

it accepts as input any combination of text, audio, and image and generates any combination of text, audio, and image outputs” (OpenAI, 2024, para. 1). Although I believe that the assertions in this article—that advances in AI will not negate foreign language learning—still hold, this release shows just how quickly AI technologies are developing. By the time this article is published, there will likely be even more advanced models, with even more human-like capabilities.

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[JALT PRACTICE] YOUNGER LEARNERS



Martin Sedaghat & Emily MacFarlane

The Younger Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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“Where’s my Magic Wand?”: Listening Matching Tasks Mediated by Roleplay with Very Young Learners

Pretend play is a powerful tool for learning and can be catered to learners of different levels, even true beginners, through teacher mediation. Very young language learners (aged 2-7) engage mostly with speaking and listening skills, focus on one aspect of a task, have high motivation and less

awareness of how language works (Pinter, 2012). Drama can provide children with an authentic environment and multi-sensory contextual cues that may accommodate and leverage these learners’ characteristics for language learning (Bland, 2015). Make-believe, also called pretend play or imaginary play, while less formal than drama, has similar characteristics and may provide similar benefits. It has even been argued that activities like make-believe play a central role in linguistic and social development (Cook, 2000).

To illustrate, my learners are eager to play shop-keeper. When a desk becomes a shop and they stock it with food to purchase, my role as a shopper is clear and they readily guess at what I’m trying to buy, even if I only speak in English. The interaction is so obvious it could be completed with physical

action alone. Adding appropriate language enriches the context and enables negotiation, description, and playfulness.

Teachers can leverage this power of context and make-believe to facilitate listening matching tasks. These roleplays reinforce the vocabulary being matched because of how saliently it is integrated into the situation. The following procedure is based on the ideas above to maximize the learning opportunities for a variety of topics using pretend play.

Procedure

The activity format is essentially a listening matching task embedded within a roleplay. The basic procedure is to engage a learner in a roleplay with the teacher, wherein they listen to the teacher and select an appropriate vocabulary item by choosing a flashcard or other representation of the item said or described. After the learner selects the item, they will either give it to the teacher or otherwise use it within the context of the roleplay. Once one learner has accomplished an appropriate selection, another learner is called to take a turn. This continues until all learners have had a chance to participate.

In my experience, there are a few important considerations that seem to promote a positive learning experience. The following principles result from trial and error in my teaching contexts. Some, like the first and third, may be less appropriate in different teaching situations. Nevertheless, I believe attention to these details is important, even if you take a different approach.

1. Start With Flashcard-Style Vocabulary Work

The procedure above is intended to follow, not replace, the introduction of vocabulary. Therefore, I suggest pre-teaching relevant vocabulary with flashcards, realia, or other tangible representations of the items like toys. I believe that multiple repetitions of stimulus, by showing the item, response, by cuing the learners to say the vocabulary item, and feedback, by praising, reteaching, or requesting repetition with each vocabulary item, prepare learners for the matching task.

I use materials in the roleplay that are the same or as similar as possible to those that were used during the introduction of the vocabulary. This can prevent confusion over minor differences like a green instead of red apple or a fedora as opposed to a baseball cap. Young learners can become preoccupied with details that are not the primary focus, so I recommend avoiding introducing new differences.

2. Set-Up a Roleplay Where the Vocabulary Forms the Object of Interaction

When you set up the roleplay, making the situation obvious helps learners understand their role. This could be done with elaborate props, sets, and costumes, but it can be accomplished equally effectively with much less preparation. There are three aspects to effective set-up: demarcating space; illustrating roles and needs; and providing for repetition.

In make-believe, spaces can be demarcated to represent other places in a shared fiction. Acting and pantomime support the construction of these shared fictions. A rug could represent a garden bed or a castle. If you are pretending to dig up vegetables, learners can easily imagine it as a garden bed. If you pretend to patrol the rug's perimeter, fighting off dragons with your imaginary sword, learners can easily imagine that the rug is a castle. Walls, chairs, whiteboards, or other classroom objects can define these spaces.

Roleplay situations also require people with needs or wants. Representing these needs and wants through actions and speech supports the learners' understanding of what is happening. For example, you are walking around the "garden", poking at the ground and saying, "Where were those... carrots!?" If there happens to be a flashcard portraying carrots on the rug, it is likely that students who remember what carrots were will realize that you are searching for them and will be happy to pick the card up and give it to you. Similarly, if you are visibly having trouble fighting off a dragon with a sword, your exasperated comment, "Where is my magic wand!?" will help them understand that they should find the item you are calling for and hand it to you, like any good squire would.

Lastly, an appropriate selection by one learner should not complete the roleplay. The situation continues until all learners have participated. This repetition supports learners who are watching and waiting for their turns and builds humor (see also Section 7).

This principle of making the situation obvious through careful set-up is perhaps the most important. The learners' interest relies upon their understanding of the situation, your needs or wants, and their role in finding the appropriate item. It is further built through the repeated participation of each class member, and the teacher's reactions and continued requests.

3. Interact with Learners One at a Time

By calling each student, one by one, to take turns in the make-believe, they are given a chance to feel

accomplished in completing the task. The students watching will undoubtedly be shouting out answers to the current participant, and this support can be helpful especially for less confident learners. If it is a problem, it can be addressed by reminding the students that each learner will have a turn.

As both the teacher and the person deciding which item to request from each learner, you have considerable control over the difficulty of the task. It can help to call more capable learners who may enjoy a challenge first when all options remain unselected. On the other hand, by waiting until only a few choices remain, a less confident learner may have an easier time making an appropriate selection. When a learner is uncomfortable participating alone, it can be appropriate to allow them to act as a pair depending on individual and cultural factors.

4. Make the Vocabulary Salient

There are several strategies for increasing the salience of input. Aural enhancement can be done by pausing briefly before saying the desired vocabulary item, saying it with strong emphasis, or repeating the input. While I believe them to be effective for very young learners, it should be noted that the research is not conclusive on the benefits of these strategies (for a review see Bloomfield et. al, 2010). Assistance can also be provided through gestures. For example, you can say, “Oh no! The monsters are so strong! I need my... wand! Yes, the... wand!” while swishing and flicking as if holding a wand. In this way, you can stay in character and make the listening more salient.

5. Learner Output Through Selection and Manipulation

While oral output is important in language learning, it is not necessary for this activity. Requiring only physical selection and manipulation of flashcards or the like keeps the hurdle to participation low and motivation levels high. This type of output is similar to that targeted by Asher (1969) in the early stages of his well-known TPR methodology that focuses on action-based output in response to listening-based input, especially for beginners.

6. Provide in-Context, Real-Time Feedback

Upon selection of the appropriate item, you can give positive reinforcement through language, facial expressions, and gesture. For example, you can say, “Yes! That’s it! That’s my wand! Now I can protect the castle!” Upon inappropriate selection, you can similarly provide negative reinforcement and offer

another chance and more clues to select the appropriate item, as in the example, “Oh no, that’s my staff. I need the wand! It’s small and blue.”

7. Let it be Funny: Incorporate Repetition and Allow Failure

“Wow. This dragon is really tough. I’ve tried my sword, bow and arrows, wand, and staff. Maybe I need ... my magic hat!” Absurd comic repetitiveness can increase learners’ enjoyment and engagement. Repetition builds comedy when it defies expectation - the learners expect the next student’s task to satisfy the teacher’s need, but it never quite does until the end of the activity.

An individual learner can also try repeatedly until they succeed. Each failure means more opportunities for context-appropriate input. Focusing on having fun and enjoying the make-believe can help learners stay motivated when they fail, and more often than not they will. The comic atmosphere also supports anxious learners and can be further built through overemphasis in voice and body language in your reactions. In fact, some learners have intentionally chosen the wrong item to see my emphatic reactions and playacting. I try to encourage an atmosphere where mistakes are welcome, and this can be a great activity to reinforce that attitude. When learners become immersed in the roleplay, they may engage beyond the simple matching task, playacting their role to a greater degree than required. This should be a welcome behavior especially if they are interacting based on the communicative and interactive contexts. I encourage it until it interferes with turn taking.

Situations for Roleplay

Throughout the explanation above, I referred to two example situations: vegetable gardening and fighting dragons. Next, I will provide six more example situations involving food, animals, and clothing. Each includes roles for teacher and learners, vocabulary to treat, suggestions for setting-up the space, suggestions for acting out the situation, clues to facilitate the matching task, and possible feedback.

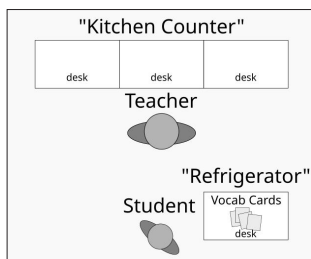
Food Situation 1: Cooks in the Kitchen

- **teacher role:** chef
- **learner roles:** cooking assistants
- **items represented:** food, vegetables, ingredients
- **setting the space (see Figure 1):** desks to serve as the counter, cooking range, and sink, with a separate space for ingredients or a refrigerator

- **acting:** Stand (or kneel) facing the counter and busily chop, wash, and stir.
- **language clues and context:** “The next order is for spaghetti. I need... tomatoes.”
- **positive feedback:** “Yes, these tomatoes are perfect!” Pretend to slice, wash, or otherwise use the ingredient.
- **negative feedback:** “No, no. This is a potato. I need tomatoes!” Toss the wrong ingredient back to the collection of ingredients.

Figure 1

Example Space for Cooks in the Kitchen

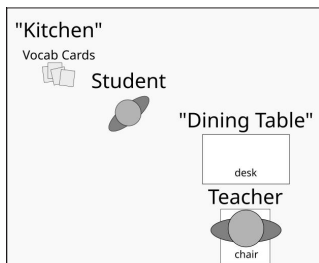


Food Situation 2: Voracious Restaurant-Goer

- **teacher role:** diner
- **learner roles:** serving staff
- **items represented:** food dishes, and drinks
- **setting the space (see Figure 2):** a desk to serve as the diner’s table
- **acting:** Sit down, wipe your hands, look at a menu, and wave down a server.
- **language clues and context:** “I’m really hungry. First, I want a salad.”
- **positive feedback:** “Oh, yes!” Pretend to gobble up the food before ordering the next item.
- **negative feedback:** “No, this is not what I want!” Shake your head, waving your hand dismissively.

Figure 2

Example Space for Voracious Restaurant-Goer

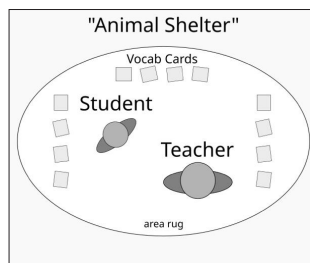


Animal Situation 1: Never Too Many Pets

- **teacher role:** pet buyer
- **learner roles:** animal caretaker
- **items represented:** animals or other creatures.
- **setting the space (see Figure 3):** An area rug can demarcate the location. Desks can serve as cages or just arrange the flash cards (or other representations) in an interesting, pet-shop like arrangement on the floor to walk around.
- **acting:** Look around at the pets, smell them, smile at some, grimace at others, pet some, and get bit by others.
- **language clues and context:** “I want a soft, fluffy pet. Maybe... a rabbit,” or similarly use descriptive language, gestures, and body language to support the selection.
- **positive feedback:** “It’s perfect! The best rabbit I’ve ever seen!”
- **negative feedback:** “Hmm. It’s a little too small and stinky. I think it’s a mouse, but I really want a rabbit right now.”
- **alternative:** For higher levels, the teacher could describe the pet (as above: “soft, fluffy”) and let the student select based on the description alone.

Figure 3

Example Space for Never Too Many Pets



Animal Situation 2: Animals are Loose!

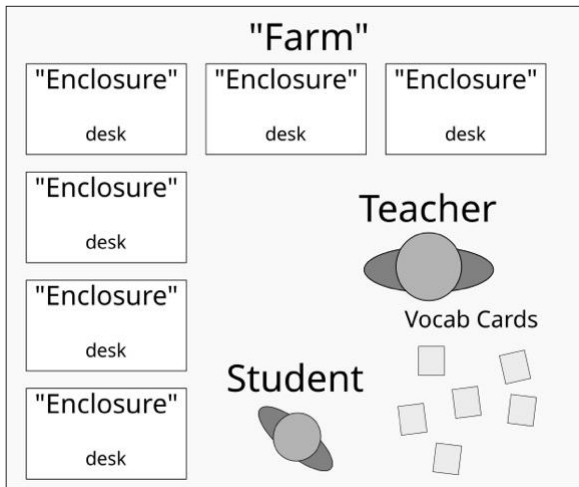
- **teacher role:** farmer or zookeeper
- **learner roles:** farm hands or zoo staff
- **items represented:** animals or other creatures
- **setting the space (see Figure 4):** Desks are set to represent cages or enclosures arranged in an orderly manner. The animal representations should be scattered around outside of the enclosures.
- **acting:** Hectically run about, frown, and panic.
- **language clues and context:** “Where are the

llamas? I can't find them. Their cage is empty!"

- **positive feedback:** "Yes. Thank you. Now the llamas are back in their cage. Safe and sound." Pretend to put the animal in the enclosure and lock it.
- **negative feedback:** "Oh, those are the quails. They don't go in this cage. Where are the llamas?!" Give gestures or sound clues if necessary.
- **alternative:** To practice animal sounds, the teacher could take the role of the animals' fellows and give clues by making the sound of each animal.

Figure 4

Example Space for Animals are Loose

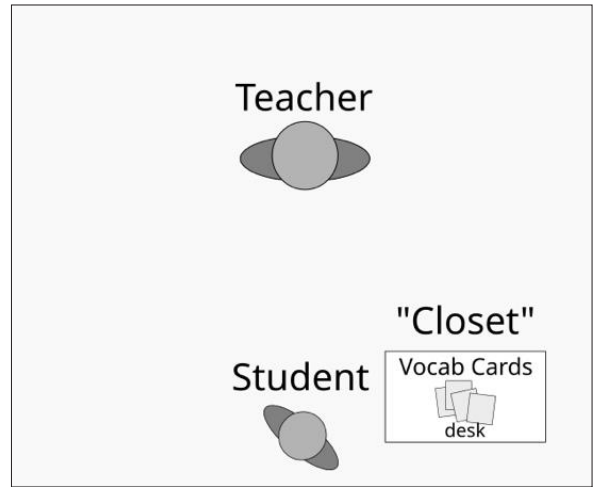


Clothing Situation 1: I'm So Cold!

- **teacher role:** a cold person
- **learner roles:** friends with lots of clothes
- **items represented:** clothing and warm items
- **setting the space (see Figure 5):** a desk to serve as a closet
- **acting:** Shiver a lot, rub your body as if to warm it up.
- **language clues and context:** "Brrr. My feet are sooo cold, I wish I had socks!"
- **positive feedback:** "Oh, so much warmer. Thank you." Pretend to wear the item before realizing *another* body part is still quite cold.
- **negative feedback:** "No, not a hat. My feet are cold, I need socks" Point at the body part if necessary.

Figure 5

Example Space for I'm so Cold



Clothing Situation 2: What Fickle Weather!

- **teacher role:** someone getting dressed to go out
- **learner roles:** friends with lots of clothes and accessories
- **items represented:** clothing and weather-related accessories (umbrella, sunglasses, etc.)
- **setting the space (see Figure 6):** a desk to serve as a closet, a space near a window or a vertical surface to represent a window like a whiteboard with weather cards
- **acting:** Look out the window and at your clothes and shake your head.
- **language clues and context:** "Oh, no. It's raining. I need my poncho." Once you're well prepared for one weather scenario, look out the window and gasp in disbelief because the weather has changed. "What?! It's sunny now?"
- **positive feedback:** "Great! A poncho. Just what I need for the rain. Thank you." Pretend to wear the item.
- **negative feedback:** "No, not that yet. First, I need a poncho." Gesture if necessary.



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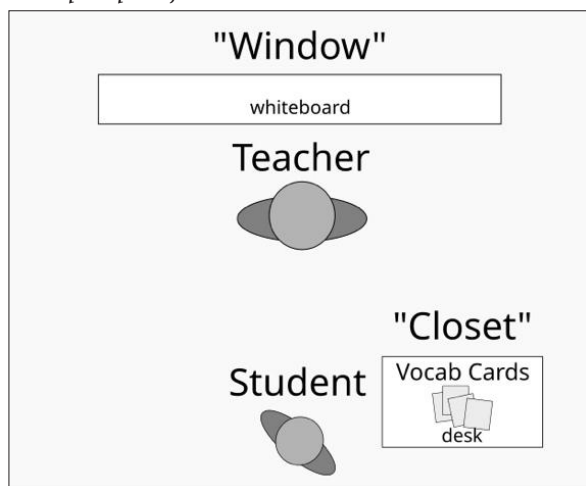
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Figure 6

Example Space for What Fickle Weather!



Conclusion

The template for activities described above gives teachers a tool to facilitate the needs of very young learners in a communicative setting. Teachers could apply this to many other situations: a doctor telling nurses to bandage injured body parts; a busy office boss who needs stationery; or a writer unable to find the letters to make a word. It could be performed as a dramatic post-reading project for picture books as proposed by Sedaghat (2023). For example, Carle's (1969) eponymous caterpillar is a voracious eater much like the restaurant goer introduced above, and Campbell's (1982) boy who wrote to the zoo fits the pattern equally well.

This template emerged as one of my most effective tools for very young learners. They love to pretend and do so easily. It is surprisingly easy to find

situations where you as a teacher can take on a role with obvious needs that the learners can fulfill by finding the right item. Interactively mediating the tasks is not only helpful for the learners, but also a rare opportunity to rekindle the joy of immersive make-believe.

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