

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Staying Young at Heart

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Whether young or further along in years, no learner wants to sit in a classroom learning something that has no interest to them. Sure, they may get something out of the lesson - pick up a stray vocabulary word here, or a random grammar point there - but ultimately the learner would get more out of a class they enjoyed - or at the very least feel more fulfilled and motivated to continue studying by the end of class. This article will take a closer look at focusing lessons on the learner's wants and needs using activities that are traditionally confined to a classroom of younger learners. After all, the learners are the only reason why the teachers are there to begin with, so it is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure the lessons are focused on the needs of the learners. However, there is nothing wrong with having a little fun while doing so. Most lifelong language learners will appreciate it . . . especially those lifelong learners that continue to stay young at heart.

Learner Autonomy - Give Them What They Want

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Many books have been devoted to the important issue of learner autonomy.

Allowing learners to choose their own topics of study or focus of skills helps with motivation and a greater appreciation for the language they are learning (Brown, 2007; Dornyei, 2001).

All it takes is a simple needs analysis of the learners at the beginning of a course or period of study to determine their interests and needs. Ask the students about their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses, the reasons why they are learning English in the first place, and what they want to be able to do by the end of the course (Brown, 1995). Armed with this information, a teacher can better create more memorable and enjoyable lessons for their learners in a group setting, or help guide their private students down the best road that leads to what they want.

It is very true that lifelong language learners are amongst the most motivated language learners around. However, even the most motivated group of learners appreciates the added incentive of attending a lesson that is focused on their wants and needs.

You're Never Too Old To...

There are so many “youthful” activities that can be done in the classroom to

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match the wants and needs of a learner. Whether it is vocabulary building, expanding knowledge or grammar, or just casual chatting, the choice of activities are endless.

The following are a few traditionally “youthful” suggestions that can be tried with adult learners:

Storytelling (with a twist)

People love telling and listening to stories. Some of the best stories come from those who have been around long enough to see and experience many great things.

Asking learners to tell stories in a classroom setting is not a new thing, but a tried and true activity in a teacher's bag-of-tricks. It is a great way to practice sentence structure, transition words, and many other things.

Why not put a spin on things and add some whimsical creativity? Learners should bring in a small stack of photos they want to share about their personal life. The photos should have a variety of family members, places they have visited, and favourite things they own. Give each of the group members a chance to tell a true story using their photos. When the stories are finished, each group could then shuffle all the photos from all the group members into one pile. After shuffling the pile, each learner will receive an equal number of photos. One learner then starts a new story

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with one of the photos in their hands. Then one by one, the other learners place a card next to the previous one played and continue the story until all the photos have run out.

After the story is finished, the learners can move to a different group, reshuffle the cards and tell another story starring themselves and their classmates. For even more zany fun, slip in a few extremely random photos of various things; for example, spaceships, dragons, ninjas, etc., and listen to the hilarious ways the learners incorporate the strange additions into the stories which star themselves.

Play Games

Games are often viewed as a younger person's activity. From video games, to sports, to board games, the variety never ceases. As we get older, we often find we do not have time to play anymore. This is truly a sad notion, but it can easily be remedied.

So many modern-day board games, along with some of the classics, are perfect for the different needs of lifelong language learners. Even in Japan, these English board games can be easily purchased, sometimes in bookstores that sell English reading material, but one of the most convenient ways to buy them is through Amazon.

Learners who want to work on their vocabulary and spelling could play a

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classic game of *Scrabble*. The game could always be made easier if played with partners.

Dictionaries could also be used if help is needed.

A more modern option is *Mad Libs*, a kind of fill in the blank game. Players provide a variety of random words with different parts of speech (a verb, a plural noun, etc.). These words are then placed into the corresponding blanks in a story provided in the *Mad Libs* booklet. Then the story is read aloud, often with a humorous outcome due to the blind randomness of the words provided.

For learners who enjoy history, there is a great card game called *Timeline: Inventions*. The *Timeline* cards contain images of historical discoveries, inventions, literature, and art which have the picture on one side and the date it was discovered, invented or created on the opposite side. The players must place the cards one by one into the correct chronological position on the playing field, a long row of cards that are played to form a timeline, without looking at the date. If they guess the date correctly, the card goes into the timeline. This game requires not only a knowledge of history, but also deductive skills and problem solving which can be discussed by all the players as they try to determine if the "graphite pencil" was invented before or after the "rubber eraser" or if "writing" came before or after "cave painting".

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Try Some Reading

Reading is a great way to build up reading fluency, vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Nation, 2009). Young reader novels in English are a good way for language learners to gain various language skills. About five years ago, I began teaching a Japanese learner privately. She was in her mid-sixties at the time. She had a large enough vocabulary, but her speaking fluency was a bit low. When doing her needs analysis, we discovered her love of *Harry Potter*. Since extensive reading has been known to be an excellent way to improve language skills (Nation, 2009), I suggested that she read the novels. Naturally she was a bit skeptical of the idea for many reasons - she felt she could not read a whole novel in English let alone seven of them, she felt the language would be too difficult, and her final concern was voiced in this question, "Isn't it a children's book?" I asked her if she had watched any of the movies - she admitted she had. So I asked her why she felt watching a children's movie and reading a children's book were any different. I told her that *Harry Potter* was known to be popular amongst readers of all ages, to the point that editions of the book are sold with more 'sober' adult covers (Pollard, 2003). This student began to read the first *Harry Potter* novel which has just over three hundred pages. Every week she would summarize what she had read, then together we would go over difficult vocabulary,

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answer comprehension questions designed to draw her attention to important points she might have missed, and discuss the story. The triumph of completing the first novel compelled her to continue to the next, then the next, and so on. After months of hard work and dedication, she completed the entire series. One remarkable occurrence could be seen with her reading fluency. After all the practice in reading, this student had manage to read the final novel, which sits at about nine hundred pages or three times the length of the first, in almost the exact amount of time it had taken her to complete the first novel. This series of young reader novels essentially acted as a gateway to more advanced adult novels. To this day, this student has completed reading unabridged English editions of *Sherlock Holmes*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and the *Devil Wears Prada*. She is still continuing to read English to this day.

Conclusion

No matter what age a learner may be, they are never too old to retry something from the past. If a teacher has conducted a needs analysis of a lifelong language learner and found that something traditionally regarded as appealing to youngsters might be appropriate material for their lesson, try it out. What can it hurt? Surely there is nothing wrong with having fun while learning. And sometimes, one of the best

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ways to have fun is to stay young at heart.

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