

# Looking at a young learner

Nayr Ibrahim

This article aims to show how a series of interrelated activities, culminating in a creative writing project, inspire a self-conscious young learner to stretch the boundaries of her limited post-beginner knowledge of English. Anchored in a framework of solid language learning objectives at word, sentence and text level, the primary aim of these activities was to develop pronunciation skills and to demonstrate the link between isolated sounds and the process of communication. However, these activities led to new learning opportunities by encouraging the child to manipulate the language creatively in order to produce a personal outcome in the shape of an illustrated cartoon strip. Ultimately, this adventure has increased the child's self-confidence, developed autonomous learning skills and enhanced the language learning experience.

## The young learner

For the sake of the article I will call this young learner Louise. Louise is a French nine-year-old child, who started learning English a year ago at the British Council and at her regular French school simultaneously. At first, this child was a reserved, well-behaved perfectionist who took very few risks. Although always attentive, on task and neat, she only participated partially in classroom activities. For the most part, she took refuge in a prison of silent insecurity. This silence was a sign of fear of inaccuracy and imperfection, and a need for an extended time period in which to assimilate and digest the weekly linguistic input. Furthermore, it protected her from the unwelcome audience of her classmates and represented a strong dependence on the teacher as the all-knowing guide. However, this silence was misleading because when called upon to react to the teacher's questions, her answers revealed that she had accumulated a substantial amount of passive lexical and grammatical knowledge.

Pronunciation was another reason for her reticence to speak on a more regular basis. At the beginning, the sounds of this new language carved many a confused furrow on Louise's young brow. At the production stage some of these foreign sounds were difficult to articulate and led to incomprehensibility. Consequently, regular pronunciation work, aimed at raising awareness of, focussing on and drilling sounds, identified as problematic for this particular group of French speakers, was introduced throughout the first year of study. These activities were accompanied and enhanced by visual aids, gestures and actions, songs and chants, tongue twisters and games. These isolated phonemes/words were then integrated into communicative speaking and writing tasks. This ensemble gave Louise a solid springboard on which to improve her intelligibility, develop her self-confidence and feel more at ease with speaking.

## The Activities

The following is an example of a series of pronunciation activities with the focus on the phonemes /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/, which sprung from the unit on Shops and Shopping:

- Once the lexical and functional elements were presented, the two phonemes were isolated using visual support in a discriminating and categorising whole class exercise.
- Further reinforcement was provided in a differentiating listening task followed by extensive drilling.
- In order to demonstrate that pronunciation is an integral part of oral communication, these words were used in a shopping role play, where children had to add the words/items to their respective /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/ shopping baskets. This encouraged Louise to produce the functional language of interacting with a shopkeeper as well as consider the difference between the two sounds.
- Louise then further investigated these phonemes by finding other words in her course book and adding them to her shopping baskets.
- As French children are introduced to linguistic metalanguage at an early age when learning their mother tongue, Louise was encouraged to reflect on their respective word classes – nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, question words, verbs – thus preparing the sentence level work for the ultimate writing activity.
- This magical cauldron of isolated words served as a trigger for a creative writing task involving the cartoon strip.

Louise was aware of the procedure to follow as this activity had been done the previous year, when children worked on the /ʌ/ and /æ/ phonemes. It was a teacher-led whole class event, with a high degree of scaffolding. The teacher acted as scribe, guiding these beginners to using words with the selected phonemes already in their lexical repertoire. The teacher also controlled sentence structure, which was simple and included the verb *to be*, *can* and *have got*. It was a collective creative project with each child contributing at least one word, sentence, idea or sequence of events. The children then illustrated the 8-scene cartoon strip, which added an element of artistic individualism. Due to a boy/girl ratio of 10 to 6 the topic of the cartoon revolved around football and the elation and disappointment of the fans.

## The outcome

This year the writing stage of the activity was handed over to the children, working in pairs. This allowed for the development of original settings and story lines and the girls escaped the football scenario to explore more creative options. After the introductory teacher-directed

stages as outlined above, Louise and her partner were asked to write an 8-part story using the isolated words they had added to their shopping baskets. Their initial reaction of doubt at their ability to compose a cohesive text was replaced by a flurry of creativity as words became sentences and meaning was created. As these post-beginners tackled independent creative writing, teacher support was reduced to monitoring, asking leading questions, providing unknown vocabulary if esteemed essential and praising their every effort. The first draft was then completed individually as a homework exercise and corrected with Louise in class. At the correction stage, Louise was prompted to reflect on: variety in verb use, correct use of verb form and avoiding the temptation to translate directly from French.

Louise's cartoon strip (see next page) reveals that the creativity factor superseded the inclusion of the /C:/and /D/ words, which is restricted to the characters (frog, tortoise and dog), the setting (the forest) and other story specific words (stops, what, lost). Her story reflects a simple narrative structure with the shopping context as the trigger for the main event. It has a beginning, middle and end and includes a problem, and a resolution in the shape of a squirrel. When asked how she came up with words and expressions such as "approach", "lost" and

"For a moment" Louise simply shrugged her shoulders and admitted to looking them up in her dictionary at home. Louise proudly read out her story, which is now displayed in the reception area for others to enjoy.

## Conclusion

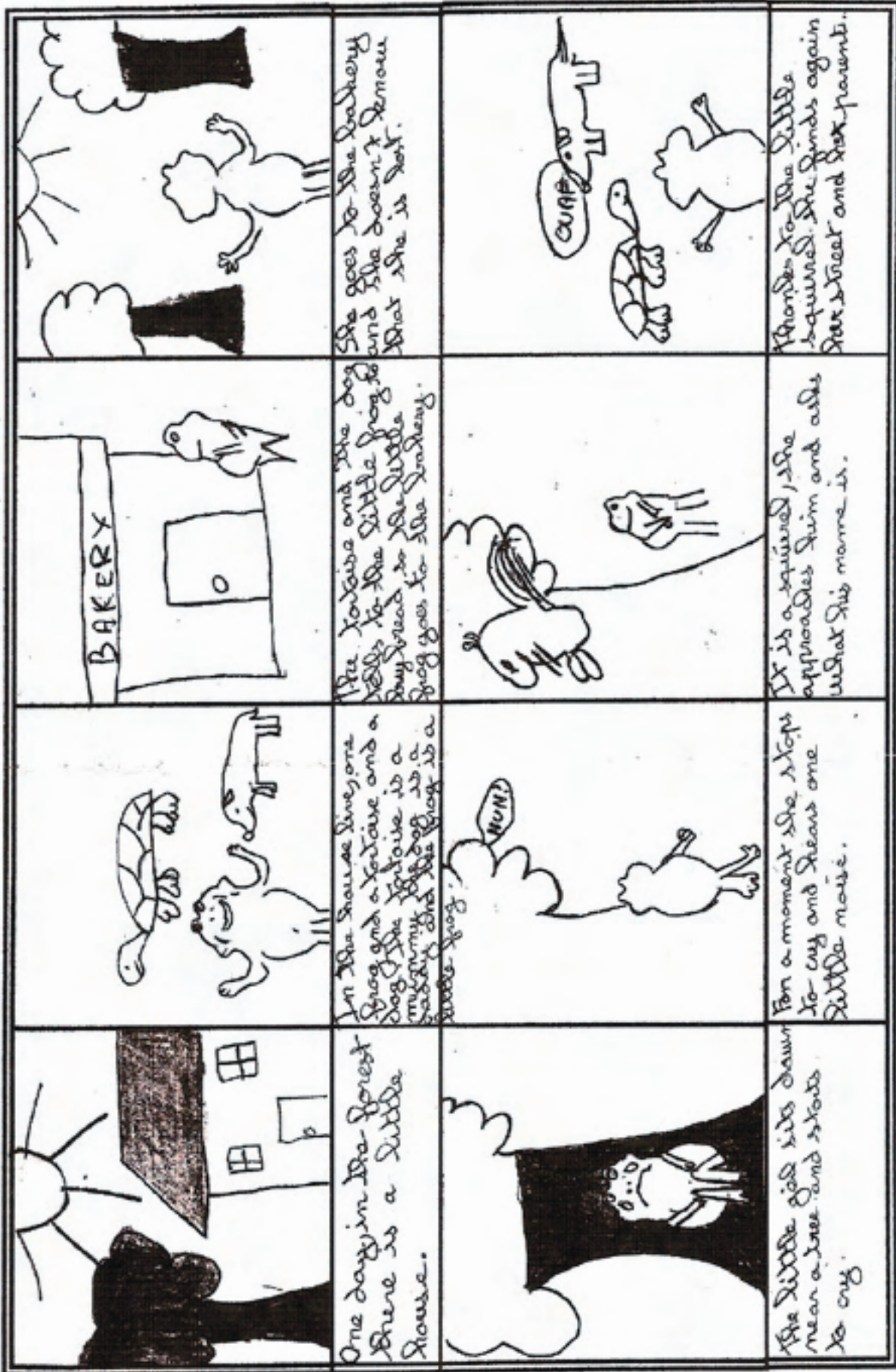
Although Louise will never shout out an answer spontaneously, her hand now shoots up as a sign of keenness to participate in all activities. Louise was given the opportunity to explore her knowledge of the English language differently and freely and discovered that she could manipulate the language meaningfully. This key to freedom and creativity has opened up the gates of her prison of silence and showed her the pleasure and power of communication.

*Nayr Ibrahim is a Senior Teacher at the Young Learner's Centre at the British Council in Paris. She has been teaching EFL and Bilingual students for the past seven years and has also co-authored a course book for the primary schools in France.*



## FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2006

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 24 <sup>th</sup> -26 <sup>th</sup> March | <b><u>IATEFL YL SIG and PIB/IFU, Vienna</u></b><br><b>"Interact – Integrating Drama and Storytelling in ELT"</b><br>IFU/PIB-Wien<br>Grenzackerstr. 18,<br>A-1100 Vienna, Austria<br>ifu@pib-wien.ac.at or fax 0043 1 60118-4500<br>gordon_lewis@kaplan.com |
| 4th - 6th April                          | <b><u>Using Real Books with Children</u></b><br><b><u>Learning English</u></b><br>University of York   |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> April                    | <b><u>YL SIG Pre- Conference Event (PCE)</u></b><br><b>"Young learners and the CLIL continuum"</b><br>International Centre, Harrogate, UK  |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> – 12 <sup>th</sup> April | <b><u>40<sup>th</sup> Interational IATEFL conference</u></b><br>International Centre, Harrogate, UK  |



She goes to the bakery and she doesn't know that she is lost.

It is a squirrel, she approaches him and asks what his name is.

For a moment she stops to cry and hears one little noise.

The little girl sits down near a tree and starts to cry.

Thinks to the little squirrel. She finds again her street and her parents.

It is a squirrel, she approaches him and asks what his name is.

For a moment she stops to cry and hears one little noise.

The little girl sits down near a tree and starts to cry.