Teaching English to Preschool and Lower Elementary School Children

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就学以前の児童および小学校低学年生への英語教育

エイディーン・ブローディ

このレポートでは幼児や小学校低学年生への、アクティビティを取り入れた英語教育の方法を考えます。教室内での席などの配置、教師と生徒の絆の重要さ、シラバスの準備、実際の教室活動、更に、資料や視聴覚教材についての情報が含まれています。

Introduction

The curriculum of the Department of English at Seisen Jogakuin College includes a course for those students who would like to enter the teaching profession. This course is designed to produce teachers at the junior high school level. That several of our students have achieved their ambition is highly commendable, given the enormous difficulties they face in terms of a heavier course load and additional examinations. Other students taking this course have opted for teaching English to younger students, mainly at the kindergarten level, and in this area, they face other problems given that all their training has been geared to the teaching of 12 — 15 year olds.

The Ministry of Education in Japan has decided to introduce English classes at the upper elementary school level on a trial basis. It seems that this proposal is more to familiarize these younger students with English than to begin the current junior high curriculum in elementary school. If this is so, it seems a pity for a couple of reasons. First, young children pick up foreign languages with much greater ease and enthusiasm than do older children. Second, since entrance into junior high school is automatic,
there would be no pressure to learn the language simply for the purpose of passing entrance examinations. In either case, however, this new development makes it increasingly necessary for colleges to provide courses more specifically aimed at the teaching of a foreign language to younger students.

What is the best way to teach English to students at the kindergarten and early elementary school level? Obviously, a traditional grammar-based approach will not be effective. Nouns, verbs, and the parsing of sentences would mean nothing to a, say, five or six-year-old. Such formalities may be left till the students are older. For these younger students, learning needs to be made, not only structured, but also enjoyable. Thus, most teaching plans for children today, in all subjects including language, are based on activities which serve to keep them occupied and interested, as well as informed.

In this paper, some of the ways this can be achieved will be described. The following topics will be covered: classroom arrangement, planning of lessons, materials used, practical tasks, and use of stories, rhymes, songs and games.

1. The classroom

Few classrooms for young learners today are arranged with the formality familiar to previous generations, that is, mathematically aligned rows of desks and chairs designed to keep children in their place, at their place, quiescent and controlled. While classes at the elementary school level usually contain individual desks and chairs, these are relatively easily moved into different formations, depending on the subject being taught. They can be placed together for group activities, or moved aside to provide space for games. They need not always be in the same formations. Different activities may require different classroom layouts.

Classrooms for preschool children most often contain largish, low tables around which chairs are placed, so that the children can be working in groups and the teacher can handle the class in these groups. Bookshelves and cupboards around the walls of the room contain the materials used for teaching and are easily accessible to both teacher and student. Large windows giving plenty of light, walls painted in light colors and decorated with posters, charts, examples of student work, etc., can all help to make the classroom as bright and cheerful as possible.

Layout flexibility is important, especially in classes where a foreign language is
being taught. The classroom needs to be organized effectively in terms of group size (and age of student) and accessibility of materials, so that, whatever the task, it can be efficiently carried out. Students, individually or in groups, can be assigned jobs such as cleaning up work spaces, tidying away resource materials, restoring classroom arrangements, and so on, and while doing this, a certain amount of the target language can be used.

Chart 1  Differing Layouts for the Language Classroom

T = Teacher
Chart 2 Class Planning

1. Consider the size of class and the classroom layout
2. Decide what resource materials will be needed and have them easily available
3. Decide who should be responsible for
   a. cleaning work space
   b. tidying away resource materials
   c. restoring classroom arrangement

2. The young learner

The majority of children are predisposed to enjoy learning. As they progress through mainstream schooling, however, their initial enthusiasm wanes as they face the myriad pressures of school life, and the realities of examinations. It seems a pity, therefore, not to take advantage of this fact, and start EFL/L2 classes when learners are still at a peak of enthusiasm rather than when it has already started to decline.

However, not all children are alike, and the teacher needs always to be sensitive to individual differences. Degrees of shyness vary from child to child. The more outgoing child might be happy and willing to speak, correctly or incorrectly, in a foreign language, but for others such an experience could be agonizingly embarrassing. Helping children to feel confident and secure in the classroom is therefore of paramount importance from the beginning of an L2 course. The pace at which individual children learn also varies, and classes will always contain students of mixed abilities. One of the best ways of overcoming these problems is to ensure from the start that the class is working in a group, sharing enjoyable activities involving the target language, and using English in a natural way. In an activity-based program of language learning, children with lesser English skills can learn from those with more English, and be helped by them. The establishment of a good working relationship between teacher (as friend, guide, organizer, etc.) and children/pupils, and between children and children/classmates, is vital to a successful second language class.

3. Lesson planning

As mentioned earlier, a traditional grammar-based approach to L2 learning is inappropriate for young children. From the viewpoint of 20 years of teaching and
observation in Japan, I would say this style is only successful with the few highly-motivated people. For most students, boredom very soon sets in, along with increasing incomprehension, feelings of inadequacy, and finally, rejection of the target language.

Which is most important for most people in the end: how to parse an English sentence, or how to communicate successfully in English? Which style of teaching is most effective if you are, for example, trying to explain the use of can/can’t: show pupils a card and ask “Can you see a dog in the picture?” (with a passive response of “Yes, I can” or “No, I can’t”), or bring a set of plastic or rubber animals, birds, and insects, and ask “Can an elephant fly?” (with an active response as children clamor to decide which creatures can or cannot fly)?

In planning a lesson, therefore, the teacher has to both have a language or grammatical goal, and present it in as lively a way as possible. A framework for teaching each new language segment and reviewing what has already been learned needs to be developed by the teacher.

**Chart showing components of a lesson**

| 1. Warm-up or preparation for class. (This may include short game activities, review of previous material, checking of homework assignments) |
| 2. Presentation of new language (using coursebook) |
| 3. Activities utilizing the new material |
| 4. Tidying-up; brief re-cap of new material; set homework assignment |

Example: *If the new language material involves teaching the numbers one to ten, the following format could be used for a 50-minute lesson:*

1. **Warm-up:** children sit in small groups in circles; each group is provided with a light ball (e.g., an inflatable plastic ball, or a bean bag); the children toss the ball to each other at the same time calling out the next catcher's name. (5 minutes)
2. **Presentation of new language, using course book, blackboard, oral repetition, writing.** (20 minutes)
3. **Activity:** children sit in small circle groups again; cards having both the number and the word (e.g., nine and 9) are in front of them. There should be plenty of cards for each number. The teacher calls out a number and the children find the correct card. (15 minutes)

(This game is similar to the Japanese New Year カルタ and can be adapted for
words and picture cards, too).

4. **Tidy-up time**: Game materials are put away. Numbers are orally repeated by whole class, with teacher holding up the cards. A number song can be played on the tape recorder (e.g., “One, two, buckle my shoe” or “One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive”). Set a homework assignment (e.g., each child makes their own number card).

(10 minutes)

The lesson plan shown above is a very basic one. Innumerable variations can be made to it, taking into account the age of the students, the language level of the class and the specific language target being taught.

### 4. EFL Activities

Since an activity-based approach to teaching a second language is being recommended in this article, it is obvious that the teacher will need to have a wide range of activity ideas in his/her repertoire.

Since also financial considerations usually have to be seriously considered in the classroom, it should be emphasized that activities do not necessarily have to involve the use of expensive equipment. Indeed, many game activities can involve the students directly by having them create their own materials. This is both fun and a memorization aid.

In a game teaching numbers, it is very convenient if a commercial bingo set is available; but it is also easy to make a set using an empty tissue box, numbers written on cardboard cut into small squares, and larger squares of paper on which the students write numbers of their own choice.

For early second-language learners (and, if the truth be told, for older students, too!), card games are always popular. Sets of cards for teaching numbers or words are easily and cheaply obtainable in packs of about 50 cards each.

**Card Game: Variation on 婆抜き or Old Maid.**

This game can be played by having the class divide into small groups of four to six students. The whole pack is dealt out among them. First, students check for any matching pairs among their own cards. These are taken out and placed on the table in front of them. The remaining cards they hold fan-wise in their hands, and each student picks a card from their neighbor’s hand, hoping to match it with one left in their own hand. This game continues until one student wins by having no unmatched cards left, (or by having the largest number of matching pairs).
SNAP
Alternatively, after the whole pack is dealt out, students place their cards, face down, in front of them. One by one, they take their top card and place it face up in the center. Gradually, the pile of cards builds up. When a new card matches the top card on the pile, SNAP is called out. The player who first calls SNAP takes the whole pile and places it beneath his/her pile. Gradually, players run out of cards and the winner is the last player in the game.

Such games can be played to teach the words for colors, or for other themes, e.g., farm animals or wild animals, flowers, clothing, furniture, etc.

Example of number card

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3 three 3
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Example of word card

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apple
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Jigsaw puzzle style kits are also available for young learners. These include letters of the alphabet and pictures which fit easily together. Children learn spelling by choosing the correct letters and the picture for each word, and then joining them all together.

Example of jigsaw puzzle style cards

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h a t
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When students have become more advanced, card sets which contain commonly used words are also available. The cards are all laid out on a flat surface and students choose cards to make short sentences.
Example of sentence-making cards

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we  like  red  roses
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Many activities for young children involve music. Particularly appropriate here are nursery rhyme songs, several of which have games which the children can play in a group. Among these are *London Bridge is Falling Down*, *Ring a Ring O' Roses*, *Round the Mulberry Bush*, and *The Farmer in the Dell*. Pairs of children can play *See-saw*, *Margery Daw* by sitting facing each other with their legs stretched so that their feet are touching. They then hold hands and rock back and forth while singing the song.

Chanting or singing rhymes or games can be a lot of fun for children, but it is generally better to just let them enjoy these as simple activities, part of the cultural content that goes with any language, rather than analyzing their language content, or using them for such things as substitution drill practice, and thus destroying much of their fun value. A valuable amount of vocabulary, together with the intonation and word stresses of the foreign language can be learnt through repetition of traditional songs or rhymes.

A board game such as *Snakes and Ladders*, or the verbal *Simon Says* game both involve the use of simple instructions, for example:

*Snakes and Ladders*: Move forward two spaces; go back to square four

*Simon Says*: Simon says “Stand up”; Simon says “Open the door”

Drawing activities can also utilize easy instructions such as *draw a circle, now draw two big round eyes; next, draw a triangle-shaped nose; now draw two pointed ears; last, draw a big red, round mouth*, resulting in fun pictures.

It is important to keep in mind that game activities should be related to the language being taught at that point, not just used to arbitrarily fill up some spare time.

As students gain in language ability, so the level of the activities can become more sophisticated: from spelling practice games, vocabulary practice games, identifying mistakes in sentences, fun writing exercises, general knowledge quizzes, telling stories, describing objects, to discussion of topics.
5. Resource Materials

In a native language context, children from a very young age (1+) enjoy having stories read to them. The repetition of increasingly familiar stories never bores them, and they gradually begin to observe and comment on both story and accompanying pictures. They learn to recognize objects and give them their proper names, distinguish colors, understand numbers, and so on. Language is absorbed naturally rather than "taught". A similar approach can be taken with young learners of a second language, and there is plenty to choose from. Publishing houses offer a wide range of children's books. Here in Japan, these are available in both teaching-English-through-English and teaching-English-through-Japanese formats.

Picture Books

Picture books, made from cloth and sometimes padded, are available for babies (0—12 months). Ones designed for very young children (1+), are sturdy with thick pages impossible for tiny hands to tear apart. Pictures or photographs and words are clear and colorful.

For slightly older children (2—5+), books remain sturdy, but a story line is introduced, usually with colorful illustrations and short, simple text. Letters of the alphabet are presented in an enjoyable way, often with characters or animals to help children remember them easily. Other books focus on teaching colors or numbers, or remind children (again using fun characters or animals) of activities which they themselves do on a daily basis (such as going to bed, or playing outdoors), or which they will soon be doing (such as going to school).

Story Books

A wide range of story books is available for all ages up to the teens. These are graded according to the age of the reader, and are clearly marked as being suitable for such and such an age group. Story books for younger children are designed to be read to the child by an adult. The paper used is firm, but destructible, and the books are not meant to be played with as the picture books can be. Books for older children include both fiction stories (some of them simplifications of classic literature), and non-fiction topics.
Course Books

Picture books and story books develop a child's listening and speaking skills. Course books help a child to read and write. Most of them begin at the 3—5 age group. They focus on activities, the directions for which must be read to the child by the adult supervisor.

As mentioned above in the picture book section, letters of the alphabet are introduced by being given a character. Teaching the alphabet as A — B — C... is of no help to a child learning to read, since this is not how the letters are usually pronounced in words. So, for example, the letter C might be introduced, with appropriate drawings, as “cat” and the letter D as “dog”, both of these animals being things already familiar to the child. A variety of activities are included in the books (e.g., matching-up exercises of letters to objects, easy quizzes on the pictures, coloring in, puzzles, guided writing exercises) to aid in memorizing letters and words. Some of the handwriting exercise books have “wipe clean” pages so that mistakes can be easily erased and corrected. Gradually, the level of the books is built up so that by about the age of six, the child should be able to read and write short sentences.

Additional Teaching Aids

To complement the course books, picture books and story books, a number of additional teaching aids are available, as listed below:

Cards
1. Picture cards
2. Word cards
3. Number cards
4. Flashcards
5. Game cards
6. Game sets/packs

Books
1. Puzzle books
2. Sticker books
3. Coloring books
4. Telling-the-time clock and book
5. Song or rhyme books

Audio-visual aids
1. Cassette tapes
2. Videos
3. CD-ROM's
4. Computers

Posters and Wall Charts
Conclusion

This article has offered some suggestions on an approach to the teaching of English to children at the kindergarten and lower elementary school level. While a comprehensive and early start to the introduction of second language lessons is advocated here, as opposed to providing only a simple introduction to the language at the upper elementary school level, it is undeniable that the introduction of a second language course prior to the current start in junior high poses a large number of problems, especially as regards a national curriculum. There are already available in Japan a variety of courses especially designed for the teaching of English to younger pupils. Decisions on what kind of course to use, planning of a progressive curriculum, training of teachers, and issuance of teaching licenses, etc., these are things which cannot be accomplished overnight. However, it is important to begin, as soon as possible, the steps that will lead to a solution of these problems.

At present in Japan there are a number of kindergartens that provide English classes for the children in their care. Unless parents continue to pay for expensive private lessons until their children reach the age for compulsory English lessons at the junior high level, most of what has been learned in kindergarten is wasted. Lowering the age for English lessons by a year or two will not alter this situation substantially. In a country where useful exposure to English is minimal, beginning foreign language classes at the earliest age possible, that is, in preschool, would be an interesting challenge.

Bibliography


Some publishers of teaching materials for children

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