Little Sponges? Child Development and Foreign Language Learning in Pre-school

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Are they, or aren't they, little sponges?

Research on older learners shows:

- Better grasp of grammar
- More developed learning strategies & skills
- More efficient at acquiring facts & concepts
- More practice in conversational skills
- Easily catch up and exceed younger learners

At the same time:

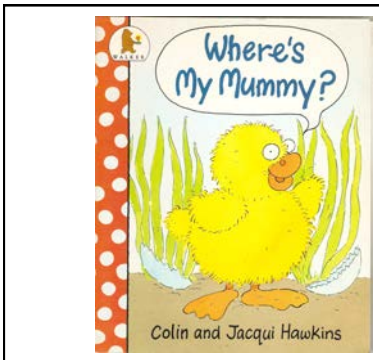
- Correlation between time and proficiency
- Positive effects on pronunciation
- Cognitive advantages
- Metalinguistic awareness
- Improved literacy and oracy in L1
- Enhancement of learning skills & strategies
- Foundations of intercultural competence

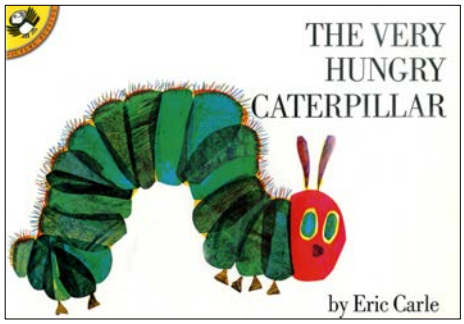
Key child development goals

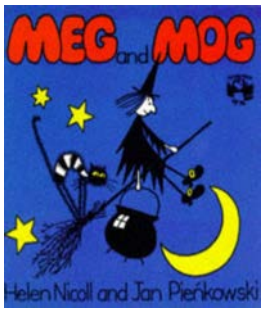
1. Symbolic function
2. Beginning to think and act on internal mental plane
3. Imagination
4. Integration of emotions and thinking
5. Self-regulation
6. Motor skills
7. Pre-literacy and pre-academic skills

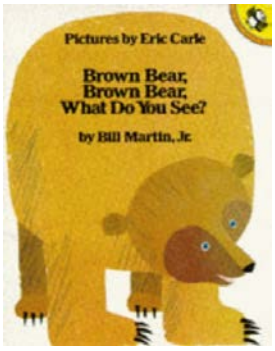
Typical activities to attain these goals:

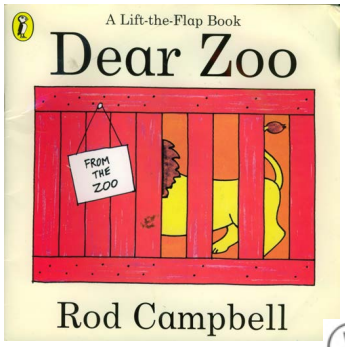
- Make-believe or pretend play
- Games with rules
- Stories and dramatisation
- Puzzles, block-building, modelling
- Art, craft and drawing
- Pre-literacy and pre-academic activities











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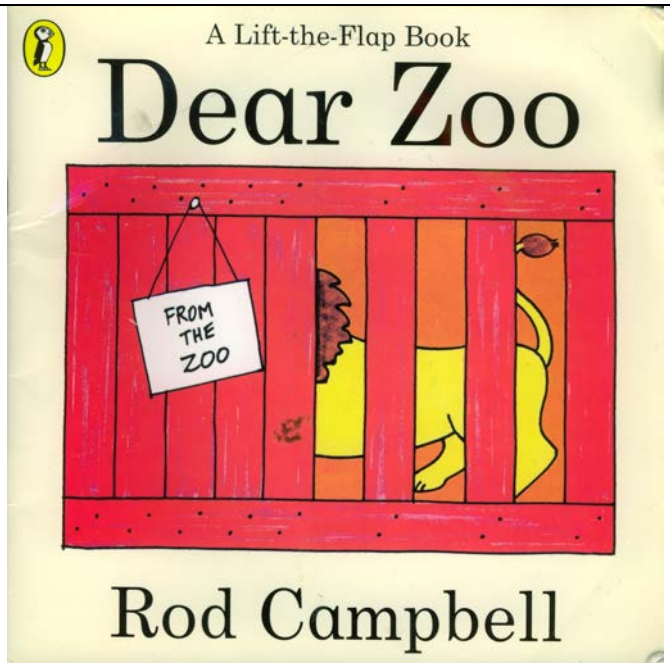

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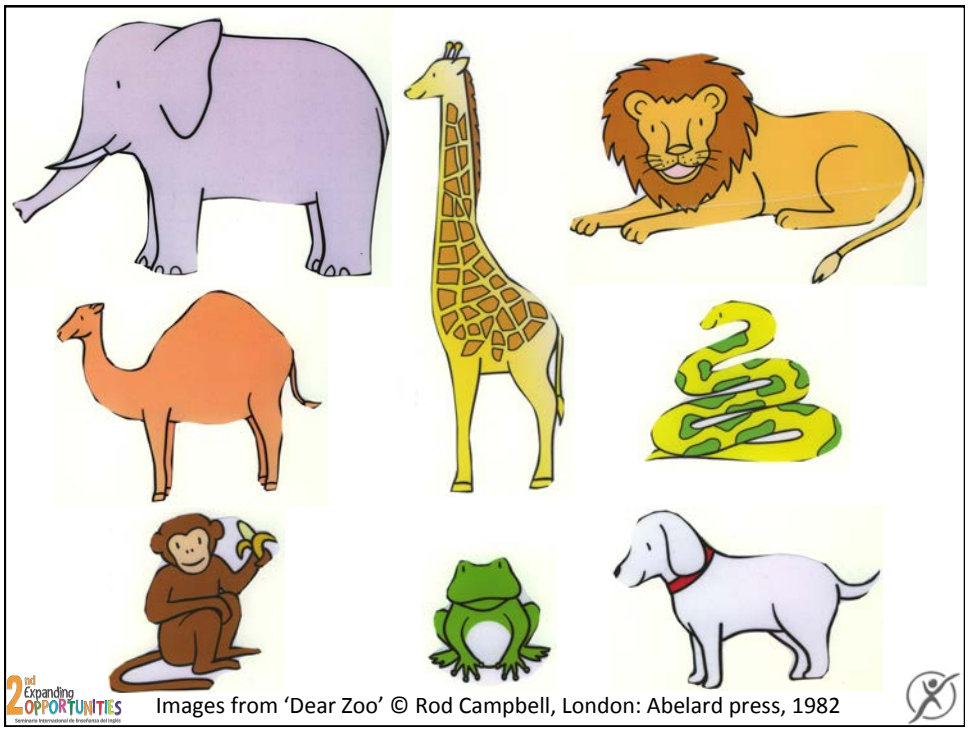
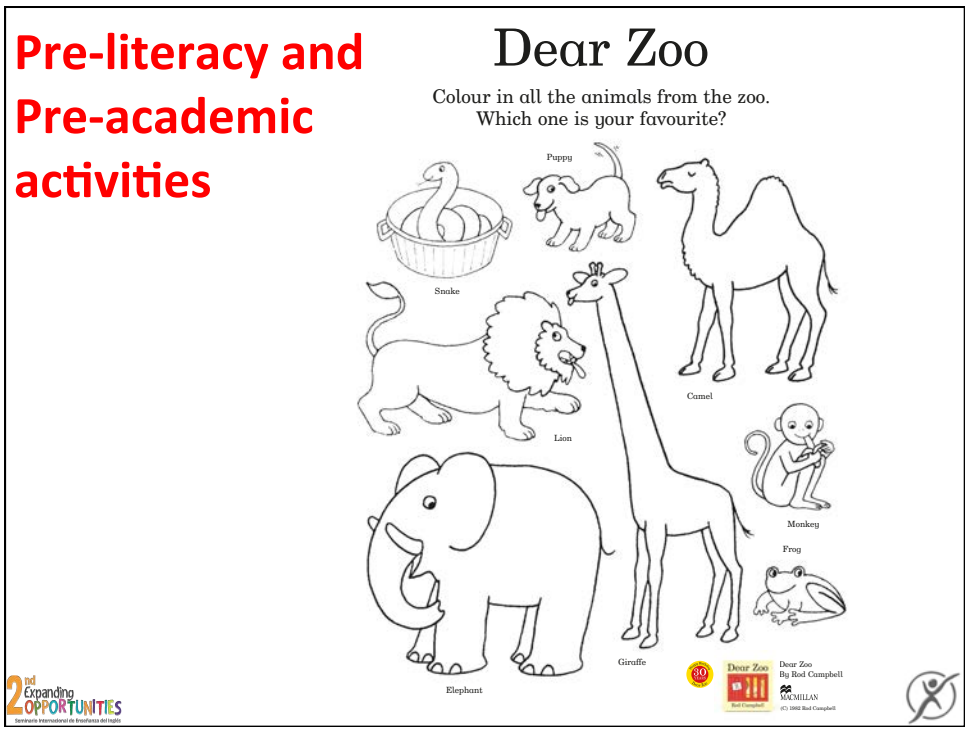


Images from 'Dear Zoo' © Rod Campbell, London: Abelard press, 1982

Pre-literacy and Pre-academic activities



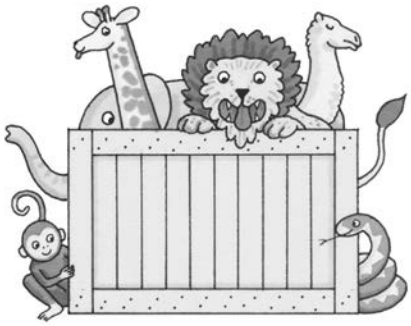
Dear Zoo

Spot the Difference

Can you spot the four differences between the two pictures below?

(If you get really stuck, the answers are upside down, under the pictures)

Picture 1



Picture 2

Differences: 1. Lion's tail 2. Giraffe's ear 3. Lion's paw 4. the Elephants Trunk

Dear Zoo
By Rod Campbell

MACMILLAN

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Example of interactive 'Dear Zoo'

Storytellers	Questioners
• They sent me a(n) …	• A what?
• A(n) …	• Did you keep him?
• He was too … . I sent him back. So they sent me a …	• A what?
• A …	

'Dear Zoo' language content

- **Animals** - *elephant, camel, giraffe, lion, snake, monkey, frog, puppy*
- **Colours** – *yellow, green, red, blue, brown, pink*
- **Adjectives** – *big, tall, fierce, grumpy, scary, naughty, jumpy, perfect*
- **Other nouns:** *box, basket*
- **Irregular past tense** – *wrote, sent, was, kept*
- **Phrasal verb** - sent back
- **Adverb of degree** – too …
- **Conjunction** – So …

'Dear Zoo' in early years ELT syllabus

- **Animals** - *elephant, camel, giraffe, lion, snake, monkey, frog, puppy* ✔
- **Colours** – *yellow, green, red, blue, brown, pink* ✔
- **Adjectives** – ~~*big, tall, fierce, grumpy, scary, naughty, jumpy, perfect*~~
- **Other nouns:** *box, basket* ✔
- ~~**Irregular past tense** – *wrote, sent, was, kept*~~
- ~~**Phrasal verb** - sent back~~
- ~~**Adverb of degree** – too …~~
- ~~**Conjunction** – So …~~

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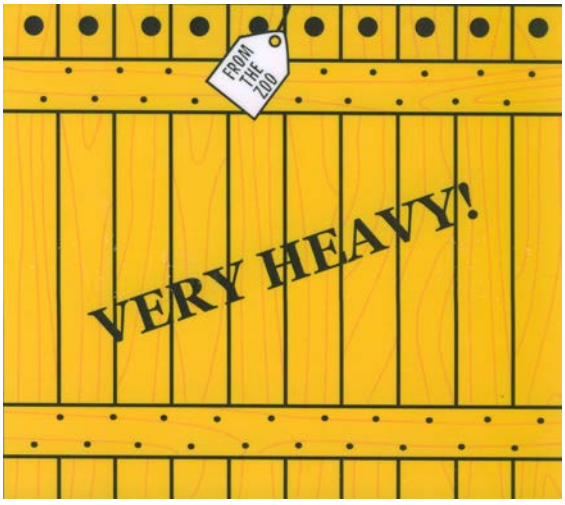
Look. A yellow box. What's in the box?



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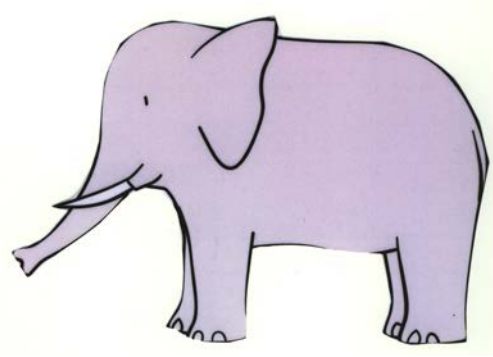
Example of adapted text; image from 'Dear Zoo' © Rod Campbell, London: Abelard press, 1982



It's an elephant!
Hello elephant.

Example of adapted text; image from 'Dear Zoo' © Rod Campbell, London: Abelard press, 1982

Examples of pre-literacy and pre-academic worksheets

- Colour the zoo animals.
- Colour dictation of boxes/baskets.
- Join the dots and name the animals.
- Match the animals to the right boxes/baskets.
- Match initial letters of animals to the pictures.
- Match pictures and and names of animals.
- Match and copy names of animals under the pictures.
- Copy and complete sentences: *It's a* __.
- Circle the odd one out.
- Circle the animals that are the same.
- Draw the next animal in a sequence.

Examples of activities aligned with early years developmental goals

- Drama game: mime the animals and freeze.
- Make a story spinner to use in re-telling story.
- Act out the story.
- Meaningful pre-writing – *Dear Zoo, please send me a …* (draw picture of animal they want).
- Craft: make zoo with playdoh and lollypop sticks.
- Song and authentic culture: *We're going to the zoo.*
- Personalisation and real life experience of the zoo.
- Learn about one animal in the story e.g. elephant or frog.
- Make flap book – choose animals, colours of boxes.
- Construct parallel story – *I wrote to the farm ...*
- Learning review (in L1).

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"With a focus on meaning, messages and communication, natural language use involves breaching nearly all norms of syllabus selection and sequencing based on analysing language."

Andrew Littlejohn, *How Young Learners Learn Language*, IATEFL YLT SIG Newsletter, C&Ts, April 2016

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Key ingredients

Exposure

Context

Interaction

Engagement

The role of language

We need to:

- learn from caretaker talk
- recognise the value of 'private speech'
- make actions verbally explicit
- use language to scaffold learning
- build on children's knowledge of L1
- use positive feedback and praise
- extend and check concepts & language

So, what's the verdict?

Aim for 'optimal conditions' by:

- **Questioning assumptions** about a **language-driven** approach
- Recognising the **limited value** of focusing on **pre-literacy and pre-academic skills**
- **Using language** to **support** young children's **learning and development**

In order to maximise your effectiveness, use a holistic approach and align early foreign language learning with key child development goals!

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Thank you!