

Teaching with bricks

By Emma Herrod

Pictures by Brickset. Images by Jetro

I wish I was able to personally chat with everyone reading this edition. I'd like to find out about your experiences of learning a foreign language. Perhaps you would talk about learning English or French at school, or recall a particular teacher who inspired you to visit foreign climes, or indeed perhaps put you off ever wanting to find the way to the post office in a town abroad. I wish I could find out how you were taught. Was it all about the grammar and rules or were your lessons fun and inspiring? My own foreign language is German and I was taught by a lovely Russian lady at school. My experience is certainly full of grammar rules, memorising lists of vocabulary and chanting...lots and lots of chanting. I guess it could be argued that it was actually a very effective way of teaching. I got As in German at school and studied the language into higher education. Possibly infinitely more impressive, is that I am able to recall a number of the memorised lists of words, including 'der Funkamateuer' (the German word for 'amateur radio enthusiast' – vocabulary every 14 year old student needs to survive!

Now (and many years later) I find myself on the other side of the classroom desks as an English as a Foreign Language teacher. Lots of students want grammar. Adult students love rules. They want to know how things fit together, and why. There is also a deep-rooted belief with lots of learners, that text books are the only 'real' way to learn a subject and there is little room for fun amongst all the rules. I reckon it's our job as the teachers to meet somewhere in the middle. Maybe we can use the textbook, if that's where you feel safe, and well...shake it up a little. Cue the LEGO® bricks...

Allow me to set the scene: A Large, very large, well-known pharmaceutical company. One director-level Russian student. One terrified teacher (me) clutching a print out, sent by aforementioned Russian student, outlining all the things he did and didn't want to learn, and how he would like to be taught. Venue: One windowless meeting room. Lesson one of 30. Gulp. My bag rattled as I walked. I had my usual bits and pieces, coloured pens, beautifully laminated flash cards, and my secret arsenal of LEGO bricks. After we had greeted each other, my Russian student was sat, pen in hand, clean pad of paper at the ready, all set to be 'given' lots of rules and things to learn by me. I got my teacher things out of my bag, trying to appear professional and desperately trying not to give away that the bag of LEGO had tipped itself over the inside of my handbag. Tiny bricks were lost amongst a sock, belonging to my son, and some lipsticks and there appeared to be a baby biscuit caked around minifigure Johnny Thunder's legs. This was not going well. Actually, things were fine. He

was a really nice guy, and we worked in his comfort zone for a while, referring to a grammar book, and discussing why certain words were pronounced as they are. In the email he had sent, which stipulated exactly what he would like to learn, he had mentioned that his English staff found him abrupt. When he asked them to do things, he felt they might be offended. He was right, they were. Being Russian, this student's manner was direct and he tended to translate his native directness straight into English. Unsurprisingly, his English staff didn't like to be told "Look into in and write your report by lunchtime!". Out came the bag of LEGO (with the weaning biscuits washed off).

I'm not sure the image will ever leave me of this student's face at the moment I tipped the bricks out onto the table. His expression sort of said, "Oh you have to be joking" and "I asked for a real teacher" mixed with "there is no way I am playing this game". The bricks were all orange and brown, of different sizes. It was Autumn, so you've guessed it, we were making the seasonal pumpkin set (40012). "Here are the instructions and here are the bricks. I would like you to pass me the bricks and tell me what to do please". His shoulders visibly dropped. I'm not sure quite what he thought I was going to ask him to do, but he was clearly relieved. "Put this orange brick down there!", he ordered. I did as I was told. "Put this orange brick on top, on the left side!". I couldn't fault my student's language. He was getting the job done. "Let's try this

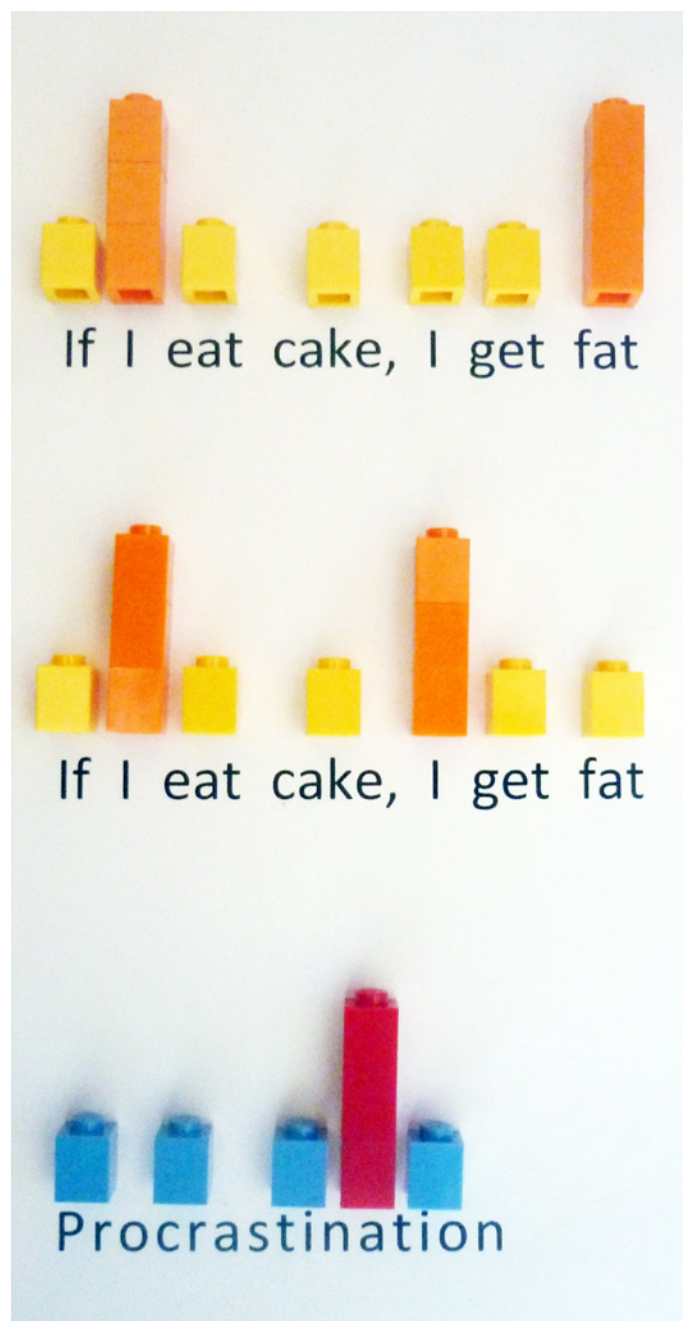
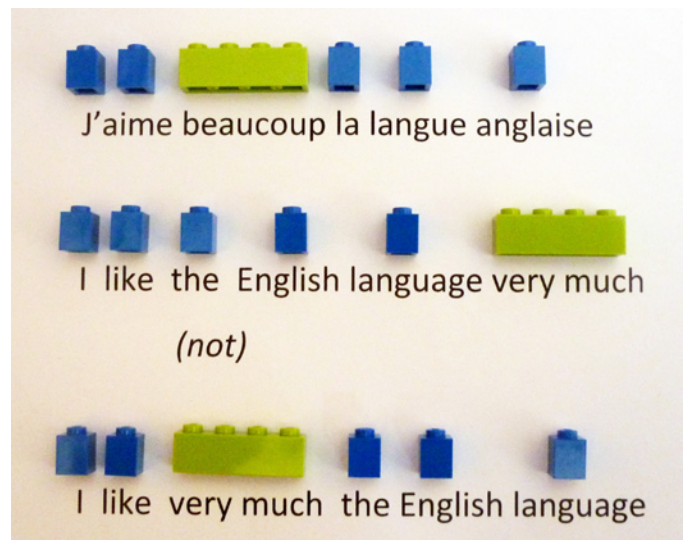


like really polite English people now, shall we?", I suggested. I passed him a brick, "Please could you put that brick down there? Thank you. Now this brick on top, just to the left. Excellent. Now this one goes on the right. Can you take this one and put it on top of that one?". You get the idea. He tried and imitated my exaggerated posh English accent beautifully. In his relaxed state, free of lists of grammar rules, his sense of humour came out. We rolled around laughing as he pretended to ask for "more tea and cucumber sandwiches" with little finger raised. We built the rest of the model, using silly English accents and way too many 'pleases', 'coulds' and 'would you mind ifs'. But it got the point across. He kept the finished pumpkin model and I hope it's still on his desk. He said the bricks and the finished model were a good visual reminder of this particular language point that he struggled with, and one which caused him a great amount of stress and upset at work. He noted that with the orange pumpkin on his desk, he would be reminded of putting his 'English head' on when he needed to ask his English staff to do something.

From the lunchtime lessons in corporate offices to the 4.30pm after school lessons with two sisters from Belgium. Both girls, had recently arrived in the country and didn't speak very much English. I had been told by the language school, that I had to use a particular text book. Children don't usually respond so well to grammar rules and certainly not to textbooks laid out for adults. We were going to need to inject some fun into these lessons and bring the exercises on the page to life. LEGO® to the rescue again!

The 4.30pm slot with kids is a dreaded one. The poor children have had an entire day at school, they're tired, and the last thing they actually want is an hour and a half of English lessons. The key thing here was going to be to keep them moving, and keep them interested. One of the activities which they loved, was 'Running Bricktation'. In the hallway I stuck a set of building instructions to the wall. One sister was the 'runner' the other the 'builder'. The runner would run out to the instructions and try to memorise a couple of the building steps, then run in and tell her sister what to do with the bricks. Only the builder was allowed to touch the bricks, so everything had to be conveyed verbally and in English. The girls loved it! It was always really competitive with lots of shouting. When they got a bit more confident at using English with each other, I used to like to take the model apart and get them to start again if they said any words in Flemish during the activity *insert evil laugh*. We had such a good time.

So far, I've described two scenarios where LEGO has been used in a fairly conventional model-building sense. I also use LEGO to help with more abstract elements of language. For example, take Miss K, a Polish student in her 20s, who had been living in the UK for eight years. Her English was great and full of lots of slang and native-style language. She was worried though because she couldn't work out why people thought she was miserable all the time. It was true, even if she had been describing how she came to win £1m, she still would have come across as totally uninterested! A little listening and it was clear that her issue was not one of being interested, but rather of intonation and sentence stress. In her native Polish, intonation is pretty steady, staying at quite an even pitch. English on the other hand moves all over the place, depending on what's being said. Placing stresses in different places, changes the sense or emotion. With Miss K, we used LEGO bricks to represent rising and falling intonation and stresses within words and sentences. For example:



We found that she responded really well to the image in LEGO®. When she was talking she said she could recall the coloured bricks and it reminded her to tweak how she was speaking. A lot of teaching is about raising awareness of such issues and reassuring students that there is something they can do about it. LEGO® in this case, gave us a wonderful visual tool.

Working with LEGO and larger classes of both adults or children can also be great fun. I think one of my favourite activities to do with groups of learners is one I call 'Home Sweet Home'. Ideal for that bit of the textbook where the theme is 'Home' or 'Where I Live'. I've used the LEGO Family Home (6754) set for this activity before and it works nicely with the detail and size when finished. With one adult class, I split the learners into four groups of three and had each team building a different section of the model (one did the roof, another the garden etc.). They then put the various sections together to complete the model, all the time talking to their colleagues in English to communicate what needed to be done. An excellent activity for giving instructions, as well as positional adjectives

(on, under, in etc.). With one beautiful finished model (and I do LOVE that house set) we talked at length about the little rooms. How did the layout of the house differ from where we live (it's smaller, obviously!)? Which items of furniture should go in each room? The picture of the house in the textbook we were using was ok. It didn't really push any buttons though. It was just a picture of a house. LEGO on the other hand gave us a cute 3D model, made using the learner's own English, which could then be opened up, turned around and played with. It is this tactile, familiar nature of LEGO which lends itself so well to use in the classroom. LEGO has, I believe, a unique ability in today's toy market, to transcend age, language and gender barriers and encourage a therapeutic feeling of familiarity and comfort in adults and children alike. LEGO sits comfortably in little hands. Children are familiar with its colours and shapes, and adults revert back to small children when they hold it in their big hands. It's a perennial hit with every generation. Given the pleasure it so often brings in our hands, it seems obvious to me that it should be used more in educational contexts.

#

