

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS (TEYL): BALANCING SCREEN TIME WITH INTERACTIVE PLAY-BASED METHODS

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Annotation: This article explores the pedagogical challenges and opportunities inherent in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in an era of ubiquitous digital technology. It examines strategies for balancing screen-based learning tools with traditional, tactile, and play-based methodologies to optimize language acquisition outcomes. Through a review of current literature and pedagogical practices, the study highlights the necessity of human-centric engagement alongside digital literacy.

Keywords: TEYL, Language Acquisition, Play-based Learning, Digital Literacy, Screen Time

The integration of technology into the classroom has fundamentally altered the landscape of English language teaching for young learners. As digital tools become more sophisticated, educators face the complex task of harnessing their power while mitigating potential adverse effects associated with excessive screen time. This article argues that technology should not replace, but rather augment, the developmental necessity of play-based interaction.

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)—specifically children aged 3 to 7—requires a nuanced understanding of early childhood development, cognitive processing, and language acquisition theories. At this developmental stage, children are not studying a language analytically; they are absorbing it holistically through their senses, environment, and interpersonal interactions.

The integration of digital media (screens) alongside traditional, tactile, play-based methods represents one of the most vital modern challenges for educators. This comprehensive guide explores the neurodevelopmental rationale, detailed methodological frameworks, classroom management strategies, and concrete lesson architectures to strike an optimal balance.

NEURODEVELOPMENTAL RATIONALE: WHY PLAY LEADS AND SCREENS SUPPORT

The Developing Brain and Language Acquisition

Young children rely heavily on the social-pragmatic model of language learning. Human language is inherently interactive—it depends on joint attention, shared eye

contact, micro-expressions, and responsive feedback loops. When a teacher asks a child a question, waits for a faltering response, and smiles encouragingly, neural pathways associated with social bonding and linguistic risk-taking fire simultaneously.

The Limitations of Passive Media ("The Video Deficit")

Research in cognitive psychology repeatedly highlights the "video deficit." Children under the age of five learn significantly less from a 2D screen than from live, face-to-face interaction.

- **Lack of Contingency:** Pre-recorded videos cannot adapt to a child's confusion, adjust pacing, or answer an impromptu question.
- **Cognitive Overload:** Fast-paced scene changes, loud sound effects, and flashing graphics on screens can overwhelm a young child's prefrontal cortex, leading to reduced attentional control and diminished verbal retention.

The Power of Multisensory Play

Play engages all five senses (sight, sound, touch, kinesthetic movement, and even taste/smell where appropriate). When a child physically handles a plastic apple, smells its sweet scent, acts out picking it from an imaginary tree, and says *"Red apple, yum!"* the vocabulary word is anchored to multiple sensory inputs in the brain. Screens can capture attention, but physical play builds deep, long-term cognitive scaffolding.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAY-BASED METHODOLOGIES (SCREEN-FREE FOUNDATIONS)

To build a robust foundation, at least 80% of instructional time should be dedicated to active, analog, play-based learning.

A. Total Physical Response (TPR) Integration

Developed by Dr. James Asher, TPR is rooted in coordination of speech and action.

- **Mechanism:** The educator issues commands in English, and learners demonstrate comprehension with whole-body movements rather than verbal output. This lowers the affective filter (anxiety) during the early "silent period."
- **Detailed Execution:** For a unit on transportation, the teacher calls out: *"Drive your car! Stop! Turn left! Ride a bicycle! Fly a plane!"* The children race around a designated open space mimicking the motions. Once motor memory is established, roles flip: a student becomes the "teacher" and commands the class.

B. Imaginative Socio-Dramatic Play (Task-Based Corners)

Children naturally make sense of the adult world by imitating it through play. Transforming classroom corners into micro-environments forces functional language use.

- The "English Café" Setup: Set up a small table with toy plates, plastic food, and play money. Assign roles (waiter and customer).
- Scaffolded Dialogue Frames:
 - *Customer*: "Hello! Can I have a banana, please?"
 - *Waiter*: "Here you are!"
 - *Customer*: "Thank you!"
- Teacher's Role: Move between groups as a facilitator, quietly coaching pronunciation and introducing vocabulary organically ("Ah, you want a napkin? Let's say: 'Napkin, please'.")

C. Multisensory Storytelling with Realia and Puppets

Instead of reading flatly from a book, bring stories to life using tangible items (*realia*).

Tactile Engagement: If reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, give children real plastic or fabric versions of the fruits. As the caterpillar eats through an apple, a child physically hands the apple puppet to the teacher.

• **Chorus and Sound Effects:** Assign specific sound effects or physical gestures to characters. Every time the word "wind" appears, children blow like the wind; every time "bear" appears, they growl. This keeps engagement high and turns listening into an active performance.

3. PURPOSEFUL AND ACTIVE SCREEN INTEGRATION (THE 20% RULE)

Screens should never serve as a passive electronic babysitter. When integrated, digital tools must act as dynamic catalysts that provoke immediate physical response, curiosity, or collaborative creation off-screen.

A. Gamified Micro-Reviews (The 3-Minute Rule)

• **Tool Selection:** Platforms like Wordwall, Kahoot, or customized digital spinning wheels.

• **Execution:** Keep screen interactions intensely brief—maximum 3 to 5 minutes. Use a projector or smartboard for a whole-class activity.

• **Physical Transformation:** Do not let children sit passively with individual tablets. Project a vocabulary-matching game on the board. Divide the class into two teams. A representative from Team A must run up to the board, tap the correct answer, and then run back to tag their teammate. The screen becomes the prompt for a high-energy physical relay race.

B. Virtual Field Trips (VFTs) as Contextual Hooks

• **Execution:** Before introducing a unit on farm animals or wild jungles, project a 360-degree interactive photo or a 60-second drone video of an African savanna on the screen.

- Immediate Transition: Turn the screen off immediately afterward. Ask guiding questions: *"What did you see? Did you see a big animal? Let's move like that animal!"* This uses the visual hook of the screen to spark imagination, immediately anchoring it back to physical movement and spoken English.

C. Interactive Digital Storybooks with Pause-and-React

- Execution: Project an animated digital storybook with voiceover narration.
- The Pause Protocol: Instruct children that whenever the video pauses (which the teacher controls manually every 30 seconds), they must instantly freeze or mimic what the characters just did. If the character looks scared, children make a scared face and say *"Oh no!"* This transforms passive watching into an active, embodied comprehension check.

4. DETAILED LESSON ARCHITECTURE: 45-MINUTE BLUEPRINT ("THE WEATHER AND CLOTHING" UNIT)

To visualize how these elements mesh in a real-world classroom, examine this structured, step-by-step lesson plan designed for 5-to-6-year-old learners.

Phase 1: High-Energy Warm-Up & Circle Time (0–8 Minutes)

- Objective: Activate prior knowledge and build community.
- Activity: Children sit in a circle on the floor. The teacher holds a "Weather Spinner" wheel. A child spins it and calls out the weather icon it lands on (*"Sun!"*, *"Rain!"*, *"Wind!"*).
- Physical Response: The entire class reacts physically:

- *Sun*: Wipe sweat from forehead and say, *"It's hot!"*
- *Rain*: Tap fingers on the floor like raindrops and say, *"It's rainy!"*
- *Wind*: Sway bodies side-to-side and make whistling sounds.

Phase 2: Analog Input and Realia Exploration (8–20 Minutes)

- Objective: Introduce new vocabulary (clothing items: jacket, boots, hat, scarf).
- Activity: The teacher pulls items out of a mysterious "Magic Suitcase."
- Tactile Engagement: Pass a heavy winter coat around the circle. Children touch the fabric, feel the zipper, and repeat the word chorally: *"Coat... winter coat."*
- Mini-Game (Dress-Up Relay): Divide children into two teams. Place a pile of clothes at the front of the room. One by one, children run up, put on a hat or scarf, look in a mirror, say *"I have a hat!"*, take it off, run back, and tag the next player.

The results highlight that the efficacy of digital tools is context-dependent. The primary challenge is not the presence of technology, but its passive consumption. When technology serves as a bridge to real-world interaction—such as using a tablet to research insects before going outside to classify them in English—it enhances rather

than hinders development. The role of the teacher remains the crucial catalyst in navigating this interaction.

Conclusion

Balancing screen time and play-based methods is not a zero-sum game. When used intentionally, technology can enrich the TEYL classroom by providing visual and auditory scaffolding. However, the foundational core of English language teaching for young learners must remain grounded in play, physical activity, and interpersonal communication.

- Limit continuous screen exposure to short, intense bursts (e.g., 5–10 minutes).

Ensure every digital activity has a mandatory follow-up task that involves peer-to-peer communication. Use technology primarily for input (listening/visuals) and play for output (speaking/acting). Prioritize apps that encourage collaboration rather than solitary engagement.

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