

## CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR IN ENGLISH TEACHING IN JUNIOR CLASSES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The article deals with celebrating Christmas and New Year in English teaching in junior classes of elementary school. Celebrating holidays is a good way of introducing a foreign language to young learners. As teachers we must be interested in teaching culture as an indispensable part of early English language teaching. Christmas and New Year are the two most common holidays and they should be taught in all grades beginning with their introduction (in the first grade) and then repeating their elements learned the year before (second, third and fourth grade). By celebrating them the teacher stimulates learners to acquire and learn a foreign language with ease and great fun.*

**Key words:** *celebrating, holidays, Christmas, New Year, junior classes, teaching*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every language is a reflection and evidence of specific culture, just as the key of its discovery. Consequently, in learning the foreign language, its cultural component cannot be omitted, neither in evident (songs, stories, religion) or in hidden form. In a modern world of global communication, when every single person is required to have a wide general knowledge, learning a foreign language makes possible the escape from monoculturalism and monolingualism.

At the moment the proportion between the world linguistic powers is such that English leads, but at the very beginning of learning English Croatian students are exposed to only one new culture, very similar to their

mother culture. Thus, they pass from a monocultural situation to a bicultural one, when they will need a wider, multicultural knowledge. Young learners become more and more aware that their community and its values are not the only one existing, so we increase their tolerance for other cultures.

We facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge with the knowledge we already have, and that is why in these cases students use experiences from the mother culture. This existing knowledge should be used to point out similarities and differences between two cultures. The teacher of a foreign language should not give his/her students culture lessons, but he/she should introduce them step-by-step to the new world with the help of linguistic materials (e.g. flash cards, ways of addressing, greetings, rhymes, songs...).

The main problem in foreign language teaching of young children, besides the inadequate knowledge of the language, is the level of cognitive maturity. Cultural systems are very complicated and sometimes, in an effort to make them more familiar to students, we may fall in a trap by creating or consolidating stereotypes of attitudes or behaviour of the member of different culture. Children are glad when they discover some new and different elements of other cultures. The process of self-discovering is the most efficient in the acquisition of new cultural knowledge.

Cultural materials (social expressions, rhymes, song, stories, celebrating holidays...) may be taught in many ways, but the most favourable way in teaching culture in junior classes of elementary school is by celebrating holidays of the foreign culture (nation).

The reasons are the following:

- Holidays abound in cultural contents, and therefore can be always used in learning the language
- Very often we have analogies between religious holidays in different cultures; at first sight those church holidays appear similar but they have their cultural peculiarities and are good for developing the consciousness of the richness and completeness of the culture
- To young learners they can be presented and elaborated in many ways – by singing occasional songs, telling stories, drawing, making masks and figures of coloured paper and modelling clay, dramatization, watching cartoons, ...
- All the above mentioned gives children the opportunity to stay in the world of play and fantasy – in this way are also included the cognitive and emotional sides of children's personality

- Holidays are usually followed by positive emotions, and that is why the atmosphere of calmness, joy, playfulness and happiness is transferred to the class and it makes easier the process of learning
- Children's wide and narrow environment takes part in such celebrations (for example by making costumes and cooking occasional food), and children have a motive to think about what has happened during the lesson of foreign language

As the foreign language lessons improve from year to year, the teacher, having enough time (meaning 4 hours a week in the first four classes of the elementary school) and possibilities, and the children having enough language knowledge, can easily adopt the system of holidays of Anglophone cultures. Children should also be encouraged to introduce the holidays of Croatian culture or other particularities in celebrating the international holidays.

We have tried to answer to several questions, which need to be asked when planning to teach holidays to very young children:

- Why do we celebrate Christmas and New Year in English teaching?
- How do we develop progression over the primary phase when we have to teach the same festival every year?
- Do every Christmas and New Year have to be taught every year?
- How different is Christmas in the 4<sup>th</sup> year from what is happening in the 1<sup>st</sup> year?
- Which festivals should appear in the primary teaching curriculum?

## **HOLIDAYS IN PRIMARY TEACHING CURRICULUM**

Culture, in a limited sense, represents the collective identity of one nation and that is why culture is reflected through aspects of behaviour, tradition, lifestyle of that nation. The easiest examples of the differences, which at the same time are related to the language and to the culture, are shown in a way of greeting and addressing. Such differences must be explained to the students in a mother tongue or in a foreign language. Greetings, ways of addressing and other conventional phrases that are an introduction to the conversation between two or more persons can considerably influence the course of the conversation.<sup>1</sup>

The students of foreign language meet traditions and lifestyle of native speakers through selected texts. Through reading and listening to

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<sup>1</sup> Valdes-Merrill, J. (1986) *Culture Bound – Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*, Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge

texts related to the different aspects of life of native speakers, students can become aware, by themselves or with the help of the teacher, of the differences between their culture and the culture of the nation they are learning about. Lifestyle and tradition of other nations should not be better or worse from our lifestyle. It would be wrong to make conclusions about values of the foreign culture according to the comparisons between observable differences in behaviour or tradition of the other culture. In foreign language teaching it is important to develop the feeling of tolerance towards different way of behaviour and lifestyle. Our opinion is that, depending on the age of the student, this aim could be easily realized through a conversation about this theme or through explanations in mother tongue and foreign language.

It is obviously that the question of foreign language teaching and learning is complex. However, nothing is less complex than a question of cultural identity of a nation. It is possible to learn historical facts, geographical information, economic and social situation of one country as well as important persons related to art and science; it is also possible to learn characteristic tradition and the way of behaviour of a nation.

However, it is difficult to give a general characteristic of a cultural identity of a nation. This problem is even more difficult because of mixing different nations and cultures, which surely has more positive than negative sides.

It is very important that the foreign language includes many language and cultural variations. English is the mother tongue to Englishmen, just as to the Americans, Canadians and Australians. An orientation to only one of those cultural variations can be hardly justified, especially during upper intermediate language lessons (for example, Christmas and New Year in England are white and snowy and people wear warm clothes, whereas in Australia people celebrate Christmas and New Year on the beach in swimming wear). For sure it is not easy to decide how much space could be given to those language and cultural variants in foreign language lessons.

Christmas and New Year are unavoidable part of early English language teaching lessons, especially for the first graders (1<sup>st</sup> year of learning foreign language). These topics we would teach every year in the first grade, but in a different way.

As language teachers, we must be interested in teaching culture not because we *want* to teach the culture of other country but because we *have*

to teach it. If we teach language but not its culture at the same time, we teach learners meaningless symbols or symbols to which learners give wrong meanings. One way of celebrating holidays in English teaching we find most interesting and challenging is project work. Why project work? The project is an ideal vehicle for teaching primary school children for a number of reasons:<sup>2</sup>

- It is an integrated unit of work: Project is a recognizable unit of work with a beginning, middle and end. Through a series of worthwhile activities, the children gain a real sense of achievements.

- It educates the whole child: Project involves the development of the whole child, rather than focusing on teaching language. During project, it can be included a wide range of skills that children are developing during their time out of school:

- The *intellectual skill* of describing, drawing conclusions, using imagination, reading and planning
- The *physical skills* of colouring, drawing, cutting, folding, gluing and writing
- The *artistic abilities* of painting, dancing, singing, acting
- The *social skills* of sharing, co-operating, making decisions together
- *Learner independence* skills such as making responsible choices, deciding how to complete tasks, getting information, trying things out, and evaluating results.

This approach encourages emotional and personal development. Wherever possible, children are given an opportunity to produce work which is personal and individual, which reflects their ideas, tastes and interests. They are encouraged to express their feelings and their opinions are valued as well.

- It integrates language knowledge and skills: Project is a prime example of experimental learning. Language introduced and practiced within a project is directly related to the task in hand. The children use language that is needed for successful completion of the activity. A project introduces and practices language, and integrates language skills, in a natural way.

- It encourages learner independence: Project work helps children make choices and take responsibility for their own work. It is also through project work that children can start developing research and study skills.

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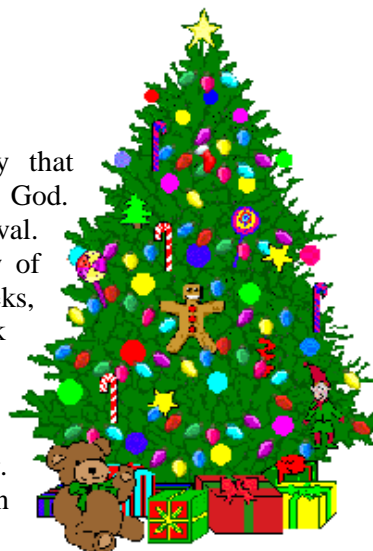
<sup>2</sup> D. Philips, S. Burwood & H. Dunford: Projects with young learners, Oxford University Press, 1999

## CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR

### *CHRISTMAS*

Christmas is a Christian holy day that marks the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. However, it is not only a Christian festival. Christmas has roots in the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, the festivals of the ancient Greeks, the beliefs of the Druids and the folk customs of Europe.

Christmas comes just after the middle of winter. The sun is strengthening and the days are beginning to grow longer. For people throughout history this has been a time of feasting and celebration.



Ancient people were hunters and spent most of their time outdoors. The seasons and weather played a very important part in their lives and because of this they had a great reverence for, and even worshipped the sun. The Norsemen of Northern Europe saw the sun as a wheel that changed the seasons. It was from the word for this wheel, *houl*, that the word *yule* (another name for Christmas) is thought to have come.

From November onwards, it is impossible to forget that Christmas is coming. Coloured lights decorate many town centres and shops, along with shiny decorations, and artificial snow painted on shop windows. In streets and shops, 'Christmas trees' (real or plastic trees) will also be decorated with lights and Christmas ornaments.

### The old man with the sack

'Father Christmas' (or 'Santa Claus') has become the human face of Christmas. Pictures will be seen everywhere of the old man with long white beard, red coat, and bag of toys. Children are taught that he brings them presents the night before Christmas and many children up to the age of 7 or 8 do believe this is true. In most countries, it is said that he lives near the North Pole, and arrives through the sky on a sledge (snow-cart) pulled by reindeer. He comes into houses down the chimney at midnight and places presents for the children in socks or bags by their beds or in front of the family Christmas tree.

Father Christmas is based on a real person, St. Nicholas, which explains his other name 'Santa Claus'. He was very shy, and wanted to give money to poor people without them knowing about it. It is said that one day, he climbed the roof of a house and dropped a purse of money down the chimney. It landed in the stocking, which a girl had put to dry by the fire! This may explain the belief that Father Christmas comes down the chimney and places gifts in children's stockings.

### Boxing Day

In the English-speaking countries, the day following Christmas Day is called 'Boxing Day'. This word comes from the custom which started in the Middle Ages around 800 years ago: churches would open their 'alms boxes' (boxes in which people had placed gifts of money) and distribute the contents to poor people in the neighbourhood on the day after Christmas. The tradition continues today - small gifts are often given to delivery workers such as postal staff and children who deliver newspapers.

## **NEW YEAR**

"Happy New Year!" That greeting will be said and heard for at least the first couple of weeks, as a new year gets under way. But the day celebrated as New Year's Day in modern America was not always January 1<sup>st</sup>. The celebration of the New Year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago. In the years around 2000 BC, the Babylonian New Year began with the first New Moon (actually the first visible crescent) after the Vernal Equinox (first day of spring).

The beginning of spring is a logical time to start a new year. After all, it is the season of rebirth, of planting new crops, and of blossoming. January 1<sup>st</sup>, on the other hand, has no astronomical or agricultural significance. It is purely arbitrary.

The Babylonian New Year celebration lasted for eleven days. Each day had its own particular mode of celebration, but it is safe to say that modern New Year's Eve festivities pale in comparison with the Babylonian ones.

The Romans continued to observe the New Year in late March, but various emperors continually tampered with their calendar so that the calendar soon became out of synchronization with the sun.

In order to set the calendar right, the Roman Senate, in 153 BC, declared January 1<sup>st</sup> to be the beginning of the New Year. But tampering continued until Julius Caesar, in 46 BC, established what has come to be

known as the Julian Calendar. It again established January 1<sup>st</sup> as the New Year. But in order to synchronize the calendar with the sun, Caesar had to let the previous year drag on for 445 days.

During the Middle Ages, the Church remained opposed to celebrating New Years. January 1<sup>st</sup> has been celebrated as a holiday by Western nations for only about the past 400 years.

#### New Year traditions

Other traditions of the season include the making of New Year's resolutions. That tradition also dates back to the early Babylonians. Popular modern resolutions might include the promise to lose weight or quit smoking. The early Babylonian's most popular resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment.

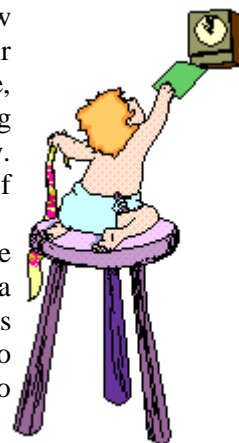
The tradition of using a baby to signify the New Year began in Greece around 600 BC. It was their tradition at that time to celebrate their god of wine, Dionysus, by parading a baby in a basket, representing the annual rebirth of that god as the spirit of fertility. Early Egyptians also used a baby as a symbol of rebirth.

Although the early Christians denounced the practice as pagan, the popularity of the baby as a symbol of rebirth forced the Church to re-evaluate its position. The Church finally allowed its members to celebrate the New Year with a baby, which was to symbolize the birth of the baby Jesus.

Traditionally, it was thought that one could affect the luck they would have throughout the coming year by what they did or ate on the first day of the year. For that reason, it has become common for folks to celebrate the first few minutes of a brand new year in the company of family and friends. Parties often last into the middle of the night after the ringing in of a new year. It was once believed that the first visitor on New Year's Day would bring either good luck or bad luck the rest of the year. It was particularly lucky if that visitor happened to be a tall dark-haired man.

Traditional New Year foods are also thought to bring luck. Many cultures believe that anything in the shape of a ring is good luck, because it symbolizes "coming full circle," completing a year's cycle. For that reason, the Dutch believe that eating donuts on New Year's Day will bring good fortune.

Many parts of the U.S. celebrate the New Year by consuming black-eyed peas. Black-eyed peas and other legumes have been considered good



luck in many cultures. The hog, and thus its meat, is considered lucky because it symbolizes prosperity. Cabbage is another "good luck" vegetable that is consumed on New Year's Day by many. Cabbage leaves are also considered a sign of prosperity, being representative of paper currency. In some regions, rice is a lucky food that is eaten on New Year's Day.

### ***NOWADAYS***

It seems that each year Christmas starts earlier and becomes more commercialised. The typical image of Father Christmas in his black boots, red suit and white beard must be recognized in almost every country in the world nowadays, but despite this Christmas is still celebrated in different ways in different countries and many still retain their own individual customs both new and old.

On New Year's Eve, many people hold parties which last until late into the night. It is traditional to greet the New Year at midnight and celebrate the first minutes of the year in the company of friends and family. People may dance, sing, and drink a toast to the year ahead. After the celebrations, it is time to make New Year resolutions, and these are a list of decisions about how to live in the coming year. Horns are blown at midnight, and people hug and kiss to begin the New Year with much love and happiness.



### **INTRODUCING CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR IN ENGLISH TEACHING IN THE FIRST GRADE**

While introducing Christmas and New Year to first graders, we would use, already mentioned, project work. This is our suggestion for a usual lesson. At first, write the phrase Happy Christmas on the board and see if anyone can read it. Explain what it means. Ask pupils to look at the first picture in their books. They repeat the words after you. Then compare

the pictures to the situation in their families. What is the same? What is different? (This is the first class, so they still did not learn to write or read even in Croatian, so we have to use the Croatian language almost all the time. And that time is the beginning of the school year – this is what we have to be aware of).

In their notebooks, they draw some pictures and write the new words (Christmas tree, decorations, Bell.). Have a little chat about Santa Claus (tell them the English name – Santa Claus or just Santa). Next, they listen to the conversation with Santa on the tape. Then they repeat after the tape. Boys repeat Santas' lines, and girls repeat the girls' lines.

In their notebooks there is the tree, which they have to decorate, first by joining the dots and then adding decorations by colouring.

### Project work

#### **Make a Christmas tree**

It is an activity that lasts for 20 minutes. Children make a pretend tree.

Aims are: - to revise colours

- eye – hand co-ordination

Materials: triangles of green cards, tin foil, screw - stoppers, and other pieces of used paper, tinsel rains.

Show the children one of the green triangles and ask them what they think they are going to make. Fold the triangle in half and stand it up. If they cannot guess, then tell them they are going to make a Christmas tree. Ask them which colours they expect to see on the Christmas tree. Show them the bright papers, or other materials you have collected and get them to tell you the colours they want on the tree. Stick the decorations to your tree as they tell you. The children now make the tree by themselves.

Or: put one big triangle on the wall, low enough for the children to reach. All the children help you decorate the class "tree".

## CONCLUSION

Language is a part of the culture of one nation and, therefore, it is impossible to imagine foreign language lessons separated from the cultural lessons about the nation to whom this language is the mother tongue. Consequently, this aspect of culture, which is directly bound to the language and its use, has to be a part of the foreign language lessons in all grades.

We have concluded that progression is obviously crucial. When a holiday appears every year in the curriculum we still need to repeat its elements learned the year before. But it is also important to bring on pupils' thinking and understanding of its meaning, to enrich the vocabulary more and more every year. That means we should not teach in the same way every year. This is also the answer to the third question in the introduction – every holiday does not have to be taught every year, but, at least, should be celebrated.

The two most common holidays, Christmas and Easter, should be taught every year in all grades. But, of course, teaching Christmas in the first year is obviously different from teaching Christmas in the fourth year. In the first year we teach children just a few key words (Christmas, Santa Claus, Christmas tree...), but in the fourth year they are capable of understanding the real meaning of Christmas, retold and explained in English.

Celebrating holidays is a good way of introducing a foreign language to young learners. By celebrating them the teacher stimulates learners to acquire and learn a foreign language with ease and, what is even more important, with a great fun. Therefore, holidays should be an indispensable part in early English language learning.

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### **BOŽIĆ I NOVA GODINA U PODUČAVANJU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA U NIŽIM RAZREDIMA OSNOVNE ŠKOLE**

#### **SAŽETAK**

U radu se iznosi važnost obilježavanja Božića i Nove godine u podučavanju engleskog jezika u nižim razredima osnovne škole. Obilježavanje blagdana je dobar način uvođenja stranog jezika u ranoj dobi. Kao učitelje jezika mora nas zanimati podučavanje kulture kao jedan neizostavni dio ranog učenja engleskog jezika. Božić i Novu godinu kao dva najuobičajenija blagdana trebalo bi podučavati u svim razredima, počevši njihovim uvođenjem (u prvom razredu), te ponavljanjem njihovih elemenata naučenih godinu ranije (u drugom, trećem i četvrtom razredu). Njihovim obilježavanjem učitelj potiče učenike da usvoje i nauče strani jezik s lakoćom i užitkom.

**Ključne riječi:** obilježavanje, blagdani, Božić, Nova godina, niži razredi, podučavanje