

How We Can Learn From Our Students: My Lessons Learned

by Travis Ruetenik

I made it through my first full year as a kindergarten English teacher in Japan! What is so special about that? Well, for me it was no small task as I was not quite sure I'd be able to handle the learning curve. My background is in the corporate world, where I spent the last few years entertaining my customers with golf and luncheons rather than songs and stickers.

Alas, life can take one in strange directions and turning oneself from a corporate banker into a kindergarten English teacher has been no small task. I learned quite a bit this first year and I'm hoping a few of these lessons might help others doing the same thing I did - building a kindergarten EFL program from the ground up in a new career and country.

Lessons I learned about three-year-olds (nen-shou)

The objective for the first lesson is to get the children to understand that we are not going to eat them. Anything else that is accomplished the first day with new three year-olds is a bonus. Just placing a tall, frightening foreign face in front of a tiny child for the first time might qualify as a full lesson. From the start it is important to work at a relaxed pace with three year-olds. The lesson plan for the first year is simply to instill in the children a positive attitude towards learning English. If they pick up a few words, too, that's great. Mine did!

With very young learners, we are not only English teachers but conduct educators. Most children need to understand much more about the kindergarten classroom





before we can even hope to teach them English. I came to expect that I had to spend most of my class time making sure the children understood what they were supposed to be doing. Spending a lot of time teaching the importance of sitting nicely, singing, repeating, laughing and having fun, not hitting the other children and not peeing on themselves takes much time and energy. It is impossible to be responsible solely for English when tears are flowing or noses are running.

Of course, three-year-olds love to pretend and even pouring an imaginary pitcher of juice will create a flurry of activity during a lesson. This creative energy is the most fascinating thing about this age group and it is important to harness it productively in the lesson. Three-year-olds are brilliant! They can turn orange juice into milk just by using their imaginations. Ask them if they like orange juice. No? Then, let's pour some milk instead! For me, just watching such vivid imaginations work is delicious. While working up the young children's imaginations and energy can be enriching, we need to learn from our mistakes when encouraging this classroom energy. Every teacher of the very young must have seen a class go from fun, fulfilling play to the pandemonium of running, bouncing children using no target language at all. Teachers must remember to continually work within the limits of using the natural energy in the classroom and establish rules for fun and learning

from the very first lesson.

The simple mention of the word "jump" in a class full of happy three-year-olds will usually have some, and then all, of the children jumping around like frogs. Instead of encouraging a jumping mess, I make my hand into a little man with two fingers for legs. It's no more than simply making "choki (scissors)" and pointing them down. When I quietly show the children that the man is walking down my other forearm, they wonder what's going to be next. After a few quiet, gentle walking steps, "walk, walk, walk," the little man treks from my wrist to my elbow and then "JUMP, JUMP, JUMPS" back to the starting point. It's physical, it's imaginative and interactive for the children, it's memorable, and most importantly, it keeps the children engaged and laughing while still maintaining their attention on the word.

Maintaining focus is a big challenge. I suspect other beginning teachers have also misdirected the lesson by focusing the children on the wrong thing. For example, I was attempting to get the children to tell me what color they like using target language "I like". So during the warm-up activity I began pointing to objects around the classroom based on color. Unfortunately, the next thing I knew, my lesson had become a "find the color" frenzy, with children frantically pointing and shouting around the room!

The children's attention is precious. One should avoid these kinds of misdirecting pitfalls, but at the same time, remain flexible and go with the children's flow. Oftentimes, young children's attention on an outside event or object can be an opportunity to introduce new language. During one class session, a cat wandered into the classroom. Had I been thinking quickly, I could have come up with an appropriate target phrase to match that spontaneous and real-life moment. That way, instead of struggling to refocus the kids, I could have taken advantage of the children's real need for language to match that interesting and funny situation.

It appears to me that most of the limits that my three-year-old children have when learning is not their ability to understand the language but a lack of knowledge regarding classroom routine and the child's role in the process. It is important to refine our boundaries with these young minds from the absolute beginning and try to show them that the best part of English time is when they pay attention to the teacher, follow directions and use the language.

Lessons I learned about four-year-olds (nen-chuu)

This past year I realized the importance of using routine, rather than drilling, to teach classroom language to four-year-old children. Routine is so important to children. Trying to hammer every new word into their active memory through drilling doesn't work very often. Teachers must first consider the children's natural need for the language they teach. Classroom language is a tool I use to open a "gate" into the children's world, as children need to know what the teacher is saying in order to respond correctly.

As I have discovered, it is not efficient to have students

repeat and memorize language as a drill. For example, rather than drilling, "open your book", every day at a predictable time while opening an imaginary book with my hands I say, "please open your book". Very quickly I was able to hear the children themselves repeating and understanding my words without ever having actually "studied" it.

I've realized that subtly planting English into their vocabularies through everyday classroom language is a learned trick of the trade. Teachers can build target language drills from the sentence forms they have learned naturally through classroom language. A day when someone has brought crackers? Teach "open your crackers," and the children will understand the meaning of "to open". Is it a rainy day? Why not teach "open your umbrella?"

As many bilingual teachers do, I made the mistake of using too much Japanese in my first few months. I was afraid of overwhelming the children with classroom language in addition to each day's lesson language. I am beginning to realize now, after gaining a little experience, that classroom directions, even in the children's native Japanese, are new and confusing to four year-olds. For the first time, these children are now being told to take out their own materials and take responsibility for their own belongings in the regular classroom. It does not appear to be any more confusing to have them build their classroom routine in the target language. I will definitely be doing this from the start next year

Finally, four year-olds often express their affection in strange ways, including throwing punches! Three year-olds do as well, but by age four, they seem to have developed some skill at it. I have learned to dash out of the classroom



as quickly as possible after "Good-bye!"

Lessons I learned about five year-olds (nen-chou)

By the time a student reaches the highest level of kindergarten in Japan, he or she will have a lot more confidence. Many of the above lessons will still apply, but at this age I find that significantly more English can be taught. I learnt that I must recycle English from old lessons ruthlessly. It is so important to go out of your way to repeat something from two, three or many weeks ago.

It helps if you remember to consult the class syllabus before each class to choose and purposely slip previously learned targets into the normal, natural classroom environment. It has even helped me to put up a poster board of previously studied sentence forms for each class to remind me of language to sneak into the classroom conversation.

Similarly, I'm now not afraid to use more advanced language around my nen-chou kids. After a year using the same curriculum, I am now comfortable enough with my own material that I can pre-teach language months before the official lesson, as real-life situations command it. "Take off your shoes" is a part of my daily walk to the classroom routine from day one, even though it's not officially taught until the fall. It makes the fall lesson incredibly easy when the kids have heard the words in context before, even once or twice. For me, it's incredibly satisfying when I can see little light bulbs above the children's heads, as my lesson in "take off your cap" is applied to the "take off your shoes" they've been hearing for months.

By the time children reach graduation into elementary school, I have learned the importance of talking to them much more freely and naturally in English. My motive is to get the children to understand that they can piece together the meanings of English sentences, even if they don't understand every single word. I am just now learning to trust the children to pick up language without actually having been taught. For example, most of my five year-olds know many common verbs and verb-object relationships, such as, "hold the pencil", "pick up your book" and "open the box". With my kids who are confident with mixing different verbs with different objects, I am beginning to test their comprehension of the studied phrases with progressive forms and other small changes. Can the child pick up the meaning of "I'm holding the book" or "Don't pick up my shoes?" With children experienced in both the kindergarten setting and the English classroom, I have learned to challenge them a little more.

Lessons I learned about teaching kindergarten in general

In kindergarten, I believe it is too time consuming to correct children's pronunciation. Isn't it a victory just getting many of the kids to open their mouths? I must enjoy their words, praise them, and respond. As long as what the child says is somewhat intelligible English, it is ok. I realize now I must not overcorrect in order to build confident

speakers.

I also learnt that I must surprise and challenge my kids by using my natural creativity. It is important to throw silly words into my lessons. My children enjoy creating their own questions, like "May I please borrow a MONKEY?" The word "monkey" is comedy gold for kindergarten children. I must use it liberally, along with its funny cousins "banana," "fish," "spaghetti," and "hippopotamus."

Finally, I learned that after one year in a new career and a new country; there will be many situations that seem to be in complete disarray. I did not at first understand why children would get so confused with what I thought were simple lessons. Learning the Japanese language helps a great deal. But most of all, I learned not to worry. Experience in the teaching profession, more than corporate banking or anything else I've ever done, is critical to improving one's performance and understanding in the first year on the job. I teach until I learn the places where confusion starts. For example, I couldn't understand why my kids had so much trouble with learning body parts. "Hand, hand, fingers, thumb" seemed so simple, until I realized that most Japanese youngsters at my school consider any part of their body from shoulder to fingertip "o-te-te!" If a child doesn't understand the word in his own language, it may require extra steps and strategies to teach them the words in a new language.

Conclusion

What a wonderful privilege it is to have such a great demand for our language. I must cultivate realistic expectations for English learning among the parents of my students and thank them for giving me the opportunity to share something so natural to me, yet so complex to the non-speaker. I must always approach parents with gratitude, humility and positivity about the English learning experience.

Similarly, it is so important to maintain an appropriate image both in and out of the classroom. Both my students and their parents have nearly no exposure to the non-English speaking world. Showing the parents that they can be fully confident exposing their children to a foreign language and culture is part of my job. In this profession, we have the ability to teach children that the world is a big and wonderful place that should be explored and experienced, whether they eventually become fluent English speakers or not.

To my students, I am Africa, I am Paris, I am America, and I am the North Pole! It is my duty and pleasure to tell the children about how fun and amazing the world can be. Of course for a second-year teacher, "lessons I learned" is a ridiculously inappropriate usage of the past tense. Even as I reflect on my learning curve over the past year, I continue to revel about the mistakes I am making in my second year!

If you have any questions or comments for Travis he can be reached at truetenik@gmail.com