

# Snakes & Ladders

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## English and Yoga A Community Centre Summer Event

*by Carla Wilson*

In the school summer holidays, many community centres hold special events for local children, with local residents able to organise some of these events with the help of the community centre. The community centre will often pay a small amount to the organizers from the proceeds of the event or it may be a fixed amount decided on by the community center. The event is usually free for participants or may require a small fee.

Organising one of these events is a good chance to get involved with your local community. For school owners, it's also a good chance to meet local children who may be interested in English lessons. For teachers who work elsewhere, it is a good chance to do something different and introduce something other than English to local

children while using English (or using a combination of English and Japanese).

This is a description of a summer event for elementary school children that a Japanese friend, Miyuki, and I held at our local community centre last summer. We are going to do a similar event this summer at the request of the community centre.

Our event was a two-hour, two-part English and Yoga event. We decided on a maximum of thirty participants as this seemed a manageable number for the two of us, and we decided to have elementary school children only as our planned activities were more suited to this age group. The

community centre advertised the event. Participants were asked to bring a drink and a small towel (the community centre sports hall wasn't air-conditioned). In the end I think we had 31 participants, mostly first- to fourth graders but a few older children too. The community centre paid us each 6000 yen each minus tax. Participants were charged 200 yen. The community centre funded the difference.

Miyuki is a qualified English teacher but hadn't taught for a while. She wanted to lead the English part of the event with my assistance. I teach English full time, mostly to children, and am also a qualified yoga teacher. I had never taught yoga to children, but wanted to try it while incorporating English too. I gave as many of the instructions as I could in simple English with demonstrations. For more complicated instructions I used some Japanese, and Miyuki assisted with this.

We each prepared a 50-55 minute session and the children had a 10-minute break in the middle. The first half of the program was the English session, led by Miyuki. She prepared several activities, such as a storyboard about the local area, making and flying paper aeroplanes with distances measured in yards, and guessing games, though any simple games involving English could have been used in this part of the event.

I led the second half of the session, which was a series of yoga-based games. These games didn't require a qualified yoga teacher. They are very simple and all yoga poses included were safe for children to do. Here are the activities we did.



Tree Pose

### Trees (active game)

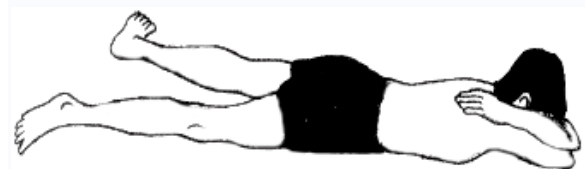
I taught participants the tree pose, which is one foot lifted and placed on the inside of the other leg's thigh. Easier versions have the raised foot resting on the calf or ankle instead of the thigh, but not on the knee as this could hurt the knee. The game had one child standing at one end of the gym with her back to the other children, who stood

at the other end. She began counting in English and the other children ran towards her. When she turned around the children had to go into the tree pose. If they lost their balance and she saw them with two feet on the floor, those children had to go back to the starting position. When a child managed to touch the counting child, the game started again with the winning child taking the place at the front.



### Crocodiles (active game)

The children learn two positions, the crocodile and the angry crocodile. The crocodile is done in the prone position with your chin/face resting on your hands or forearms, elbows out to the sides, and the angry crocodile is the same with the head still resting on the hands but propped up with the elbows underneath.



Crocodile Pose

The participants were divided into three groups: crocodiles, logs and children. The children were chosen first and they turned their backs to the others so they wouldn't see who was to be a crocodile or a log. The others were then divided into crocodiles and logs. The crocodiles and logs lay down next to each other in a long row as if they were in a river and they all did the crocodile pose. The children had to get from one end of the logs and crocodiles to the other by carefully stepping between them. If they touched a log, nothing happened. But if they touched a crocodile, the crocodile would raise its head angrily and the child had to go back to the beginning of the line. Everyone wanted to be a crocodile so the game needed to be played three times.

### **Sleeping Snake (quiet game)**

All the children lay down with their head on the next child's stomach, making a large circle (see photo on first page). They tried to match their own breathing to the breathing of the child whose stomach they were resting on, by feeling the movement of the stomach. In the end all the children were breathing in unison and were very relaxed.

### **Tinkling Bell (quiet game)**

The children sat in a circle with their eyes closed (you can use two or three circles if there are a lot of children). One child stood and had a small bell (a mobile phone strap with a bell is an ideal size). That child walked around the circle and then tinkled the bell quietly near another child's ear. They changed places and the next child walked around. We continued until most of the children had had a turn.



### **Animal Janken (semi-active game)**

The children learned the snake pose (cobra - Fig. 1 below), the mouse pose (child pose - Fig. 2 below) and the lion pose (Fig. 3 below). The children formed pairs and played janken (scissors-paper-stone), substituting these animal poses for the usual hand gestures. Snake beats mouse, mouse beats lion and lion beats snake. The children closed their eyes and went into a pose while the teacher counted to ten. Then they opened their eyes to see who had won. This can also be played with all the children playing against the teacher.

1.



3.



2.



After the event, the participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire about the event. The community centre later informed us of the participants' feedback, which was very positive on the whole. For many children it was their first time to experience English and their first time to experience yoga. They seemed to have gained a good impression of both. The tree game was very popular and also the tinkling bell game was surprisingly popular, at least among the girls. The only negative feedback we received was that some of the boys didn't like the quiet yoga games. The community centre co-ordinator popped into the hall at times to see the event, and she was very pleased with it too. Some parents stayed throughout the whole event and told us afterwards that they had really enjoyed it. I think many of the children who participated will attend again this year. It was a very positive experience for Miyuki and I, and we are looking forward to holding the event again this August. It was a good opportunity for Miyuki to get back into teaching English, and she is now working as a part-time English teacher in elementary schools. I was glad to have a chance to mix yoga and English in this way, particularly as I am very interested in the effects of yoga on language learning. If anyone has opportunity to get involved with this kind of event, I would highly recommend it. It needs to be organised quite well in advance as community centres (ours at least) tend to have a lot of paperwork that they like to be filled in well before the event and there also needs to be time for the event to be publicised. It is well worth the preparation and effort though.

The format of the event could be used with many types of activities, not only yoga. Community centres often have very good facilities that would allow sports, dance, arts and crafts, music or even cooking. By incorporating an activity such as yoga with English, children who may have no interest in English are given a chance to learn a little English while doing an activity they do have an interest in. Ideally I would hope that such events could give children a positive attitude towards English before they encounter it at school, and also let the children learn a few English words and phrases in the context of the games and activities.

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