

Vol. 1 No. 2 (2024):
Winter



Engaging Mixed-Age Learners with Personal Interests in ESL Beginners

Hasan Alisoy

Nakhchivan State University

<https://doi.org/10.69760/qzjaad68>

Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of using personal hobbies and daily routines to engage mixed-age learners (ages 12-17) at A1-A2 English proficiency levels over a 34-week course designed to help them progress toward B1 proficiency. The research focuses on how integrating personal interests into lessons increases motivation, participation, and language acquisition. A class of 18 students was divided into sub-groups based on age and proficiency, with activities tailored to meet their developmental needs. The findings show that connecting lessons to students' lives significantly improves engagement, vocabulary retention, and oral communication. Collaborative tasks involving both younger and older students fostered peer learning, creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. This approach proves beneficial in mixed-level classrooms and could be adapted for higher proficiency levels and larger class sizes.

Keywords: Mixed-age learners, personal interests, project-based learning, A1-A2 English, peer collaboration

Introduction:

Background:

Teaching a mixed-age group of students aged 12 to 17, with English proficiency levels ranging from A0 to A2, requires a flexible and dynamic approach. The differences in age, maturity, and language skills necessitate careful classroom management and lesson planning. Younger students (ages 12-13) typically display more enthusiasm and energy, while older students (ages 16-17) often require more structured tasks and may focus on more practical learning needs (Kos, 2021). In addition to these age-related differences, the disparity between students who are complete beginners (A0) and those approaching an A2 level adds further complexity (Brining, 2015). Teachers need to create an inclusive environment where all students can progress, regardless of their starting point.

Challenges:

Managing such a diverse group presents challenges not only in terms of language ability but also in



This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License

Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language Education
Vilnius, Lithuania

emotional and cognitive development. Some students, particularly those at the A0 level, struggle with basic vocabulary and forming simple sentences, while others at the A2 level are more comfortable with elementary grammar and can engage in more complex conversations (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). Balancing these differences requires differentiated instruction that meets each learner's individual needs. Despite these challenges, initial results from the first two weeks of teaching indicate that the approach is working well. Using project-based learning as the core method, students are making steady progress towards their language learning goals, with the ultimate aim of reaching B1 proficiency (Kos, 2024).

Objective:

The primary objective of this study is to teach English to mixed-age and mixed-level learners through a project-based approach. By integrating students' personal interests, daily routines, and real-world activities into the learning process, the classroom becomes a collaborative space where learners engage in meaningful language use. The focus is on fostering communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, while gradually building their English proficiency through practical, hands-on projects that cater to both individual and group needs.

Methods

Participants

The study involved 18 students aged 12-17, all enrolled in an A1-A2 English language class. To account for differences in maturity, learning styles, and cognitive development, the students were divided into two sub-groups: younger students (ages 12-14) and older students (ages 15-17). This division allowed for more tailored lesson activities and ensured that age-specific needs were addressed while promoting collaboration across the age spectrum.

Materials

1. Lesson Handouts

Instead of textbooks, students were provided with customized lesson handouts for each class. These handouts focused on daily life, routines, and hobbies, incorporating essential grammar and vocabulary tailored to the students' proficiency levels.

2. Supplementary Materials

Personal hobby-sharing worksheets, visual aids (such as flashcards and posters), daily routine charts, and videos showcasing everyday activities were used to support lesson objectives. These materials catered to different learning styles, ensuring that both younger and older students were actively engaged.

3. Technology Tools

Interactive digital tools, such as quizzes and polls, were integrated into lessons to collect and share information about students' hobbies and routines. These tools helped to create an interactive learning environment, especially for older students, while providing an informal method of assessment.



Procedure

1. Week 1: Introduction to Hobbies

In the first week, the focus was on getting students to talk about their hobbies. Younger students (ages 12-14) were provided with visual aids like drawings and flashcards to help them express their hobbies. They described their hobbies using simple vocabulary, which encouraged them to engage without feeling overwhelmed by more complex language tasks. Older students (ages 15-17) were given the task of writing short paragraphs about their hobbies and presenting them orally to the class. This approach encouraged them to practice both writing and speaking, making them more confident in using English to describe personal interests.

2. Week 2: Describing Daily Routines

In the second week, students were introduced to the vocabulary and sentence structures needed to describe their daily routines. Younger students practiced using basic phrases such as "I wake up at 7 AM" or "I eat breakfast." The focus was on reinforcing present simple tense and time expressions. Visual aids, such as daily routine charts, were provided to support their learning. Older students were tasked with creating more detailed descriptions of their routines, incorporating linking words and a wider range of vocabulary. This task helped them to practice fluency and structure while explaining their daily schedules.

3. Week 3: Combining Hobbies and Routines in Group Work

In the third week, students collaborated in mixed-age groups to create posters or presentations about their hobbies and daily routines. The aim was to combine what they had learned in the previous weeks into cohesive descriptions. Each group included both younger and older students to encourage peer learning and collaboration. Younger students contributed by drawing or adding visuals, while older students helped write more complex sentences or paragraphs. This teamwork allowed them to engage with the material in a meaningful way, and the final presentations fostered communication and confidence across the group.

Assessment

Formative assessments were used throughout the three weeks to monitor student progress. These included:

- **Teacher Observations:** Teachers observed how well students engaged in the activities, providing immediate feedback where necessary.
- **Peer Feedback:** During group work and presentations, students gave feedback to their peers, encouraging constructive criticism and positive reinforcement.
- **Quizzes:** Short quizzes focused on the vocabulary and sentence structures introduced in each lesson. These quizzes assessed both individual understanding and group collaboration.
- **Final Presentation:** At the end of Week 3, students gave group presentations on their hobbies and routines. This was the culmination of the lessons, allowing students to demonstrate their ability to



fluently describe their personal interests and daily lives in English. The presentations were assessed on clarity, fluency, and the ability to work collaboratively.

Results

Student Engagement

Younger students (ages 12-14) demonstrated greater participation during activities that included visuals and interactive tasks, such as hobby-related drawings and flashcards. These activities helped reduce the anxiety often associated with language learning, particularly for students at the A0 level. In contrast, older students (ages 15-17) engaged more during written assignments and oral presentations, where they could apply their more advanced skills and structure their thoughts more clearly. This division of engagement allowed both age groups to contribute in different ways, fostering a balanced learning environment (Kos, 2021).

Language Improvement

All students demonstrated significant improvement in vocabulary related to hobbies and daily routines. Younger students benefitted from interactive tasks, which reinforced key vocabulary and sentence structures in a playful and accessible manner. Collaborative group work, particularly mixed-age pairings, had a profound effect on speaking fluency, as younger students relied on the more advanced language skills of their older peers for guidance. This peer-assisted learning approach created an informal support system that benefitted students at all levels (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022).

Classroom Dynamics

The use of group activities fostered a collaborative learning environment. Younger students gained confidence by working alongside older peers, who often assumed leadership roles within their groups. This dynamic allowed younger students to engage more fully and reduce the fear of making mistakes, while older students developed valuable mentoring and leadership skills. By working together, students learned not only English but also essential soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving (Kos, 2024).

Discussion

Engagement through Personal Interests

The use of personal hobbies and daily routines in lesson planning proved to be an effective strategy for maintaining student engagement across different age groups. For younger students, who often have shorter attention spans, incorporating personal interests into the lessons made the activities more relevant and engaging, reducing distraction and increasing participation. These students, typically less comfortable with extended written tasks, were able to focus on shorter, more interactive tasks that related to their everyday lives. On the other hand, older students, who prefer more structured and purposeful activities, were more engaged in discussions and writing assignments when the content reflected their real-world experiences and daily routines (Kos, 2021).

Differentiated Instruction

This study reaffirms the importance of differentiated instruction in mixed-age classrooms. By adjusting the complexity of tasks to suit different age groups, teachers can create an inclusive learning environment. For younger students, simpler language tasks like using flashcards, drawing, or short sentence



construction made learning more accessible, while older students were challenged with more complex language structures and longer writing tasks. Differentiated instruction ensured that all students could contribute meaningfully, regardless of their age or proficiency level, supporting the progress of both beginner (A0) and more advanced (A2) learners (Brining, 2015).

Challenges

One of the main challenges encountered was ensuring that older students remained engaged during activities that were too simple for their language level, while simultaneously making sure that younger students were not overwhelmed by more complex tasks. The need to strike a balance between providing age-appropriate content and ensuring that all students are learning at their own pace was central to the lesson planning. To address this, frequent switches between age-specific activities and mixed-group projects helped maintain interest and mitigate feelings of boredom or frustration. By alternating between individual and group tasks, both younger and older students stayed engaged throughout the lessons (Kos, 2024).

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that incorporating students' personal lives—such as their hobbies and routines—into language lessons is a powerful way to foster engagement and ownership of learning. For younger students, who may struggle with abstract content, making lessons relevant to their personal experiences increases motivation and focus. For older students, linking lessons to real-life activities reinforces the practical value of language learning. This approach encourages teachers to consider the specific interests and developmental stages of their students, particularly in mixed-age classrooms where tailored instruction can make a significant difference in learning outcomes (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022).

Conclusion

Integrating personal hobbies and daily routines into English language lessons for mixed-age A1-A2 students has proven to be an effective strategy for increasing engagement and improving language skills. By tailoring lesson content to the interests and daily lives of the students, this approach fosters a positive and inclusive learning environment where both younger and older students feel involved. The collaborative nature of the activities also enhances oral communication skills and helps students relate to the material in a more meaningful way. The success of this method suggests that it can serve as a model for similar mixed-age, mixed-level classrooms.

Future research could explore how this strategy can be adapted for more advanced proficiency levels, such as B1-B2, and how it can be applied to larger class sizes. Additionally, investigating the long-term impact of integrating personal interests into language learning could provide further insights into sustaining student engagement and language acquisition over time.

References:

Wei, J., Chen, J. C., & Adawu, A. (2014). Teaching ESL beginners metacognitive writing strategies through multimedia software. *CATESOL Journal*, 26(1), 60-75.



- Kos, T. (2021). Exploring young learners' L2 development and perceptions of mixed-age and same-age peer interactions in EFL mixed-age classrooms. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(2), 331-364.
- Kos, T. (2024). Enhancing Young Learners' Collaboration through Tasks--What Can Language Pedagogy Learn from Research?. *TESL-EJ*, 28(2), n2.
- Brining, D. (2015). *The challenges faced by teachers of English as a foreign language to young learners in international contexts and their training and development needs and opportunities* (Doctoral dissertation, University of York).
- Brining, D. (2015). *The challenges faced by teachers of English as a foreign language to young learners in international contexts and their training and development needs and opportunities* (Doctoral dissertation, University of York).
- Erdemir, E., & Brutt-Griffler, J. (2022). Vocabulary development through peer interactions in early childhood: A case study of an emergent bilingual child in preschool. *International journal of bilingual education and bilingualism*, 25(3), 834-865.
- REBIHI, N., & GUIDOUM, K. (2024). *Interactive and Pedagogical Challenges Faced by Primary School Teachers Instructing Simultaneously English and French: A Case Study of Third-Year Pupils* (Doctoral dissertation, ibn khaldoun university-Tiaret).
- Pepanyan, M., & Meacham, S. (2021). The Element of Play and Dynamics of Interaction in an Adult L2 Classroom With the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. *Play and Literacy: Play & Culture Studies*, 145.
- Mourão, S., & Leslie, C. (Eds.). (2024). *Researching Educational Practices, Teacher Education and Professional Development for Early Language Learning: Examples from Europe*. Taylor & Francis.
- Shahnama, M., Ghonsooly, B., & Shirvan, M. E. (2021). A meta-analysis of relative effectiveness of flipped learning in English as second/foreign language research. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 69(3), 1355-1386.

