TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION AND STORYTELLING WITH YOUNG LEARNERS: ANALYSIS OF ITS ADVANTAGES

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Alejandra Recio is a full-time PhD student at the University of Leeds. Her areas of interest are Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Education. Her research project is aimed at investigating the implementation of the Task-based Instruction (TBI) approach with very young learners of English supported by ICT tools and ICT-supported stories. She has experience in teaching English in bilingual schools, in private language centres, and using the communicative approach in Foreign Language contexts in Mexico. She has also worked with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a systems administrator and as a lecturer implementing undergraduate courses in virtual learning environments like Blackboard. This has given her insight into the potential uses of technology in educational settings.

Classroom language methodologies have followed a progression of methods that have gone from prescriptive lessons, focused on the teaching and learning of linguistic features of a language, to lessons where the focus is communicating in the target language supported by noticing events of such features. The communicative approach to language teaching (attached to the latter trend) currently shapes the language teaching practice in classrooms worldwide. Task-based Instruction (TBI) finds its roots in the communicative approach and to date has been actively used in language classrooms for more than a decade. This work reports on the observations carried out during a period of two months within a pre-school classroom, where communicative tasks have been used within an English as a Second Language context. The purpose of these observations is to inform the development of an English as a Foreign Language teaching methodology that incorporates TBI in an on-going research project.

INTRODUCTION

There is a trend to expand the English curriculum to the lower levels of mainstream school systems in many countries around the world (Cameron, 2003). With the purpose of responding to the challenges that this phenomenon poses, a research project aimed at designing a methodology of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for pre-school children based on the Task-based Instruction (TBI) approach is being carried out. The research is being informed by practice through a series of participant observations conducted in a pre-school classroom in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context in a UK school.

The overall purpose of this paper is to show the potential of TBI for the Young Learners curriculum, as it can provide children the support they need to learn English according to their requirements as learners. The first part presents the advantages of TBI to teach English to young learners and the second shows some findings of the observation sessions illustrated with material produced by children when performing communicative tasks.

THE POTENTIAL OF TBI

TBI finds its roots in the notion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and has to date been actively used in language classrooms for more than a decade. It followed other approaches -Grammar-Translation, Audio-Lingualism- and parted from them by changing the underlying principles of curriculum design. In TBI, morphosyntactic, phonological, and lexical language elements (grammar, phonology, discourse, and vocabulary) are located secondarily in curriculum design, while

specific learners' needs and ways of learning the language are brought to the foreground (Nunan, 1991; Ellis, 2003).

TBI seems to have characteristics that suit children's needs as language learners. Furthermore, communicative tasks constructed around stories make them valuable for teaching languages to young children. This assertion is based on research results that show how stories appeal to young children by providing them with meaningful learning contexts to develop language or social skills (Boltman, 2001; Nutbrown, 1999; Ryokai *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 1995, 2000). TBI's methodological potential and the usefulness of stories as a thematic component to teach languages are highlighted by Kiernan (2005: 59) while conducting a small-scale research project with beginner-level adult learners: *"tasks provide a framework for storytelling [stories] which can be manipulated by the task designer or teacher to both support and challenge the learner"*. At this point, and despite the fact that success in language development cannot be attributed to the presence or absence of learning *devices* (stories) or an approach (TBI), results of the above studies are promising in terms of the educational benefits that stories and TBI offer to young learners (Lee, 2005; Pinter, 2005).

The concept of *task* for very young language learners

The diverse understanding of the elements that compose task definition (i.e. scope, perspective, authenticity, linguistic skills, and psychological processes concerned with task performance) constitutes the origin of the varied meanings of tasks found in the literature (Ellis, 2003). For instance, considerations regarding the scope of tasks vary in terms of differentiating a *classroom exercise* from a *task*, so while some believe that tasks are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use, others think that any kind of language activity can be considered a task. This diversity of understanding affects each of the elements mentioned above and, not being our intention to create a new meaning for task, we suggest the use of a working definition, one that within this project considers already existing descriptions, the age of the learners

that will be using tasks and the context in which the tasks will be implemented. In view of these conditions, *task*, within this research project, is defined as a meaningful and purposeful activity [specifically for young children] that involves learners in comprehending –understanding-, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language, while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. There should be specific requirements set by the teacher as to what will be regarded as successful completion of the task -not necessarily the production of language-, where learners are required to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought.[1]

Characteristics of young children as language learners

Regardless of the individual differences in children's language development and the theories that explain the processes involved in its acquisition and growth, it can be said that children learn languages (first or second languages in certain conditions) relatively easily. For instance, linguistic theories maintain that children have a natural ability to learn languages (Keis, 2006) and studies conducted on bilingualism show that children are able language learners (Bialystok, 2001).

Now, despite the ease with which children learn languages, foreign language contexts challenge their natural ability given that this *easiness* is related, among other factors, to exposure -which in these contexts will be limited in the majority of cases to the language classroom. Considering this, the importance of making classroom language learning events meaningful and appropriate to children's learning needs becomes crucial. At this point, in order to learn how to increase the learning potential of classroom events, it is helpful to analyze children's characteristics as learners first, to later match these characteristics to teaching approaches. This match would serve the purpose of designing meaningful language lessons for young children that would address their needs as learners. In connection with this idea, Table 1 explains the characteristics of children associated with language learning and development.

Children are:	Research, teaching literature, and observation evidence
Good at language understanding (at a holistic level)	- are already very good at interpreting meaning without necessarily understanding individual words (Halliwell, 1992). - rely heavily on oral language (Cameron, 2003).
Uninhibited in language production	- already have great skill in using limited language creatively. - take great delight in talking (Halliwell, 1992; Cameron, 2003). - are less inhibited than older learners to talk in the foreign language (Cameron, 2003). - most lack self consciousness when they speak a new language (McIlvain, 2004).
Willing to engage in language construction within their cognitive capacity	- have fun with language: i.e. rhyming and alliterations. - need and enjoy repetition (McIlvain, 2004). - require that language learning opportunities have appropriate literacy [language] demands.
Developing nascent literacy skills	"[...] literacy teaching needs to be sensitive to the development of first language literacy, to the differences between first language and English in the relationship between spoken and written forms, and to the learners' knowledge of spoken English." (Cameron, 2003: 108). - may not be ready for certain structures and complexities in either first or second language (McIlvain, 2004).
Indirect but active in learning style	- frequently learn indirectly rather than directly. - are continuously asking questions, wondering (Tizard and Hughes, 1984).
Engaged in understanding the world and constructing reality	- are always searching for meaning (Cameron, 2003), causing them to be actively involved in a process of formulating the rules that lead to the understanding of the world (Wells, 1987). - like to process new experiences, ask questions, experiment (Donaldson, 1987; Tizard and Hughes, 1984).

Table 1. Characteristics of young children as language learners

TBI attributes in the light of young children's characteristics

With the purpose of establishing a rationale of why the characteristics of TBI suit young children's needs as language learners, its methodological description is explained in relation to young children's characteristics as language learners. The following reasoning underlying each connection provides the basis for this argument. This relationship is summarized below in Table 2.

a. Learners' needs. Children use language – among other reasons- to understand the world, to make sense of their reality and the rules to engage with other children and adults. Tasks in a language classroom can address the need of children to make sense of their reality because the approach allows for planning the language objectives based on learners' needs. For example, a task in a young learner classroom

could be to draw a picture about how Goldilocks felt when she left the bears' house and talk about this picture with the target language vocabulary related to emotions. The task will help the children understand or deal with the morale of the story –it's not right to enter other people's houses without permission- through a language task.

b. Learner-centred curriculum. In TBI, learners influence curriculum design. This is interesting when learners are young children who can change the course of a task or go beyond its expected outcome because of their natural curiosity towards new experiences. If the teaching approach provides room to let learners guide the learning process –to an extent which the teacher considers appropriate or useful-, teachers will have more tools to plan and carry out language learning opportunities related to the learner.

c. Learners communicating in the target language. One of the purposes of using communicative tasks in language classrooms is to get learners to talk in the target language. Children's lack of inhibition to talk becomes an advantage because if the topic of the tasks interests children, communication is likely to occur and even to be initiated by children rather effortlessly.

d. Focus on form. TBI allows for a type of syllabus where complex features of the language are taught according to learners' needs. Young children do not need explicit teaching of these features because they are developing the skills to grasp the concept of a language rule. The *delay* in the teaching of complex language features can be planned because TBI in principle accepts the teaching of these concepts as secondary. Learner needs –i.e. playing with the language, being

exposed to it – come first. Moreover, if the young learner curriculum is planned on a long-term basis, communicative tasks can incorporate a focus on form gradually, considering how children develop the skills to understand concepts related to complex features of language.

e. Correction of form. TBI asks for a focus on form to happen in natural interventions such as, for instance, when learners ask for an explanation or actually make a mistake. Considering that young children are taught form in L1 in natural instances, TBI seems an appropriate approach to teach an L2 considering this principle. If, for instance, children use the wrong form of the past tense of a verb, parents, family or care-takers might correct them. However, these corrections happen naturally since the word is normally corrected when the children make these

	Methodological characteristics of TBI	**Children's characteristics as language learners**
a. Learners' needs	Language learning activities should directly reflect what learners *"potentially or actually need to do with the target language"* (the *"rehearsal rationale"* (Nunan, 1991).	Children as language learners are always looking for meaning (Cameron, 2003). They are involved actively in the formulation of rules that lead to the understanding of the world (Wells, 1987).
b. Curriculum flexibility	Teacher control instruction lessens in favour of learner-centeredness (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998).	They like to process new experiences, ask questions, experiment (Donaldson, 1978; Tizard and Hughes, 1984).
c. Learners communicating in the target language	Communicative tasks are especially suited for this approach (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996).	They are less inhibited than older learners to talk in the foreign language (Cameron, 2003). Most lack self-consciousness when they speak a new language (McIlvain, 2004).
d. Focus on form	Procedural syllabi allow for a random selection and sequencing of tasks (Guerrero, 2004). In TBI, morphosyntactic, phonological, and lexical language elements (grammar, phonology, discourse, and vocabulary) are located secondarily and curriculum [and tasks] design parts from specific learners' needs and ways of learning the language (Nunan, 1991).	They are developing first and second language literacy, becoming familiarized with the written word (Cameron, 2003).
e. Correction of form	Focus on form is required (to foster the acquisition of formal linguistic elements) but should occur in *"natural interventions"* during tasks (Harley & Swain, 1984).	They require that language-learning opportunities have appropriate literacy demands. They may not be ready for certain structures and complexities in either the first or second language (McIlvain, 2004).

Table 2. Connection between TBI and Young Children as language learners[2]

mistakes and without formal teaching of a language rule. The person who corrects a child does not go into detail or long explanations about why the form for the past tense of the verb *run* is *ran* and not *runned*. In TBI communicative tasks, focus on form can happen spontaneously. If children doing communicative tasks make a mistake related to form, they can be corrected in the way they would be corrected by parents, when the mistake occurs and without formal language rule explanation. Furthermore, the focus on form is not necessary for communicative tasks to take place. Children will ask for language explanations as they are ready to understand them. This again will happen naturally because children will show signs of readiness and tasks can evolve to consider form according to these signs.

The relationship between young learner needs and TBI methodology summarized in Table 2 has been thus far suggested. Moreover, the results of a small-scale field study (discussed in the second part of this paper) are encouraging in

terms of the benefits of implementing TBI with young learners.

REALITY CHECK: ESL PRE-SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

In order to study the strategies employed by teachers to support the language development of pre-school children in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context and to see how this support could be translated into tasks in an EFL classroom, a series of participant observation sessions were conducted in a school in the UK with pre-school children whose native language is different from English. The school was chosen because of the varied ethnic backgrounds of the students, the teachers' positive response towards this work, and the approach that the teacher was using to support the language and literacy development of these children –storytelling and related activities. The observations took place between September 2005 and January 2006, once a week, in sessions of three hours, at a literacy-

Story-related task	Means	Variations
Teacher telling a story	Oral telling	Fiction and non-fiction Short and long versions of the same story With/without props, i.e., puppets or objects related to the story Asking the children questions as the story is being told
Children re-telling a story	Oral re-telling	Using the pictures from the book as clues Using puppets: individually/group
Drawing a picture	Pictorial	Without asking children to describe the drawing. Asking for a description
Recognizing vocabulary	Oral Symbolic	Having children recognize words from their sound, from pictures, or through written text
Recognizing phonological patterns	Oral	Asking children to repeat and distinguish patterns: rhyming, alliterations, or middle sound Hat/pat; cat/car; train/rain
Making puppets	Pictorial	Pictures of characters directly taken from the story read Pictures of characters different from the pictures of the story
Role-playing with puppets	Oral	Individual Group
Writing sentences to describe pictures	Writing	With corrections: letter formation, punctuation, capitalization Without corrections

Table 3. Tasks in a pre-school classroom

training course organized and run by the teacher of the children attending this course.

On average, each session included 4 children and 3 adults. The structure of these sessions was to sit around a small table –at the children's school library-, and perform diverse activities related to literacy. Such activities were organized resembling a storytelling session, where the teacher read a story to the children and asked them to complete activities that stemmed from the tale. The diverse language background of the children who attended the course included Somali, French, Vietnamese, Farsi, and Spanish. At home, all the children spoke their mother tongue with parents and family.

With the aim of generating a set of typical tasks performed within this context and of conducting a further analysis of them, the observed tasks were classified. Below is a list of some of the activities produced during the participant observation period, showing delivery means and variations (Table 3). The work observed was not consciously or explicitly based on the TBI framework; however, after perceiving key elements of TBI in its philosophy and organization, we judged it suitable for the present analysis. The data source for the analysis consisted in observation notes, the anecdotal journal generated during this course, and sample material prepared by the children during the sessions.

Detail of Telling-a-Story task

Following the task cycle suggested by Willis (1996), the telling-a-story task takes up the sequence of events shown in Fig. 1. In this task,
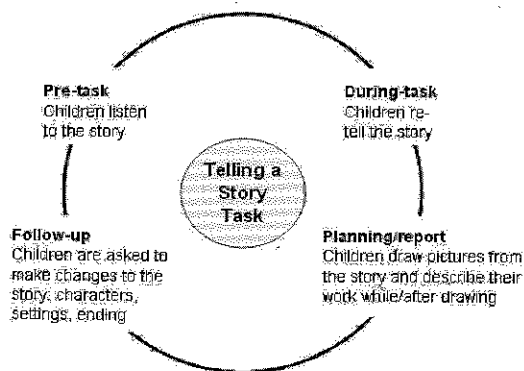

Pre-task
Children listen to the story

During-task
Children re-tell the story

Telling a Story Task

Follow-up
Children are asked to make changes to the story: characters, settings, ending

Planning/report
Children draw pictures from the story and describe their work while/after drawing

Fig. 1. Telling-a-story task cycle.

children are asked to tell a story to the teacher in small groups. Children are encouraged to follow a structure in the story where a beginning-middle-end organization can be observed; however, children are free to change details as long as they can talk about the reasons underlying such changes.

Other types of tasks that can be used with young learners include *listing* (i.e. characters from stories); *ordering and sorting* (i.e. elements from stories such as vocabulary); *comparing* (i.e. story versions); and *problem-solving* (i.e. stories' plots) (Willis, 1996). Taking into account that this classification is not all-embracing (Ellis, 2003), other types of tasks can be used, as long as the operations that learners are required to complete while performing tasks consider children's characteristics as learners, as previously discussed.

Considerations of task effectiveness with young learners

There is an important feature of the tasks observed which we decided to label the *performance component*. This is the children's response to the activity and the degree of proximity between the teacher's expected outcome of the activity and the actual one. The expected outcome of each exercise was discussed with the teacher before the children joined the session. We, as participants, were aware of the teacher's objective in each task. This feature was analyzed on a per-task basis; that is, each task observed was considered *complete-matching* if the children were able to finish the task, felt motivated by it, and the outcome met the teacher's expectations; or *part-matching*, when the previous conditions differed from the teachers' expectations or were not met in full.

On the whole, the tasks observed were successful, but certain variations presented more challenges to children or generated discussion between them not directly related to the plot of the story; for instance, when children were asked to make puppets with character pictures that differed from the story pictures. This task produced interesting twists that, to some extent, addressed the way children learn: always asking, always making sense of the world. The original

purpose of the task was to complete the puppets and use them to retell the story. However, when the children noticed the differences between the pictures from the book and the puppets that they were making, they spontaneously started talking about these differences —clothes, facial features, height, or size. This discussion was made relevant to the task when the teacher talked with the children about the differences, asking for example which characters the children preferred. The teacher later told us that it is important for children to recognize differences in shapes and patterns because it is a useful skill to understand Maths concepts. In this way, tasks with *part-matching* components were still learning experiences for the children.

Children's language development: sample of produced material

Early October 2005

"The Gingerbread Man" is a story with multiple variations. It is about a couple that bakes gingerbread shaped like a man, from which the story takes its title. "The Gingerbread Man" character jumps out of the oven to avoid being eaten and is chased by different characters, including its makers. The chasing characters are usually animals, although some versions have children. As the Gingerbread Man escapes from its chasers, he repeats its trademark phrase: *"Run, run as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man"*, showing in a way its confidence in being faster than others and unbeatable. However, the gingerbread character
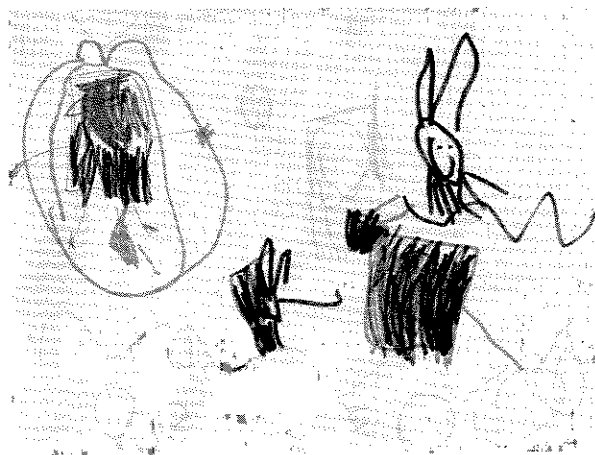
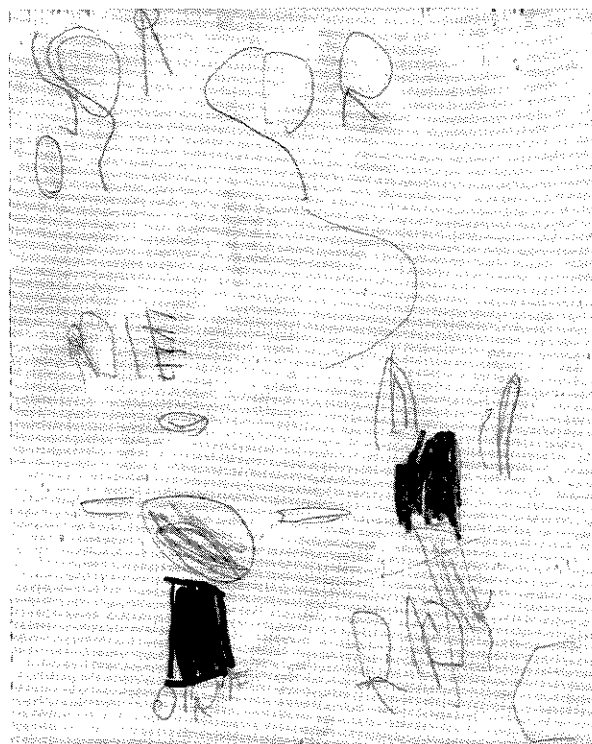**Fig. 2. "The Gingerbread Man"**

Fig. 3. Words from "The Gingerbread Man"

is finally tricked by an astute fox and gets eaten at the end of the story.

After having listened to the story "The Gingerbread Man" (based on the version published by Ladybird[3]), they were asked to draw a picture about it (Fig. 2). As Sarah[4] (4 years and 3 months) was drawing the picture, she was talking about it. The figure inside the circle is the gingerbread man, being cooked in the oven. To the right of the circle, there is a square coloured in black, which represents the cow that tried to eat the gingerbread man. The picture on top of the cow is the wolf that in the end ate the cookie. The wavy lines represent the river in the story, and the sun was drawn because everybody was running outside chasing the Gingerbread Man. After drawing the picture, the teacher asked the children to *write* their own story (Fig. 3). Sarah *wrote* "wolf" under the picture to the left of the page, and the letters at the top represent the word "gingerbread".

Late January 2006

The teacher told the children a modified version of "The Gingerbread Man" called "The Chapati

Man". A key difference between the stories is the main character. Instead of gingerbread, the runaway character is a chapati (Indian food shaped as a flat circle made with flour, salt, and water). A girl is the one who makes and cooks the chapati and the chasing characters are people and animals. A pig is the astute character that finally tricks the Chapati Man to eat it.

After listening to the story, children were asked to colour a picture of a girl who, like in the story, cooked chapatis. The question above the square where the ingredients of the recipe are drawn reads: "What happens next?" The children talked about the story to answer this question (Fig. 4). Having finished the telling, the teacher showed the children a chapati recipe and asked them to copy the recipe, drawing pictures of the ingredients. The children were talking about their pictures and the recipe while drawing and copying (Fig. 5). The work illustrated here is also Sarah's (4 years and 6 months).
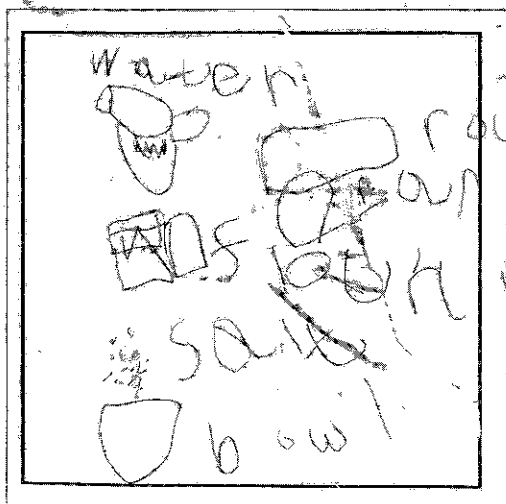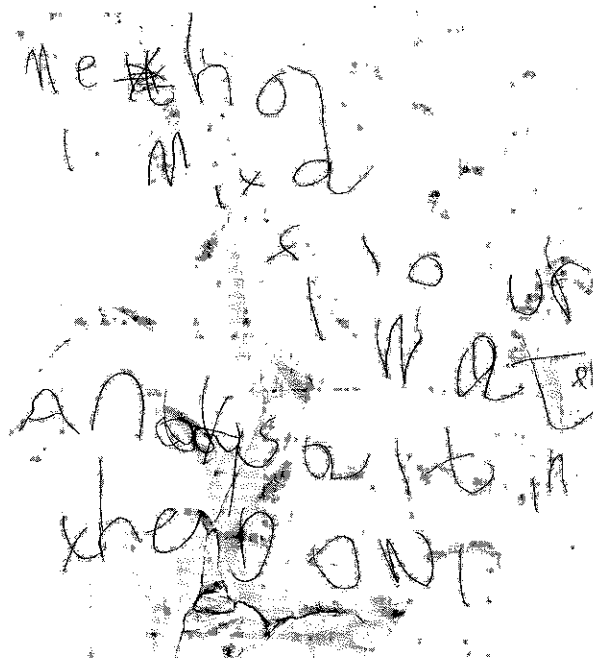

Fig. 5. "How to make chapatis"

Fig. 4. Recipe from "The Chapati Man"

The material shown in the pictures provides an example of the outcome of communicative tasks performed by young children. This material is useful in various ways, i.e. to observe and keep track of a child's language development. To illustrate this, observable changes in the writing of the sample work are used as the focus of analysis.

Changes in writing skills observable from the materials gathered during the tasks

The following is an extract from the entries of the anecdotal journal:

> "Changes in writing between the two work samples are related to many causes, including child maturation. However, the children's teacher saw Sarah's development as 'interestingly fast', considering that at the beginning of the course in September, the gap in oral and writing skills between Sarah and the older children (4 years, 10 months and 5 years old) in her class was considerable. By the end of January, according to Sarah's teacher, she had overcome the gap in language production and writing skills evident in September in a rather short period of time.
>
> Letter formation and separation between letters to write words have improved from October (Figs. 6 and 7) to January (Fig.

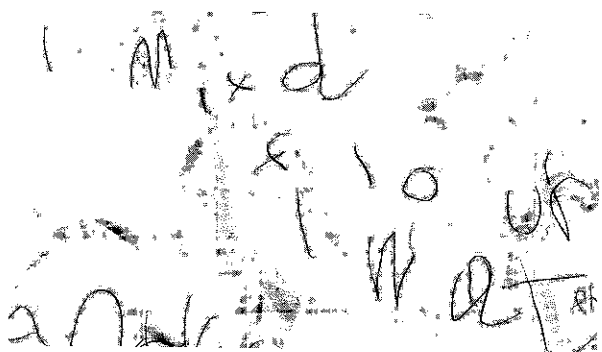**Fig. 6. 'Gingerbread'.**

Fig. 7. 'Wolf.

Fig. 8. Chapati recipe: "I mix[e]d flour water"

8). In both cases, children had to copy words from a model given by the teacher (book and printed recipe)."

CONCLUSIONS

The objectives of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) courses need to consider the long-term goal of the English curriculum in mainstream school and allow young children to learn according to their needs (Cameron, 2003). Considering this, it is suggested that the TBI approach can address the long-term goal of language curriculum while looking at children's needs.

With the purpose of understanding the processes involved in the support of language development in ESL contexts, an observation exercise was organized. This exercise yielded interesting results on the feasibility of implementing tasks with young learners.

A review of the literature shows that to date, the use of communicative tasks with very young learners is a somewhat unexplored area (Pinter, 2005). With the exception of studies conducted at the primary level by Prabhu (1987), Carless (2002) and Lee (2005), studies connected to the implementation of TBI with children in the age range of 3 to 5 are scarce. Research of this kind is thus considered relevant, as the positive effects that tasks have in language development, as was shown in the case of a child in this paper, are worth exploring and pursuing.

Notes

[1] Based on definitions from Cameron (2001), Ellis (2003), Nunan (1989), Prabhu (1987), Richards, Platt and Weber (1985) and Skehan (1998).

[2] Based on Donaldson (1978), Harley and Swain (1984), Tizard and Hughes (1984), Nunan (1991), Willis (1996), Ellis (2003), Cameron (2003) and McIlvain (2004).

[3] Ladybird Books is a publishing company of children's books. The reduced vocabulary versions of traditional stories used in their Reading Scheme have made the company's books popular in British primary schools. A small sample of the modified versions of traditional tales is available on the company's website, which can be accessed at http://www.ladybird.co.uk/playzone/index.html.

[4] All children's names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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