

Teaching and Practicing Numbers

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Introduction

When it comes to teaching new vocabulary, teachers are often puzzled as to how to present the new items in a way that will appeal to the pupils and make them learn effectively and at the same time joyfully. Throughout the years, I have tried several different teaching styles, techniques and approaches and found out it is almost impossible to find the perfect way. But what it comes down to in the end is simplicity and diversity.

In my opinion, there's nothing more efficient than changing the activities, mixing and matching various strategies and thus keeping the learners interested and motivated.

Here's a short list of various approaches to teaching numbers. I would like to point out that some of them have worked perfectly with all of the pupils while some proved of use in some classes and failed in others. It is all a matter of practice and sooner or later the "correct" style will have shown itself and will enrich your teaching and give it some extra flavor we have all been looking for.

Listening to Numbers

Children have an extraordinary ability to memorize the words and phrases they hear and thus the importance of a proper input is even greater. The better the input, the better the output. Therefore clear and accurate presentation of the words' pronunciation should be provided for the pupils. Either a teacher may read out the numbers aloud or another media could be used, such as a CD recording. Each number should be repeated a few times, allowing the kids to remember the correct pronunciation.

Repetition of Drills

After the input has been sufficient and each number has been presented to the pupils a few times, it is time for practice. At the beginning, it is probably a good idea to involve the whole class in repeating the numbers. Children work as a group and by taking an active part in choral repetition and being one of the many involved in this process, pupils build up their confidence so eventually we may choose pairs of students to say the numbers and then even individuals. In order to make this activity a bit more lively, we may try changing the pace and the volume. Pupils love that and follow accordingly.

Numbers on Flashcards

Frequent repetition practice can become dull so actions should be taken to keep the class motivated and creative. After making sure the class is confident naming the numbers, bringing in flashcards is always a nice option. Illuminated pictures of numbers can be put to use in a number of ways, the most simple being connected to a very simple question: "What number can you see?" The pupils first answer together and later answer individually. I suggest starting with the correct order (e. g. numbers from 1 to 20), then mixing the flashcards a bit, slowly uncovering each "hidden" number and making them guess which one is hidden. Every now and then we also play the which-one-is-missing game where I hide one of the flashcards and then the pupils have to guess which one it is. This game is lots of fun and they never get tired of it. This is also a nice way to end a lesson.

The Fingers Game

Once acquainted with the numbers, we may try simple calculations. Step by step various techniques are uncovered and applied. Usually I start the fingers game by showing them, for example, three fingers and they have to tell me how many they can see. After playing this for a while, it is their turn to show me the number of fingers I say. It is best for the pupils to close their eyes while doing

the exercise (thus preventing them from looking to their neighbor and cheating). Once I see that no mistakes are made, we start practicing simple calculations. With their eyes closed they answer my “calculation questions” such as: “What’s $5 + 5$?” Either the solution is shown with fingers or said out loud. The last part of the game is the one the pupils particularly like. Namely, they become the teachers and make calculations. Their peers have to answer them correctly – either by showing fingers again or by saying out loud the solutions.

In My Bag I've Got...

This is a game of guessing and predicting and it involves so much more than the knowledge of numbers. We can include a wide array of new vocabulary items (things such as stationery, toys, and the like). It can evolve into a memory game where pupils have to remember the items from the bag and then repeat them – either orally or in writing and/or drawing. After we have finished discovering the contents of my bag, it is their turn to talk about their satchels’ contents, which is usually a very lively activity everybody enjoys. You may be surprised what some pupils bring to school ... The “I’ve got” and “(s)he’s got” structures can be practiced here as well.

How Many ... Can You See in the Classroom?

Applying the acquired knowledge onto real things from our surrounding is always a good starting point. Pupils love searching for answers and finding solutions to different questions. A nice way of making them be careful and attentive to details is by asking them questions about the classroom, e. g.: “How many windows can you see?” Then individual pupils ask the questions, the point being to ask as many different questions as possible and to use as many different numbers as possible. Afterwards the game can be continued with their eyes closed – this part is really lots of fun for the class and they never get tired of it. As for their homework, I often give them the task of writing about the things in class, trying to find something for each number up to (for example) twenty. Checking the homework next time we meet is always enjoyable, believe me.

Recording of Learner's Speech

Once the numbers have been practiced sufficiently, it might be nice to record the pupils’ pronunciation. Counting may be recorded in isolation or a song/a rhyme/a chant on numbers may be learnt by heart and then performed in front of the class. The recording can be listened to immediately after the production has taken place and/or at the end of a school year as a kind of sum-up of what they have learnt. Pupils’ active involvement during the recording process is music to every teacher’s ears and hearing themselves speak English is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. A teacher, though, should try to find rhymes and songs that are easy enough for all the pupils to memorize for their first contact with a foreign language should be enjoyable, motivating and rewarding – which sets a great basis for further development.

Conclusion

There are numerous ways of teaching and practicing numbers in a young learners’ classroom and the only trick is to find the right balance between the various approaches and techniques and thus make each lesson a motivating, aspiring, creative, communicative and enjoyable experience. There are no rules as to how to mix and match the games and strategies, but be sure that the pupils’ reactions and the extent of their active involvement will help you understand what they like, what they want and (last but not least) what they need in order to learn a foreign language effectively.