house. I spent a lot of time watching videos on YouTube or playing video games myself, which meant I interacted a lot with the language, and my parents were always the *try to figure it out yourself first* type, so I was forced to truly engage my brain and use contextual clues. I've always loved things that stimulated my brain, and English naturally became one of them.

When did you first realize you had a hunger to learn English?

I always was, and still am, a very competitive person. It's still a vivid memory to me – 1st grade, we had a lesson about going to the market where we learned the names of fruits and vegetables, plums and such. All of a sudden, one of my classmates mentioned *meat*. Not only did he mention a word I didn't know, but he also proceeded to converse about it with our teacher. I couldn't understand what they were talking about until the teacher translated it later, and that bothered me so much that, in turn, I decided to become fluent in the language.

Growing up, what role did your parents play in your exposure to English? Were there any routines or rules about cartoons, YouTube, or other English content?

Honestly, they were always very supportive of whatever I wanted to learn as a kid. Obviously, I had some restrictions about how much time I could spend online when I was little, but they rarely restricted the content I was exposed to unless it was inappropriate for a kid. Additionally, both my parents spoke pretty much fluent English, and to this day, we still mix a lot of languages in my household in everyday life.

Lara, I assume you were ahead of your peers when it came to English. Did you ever feel bored in your early English classes at elementary school? Can you remember how those lessons felt for you?

After my decision to become fluent in English, I progressed very quickly, but I was still just a kid, and so it was all entertaining to me nonetheless. I remember, as I assume every Croatian student does, learning with Ronnie the Rabbit, Jessica, Elliot, and Ms Lemon. Their stories were always fun to follow, and our teacher made sure we all participated in lots of projects and fun tasks, so I was never bored, despite knowing the actual content we were learning.

I know you've mentioned before that you had a wonderful English teacher in the upper grades of primary school. Can you tell us what you liked most about him and what made him such a great teacher?

As I've already mentioned, he made sure everybody participated. It's not only his ability to teach and include everyone while making them feel comfortable that made him my favourite teacher; during Covid-19, we had online classes, and I was really struggling to stay motivated. Most of the other teachers had no issue writing Cs and marking me for not doing my homework, but he'd always text me on the day of the deadline with any assignments I left uncompleted and remind me to do them, and sometimes even left positive comments to encourage me. I guess that impacted me long-term more than I realized at the time. I find it important for teachers to see their students as people, not only a part of their job. He did a wonderful job at that.

Even though you picked up English outside the classroom, do you think your school English classes still offered benefits?

While I could easily learn English in my daily life, it wasn't as easy to find someone to communicate with in the language. Not to mention, some of the topics we learned about that I found interesting are something I never would've found or picked up on my own. The most beneficial thing was having somebody force me into learning grammar rules, because I've never had the discipline to practice things I could tell by ear.

You also took part in county English competitions. How did you do in those competitions, and what were your results?

I'd like to say I did pretty well. Sadly, English competitions only happen every other grade, so I only participated twice – in 8th grade and last year. My first one, I did super well and was 3rd in the county. Last year, I placed higher, but had fewer points. 45, I think.

Not advancing to the state level—did that feel discouraging at the time, or did it become an added motivation for you?

By now, you've got the gist that I'm very competitive. In 8th grade, I didn't really care because I still did better than everybody in my school. In sophomore year, though, I missed only 2 points to advance further, and that bothered me a lot. I'm still cultivating that feeling to use as motivation next year when I can participate again.

In your opinion, how important is it for students to participate in competitions, and why do you think that is?

Personally, I'll always advocate for it. It's easy to delude yourself into thinking you're good at something in a controlled environment. You might be the best in a room full of average people, but that doesn't make you the best overall. Engaging with people and content at a larger scale forces you to expand your horizons and learn things you otherwise might've never encountered. It also teaches the all-star kids to manage their ego and learn that not being the best isn't the end of the world.

What are your favourite activities with English outside the classroom? What kind of content do you usually engage with?

This has varied a lot throughout the years. I learned a lot of my English from gaming and interacting with people online over platforms like Discord. Nowadays, I mainly read, because I am too impatient to wait for books to be translated into Croatian. I do some of my own writing when I have time, as well. Other social media platforms, like TikTok or Instagram, are dominated by English content, but I've become so used to it that I don't really see it as exposure to the language anymore.

What kind of books do you read? How often? Who's your favourite author?

I try to read daily. I'm the type of person who always carries a book around, just in case I have time to read it during the outing. I enjoy books with psychological aspects, especially if they're set in an academic or fantasy setting. My current read is *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tart. If I can get my hands on a Croatian edition, I'll read it in my own language, so I mainly read romance books in English now, since I read those as e-books. As for authors, I've collected almost all of Stephanie Garber's books, so she's up there, but my all-time favourite is V. E. Schwab – there isn't a single book written by her that I haven't thoroughly enjoyed.

I'm particularly interested in the content you follow. What kind of vlogs, blogs, podcasts, or websites do you enjoy? Do you have any favourites—like I enjoy watching shows by Jimmy Kimmel?

Lately, I've been trying to lower my consumption of short-format content, so I enjoy following influencers like Bella Dane, who give advice on living life offline and improving yourself. When it comes to blogs, I love the app *Substack*. I tried really hard to get into podcasts for a while, but they're just not for me – the lack of things to do with myself while listening to somebody talk drives me insane, and I always find myself zoning out. I'm not big on things like shows or movies either. The only shows I ever really indulged in are *Devil's plan* and *University War*, which are both South Korean. They're easier to watch, since their culture is formed around being subtle, so there aren't as many curse words or provocative gestures as you'd find in American or British reality TV.

When you read or watch something, do you take notes? Do you write down new words or interesting grammar, or do you just let it sink in as you go?

Normally, when I come across something I don't know, I reach for a dictionary and check what it means without stressing whether it'll stick long-term. Every now and then, I'll pick a harder read, or I'll reread something, and then I'll take notes. I'll give myself a longer period of time to truly annotate and analyse the book. I have a separate notebook in which I write down any quotes I like from books, and a folder in my notes app where I write any words or grammatical structures that I want to remember for further use.

You mentioned a friend you speak English with in your free time. How does it feel to have these conversations? Was it her idea, or did you take the initiative? And do you enjoy practicing English this way?

It all started in the 2nd grade of primary school, when we both got hooked on the game *Animal Jam*. We had to talk to each other in English if we wanted other players to understand us, and some other games, like *Roblox*, censored words in languages that aren't English to lower the risk of inappropriate content. Naturally, we started texting in English as well, and it has remained that way to this day. It's not a chore, and it's simply talking to a friend, so it's enjoyable, yet serves as a great way to practice because it lets you figure out how to use the language organically in everyday conversations.

Do you think that speaking English with your friend has helped improve your fluency?

Definitely, we looked back on some screenshots of our old chats and some vlogs we recorded together in English recently, and you can really see the progress in our grammar and vocabulary over time. When learning a language, having somebody to speak it with is one of the most helpful tools.

Would you be honest with us—when you speak English, do you think in Croatian, in English, or a bit of both?

I've never given that much thought. I believe I think in the language I'm speaking at the moment. To me, it doesn't really make a difference because I know a lot of English vocabulary and the grammar comes naturally, whereas when I'm speaking, for example, Italian, it takes conscious effort and thought to form a grammatically correct sentence.

Which activities do you enjoy most during your English classes?

I love both talking and listening to people state their opinions, so I really enjoy discussions. This means I also enjoy oral exams, because our teacher makes it feel like a conversation. Other than that, I love group work and brainstorming tasks like writing.

Do you have a special method for memorizing English vocabulary?

The most important thing is to try and figure it out yourself. Our brains are wired to remember what we went through, so a word sticks easier if you had to figure it out from the context, rather than just opening up a translator app. If you must use a translator app, write the word down afterwards. Associations are really important, too. To this day, I remember the book from which I learned the word *myriad*.

Do you think grammar should still be taught in the traditional way, or do you think our approach to teaching it needs to change? What methods do you think would work best for students today?

I think the best way to learn anything regarding a language is by correcting someone as they speak. Solving sheets upon sheets of grammar practice can feel monotonous and doesn't necessarily help someone develop the ability to form a sentence correctly on the spot. I believe we should work toward making the grammar feel natural. Letting someone speak, then correcting them and explaining the *why* behind it works much better than correcting their sheet work. Though I might be biased, because I still haven't learned the majority of the rules for the tenses to this day and I struggle with explaining my sheet work.

Spelling seems to be a challenge for many students today. Why do you think that is, and what has helped you avoid such problems?

I am 100% positive that it is because of the current trend. We are living in a time period where people try to simplify everything. Abbreviations like *wbu* (what about you), *iykyk* (if you know, you know), memes and the trend of writing genuine nonsense are really impacting kids' and teens' ability to spell. In Croatia, we also have a trend of spelling things the way you'd pronounce them, so it's not necessary for students to know how to spell to talk to their peers in English. The only reason I don't find myself stuck in this pattern is that I write a lot, and do things like searching for synonyms and looking up things in dictionaries, then spelling them letter by letter into my own work.

When learning a foreign language, what aspects do you find most difficult, and which ones do you enjoy the most?

It's the hardest to start, knowing zero vocab and not understanding why the grammar is the way it is. Since I learned English without being aware that I was taking it in like a sponge, it's frustrating having to face all kinds of different obstacles with other languages. I enjoy reading and learning vocab and expressions, but I usually struggle with grammar since I don't have people to correct me when practicing by myself.

So, when we talk about learning English, do you think of it as "learning," or does it feel more like just being exposed to the language? Does it feel like studying, or more like something you do naturally every day?

English is natural for me at this point. Sometimes, I'll look back on some content I consumed and won't even be able to remember whether it was in Croatian or English. As I've said previously, grammar rules are still something I have to study. Knowing how to say something discourages me from learning why exactly I'm saying it that way.

What would you like to say to teachers in general about making their lessons as effective as possible? In your opinion, what is the most important thing a teacher should bring to the classroom?

Language teachers definitely need to make their classrooms a place of interaction, more than other subject teachers. Languages aren't really something you can cram, so students have to feel comfortable enough to express themselves despite being unsure of their knowledge level, which in turn lets others provide them with feedback. If students don't feel like they can interact freely with you or their classmates in your class, they won't feel free enough to actually bother learning.

Finally, what advice or encouragement would you like to give to students of all ages who have the opportunity to learn English?

If you are not quite good at English, today, there are so many ways to learn it that bad experiences with peers or teachers shouldn't discourage you from doing so. I'm generally against the use of AI, but if you're afraid to speak to others or just shy, there are tons of AI-powered apps that let you speak to your phone and provide feedback with lots of fun ways to learn. We can't stop the development of digital resources or AI, so I believe we should make the best of it. Good luck!

Is there anything else you would like to add, or any final thoughts you'd like to share to conclude this article?

First of all, I am honoured to be included in the article. I have to extend a great lot of thanks to my amazing teacher who asked me to participate. Since starting high school, especially a course that's regarded as one of the most challenging, her amazing feedback and positive encouragement, as well as always trying her best to satiate our need for excitement by constantly thinking of fun projects both at the school level and beyond served as a constant motivation. My conclusion, as someone who's had great teachers during their entire career: Teachers are what impacts one's learning journey the most.

Skills in focus: READING AND WRITING SCARY STORIES

Anna Maria Popović
Osnovna škola Ivana Kukuljevića Belišće

INTRODUCTION - a few words on "Skills in focus: READING AND WRITING SCARY STORIES"

The research on ''Scary stories" was done due to the preparations for the ''Scary stories project" in 2014/2015 school year and it was a result of:

- a few years' observations of elementary students' need for ''scary" in stories and their interest in Halloween celebrations,

- the fear and worry of both teachers and parents of the phenomena mentioned,

- and further research on the explanation of ''scary" in fairy tales and stories as a means of promotion of reading.

The other reason was taking part in the Croatian ''Let's read together" project that school year. And last but not least, during the project, we tried to enjoy scary stories in English written by elementary students of our school (7th & 8th graders).

Througout the research we will be looking for answers to a few ''scary" questions:

1. In what ways are classic/ fairy tales & scary stories present in our lives?
2. What is the ''scary" in scary stories?

Is there a psychological explanation for the use of ''scary stories" in reading and promoting reading?

MAIN PART

The answer to the question about **the ways in which classic/fairy tales & scary stories are present in our lives** is not a mystery. They can be visible and literally heard every day. Our language and culture are full of storytelling, fairy tales, and ''scary" stories. The tradition of telling them is as common in our language and culture as fear is part of human nature.

For example, the *''Oxford Minireference Thesaurus"* (p.493) gives us a choice of 23 words and phrases which can be used instead of the verb ''to scare"! Therefore we can:

alarm	*make fearful*	*(informal) put the wind up*
appal	*make nervous*	*(informal) to scare the pants off*
awe	*make one's blood run cold*	*scare stiff*
cow	*make one's flesh creep*	*shock*
daunt	*make one's hair stand on end*	*startle*
frighten	*panic*	*terrify*
horrify	*petrify*	*terrorize*
intimidate	*put the fear of God into*	-

Additionally, the *"Universal thematic dictionary of English language"* (pages 159-160) offers us quite a few (31) every-day & idiomatic scary expressions such as:

(to) be frightened of...	*(to) have butterflies in one's stomach*
(to) be frightened to death	*(to) have (sb's) heart in (sb's) mouth*
(to) be panic-stiken	*in fear and trembling*
(to) be paralysed with fear	*in a panic/fear*
(to) be petrified	*(to) inspire people with awe*
(to) be on pins and needles	*(to) jump with fear*
(to) be scared of...	*(to) live in fear of...*
(to) be terrified of...	*(to) make (sb's) flesh creep*
blood-curdling	*"my heart sank"*
(to) find (something) frightening	*(to) shake like a leaf out of fear*
(to) freeze the blood in (sb's) veins	*(to) strike terror among people*
(to) get/ have cold feet	*"the colour drained from my face"*
(to) get a fright	*thrilling experience*
(to) get into a sweat about...	*(to) tremble in (sb's) shoes*
gooseflesh/ goosebumps (Am)	*(to) turn as white as a sheet*
hair-raising	-

Does this number of ''scary'' words tell us anything? Most definitely. It confirms that fear plays a significant role in our development as human beings and that talking about it, writing about it, and reading scary stories has been, is, and most probably will be part of our culture and language whether we want it or not, whether we like it or not.

Elizabeth Danish in her article on ''The Influence of Fairy Tales on Children'' stated that ''Fairy tales have been around as long as anyone can remember, and have been told to children since we first started having them. We tell them stories of fairy tales when they go to sleep, and they watch Disney re-enactments and shows that reinforce them further. They get read at school and generally they are everywhere while we're growing up and while our children are growing up. (...)'' (http://www.health-guidance.org/entry/15745/1/Influence-of-Fairy-Tales-on-Children.html)

The ''Classic and Fairy Tales'' article at http://freestories for kids.com are trying to explain why fairy tales are successful with kids:

''All kinds of fables and tales have been used in education since long ago. They were used as a way to reach children's minds and hearts. Stories were usually starred by heroes, princesses, monsters, and other creatures of the fantasy world. This way, the always-working children's imaginations were captivated by these stories. They lived the same adventures their favourite characters lived and, more importantly, they learnt the same lessons their heroes learnt.''

Following her argument, a brilliant article for ''The Reading Teacher'' magazine by Patricia O.Richards, Debra H. Thatcher, Michelle Shreeves, Peggy Timmons, and Sallie Barker titled:''Don't let a good scare frighten you: Choosing and using quality chillers to promote reading'' (1999) has to be recommended for a thorough study. The authors of the atricle point out in the introduction that ''(t)he popularity of scary stories among elementary and middle school students seems to have grown in direct proportion to educator's and parents' horror over this current reading trend. (p.830)''

At the same time they convince that ''(t)he popularity of scary stories is not new. In traditional literature, tales from the oral tradition handed down through generations in all cultures, contain many scary stories. These ancient stories and poems grew out of the human quest to understand the natural and spiritual worlds. (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 1996). People in ancient times perceived the world as an unpredictable and scary place. (...) The world is still an unpredictable and often scary place for children and even for adults, which could explain the popularity of adult horror books and movies.'' (p.831)

The studies and observations by Patricia O.Richards and her colleagues, on the other hand, confirm that ''(e)ducators and parents are torn between wanting to see children reading and not wanting them reading certain kinds of books, particularly scary books. (p.830)''

As Elizabeth Danish phrases it ''(f)airy tales have come under much scrutiny and are widely studied. This is partly because of their status in popular culture but also because they are such early examples of storytelling and

this allows us to learn more about the fundamentals of storytelling in general, and about the psychology behind it."

Have you ever thought of fairy tales as too scary for children? According to my recent research, more and more articles put emphasis on the scary elements of fairy tales and there is more and more criticism coming from parents who suggest that "(f)airy tales are too scary for modern children" (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/9078489/Fairytales-too-scary-for-modern-children-say-parents.html). Parents express their worry that because of some of the traditional fairy tales "(...) their children have been left in tears" or that they "(...) prompt too many awkward questions".

Could you guess the most inappropriate fair tales & characters of today? On one of the lists of "TOP TEN FAIRY-TALES NO LONGER READ TO CHILDREN" there are some kids' no-longer-favourites:

Fairytale	Problem
1. Hansel and Gretel	- two kids abandoned in the forest
2. Jack and the Beanstalk	- deemed too 'unrealistic'.
3. Gingerbread Man	- would be uncomfortable explaining gingerbread man gets eaten by a fox
4. Little Red Riding Hood	- deemed unsuitable by parents who have to explain a young girl's grandmother has been eaten by a wolf.
5. Snow White and the Seven Dwarves	- the term dwarves was found to be inappropriate
6. Cinderella	- story about a young girl doing all the housework was outdated.
7. Rapunzel	-parents were worried about the focus on a young girl being kidnapped.
8. Rumplestiltskin	- wouldn't be happy reading about executions and kidnapping
9. Goldilocks and the Three Bears	- sends the wrong messages about stealing
10. Queen Bee	- inappropriate as the story has a character called Simpleton

Meredith Chambers, the author of "Top 10 Classic Fairy Tales Considered 'Too Scary' For Today's Kids" empasizes that "(...) recent research has revealed that more and more parents are replacing some of the classic Fairy Tales that many of us grew up reading with modern variations of these stories or entirely different books altogether. The truth is that if you were to break down these tales, you'll find stories with heavy topics such as kidnapping, death, and abandonment that can terrify young children." (http://nj1015.com/top-10-classic-fairy-tales-considered-too-scary-for-todays-kid/)

Attempts have been made to explain why such fairy tales should no longer be read to children. Elizabeth Danish in her study of the infuence of fairy tales on children tried to "(...) address some of the potential negative impacts of [such]stories."

Negative impact	Explanation
Modern discord	-old-fashined & out-of-date: ''(...) these stories are also very old, and in some ways very dated; what you need to remember is that things have changed since the times of fairy tales, and the concern is that these tales might now be less relevant and so even damaging. In particular the concern is that fairy tales might be a bad influence on women, whose roles are less liberated in most fairy tales.''
Self Image	''Some studies have suggested that girls who read a lot of fairy tales or have a lot of them read to them have lower self images than others. This could also be because of the conventional image of the princess – of being slim and beautiful and attracting men from around the world – like Sleeping beauty, 'Bell' from Beauty and the Beast, or Helen of Troy. Any of these emphasize looks as the most important feature of those princesses (you rarely hear about the over-weight-yet-smart-and-kind princess). This of course is not a great message to send in that it again stifles ambition, but it can also be damaging for the self image of those girls who perhaps do not conform to the stereotype and are powerless to do anything about it.''
Reality	''Another problem that some might find with fairy tales is that they are often far removed from reality. Many women end up waiting out for their man that fits the image of 'Prince Charming' and who will ride in on a steed and rescue them (...).'' ''This can lead to something like dissatisfaction for those whose lives do not pan out quite as they hoped and fairy tales might put too fine a point on this. Fairy tales also tend to focus very much on the hero's journey – the coming of age – and don't tend to give much space to what happens after the hero and the princess ride off into the horizon.''
Nightmares	''(...) some fairy tales can be somewhat scary for young children and that they often contain quite horrific images and scenes.''

From what has been presented here we may begin asking ourselves: ''(...) Are fairy tales a bad influence?'' Elizabeth Danish, like some of the researchers, disagrees on numerous points with such a statement and claims that ''(f)airy tales encourage imagination and creative thinking.''

Another author of an article on fairy tales, Melissa Taylor, in her ''Why fairy tales are essential to childhood'' analyzes the reasons some parents give against fairy tale reading and concludes that ''(...) these parents have lost their reasoning skills – completely.'' (http://imaginationsoup.net/2012/02/fairy-tales-are-essential-to-childhood/). Therefore, she makes a list of important factors which make fairy tales essential to chilhood:

The importance of fairy tales:
1. **Fairy Tales Show Kids How to Handle Problems** -help children how to navigate life; *''Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.''* - G.K. Chesterton
2. **Fairy Tales Build Emotional Resiliency** -show real life issues in a fantastical scenario where most often the hero triumphs - discover in a safe environment that bad things happen to everyone
3**. Fairy Tales Give Us a Common Language (Cultural Literacy & Canon)**
4. **Fairy Tales Cross Cultural Boundaries** **-** Many cultures share common fairy tales like Cinderella, with their own cultural flavor

The importance of fairy tales:
5. **Fairy Tales Teach Story**
- understanding the basics of story — setting, characters, and plot (rising action, climax, and resolution) as well as the difference between fiction and non-fiction
6. **Fairy Tales Develop a Child's Imagination**
7. Fairy Tales Give Parents Opportunities to Teach Critical Thinking Skills
8. Fairy Tales Teach Lessons
- to teach morals and lessons

Finally, the authors of the ''Classic and Fairy Tales'' article point out that ''(...) our world and our culture have faced a complete transformation over the course of the last centuries. Many of the values and beliefs of previous generations have dissapeared. The way people live in cities is completely different to that of some time ago. (...) Fortunately, the core values, the ones that are more important to develop into a complete human being, haven't changed that much. Generosity, kindness, respect, tolerance, sincerity, humility and many others are still in the list of qualities we wish our children to have.

However, most of those fables and classic tales have become a bit outdated. (...)That is the main reason [they] think new educational stories are needed for our children."

Similarly , Elizabeth Danish advises parents and their children that besides fairy tales their kids ''(...) should be exposed to lots of different stories and stimuli." Otherwise, ''(s)hielding (...) children from fairy tales would be to shield them from a very rich and culturally significant form of storytelling and one that can bring them great enjoyment."

Let us now enjoy the second part of today's lecture and go back to the basic question of: **What is the ''scary" in scary stories?** Before talking about scary stories it is crucial to explain the very term of a ''scary story" itself.

The members of a Teachers As Readers group who wrote the article ''Don't let a good scare frighten you: Choosing and using quality chillers to promote reading" (1999) provide us with a necessary definition:

''(s)cary stories is a superordinate category that encompasses more than horror stories. Science fiction includes scary elements, as does fantasy, both ancient and modern. Thrillers can be scary and include mystery stories, adventure stories, and survival stories. Even nonfiction can be scary with true accounts of harrowing survivals, disasters, and gruesome or weird natural creatures and occurrences.(831)"

Table 1: Types of scary stories

Science fiction (*Loch, The Golden Compass*)	Adventure (*The Ghost-Eye Tree*)
Ancient fantasy (*Dragons*)	Survival (*The Half-A-Moon Inn*)
Modern fantasy (*Monsters*)	Nonfiction (*Tornadoes*)
Mysteries (*The Man Who Was Poe*)	True accounts (*The Titanic*)

Table 1 shows types of scary stories and a few exemplary titles.

It is also important to point out that ''(s)cary stories may contain violence, magic, or the supernatural. Frightening things happen as people persevere to overcome adversity or solve problems. Sometimes inexplicable occurences are cause for investigation, and terrifying encounters with evil people, creatures, or tricksters result. These stories deliver an emotional punch. They have fast-paced plots, suspense, and dramatic power. They may deal with subjects that are not openly discussed, or are taboo, such as death, jealousy, hatred, selfishness, injustice, power, lust, oppression, and life beyond the here and now." Patricia O. Richards stated with her colleagues.

They also confirmed that ''(w)hat makes a book scary for a child is quite different than what adults interpret as scary (Bettelheim, 1976; Kellerman, 1981)." They admitted that ''(t)he elementary school children they surveyed identified several ''scary" characteristics. Primary-grade children pointed to monsters, ghosts, bugs, big dogs, dead creatures, being left alone by mom and dad, and ''something in the basement." Children in the intermediate grades cited ''weird" yet realistic and suspenseful elements such as a face in the window, creaking stairs, stormy nights, accidents, ''people in black", and being home alone. Interestingly, these scary elements of self-selected books correlate closely with typical children's fears. (p.832)"

In the very same article it is noticed that ''(a)s children grow and develop, it is normal that they experience fears and worries. These fears change as children mature cognitively, psychologically, and physically (Crosser, 1994)."

The following table presents the children's fears by age:

Children's fears

Stage	Age	Types of fears	
1.	0	loud noises	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
2.	2-5	large objects/animals	(threat of harm)
	2-12	darkness	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
3.	3-4	sudden changes	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
	3-5	bad people, separation from parents	(threat of harm), (novelty/unfamiliarity)
	3-6	masks	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
	3-7	ghosts/monsters	(threat of harm)
	3-10	being lost	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
4.	5-7	being alone	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
	5-14	noises at night	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
5.	6-10	sickness	(novelty/unfamiliarity)
	6-13	bodily injury	(threat of harm)
6.	7-9	storms, animals	(novelty/unfamiliarity) (threat of harm)
	7-13	stranger/kidnapper/robber	(threat of harm)
7.	10-14	punishment, grades/tests, physical appearance	(social rejection) -II- -II-
8.	11-14	death	(threat of harm)
9.	13-14	crime in general, war, personal relations, sex issues, family	(threat of harm) (social rejection) -II- -II-

The analysis of the presented fears and worries enables us to notice ages at which children are exposed to a variety of challenges and factors they are supposed to face.

The same authors of ''Don't let a good scare frighten you (...)'' article conclude that:

''It may seem that reading stories based on children's normal developmental fears would harm vulnerable children causing them undue emotional trauma. This is not a case for most children. C.S. Lewis (1966) pointed out that though books may contain frightening situations, scary books themselves do not cause fear. (...)'' (p. 832)

Moreover, there are researchers who enumerate benefits of scary stories. For example ''Bettelheim (1976) contends that books that allow children to see they are not the only ones with fears and that suggest ways to solve problems presented by these fears are immediately meaningful to young readers. Scary books allow children to actively participate in the story in ways that other media do not.

''The child is able to stop and go as he pleases and has the ability to achieve mastery over the material'' (Kellerman, 1981).

This sense of control enables children to master their fears (Crosser, 1994; Robinson et al., 1991). Each success in mastering a fearful situation strengthens the child's ability to cope with future fearful obstacles (Crosser, 1994).''

For many teachers and parents it may come as a surprise to find out that it is not good to protect one's child from scary stories too much. The authors of ''What's too scary?'' article explain that '' Sometimes parents think it's their job to remove all stress from children's lives, but the truth is that, with our support, small bits of stress (child-size bits) are important sources of positive development, as chil-

dren broaden their toolkit of coping strategies." (http://families.naeyc.org/learning-and-development/child-development/whats-too-scary)

It is believed that ''(s)cary stories neither promote an unhealthy interest in the macabre nor instill undue fear and anxiety. Teachers and other adults must trust children's interest in scary books and recognize the role of fear in children's normal development." (Richards, p. 834)

What they happen to promote is reading itself.

Another important fact to be mentioned about children's perception of scary stories is that ''(w)hen reporting children's retelling of stories, Trousdale (1989) found that children did not dwell on the horrific or gruesome story elements disdained by adults, but instead focused on the successful resolution of the story." (p. 834, ''Don't let a good scare frighten you: Choosing and using quality chillers to promote reading" (1999))

As long as the end of the story has a positive resolution at the end it is not that scary.

CONCLUSION

The last question to be answered during this presentation is whether **there is a psychological explanation for the use of "scary stories" in reading and promoting reading?**

All that being said about how fairy tales and scary stories are essential cannot dismiss the fact that ''(c)hildren choose to read scary stories. Without encouragement from adults and sometimes against adult directives, children actively seek out stories that chill and thrill them. Teachers must try to understand children's perspectives and value their choices rather than dismiss their book selections as inappropriate or harmful (Worthy, 1996)as underlined by Patricia O. Richards in her article (p.831). Furthermore, she enumerates ''(...) complex motives children have for choosing books just as adults do". In short, they are:

Children's motives for choosing scary books:
1. children like the impossible, the element of surprise
2. children find them entertaining & "cool"
3. children like collecting and trading (books), childhood love of series books (collectible sets in a consumer culture like ours, marketing and advertising influence)
4. children enjoy discussing responses to books with others (one of the pleasures of literature is social interaction)
5. children like the suspense and mystery of the stories (holding their attention and keeping them interested) "The not knowing makes me want to turn the page and keep reading" one fourth grader explained."
6. children respond to emotions, emotions play an essential role in entertainment;

According to Patricia O. Richards' collaborative article (p. 834): ''The research and the students themselves are telling teachers that scary books may be more helpful than harmful." Consequently, the study of their classroom experiences shows that ''(i)ndependent reading is the cornerstone of any reading program. The main instructional goals are proficiency and enjoyment. Readers employ the skills and strategies they have learned and increase their reading competency as well as their desire to read. During in-school independent reading, readers should be encouraged to read a variety of books and to broaden their reading horizons, but individual taste and freedom to choose should prevail."

The same authors offer a long list of ideas for a literature study, of which only a summarized sample is presented here (p. 836-837):

Examplary literature study questions:		
1.	character study	i.e. Who is scary and why?
2.	setting	i.e. Does the story take place in a real or imaginary place?
3.	plot	i.e. How does the author tell the story?
4.	point of view	i.e. Who tells the story?
5.	theme	i.e. What do the characters learn?
6.	style and tone	i.e. How do they create and relieve tension?
7.	genre comparisons	i.e. Do authors borrow characters, myths, legends from one genre and use them in another?
8.	author comparisons	i.e. Do authors write in different genres?
9.	illustator study	i.e. What physical characteristics make monsters or villains scary?

They also conclude that ''(w)ith attention to selection criteria, scary books can be useful for instructional purposes.'' (p. 839)

From what has been said, so far it seems to be clear that there will always be different opinions of fairy tales and scary stories and their influence on children. There is no clear answer whether they are ''too scary'' or ''scary enough'', it will always be a matter of a researcher, an individual child, a parent, or a teacher's literature selection and evaluation criteria.

However, we may conclude that at the right age a well-selected scary story can not only help a child in their natural development and meet his/her needs but also respond to a child's emotions, offer them a share of impossible but entertaining suspense and mystery which will, most desirably, keep them reading.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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Mythical Escape Room in a Box

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This article describes the educational value of student participation in extra-curricular activities through the example of the 7th Millennium Competition in Creative Industry, held in November and December 2025 at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek. Although such activities can seem difficult to organize due to time constraints for both students and teachers, the article highlights their significant benefits.

The competition brought together elementary, high school, and university students from Croatia and abroad, aiming to foster creativity, critical thinking, and digital skills through team-based project work. Participants developed original project solutions within predefined themes, including Cultural Identity, Mythology, and Hydrogen. The described team, consisting of three secondary-school computer technician students mentored by an English and German teacher and a History teacher, chose the theme of Slavic mythology.

Abstract

Our project, *Mythical Escape Room in a Box*, was designed as a portable educational escape room game based on the mythological conflict between the gods Perun and Veles. The game integrates historical content, foreign language learning, and digital tools, and includes puzzles using Glagolitic script, runes, and mythological symbols. Created in both Croatian and English, the game promotes teamwork and is intended to be completed within a single school lesson.

Article

The article outlines the three-stage competition process, culminating in a live presentation at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek, where the team successfully presented a completed, market-ready product. Despite the demanding preparation carried out outside regular classes, the experience proved highly valuable. Students developed creativity, collaboration, presentation, and practical project-management skills. The project also has wider applicability, as it can be used in education, museums, or tourism, demonstrating the long-term value of well-designed extra-curricular projects.

To start with, during November and December 2025, the Faculty of Economics in Osijek organized the 7th Millennium Competition in Creative Industry. It is described as a unique international event bringing together elementary and high school students as well as college students from across Croatia and abroad. Since the aim of the Competition is to encourage participants to engage in original creative work, while developing creativity, critical thinking and digital skills through creating project solutions addressing current topics and challenges of the creative industry, we decided to try out our luck and to apply to the competition.

The main idea of the Competition is to develop a project solution within a team of maximum three students mentored by no more than two teachers from different sectors following one of the Competition's themes - Cultural identity, Mythology, and Hydrogen. The team which I mentored as an English and German language teacher alongside my colleague, a History teacher, involved three students from the second grade of computer technicians. Since cross-curricular collaboration is strongly encouraged in this competition, we decided to compete in the category of Slavic mythology combining foreign language learning with discovering historical facts. The first step, for us as a team, was to develop a project solution – an idea which would lead us to creating the final product intended for the market. We decided to invent and design a game called Mythical Escape Room in a Box in the form of a portable escape room based on a story from Slavic mythology about Perun and Veles. For this purposes, the students needed to create the game rules, puzzles, clues, and instructions. After having agreed on the concept, students distributed the workload among themselves and started preparing five different sets of puzzles for the players to go through when playing the game. We, as a team decided that each mystery should contain elements of Slavic mythology, so the students creatively incorporated the conflict between Slavic gods Perun and Veles in the introductory story. Moreover, they continued to create tasks for players which were to be solved by using the Slavic alphabet Glagolitic, runes, symbols related to Slavic deities and stories originated in Slavic mythology.

To further enrich the content of the game, students incorporated digital elements using various digital applications appropriate to the knowledge and skills of secondary school students and decided to prepare an English-language version of the game as well. The game is designed to be completed within one school lesson (approximately 45 minutes) and requires teamwork, with an optimal team size of three to six students. The moderator explains the rules of the game, with the goal to resolve the conflict and restore balance and coexistence between the two gods. Teams then embark on their mission and receive the first puzzle card, which must be solved within a set time limit. After solving a series of five puzzles, teams reach the final solution that restores balance and leads to the reconciliation of Perun and Veles. The moderator then awards participants a certificate for successfully completing the game.

The process of applying the project solution to the Competition comprised of several steps. The first step was to briefly describe the imagined project solution to the evaluation board who then awarded points to each presented idea. Around 80 teams took part in the second level of the competition, in which the task was to create a short video in which all the team members needed to present themselves and their role in creating the project solution. Not all applied project solutions were accepted in the second level of the competition due to insufficient points. After reviewing the videos, the evaluators decided, based on the proscribed criteria, that only 37 teams were to be accepted in the final, third round of the competition, which meant they will have to present their project solution to the evaluation committee in a live two-day event held at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek.

Since our project solution received a high score of 28 points from the possible 30 points in total, we were invited to present our project solution in Osijek. Students began preparing a presentation in which all of them took part and presented a part of the development process, also they were asked additional questions by the evaluating committee. In addition, we made a finished product, a box, containing all the materials for the game to played, which we decorated accordingly and included in our presentation.

As already mentioned at the beginning of the article, teachers and students oftentimes fail to participate in activities similar to this one because they lack the time or simply are not sufficiently motivated. To be honest, all the work during the preparation stages of our project solution had been done outside regular classes which took a lot of organisation and effort from both the participating students and us as teachers. However, regardless the difficulties we faced in the process, the experience has proved itself as a very valuable one for the entire team. On one hand, students had the opportunity to show their creativity and wit while creating the tasks, to learn

something new by exploring Slavic mythology and to incorporate their vocational skills by creating digital materials incorporated in every task. In addition, during the entire process they were working together, successfully collaborating while at the same time managing team work and work distribution. What is more, they had the chance to present their project idea themselves and to receive proper gratification for it. All of this combined, proves that no matter the obstacles, the experience and knowledge gained by participating in this competition is beneficial and worthwhile. Ultimately, having created a finished product, our students can fully understand the meaning of creating a project solution starting from a project proposal and finishing with a ready-made product.

The project solution itself, the game Mythical Escape Room in a Box, also has added value elements since it can be used not only in the classroom to enrich history lessons, but can also be presented as an educational tool to museums and even tourist centres if launched on the market. Since the project solution includes digital elements, it is also connected to the new media sector. By applying various digital tools in the creation of game components, the project enables students to engage in multimedia learning by linking Slavic mythology with contemporary technological achievements. The fact that the entire project proposal is designed as a bilingual game, available in both Croatian and English version, further enhances its potential for wider application both within and beyond educational institutions.

To finally conclude, even though our everyday responsibilities may prevent us from sharing our free time for the purposes of additional school-related work, in most cases it pays off and you learn to appreciate the new experience not only because of your, but because of your students` growth as well. Hopefully, next year, there will be at least one more project solution taking part in the Competition as a result of reading this article.

A “HUPELAND” poem and a “POEM ON A STRING” break-time activity

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Abstract

Have you ever asked yourself: "Where are the HUPE branches?" and "How to remember all of them?"

If writing a poem would be a way to remember them all, what would it look and sound like?

If one would like to share that poem and ask other teachers to upgrade it and contribute to a joint-venture mini-project, what form of an activity could that teacher choose?

This short report-article is answering all of the mentioned questions.

First, with a "HUPELAND" poem and then with a "POEM on a STRING" break-time activity.

Interested?

Article

HUPEzine ARTICLE: A “HUPELAND” poem and a “POEM ON A STRING” break-time activity by mgr Anna Maria Popović

https://carnet-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/anna_popovic_skole_hr/IQDH7ZVVh4CtRb9z5rMzf9T-mAbn-cpqPh1l_curdFkuK8Rw?e=S4BJ29

INTRODUCTION

It all started with two simple questions: "Where are the HUPE branches?" and "How to remember all of them?"

Then, other questions followed: "Is there a different way of remembering them?" and "How about giving branches names, as if they were characters, and writing a poem?"

So, a poem came along:

"HUPELAND"

Long, long time ago
in a faraway HUPELAND
lived a yabadoo HUPEDU,
not far from a HUPESP speciality,

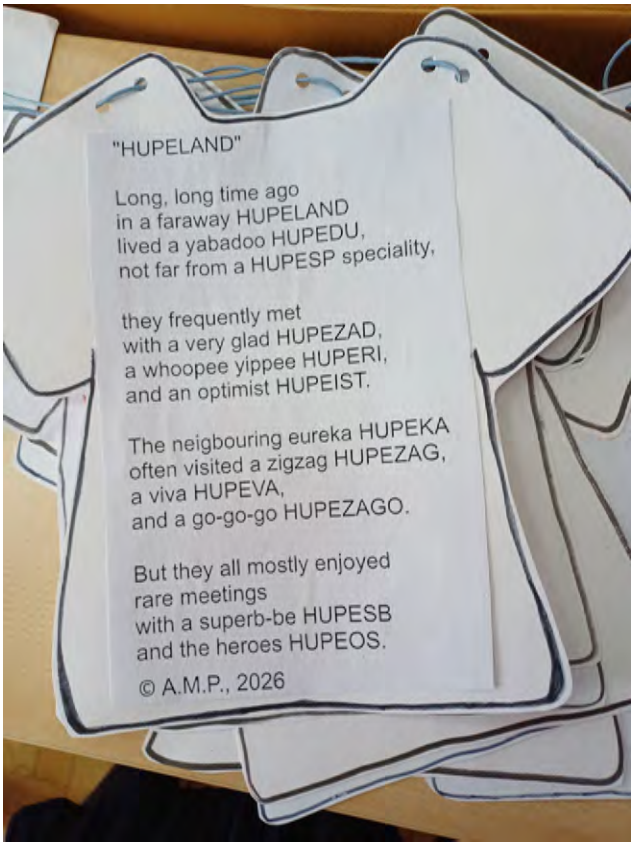
they frequently met
with a very glad HUPEZAD,
a whoopee yippee HUPERI,
and an optimist HUPEIST.

The neigbouring eureka HUPEKA
often visited a zigzag HUPEZAG,
a viva HUPEVA,
and a go-go-go HUPEZAGO.

But they all mostly enjoyed
rare meetings
with a superb-be HUPESB
and the heroes HUPEOS.

MAIN PART

Naturally, the poem had to be shared. First, with one of the "HUPEOS" in charge, the HUPE Osijek branch president, our colleague Adrijana Rožđijevac. Then, with other "HUPEOS". A break-time activity "How to learn HUPE branches" during the HUPE Osijek branch meeting seemed like a good idea. The activity was planned in the form of a "POEM on a STRING" with twelve T-shirt-shaped mini-posters put up on the wall (connected and "hanging on a string"). One T-shirt poster with the poem and eleven T-shirt posters with names of 11 HUPE branches and plenty of space for teachers to write on.



Here's the outline:

* time - during longer coffee breaks, prep works visible to everybody from the very start

* space - the purple wall of the HUPE meeting FZOOS room

* materials needed:

- paper "T-shirts" prepared in advance, hanging on the "string" attached to the wall

- sellotape, markers

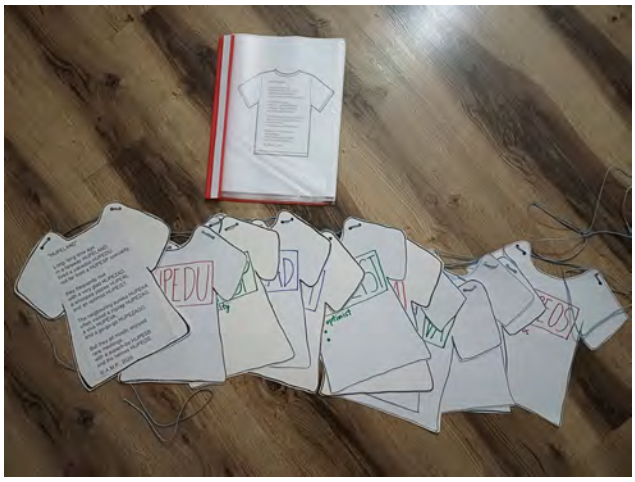
- Important: participants should find out about the "How to learn HUPE branches" activity and the free "POEM on a STRING" activity before the coffee-break, roaming and mingling, reading, coffee, and writing.

The procedure:

1. participants get to read the poem "HUPELAND" by A.M.P., 2026 option a - the poem is read out loud by a volunteer/2 volunteers from the 12th paper "T-shirt" on the wall, option b - the printed version of the poem is given to 1-2 chosen volunteer readers,

2. participants are asked to freely contribute to the rhyme-names for 11 HUPE branches by adding and writing their ideas on the 11 paper "T-shirts" hanging on the wall while having a coffee-break. The results can be read out loud and briefly presented/summarized at the end of the meeting (later summarized and sent in the email).

3.* participants are given a gift of a paper handout with space for their new "HUPE POEM" or "MY SUMMER POEM" (an empty T-shirt template. Source: pngtree-blank-t-shirt-outline-clipart-illustration-png-image_13407957.png)



The report:

During the third HUPE Osijek branch meeting on April 9, 2026 we did it! And modified the procedure a little.

The participants received all the handouts, including the poem. Four volunteer participants read the poem out loud beautifully and intuitively. The invitation and instructions were given. The creative teachers freely contributed to the rhyme-names for 11 HUPE branches by adding and writing their ideas on the 11 paper "T-shirts" hanging on the wall while having a coffee-break. Coming up with another 13 new rhyme-names!

As a gift, the present teachers kept the other handout, the one with space for their new "HUPE POEM" or "MY SUMMER POEM" or their own follow-up activity with their own students before summer holidays.

The results:

1 yabadoo crew HUPEDU

2 HUPESP speciality

3 very glad, add, add, add HUPEZAD

4 whoopee yippee, bubble tea, memory HUPERI

5 near-sea optimist HUPEIST

6 river4, eureka HUPEKA

7 zigzag, flag HUPEZAG,

8 brava, viva HUPEVA,

9 pro, glow, go-go-go HUPEZAGO.

10 super-bee, busy-bee, superb-be HUPESB

11 lege-land heroes HUPEOS.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it seems to prove the fact that "life-long learning", "creativity", and "problem-solving skills" are not reserved for "students only". Teachers are life-long learning students themselves.

Now, the HUPEzine is an opportunity to share the poem idea with other "HUPELAND characters".

A "HUPEOS" joint-venture "HUPELAND"

Long, long time ago
in a faraway HUPELAND
lived a yabadoo crew HUPEDU,
not far from a HUPESP speciality,

they frequently met
with a very glad, add, add, add HUPEZAD,
a whoopee yippee, bubble tea, memory HUPERI,
and a near-sea optimist HUPEIST.

The neigbouring river4, eureka HUPEKA
often visited a zigzag, flag HUPEZAG,
a brava, viva HUPEVA,
and a pro, glow, go-go-go HUPEZAGO.

But they all mostly enjoyed
rare meetings
with a super-bee, busy-bee, superb-be HUPESB
and the lege-land heroes HUPEOS.

Pause, Move, Learn: Brain Breaks that Recharge the EFL Classroom

Dajana Vukadin
OŠ Sveta Klara

Abstract

Maintaining students' attention throughout a lesson is an ongoing challenge in many classrooms, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where learners must simultaneously process new vocabulary, grammar, and communicative tasks. Brain breaks—short, structured pauses that interrupt intensive cognitive work—have been increasingly recognised as an effective strategy for improving concentration, motivation, and classroom atmosphere. Research in neuroscience and education suggests that brief periods of movement, creativity, or mindfulness can enhance cognitive performance and support learning. This article explores the theoretical foundations of brain breaks and offers practical suggestions for integrating them into the EFL classroom in ways that support both student well-being and language development.

Introduction

Every teacher recognises the moment when a classroom's energy begins to fade. Students who were attentive and engaged at the beginning of a lesson may gradually lose focus, start fidgeting, or become distracted. In language classrooms, where learners are constantly processing new linguistic input, this drop in concentration can happen surprisingly quickly.

One approach that has gained increasing attention in recent years is the use of **brain breaks**—short, purposeful pauses that allow students to step away from demanding cognitive work for a moment before returning to learning with renewed focus. These brief activities can involve physical movement, creativity, or playful language tasks. While they typically last only one to five minutes, their impact on classroom engagement can be significant.

In my own teaching, I first started experimenting with brain breaks when I noticed that even motivated students began to lose focus after a period of concentrated work. A short movement activity—sometimes as simple as a quick game of *Simon Says*—often changed the atmosphere in the classroom almost instantly. Students laughed, moved around for a minute or two, and then returned to their seats noticeably more alert and ready to continue working.

For teachers of English as a Foreign Language, brain breaks also offer an additional advantage: they can easily incorporate vocabulary, speaking, and listening practice while refreshing students' attention. When used thoughtfully, they become not a distraction from learning but a valuable part of it.

Why the Brain Needs a Break

Research in neuroscience suggests that sustained attention is limited. According to Medina (2014), learners' concentration tends to decline after approximately fifteen to twenty minutes of continuous cognitive effort. When students work beyond this point without a pause, mental fatigue can begin to affect their ability to process and retain new information.

Educational researchers have also emphasised the relationship between **movement and cognition**. Jensen (2005) explains that physical activity increases oxygen flow to the brain and supports processes related to memory and attention. Similarly, Ratey (2008) highlights how movement stimulates neurotransmitters associated with motivation, mood regulation, and cognitive performance.

In addition, studies suggest that physical activity supports the development of executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation (Diamond & Lee, 2011). These skills play an important role in successful learning, particularly in language classrooms where students must switch between listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

From this perspective, short breaks during lessons are not interruptions but opportunities for the brain to reset.

Benefits of Brain Breaks in the EFL Classroom

When implemented regularly, brain breaks can positively influence several aspects of classroom dynamics.

Improved Attention

Short pauses allow students to recover from cognitive fatigue and return to tasks with improved concentration.

Reduced Anxiety

Foreign language learning can be stressful, especially when students are asked to speak in front of peers. Playful activities create a relaxed atmosphere that encourages participation.

Increased Motivation

Games and movement help maintain students' enthusiasm and energy during lessons.

Better Classroom Behaviour

Research has shown that incorporating brief physical activity into classroom routines can increase on-task behaviour and reduce disruptions (Mahar et al., 2006).

Opportunities for Language Practice

Perhaps most importantly for EFL teachers, brain breaks can be adapted to reinforce vocabulary, grammar, and communicative skills. For instance, a quick game of Simon Says can be used to practise vocabulary through commands such as "touch something blue" or "jump three times." Activities like "Move if…" encourage students to respond physically to simple statements about themselves, while short miming or guessing games reinforce vocabulary in an engaging way.

During one lesson with younger learners, a quick mime activity unexpectedly turned into a lively guessing game where students began adding their own clues and gestures. What was intended as a two-minute break became a spontaneous speaking activity, with students eagerly using English to help their classmates guess the word.

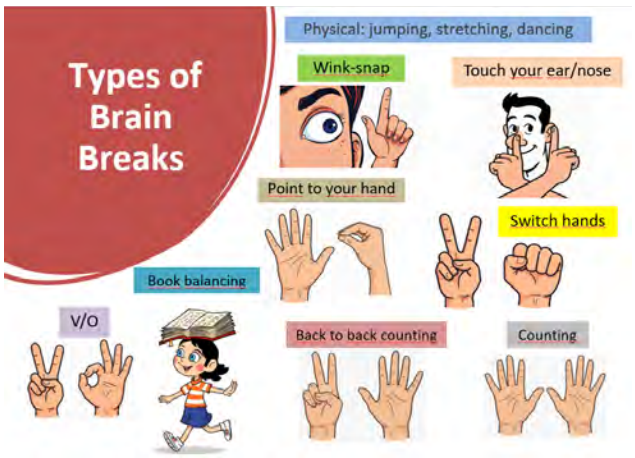
Types of Brain Breaks

Brain breaks can take many forms depending on the needs of the class and the objectives of the lesson.

Physical Brain Breaks

Movement-based activities are among the most effective ways to restore energy and attention. Even simple exercises lasting one or two minutes can help students refocus. These may include stretching, jumping, clapping patterns, or short dance movements.

Such activities activate the body and stimulate brain function, preparing students to re-engage with learning tasks.



Mindfulness Brain Breaks

Some situations call for calmer activities that help students relax and centre their attention. Mindfulness-based breaks can involve breathing exercises, brief guided visualisations, or short moments of silence.

Research suggests that mindfulness practices in schools can improve emotional regulation, concentration, and overall well-being.

Cognitive Brain Breaks

Cognitive brain breaks stimulate thinking in a playful way while offering a change from routine academic tasks. Riddles, word associations, tongue twisters, or quick counting challenges can activate students' curiosity and problem-solving skills.

Creative Brain Breaks

Creative activities encourage imagination and collaboration. Short storytelling tasks, drawing challenges, or simple acting games allow students to express themselves while practising language in a relaxed context.

When to Use Brain Breaks

Brain breaks are most effective when used strategically throughout the lesson. Teachers may introduce them after fifteen to twenty minutes of focused work, after completing a demanding activity, or during transitions between tasks.

They can also be particularly useful before introducing a new topic or when students appear tired or distracted.

Most brain breaks should last between **one and five minutes**. Their purpose is not to replace instruction but to refresh attention so that students can continue learning more effectively.

As students become familiar with these activities, they quickly recognise them as part of the classroom routine, making transitions smooth and efficient.

Practical Considerations

Teachers who wish to integrate brain breaks into their lessons may benefit from a few simple guidelines.

Activities should be appropriate for students' age and language level. Younger learners often respond well to movement-based activities, while older students may enjoy puzzles, creative challenges, or short discussions.

Variety is also important. Alternating between physical, cognitive, and creative activities helps maintain students' interest and prevents the routine from becoming predictable.

Finally, clear instructions and established routines help ensure that brain breaks remain purposeful and manageable within the classroom setting.

Challenges and Possible Solutions

Although brain breaks are relatively simple to implement, teachers may encounter a few practical challenges when introducing them into their classroom routines.

One common concern is the **lack of time**. Teachers often worry that short breaks will reduce the time available for instruction. However, experience and research suggest that brief pauses can actually make lessons more efficient by restoring students' concentration and reducing off-task behaviour.

Another challenge may involve **classroom management**. Movement-based activities can become noisy or chaotic if expectations are not clearly established. Setting simple rules and practising routines can help ensure that brain breaks remain structured and purposeful.

Some students may also show **initial reluctance** to participate, particularly older learners who may feel self-conscious about movement activities. In such cases, it can be helpful to begin with quieter or cognitive activities before gradually introducing more active ones.

With consistent use, most students quickly begin to look forward to these short pauses and recognise them as a natural part of the lesson.

Conclusion

Brain breaks represent a simple yet powerful strategy for supporting student engagement and learning in the EFL classroom. By incorporating short moments of movement, creativity, or reflection into lessons, teachers can help students refresh their attention and remain focused on learning tasks.

Beyond improving concentration and classroom behaviour, brain breaks also create opportunities for language practice and meaningful interaction. When thoughtfully integrated into lesson planning, these brief pauses contribute to a more dynamic and supportive learning environment.

Sometimes, giving the brain a brief moment to pause is exactly what students need to move learning forward.

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Buzz'n'Spell 2026

Josipa Bičanić, učiteljica mentorica
OŠ Đakovački Selci
Ivana Hrastović Mandarić, učiteljica izvrsna savjetnica
OŠ Vladimir Nazor, Đakovo

Early March 2026 brought a welcome change to the usual school routine in Đakovo. The town hosted its first inter-school English spelling competition, *Buzz'n'Spell*, bringing together pupils from grades 3 to 8 for a day that was as lively as it was educational. It was a reminder that language learning can step beyond the classroom and become something shared, dynamic, and memorable. For many students, it was also their first opportunity to use English in front of a wider audience, which made the experience both exciting and slightly intimidating.

The first *Buzz'n'Spell* in Đakovo was organised through the collaboration of local schools, including Primary School Đakovački Selci and Primary School Vladimir Nazor Đakovo, with the support of the city and several partners. The involvement of the Profil Klett publishing house added a professional dimension to the event by providing certificates, accreditations, symbolic gifts for all participants, and awards for the most successful competitors. Their contribution not only rewarded students' efforts but also reinforced the sense that their participation mattered and was recognised beyond the classroom context.

Equally important was the support of the City of Đakovo, which helped cover the costs of food and refreshments, and the venue itself, which proved to be well suited for an event of this kind. Behind the scenes, members of the judging panel carried out their roles professionally, while student volunteers from local secondary schools played a key role in the logistical organisation. Their involvement also gave them a chance to contribute to the community and support younger learners. The success of the event was therefore not the result of a single effort, but of a co-ordinated community initiative.

The size of the event shows how meaningful it was. Around 70 students from 12 primary schools took part, supported by about 25 mentors, as well as secondary school teachers and student volunteers who helped organise everything. The high number of participants highlights a clear interest in this kind of activity, particularly those that bring energy and interaction into language learning. It also suggests that teachers are eager for opportunities that allow their students to apply what they have learned in more authentic and engaging ways.

The atmosphere throughout the competition was both stimulating and competitive, but also supportive. Students stepped forward one by one, facing not only the challenge of spelling unfamiliar or demanding words but also the pressure of performing publicly. Every participant who stood before the panel showed a remarkable level of courage. For many young learners, speaking in a foreign language in front of others is a significant challenge, and events like this create a rare space where that challenge becomes a shared experience rather than an individual struggle. The presence of peers going through the same experience seemed to make the situation less intimidating and more encouraging.

Students were asked to listen carefully to English words and spell them aloud. Yet, as anyone present could observe, the event quickly proved to be much more than a test of vocabulary. It became an opportunity for students to demonstrate focus, confidence, and composure in front of an audience—skills that are just as important as linguistic accuracy but often much harder to nurture in everyday classroom settings. The format also required quick thinking and concentration, as students had only a short time to process each word before responding.

From a teaching perspective, the value of a spelling competition like *Buzz'n'Spell* goes far beyond correct or incorrect answers. Spelling in English requires learners to connect sound and form, often navigating inconsistencies between pronunciation and orthography. In this process, students develop phonological awareness, reinforce vocabulary, and practise attentive listening. However, what makes the experience particularly meaningful is the context in which these skills are applied. Unlike typical classroom exercises, the competition setting introduces an element of unpredictability and excitement, which can significantly increase student motivation and engagement.

At the same time, the competition format encourages the development of personal and social skills. Students learn to manage nervousness, remain focused under pressure, and accept both success and mistakes as part of the learning process. The fact that all participants were acknowledged and congratulated highlights an important pedagogical message: participation itself has value. As the organisers emphasised, simply standing in front of an audience and demonstrating one's knowledge is already a significant achievement. This approach helps create a more positive attitude towards learning and reduces the fear of making mistakes.

For teachers, events like *Buzz'n'Spell* offer a useful reminder that learning does not need to be confined to traditional formats. Activities that introduce elements of performance, collaboration, and friendly competition can transform how students perceive language learning. Rather than seeing English as a subject to be tested, students begin to experience it as a skill they can actively use. This shift in perspective can have long-term effects

on motivation and confidence, especially for those students who may not always stand out in more traditional classroom settings.

Perhaps the most encouraging outcome of the competition was the reaction of both students and mentors. The high level of interest, the positive feedback, and the visible enthusiasm among participants all suggest that *Buzz'n'Spell* has the potential to grow into a tradition. Many students expressed a desire to take part again, while teachers recognised the value of such experiences in supporting language development. The organisers themselves expressed the hope that this was only the beginning—that the competition will continue to develop in the coming years, further promoting a love of English and providing students with opportunities to challenge themselves in new ways.

In an educational context where maintaining student engagement is an ongoing challenge, initiatives like this demonstrate that relatively simple ideas can have a powerful impact when implemented thoughtfully. A spelling competition may not seem revolutionary, but when it is embedded in a supportive environment, enriched by collaboration, and aligned with clear pedagogical goals, it becomes something far more meaningful. It shows that motivation often grows from experience rather than instruction alone.

Buzz'n'Spell reminds us that language learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about building confidence, resilience, and a willingness to communicate. For the students who took part, the experience will likely be remembered not just for the words they spelled, but for the moment they stepped forward, took a risk, and succeeded in doing something that once seemed difficult. For teachers, it serves as a simple but inspiring example of how to make learning both effective and lasting, while also strengthening the sense of community within and between schools.

Looking ahead, the success of the first *Buzz'n'Spell* in Đakovo opens the door to something even more meaningful—the possibility of building a lasting tradition. With such a strong response from both students and teachers, it is easy to imagine this competition becoming a regular event, one that future generations of pupils will look forward to and prepare for with enthusiasm. Establishing continuity would not only strengthen the impact of the competition but also create a sense of belonging within the school community, giving students something to aspire to each year.

By continuing to organise events like this, schools can offer students valuable opportunities to use English in authentic, motivating contexts. Just as importantly, they can inspire younger learners who watch their peers participate, encouraging them to take part in the years to come. In this way, *Buzz'n'Spell* has the potential to grow beyond a single event and become a source of ongoing motivation, confidence, and connection, both within schools and across the wider educational community.

Initiatives like this can play an important role in shaping how students experience language learning—not as an obligation, but as something they actively engage in and enjoy. And perhaps that is the most important outcome of all: creating learning experiences that students not only remember, but look forward to repeating, year after year.

Međuškolsko natjecanje u sricanju iz engleskog jezika

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From Page to Screen to Student Voice: Reimagining Literature through Film, Media and International Collaboration

Ivana Opačak
Ekonomsko birotehnička škola

Abstract

This article explores how literature can be revitalised in the English language classroom through the integration of film, media literacy, creative reinterpretation and international collaboration. Using Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as an example, the article demonstrates how combining literary texts with film excerpts, discussion of social themes, digital creation and collaborative learning can motivate students to read more actively and engage more deeply with literary works. Particular emphasis is placed on student-centred activities such as analysing film scenes, reinterpreting poetry, creating podcasts or digital media products and reflecting on universal themes such as dreams, identity and social equality. The approach encourages students to move beyond passive reading towards creative and critical engagement with literature. By connecting literary analysis with contemporary media practices and intercultural dialogue - especially within the context of Black History Month - teachers can foster motivation, intercultural awareness and key 21st-century skills in the ELT classroom.

Tips for teachers – motivating students to read, think and create with *A Raisin in the Sun* (during Black History Month)

One of the questions many (not only) English teachers ask themselves today is simple but challenging: How can we motivate students to read literature more actively and meaningfully?

In a time when students are surrounded by visual media, short-form content and digital communication, traditional approaches to literary analysis often fail to capture their attention. However, literature does not need to compete with modern media – it can collaborate with it. By integrating film, media literacy, creative reinterpretation and international collaboration, literary texts can become powerful tools for developing students' language skills, creativity and critical thinking.

An inspiring example is the **use of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun***, one of the most influential American plays of the twentieth century, explored in the **international eTwinning project *Raisin(g) in the Sun – Teaching Dreams*** (September 2025 – March 2026).

For classroom implementation, an **open educational resource** was created: the **learning scenario *Raisin(g) in the Sun – Teaching Dreams***, designed for six English lessons, published in the Croatian educational repository Edutorij. The experience offers valuable ideas that teachers can adapt in their own classrooms to motivate students to read more deeply and engage more actively with literature.

Using literature as a bridge between cultures and generations, students may explore themes of dreams, identity, family relationships, racial and gender equality, while reflecting on the meaning of the "American Dream" in the 1950s and today. Through literary and film analysis, they may examine the deeper meaning of the play and the film adaptation while also reflecting on their own dreams and the ways in which both individuals and societies shape them.

Start with Film: Lowering the Barrier to Reading

For many students, approaching a dramatic text from the 1950s (like *A Raisin in the Sun*) may initially seem challenging. Film can serve as a powerful entry point into literature. Showing selected scenes from the film adaptation before reading the play allows students to become familiar with the characters, relationships and central conflicts. Instead of facing a dense text first, students begin with visual storytelling that sparks curiosity and emotional engagement.

After watching a key scene, students can discuss questions such as:

- What conflicts do you notice between the characters?
- What dreams does each character seem to have?
- Which character do you sympathise with most?

Once students are emotionally invested, reading excerpts from the play (as well as achieving learning outcomes – students interpreting audiovisual and written texts to understand themes, characters and conflicts) becomes more meaningful.

Use Literature to Ask Real Questions

One of the strengths of A Raisin in the Sun lies in its universal themes: dreams, family expectations, identity, inequality and social mobility. Rather than focusing solely on plot or vocabulary, teachers can invite students to explore questions that connect literature to their own lives:

- What does the "American Dream" mean today?
- Can dreams ever be postponed without consequences?
- How do family expectations and social background shape our choices and our dreams?

A particularly powerful activity is analysing **Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem*** (***What Happens to a Dream Deferred?***), which inspired the title of Hansberry's play. Students reflect on the famous metaphor and the powerful question(s): *What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore – / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar over – / like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?*

Inspired by Hughes's poetry, students may create **modern adaptations of the poem**, connecting dreams with contemporary realities such as technology, social media and global uncertainty (reflecting on the question: ***What happens to dreams in the age of social media?*** *What happens to dreams offline, when technology fails or opportunities disappear?*). Students can thus achieve valuable learning outcomes – critically analyse literary themes and connect them with contemporary social issues.

Encourage Creative Reinterpretation

Students are often more motivated when they are not only readers, but creators. Instead of writing traditional essays and book/film reviews, teachers can invite students to reinterpret literary texts through creative formats such as podcasts, short video trailers, digital comics, blackout poetry, letters written to fictional characters, speculative timelines imagining what happens after the story ends… For example, students can create a podcast discussion between characters from the play or produce a movie trailer presenting the story (part) to modern audiences.

This approach transforms literature from something to analyse into something to reimagine and recreate, encouraging students to creatively reinterpret literary texts using different media and narrative perspectives.

Integrate Digital Creation and Media Literacy

Digital tools can significantly enhance literary engagement when used thoughtfully. Platforms for collaborative writing, digital walls, podcast production or interactive presentations enable students to transform their interpretations into authentic digital products.

Students might:

- generate **visual representations of** (characters' or personal) **dreams** using AI-assisted tools – this collaborative TaskCards digital wall might be inspiring;
- create **collaborative presentations analysing and interpreting scenes** – such is this collection of short presentations prepared for an international meeting;
- build **interactive digital collections** of quotes or (blackout) poems – the collaborative podcast produced by an international team (a creative reinterpretation of the play's Act I, Scene II), the interactive Genially image – a visually engaging overview of the project outcomes, or the collaborative blackout poetry collection, inspired by selected pages from the original play, may be inspiring…

Such activities combine literary interpretation with media literacy, helping students use digital tools to collaborate, create and present interpretations of literary works and understand how meaning can be communicated through different formats.

Promote International Collaboration

One of the most motivating elements for students is the opportunity to communicate and work with peers from other countries, for example on TwinSpace pages, TwinBoards and in Forum Threads (within Erasmus/eTwinning projects on the European School Education Platform/ESEP). International collaboration encourages students to see literature from multiple cultural perspectives.

The Story of Collaboration Beyond the Classroom – in the Context of the New Education System Reform

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Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola

Abstract

This article presents an example of long-term interdisciplinary collaboration between two teachers at the Secondary School of Economics in Slavonski Brod within the context of the ongoing education reform and the introduction of modular teaching. By combining ELT and law-related subjects through the CLIL approach, the authors demonstrate how language competences and legal literacy can be developed simultaneously through project-based and experiential learning. Their collaboration, implemented through eTwinning and EPAS activities, encourages students to apply legal knowledge in authentic international communication contexts while developing critical thinking, civic awareness and social responsibility.

The article highlights several innovative workshops and peer-teaching activities focused on human rights, children's rights, gender equality, labour rights and European cooperation. Special emphasis is placed on the educational value of peer learning, intercultural dialogue and simulations of real-life legal and diplomatic situations. The authors also reflect on the professional growth resulting from interdisciplinary teamwork and on the importance of collaboration beyond traditional classroom boundaries. The paper argues that such human and professional synergy represents a sustainable model for modern education, capable of preparing students for the challenges of a globalized and interconnected society.

Article

A few years ago, when two teachers first sat down to discuss **how to connect English language teaching with the group of law-related subjects** at the Secondary School of Economics in Slavonski Brod, they knew they didn't want just another "box-ticking" interdisciplinary lesson. They wanted to break down the invisible walls between their classrooms and show their students that, in the real world, knowledge does not come in separate compartments. Today, in light of the ongoing reform of the education system and the introduction of modular teaching, looking back at the many eTwinning / EPAS project activities, workshops and lessons they have conducted together, they can proudly say: "We have created something bigger than ourselves."

The Synergy of Language and Law

The collaboration of Ivana Opačak, a teacher of Croatian and English, and Ivan Devčić, a teacher of law subjects with a degree in law, is based on a simple yet powerful idea: the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) method. While one of the teachers monitors students' language development and their ability to express themselves in English, the other ensures that every spoken word is legally grounded and accurate. In their classroom, English is not just a subject to be learned; it is a tool that enables students to unlock the world of national and European law, labour legislation and human rights. Without legal knowledge, language remains superficial; without language skills, law remains confined within local boundaries; without collaboration, justice loses the breadth, adaptability and shared understanding needed to address a globalized world.

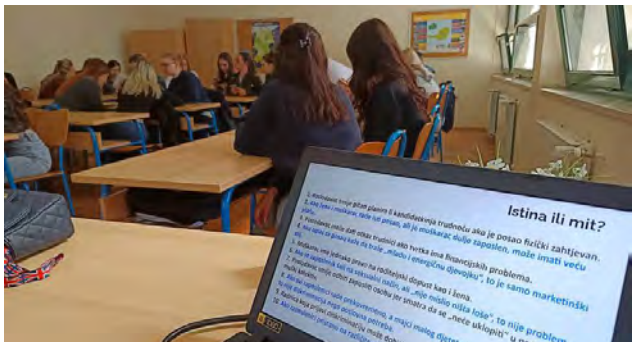
What makes their collaboration special is the process that happens "behind the scenes." Planning such lessons requires hours of joint work beyond their regular teaching

load. They often discuss how to translate complex legal concepts such as "the right to an effective remedy" or "direct discrimination" into English without losing legal precision or overwhelming students. This dialogue between them as professionals continuously enriches their work – one of them has begun to view teaching methodology through the lens of communication, while the other has become more aware of the legal nuances carried by every word in a formal context.

Innovative Workshops as Bridges of Understanding

The two teachers are often asked what this looks like in practice. For example, during Women's Month (March 2026), they designed a workshop titled "**Rights, Not Only Flowers**". In law classes, they analyzed national legislation and European directives on gender equality, empowerment and the importance of women's voices in society, while in English classes they transformed those same concepts into arguments for international debates. Watching students discuss gender equality with such passion and precision with their international (eTwinning / EPAS) peers was/is their greatest reward – that was the moment they saw their collaboration producing tangible results. Through collaborative activities and guided conversation, students explored real-life challenges related to discrimination and unequal opportunities in Croatia, Greece, Spain and Romania, as well as the progress made in protecting women's rights across Europe. Students expressed their ideas openly, shared personal perspectives, and critically analysed social norms, demonstrating empathy and awareness of the importance of equality. The activities encouraged them to become more informed, responsible and active young citizens who understand the value of respect, inclusion and equal rights for all.

As coordinators of the European Parliament Ambassador School (EPAS) programme, the two teachers strive to simulate real-life situations from the world of diplomacy and law. The peak of that synergy was their meeting with students and teachers from the Romanian school Liceul Tehnologic "Lazăr Edeleanu" (within the project Europe2Go) on April 2, 2026. During the workshop "**(How) Can We Unite Europe?**", organized in the Media Literacy Week, Croatian and Romanian students reflected on the meaning of peace and the role of media in shaping public opinion, discussing the presence of conflict and instability in today's Europe and the world. They participated in a simulation of international cooperation, taking on the roles of different European regions facing challenges such as shortages of food, water, energy and infrastructure. Through teamwork, negotiation and decision-making, they attempted to reach common agreements and develop solutions together. The activity ultimately emphasized the importance of dialogue, trust, cooperation and mutual understanding in addressing shared European and global challenges.



By connecting classrooms across borders, the initiative demonstrated how education can bring young people together and encourage them to actively contribute to a more united and inclusive Europe. Croatian and Romanian teachers stepped aside and observed their students confidently using legal terminology in English to protect their interests. In those moments, they were no longer just lecturers – they became mentors, guiding students through experiential learning.

Peer Teaching and Social Responsibility

The two teachers also place great importance on the topic of **Children's Rights**. On the occasion of International Human Rights Day (in December 2025), Junior EP Ambassadors – the members of the local Youth Parliament – led peer-teaching workshops titled "Children's Rights – from a Child's Perspective" at their school and at the local Youth Center. This chain of knowledge the two teachers initiated is their greatest success. Students who once hesitantly translated simple sentences started confidently citing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, critically analysing its implementation in modern society. This was/is not just learning for school – it was/is learning for life.

One of their favourite project activities was "**Who Takes Care of Those Who Care?**" They decided to step outside

their comfort zone and take their students to a Secondary medical school in Slavonski Brod. It was a unique challenge: preparing them to become instructors to their peers in a different educational sector. Together, they mentored them to explain labour rights and the importance of workplace safety to future healthcare professionals. This approach fosters empathy and a sense of social responsibility, which they consider just as important as (if not more than) grades.

A Digital Legacy and a Vision for the Future

The two teachers are proud that they have not kept their collaboration to themselves. All their joint learning scenarios – from children's rights workshops to civic literacy – have been published in the national repository Edutorij. They aim to encourage other teachers to embark on this path, as they believe interdisciplinarity is the only right direction for modern education. They are aware that the system often does not recognise the additional effort required for this type of teaching, but the feedback they receive every day from their students is more valuable than any bureaucratic confirmation.

For them, collaboration is not just about planning a shared lesson in a timetable. It is a daily exchange of ideas, continuous learning and mutual professional respect. Their communication often continues long after classes end – they share links to new European court rulings, interesting eTwinning projects, or digital tools that could enrich their next lesson. It is precisely this passion for continuous development that has kept their collaboration alive for years.

When they see their former students confidently stepping into the labour market or higher education, equipped with the skills they have helped them develop, they know that every hour of planning and every joint project was worth the effort. They do not just teach English or law – they educate informed, critical and socially aware young people ready to face the challenges of the modern world. That is their mission and their favourite story – one they continue to write with every new school day, convinced that the future of education lies in this kind of human and professional synergy.

Authors: Ivan Devčić & Ivana Opačak

For me, equality means
that girls and boys have the same chances in life.
It means we can choose the same jobs,
study the same subjects
and share responsibilities at home,
at school and at work.
Equality is not only about giving flowers
on Women's Day.
It is about respect, fair treatment
and listening to women's opinions every day.
I think real equality means
that everyone is valued the same,
no matter if they are a woman or a man.

How Young Learners Learn Grammar - A Practical Guide for Primary EFL Teachers

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A Note on the Research Behind This Guide

This guide grows out of an ongoing research initiative involving teachers and students from across Croatia. In the first round of the study, a questionnaire was administered to approximately 300 seventh-grade students across Croatian primary schools, with their teachers participating as partners in the data collection process. The survey was designed with a clear practical goal: to develop a validated instrument that teachers can use to identify the grammar-learning profiles of their students — that is, to understand how individual learners approach, experience, and respond to grammar instruction, so that teaching strategies can be meaningfully adapted to those differences.

Analysis of the first round of results revealed important insights — but also indicated that certain items in the survey required refinement before the instrument could be considered fully valid and reliable. This is a normal and healthy part of developing any rigorous research tool: the first cycle of data collection is as much about improving the instrument as it is about gathering findings. Accordingly, a second round of the survey is currently being prepared, incorporating revisions informed by the initial analysis.

Once validated, this survey will be a practical tool for classroom teachers. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach to grammar teaching, it will help teachers see who is sitting in front of them — which learners rely on rules, which absorb language through use, which are anxious about grammar, and which are confident — and respond accordingly. The theoretical foundations of that instrument, and the pedagogical thinking it is built on, are what this guide sets out to explain.

How Young Learners Learn Grammar

A Practical Guide for Primary EFL Teachers

In preparing this guide, the following key works in applied linguistics and second language acquisition research were consulted: Ellis (2006), whose synthesis of research on implicit and explicit knowledge remains foundational to understanding the distinction between these two types of learning; Norris and Ortega (2000), whose quantitative meta-analysis of L2 instruction provides the most robust evidence base for the effectiveness of explicit grammar teaching; Hrgovic (2012), whose study of Croatian EFL learners' beliefs about grammar offers directly relevant insight into the attitudes and experiences of students in our educational context; and Almazloum (2018), whose qualitative investigation of learner beliefs highlights the complex, multidimensional way in which learners conceptualise grammar. Together, these sources inform both the theoretical framing and the practical recommendations offered throughout this guide.

1. Who Is Sitting in Front of You?

Before you can decide how to teach grammar, it helps to pause and really think about your learners — not as small adults, but as people whose minds work in a fundamentally different way from older students or adult language learners. Children in primary school are not simply less experienced; they are cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally distinct, and that distinction is both a beautiful challenge and a tremendous opportunity. As Hrgovic (2012) and Almazloum (2018) both observe, learners' attitudes towards grammar — their beliefs about what

grammar is, what it is for, and how it should be taught — are formed early and are closely linked to their broader classroom experiences.

Cognitively, children between the ages of 6 and 11 are in what developmental psychologist Jean Piaget described as the concrete operational stage. They think in terms of things they can see, touch, do, and experience. Abstract explanations — the kind that begin with 'The present perfect is formed by...' — land with a dull thud on a mind that is still building its capacity for abstract reasoning. This does not mean children cannot learn grammar. It means they learn it best when it is embedded in concrete, meaningful, enjoyable activity rather than presented as a system of rules to be memorised and analysed. Ellis (2006) similarly notes that young learners have a pronounced reliance on implicit learning mechanisms, making input-rich, experience-based instruction particularly well-suited to this age group.

Emotionally, young learners are strongly driven by the need for safety and belonging. They thrive in classrooms where they feel encouraged, where mistakes are normal, and where the atmosphere is playful rather than pressured. This has enormous implications for grammar teaching: a child who feels anxious about being corrected in front of the class is a child whose language acquisition is being actively blocked. Hrgovic (2012) found that Croatian EFL learners who reported more positive attitudes toward grammar also tended to be more successful learners — a finding that underscores the tight connection between emotional experience and grammatical development. Motivation in this age group is largely intrinsic and immediate — they are not learning English to pass an exam three years from now. They are learning it because it is fun, because the teacher smiles, because the song is catchy, or because their friend did it too.

Key insight: Primary school children are natural language acquirers. They do not need to understand a rule to follow it — they need to encounter it often enough, in meaningful contexts, to internalise it (Ellis, 2006). Your classroom can be, in many ways, a miniature language environment.

What this means practically is that your job as a primary EFL teacher is not primarily to explain grammar, but to create the conditions in which grammar is absorbed. That shift in perspective — from transmitter of rules to designer of language-rich experiences — is at the heart of effective teaching with young learners.

2. Two Kinds of Knowledge: Knowing and Doing

One of the most useful distinctions in language teaching is the difference between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, a distinction articulated with particular clarity by Ellis (2006). Understanding this distinction will help you make sense of why your learners can sometimes recite a rule perfectly and then completely fail to apply it in speech — and why that is entirely normal.

Declarative Knowledge: Knowing That

Declarative knowledge is factual, conscious, and statable. It is the knowledge you can put into words. When a learner can tell you that 'in English, we add -s to the verb in the third person singular present simple,' that is declarative knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that grammar books are full of, the kind tested by fill-in-the-blank exercises, and the kind most easily taught through explicit instruction.

Declarative knowledge is genuinely valuable — it allows learners to monitor their output, to self-correct in writing, and to approach new grammatical challenges analytically. However, it has a crucial limitation: knowing a rule does not automatically translate into being able to use it fluently. As Ellis (2006) notes, the relationship between explicit, declarative knowledge and implicit, procedural competence is not straightforward — the two can develop largely independently of each other. The rule must be practised so extensively that it becomes automatic, almost instinctive. Until then, relying on declarative knowledge during real-time speaking places enormous demands on a learner's attention, slowing them down and often freezing them up entirely.

Procedural Knowledge: Knowing How

Procedural knowledge is what underlies fluent, automatic language use. It is the kind of knowledge you cannot easily put into words — just as a skilled cyclist cannot easily explain what they do with their weight when pedaling. In language, procedural knowledge is what allows a speaker to produce grammatically correct utterances without consciously running through rules. It is built up gradually through meaningful practice, repetition, and — crucially — through genuine communication (Ellis, 2006).

For young learners, procedural knowledge is the goal. And the good news is that children are remarkably efficient at building it, particularly when they are immersed in language-rich, low-stress environments. Their brains are still highly plastic, and their capacity for implicit learning — picking up patterns without being taught them explicitly — is genuinely extraordinary. Research consistently shows that children outperform older learners in

implicit learning tasks, even when those older learners have more explicit grammatical knowledge (Ellis, 2006; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Think of it this way: declarative knowledge is knowing the recipe; procedural knowledge is being able to cook the dish without looking at it. Your primary learners are building the kitchen skills, not memorising the cookbook (Ellis, 2006).

3. Explicit and Implicit Grammar Teaching

The debate between explicit and implicit grammar instruction has been one of the most lively in applied linguistics for decades. The good news is that both approaches have their place in the primary EFL classroom — and the most effective teachers tend to use them in a thoughtful, balanced combination.

Implicit Grammar Teaching: Learning Without Noticing

Implicit grammar teaching means creating conditions in which learners absorb grammatical patterns through exposure and meaningful use, without being asked to consciously focus on or analyse those patterns. Songs, chants, stories, games, role plays, and rich classroom routines are all powerful vehicles for implicit grammar learning. This approach closely mirrors the way children acquire their first language (Ellis, 2006), and Almazloum (2018) found that even older EFL learners valued and benefited from exposure-based, implicit learning opportunities alongside explicit instruction.

When you sing a song that uses the present continuous ten times in two minutes ('What are you doing? I am jumping!'), your learners are being exposed to a grammatical structure in a way that is entirely non-threatening and naturally repetitive. Over time, that repetition builds a mental template for the structure that operates below conscious awareness. They have not 'learned the present continuous' — they have absorbed it. This is precisely how children acquire their first language, and it is a mechanism that remains highly active in the primary years.

Implicit teaching is particularly well-suited to primary classrooms because it aligns with how young learners actually process language. It keeps the affective filter — the emotional barrier that rises when learners feel anxious or put on the spot — firmly lowered. It also harnesses children's extraordinary gift for pattern recognition. Research consistently shows that children outperform older learners in implicit learning tasks, even when those older learners have more explicit grammatical knowledge (Ellis, 2006; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Hrgovic, 2012).

Explicit Grammar Teaching: Making the Pattern Visible

Explicit grammar teaching involves drawing learners' conscious attention to a grammatical form, naming it, and helping them understand how it works. In primary school, this does not need to look like a university grammar lecture. It can be as simple and brief as: 'Look! When we talk about things that are happening right now, we use -ing. What is the teddy bear doing? He is... sleeping!'

Explicit instruction becomes more meaningful as children move through primary school and their capacity for metalinguistic awareness — the ability to think and talk about language as an object — gradually develops. By the age of 9 or 10, many children can benefit from brief, clear explanations of grammar rules, especially when those explanations are immediately followed by engaging practice. Norris and Ortega (2000), synthesising findings from dozens of studies, found that explicit teaching methods tend to produce stronger and more durable gains in grammatical accuracy than implicit methods alone — particularly for complex or 'difficult-to-notice' structures. This finding is consistent with Almazloum's (2018) observation that learners themselves often recognise the value of explicit instruction, especially when it is balanced with opportunities for communicative use.

The key word for primary teachers is brief. Explicit attention to grammar should be a spark, not a lecture — a moment of illumination that helps learners notice what they have already been encountering implicitly. As Hrgovic (2012) noted in her study of Croatian EFL learners, students who receive explicit explanations report greater confidence in their grammatical understanding — but this benefit is only realised when explicit moments are followed by meaningful practice. Then, quickly and enthusiastically, return to communicative activity where that structure gets used.

A practical balance: Let implicit learning do the heavy lifting through stories, songs, and play (Ellis, 2006). Use explicit moments strategically — a short, clear explanation, a fun discovery task, a quick colour-coded pattern on the board — to help learners notice what they are already absorbing (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Then move straight back into meaningful use.

4. Putting It Together in Your Classroom

Understanding the theory is a wonderful beginning. Translating it into Monday morning practice is where the real art lies. Here are some principles to carry with you.

Start with Exposure, Not Explanation

Introduce any new grammatical structure through rich, comprehensible input before you ever name or explain it (Ellis, 2006). Tell a story that uses the past simple throughout. Play a game that requires the comparative form. Sing a chant packed with questions in the present perfect. Let learners' brains begin the work of pattern recognition before you bring the conscious mind in to assist.

Design for Noticing

When the time feels right — and it need not be long after initial exposure — create a brief moment that invites learners to notice the pattern. You might draw their attention to a recurring form on the board, use colour to highlight endings, or ask a simple question: 'What do you notice about these sentences?' This is explicit instruction in its most learner-centred form. Norris and Ortega (2000) describe this kind of guided attention to form as particularly effective when it follows meaningful input. You are not pouring rules into passive recipients; you are guiding curious minds toward a discovery they are already poised to make.

Prioritise Meaningful Practice Over Drilling

Once learners have encountered a structure and had it gently illuminated, the path to procedural knowledge runs through meaningful, enjoyable practice — not through mechanical drilling. Role plays, information-gap activities, guessing games, collaborative storytelling, and creative tasks all require learners to use grammatical forms in genuinely communicative ways. Ellis (2006) argues that it is precisely this kind of communicative, task-based engagement that drives the conversion of declarative knowledge into procedural fluency.

Welcome Error as Evidence of Learning

When a child says 'He go to school every day,' that error is not a failure — it is evidence that a grammatical system is being actively constructed. The child has grasped the meaning of the present simple and is applying it consistently; they simply have not yet fully internalised the third-person -s rule. Respond to the meaning, recast naturally ('Oh, he goes to school every day? Does he like it?'), and trust the process. Over-correction, particularly in front of peers, is more likely to raise the affective filter and slow learning than to accelerate it — a point well illustrated by Hrgovic's (2012) finding that Croatian learners' attitudes toward grammar deteriorate when classroom experiences feel pressured or punitive.

Know Your Students, Adjust Your Balance

The balance between implicit and explicit teaching is not fixed. A class of energetic seven-year-olds may thrive almost entirely on implicit, activity-based learning with only the lightest grammatical metalanguage. A class of ten-year-olds who have been learning English for four years and are developing metalinguistic awareness may welcome slightly more explicit work — and may even enjoy the challenge of discovering rules collaboratively. Almazloum (2018) found that learners hold nuanced views about grammar: they value both implicit exposure and explicit explanation, and they appreciate teachers who are responsive to their individual needs. Watch your learners. Their engagement, their errors, and their enthusiasm are your most reliable diagnostic tools.

You do not need to choose between explicit and implicit teaching. You need to be a thoughtful, responsive teacher who draws on both — using implicit immersion as the foundation (Ellis, 2006), and explicit guidance as the scaffolding that helps learners build higher and faster (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Trust your learners' extraordinary capacity to absorb language, and trust yourself to create the conditions in which that capacity can flourish.

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From extra lesson to published writers

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Abstract

"English jouralists" was an extracurricular activity used to provide students with an authentic language task, at the same time teaching them the skill of writing articles for the school magazine. The teacher took the students to workshops and lectures given in English at a public library in Zagreb and subsequently guided them through a structured process of writing and refining their articles. Peer collaboration and critical thinking played an important role in imporving drafts of their writing. Students were able to improve their listening skills, note-taking skills, and became more confident in using English. The awareness that their work would be published under their names made the experience authentic and relevant.

Introduction

When I was given a task to have an extracurricular activity – ***English journalists*** two school years ago, I didn't know what to do with the students. Up until then, no one had done this before at the school I worked at. I had to plan what the students would do for the upcoming school year and think about the activities they would do.

From research to a contact

I started searching the internet to come up with some ideas. I thought it might be a good idea to visit some embassies as a school group. So, I started opening the websites of the embassies in the Republic of Croatia and came across something interesting on the website of the American Embassy in the Republic of Croatia. They have American Spaces in Croatia. There are currently five American Corners in Croatia: Osijek, Rijeka, Vukovar, Zadar, Karlovac, and two Affiliate American Corners – Zagreb, Koprivnica. The Corners are organised in public libraries. They provide welcoming environments where visitors can connect and learn about the United States through programs and lectures, as well as through books, movies, and magazines. Membership is free and open to all.

I have contacted a person who runs the Affiliate American Corner Zagreb and asked about the lectures/workshops she organizes in the library and asked her to contact me when they would have something interesting for my students and that is how it all started. She told me that they would have a few lectures/workshops in English language during the school year.

From a contact to an idea

Then I had an idea, my students can visit the library and write articles about it for the school newspaper which is published at the end of every school year.

As English teachers, we often ask ourselves a simple but important question: How can we make language learning meaningful? I think I found one very practical answer—by creating an extracurricular English class focused on journalistic writing. While regular classroom instruction provides the necessary foundation, extracurricular activities can open additional space for creativity, curiosity, and authentic communication.

Once a week, a group of motivated students stayed after their regular lessons to take part in an additional English class. The aim was clear: to learn how to write articles for our school newspaper and experience the process of real publication. What began as a small project soon became one of the most rewarding teaching experiences of the year and for the students it developed into a rich learning experience that combined language practice, research, collaboration, and creativity.

A visit to the library

The person that organizes American Corner Zagreb has sent me an e-mail with the timetable and the name of a lecture/workshop and I have organized the visit with my students.

We visited the library three times that school year. First time it was an interview with an author of the book *Knight with a Heart*, second time it was a lecture about Palo Alto University and the third time was a presentation of the graphic novel *Leina priča*.

After returning from the library, students began transforming their notes into structured articles. This stage required them to:

- marize key information
- paraphrase ideas
- express personal reflections
- dev

We followed a process-writing approach, including drafting, peer feedback, and revision. According to Flower and Hayes (1981), writing is a recursive process that develops through planning, reviewing, and rewriting. The students experienced this firsthand as they refined their texts step by step.

The process was both challenging and rewarding. Students discovered that writing an article requires not only language skills but also critical thinking and careful organization.

Peer collaboration also played an essential role. Students discussed their ideas with one another, shared drafts, and offered constructive feedback. This type of collaborative learning reflects the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the importance of social interaction in the development of cognitive and linguistic skills. Working together allowed students to learn from one another's strengths and perspectives.

The editing and revision process

Before the articles were ready for publication, students participated in several rounds of revision. Editing sessions focused on improving clarity, correcting grammatical errors, and strengthening the overall structure of the texts.

Writing for a real audience made an important difference. Students knew their texts might be read by teachers, classmates, and the wider school community. As a result, they became more attentive to grammar, vocabulary, and overall clarity.

They learned that good writing rarely appears perfectly in the first draft. Instead, it develops through careful revision and reflection. This understanding helped them view writing as an evolving process rather than a single task.

As their English teacher I provided guidance throughout this stage, helping students refine their ideas while encouraging them to maintain their own voice and perspective.

The joy of publication

At the end of the school year, the students' articles were proudly published in the school newspaper.

English corner

Knight with a Heart

Aleksandra Cvitković, head of the American corner in the August Cesarec Library in Zagreb, invited our journalists to the presentation of the book Knight with a Heart. The meeting took place on 19th October in 2023. The author of the book Ognjen Livada presented his book and answered some questions. You can read the interview below.

The interview with Ognjen Livad, Knight with a Heart:

1. Where are you from and how old are you?
I'm from Zagreb and I'm 47 years old.

2. Are you a writer and what do you do for a living?
For living I do various things, I like to call myself a freelancer. I do project involving writing with children, mostly with children.

3. Why did you start writing?
It is something that I just started doing, I just had a need for it.

4. How many books did you write?
I don't know. I wrote a lot of stories. Some of them are translated into English. But I think I have published four books.

5. What are your books about?
There are different books. If I have to put them in one category, it would be: Trying to improve the quality of our lives. Empowering people to be the best version of themselves. This is very important for me.

6. Do you only write books for children?
No, I don't. I have written some books for parents as well. I had a blog for parenting. I have a collection of my stories for parents. But most of them are for children and young adults.

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7. What was an inspiration for this book?
Inspiration was another book. I was telling a story in a public library in Karlovac, and then children wanted to hear another story. I asked them to tell me which characters they want in the story. They said that they want to hear a story with a dragon, a kid and a knight. And that's how this story came to life.

8. Why do you write books in English?
I don't know. It's not that I want it is also something that just happened. I was in New Zealand when I started writing three different books in English. For me it was really strange but I did it.

9. Who is this book for?
For me this book is for everyone. It is book for children and young adults but also for parents and grandparents as well. For me this book is universal, it helps us remember the power we have in ourselves. **We are all different but we all have a need to be loved and to be accepted.**

Franka Grizelj 7.a, Patricia Knežević 7.a i Emili Sitnik 7.b

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Discovering Silicon Valley

Dr. Anja Stević, from the University of Vienna, held a presentation about Palo Alto University in August Cesarec Library in Zagreb on 15th December in 2023. Our journalist group was there.

Palo Alto is a private university in Palo Alto, California. It has a connection with Stanford University. It is in Silicon Valley. Dr. Anja Stević lived and worked there. She told us about the Campus and how she enjoyed it there. The Campus is big and very green. She saw the famous companies in Silicon Valley such as Google, Tesla and Apple. She lived in a rented apartment near the famous house in which Mark Zuckerberg (in his garage) founded Facebook. Living and studying there is very expensive, but people can afford it if they get a scholarship. Dr. Anja Stević said it was a great experience working and living there.

Franka Grizelj 7.a, Patricia Knežević 7.a i Emili Sitnik 7.b

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The graphic novel "Leina priča"

Our journalist group was at the presentation of the graphic novel "Leina priča". The presentation took place at the Bogdan Ogrizović library in Zagreb on 10th January, 2024. The presentation of the book is related to the celebration of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27th January and is dedicated to the life story of Lea Deutsch, the youngest actress of the Croatian National Theatre who was killed during The Holocaust.

The story talks about the life and fate of Lea Deutsch, who was the youngest actress in the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb in the 1930s. Because of her exceptional talent, she was called a miracle child. She was born in Zagreb on 18th January, 1927, and died at the age of 16 on the way to Auschwitz.

The graphic novel was presented by Lina Jurjević from the association HERMES, whose idea was to do the project, and Ida Ljubić, a history teacher at the High school of Tourism in Zagreb and the author of the novel.

The digital version of the novel is on this link
https://hermes.hr/hr/novela/

Franka Grizelj 7.a, Patricia Knežević 7.a i Emili Sitnik 7.b

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Seeing their names in print was a powerful moment. This was the first time their English writing had been shared publicly. The sense of achievement was visible and heartfelt.

Project-based learning research confirms that producing a tangible final product increases student motivation and engagement (Thomas, 2000). This extracurricular class demonstrated exactly that. Students were not simply completing assignments—they were creating something real.

Why extracurricular activities matter

This extracurricular class demonstrated how valuable additional learning opportunities can be. Even one extra lesson per week can significantly enrich students' educational experience.

Through this project, students developed not only their writing abilities but also a range of other important skills:

- istening comprehension
- note-taking strategies
- critical thinking
- teamwork and collaboration
- confide

Most importantly, they began to see themselves as capable English users—not just learners.

Extracurricular activities also allow teachers to experiment with different teaching approaches that may be difficult to implement during regular lessons due to time constraints.

Final reflection

As teachers, we often look for innovative methods, yet sometimes the most effective ideas are simple: give students a purpose, guide them through the process, and celebrate their achievements.

This extracurricular journalism class did exactly that. It strengthened language skills, fostered motivation, and built a bridge between classroom learning and the real world.

For English teachers seeking ways to enrich their programs, similar extracurricular initiatives can provide valuable opportunities for students to practice language in meaningful and engaging ways. When students write with purpose, they do not simply practice English—they live it.

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KOVASONG - Music and Performance in Foreign Language Teaching

Rašeljka Budić
OŠ Ante Kovačića

Abstract

This article describes *KOVASONG*, a school project organized to celebrate the European Day of Languages. Inspired by the Eurovision Song Contest, students performed songs in different foreign languages and took part in various creative activities. The project connected language learning with music, teamwork, and performance, while encouraging communication, cultural awareness, and student participation. It also showed the importance of cooperation between different school subjects and the positive impact of creative projects on motivation and school atmosphere.

KOVASONG – Using Music and Performance in Foreign Language Teaching

Introduction

Modern foreign language teaching is increasingly focused on helping students learn through active participation and communication. Instead of learning a language only through textbooks and separate exercises, students benefit more when they use it in real or life-like situations. In classroom practice, this means that teachers are constantly looking for ways to connect language learning with meaningful experiences that motivate students and support long-term learning.

In this sense, music, performance, and project-based learning have proven to be very effective approaches because they connect language learning with creativity, emotions, and teamwork among students.

Building on this idea in our own teaching practice, this school year, in celebration of the European Day of Languages, our school organized a special project called *KOVASONG*. Inspired by a presentation about *HUGOsong* delivered by colleagues from Hugo Kon Primary School, we decided to create a similar event with our own students.

From a teaching perspective, the project was also an opportunity to observe how students respond when language learning moves outside the classroom and becomes part of a shared creative experience. It offered insight into motivation, collaboration, and spontaneous language use in a non-traditional learning environment.

Project planning and preparation

At the beginning, the project did not seem particularly demanding. However, as soon as planning started in detail, it became clear that it would require continuous preparation from the very first days of the school year in order to be ready by the end of September. Although this made the process more challenging, it also turned out to be highly rewarding because it connected different subjects, teachers, and students in a meaningful way.

Students worked in groups and selected songs from the Eurovision Song Contest. The structure of the project was simple but effective. For the competition part, each group had to choose a song performed in a foreign language other than Croatian. For the interval programme, students had more freedom and could perform songs of their own choice. In total, four groups participated in the competition, while six additional performances were included in the interval act. Even teachers joined the event with two musical performances, which created a special atmosphere in the school.

The preparation process required close cooperation between different school subjects. In Information Technology lessons, students prepared presentations with short video clips of original songs and also worked on backing tracks for performances. These materials were used during the event while the audience was gathering in the sports hall, which helped create a lively and engaging atmosphere from the very beginning.

In Art lessons, students designed and decorated the stage and created posters with the list of songs and performers. This gave the event a visual identity and helped students feel ownership of the space. Physical Education lessons were used for planning and practising choreography and Music for singing rehearsals.

Design and Technology had a very visible role in the project. The teacher created a special "Crystal Microphone" trophy using a 3D printer, which became the symbol of the winning performance. This small but meaningful detail increased students' excitement and sense of achievement.

English and Croatian language teachers worked with students on the script for the programme and supported them in researching interesting facts about the languages represented in the songs. This helped students connect language learning with cultural awareness and develop a broader understanding of linguistic diversity in Europe.

Each group had several responsibilities. They needed to find and analyse song lyrics and their translations, understand the meaning of the songs, and select the part they wanted to perform. They also practised pronunciation carefully, especially because many of the songs were in languages unfamiliar to them. In addition, students planned choreography, stage movement, props, and costumes, and they rehearsed regularly in order to feel confident during the final performance.

The KOVASONG event

The final event took place in the school sports hall and involved the entire school community. As the audience gathered, they watched a short video compilation of original Eurovision performances. This helped create excitement and set the atmosphere for the programme.

The event was hosted by three students, mainly in English and Croatian, but parts of the announcements were also delivered in French, Estonian, Dutch, and Italian. This multilingual element made the programme more dynamic and gave students the opportunity to experience different languages in a natural and enjoyable context. Throughout the event, short interesting facts about the languages and songs were shared with the audience, which added an educational dimension to the performance.

During the first part of the programme, the four competing groups performed their songs. The atmosphere in the hall was extremely positive. Students supported each other enthusiastically, and some even prepared banners to cheer for their classmates. It was clear that the focus was not only on competition, but also on shared enjoyment, participation, and encouragement.

Voting and interval programme

Originally, we had planned to organise a digital voting system to make the process more modern and efficient. However, as not all students have access to mobile phones, we decided to switch to a more traditional approach. In the end, students voted by writing the title of their favourite performance on slips of paper. This simple method worked very well because it was inclusive and ensured that everyone could participate equally. It also added a sense of anticipation while the votes were being counted.

While the jury was counting votes, the interval programme began. It included six additional performances, which added energy and variety to the event. One of the most memorable parts of the evening were the performances prepared by teachers. Ten teachers took part in total, and although they themselves described their performances as imperfect, their enthusiasm and willingness to participate created a very positive response from students.

These teacher performances were particularly significant because they showed students that language learning does not stop in the classroom. Songs performed in English and Italian, *Waterloo* and *Volare*, were especially well received and created a moment of strong connection between students and teachers. For many students, this was one of the highlights of the entire project.

Whole-school involvement and atmosphere

One of the most important aspects of the project was the involvement of the entire school community. Not only students and teachers participated, but also non-teaching staff, including the janitor, secretary, and cleaning staff. Their contribution to the organisation and support of the event helped create a sense of unity that is not often experienced in everyday school activities.

This level of involvement turned the project into a whole-school event rather than just a classroom activity. It strengthened relationships within the school and contributed to a positive and supportive atmosphere. From a teaching perspective, this was particularly valuable, as it showed how school projects can influence not only learning outcomes, but also school culture.

Winners and celebration

At the end of the programme, the winning group received the "Crystal Microphone" trophy, created using a 3D printer by the Design and Technology teacher. This award became a strong symbol of effort, creativity, and teamwork.

All participating groups received symbolic gold, silver, and bronze microphone certificates, along with small treats. A few days later, the school organised a pizza celebration for all participants, which allowed students to reflect on the experience in a relaxed and informal setting.

Reflection and learning outcomes

After the project, students reflected on their participation and group work. Many of them honestly recognised that not all members had contributed equally or learned the lyrics to the same extent. They also realised that their performances were not perfect, but this did not reduce their satisfaction. Instead, it helped them identify what they could improve in future activities.

Overall, the project contributed to several important learning outcomes. Students improved their pronunciation and speaking confidence, developed teamwork and communication skills, and became more aware of linguistic and cultural diversity. In addition, the project had a strong impact on motivation, as students experienced language learning in a different, more engaging context.

Why projects like this matter

Projects such as *KOVASONG* demonstrate that foreign language learning can be much more effective when it is connected to real experiences, creativity, and collaboration. Music and performance allow students to use language in a natural way while also developing confidence and motivation.

In addition, such projects have an important role in building a positive school environment. They encourage cooperation, strengthen relationships between students and teachers, and create opportunities for self-expression that are not always possible in traditional lessons.

Following the success of this project, there is a strong intention to continue organising similar thematic events in the future. These could be connected to different occasions such as Mother's Day, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Pink Shirt Day, World Book Day, Earth Day, International Day of Friendship, or Halloween-themed cultural evenings. Each of these events would allow students to continue learning through music, language, and performance in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

Conclusion

KOVASONG was more than a school event. It was a learning experience that brought together language learning, creativity, teamwork, and the whole school community. It showed that when students are given the opportunity to use language in a meaningful and enjoyable context, learning becomes more natural, engaging, and memorable.

From a professional teaching perspective, the project confirmed the value of integrating creative and interdisciplinary approaches into foreign language teaching. It also highlighted the importance of school-wide collaboration in creating positive learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom.

RUBRICS FOR EVALUATING WRITING

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Evaluating language skills is challenging, and teachers strive to be impartial, fair, accurate, and professional while also fostering students' personal growth and a love of the language. For me, the most demanding area is assessing writing, as it involves multiple components, including purpose, audience, and form, as well as spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.

My Grade 6 class had just completed a unit on "My Home, My Town" so instead of a traditional test, I chose an alternative form of assessment that allowed students to demonstrate their understanding through writing.

I designed a task that encouraged the use of target structures and vocabulary, particularly the present simple and present continuous tenses. Since we had practised email writing in class, I selected this format for the assignment because an email provides a clear structure and allows students to express ideas, answer questions, and use descriptive language. It also offers a practical, real-life context and an opportunity to use modal verbs such as *can*, *must*, and *have to*.

This is the task below:

Read the email from Jo. Write Jo a reply (an email). Answer all the questions.
Use some of the new adjectives (describing words) we learned. Use some modal verbs (can, must, have to). Use some conjunctions (and, but, or). Use the same form:

Ask for and give news or advice.
Describe the place and house/flat/room.
Describe what you can do there.
Close the email.

Check the spelling and grammar. Here is the email:

Hi!

How are you? I hope you are well. Thank you for inviting me to come to the seaside with you and your family. I asked my parents if I could go, and guess what, they said yes!

Can you tell me about the place where we will stay? What is it called? Where is it? Is it in the town or in the countryside? Is it close to the beach? Is it big or small? Is it old or modern? What does our room look like? What can we do there during the day? What can we do in the evening or at night? Are there any buses? Are there any parks, museums or shops? I'm so excited!

I have to go now because I have to pack my suitcase. I can't wait until Saturday!

See you soon,

Jo

Although the task seemed straightforward, I needed to ensure fairness in the evaluation process and clearly justify the grades. Students needed to understand how their writing would be assessed, so I created an evaluation rubric. Its purpose was to provide clear criteria, ensure consistency, and help students understand the expectations and how to achieve higher marks.

The rubric included key aspects of the task, including the email format (greeting and closing), organisation and coherence, and language use. This involved the use of adjectives, conjunctions, modal verbs, descriptive elements, and the ability to answer questions effectively.

To ensure clarity, the rubric was written in Croatian, the students' first language. It follows the five-point grading scale used in the Croatian educational system and is divided into four categories: content, vocabulary and sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. However, for our purposes, the rubric presented below is in English.

RUBRIC FOR EVALUATING EMAIL WRITING

CONTENT / IDEAS / TEXT ORGANIZATION

5 points:

The email is creatively written and includes all of the required elements: a greeting (opening phrase), asking questions and providing information or giving advice, a description of the place and accommodation (house or apartment and room), a description of activities (what can be done there), and a closing phrase. The email is very well organized, logically structured, and focused on the topic. The student answers all the given questions and uses the phrases and expressions we studied appropriately.

4 points:

The email contains most of the required elements (at least four), such as a greeting, a description of the place, a description of activities, and a closing phrase. The text is generally organised and follows the assigned topic. The student answers most of the questions, with minor deviations or a minor lack of detail.

3 points:

The email contains some of the required elements (at least three), for example: a greeting, a description of activities, and a closing phrase. The student partially deviates from the topic and presents basic ideas, but without sufficient elaboration or connection. Only some of the questions are answered.

2 points:

The email contains fewer required elements, and some important aspects are missing (such as the description of activities or a closing phrase). The text lacks clear organisation and sufficient development. The student answers very few questions, and the ideas are not clearly connected.

1 point:

The email does not contain the required elements, has no clear topic, and/or is difficult to understand. The student does not answer the given questions, and/or the text is disorganised and incomplete.

VOCABULARY / SENTENCE STRUCTURES

5 points:

The student correctly uses new words and expressions such as: *hello/hi, how are you, I hope you are well, we are all well, guess what, the place is nice/ quiet/ messy/ large/ cozy/ bright/ big/ small/ boring/ interesting, I have to go now, see you soon, take care, what do you think we should do, why don't we, we can*… The student successfully uses adjectives and conjunctions to expand and connect sentences. The student uses a variety of sentence structures, and the vocabulary is appropriate for the task.

4 points:

The student uses a large number of new words and expressions, as well as most of the key vocabulary. The student uses adjectives and conjunctions. Sentences are mostly correctly formed but show less variety.

3 points:

The student mostly uses basic vocabulary but also includes some new words and expressions. The student uses some key words, adjectives, and conjunctions, but to a limited extent. Sentences are generally simple and similar in structure. The vocabulary is more limited, but it does not hinder understanding.

2 points:

The student uses new words and expressions to a very minimal extent and mainly relies on basic vocabulary. The student uses very few adjectives and conjunctions. Sentences are very simple and often repeat the same structures.

1 point:

The student does not use any new words or expressions, relying only on basic vocabulary. The student does not use adjectives or conjunctions. Sentences are very simple, often incomplete or incorrect, which makes understanding difficult.

GRAMMAR

5 points:

The student correctly uses the grammatical structures studied, such as the present simple and present continuous, as well as modal verbs (*can, must, have to*). Sentences are grammatically correct, and the text contains no errors or has not more than two minor grammatical errors that do not affect understanding.

4 points:

The student generally uses grammatical structures correctly, with occasional mistakes. A small number of errors are present (up to four), but they do not hinder the understanding of the text. Most sentences are grammatically correct.

3 points:

The student has up to five grammatical errors that do not interfere with understanding. The student uses basic grammatical structures, but with more mistakes (up to five); however, the text is still understandable. The use of tenses and modal verbs is not always correct.

2 points:

A larger number of grammatical errors appear in the text (up to six), and some of them may make understanding more difficult. The student has difficulty using grammatical structures correctly, including tenses and modal verbs.

1 point:

The email contains seven or more grammatical errors. Errors are frequent and significantly hinder the understanding of the text. Grammatical structures are not used correctly.

SPELLING

5 points:

The student correctly writes all or almost all of the words on their own. Thus, spelling mistakes are very rare or non-existent. The student correctly uses capitalization rules (at the beginning of a sentence and for proper nouns) and correctly uses punctuation marks (a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark).

4 points:

The student spells most of the words correctly, with a small number of spelling mistakes. Capitalization is generally correct, although occasional errors occur. Generally, the student uses punctuation marks, but sometimes they are missing or not always used correctly.

3 points:

The student often makes mistakes in spelling and has a larger number of errors. The student sometimes forgets to use capital letters, and punctuation marks are often omitted or used incorrectly. Despite this, the text is still understandable.

2 points:

The student has a large number of spelling errors. Capitalization rules are often not applied, and punctuation marks are not used correctly. Errors make the text more difficult to understand.

1 point:

The student has a very large number of spelling mistakes that significantly hinder understanding. Capitalization rules and punctuation are not used, making the text difficult to understand or unclear.

(0 Points: The student did not write anything.)

Total number of points: 20

18 – 20 = 5 (excellent)

16 – 17 = 4 (very good)

13 – 15 = 3 (good)

10 – 12 = 2 (satisfactory)

0 - 9 = 1 (insufficient)

I was very pleased with the overall results. About half of the students achieved an excellent grade, over a quarter received a very good, and a smaller number earned a good grade. These results were a pleasant surprise, as the class usually performs better in other language skill areas.

I believe the rubric played a key role in this improvement by providing clear expectations and helping students prepare more effectively. Its simplicity allowed them to focus on meeting specific criteria rather than guessing what was required.

Students were already familiar with the email format, having read, analysed, and practised similar tasks in class. We also reviewed the rubric together, which helped them clearly understand the expectations and how to achieve higher grades. Overall, structured preparation, guided practice, and a clear rubric contributed significantly to the positive results.

I strongly recommend creating rubrics tailored to the writing task. They support fair and consistent assessment while also serving as an effective learning tool. By clearly outlining expectations, rubrics help students understand what is required and how to achieve better results. When students know which elements are assessed, such as structure, vocabulary, grammar, and content, they approach tasks with greater focus and confidence. This reduces uncertainty and leads to more organised and purposeful writing.

Rubrics also promote objective assessment and make it easier to justify grades. In addition, they encourage self-assessment and peer review, helping students become more independent learners. Overall, well-designed rubrics benefit both teachers and students and contribute to improved performance and a more supportive learning environment.

Talk It Out: Why Dialogues Are the Secret Ingredient to Language Mastery

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The Power of Conversation

Language learning is often treated like a one-way street: teachers talk, students listen. But real communication is a two-way exchange. Dialogues bring that dynamic into the classroom, transforming passive listening into active engagement. Whereas dialogues improve comprehension of natural speech patterns, intonation, and rhythm, monologues focus on extended listening but lack interaction. Students participate actively in dialogues through turn-taking and role-play. When they speak and respond, they are not just learning words. They are learning how to connect. Dialogues also help students practice vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in context. Unlike monologues, which often leave learners passive, dialogues encourage interaction, build confidence, and foster cultural awareness. They're flexible too, easy to adapt for SEND learners or extend for gifted students. For SEND learners, simplify language, add visuals, and slow the pace. For gifted students, turn dialogues into creative projects—write alternative endings, record podcasts, or design video clips. Personalization through voice variation makes every learner feel included.

Why Dialogues Beat Monologues

Monologues can be useful for presenting information, but they do not feel like real conversations. In real life, we talk back and forth, ask questions, and share ideas. Monologues often make students just sit and listen, and that can make shy learners feel less comfortable.

Dialogues are different. They feel natural because they copy real communication. When students take part in a dialogue, they work together, listen, and respond. This builds confidence because they are not alone. They are part of a team.

Dialogues also give learners the chance to hear real language in context, not just isolated sentences. They can practice useful phrases like:*"I agree with you."*, *"How about we try this?"*, *"Could you explain that again?"*, *"Would you like some help?"*, *"What if we compromise?"*

Through these exchanges, students improve pronunciation and fluency because they repeat words and hear how they sound in real speech. They also learn about culture, how people greet each other, make suggestions, or show politeness, because these things are included in everyday conversations.

Practical Classroom Wins

Imagine a listening task where students hear two friends planning a weekend trip. Instead of just answering yes/no questions or filling in blanks, they go further. First, they **predict what will happen next**: Will they choose the beach or the mountains? Then, they **role-play the conversation**, taking turns as the friends. Finally, they **add their own twist**: maybe the trip gets cancelled, or they invite a third friend.

This approach turns listening into an active, creative process. Students are not just hearing words; they are using them. For shy learners, this can be a game-changer. Acting out dialogues gives them a safe space to speak, without fear of making mistakes. It feels like permission to join the language, not just watch from the sidelines.

Tech That Talks: Microsoft Clipchamp

Voice-rich practice gets a boost from technology. Tools like Microsoft Clipchamp let teachers and students create dialogues with multiple voices, edit recordings, and polish pronunciation. It's simple, engaging, and perfect for blended learning.

Technology makes voice-rich practice easier and more fun. With tools like *Microsoft Clipchamp*, teachers can record dialogues using different voices, so students hear a natural conversation instead of just one tone. You can

edit the recordings, cut out mistakes, and even add background sounds to make it sound authentic. Students can listen to these dialogues many times, repeat the phrases, and check their pronunciation.

Clipchamp is simple to use—no advanced skills needed. Teachers can create short dialogues for lessons or let students make their own recordings as projects. This works well in blended learning because students can practice at home and share their work online. It turns speaking and listening into an interactive experience, not just a classroom activity.

Gamification: Friend or Foe?

Platforms like *Kahootopia* can make learning exciting because they turn questions into a game. Students love the challenge and the instant feedback. A quick quiz after a role-play is a great way to check understanding and keep energy high. It helps teachers see what students remember without making it feel like a test.

But it is important to use these tools wisely. If every dialogue turns into a game, students may focus more on winning than on speaking and listening. The goal is to support dialogue practice, not replace it. Think of Kahoot as a spice—add a little to make the lesson fun, but don't let it take over the whole dish.

Your Quick-Start Checklist for Bringing Dialogues to Life

Ready to make your lessons more interactive? Here's how to begin:

1. Replace one monologue with a dialogue this week.

Pick a short conversation instead of a long text. Even a simple exchange, like two classmates planning an activity, can make the lesson feel more lively and engaging.

2. Explore voice-rich practice with Clipchamp.

This tool lets you record and edit dialogues with different voices, so students hear natural speech patterns. It's easy to use and perfect for creating audio tasks. You can find our step-by-step guide here: https://bit.ly/MSCLIPCHAMP

3. Adapt dialogues for diverse learners.

Simplify language and add visuals for those who need extra support. For advanced learners, include creative challenges like rewriting parts of the dialogue or recording their own versions.

4. Choose topics that matter now.

Keep conversations connected to real life and to what students are currently learning in class. If they're studying food vocabulary, create a dialogue about ordering in a restaurant. If the theme is travel, let them plan a trip together. Linking dialogues to ongoing lessons makes practice meaningful and easier to remember. When the topic feel familiar, students are more confident and motivated to speak.

Dialogues are more than just speaking exercises. They are about building real connections. When students take part in a dialogue, they don't just repeat words; they listen carefully, respond thoughtfully, and create something together. This turns language learning into an active process instead of a passive one.

It feels different because students are not only learning grammar or vocabulary—they are learning how to interact like real people. They share ideas, express feelings, and solve problems through conversation. This makes lessons more meaningful and enjoyable. Instead of memorizing sentences, students experience communication as something alive and personal. That's why dialogues make language learning feel less like a school task and more like a human experience.

The Magic of Storytelling and Picture Books

Tea Horvatić

In the English Language Teaching (ELT) world, picture books are often misidentified as "just for kids." However, they are powerful multimodal tools that bridge the gap between visual literacy and linguistic competence. Scientific research (Raised Right Books, 2023) shows that children who are read to at an early age regularly, have higher cognitive development, academic success, and better emotional well-being. Moreover, Cambridge study states children who read for pleasure perform better at cognitive tests and have better mental health when they enter adolescence (Sun et al., 2023).

Storytelling isn't just an activity, it is a pedagogical vehicle that provides authentic context and makes the language stick. The following information shows why picture books work according to Ellis, 2014.

Why Picture Books Work?

- **Visual scaffolding:** The illustrations provide immediate context, allowing learners to decode meaning without needing a translation for every word.
- **Motivation and emotional engagement:** Stories build empathy. When students care about a character, their motivation to understand the narrative increases which can help develop positive attitudes towards foreign language, culture and language learning.
- **Repetitive structures:** Many picture books use "circular" or repetitive language patterns, which are perfect for natural grammar acquisition and pronunciation practice.

To truly enchant a classroom, the teacher must move beyond simply reading the text. Successful storytelling involves:

- **Paralinguistic features:** Use gestures, facial expressions, and varying vocal tones to signal different characters. This provides additional "clues" to meaning.
- **The "Affective Filter":** By creating a cozy, high-interest environment, teachers lower the students' "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982). When anxiety is low and interest is high, the brain is more receptive to new vocabulary.
- **Real-world props (realia):** Bringing a physical "red hat" or a "plastic caterpillar" into the room turns a 2D story into a 3D experience.

Practical Strategies for the Classroom

To move beyond passive listening, try these three phases:

1. **Pre-reading (The Hook):** Show the cover and ask for predictions. "What do you think the Gruffalo is feeling?"
2. **While-reading (The Interaction):** Use "Think-Alouds." Pause and ask what might happen next or how a character should solve a problem.
3. **Post-reading (The Creation):** Have students rewrite the ending, create a "missing scene," or design a new character that fits the story's world.
4. **Cross-curricular links:** maths (time, numbers, measuring), science (the life cycle of insects, animals, skeletons), art (making a box, making books), IT (create digital storytelling), music (singing songs, playing instruments, acting out stories), P.E. (moving like different animals, moving to music).

The photograph below shows a post-reading activity where first grade students created their own character in groups. The task was to cut out and colour the caterpillar and create a similar story – an extension activity where students add various food vocabulary, learn colours and lexical items that were not mentioned in the original story. An additional task was to create a stop-motion animation with these paper puppets which was a correlation between IT and English.

Another activity teachers can employ is creating students' picturebooks with characters of their choice and stories that can contain all the vocabulary that was done in classes. The photograph below shows second graders reading their stories out loud to the classmates in a circle. Everyone got a chance to present their work and comment on peers' stories.

Recommended picture books for your classes

Here are four versatile titles that work across various age groups and proficiency levels:

Title	Target Focus	Why It Works
"The Gruffalo" by Julia Donaldson	Rhyme, Rhythm, & Adjectives	The rich descriptions and rhyming scheme help with "chunking" language and phonological awareness.
Dr. Seuss	"The Cat in the Hat"	Phonics & Vocabulary: Controlled vocabulary (236 words) makes it ideal for emergent readers.
Dr. Seuss	"Green Eggs and Ham"	For repetitive sentence structures.
Shel Silverstein	"The Giving Tree"	Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): Great for higher-level discussions on empathy and selfless love.
"The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle	Basics: Days, Food, Numbers	A classic for a reason. It provides a foolproof structure for young learners to master essential vocabulary.
Mo Willems	"Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!"	Imperatives & Persuasion: Interactive storytelling where the class must say "No!" to the pigeon.

Integrating storytelling isn't about teaching from a book, it's about starting a conversation with it. As the research by Sun et al. (2023) suggests, the benefits of childhood reading extend far beyond the classroom walls, impacting a student's cognitive architecture for years to come.

By bringing picture books into the ELT classroom, we do more than teach vocabulary. We provide a "safe harbor" where language is not a series of rules to be memorized, but a world to be explored. When a child asks, "Can we read it again?" you know you haven't just taught a lesson, you've sparked a lifelong relationship with the English language.

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TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS OF EFL TO WRITE

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Abstract

Teaching writing to young learners of EFL presents unique challenges, as children are still developing literacy skills in their native language. Writing should be introduced from the earliest stages of language learning to foster confidence, motivation, and positive attitudes toward English. We should use encouragement, praise, and individualized instruction in helping children overcome initial difficulties in order for them to avoid developing negative perceptions of writing.

Writing develops gradually, from tracing and copying words to guided writing and simple sentences. Creative tasks like drawing and making mini-books are effective tools for integrating writing with reading and vocabulary, while also making learning enjoyable and suitable for different ability levels. Overall, a flexible, student-centred approach that focuses on quality helps children develop writing skills, gain confidence, and enjoy learning English.

Teaching young learners to write in English as a foreign language is quite challenging because they are only just developing this same skill in their native language, and there are often differences in some of the letters and sounds. However, I believe that this skill should be introduced from the very beginning for several reasons.

First of all, young children are eager to please and will try to complete any task given to them. With a little time, help, and guidance, they are usually successful. Secondly, if they are not encouraged to attempt writing simple words early on, they may begin to perceive writing as something difficult. As a result, some may decide that they cannot do it and become reluctant to try to write when it is required of them. In my opinion, children should start writing as early as possible, and every attempt they make should be praised.

To begin developing their writing skills, the first step is tracing words in their workbooks so that they learn how to form letters correctly. At the beginning of the first grade, I closely monitor this stage to ensure that they form letters properly—from top to bottom rather than the other way around—and I guide them in holding their pencils correctly.

Later, they draw pictures and copy the corresponding words from the board into their notebooks. At this stage, most pupils have not yet learned how to write all the letters, although a few have. Therefore, I believe it is important to write the vocabulary on the board for them to copy because, in this way, we encourage those who are just beginning to write while not holding back those who are already able to do so.

Those who cannot yet write simply draw the pictures. When they bring their work to me, I write the words for them. Some pupils can write entire words, others can write only the initial letters, and some may use invented spelling. Again, I praise their efforts, including any letters they have written independently. Beneath their work, I provide the correct spelling and letter formation, showing them the standard form. I never cross out their attempts; instead, they always receive a checkmark, a happy face, or a sticker for their effort.

It is important not to require them to correct everything at the beginning, as this can be overwhelming and may discourage them. Instead, I select one or two words for them to correct by copying what I have written. It is much easier for them to copy something directly in front of them—either by tracing my example or by writing it underneath the example—than to copy from the board, where they can easily lose their place.

Although copying from the board seems simple to us, it is a complex process for a child. They must locate the word, observe how each letter is formed, and reproduce it in their notebook. Then they must return to the board repeatedly for each subsequent letter, while each time remembering which letter it is that they need, as well as the place where it is to be copied. This is a long and tiring task that requires a great deal of concentration for young learners. As a result, they sometimes lose their place or mix up the letters between words. For example, instead of writing *cat, dog, pig*, they may produce *cat, doig, pi* without noticing the mistake.

When this happens, I point out the error in a humorous way, saying that they have invented a new animal, and I wonder what it might look like. We laugh together, and then I help them correct it.

However, I believe it is essential to correct all written work in the primary grades. Otherwise, the children may assume their incorrect forms are correct, and these may become part of their internalized written vocabulary. Such errors are much more difficult to correct later because they become fixed in their memory.

The wide range of ability in the classroom is also why I divide the vocabulary on the board into two sections. The first section contains the basic words that all pupils should copy, while the second includes additional words for those who finish quickly or wish to do more. If some pupils feel frustrated because they have not finished copying all the words, I reassure them by saying, "English is not like all the other subjects, and we cannot take the board home for homework, can we?" This usually makes them laugh, reducing anxiety and helping them feel comfortable doing what they can.

If many pupils have not finished, we simply continue the task in the next lesson. At first, their writing is large and untidy, but gradually, we work on accuracy and neatness. I emphasize that the quality of their writing, that is how correctly the words are formed, is more important than the quantity.

Another reason for this approach is that I want to "hook" them on English right from the first grade. I want them to experience English as something fun and easy. When children enjoy learning, they are motivated to practise more and to try harder. This positive attitude lays the foundation for their future learning.

Next, the children begin guided writing. For example, when studying topics such as food, animals, or colours, they complete simple sentences like *"I like apples/ dogs/ blue."* or *"I don't like jam…."* When learning about emotions, they write sentences such as *"I'm happy."* or *"I'm hungry."* At this point, they are ready to become authors!

My primary classes create several simple mini-books on various topics throughout the year. In this way, not only do they practice the vocabulary, but they also practise their writing and reading skills. For example, they make a *My Colours Book*, where they write one colour per page and draw something in that colour; *The Happy Book*, where they write and illustrate feelings; *School Things*, where they write and draw items used at school; *I Like…, I Don't Like…*, focusing on food preferences; *My Animals Book*, where they write and draw animals; and the list goes on.

The number of pages they write is up to them, although I encourage at least four and a title page. When their book is finished, I help them correct it and staple it together. Then they read it to me or to a classmate. Blank pages are added to the end of the book and are used for stickers, happy faces, or signatures from those they read to. These books are not formally graded, as the goal is to practise writing and global reading while developing sight vocabulary.

This approach to teaching writing to young learners of English as a foreign language is highly individualized, allowing each child to progress at their own pace and level without the pressure to complete everything "on time." Although it is very time-consuming, it is worthwhile because the children develop writing skills early on, they enjoy writing, and they feel a sense of accomplishment when they complete their books. Ultimately, the young learners develop a positive attitude toward learning English and are motivated to do their best.

When Your Relationship With Teaching Changes: Reclaiming Teacher Ideals in the EFL Classroom

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Whenever I talk to teachers about their work, the conversation is rarely just about lessons, curricula, or test scores. It is full of emotion, spanning from frustration to pride and from exhaustion to joy. And wherever there is emotion, there is a relationship.

Though most teachers do not habitually think of their work as a relationship, if you listen closely to how they talk about teaching, it becomes obvious that teaching is not just something they do. It's something they are ***in a relationship with***.

The reality of every long-term relationship is that it enters a phase where the original terms no longer fit. The way you show up, the energy you bring, the hopes and ideals you hold - all these parts of you evolve with experience, context, and self-awareness. For many teachers this shift happens between year 8 and year 20 (a solid scope, I know, but we are all different!), when they have been in the trenches long enough to have experienced all the seasons, and are still showing up, even when the work no longer feels the same.

This article is for the teachers who are right there, in that in-between space where their professional identity is shifting, but they have not fully acknowledged it yet.

From Early Ideals to Ecosystem Realities

Many EFL teachers enter the profession with a spark, imagining:

- classrooms alive with communication and curiosity
- creative, collaborative tasks that engage students
- lessons that are not just educational, but also energising and joyful
- students who respond to our energy, humour, and ideas
- ourselves energised, creative, present

This early period is the "honeymoon": the phase of possibility.

What we rarely prepare for is the next phase, when the ideals meet the ecosystem. There are many systemic forces at play: class sizes, mixed-ability groups, curriculum constraints, assessment demands, and individualisation requirements.

But in an EFL classroom, it also gets more personal. Language is a social instrument, and language teaching often heavily relies on affective factors (i.e., motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, enjoyment, willingness to communicate), which assume psychological safety as a prerequisite for achieving learning outcomes. So, in a language classroom we are covertly tasked with regulating:

- the group's mood
- your own presence
- conflict and tension
- silence and discomfort
- student-to-student dynamics
- the subtle interplay between safety and challenge

And we do all this while being responsible for learning outcomes.

Teachers often carry the entire relational and cognitive load of the classroom, as if every student's engagement and learning rests solely on our shoulders. This weight is invisible to many, but over time, this continuous, invisible emotional labour grinds even on the strongest amongst us.

And then, while we are still committed to performing enthusiasm even when there is none left to draw from, we slide into feeling drained and numb.

Under the Surface

You might have heard colleagues saying (or yourself thinking) something along these lines:

- *I thought I'd be more creative than this.*
- *I thought students would be more engaged.*
- *I didn't expect to feel numb.*
- *I didn't expect the job to become so performative.*
- *I miss the teacher I once was.*
- *I'm doing everything I can, and it still feels like I'm failing.*
- *The kids have changed… or maybe I have.*

Over time, the tension between our early ideals and what we can bring to life compounds into a grief that is rarely named.

In fact, most teachers do not call this grief. They call it overwhelming, or burnout, or frustration. **But recognising it as grief matters.**

It is the emotional response to the gap between what we expected and what is. Interestingly – and importantly – grief, like any emotion, is informative. It reflects the values, care, energy, and ideals you invested in your work.

You grieve:

- the teacher you thought you'd be
- the idealistic teacher you once were
- the energy you used to have
- the lessons you imagined
- the activities that fell flat
- the belief that effort alone could compensate for systemic constraints
- the version of teaching that existed in your mind but not in the current classroom

The Permission Many Teachers Need (But Rarely Hear)

Your relationship with teaching is alive: it has ruptures and repairs, misalignments, unmet needs, and unspoken expectations.

And guess what? You are allowed to evolve:

- to outgrow a version of your teaching identity
- to retire strategies that once worked
- to be a different teacher in year 15 than you were in year 2.

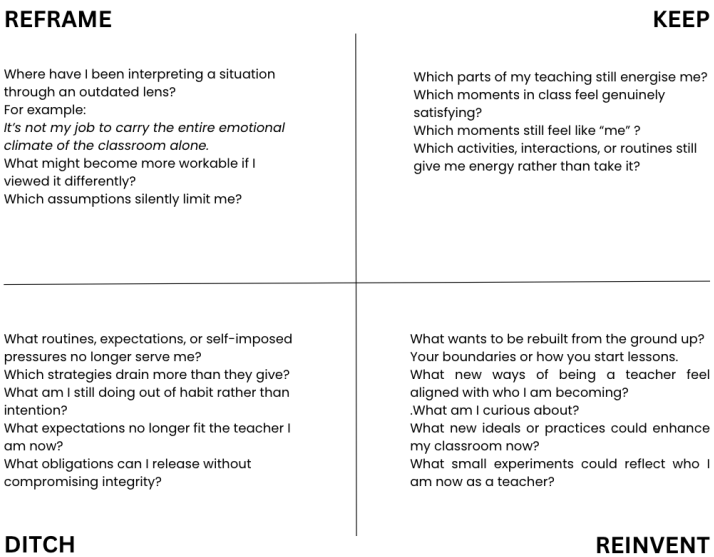
This doesn't mean the relationship has to be over. Rather, it tells us that the relationship has matured and now requires conscious recalibration.

Reclaiming Choices: Keep-Ditch-Reframe-Reinvent

Recognising grief gives you information: it shows you where your energy, attention, and choices can have the greatest impact.

Using this 4-step framework of Keep/Ditch/Reframe/Reinvent, I invite you to reflect on who you are now, with all the experiences that have shaped your teaching identity, and:

- Keep what nurtures,
- Reframe what constrains,
- Ditch what drains,
- Reinvent what emerges



When you walk through these four quadrants, you might notice patterns of:

- alignment,
- exhaustion,
- holding onto something that no longer serves you,
- where your early ideals are still true, and
- where they are ready to evolve.

This is the genuine work of professional wellbeing: not bubble baths, not generic "teacher self-care", not tips and tricks, but the ongoing tuning of your inner world to match the work you show up to do every day.

Over to you…

By now, you might be on board with me and recognise that our idea of *teaching* naturally evolves over time — as do we. By noticing the grief and the gaps between past ideals and now, you reclaim your agency and can start shaping how you show up with intention and choice.

And once you are aware of how your ideals have evolved, you can shed the habits and unspoken expectations that weigh you down and make space to focus on what truly matters to you now.

Reflection snacks

Notice your relationship with your work today. What does it feel like?

When you first started, what did you hope your classroom would feel like? Which aspects of that vision are still alive today? What has changed, for better or worse?

Where do you feel sadness in your work? What is it trying to tell you?

Which aspects of your early ideals deserve recognition, and which are calling for transformation?

In the 4-step framework pick one item for each category. What will you keep, reframe, ditch, and reinvent this month?