

# USING A TREE THEME TO DEVELOP LANGUAGE SKILLS

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A teaching programme is described in which trees are used as a unifying theme for developing language skills at the lower primary level.

The teacher of any language is primarily concerned with a child's ability to use and to respond to words. From primary level through to high school children need to be given the confidence to use words and to be reassured that their efforts to explore language are valid. Thus the language teacher must, amongst other things, encourage and help children to express themselves effectively both orally and on paper.

It is generally accepted that even very young children use all their senses to explore and understand the world around them and so it makes sense to use their environment as a context in which to encourage the development of language skills. Working on a specific project/theme in which language becomes the tool for learning is a way of incorporating many of the language skills required by most syllabuses and developing new knowledge at the same time.

A term project on trees undertaken by the English Std. 1 class at the Mafeking Preparatory School so caught the interest and enthusiasm of the pupils (and their parents) that they willingly attended school on some Saturday mornings to participate in extended experiences which could not be fitted into the ordinary school day.

Before embarking on a project however, it is helpful to discover what the children already know about the subject. Talking informally about it provides the children with an opportunity to go beyond the basic level of speech and to both use and hear new words and express new ideas before committing themselves to paper. Most children find it a daunting task to write in a vacuum on topics picked at random. They need to build up a store of images and their observation needs to be sharpened i.e. they must be encouraged to *really* look at something by touching it, smelling it, listening to it and even tasting it if appropriate. Such exploration coupled with discussion is an important step in helping children to find the words they need to describe their experiences.

Each child in the class was asked to choose a real tree to look at and write about. They were to identify it, using reference books if necessary, and to describe it. (See Figure 1). The children were encouraged to note anything of interest about their tree e.g. fruit, pods, flowers, insect and other life as well as possible uses. A walk around the school grounds became more meaningful once the pupils' awareness of trees had been awakened. (See Figure 2). This active learning process provides a firmer base from which to develop vocabulary and language skills, using the tree theme. Drawing trees and making leaf and

My peach tree  
My peach tree is only 18  
months old. Every winter my  
peach tree loses its leaves  
and stops growing.  
In the summer my peach tree  
needs water, heat from the  
sun and fertilizer to make it  
grow again.  
My peach tree makes flowers  
which turn into peaches. I love  
to eat peaches because they  
taste delicious.

Good

FIGURE 1 Description of a tree

We went into the school  
garden and we noticed all kinds  
of things. We saw the lemon  
tree. You can make all sorts  
of things with lemons.  
We also saw the Jacaranda  
tree. The one in the school  
grounds is very old. There are some  
poisonous trees in the school  
grounds. There are some ever-  
green trees in the school  
grounds and also some trees  
that lose their leaves.

FIGURE 2 A walk in the school grounds

bark rubbings are also experiences which help the child to internalise and consolidate what he has gleaned from his observation and his written expression of these observations.

Stories (e.g. about Johnny Appleseed and the willow pattern) and poetry read to the class were used as a stimulus for their own story writing, using both the imaginative and descriptive approach and as encouragement to express their feelings in verse. (See Figure 3). While gentle constructive criticism is important in any writing the children do, equally important is the development of vocabulary which will give the children the 'tools' (words) they need to express their ideas freely and clearly.

Pine trees are rather tall.

They make me feel very small.

Their branches reach into the sky,

up where the birds fly.

Their needles are sharp and their trunk  
are covered in bark.

Even though I saw no nest

I like pine trees best.

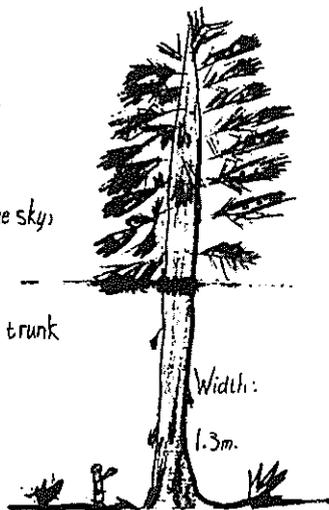


FIGURE 3 A poem by a pupil

Teacher-made and child-made crosswords (see Figure 4) and collective nouns e.g. orchard, plantation, forest etc. were explored as a means of developing vocabulary. Discussing homonyms and homophones encouraged children to widen their experience of the meaning and use of words such as:

trunk = stem of tree	season = to mature
= elephant's nose	= spice
= suitcase	= time of year.

Vocabulary-building exercises also included diminutives e.g. sapling, rootlet, leaflet; opposites e.g. tall-short, smooth-rough, deciduous-evergreen; and plurals such as trees, branches and leaves.

Other language exercises involved arranging words in alphabetical order, unscrambling sentences e.g. 'are evergreen conifers called', unscrambling words such as 'gransoe' (oranges), making several words from a multisyllabic word (e.g. mulberry = berry, merry, rye, mule, buy etc.) and learning about new expressions such as 'to branch out', 'cannot see the wood for the trees' and 'to root out'. Because of the children's active participation in learning about trees and their first-hand knowledge of trees, expressions such as 'the root of' and 'to turn over a new leaf' are more likely to become an integral part of their vocabulary (thus enriching their language) than remaining an 'abstract saying' soon to be forgotten.

Using the tree theme for the development of language triggered discussions, 'research' and writing about forestry, sawmills, paper and printing, the

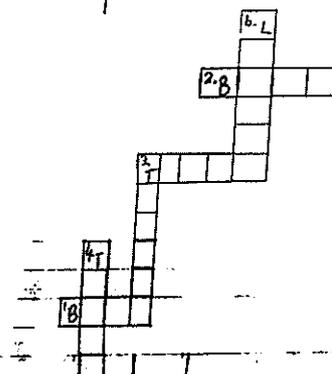
## Across

1. New growing tips.
2. Protects the trunk.
3. Small branches.

## Down

4. The body of a tree.
3. Protects the tree.
6. The green part of a tree.

Very good



Solution on back page

FIGURE 4 A child-made crossword

importance of wood, fruit, fossils (petrified wood) and recycled paper. Workcards requiring the children to write information about a variety of tree topics e.e. the giant redwoods, Tsitsikama forest, citrus trees etc. stimulated the development of basic research techniques using the school resources as well as those of the public library.

The tree theme was developed across the curriculum too, for example as story sums in maths and studying the trees mentioned in the Bible. Other extended experiences such as planting trees, collecting leaves, doing class reading in the shade of trees, identifying trees in the schoolground and even trying to make their own paper helped children to develop and reinforce language skills as well as broadening their experience of their environment.

## REFERENCES

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