

## *Original Paper*

### “Just Teach Them Some English”

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#### ***Abstract***

*This paper chronicles the experiences of a native English-speaking teacher in an EFL situation at a Japanese kindergarten. The paper discusses how the author coped with certain problems that arose over a twenty-year period, and then explains what measures were taken in order to remedy some of those issues. Also, suggestions for others that may be in the same type of situation are made based on steps that were taken over the years to enhance the students' learning and motivation during the lessons.*

#### ***Keywords***

*young learners, EFL, action research*

#### ***Introduction***

In 2001 I had been asked to teach English once a week at the kindergarten that was associated with the university at which I was employed in Kumamoto, Japan. As a native speaker of English at the university it was assumed that teaching kindergarten children was an appropriate request of me. I would be teaching the two middle classes (3-4-year-olds) and the two 4-5-year-old classes for roughly 25 minutes each on an every-other-week alternating basis; in other words, I would see each class for 25 minutes twice a month.

When I inquired what I should be teaching the children, the principal of the kindergarten simply asked me to, “Just teach them some English.” It was a simple enough request with no curriculum, no real expectations, and no specific instruction regarding what the children should learn. My reaction to the request, even though my training had been for teaching high school and college aged students, was to accept the instructions for what they were and reluctantly complied. I thought that a 25-minute class teaching kindergartners would be easy. I was wrong.

This case study will describe some of the successes and challenges of my experiences teaching EFL to young children on a bi-weekly basis. There will first be a brief explanation of the situation in which the teaching took place, and then some description of activities and resources used during an over-twenty-year period will be given. It is the hope of the author that some of the information will be useful to others who are asked to do the same thing as what was described above.

### **Situation**

In the first semester of the academic school year of 2001 I was asked to conduct English lesson for the kindergarten associated with the college at which I was teaching. This is not an uncommon request of native English-speaking teachers working in Japan, regardless of experience. I was told that the director of the kindergarten was looking for someone who could teach two back-to-back twenty-five-minute lessons once a week. Kindergartens in Japan are most commonly divided into three groups: 2-3 year-olds (the youngest), 3-4 year-olds (the middle group), and 4-5 year-olds (the oldest). It had been requested that I instruct the middle group and the oldest groups on alternating weeks. Each age group was made up of two separate classes.

I was given no curriculum, and was not requested to teach anything in particular, only to play English games and use English songs. No further requests were made, and, unfortunately, I did not think to ask any specific questions regarding the position. I had no prior experience teaching young learners and was not familiar with many games or songs that might be suitable for them. This would prove to be most frustrating in terms of planning lessons for the learners; how and what to teach them. Apparently, *Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes* can only be used so often before even the youngest child becomes bored with the song. My lack of experience would lead to some unexpected challenges for me when I first began teaching at the kindergarten.

### **Challenges**

My inexperience teaching at the kindergarten level (in any culture) was probably the largest hurdle I had to overcome. However, during the first year of teaching at the kindergarten I experienced several challenges, from struggling to find materials to trying to think of any lesson plan that would be suitable for the children.

These were not the only issues that would arise over the next twenty plus years of teaching at the kindergarten; especially the challenge of extremely loud children not being able to calm themselves. Due to the nature of EFL, and given the situation in which I was teaching, one issue that had never occurred to me before I began would be that of the Japanese teachers offering instant translation for the children when I would give instructions in English. At first the L1 translations from the Japanese kindergarten teachers were, to me at least, unwelcome interjections. The Japanese teachers wouldn't do it all the time, mostly it occurred was when I was explaining how to play a game, or what to do next in an activity.

I felt that because the children's time with English was very limited, I wanted them to hear only English. However, Shin (2006) explains that since the learners' time is comparatively short during EFL lesson, that the use of the L1 saves time for the target language that a teacher wants to teach at a given time. The L1 is seen as a resource, not a hindrance to aiding in teaching the L2, as stated by Inbar-Lourie (2010). The debate of whether EFL classrooms should be English-only is not yet settled. In my experience I found that in order for the atmosphere of the class to be comfortable for the children, complicated explanations given in both languages help ease learners' anxiety. If the focus of the lesson is more on the TL rather than insisting on an English-only policy, students can feel relaxed. This is not to say that the L1 can be used constantly but helps those children who may feel stressed because they don't understand anything that is going on around them. I have come to accept the Japanese teachers' interjections into the lessons and help now, and for me, there is a predominant use of English with a healthy mix of Japanese when necessary.

Another challenge when I first began was not fully understanding the level of the learners' English exposure, or lack thereof. This was an issue that I struggled with for the entire first year of teaching there. It became paramount that I learn what vocabulary and grammar structures the children would be able to comprehend.

One example of this occurred on my first day. I decided that the best way to start would be to teach greetings in English; "Hello," and "Good morning," were easy enough for the children to understand and correctly use. However, when I moved on to the question "How are you," and the response, "I'm fine," the students did not seem to quite understand the relationship between the question and response. The following is an actual dialogue between the students and me after I explained the meaning of "How are you?" and "I'm fine," in Japanese:

Me: OK, now I will ask, "How are you?" and then you answer, "I'm fine." OK?

Sts: OK!

Me: How are you?

Sts: How are you?

Me: No, no ... I say, "How are you?" You say, "I'm fine." Do you understand?

Sts: OK

Me: How are you?

Sts: How are you?

This would continue even after I modeled it several times with the teachers in the room in front of the students. This interaction and confusion occurred every year. It usually will take about three or four meeting times for the students to finally use the question and response correctly.

Sometimes trying to push a lesson on young learners can end in frustration. One such instance of struggling with the students' comprehension level was introducing the ABC's too early. Many children in Japan have probably heard the ABC Song at some time or another. However, Nunan points out that, "It is generally agreed that learning to read in a first language is an important prerequisite to learning to

read in a second language...” (Nunan, 2011, p. 85).

My mistake was thinking that it may be a fun idea to try to teach the alphabet to the older class and then have the children write down their own names on a name tag so they could wear it during English lessons. Most of the children unfortunately were still learning how to read and write the Japanese Kana characters (which is a little more complicated than the alphabet). The lesson did not work. Even though the students were able to sing the ABC Song, attempting to have them print their own names, or even understand what they were attempting to do, was a disaster. After the first year, I never tried this again. Unless it is an English immersion situation, the time could be better spent on something else.

One final example of overestimating what students are capable of, or perhaps even too shy to want to try, is asking them to play ‘Fruit Basket.’ If you are unfamiliar with this game, it is a child’s game in which one student stands in the middle of a circle of the other children seated in chairs. The child in the center must proclaim what fruit he/she likes (“I like apples” or “I like bananas”). Those who may like that fruit have to stand and find another seat to sit in, including the student in the center. Once everyone is seated there will be a new student left standing in the center.

This sounded like a fun game to teach the students. However, it took a long time to explain and once we were able to finally start to game, usually the student in the center was too shy or embarrassed to speak. Perhaps they forgot the English phrase they were supposed to say. Perhaps they couldn’t think of a fruit in English. Who knows? What I did discover was that if a young learner is not ready to speak the TL, he/she is not going to speak it. I have since adjusted the way in which this game is played by giving each student a picture of one of a fruit so that the children can better understand who should find a new seat and what type of fruit they would like to announce to the others.

There were several trials and errors over the years, from overestimating or underestimating the students’ level, to choosing a game that wasn’t as fun as I had originally thought it might be. One thing I can say for certain is that it has been a rigorous learning experience. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) wrote that,

“Learning a second language can be exciting and productive...or painful and useless. One’s efforts can end in the acquisition of native-like fluency or a stumbling repertoire of sentences soon forgotten...The difference often lies in how one goes about learning the new language and how a teacher goes about teaching it. To be successful, a learner need not have a special inborn talent for learning language. Learners and teachers simply need to ‘do it right.’” (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982, p. 3)

In the next section I will discuss some of the successes I have had and some suggestions that may help those in a similar situation.

Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) explain that young children learning a foreign language may go through a silent stage when the learner first hears the new language. Next, the early production stage begins when the child starts using short words from the new language; the child can communicate using simple phrases and sentences. In other words, it was important for me to keep this in mind and

not becoming frustrated when a game or activity didn't pan out.

### Recommendations

One of the many things I was not prepared for when I began teaching at the kindergarten was the amount of energy that teaching children would require in comparison to my teaching job at the college. The younger learners, I was surprised to discover, were very willing and excited for the 30-minute English lesson. After an hour of teaching kindergartners I was ready for a nap. However, I also came to realize that their energy was contagious; it drove me to try to be a better teacher for them. One of the biggest successes I experienced was simply learning to have fun *with* the students.

### Signals

Something I came to realize was that 'signals' from the teacher to the students, whether verbal or non-verbal, helped set the mood for the lessons. A signal to pay attention, a signal to quiet the students down, a signal that English time was starting. Once the children learned and recognized the signals, they were usually quick to come to attention or readied themselves for what was to come. The signals can be anything the teacher decides to use; a hand signal, a word or phrase, or even a sound can be implemented with the class, as long as the learners are aware of what the signal means.

One such signal I used when the children were getting a little too loud or distracted was to quickly sit/stand straight with my arms tightly at my sides while I said, "Red light." The students would immediately become quiet and imitate my gesture.

During my third or fourth year at the kindergarten I began using the song *Wind the Bobbin Up* to begin the lessons. It had not been my intention to use this song more than once or twice; however, this song became a signal to the children that it was English time, and they were more than happy to join singing and using the gestures. I also noticed that the students slowly began to sing the song along with me, repeating the words very nicely (another unintended language learning opportunity). This song is now used at the beginning of every class, along with a brief warm up when I first greet the students, preparing the learners for 'English time.'

### Topics/themes

I soon realized during the first month of the first year of teaching at the kindergarten that simply having a game prepared for the children to play each meeting time was not going to be enough to convey any meaningful message to the class. Just skipping from *Head, Shoulder, Knees & Toes* to *What's the Time, Mr. Wolf* might be fun once or twice, but has little real application outside the room. Trying to think of or research a new game to play for each lesson was almost impossible.

In his book Nunan (2010) suggests as a learning strategy is using context to help children, "... guess the meaning of unknown words, phrases, and concepts." (Nunan 2011, p.160) Kiziltan & Ersanli (2007) also suggest that theme-based CBI (content-based instruction) can be an effective strategy for teaching

young learners who are in the process of language acquisition.

Using themes as a strategy for teaching young learners can give focus to the lessons, instead of simply playing various games or singing random songs, the learners are given a context within which new vocabulary and grammar function in a real-world manner. This method also aids the teacher by adding structure to the lessons. Once the theme of the lesson is decided activities can then be guided within that context. It is also important to point out here that the topics need to be those that children are familiar with. There is no point in trying to teach a five-year-old about macroeconomics. Stick to topics that fit the students' interests and developmental knowledge.

If you teach colors, for example, instead of showing them flash cards and telling the learners the colors, try asking who has a red shirt, or who is wearing blue socks. Be creative, look around the room and show them objects that they are familiar with and see every day. Bring personalization/ownership into their lessons and they will grasp the new concepts with motivation to ask for more information.

### Questions

As stated in the previous section, questions can be an excellent tool to spark learners' interest. Questions by the teacher can serve several purposes. Meng & Chattouphonexay (2012) explain that questions can be used by the teacher to check the students' understanding, to review previously taught information, and elicit information, to name a few. Also, questions can utilize more than one purpose at a time.

Teachers can use questions to raise the students' awareness of what is being taught. Questions to the children while conducting a lesson can also draw attention to the teacher and help the learners focus on the teacher. One aspect of doing this I learned is that by asking the children questions instead of spoon feeding them information can enhance active learning amongst the learners.

For instance, instead of telling the class that the picture you are holding is that of a car, first show them a bicycle, then a motorcycle, and then ask them what they think the next picture will be. I found that the students were more than willing to yell out their own ideas, sometimes in English.

The question, "What animal is big, gray, and has tusks?" is a way to check students' understanding of the context and also is being used to elicit information from the students at the same time.

On the other hand, one interesting aspect of questions during the lessons was how often the children would ask questions, usually in their native language. If a student noticed something interesting or funny, he/she would speak up immediately, seemingly unconcerned with what the other students might think of the question. I found this curious at first because, as is often the case, college aged learners are more apprehensive to speak up or ask if they do not understand something during class. After my first year of teaching at the kindergarten, it was becoming beneficial to the class environment if I simply allowed the children to ask their questions, even if the questions would interrupt what I was doing at that particular time.

Allowing the students opportunities to ask me things in their native language gave me the chance to interject a wide variety of peripheral language into the lessons. Holsten (2003) comments that exposure through comprehensible input strengthens vocabulary learning, and incidental language fortifies this. Also, in their study on the peripheral language effects on learning Bahmani, Pazhakh, and Sharif (2012) they found, "... that learners' exposure to weak stimuli can cause learning without awareness, so pupils of all levels of intelligence and aptitude can use the periphery of the educational setting to acquire knowledge" (Bahmani, Pazhakh, & Sharif, 2012, p. 50).

When the students ask questions that do not, at first, appear to be relevant to the current lesson, it does not mean that they are being disruptive, rather they are curious. I saw these questions as an opportunity to increase their exposure to English and hopefully enhance their general interest in what was going on.

### **Materials**

One thing about teaching that is universal is struggling with materials and how to use them. Over the years I have had the same experience; wondering what I can use in order to teach the next lesson. For kindergartners picking a textbook is close to impossible (as textbooks for very young learners are almost nonexistent).

My first piece of advice regarding materials is to never throw anything away. If you have storage space, keep anything and everything you make for your lessons. Designing and creating your own materials is time consuming, and might cost more than you'd rather spend sometimes, but after the materials are made, the use you can get out of them is worth the trouble, especially when EFL materials for very young learners are hard to find.

Authentic materials also play an especially important role in teaching; from catching the initial interest of students to raising motivation in the classroom. Tomlinson explains that "[authentic materials are] ... ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes" (Tomlinson, 2001, pp. 68). These types of materials can be anything; a stuffed animal, background music, toy fruits, a pile of old clothes, or even your students' own things that they might use or bring to the classroom. The items can grab the children's focus and, going back to what was said earlier, can promote questions. Another plus to these materials is that they can be used for any number of topics/lessons.

One final thing about materials for the classroom is the following quote is in regard to choosing materials for the classroom: "In other words, it is important for teachers to evaluate materials by asking themselves how effective the materials will be at facilitating learning" (Raflaovich, 2014, p. 101). It is imperative when choosing things with which to teach our students that we think about what our students' needs and interests are, and then continue to adapt them for future uses.

### **Conclusion**

After being asked to teach English to young learners with no real curriculum, no goals for any outcomes set, and no honest expectation from the administration as to what was wanted from me, the

experience of my time with the children has ultimately been rewarding. During my first few years teaching there I was pointed in the direction of ‘action research’ by a colleague. This method of considering an issue or problem in the classroom and documenting why and how to change made me a better teacher at both the kindergarten and the college.

It took several years to adapt, adjust and create ideas and lessons plans that I found to be enjoyable and suitable for the students at the kindergarten. And I am still finding new challenges every year and researching new ways to tackle issues. The suggestions written above are merely a few solutions to challenges that have arisen. My final word of advice when it comes to teaching EFL to young learners is this; play with the students. Don’t merely stand by as they play a game, join in with them, enjoy the lessons and activities with the students.

Finally, I will leave you with this thought from Hayitova and Mirzaahmedov (2019); “The language teaching process for kindergarten-age children is very difficult and at the same time enjoyable. When a teacher is able to fully reflect his/her skills, he/she will achieve the goal” (Hayitova & Mirzaahmedov, 2019, p. 24).

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