

Snakes & Ladders

A publication of English Teachers in Japan (ETJ)

ISSN 1883 0080 Volume 2 No. 3 Winter 2009

Eigo Noto: On a Positive Note

by Ellen Head

I am lucky enough to be using Eigo Noto with 18 year old undergraduates who want to become elementary school teachers. My course is a compulsory course on which first years are supposed to learn to lead activities. The first thing they do is learn to stand in front of a group and make eye contact with every member; then they progress to learning simple routines for starting a class, using OUP's Classroom English Guide (Gardener and Gardner, 2005), and then to leading games like Bingo, Simon Says, flash-card drills, quizzes, and activities from Eigo Noto.

Now why would I dare to think this could be relevant to you, if you are a native English speaker currently teaching in an elementary school? Well, preparing this course has allowed me to cherry-pick the bits of Eigo Noto which I think work. My students studied English in high school but that left them with a neutral or negative attitude to English. Rebuilding the confidence of 18 year old false beginners is quite a different ballgame from teaching 10-12 year olds, but factors they have in common include: both groups are lively, mixed ability, like to move and draw, and have quite a short concentration span. Until just before the 2008 autumn term, I used age-appropriate Eigo Kaiwa materials (Smart Choice by Ken Wilson). Then I was instructed by my head of department to start using Eigo Noto, and to cover one year of Eigo Noto in each term. I was given the teacher's manual in Japanese. At first I couldn't make much of this, but I found that the lesson plans do have suggested English scripts for the ALT and class teacher. Since this change, my classes have been 100% more lively and motivated. Although this is largely due to the fact that students perceive that these materials are relevant because they will have to teach them one day, there is also a fun-factor derived from Eigo Noto itself. Much has



been written in criticism of Eigo Noto, but in this article I will concentrate on its virtues, controversial perhaps, but, I hope, worthy of discussion.

Eigo Noto (EN) is "English lite". The book looks colourful and is designed to manipulate teachers into making their lessons fun, physical, noisy, cheerful, multilingual events. The book's unspoken message is that English is fun but is just one of many languages. The content is mostly based on Japanese culture, but there is some chance to compare cultures. Sometimes the selection seems a bit clichéd (Italians eat spaghetti, Korean ladies wear a chimachoguree) but such details serve to make links with things children already know. This is part of an overall strategy in EN to motivate by including activities at which children can succeed without English language ability, by drawing on general knowledge or games with an element of chance. EN has evidently been written by a committee who have some information and aspirations about good, current elementary school practice. The elements of TPR, cross-curricular themes, problem-solving and language awareness all suggest that the writers were trying very hard to incorporate contemporary practice. What EN lacks is a clearly stated grammar syllabus, but there is some attempt to ground children's knowledge by repeating particular forms. Questions with "Do"

Lesson 4

I can swim.

できることを
紹介しよう

Let's Listen ①

CDを聞いて、(例)のようにどの動物のことか、()に番号を書こう。



Lesson 4

12

Let's Listen ②

CDを聞いて、それぞれができることを○で囲もう。



Let's Chant

リズムに合わせて言ってみよう。

♪ I can swim. ♪



“Do you like X?” “What do you want?” “Do you have X?”, with short answers “Yes I do” “No I don’t”, form the core of EN 1 (Eigo Noto for 5th graders), along with “What is it?” and “How are you?”. Depending on your teaching situation you may want to teach a little about articles and quantifiers or just introduce them as fixed phrases (some grapes, an apple). Possessives (my, your) would also be helpful to teach. At a workshop for elementary school teachers in Sakai, JTEs were told they would not be expected to deal with questions about grammar but should focus on meaning and leave grammar to be dealt with at Junior High. But cases where grammar affects the meaning can crop up fairly soon (“I want a grape/some grapes”). Native-speaker English teachers and JTEs will need to negotiate and find particular activities and strategies to create a comfort zone between grammatical correctness and easy fun. EN 2 (Eigo Note for 6th graders) grammar continues the focus on questions (“Can you X?” “Where do you want to go? What time do you get up?”). EN 2 content is more interesting than EN 1 as it features festivals, time zones, jobs and story-telling.

My favourite feature of EN is the playing cards with images of vocabulary items (food, clothes etc), to cut out and use for role plays or card games, in the back pages of each book. Having cards means students have symbolic ownership of the words. I suggest getting them to write

the English vocab words on their cards, although there is no special space for this. Games that could be played include “go fish”, “memory game”, “happy families”. In the first few lessons I teach “please give me X” (actually I use the song from New Finding Out 3, “Please give me a gorilla”) so that students can learn English for sharing scissors and crayons which they will need when preparing the cards. We play a kind of Chinese Whispers game to practice “Please give me” “Here you are”. Two sets of about 10 items of classroom equipment are placed on two desks at the front of the classroom. Students line up in two teams. In each team, the student furthest from the desk has to ask his neighbour for each item in turn, until the message reaches the student standing nearest the desk, who picks up the item and gives it to the next student saying “Here you are”. The team to finish first are the winners. Not all classes will sit decorously in a group to play go-fish, or whatever, but even in larger classes, card games can be done in teams overseen by the teacher. I enlarged the cards to make A5 size flash cards which can be seen from a distance.

My second favourite feature of EN is the CD. Many of the songs and tracks are very short indeed so I have recorded a copy with several repeats of each track. Some of the songs are recorded at a very fast speed,

for example the ABC in EN 2. But if you practice without the CD (practicing it as a rap before singing), then it can energise the class to try and do it very fast, especially if you are doing gestures as well. My favourites are the chant “Green cap, green cap, have you got a green cap?” in EN 1 Unit 5, and the final unit of EN 2, the story of the enormous radish, in which exaggerated Monty Python-style acting appealed to my students. The activities lead up to making a class play. I thought a full-on play would be beyond my students, so I gave out costumes (a headscarf for “Granny”, a black woolly hat for the cat and so on) and asked the appropriate people to come to the front when they are mentioned on the CD. This worked very well, and one class made an original play (in which Barack Obama pulled out the radish shouting “Yes, we can!”). I know every track is not going to work for every class, and some of the listening material seems to be designed for Japanese teachers who are working without an ALT. If you can get hold of the teacher’s manual, it has scripts for the CD so you can read instead of using the CD for activities such as the dot-to-dot drawings in EN 1 Unit 3 and EN 2 Unit 1.

EN 1 Unit 3 is a good example of how EN can look completely impenetrable at first, but actually result in a stimulating lesson, with a little strategic editing and supplementing. The unit first introduces “rock paper scissors” in English (it would be nice to have the English words written on the book alongside the Japanese explanation, so I would have students write under the pictures as appropriate.) Students then listen to the numbers 1 to 10 in six other languages, including Japanese. My students were certainly interested in that, and it gave me a chance to point out similarities between certain languages – introducing the concept of “language distance” (the idea that languages with common roots are “closer”, for example, Japanese is closer to Korean than to English). The TPR counting song “Ten Steps” which follows, is apparently sometimes taught in nursery schools, and might be familiar to students already. The game of gradually omitting various numbers and replacing them with a clap, challenged my students and provided a lot of hilarity. The next activity is a cross-curricular themed one where students have to look at the volume of a geometric figure and count the number of boxes. (I would have omitted this but they chose to do it as a presentation.) The language target would be “How many?” One positive aspect of this kind of activity is that winning is not dependent on the level of English skills and so students whose level is lower also have a chance to succeed, thus boosting motivation for English. The



following game requires students to fill in a pyramid of boxes with various numbers and then work with a partner to play “rock paper scissors”. The winner has a chance to guess one of the numbers on their partner’s page and if he guesses correctly, he can cross out the number on his own page, before moving on to a new partner and repeating the sequence “rock paper scissors” and guessing the number. Once you have decided what phrase to use for guessing the number, and drilled that in English (“Do you have a six? Do you have a two?”) students keep playing until one person has crossed out all the numbers. I thought this game looked unnecessarily complicated, but once we had understood the instructions, it led to a very energetic and focused 10 or 15 minute activity in which students were speaking English almost the whole time. A final activity has students ask each other “How many strokes?” in their favourite Japanese kanji character.

EN has many activities which are suggested to be done as a “mill”, i.e. students stand, speak to a partner, and change partners at random when they have finished with one partner. The rock paper scissors activity (above) works as a mill because students are driven by the desire to win and so they don’t linger with one partner and speak Japanese. But many of the activities might work better in a formal speaking line, where the teacher has some control over the timing and students are not forced to search around for partners (which, depending on the group dynamics, can be very difficult). For a speaking line, the teacher designates numbered pairs. Students need to know that they are A or B of the pair. Then they line up, all the As in one line and all the Bs in the other line opposite them. A asks their question to B,

who answers, and then B asks a question to A. It is helpful if there is some visual cue on the blackboard, for example, if the question was “Do you like cats?” the cue could be a picture of a cat and a question mark. After about 90 seconds, the teacher claps and the student at the top of the line, goes to the bottom to join a new partner, and the other students move along to a new partner. This is how I would organise many of the activities, for example the “Name card” activity in EN5 Unit 1, feelings in Unit 2 and likes and dislikes in Unit 4. My classes are 16-20 students. For those with larger classes, if you have a team-teacher then you could organise two speaking lines, but otherwise it depends on your students whether this is a viable activity or not.

EN is trying to cater to mixed abilities; for schools which have no prior English program as well as schools which have established programs and for students who may have studied in a cram school. In many ways it seems as if EN’s approach is to use English Activities as a tool for students’ personal and social development rather than for learning English as an end in itself. The idea of the EN writers is that children will “pick up” English as they might catch a cold, which is an idea born in research contexts where children have more extensive exposure to English. Not all the language children will need is explicitly taught but, on the positive side, many of the activities encourage students to personalise and communicate. Although EN leaves lots of gaps in students’ knowledge, if these can become a source of curiosity and motivation, EN will have done its job. Hopefully over time teachers will build up and share routines for extending EN so students learn to make sentences and questions rather than word-salad. At the very least EN has created a baseline from which to discuss and supplement the curriculum.

Ellen Head has taught in Japan since 2000, and at the Childhood Education Faculty of Poole Gakuin University since it opened in 2006. Her experience with young learners includes two years in Greece and time as a volunteer storyteller in an English elementary school. She can be contacted at the following address:< ellenh@poole.ac.jp>.

Postscript

Since this article was written, the new government has

said they won't be providing free copies of Eigo Note to all students. If Boards of Education want their schools to use EN they will have to purchase it themselves. This may reduce the number of schools following an EN-based curriculum.