Meet the family

For Sandie Mourão, frogs spawn some exciting ideas for the very young.

Taking a regular theme, such as My family, and turning it into a frog project is lots of fun and really easy. My young learners are between three and six years old, and they love talking about their families, but they get even more excited when they meet a frog family to play with! Happily mixing their real world with an imaginary one, we are constantly recycling the vocabulary of the family, while the children’s interest is maintained by getting them talking and listening, moving, making things, singing, thinking and playing. Each and every activity becomes a new context for using the language they very quickly get to know.

This collection of activities involves a family photo, props, a rhyme, miming, making a set of froggy heads, telling a story, role playing and mask making, singing a song and playing some simple games. And if your children really enjoy frogs, you can even go cross-curricular! The internet is a huge asset here.

So, if you are interested in meeting my frog family, read on!

Family photos
Bring in a photo of your family; if you think your children will comply, ask them to bring in photos too. Talk about the photos and get the children used to hearing words like mummy, daddy, brother, sister, etc.

Props
I like to have a pile of props, which are stereotyped for family members: a handbag for Mummy, a newspaper/briefcase for Daddy, a cap for Brother, a bonnet for Sister and a toy for Baby. I pile these on the floor and ask who they belong to. The children take it in turns to take a prop and stand in a family group for a photo. Ask for a child to volunteer to be the photographer, pretend to hold a large camera and take a photo. (Did you know that in English-speaking countries we say cheese to get a smile when we are posing for a photo?)

A rhyme
As you set up the family photo, say the following rhyme, pointing to each of the children in turn:

Mummy, daddy, Brother, sister, And there’s baby too! Smile, please! Say, ‘Cheese!’ CHEESE! (and the photographer goes ‘click!’)

This is very simple, but perfect for little children, who love pretending.

Miming
Decide, with the children, how to represent each family member by doing a mime. This is actually quite a fun activity, and gives great insights into how certain cultures view the male/female roles. In Portugal, we have come up with these mimes:

Mummy: walking on high-heeled shoes; doing the dusting; making the dinner
Daddy: working on the computer; working on a car engine; reading a newspaper

Sister: playing with dolls; skipping; doing homework
Brother: playing football; riding a bike; playing computer games
Baby: crying; sleeping; crawling

Choose just one of the representations per family member, otherwise it gets complicated! Ask the children to stand up and see if they can remember which mime goes with which person. Then play the game.

A miming game
Call out the names of the family members and the children mime accordingly. Call out STOP! and the children become statues. If a child moves, or is the last to stop moving, then they are out of the game and have to sit down. As each child is out, they get a turn at calling STOP! The last child to be caught moving is the winner.

Children as young as three may have problems keeping as still as statues, but most four-year-olds enjoy this game enormously. However, they all love miming!

Making frog heads
For every theme I use with very young children, a set of visuals is an absolute must – brightly coloured and humorous if possible. For this story and the subsequent games, I make a set of five frog heads, using green card with various additions to make the different members of the family: red lips for Mummy, moustache for Daddy, blue bow-tie for Brother, pink cheeks and lips for Sister and a dummy for Baby. I cover everything with sticky-backed plastic, so it’s a longer-lasting resource. On page 24 is a template which you can copy and a photo of the finished heads for the five family members.
Meet the family
TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

Telling the story
When I first started teaching children, I came across a story by Sarah Phillips, which I’ve used consistently over the last decade. The original story is for children from the ages of five or six, but it is so simple and such fun that children as young as three love it and find it very easy to pick up the words and phrases and play with them. The story in the box here is my adapted version, but you can make other changes until you feel comfortable. Feeling comfortable with what you say, and how you say it, is very important! I like to ask the children why they think the frogs fell in the water, just to check they understood what happened! If you speak their mother tongue, you could talk a little about things that sink.

Roleplaying
When you’ve told the story once, using the frog heads, give the heads to five children and retell the story helping them to do the actions as you tell it again. Each child will want to have a go, so prepare yourself for telling the story lots of times! I spread this over a couple of lessons, and find I need to make a note of who has, and who hasn’t, roleplayed, so everybody gets a chance.

Making masks or puppets
Can you get paper plates in your local supermarkets? I’ve been lucky enough to find green ones, so I could make frog masks with everyone! Alternatively, white plates can be coloured with green wax crayons, or you can stick pieces of green paper on them. Using the simple additions you added to your frog head visuals, children can quickly make a frog mask. (You will have to cut out the eye holes.) In Portugal, we buy our bread in paper bags, which are also great for sticking your hand inside to make puppets! The simple additions are just as effective for puppets, as you can see from the photos opposite.

With very young children, give pre-cut additions, which they have to stick in place. With older children, encourage them to cut out their own additions and to draw eyelashes, cheeks, etc. Some children will be very keen to add their own creative touches, others will be happy to do the minimum!

The frog family story

A family of frogs! Look! Here’s Mummy frog, Daddy frog, Brother frog and Sister frog. And here’s Baby frog!
(Show the heads of the frog family.)

Look at the sun ...
(Show a picture of the sun, or if you are lucky enough, point to the sun through the window!)
... it’s very hot! The frogs are very hot!
(Make yourself understood by fanning yourself and puffing from the heat!)

This is a pond, it’s cool!
Uuuuuuuu!
(Use the carpet you may be sitting on, or draw a pond shape on the floor or on the board.)

Look! There’s a leaf on the pond, a big green leaf.
(As you say this, put a paper leaf or draw one in the middle of the pond shape.)

Daddy frog was so hot he went hop, hop, hop! Daddy frog jumped onto the leaf on the pond.
(Use lots of gestures, so the children know that Daddy frog is hot! Jump with Daddy frog onto the leaf and leave him there!)

Ahhhh! That’s better!
(Wipe your forehead and sigh loudly!)
Meet the family

Sharing
Roleplay the frog story again, using the masks this time. It’s nice to decorate a classroom with the work the children do, but they will also be desperate to take their masks home and show their parents and siblings. Allowing children to share what they have done with their family is an important step in any project.

Singing a song
This song is sung to the tune of ‘Ten green bottles’: it is very simple and lots of fun, as the children become frogs and hop off one by one.

Five green frogs
Five green frogs sitting on a log
Five green frogs sitting on a log
When one green frog jumps into the bag,
There are four green frogs sitting on a log.

Glub! Glub! (one child hops off . . .)
Four green frogs . . . etc.
Three green frogs . . . etc.
Two green frogs . . . etc.
One green frog sitting on a log
One green frog sitting on a log
When one green frog jumps into the bag,
There are no green frogs sitting on the log.

Glub! Glub!

Playing games
Using the visuals you’ve made of the frog family, you can also play some quick, easy games for five-minute time fillers.

Kim’s game
Place the frog family heads on the floor, board or table. Give the children a short time to memorise them. Once they have looked carefully, ask them to cover their eyes (‘Cover your eyes!’), while you take one frog away. Ask the children to look (‘Open your eyes!’). Mock a surprised expression (‘Goodness, there’s a frog missing!’). Can they say which frog has been taken away?

Choose a child who was able to guess correctly to be the next one to steal a frog while the others aren’t looking.

Guessing game
A group of children sit in a circle and one child (child A) has one of the frog family heads hidden. The other children cannot see the head, and ask ‘Is it Mummy frog?’ Child A replies, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. One of the children who guesses correctly then holds a frog for the others to guess which one it is. Very young children can be allowed to ask one-word questions, such as ‘Mummy?’, but older children can be encouraged to use the question form, ‘Is it Mummy frog?’

Cross-curricular activities
If you are lucky enough to work with the children for longer periods and/or have the support of a classroom teacher, then you can include all sorts of cross-curricular activities, especially if the children appear to enjoy learning about frogs.

Maths
Possibilities include numbers from 1–5, simple addition and subtraction; How far can you leap/jump from a sitting position? Who can jump the farthest? Measuring lengths; counting how many leaps it takes to go a certain distance, across the playground, across the classroom, etc.

Environmental studies
Children love learning about frogs, where they live, what they eat, what they can and can’t do. In England, children collect frogspawn, put it in a tank and watch it grow into tadpoles and then into frogs. This may not be possible in the country you work in (it’s not easy in Portugal), but have a go if you can – children will be fascinated!

Physical education
Did you know there’s a jump named after the frog? The leapfrog! Why not try doing leapfrogs in PE? How many children can we leapfrog over?

Telling stories
You can tell stories in the mother tongue that have frogs in them. The Frog Prince comes to my mind immediately, as this is translated into Portuguese. Are there any others in the country you work in? Why not find out?

Froggy websites for teachers and children
There are lots of froggy websites – try visiting the following for educational froggy links:

- [www.pca.state.mn.us/kids/frogsforkids.html](http://www.pca.state.mn.us/kids/frogsforkids.html)
- [www.kiddyhouse.com/Themes/frogs/](http://www.kiddyhouse.com/Themes/frogs/)
- [www.enchantedlearning.com/themes/frog.shtml](http://www.enchantedlearning.com/themes/frog.shtml)

These next three are for teachers to swot up on frogs! There are some excellent photos to download, too!

- [www.exploratorium.edu/frogs/](http://www.exploratorium.edu/frogs/)
- [http://allaboutfrogs.org/frogland.shtml](http://allaboutfrogs.org/frogland.shtml)
- [www.naturesound.com/frogs/frogs.html](http://www.naturesound.com/frogs/frogs.html)

We started with sharing our family photos and ended up, several lessons later, with a headful of frogs, and what fun we’ve had! It just goes to show how easy it is to motivate little children and help them to acquire simple language by using different types of activities and giving them a context to use it in.

Phillips, S Young Learners OUP 1992

Sandia Mourão has lived and worked in Portugal since 1987. She started working exclusively with children in 1993 and is especially interested in teaching English to very young children. She also trains primary and pre-school teachers. She is the co-ordinator of the IATEFL Young Learners SIG.

nettles@hotmail.com