

Guide - Working with Young Learners

What is a Young Learner (YL) Student?

The term young learner is interpreted differently around the world. But most commonly YL is defined as **a child from the age of 9 to 14.**

How is Teaching English to Young Learners Different From Teaching English to Adults?

There are **similarities** between teaching young learners and teaching adults. Like adults, young learners are individuals with their own characteristics, likes, dislikes and beliefs. It is therefore difficult to generalize and summarize about teaching them.

However, there are **six key areas where teaching young learners differs** from having session adults:

- YLs learn best through imitating, memorizing, acquiring intuitively through repeated exposure and production in engaging activities.
- YLs learn best through play and other enjoyable activities.
- YLs are not capable of focusing on one task for long periods of time. Therefore activities must be short, varied, motivating and interesting.
- YLs learn through the here-and-now principle, which implies that they need to be supported to communicate through purposeful, real, here-and-now experiences and activities.
- Motivation may appear to be low, as YLs do not have clear goals of why they want to master English.
- Young learners often learn slowly and forget quickly. The popular belief that young learners find it somehow much easier to learn than adults is widespread, but not supported by any kind of evidence.

Important Tips for Working With YLs

- **Establish a connection with your YL.** Learn about your buddy and how they learn. Show them that you care enough to get to know them individually.
- **Change activities often.** Plan sessions with a variety of components. Studies reveal that YLs can only focus for about 10-15 minutes at a time. If you try to

plan activities that last longer than this, you're going to have more classroom management issues. Instead, try to keep activities short and change things up often.

- **Use interactive activities.** Because children love discovering things, and because they respond well to being asked to use their imagination, they may well be involved in puzzle-like activities, in drawing things, in games, in minimal physical movement or in songs.
- **Introduce new vocabulary with visual aids.** Teaching YLs what an item looks like when introducing it will help students recognise it more easily in the future and will make a learner feel more excited about the word.
- **Repeat, repeat and repeat.** Practice makes perfect and repeating structures and language is extremely important for language mastering. When you introduce a new concept, it is vital to then refer back to it when building on the knowledge in the following session.
- **Create routines.** Young learners need to know what to expect and how to act. That is why you need to implement routines and procedures. For example, start every new session with reviewing and revising, common greetings and asking common questions.
- **Create stories.** Stories are one of the simplest and richest sources of language input. YLs both enjoy and benefit from stories told and reproduced in a foreign language.
- **Discipline.** Establish required session rules in a friendly manner for good session management.
- **Be truthful.** Explain to learners why certain activities may be valuable. Let them agree if they want to complete them or not.
- **Make a reward system.** Motivation through the use of praise and reward systems not only makes the learner feel happy when getting something right but can boost their confidence and help them remain focused and work effectively.

References:

1. [*The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners*](#)
2. *Cambridge TKT: Young learners. Handbook for teachers.*
3. *A course in English Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press 2012*