

Focus on

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

1. What is it?

When students are curious, their learning becomes more purposeful. Inquiry-based learning seeks to tap into students' curiosity by giving them opportunities to engage in authentic discovery. Students ask their own questions about a topic that interests them, discover the answers, and share their findings with others.

In inquiry-based learning, students are encouraged to take the initiative in how they go about investigating a topic. In this way, they move from being receivers of information to becoming active participants in their learning. The teacher still plays an important role by providing varying degrees of support and guidance appropriate to the needs of their students.

Students can be guided through the initial stages of inquiry. For example, if the class is studying a unit on creativity in their coursebook, the teacher could begin by asking students to reflect on what creativity means to them, how people express creativity, and which artists they admire. Students then formulate their own questions about the topic, based on what they would like to find out. The questions should be broad and open-ended to allow for exploration, discussion, and critical thinking. On the topic of creativity, for example, the questions might include *Where do artists get their inspiration from?* or *How do you become an artist?*

If the students' questions are not answered in the course of the lesson or unit, this is a perfect opportunity for further research, either in class or at home.

While the focus of inquiry-based learning is the process of inquiry, with the teacher's support and guidance, it also provides opportunities for students to learn new grammar and vocabulary and to develop skills and strategies for reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

Learner engagement

Inquiry-based learning can make lessons more dynamic and motivating. Students are able to explore areas of a topic that interest them personally. This can help to increase their motivation and enthusiasm, which can have a positive impact on learning. Students have real reasons to use the language and, with guidance from the teacher, are able to use the target language and vocabulary more naturally.

Independent learning

Inquiry-based learning can help students become more autonomous learners. With the teacher's support, each student has more opportunities to make decisions about what they focus on and how they work. Over time, students become more aware of where their strengths lie and where they could develop and improve. This, in turn, can help to improve their self-esteem and confidence.

Developing a growth mindset

Mindsets are an individual's beliefs about the extent to which intelligence, talent, and ability are seen as rigid and unchanging (a fixed mindset) or as open to development (a growth mindset). A fixed mindset may impede learning, whereas a growth mindset can provide the basis for a positive attitude towards learning and lead to more successful learning outcomes. A growth mindset can help students face challenges and setbacks and learn from their mistakes because they believe they can improve through their own efforts. Inquiry-based learning, with its focus on the process of discovery and on independent learning, can help students develop a mindset oriented towards growth.

Skills for the future

Inquiry-based learning can help to equip students for future education and employment opportunities in an interconnected, globalized world and to learn the skills that are crucial for lifelong learning and success in the wider community.

During the process of formulating questions for inquiry, carrying out research, and evaluating information, students will learn ways of thinking and working which require a range of global skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and digital literacies.

Inquiry-based learning can also foster skills of communication and collaboration. Students are encouraged to work together, which provides opportunities to exchange ideas, share understanding, and work towards a common goal. To do this, students need to be able to communicate clearly and work effectively in groups.

3. What are the challenges?

Asking appropriate questions

Some students may lack confidence when asked to set their own questions for investigation and discovery, especially if they are not accustomed to doing this. Initially, the questions they ask may not lend themselves to this approach, particularly if they are closed rather than open questions. For example, the question *Should formal exams be banned?* could potentially generate fewer ideas than *What might happen if formal exams were banned?* Teachers can support students by providing examples of relevant questions, gradually allowing them more freedom to think of their own questions and helping them to formulate the questions until they understand how to go about it themselves.

Finding answers

Teachers may be concerned that their course materials or lessons will not provide the answers to the questions students ask. Encourage students to use their prior knowledge to begin answering some of the questions and guide them on the best ways to find the answers they are looking for.

Unexpected language

When students have the freedom to explore a topic from different angles, they may encounter or need to use grammar and vocabulary that has not yet been introduced, or they may need subject-specific vocabulary they do not know. While it is important for the teacher to prepare lessons carefully and introduce key grammar and vocabulary that will benefit all learners, it will not be possible to predict everything that comes up. Teachers can deal with this by encouraging students to help themselves by using a dictionary and other reference materials, and by guiding them on the words which are most useful and worth remembering.



4. How can this be implemented?

Stages of inquiry-based learning

1 Engagement

The teacher introduces the topic in an interesting and appealing way to spark students' curiosity. Students reflect on the topic or theme, thinking about what they know and what they would like to discover.

- Use K-W-L charts (I know, I wonder, I learned) to help facilitate reflection and give students a tangible way to record their thinking.
- Provide as much support as students need to help them formulate their questions, for example by giving them a list of questions to choose from or adapt.
- If you are just starting out with inquiry-based learning or have a large class, you could ask students to suggest a number of questions they would be interested in exploring as a class, rather than having each student work on a separate question. Write the questions on the board and get the class to vote on one question they would like to explore together.

2 Exploration

After deciding on the question(s), students set about finding the answers. During lessons, provide regular opportunities for them to revisit their question(s). Doing this will help them to continually build and expand on their answers. This stage works best when students work collaboratively.

- Encourage students to use a range of resources, including the school library, a parent or sibling, or by doing an online search, with appropriate guidance.
- When using the internet to explore, identify relevant webpages that are both age and level appropriate and ask students to use only the approved websites. WebQuests (inquiry-oriented lessons in which most or all of the information is found on the internet) work well as students only engage with sites that have been approved by the teacher. Make sure you follow your school's online safety policy.
- Expand students' digital literacies and critical thinking skills by teaching strategies for engaging with online content, such as checking facts found on a website and evaluating the writer's intention.

3 Communication

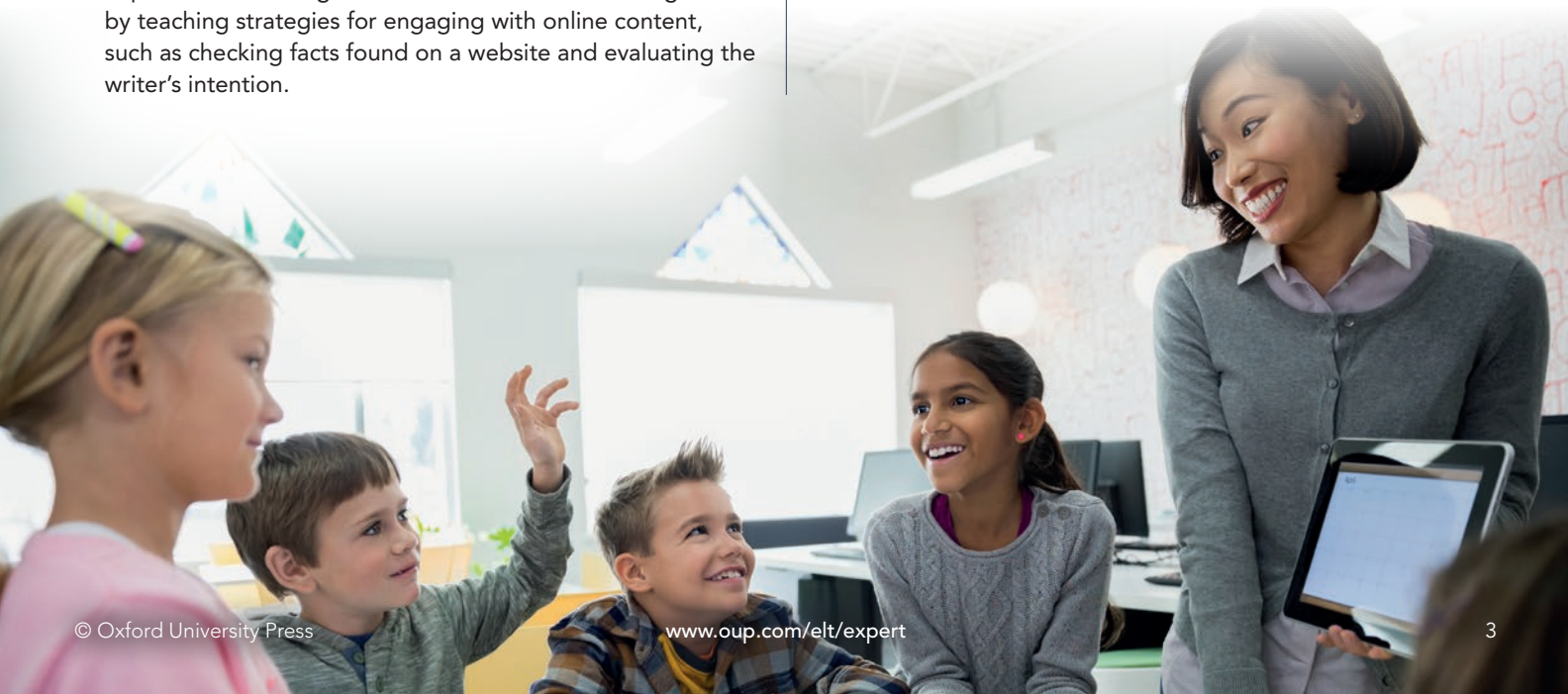
A key principle of inquiry-based learning is that students work and learn together. For example, they will need to listen to each other, take turns, ask for clarification, share new information, and summarize and present their findings in an engaging way.

- Discuss and establish rules for pair and group work such as 'Give everyone the chance to speak' and 'Respect everyone's opinion'. Provide useful language for facilitating this.
- Model good communication strategies wherever possible, for example by being a good listener yourself or making eye contact with students when they speak to you.
- Help students to allocate roles in group work, such as facilitator, presenter/reporter, or record keeper, by asking them to reflect on what different roles entail, and why they might be suited to different tasks. Students can also try out different roles in the group.
- Set specific tasks to help students develop communicative and linguistic competence. For example, the task 'Tell each other what you discovered' could result in a situation where each student delivers a monologue and there is little engagement with other students. Instead, the task could be: 'Share your findings and rank the information in the order you think is most important/interesting.' This will encourage students to develop a better understanding of the content and the language they need to discuss it.

4 Reflection

Encourage students to reflect on what they have learned, how their opinions may have changed, and how they can further develop their knowledge and skills in the future. For example, they can reflect on the new subject-related information they have acquired, the grammar and vocabulary they have encountered, or the skills and strategies they have used, such as ways to present information or how to carry out an online search.

- Help students to reflect by giving them questions to consider, for example: *What went well? What could you have done differently? What are the three most interesting things you have learned?*



5. Over to you

Inquiry-based learning can help students become more engaged and independent learners. It can help them develop critical thinking skills. It also encourages them to make use of a wide range of resources alongside their coursebooks in order to explore and understand the world around them, seeking answers to questions which interest them. The teacher plays an important role in creating the kind of safe, supportive classroom environment that will encourage students to participate in the activities and discussions, and in guiding them to develop key skills and strategies. Inquiry-based learning can help to foster a culture of curiosity and collaboration in the classroom and provide opportunities for students to use English with a real sense of purpose.

Talking points

- 🗨️ How could you use inquiry-based learning to support English language learning with your students?
- 🗨️ What elements of inquiry-based learning do you already use in your classroom?
- 🗨️ What positive impact do you think inquiry-based learning would have on your students?
- 🗨️ What challenges might you face in implementing inquiry-based learning with your students? How could you overcome these challenges?
- 🗨️ How could you support your students as they formulate questions for inquiry?

6. Further reading

What is Inquiry-Based Learning and How Does it Help Children Prepare for the Real World?

👉 <http://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-inquiry-based-learning-and-how-does-it-help-prepare-children-for-the-real-world-115299>

OUP ELT Global Blog: Inquiry-Based Learning: 4 Essential Principles for the ELT Classroom

👉 <https://oupeltglobalblog.com/tag/inquiry-based-learning/>

Resources and Downloads to Facilitate Inquiry-Based Learning

👉 <https://www.edutopia.org/article/inquiry-based-learning-resources-downloads>

WebQuests

👉 <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/webquests>



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