

Attention seeking

How can practitioners sustain children's attention and involvement when they don't share a language? *Michael Jones* shows one way

We know that children learn language quickly if they are involved in meaningful activities, particularly with adults and other children. By 'involvement' we mean really focusing, listening, and talking about what they are doing, and about their ideas. But sometimes it can be a real challenge to create opportunities for this 'sustained shared thinking' in lively settings. So what can practitioners do to keep children interested, focused and engaged?

Let's take as an example a session that I led on language development at the Children's Centre at The Mall, in Luton. The Mall is an unusual setting, as it is based in the local shopping centre. There are a regular group of children enrolled at the nursery, but a drop-in facility is also available for parents who want to leave their children there while they go shopping.

As The Mall has restricted access to an outdoor play area, practitioners compensate by leading boisterous activities in the main section of the setting. So, there is probably an above-average amount of background noise, which could affect children's concentration. Over half of the children there are learning English as an additional language, including 35 children from Poland.

It was agreed, with centre manager Pam Swain and centre teacher and Early Language Lead Practitioner Sarah Craigs, to involve the staff in a series of practical activities with the children. As we worked together we could talk about the significance of what we were doing, and its relevance to everyday practice.

I planned activities based on one of my favourites stories, *Cock-a-Moo-Moo* by Juliet Dallas-Conté and Alison Bartlett (Macmillan Children's Books). Set in a farmyard, it features a cockerel who forgets how to crow. All the animals tease him, until one night a fox enters the henhouse and tries to eat all the chickens. Luckily, the cockerel can crow in all the different animal 'languages', and wakes all the animals, who then chase the fox away. It's a repetitive and predictable story, with lots of opportunities for children to name the animals, make animal noises and re-enact the story.

As part of Luton's Every Child a Talker project, we are particularly interested in developing and extending children's vocabulary, in English as well as in their mother tongue.

My aim was to involve the children in story-related activities long enough for them to learn new vocabulary in English, while reinforcing vocabulary from their own languages, through a mixture of talking with adults and with each other.

JOINING IN

I was assigned two members of staff for the morning, including Zita Svec, who speaks Polish. My first job, as leader of the activity, was to find out how to name all the animals in Polish (I wrote them down on a piece of paper so I would remember).

We decided that 'dangerous' would be a word that we would encourage the children to use, in English and Polish, as a way of describing the fox. We had with us a large bag of soft farm animal toys and hand puppets, a collection of plastic farm animals and two copies of the book.

On the other side of the nursery

we had covered a table with large sheets of white paper, stuck down with masking tape, ready for a related small-world play.

We put down two colourful rugs in the book corner, which immediately gave passing children the feeling that something interesting was going to happen. Then we laid out the large toys, and waited to see which children would come and join in. Immediately we had a group of five children, including two from Poland. One of them, a four-year-old boy called Blazej, was at an early stage of learning English.

We encouraged the children to play with and name the animals and engaged them in conversation. This was initially adult-led, but we quickly sat back so the children could talk to each other or the adults, as they wished.

I did my best to name the animals in Polish, much to Blazej's amusement. After ten minutes I collected up the large animals and laid a large coloured cloth on the floor. At this point a few children moved away, but their places were quickly taken by children who had been watching. Blazej stayed.

PLAYING A GAME

What followed was an adult-led activity, and I let the children know by saying, 'We're going to play a game now. We will take turns and the grown-ups will help you.'

I asked the children to sit round the cloth, and to close their eyes. While



Children create their own role-play farmyard with small-world animals

the children tried very hard not to look, I hid our collection of small plastic farm animals under the cloth. We took turns to feel under the cloth, take out an animal, say its name and say what noise it made.

This proved to be very exciting. Once everyone had had two turns each, we encouraged the children to play with the animals. This was adult-supported. Blazej at this point became very interested in the various dogs, and Zita chatted with him about them in English and Polish. He taught me how to say 'dog' (pies) and 'dangerous' (niebezpieczny) in Polish.

We discovered that a few of the children were unsure of the difference between a duck, a swan and a goose, so we were able to talk about this as they played with the animals.

After this ten-minute activity I asked the children to choose a toy to hold, as I was going to tell the story of *Cock-a-Moo-Moo*. I told them, 'I will tell you a story now. But if you want

to join in, you will need to stay for the whole story.' One child moved away, (he rejoined us later on), but two others joined in.

MAKING A FARM

We had now been together as a group for 30 minutes, and the children's interest and involvement was still high. A couple of children were keen to look at the books on their own, and to match up their small toys with the pictures.

At this point we collected up the small animals and books and moved as a group to the table at the other side of the nursery. Blazej came with us. Our plan here was to give the children thick coloured felt pens, and encourage them to make a 'farm' for all their animals.

We intended to begin the activity as adult-led, changing to adult-supported once the children were engaged. This happened fairly quickly, as they were very keen to draw and play. Soon we had a pond for the ducks, geese, and swans, and a brown field for the pigs



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and a green one for the other animals.

Blazej found some corks and lolly sticks and said he had made 'a fence to stop the dogs from running away. They are not dangerous' (said to Zita in Polish, which she interpreted for me). As the children created the farm, we adults were able to talk with the children about what they were doing, and support them to play with each other.

Gradually, we were able to move away, though one of us stayed nearby to observe and support when necessary. The farm activity was still going strong when it was time to tidy up 30 minutes later (and Blazej was still there!).

Afterwards we discussed the value of these activities. We had all been impressed by the way the children had remained involved and enjoying themselves. We had combined creativity, story and language in a way that maximised learning.

Sarah, Zita and the other practitioners felt that Blazej had been so involved because the activities made total sense to him, and he possibly recognised that he could learn a lot of English by taking part.

Finding the balance between adult-led and adult-supported activities, based on a story, with children free to come and go as they choose, helped to promote involvement and encourage lengthy and detailed conversations, as well as stimulate creativity. ■

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STARTING POINTS

To support children's involvement:

- Assign two adults to the activity, for its duration – this enables quality conversations
- Choose a popular story with lots of action, and provide soft toys and small-world toys to illustrate the story
- Find out how to say the key vocabulary in another language, and think about how to involve children who are at various levels of development – this will ensure maximum involvement

by all children

- Be aware of when to change between leading and supporting the children throughout the activities
- Let the children know how you expect them to behave in an activity: listening and responding, or playing and talking together
- Plan to repeat the process, with activities for extension, over a period of a week
- Be ready to take the activity in whatever direction the children choose!