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# Topics, tasks and a resource book

## Promoting learner autonomy in the primary English classroom

*Die Neuentwicklung eines Englischlehrmittels für die Primarschule (4.n– 6. Klasse) gibt Anlass zu Überlegungen zu einem interdisziplinären Ansatz, der Sachthemen und damit verbundene Lernaufgaben (*tasks*) in den Mittelpunkt stellt. Wenn die kommunikativen Absichten der Lernenden und nicht eine grammatikalische Progression den Sprachbedarf bestimmen, brauchen diese früh schon Mittel und Wege, um autonomer als gewohnt arbeiten und sich die notwendigen Informationen selbst beschaffen zu können. Das Resource Book for Explorers, das hier vorgestellt wird, ist ein multifunktionales Nachschlagewerk für Primarschüler und –schülerinnen, das einerseits die Lernerautonomie fördert, anderseits das notwendige Mass an Steuerung bietet.*

### Classroom materials for upper primary learners of English

"Explorers" is a content and task based course for upper primary level learners who have had one or two years of English previously. It is produced by the *Zürcher Lehrmittelverlag* and regionally coordinated by the *Interkantonale Lehrmittelzentrale.* The authoring team (Brigitte Achermann, Keith Sprague and Käthi Staufer) is based at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences' School of Education (PHZH).

### An interdisciplinary approach

There are several important arguments in favour of an approach which links foreign language learning to other subjects on the curriculum:
Firstly, with modern curricula expanding in scope to take account of the increasing need for new skills, it makes more sense than ever to look for ways of creating synergies between different subject areas so that, ideally, the learning of every subject aids the learning of other subjects. Secondly, for primary-school pupils, linking foreign language learning to subjects and topics on their school curriculum is more authentic than simply learning languages for social purposes. Knowing how to buy a train ticket or order a meal in English is of limited use to ten-year-olds when their everyday environment offers no opportunites to use these functions. Whereas adults learning a foreign language are often motivated by a long-term goal, children learn best by interacting with the world around them and experiencing things at first hand.
"Explorers" has taken the interdisciplinary idea one step further than is usually the case by continually drawing on the expertise of specialists from a range of different subject areas and by involving methodology experts from other areas of the curriculum at the initial conception stage. Thus, it has been possible to establish cross-curricular connections that extend beyond the sharing of content to general pedagogic principles and methodology.
The six global themes which the whole course is based on come from the subject area of "Mensch und Umwelt / Mensch und Mitwelt / Natur, Mensch, Mitwelt" (as it is variously known in different cantons) – history, geography, science and technology, and social studies – plus the two additional subject areas of art and music.

### Task- and action-based learning

Current thinking in both subject matter and language teaching methodology is based on a view that places the learner centre-stage as an active constructor of knowledge and understanding. In terms of classroom practice, this means that pupils are encouraged to explore subject matter, form hypotheses and draw their own conclusions, which calls for a task- and action-based approach to language learning.
"Explorers" has incorporated task- and action-based learning into a modular organising principle whose linguistic backbone, rather than a pre-determined grammatical syllabus, is a defined repertoire of communicative language competences needed to fulfil a range of tasks. This repertoire is built up cyclically through the learner's engagement in communicative scenarios composed of series of tasks leading to concrete outcomes (cf. Stotz 2005, 15f.).To be able to communicate successfully, the learners are sup-

ported in various ways by prompts, strategies and the provision of appropriate self-access resources such as the Resource Book for Explorers, which will be discussed in more detail below.

**Course Components**

The main components of "Explorers" are the Task Cards (approximately 120 per year) which contain the instructions for each task, broken down into manageable steps and illustrated. They are delivered in a box and the pupils use them flexibly together with the other learning media. The Explorers Book complements the task cards. It contains the pre-task, texts, pictures, charts to complete, language practice activities, songs, rhymes, games, a formative assessment instrument and an answer key. The Audio CD contains most of the listening material, while a DVD with short films specially made or adapted for "Explorers" provides additional documentary input.

The Lexicards facilitate the learning of the target lexis; i.e. the approximately 300 words designed to be learned for productive use each year. The cards bear an illustration on one side and the target word accompanied by an example sentence on the other. An interactive Trainer CD-ROM contains language practice activities which learners can work on independently at their own pace and level.

Finally, the Resource Book is a newly developed reference book which the pupils use throughout the three-year-course. Its different sections are described in more detail below.

**Designing the "Resource Book"**

Where communicative purpose determines the need for language rather than a language syllabus determining the scope for communication, it follows logically that the language which learners will need cannot always be entirely predicted. Although the pre-task and task cards provide them with certain task-specific language support, they will need to be able to access further resources independently. This is important not only for purely practical reasons, but also in terms of constructivist principles. Having access to resources which they can use as and when they need them gives learners more control over their own learning and helps train them in the skilled and responsible use of information media.

The purpose of providing young learners with a Resource Book, then, is twofold: to enable them to learn and work autonomously as well as to introduce them to using a linguistic reference source at an early stage of their foreign language learning.

These initial considerations lead to a series of practical questions concerning the conception of this tool, including:

- What kind of information will the learners want to look up?
- What kind of information is suitable for inclusion in a reference work?
- How can a sensible balance be struck between making each section comprehensive enough to be of real information value and keeping the content sufficiently simple to remain accessible to the target group?

These questions provided the starting point for drawing up the detailed specifications for the Resource Book as well as serving as a guideline for writing the material.

**The different parts and their functions**

***Dictionary***

The English-German / German-English translation dictionary will contain around 3000 entries when completed. 1400 words appropriate for the learners' level and age form the basic core to which the entire additional lexis occurring anywhere in "Explorers" is gradually added. Wherever useful, the entries are supported by example sentences. Any dictionary code which is not self-explanatory is avoided, and instead of phonemic transcription a CD-ROM is included for checking pronunciation.

***Gallery***

This is a full-colour picture dictionary which contains around 75 single or double-page pictures reflecting different aspects of all the topic areas covered in "Explorers". Where it can be assumed that the corresponding lexis is familiar to learners in German, the pictures are labelled in English only; where the lexis is of a less basic nature, the labelling is bilingual.

***Language Reference***

The Language Reference introduces the learners to elementary grammar and notions, explained in German and supported by plenty of examples, illustrations and charts.

In order to enable learners to use this section productively, it is particularly important to provide them with structures that have a high generative potential or a high degree of functional flexibility. Moreover, the learners need to be able to investigate grammatical features they are likely to encounter frequently in texts and which they should be able to decode with some help. In order to meet these needs, the material offered must extend well beyond the expected productive level of the learners in a similar way that an encyclopaedia extends beyond its users' capacity for memorising facts.

***Language Links***

The idea behind this section is to promote interlingual language awareness and thereby foster the transfer of skills and strategies between different languages. This should not only facilitate the beginning of instruction in a second foreign language and help promote a positive attitude towards

different languages and cultures, but should also motivate school children from immigrant families to tap into their existing bilingual and multilingual repertoires.

***How to say it***
This section comprises approximately 20 communicative functions for general social interaction in class (e.g. offering, suggesting, apologizing) as well as for more academic communication purposes (such as hypothesising, classifying or giving reasons). For each function, a range of useful expressions and phrases is listed, supported by example texts, mostly dialogues.

***Writing Organiser***
The Writing Organiser covers a range of important text types (including non-continuous texts such as mind maps or graphs) designed to support written output. There is a step-by-step introduction to producing each type of text, with highlighting of characteristic features and examples based on actual writing tasks.

## Integrating the Resource Book into task work

***Providing guidance***
In the early stages the pupils will need support and instruction as to when and how to use the Resource Book. While pupils may to some extent be familiar with using reference materials in other subjects, for example mono-lingual dictionaries, encyclopaedias or possibly the Internet, we cannot necessarily make the assumption that they will transfer these skills to their English lessons. Indeed, the multi-facetted aspect of the Resource Book goes far beyond using, say, a dictionary.

***Learners become familiar with the materials***
As an introduction to the course, pupils carry out a task which is focused solely on getting to know the materials. Entitled the 'Explorers Rally' this introductory task allows the pupils to explore and discover the different parts of Explorers, including the Resource Book. Among other things, the pupils are required to look up a number of words, check the plural forms of a list of nouns or find phrases to describe a classmate.
This task, together with the resulting feedback stage, demonstrates to both learners and teacher alike to what extent they have understood and can use the Resource Book. Awareness of how to use the book is the first stage, however. The pupils need to work with it consistently to enjoy maximum benefit and increase their autonomy in learning.

***Encouraging autonomy***
Throughout the Explorers materials explicit learning strategies appear. These strategies are intended to guide the learners in their learning. A number of the strategies make specific reference to the Resource Book, for example on how to check spellings or look up words.
In addition to the learning strategies which refer to the Resource Book, the task rubric makes reference to it consistently. The learners are regularly required to refer to the Gallery, for example. Or, having worked out a 'rule' (e.g. When do you say 'there is' and when do you say 'there are'?) pupils are instructed to check in the Language Reference section to confirm their hypothesis. All the sections of the Resource Book are covered in this manner. With time, it is expected that the learners will use the Resource Book as and when they need it as a natural means to support their learning. If this can be achieved, the pupils will have reached a high degree of autonomy in their learning and can be expected to be able to transfer the skills they have acquired to the learning of another language.

***The teacher's role***
When beginning to work with Explorers, the teacher will need to guide the pupils to ensure they are able to work with the Resource Book effectively. It is important, however, that the teacher is gradually able to withdraw support or guidance as the learners gain skill in using the book. The teacher should become less and less a source of information and the expression "Look in your Resource Book" should become increasingly commonplace in class. For some teachers this may well involve a change of attitude, as they become less the 'knowers and providers' of language – a role which many teachers may be familiar with on the basis of their own language learning biography - and more the 'facilitator of language learning'.

## References


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