



ETJ
presents



Snakes & Ladders

A publication of English Teachers in Japan (ETJ)

Fall 2006

INSIDE:

Suggestopedia:

Music Magic and
Classroom Control

See page 6

How We Can Learn from our Students

My Lessons Learned

See page 10

Plus...

**Games and Activities,
Business Matters,
Events and Festivals,
Very Young Learners,
and
Teacher Talk**

Parents Assisting in TEFL:

Opening the World of English
Beyond the Classroom Walls



by Dawn Shimura

In April 2005, there was a discussion in the ETJ-Activities Group about encouraging parental involvement in children's English classes. A number of ideas and opinions were given and some teachers showed a great interest, including mothers in class. The following will expand upon an article written in the 2003 Spring issue of Snakes and Ladders about one parental-operated English class which at that point was up and running for one year. It has been three and a half years now since it began, and the parents and I are still working together! It is my hope that if you too are considering or are currently including parents in a children's English class, that you will get a few ideas or at least some encouragement from our experience. Our class uses parents' help in every aspect of the English classroom, from administration to class planning, without having the mothers actually lead the class.

"A parental-operated English class! You've got to be kidding!" "Teaching the kids and dealing with parents in every class! You must be crazy!" "What parent has the time anyway? Isn't driving the kids to the English classes work enough?" For many parents and teachers these are expected responses to the mere mention of parents helping in the EFL classroom. In many cases, I would really have to agree; it may be best to keep parents out of the classroom and let the teachers do their jobs. In some situations, however, it may also be beneficial to include parents to a certain degree, depending upon the class needs and the interest level of the parents. This article will present my experience with one parental-operated English group, starting with the advantages of such a group from three perspectives: a teacher's, a parent's and a student's.

From a teacher's standpoint, one advantage of this method and the reason I started this parental-operated English class is the efficient use of the

teacher's time. In my case, I only had enough time available for commuting and the one-hour of actual class time. The parents were able to take up the other responsibilities like checking and assigning homework, checking attendance, typing up class rosters, collecting fees, briefing newcomers, arranging room rental and payment, and preparing materials. These extras can often take up more than double the time spent teaching class, and if the parents are capable of carrying out these responsibilities, the EFL teacher can dedicate his/herself solely to the facilitation of the class.

Secondly, from the vantage of the parents, there may be financial savings. Initially, the EFL teacher may want to charge the going rate for class fees because, in actuality, it does take time to establish a group like this. Although the parents are very capable of doing the jobs listed above, the EFL teacher will have to provide resources, guidance, and time in the beginning. However, as parents establish the procedure that suits the group best, they can effectively carry out their responsibilities without the teacher's help. At this point the teacher's workload is greatly decreased, and the teacher could lower the fee. (In September, the participating parents, in reality mothers, were asked about the pros and cons of parental involvement in English classes. Please see the "Through the Mothers' Eyes" table for the summary of this survey.)

From a student's learning perspective, the greatest advantage of parental involvement is the parental involvement itself. The parents learn about TEFL, set goals for English learning, check homework before class, assign new homework, observe classes, and monitor progress. They learn English with their children and learn how to teach English. The parents casually discuss ways of encouraging study at home and share their ideas with one another. Parents begin to feel ownership in their children's English learning and are able to assist both in class and at home, opening up the child's world of English beyond the classroom doors.

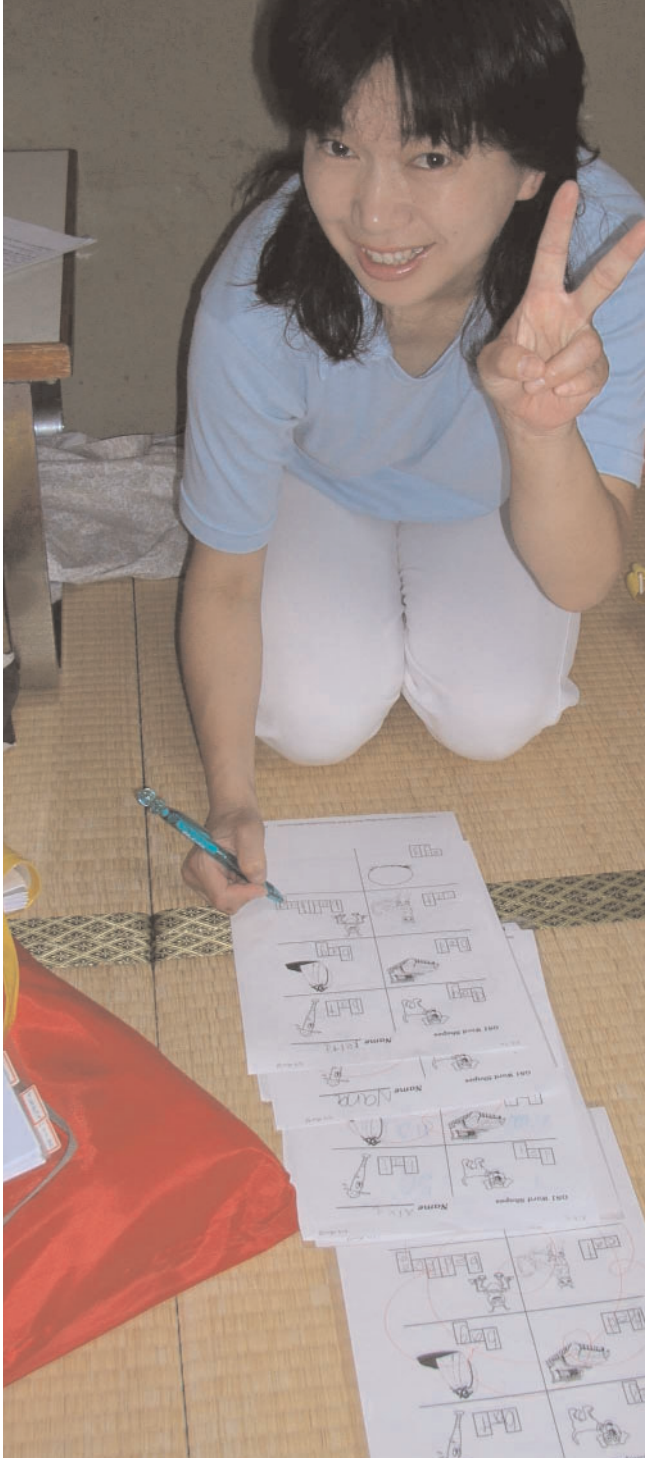
Founded in 2002, our Smiley English group evolved into what we have today, a one-hour class each week, divided by age and/or English level.

Each group has its own set of goals. Two mothers plan each lesson according to the goals. The in-class time for each group is quite short, ranging from twenty to thirty minutes; thus the plan is also short and simple. The plan is given to me preferably in advance but sometimes at the start of class. The mothers also provide the materials for the class, reducing the amount of supplies I need to bring. When I arrive at 3:40, the homework ideally has been checked already by the parents. I glance at the plan and begin class.

We begin the A class with a hello song. The A class continues with finger play songs like "Open, Shut Them", "The Itsy Bitsy Spider", and "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes". After singing songs, I introduce the parental assistants' chosen activity to fill in the remainder of the twenty-minute class. In the past, these activities have included reading the Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? book, the children reciting the same book using prepared cues (for example, pieces of colored material tied in order on a string and slowly pulled out one by one from a bag), and playing games to review colors. We finish with a goodbye song.

The B class also starts with a hello song. The B class planners have the Japanese version of the Super Tots Teacher's Guide, and I have the English version. They tell me the activities they would like me to do by giving me the page number and section from the teacher's manual. I quickly read over these sections and lead the class. Usually this works out just fine, but occasionally I do not have time to read it thoroughly, or I may not like the activity for whatever reason and must improvise. Provided I know the goals of that day's class, this is not difficult. The final 5-10 minutes are spent introducing phonics. The order of introducing the phonics sounds was taken from Finding Out. Writing practice is done at home using their Finding Out

<i>Class, Age, General goals</i>	<i>Class Time 1st and 3rd Thursdays of each month</i>	<i>Class Time 2nd and 4th Thursdays of each month</i>	<i>Current texts in use</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
A class kindergarteners play in English	3:40-4:00	X	<u>Brown Bear, Brown Bear</u> <u>Spot Goes to the Farm</u>	7
B class 1st-2nd grade phonics and conversation	4:00-4:20	3:40-4:10	<u>Super Tots 1b</u> "Blending a Hand"	6
C class 2nd -5th grade phonics & reading	4:20-4:40	4:10-4:40	<u>Finding Out Home Book</u> "Blending a Hand" <u>Reading Tree</u> readers	7



A mother checking homework

Home Book and "Blending a Hand" worksheets. The parents set the pace. If the pace seems too slow or too fast to me, I will comment; however, I keep my input to a minimum. At the end of class, on my cue, the students call out to the mothers, "Is there any homework?" The typical response from the assigned class planner is, "Yes, of course!" but the occasional, "No" is always welcomed with a round of applause. Class ends with a goodbye song, and then the C class begins its 20-30 minute session using the same phonics materials, but at a more advanced level, plus readers.

The parents meet as a group as necessary, about three to four times per year, but on a regular basis, only two parents at a time attend each class. Each parent is assigned to be a class planner for two consecutive months, with no two same pairs working together two months in a row. See the following rotation plan example:

April	Parent A & Parent B
May	Parent B & Parent C
June	Parent C & Parent D
July	Parent D & Parent E
August	Parent E & Parent A

This type of rotation reduces unnecessary parental involvement by utilizing only two parents during class time, thus not wasting parents' time and not overcrowding the classroom. It also provides continuity by rotating only one person out at a time so that one of the two parents always knows what was done during the previous month.

Since every parent does not attend every class, the planners keep a journal for each class. The hand-written record allows them to review previous class content for future class planning. The journal also cues them in as to what their children should have learned up to this point. It is also useful for newcomers to read to get an idea of what has been done and how the class works.

As I mentioned in my 2003 article, the keys to success for our particular group are two-fold, the dedication of the mothers and the lack of dedication, so to say, on my part. The mothers take time during classes to quietly plan and take out-of-class time to prepare. They take turns serving a one year-long term on the Smiley committee as chair, vice chair, or treasurer. For me, the hardest part of getting this group going was learning not to do anything. All of the mothers came to the group with no experience in TEFL and were clueless as to where to start. I, too, had only worked independently as an English teacher. So often it would have been much easier to just do it myself, but in doing so, I would never have been able to hand over the responsibilities I frankly did not have time to do. I would also have been taking away their chance to learn about English teaching and learning. I could have chosen the texts for them, but it was important for them to discover the wealth of books, videos, CD-ROMs, and other materials available today. I could have provided all the toys and picture cards, but they had some wonderfully useful materials in their own homes. In taking on the responsibility of teaching their own children English, they are discovering that although English learning does happen in the classroom, they have many other resources, including themselves, at their disposal.

In other children's English classes, I have heard so many parents actually refuse to help their children with their English for fear that they might instill poor English pronunciation in



B class doing phonics

their children. In Smiley, however, the mothers have taken responsibility for their children's learning and have found ways to assist in their children's English learning. For example, they decided that phonics is important for their children to learn as it will help them with junior high school English. The C class put it as their first priority; the B class put it as a second priority to learning natural conversation skills. They chose materials to facilitate the acquisition of these skills. While assisting the classes they practice English themselves, checking their own pronunciation. The parents also casually discuss ways for their children to learn at home, sharing their ideas. Some of them find the StudyDog and Starfall websites useful, and some of them enjoy and share children's music. Also, because I observe the parent-child communication inside the classroom, I can envision the parents and children playing with the vocabulary they used in class at home, too. Even those mothers with low level English skills do not say that they cannot help their children with English; they may admit that they need to study more, but they do not refuse to speak in English to their children.

In conclusion, parental assistance can be a benefit for English learning provided the teacher and parents are willing to put in effort to make it work. Another ETJ member recently recommended that I read *Second Language Teaching and Learning* by David Nunan. Although the book targets adult learners, the ten learner-centered steps listed on pages 19 and 22-23 reflect somewhat what was created in Smiley English's parental-assisted class. Some of these negotiated-learning steps include, "Allow learners to create their own goals," "Allow learners to generate their own tasks," and "Encourage learners to become

researchers." On page 12 Nunan also states, "It can be seen that... [learner-centered instruction] is a matter of educating learners so that they can gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning." By empowering parents to claim more responsibility in their children's English education, the world of English for these children cannot help but grow, even if just a little at a time. As a result, the EFL classroom gradually becomes a piece of that English world for them and not the only world of English.





Storytelling with the author

"Through the Mothers' Eyes"

The following is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of parental participation in children's English classes according to mothers in Smiley English.

Pros

- Opportunity to decide lesson content and customize according to the needs of their children
- Observation of lessons
 - ...of lesson content
 - ...of teacher's dialog with children
 - ...of children's attitude toward the lesson (enjoyment, understanding, relationship with teacher)
 - ...of children's progress, ability to overcome shyness, clear pronunciation, understanding of spoken English and ability to respond in English
- Ability for a mother to quickly intervene when a child misbehaves or loses interest
- Gives mothers a better sense of what they can do to support their children
- Creation of a relaxed learning atmosphere, differing from a typical classroom setting
- For mothers interested in English, it is a pleasurable place for using English
- Opportunity to plan special events—always with wonderful results, a joint accomplishment with children (although a lot of work was involved)
- Interaction with other mothers (this was an important benefit for many who responded to this survey)

Cons

- Even with a textbook to work from, choosing activities or enjoyable games for the children was difficult.
- As a new member, I was unsure of how to assist and tended to rely on the teacher too much.
- Coming up with ideas that would stimulate the children's understanding of English was worrisome, but it could also be very enjoyable.
- English being a weak point, it was difficult to plan progressive lessons.
- It was good when that month's mothers could get together to discuss and plan lessons, but little by little women in the group became very busy.
- For a working mother, it was very difficult to make time to participate.
- When mothers are present in class, kids can rely on them too much.
- For village sponsored events like TSUKIMI KAI and the Christmas Party, village employees expected too much participation from our group.

References

David Nunan (1999) *Second Language Teaching & Learning* Heinle & Heinle Publishers
 Bill Martin Jr. & Eric Carle (1996) *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?* Henry Holt and Company
 Eric Hill (1997) *Spot Goes to the Farm*. G.P. Putnam's Sons
 Aleda Krause & Michelle Nagashima (2001) *Super Tots 1*. Pearson
 David Paul *Finding Out 1*. MacMillan
 Roderick Hunt, Thelma Page & Sheila Pemberton (1996) *Oxford Reading Tree*. Oxford University Press
 "Blending a Hand". David Lisgo
<http://kweto.com/etjaichi/davidlisgo/BAH/index.html>
 Starfall <http://www.starfall.com/>
 Study Dog <http://www.studydog.com/>
 "Open, Shut Them"
 Words can be found at
http://www.tulsaschools.org/PAT/Open_Shut.html

If anyone would like more information about our Smiley English class, please contact me at dawn@mbb.nifty.com or through ETJ Groups.