

Advancing Learning:

The secrets of using learning routines with young children

By Carol Read

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What are 'learning routines' and why should you use them with your young learner classes? Expert author Carol Read explains all, offering tips and practical advice.



Introduction

Learning routines are established procedures and patterns of behaviour that you teach children and then use regularly and repeatedly for carrying out certain everyday classroom activities. Learning routines impact positively on children's learning, behaviour, participation, and social and emotional wellbeing, as well as on your ability to manage your classes effectively and to achieve successful teaching and learning outcomes.

What learning routines can you use?

Learning routines can be used at any stage of your lesson. They include:

Opening routines: to use at the start of every lesson, such as greeting the puppet, singing a 'hello' song, taking the register, saying how you feel today, identifying the day of the week, talking about the weather and setting learning objectives.

Activity routines: to create the appropriate atmosphere and learning climate for specific activities, such as circle time and story time.

Transition routines: to help children make the transition between different stages of the lesson or to move from different parts of the classroom in an orderly way.

Classroom routines: for specific jobs and roles, such as giving out and collecting in materials and resources, drinking water and going to the toilet.

Energy building routines: to use when you feel children's energy and attention is flagging and they need a short, physical break.

Settling routines: to use when you feel children need to calm down and re-focus their attention, for example after doing a lively, physical activity.

Thinking and feeling routines: to use when you wish to foster certain skills and attitudes, such as explicit thinking, cooperation, mindfulness, and social and emotional learning.

Closing routines: to use at the end of every lesson, such as reviewing learning, tidying up, singing a 'goodbye' song, and saying goodbye to the puppet.

How do children benefit from learning routines?

Learning routines enable young children to blossom and thrive both as language learners and as people. In particular, learning routines:

- give children security and confidence about what they are expected to do in lessons;
- show them how to behave and help them to manage and regulate their behaviour;
- provide frequent, repeated exposure to the same language in a meaningful, social context, which aids memory and encourages active language use;
- provide opportunities for repeated, guided interaction and turn-taking in a context that is predictable, familiar and safe, and which builds confidence and promotes 'ownership' of learning;
- develop children's willingness, sense of responsibility and autonomy in carrying out everyday classroom tasks;
- foster children's active participation in a safe environment;
- create a sense of community and positively develop and reinforce social and emotional skills and attitudes.

How do teachers benefit from learning routines?

Learning routines enable you to create optimal conditions for young children's language development and psychological wellbeing. In particular, learning routines:

- allow you to create a safe and caring learning environment;
- help you to manage your class positively and effectively;
- enable you to carry out essential routine classroom tasks more quickly and efficiently;
- provide for smoother transitions between activities;
- provide opportunities for you to expose children to naturally contextualised language which extends beyond the core syllabus;
- cut down on lesson preparation time and free you up to focus more on active language instruction, especially once children are confident in carrying out the routines you establish;
- provide a framework in which to create a positive socio-affective atmosphere in your lessons and develop relationships with all children based on care, mutual respect and trust.

How to make the most of learning routines

In order to make the most of learning routines in your lessons, the following guidelines will help:

Prepare your learning routines

Decide on the learning routines that you are going to introduce in your lessons and prepare the exact procedure and language you will use to carry out each one. For example, as part of your opening routines, you might:

1. Hold up a 'feely bag' with the puppet inside. Ask children 'Who's here?'
2. Encourage children to say the name and call to the puppet to come out of the bag.
3. Use the puppet to say 'Hello, children' and get children to respond 'Hello, ...', naming the puppet.
4. Get the puppet to greet individual children, e.g. 'Hello, Maria. How are you today?' and encourage children to respond, e.g. 'Hello, ... (naming the puppet). I'm fine'.

Repeat your learning routines

Make sure that you repeat your learning routines regularly and systematically whenever appropriate. Use exactly the same procedure and language pattern each time, especially at first. Explicitly model language and be ready to support children in giving either non-verbal or verbal responses as they become familiar with the routine.

Be flexible in adjusting your learning routines

Once children are responding confidently to particular learning routines, be ready to adjust the procedure and language to reflect this. For example, in a learning routine in which children talk about today's weather, the learning routine might evolve over time in the following way:

Phase 1: Walk over to the window, point to the sky and ask the class 'What's the weather like today?'. Hold up weather flashcards in turn (keeping the flashcard with the correct weather till last). Ask 'Is it sunny?' / 'Is it rainy?' as you show each one. Children nod or shake their heads and say 'Yes' or 'No'.

Phase 2: Once children are familiar with the weather vocabulary, go to the window, point to the sky and ask 'What's the weather like today?' in the same way. Follow this by asking, e.g., 'Is it sunny?' / 'Is it rainy?' but this time without the support of flashcards. Be ready to use mime or gesture as a reminder of meaning, if necessary, and encourage children to answer 'Yes, (it is)' or No, (it isn't).

Phase 3: Once the children are familiar with the weather vocabulary and can use it independently, go to the window, ask 'What's the weather like today?' and encourage children to respond by naming the weather, e.g. '(It's) cloudy'.

Phase 4: Once children are familiar with both the question and answers, nominate different children (choosing confident ones at first) to take turns each lesson to go over to the window, point to the sky, ask the question themselves and choose other children to respond. In this phase, the children are carrying out the learning routine independently without you being involved at all.

By evolving the procedure you use for learning routines in this way, you support children's learning appropriately and give them greater independence and freedom in using language once they are ready to do so.

Use learning routines to frame your lessons

Use opening and closing routines to provide a clear framework and structure to lessons (beginning and end). In order to develop children's metacognitive skills, be sure to also include setting objectives and conducting a learning review. However, at the same time, be careful not to spend overlong on opening and closing routines and make sure that the main part of your lesson (the middle) is focused on active instruction and developing children's language skills using a range of varied activities.

Remember to do your learning routines

Remember that although learning routines may at times feel repetitive for you, children generally love to repeat them over and over again. Be prepared that once you have established particular learning routines, children are quite likely to remind you and insist on doing them, even if you forget one day or decide to miss them out because of lack of time.

Give children opportunities to use the language of learning routines

Many learning routines give children frequent, repeated practice and opportunities to interact and take turns using almost scripted language in specific situations. As children become familiar with learning routines, they become increasingly confident in using the language associated with them. For this reason, it is a good idea to give children regular opportunities to improvise, role play and re-create similar situations where they have an opportunity to use language they have learnt as part of learning routines more freely and independently. This might be, for example, during 'learning station' activities where groups of children move round the classroom and take turns to play with the puppet, pretend to be the characters in a story, or use flashcards to role play the part of the teacher in a game.

In conclusion ...

Learning routines provide you with seemingly small yet highly significant steps in creating optimal conditions for successful language learning in the pre-primary classroom. In addition to developing children's feelings of security and self-confidence, learning routines promote internalisation and 'ownership' of language through well-rehearsed and repeated scenarios. They also allow you to teach and manage your classes in a well-ordered and positive way.

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About the author



Carol Read has over 30 years' experience in ELT as a teacher, teacher trainer, academic manager, materials writer and educational consultant. Her main specialization is in early years and primary English language education.

Carol's publications include award-winning titles such as *500 Activities in the Primary Classroom* and *Tiger Time*. Her latest publication is a new, global pre-school course, *Big Wheel / Mimi's Wheel / Ferris Wheel*. Carol is a former President of IATEFL.

You can find out more about Carol by visiting www.carolread.com