

Think It, Map It, Learn It

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During my teaching years, I often struggled to encourage my students to speak more and feel confident, whether they needed to retell a text, talk about themselves, or organise their thoughts effectively when writing an essay. I found that the most effective approach was using mind maps. They helped students structure their ideas visually and provided small reminders that boosted their confidence when speaking or writing. In this paper, I will outline three ways in which mind maps can be used with lower primary school students with an A1 or A2 level of English. The three examples of mind map activities include talking about a topic (Figure 1), writing an essay (Figure 2), and retelling a story (Figures 3 and 4).

What Are Mind Maps?

Mind maps are made up of words, colours, lines, and pictures. They are very easy to create and can help our students remember information more effectively, generate novel ideas, save time and make the most of it, organise thinking, achieve better grades, and even enjoy studying. According to Buzan (2003), a mind map is an effective method for getting information into and out of our brains. It offers a way of studying and revising that is quick, engaging, and reliable. Mind maps make note-taking more interesting and are one of the best tools for generating new ideas and planning projects.

How Does Our Brain Work?

There is some evidence that the two brain hemispheres have somewhat different biases in how they interact with one another. It is thought that functions such as language and motor abilities may show a greater bias to the left-brain hemisphere, whereas visuospatial attention

could be a more right-lateralised function (Gotts et al., 2013). However, both hemispheres need to work together for learning to be effective. In school, teaching activities often emphasise linear and verbal methods such as writing in continuous text, following logical sequences, and organising information in lists. Visual tools such as mind maps can complement these approaches by presenting information spatially and visually as well as by using colour, layout, imagery, and organisation. Dual-coding theory research in cognitive psychology suggests that verbal and visual information are processed through distinct but interconnected cognitive systems. Therefore, providing both verbal and visual representation may improve learning outcomes such as comprehension and memory when compared to single-mode presentation (Paivio & Csapo, 1969). By encouraging learners to actively process both words and images, mind mapping could support the meaningful organisation of information, which can make learning more engaging and effective.

People often think in colours and pictures. For example, if someone says, “think about your family”, the first thing that comes to mind might be an image of our family (with all the colours and details), not the word “family” written on a piece of paper. Our brains can think and remember visually. That is why drawing is such a useful tool for memory. When we want to remember something, an effective approach might be to sketch it, even if only in a simple form. This works especially well with very young pupils who struggle to remember English vocabulary: By drawing a picture of a word quickly, they support their memory, making learning easier and more enjoyable.

How Do You Create a Mind Map?

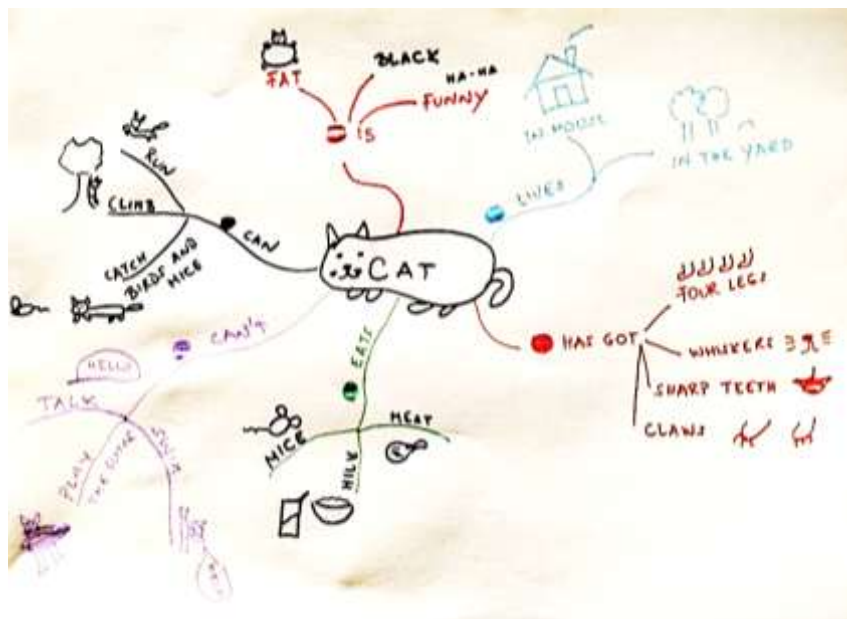
In order to help young learners draw a mind map, the following simplified instructions can be useful: To create a mind map, you will need a blank sheet of paper and some coloured pens. Start by drawing a picture that represents your main topic in the centre of the page.

From this central image, draw several curved, connected lines reaching outwards. These are your main branches. Label each branch with a key idea and add a small picture to support it. From each main branch, you can draw additional, smaller branches that explore related ideas. These branches spread out like the limbs of a tree, helping you organise information in a clear, visual, and creative way.

Mind maps can help young learners organise the ideas they want to talk about. For example, if they want to give a short presentation on an animal, they can start by creating a mind map. In the centre of the page, they draw the animal they want to talk about. From this image, they draw several lines, each labelled with a key prompt such as “It is...”, “It lives...”, “It has got...”, “It eats...”, “It can...”, and “It can’t...”. From each of these main branches, students can draw smaller branches with additional details. They can add pictures, colours, numbers, and words. In doing so, they can be creative. This way, they prepare everything they need to say in a visual, organised, and engaging way. Figure 1 below illustrates an example of a mind map for the word “cat”.

Figure 1

Mind Map of the Word “Cat”

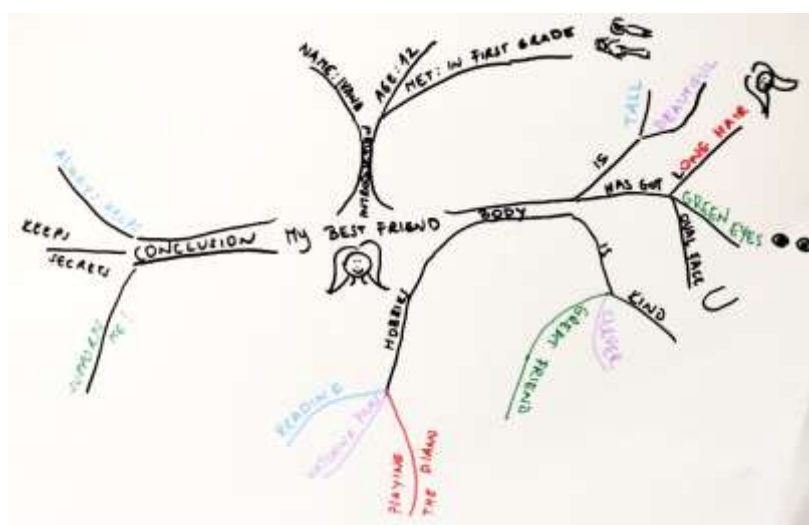


When the students have their mind maps, it is much easier for them to talk about a certain topic such as a cat. In this example, the following simple description might be given based on the mind map in Figure 1: *The cat is fat and black. It is very funny. Sometimes, it lives in a house, and sometimes it lives outside, in the yard. It has got four legs with claws, whiskers, and sharp teeth in its mouth. The cat eats meat and mice and drinks milk. It can run, climb, and catch birds and mice, but it can't talk, swim, or play the guitar.*

Mind maps can also help young students write essays more easily and quickly. A successful essay needs a strong introduction, interesting and imaginative content, and a clear conclusion. For example, if the essay title is “My Best Friend”, children can begin by drawing a picture of their friend in the centre of the page. On one of the main branches, they can plan their **introduction**, perhaps noting their friend’s name, age, and how they met. Additional branches can represent the **body paragraphs**, such as appearance, personality, hobbies, or shared experiences. Finally, another branch can help them plan the **conclusion**, summarising why this friend is special to them. The mind map for an essay with the title “My Best Friend” is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Mind Map for an Essay on “My Best Friend”



By organising ideas visually before writing, students gain clarity, confidence, and a logical structure for their essay. For example, the essay could start like this: *My best friend's name is Ivana. She is 12 years old. We met 5 years ago, on our first day of school. Ivana is tall and beautiful. She has got long hair, green eyes, and an oval face.* Naturally, students will add more details according to their age and knowledge, but also according to the essay questions they are to answer.

Students can also use mind maps when they need to retell a text from their coursebook. Figure 3 is an example of a text from the coursebook *New Building Blocks 4* (Čajo Anđel et al., 2021, p. 11) meant for children in lower-primary school at A1 or A2 level of English.

Figure 3

Text for Retelling

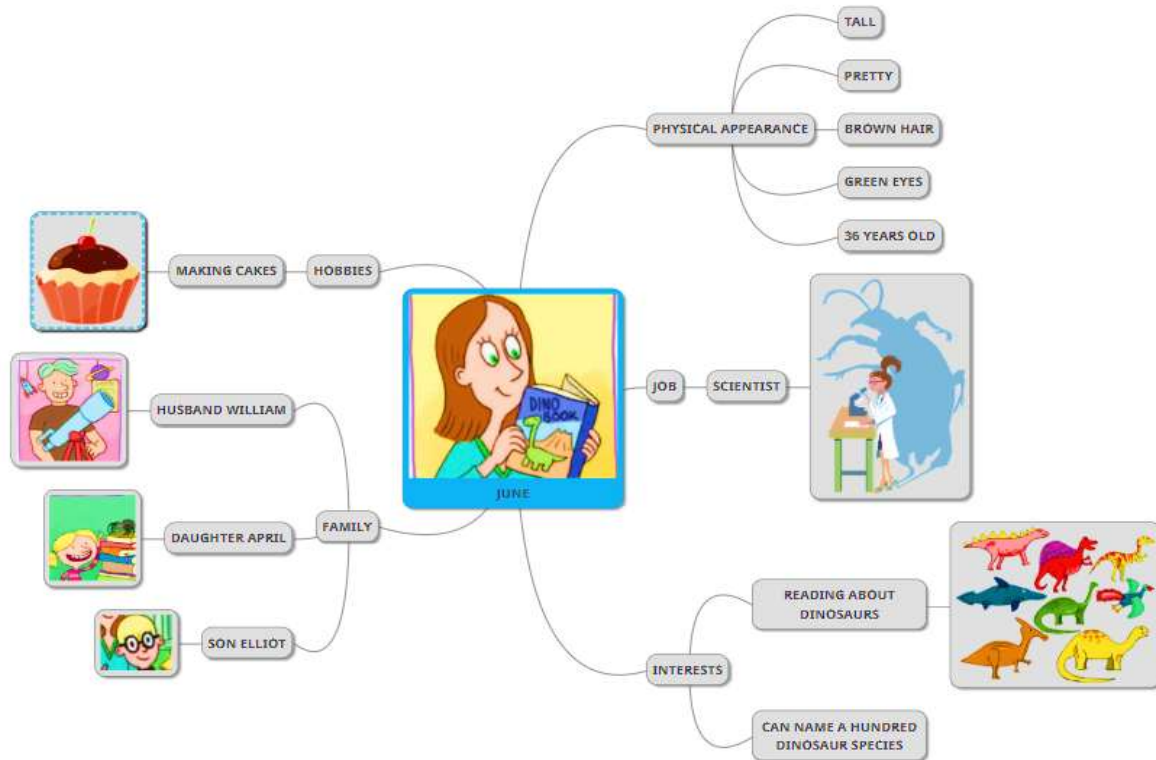


This is my mum. Her name is June. She is 36. She has got brown hair and green eyes. She is tall and pretty. Her job is very interesting. She is a scientist. She has got a lot of books. She likes reading about dinosaurs. She can tell you everything about T- Rex. She can also name a hundred dinosaur species! Her hobby is making cakes. She can make the best cakes in the world!

A mind map for this text could be organised as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Mind Map for the Text in Figure 3



As students create their mind maps of the text, they need to read carefully and truly understand what they have read. For many of my young learners, the most challenging part of retelling a text is identifying what is important. When they build a mind map, they are required to simplify the content, which helps them focus on the key ideas to extract.

Using mind maps for a presentation also means that students do not have to memorise the information by heart. They can easily follow the facts laid out on the map. This visual support is especially helpful for young pupils with learning difficulties as it allows them to see the structure more clearly and understand the material more easily.

Conclusion

Mind maps allowed my lower-primary school pupils to find their voice, both in speaking and writing. They helped the children transform anxiety into confidence, confusion into clarity, and ideas into meaningful communication. When students are given the tools to organise their thoughts creatively, learning becomes not only easier but also more enjoyable. Mind maps truly opened the door to better expression and to better understanding. My teaching also became easier because I managed to engage all my students in building mind maps, irrespective of their age and level of English.

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