



## Creative ELT Activities for Children and Children-at-Heart

by [Laura Loder Buechel](#)

Multilingual language learners of English in Swiss primary schools have two or three lessons a week of English, and these are taught by the classroom generalist teacher, so there are endless possibilities for combining different subjects—from science to music and the arts—into English language lessons. Yet, as the classroom teacher mostly speaks the local language of the learners, it is often the case that learners and teachers switch back to the local language, which is not negative in and of itself but does provide less time in the target language.

If the class is not self-driven to speak English, especially in such an open setting, there are plenty of ideas for motivating or reminding learners to stick to English. The following techniques will allow you to carry out fun, creative tasks that can

- cover curricular aims,
- provide opportunities for creative and critical thinking, and
- require engagement from all learners—much more so than traditional textbook activities.

## Creative Classroom Activities

### 1. Improv

Improv can be used for all ages and levels and makes for short, creative breaks that can fit any number of topics in the classroom (see Cahnmann-Taylor & McGovern’s 2021 book, [Enlivening Instruction with Drama and Improv](#), for endless ideas). In this example, inspired by Cahnmann-Taylor & McGovern’s book, fourth grade learners (10-year-olds) in their second year of learning English were put in groups of three. One child was the museum curator, one the artist, and one the artist’s medium. The artist had exactly 1 minute to “form” the sculpture, and then the curator had to describe to the rest of the class what the piece was about and interview the artist.

Important here is that the sculpture doesn't move, and if it does, then this is discussed! Figure 1 shows some ideas for what can be on the board to help scaffold the activity, but what actually happens can go well beyond what is expected! For example, the curator might talk about the materials (what the art piece is made of), or the artist might become egocentric and brag about "the piece." This can easily be turned into a writing activity, roles can be swapped, language corrected, and art appreciated.

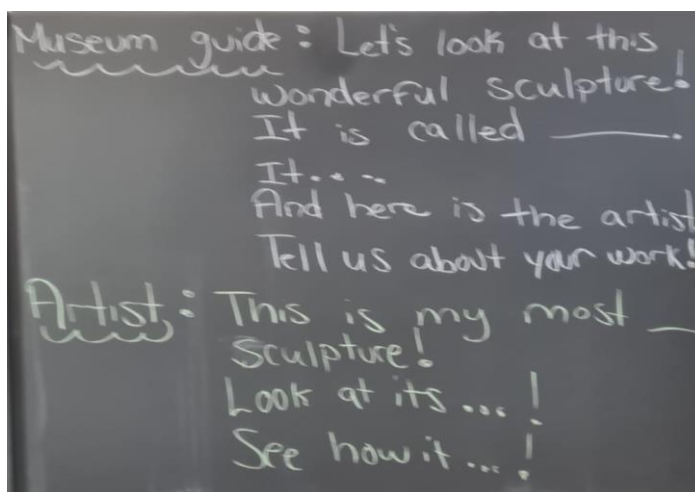


Figure 1. Artist and curator improv.

Improv activities are easily tied to lesson content. If you go to [Cahnmann-Taylor's](#) website, there is an alphabetical list of improv games that you can think about adapting to your own specific needs, such as using the "Yes, and!" activity for planning a class trip or "Landscapes" for a lesson on habitats and environments.

## 2. Lip Syncs

Letting learners choose their own song motivates them to learn the language, and lip syncs are a wonderful way of focusing on pronunciation, comprehension, and interpretation. When learners work on their own songs, they actively use the dictionary, repeat the lyrics over and over again, and develop confidence as they go.

Songs by Katy Perry, Lenka, and Imagine Dragons (and some 21 Pilots songs) work well for 9–12-year-old children. Through watching existing lip syncs, for example Lip Sync Battle Shorties, learners can create success criteria to apply to their own interpretations. Elementary schools all over the world host lip sync battles (as any web [search](#) will show), and many multilingual language learners are already listening to music in English, so why not bring this activity into the English language classroom?

## 3. Parodies

Parodies are a wonderful way of expressing political views, feelings about life, or even the understanding of school subjects (like in the [ASAPScience parodies](#)). Parodies can also just be plain old silly and learners can simply have fun with the language.

Normally, I start working with parodies by working with the Ylvis "[What Does the Fox Say?](#)" song and have the learners turn it into "What does the teacher / my parent say?" The learners learn to use rhyming dictionaries, clap out syllables, and turn sentences around. Learners can all work with the same song or they can each choose their own song.

I tend to start lessons on parodies by showing one from the internet (like The Holderness Family's "[Slime after Slime](#)") and work with an example in more or less detail and then have the learners continue working on their own. Here are some follow-up activities:

- Have them write up their final versions nicely and decorate them to make laminated placemats for family members.
- Have a little show and invite other classes.
- Have students read one another's parodies out loud and show some appreciation.

What is also nice is that students can work at their own level—some just replace words; other learners go gung-ho and rewrite pretty much the entire text.

#### 4. Destination Imagination Instant Challenges

[Destination Imagination](#)'s Instant Challenges lend themselves well to multilingual language learners. As part of the course English is Everywhere, my students simplified many of the original instant challenges [here](#). The principle is simple:

- Learners get a piece of paper with a challenge on it. (E.g., "Create a bridge that can hold five coins using only 10 sheets of paper and 10 paperclips" or see the Appendix for a "Ping-pong-athon" challenge.)
- They have a few minutes to plan within their groups (without getting the materials).
- They then fetch the materials and have another few minutes to meet the challenge.
- When time is up, each group's device is tested in front of the class and scores are assigned and noted for each category on the board.

It is also important to encourage learners to use English during the group work, the testing, the scoring, and the plenary afterwards. These challenges are great for teaching collaboration, they are short but can be expanded for analysis, they do not require complicated materials, and they can serve many purposes, from teaching students to follow simple instructions to allowing them to practice negotiation and many other science or creative thinking skills. It is also helpful here for you to be dramatic—wear a funny hat, act like the ringmaster, be loud about how much time is left—then, the learners will get into the friendly spirit of the competition.

#### Additional Techniques

Here are some other great techniques (adapted from Loder Buechel, 2021, p. 28) for motivating learners to stick to English:

##### Model the Behaviors You Want Your Learners to Use

- *Ask for help*: "Oh, my goodness! What does *Kaulquappe* [German for *tadpole*] mean in English? Can anyone help?"
- *Use body language*: "I don't know the word for this sport [move hands to show juggling]. Does anyone know?"
- *Paraphrase*: "When we were in the United States, we ate that sweet dessert, kind of like a giant cakey Oreo." [Whoopie pie]

##### General Classroom Habits

- *Prize distribution for on-task, in-English behavior*: Beads on strings, treats in cupcake liners.

- *Local-language table or stoplights*: When learners feel the need to use the local language, they go to a specific table or hold up a stoplight in their groups to indicate that they are purposefully doing this.
- *Props*: Plastic microphones or silly hats are motivating for speaking English.
- *Chanting to yourself*: Chant your task as you do it. (E.g., “I am folding origami” as you fold paper.)

## Roles

These roles are all tied to a language-related job (not just, e.g., timekeeper or manager), and sometimes it is good to have the learners wear stickers with their roles written on them so they “live” their jobs. When they wear stickers, they are held accountable by one another, it’s easier for you to monitor, and it feels “official.”

- *The dicto-fan*: The child who looks up words in the dictionary and reports the definition to the class when needed.
- *The writer*: The child who takes notes.
- *The monolingual*: The child who says, upon hearing a language that is not English, “I don’t speak that language!”

If you are interested in hearing more details about these projects, you are welcome to view [my presentation](#) or read the article “Letting Go of the Coursebooks: Creative Tasks in Primary School EFL” on page 24 of [Issues in Education](#).

Have fun!

## References

Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & McGovern, K. R. (2021). *Enlivening instruction with drama and improv: A guide for second language and world language teachers*. Routledge.

Loder Buechel, L. (2021). Letting go of the coursebooks: Creative tasks in primary school EFL. In M. Cruz & C. Pinto (Eds.), *Issues ’21: Issues in Education* (pp. 24–35). Politécnico do Porto.

---

**Laura Loder Buechel** has been a teacher trainer in Zurich, Switzerland for the past 20 years. She received her BA from La Salle University in Pennsylvania, her MEd from Northern Arizona University, and her PhD from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. You can find out more about her [here](#).