5 Early foreign language learning

5.1 Didactics for early foreign language education

The core of early foreign language learning (vvto English) is that children learn in a playful manner, closely linked to the age and the zone of proximal development. Frea Janssen-Vos' vision follows this line: play is an activity which teaches children to cope with the world and adults' rules such as language and social relations. According to Rita Kohnstamm children enjoy playing and being active but their play does not necessarily need to be aimed at achievement.

The second core is an attractive, activating and varied supply of (language) activities which link to young children's world of experience and interests. Activities, which are normally carried out in Dutch (L1), can be done in the same way in English (L2): language development takes place via interaction; the teacher provides language support.

5.2 Components and phases

Another core is working with themes and the five healthy components, offered in phases. Even though it was originally developed for regular English from group 7, the four phase model can also serve as the foundation for early foreign language learning. However, the lesson time for younger pupils is preferably divided over several lessons and days a week. Language support is offered in all phases and activities.

Input: suitable themes and activities are chosen for the infants school and are carried out in English as the target language via demonstration and examples, using facial expressions, body language and concrete materials. The pupils are stimulated to join in or imitate the teacher actively and enthusiastically. These are receptive activities: it is the silent period during which the pupils are not yet required to speak. Examples of input activities with language support are listening and/or watching whilst the teacher reads from a picture book, tells a story, sings a song or recites an action story and action chain (TPR).

Processing on form and content takes place at the same time through assignments which stimulate the pupils to join in non-verbally, such as pointing out animals from the story, acting out a story (TPR), joining in with movements from a song about animals, playing a game (such as animal bingo) or carrying out arts and crafts activities related to the theme.

(Pushed) output during each theme is limited (from the input) to imitation and reproduction of English in a variety of activities such as reciting songs, poems, rhymes, tongue twisters, chants and action stories. Repetition of chunks offers a safe way of language reproduction. Some examples of activating output activities: reacting to a puppet, singing and reciting songs and rhymes, miming and acting out stories the children are familiar with.

Strategies can be taught by encouraging the pupils to predict, watch, listen, copy and speak.
There is a great deal of interaction between the teacher and the pupils. The components and phases in which interaction occurs, should be matched to the age of the child. See figure 5.4. Since learning English takes place at the same time as learning the subject content, there is no clear division between Eibo themes and subject knowledge for young children; they learn how to count, for example, but in English. Eibo themes for older children, such as 'at school', are not covered with young children.

5.3 Basic pedagogic and didactic conditions

Besides input, components, phases and an interactive playful approach, there are several basic pedagogic and didactic conditions required of the programme:
- the link between time/situation and the person or puppet speaking in the target language
- a safe environment
- the English programme is divided across several short lessons
- in each lesson there is a great variety in activities, execution and content
- a continuous, structured learning line from the first year till group 8, ranging from simple to more complex activities.

The enthusiastic teacher ensures a safe learning environment in which pupils are stimulated to join in. See figure 5.5 for the ten do's and don'ts for early foreign language learning, divided across input, practice time, feedback and didactics.

The basic elements for an early English lesson scheme or project can be found under the general vvto umbrella:
- phasing from input to output
- thematic organisation of learning
- subject specific principles (do's)
- pedagogic and didactic basic requirements
- communication as aim.

5.4 Role of the teacher

A (qualified) teacher, specialised in early English, teaches English (with volunteer support, if so desired), if possible several hours a week, and is responsible for the pupils' continued learning line and for the subject English as a whole within the school. Teachers of different classes exchange information, evaluate and adapt lessons and programmes and keep parents informed.

The following three types of teachers may teach early English:
1. the class teacher
2. a teacher specialised in early English
3. a native or near-native English speaking teacher.

And then there are:
1. the class teacher who is not (yet) specialised in early English
2. the English coordinator: responsible for English within the school.
The professional standard for foreign language teacher (www.levendetalen.nl) comprises four domains with criteria. Adapted for the early English primary teacher, a fifth domain is added. The domains and criteria for the early English teacher are:

1. subject knowledge: good command of English, up to date knowledge of subject-specific didactics
2. knowledge of learning processes: insight and skills to develop and apply early English to various levels
3. knowledge of assessment and feedback: assessment, evaluation, provide and adapt feedback
4. knowledge of context: contexts and relationships of English as a subject
5. attitude: enthusiastic, positive and professional attitude, willing to commit to further schooling, consultation and intervision.

A standard for early foreign language learning (www.europeesplatform.nl) offers guidelines for schools with regards to results, the learning process, quality management and preconditions. The aim is to ensure that the quality of the English lessons is transparent and measurable.

5.5 Learning line

The teacher does not work at random but follows a structured line. The teacher chooses kindergarten themes that are suitable to being handled in English and deals with them in the same way as in Dutch. A learning line is built up by extending the themes each year and by working from simple to more complex activities. The pupils’ language skills levels do not increase proportionately with the number of hours spent learning English since the first year, because a lot of the time is spent on repetition and extending the theme.

In the first two classes (group 1/2) the teacher chooses themes suitable for the children. The teacher may opt for a course book or chooses relevant themes, subjects or topics and looks for suitable teaching materials. To accommodate the main differences between pupils, the teacher can work interactively with the pupils in small groups outside of the classical lessons. The levels will vary widely from the silent period through early language production to speech emergence and elementary speaking skills at the end of the second year.

In the third and fourth year (group 3/4) the teacher uses the same approach to expand topics and themes from the first two years and adds new themes. The aim is to stimulate the pupils to speak, to get the most out of each individual and ensure the pupils experience success by encouragement and praise. Since the pupils are busy learning to read and write in Dutch at this stage, learning to read and write in English is not a priority. Pupils who are ready, can be guided in this process.

5.6 Activating methods

Suitable activating methods for early English are:

- TPR activities: assignments in the form of (friendly) commands such as an action chain (a series of consecutive actions), an action story (join in with a short story using actions and mime)
• games: such as 'Simon says' (carrying out commands in play)
• songs: such as action songs (moving to music and lyrics) for each theme, traditional English children's songs for young children or new lyrics to tunes
• picture books: for language input
• rhymes and verses: to remember and reproduce language; with movements
• story bags: concrete materials in a bag or box to make learning more tangible.

5.7 Teaching materials
Teaching materials for pupils and instruction books for teachers can be found around the world for first, second and foreign language learning, at different levels and aimed at different cultures. The availability of Dutch materials for early English is also on the increase. The school chooses the material which fits their own educational vision and based on the principles of early English methodology. Working with a course book can offer teachers support, but it is the teacher who determines the quality of early language teaching.

Back to our hypothesis: early foreign language teaching of English equals playing.