ON THE NET

Lets Go to the Zoo! Sites for Young Language Learners

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While the debate over the optimal age for second language (L2) acquisition continues into the 21st century -- that is, whether or not there is a clearly established critical period beyond which L2 learning cannot take place -- most people believe (rightly or wrongly) that "earlier is better" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000). It is not the purpose of this article to review the age acquisition research nor even to take a stand one way or another. Presumably other articles in this volume will address this issue. We will simply begin with the premise that early language learning can be beneficial, if one follows some commonly accepted precepts of second language acquisition (SLA).

Most research shows that L2 learning is facilitated by pedagogically sound instruction that involves meaningful input and intake of the target language (TL). The L2 should be presented in a contextualized manner and should, in some way, make a personal connection to the learner (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). Much of the literature suggests that the use of thematic units with younger learners fits the bill: The themes are of high interest to the learners, the L2 is presented in a contextualized manner, and -- when chosen properly -- the subject matter is meaningful to the young learner because a cognitive frame of reference already exists (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Shrum & Glisan, 2005). In other words, L2 learning is facilitated because the young learner is already familiar with the topic or content in the first language (L1) context. Meaningful learning takes place when the new material to be learned is related to something already known (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978).

Presentation of language in context seems to argue for the use of authentic materials in L2 instruction, even at an early stage. Using authentic texts to teach reading and listening skills provides language learners with real-life opportunities to use the TL (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). If the aim is to enable learners to manipulate the TL in real-life circumstances, then they must practice with real-life examples. The goal, of course, is to select the authentic texts carefully, not edit them, and construct an age- and level-appropriate task for the learner to perform (Shrum & Glisan, 2005). In the instance of young learners, use of authentic language, in context, of high interest, and of familiar nature to the learner would seem to be the best bet for success. With this in mind, FL instructors might do well to consider a trip to the zoo -- a virtual zoo. There are a good number of virtual zoo sites

VIRTUAL ZOOS ON THE NET

Virtual zoos on the Net are fruitful places for young language learners to explore. These sites are of high interest to youngsters, offer familiar content, and frequently have sections designed with educational activities for children. We will examine three sites below in some depth and will also explore a third site where young learners can create their own animals and write about them.
El Parque Zoológico de Barcelona

The homepage of the Barcelona zoo contains links to many different pages offering a plethora of zoo resources. Information is available on zoo hours, entrance fees, zoo services, and the general makeup and philosophy of the zoo itself. The zoo schedule page is illustrated below.
In addition, realtime webcams exist for select animals at the zoo: chimpanzees, penguins, and Copito, the albino gorilla that has lived at the zoo since 1966. Quite a few links deal with Copito, who is a local celebrity. In addition to the webcam, there is a video, several magazine articles about him from his early days until his arrival at the Barcelona zoo, and a family tree depicting his lineage and offspring.

Also accessible are virtual "index cards," fichas, that provide information about the different species of mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Each ficha gives a brief description of the animal, its geographic origin and habitat, social customs, and primary food source (carnivore, herbivore, etc.). A world map illustrates the precise location of the animals range.
The *ficha* also offers a list of identifying data including weight, length, gestation period, usual number of offspring, and longevity.

For those young learners who are more advanced, a detailed description of the animal is provided at the bottom of the *ficha*.

Many of these zoo pages contain simple language that would be accessible to young learners. Numbers and cognates make the TL even more understandable to learners in the beginning stages of language study.
The zoo in Baranquilla, Colombia is another interesting site worthy of investigation. In addition to offerings similar to those of the Barcelona Zoo (general information, inhabitants and their descriptions, etc.), this zoo site has a specific site where youngsters can send in questions. The recipient of the questions is a cartoon figure, Zofo. Questions are submitted electronically on the form provided and answered on the Web site.
Another example of an activity specifically for young learners is the contest for "queen of the zoo" that the Baranquilla zoo just completed. This competition included 10 contestants from the animal world. Each contestant had a campaign ficha, containing her description and vital statistics. In addition, responses to personal questions such as "What famous personality would you most like to talk with?" The winner, Costeña the Jaguar, chose the Spectacled Bear as her conversation target!

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Reinado en el Zoológico

Costeña Jaguar

- Medidas: 1,93 metros.
- Peso: 62.2 Kg.
- Edad: 12 años
- Ecosistema de procedencia: Selva Húmeda
- Pasatiempo: Cazar a gran velocidad

¿Qué poder le gustaría tener?
- Me gusta mucho la velocidad así que me encantaría poder volar para ir a los lugares que quisiera.

¿Con qué personalidad le gustaría sentarse hablar?
- Con el emblemático gato de antojos que vive en los Bosques de Niebla.

¿Cuál es la parte de su cuerpo que menos le gusta?
- Mi panza creo que es muy rellenta.

¿Qué es lo que mejor sabe hacer?
- Cazar, saltar, de ahí viene nuestro nombre.

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Zoo de la Palmyre, France

The Zoo de la Palmyre in south-west France is another great zoo site including a good variety of useful information (zoo hours, location, animal names, etc.) for the the sorts of activities already mentioned. Most of this site uses Macromedia Flash for display and interaction. Moving animals make the site more visually attractive.

Maps with driving instructions provide for a nice way to make geography more meaningful. By examining a zoo outside of a major urban center, in the Charente Maritime department in this case, we help reduce the all too common impression that France means Paris.
Information about animals on the site can be accessed by animal names or by location in the zoo. The first is quicker but the second gives the impression of visiting the zoo in its actual layout. There is also a search engine for looking up a *fiche technique* by the animal's name directly. Here below we see the listing of mammals.

The *fiche technique* for the polar bear includes information about the animal's class, order, and family. We see biological data about individual animals as well as information about how they live and what environmental threats they face. Students learn about their habitat and their eating habits.
The interactive zoo visit uses Flash to let the visitor move a monkey around a map of the zoo. Touching the *borne* or post for each animal enclosure brings up a photo of the animal and a quiz.
The giraffe quiz sample seen here uses humor to review information about the animal.

To transport a giraffe one

- walks him
- uses a trailer with telescoping roof
- puts roller skates on him
- puts him in a big box and mails it at the post office

Another section presents the zoo's pedagogical programs for school classes and projects.
The Palmyre zoo has a history of communicating with young people about animals in the world and the importance of conservation of the environment. In fact, the founder of the zoo began his career by bringing his animals to schools all over France to teach children about them. Now we can bring the children to the zoo through the Internet.

OTHER SAMPLE ZOO SITES

A Google search using the key words zoo and virtual in the TL will yield many possibilities for language teachers to explore. A few are offered below to get you started:

**Portuguese:** Zoologicovirtual.com

**Italian:** Parco faunistico Le Cornelle
German: *Zoo Hannover*

![Zoo Hannover Image]

**Making Your Own Zoo**

A final site worth mentioning is the *Switch Zoo* site.
This site is specifically meant to be used for educational purposes, as the "Welcome, schools!" banner attests. This site is loaded (pardon the pun) with animation that will delight young learners as they "monkey" around with different animal heads, legs, and tails to create new and unique creatures. For example, they can take a cheetah...

...and convert it into a completely new animal of their own creation:

They can then write about their creations and title their stories in the TL. (Diacritics are supported in this environment.)
A helpful FAQ file is available to instruct young learners how to operate the site and design their animals. While they are creating, animal facts pop up everywhere. In addition, there are other animal games to be played that require critical thinking on the part of the learner. While these are all in English, these features do add to the educational nature of the site.

CONCLUSION

When searching for authentic materials on the Web that are age appropriate and exciting for young learners, we need to look for the sites where native speakers target the same age level in the countries where the target language is spoken. School Web sites, magazines for kids, special interest sites, and collections of children's literature, songs, and rhymes, are among the valuable locations where language teachers can look to see what native speaker children are doing online. Zoo sites are a special case because of the high level of interest and affection that animals generate in children. In all, the variety of activities and approaches, the focus on presenting engaging material for young people, and the interdisciplinary value of this subject matter, including the ecological and conservation messages that are so prevalent, make these zoos a visit that is worth the trip.

REFERENCES


