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How can we encourage our learners to feel self-confident?

Jeanne Perrett

The small things

Let's start with the physical comfort of our students. Having the room properly heated or cooled, asking if they would like the window open, making sure everyone has had some water or checking to see if anyone needs to go to the bathroom or wash their hands only takes a minute at the beginning of the lesson and it helps our children to know that their welfare is our concern.

Then making sure that everyone has their books, praising them for being organised or having their pencils sharpened and ready; these things seem trivial but they count. They count because we are acknowledging the fact that it isn't always easy to get up and ready for school every morning, day after day and that just managing that well is an achievement.

So, starting by checking the small things helps to give our students a feeling of well-being before the lesson has even got going.

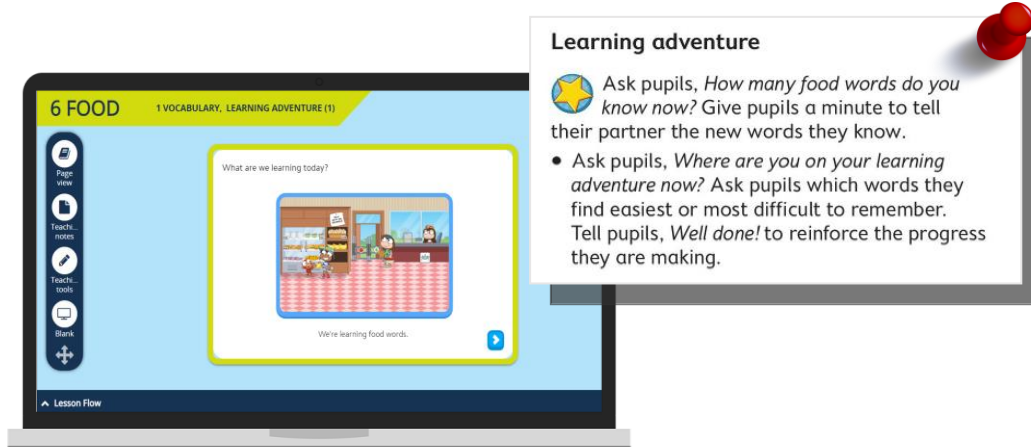
Clarity and familiarity

Be clear. Be clear about what you are all going to do and why you are going to do it. There is no such thing as 'the obvious' when it comes to learning. For example, you know that English is a language spoken internationally but primary aged students may have no concept at all of what 'internationally' means, and they may never have considered the concept of language

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itself. So, we must state the 'obvious' and do it in ways which are meaningful to the children, through videos, pictures and relatable examples. This goes for everything; what a verb is, how we form negative statements, what question marks indicate and what today's lesson

aims are. Whatever they need to know, we need to state it clearly and, when they have forgotten, we simply tell them again, without ever making them feel that they 'should' have remembered. They forget - we remind. That's our job.



Pic. Learning adventure stage of the lesson from Poptropica English Islands Level 2. Image of the Presentation Tool.

Then there is the familiarity of a routine. Apart from making us feel reassured that we know what is happening, routines also feed into the innate need for repetition. Young children want their favourite bedtime stories to be told in the same way each night and they will pop their heads up to correct us if we do something differently. That repetition is part of practice; doing, saying or hearing something again and again until we are completely sure that we know it. Most teachers don't need reminding of this, but it might be useful to remember that within that routine one can also have surprises. In fact, a five minute 'something different' slot could be built into your routine. This could be a fun quiz or game or song and dance. One simple way of managing this is to write the names of different 'surprise activities' on pieces of card, put them into a pot and let a different student pick a card each day. Or your coursebook may provide such surprises, such as the Pop Quiz in Poptropica English Islands.

Pop quiz

Revise *Do you like... ?* with a guessing game. Choose a food flashcard and hide it behind your back. Pupils guess by asking, *Do you like (fish)?* Reply, *No, I don't.* until pupils guess the card correctly, when you reply, *Yes, I do.* Pupils can then have a turn at hiding a card.

Pop quiz

Put the food wordcards in a bag. Pupils pass the bag around while some music is playing. Stop the music. The pupil with the bag picks out a card and makes a sentence with the food item on it, e.g. *I like beans for lunch. I don't like cereal for breakfast.* Play the music again and repeat.

Pop quiz

Create actions for the chant. Mime eating a chicken drumstick or peeling a banana, thumbs up for *like*, shake your head for *don't like*, etc. Play the chant (CD2, Track 55) again. Pupils chant and do the actions.

Pic. Pop quiz ideas from Poptropica English Islands Level 2 course. Source – Teacher's Book.

Room to manoeuvre

We all feel more confident if we know that we are free to experiment and, within that experimentation, to make mistakes. It can't be stated often enough that we will only ever learn something by doing it wrong, often many times, before we do it right. It's possible that the message is even more important nowadays when we see and hear

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perfect versions of whatever has been created - music, cookery, writing to name but a few - especially on social media. The learning process is not brought to our attention as often as the result and the results are often digitally altered to look more impressive. We need to remind our children of this and make them feel good about their efforts, however small and however halting. Peer pressure often plays a part in a lack of self-confidence; you only need one mocking 'friend' to put you off. So, we must be vigilant in noticing little glances or whispered asides and praise the majority of the students who are being quietly accepting or showing encouragement.

Space to flourish

Finally, confidence in our language learning abilities will soar when we know we can make the language our own and use it in the way that we want to. This goes beyond personalizing activities, which can be done at any level (What's your favourite food? Do you like tomatoes?) and is dependent on the teacher noticing and accepting what individual children are really interested in.

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So, for example, if we continue with the example of food, a sporty child might be interested in what famous sports people have for breakfast or which foods give us stamina. A child who is interested in nature might want to know what birds and animals eat. For this to happen, first we need to notice their interests, show enthusiasm for what they are finding out and encourage them to share what they have learnt with the class.

Author:

Jeanne Perrett has been working in the language teaching sector for over thirty-five years as a teacher, school owner, publisher and writer and is the author of many acclaimed pre-primary and primary EFL series. She has trained teachers all over the world and frequently presented at professional conferences. Jeanne graduated from Sussex University with a degree in English Literature and has lived in Greece since 1981. Apart from her professional experience, she draws a lot on the practical knowledge she has gained as the mother of four children and now as the grandmother of five. Jeanne is one of the authors of the Now I Know series, published by Pearson.

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