

Snakes & Ladders

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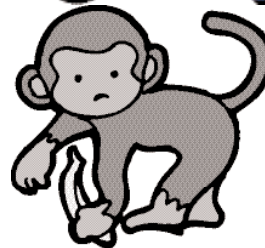
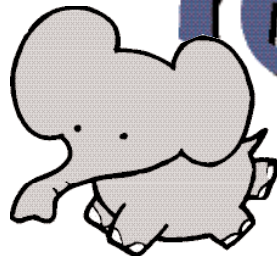
Games, Events and Festivals, and Business Matters

Teaching

THE

VERY

Young



*This article arose out of an exchange of views and sharing of ideas on the ETJ e-mail list that took place over several weeks earlier this year. Two of the main contributors to the discussion, **Emily Homma** and **Don Block**, share their extensive experience of teaching two-year-olds.*

How would you describe your baby classes?

Don Block: In my school's case, the definition of a baby lesson might be "Okaasan to issho ni asobu English circle" (Mommy/baby English playgroup). We expose the children to English, though not at random, as some of the vocabulary and grammar is recycled. We encourage the mothers to be very gung-ho and positive and to leave their fears of English outside. We strongly discourage criticism of

kids by their own mothers. Mothers often laugh at their children's mistakes or correct them. The moms at my school do it much less these days because we are so emphatic that it is not a good thing. Basically, I always make the babies right.

Here's a simple example: I show a purple flash card to a few two-year-olds and ask "Who knows what color this is?" One child answers "Blue". Instead of saying "No, it's purple", I say cheerfully something like, "Great! It does look like blue. Purple and blue

are similar!” Then I flip blue and purple cards alternately in front of them as I say the colors. The positive benefits are huge; talkative, happy, non-shy, excited babies that look forward to their English classes.

Emily Homma: The baby classes I conduct at present have evolved out of what used to be a mixed class of babies, toddlers and preschoolers. Now I hold three separate kids’ classes according to the learners’ ages and readiness. A baby class is usually just a one-mother-and-one-child class, but once a month, or on special occasions, all the babies and moms meet up to socialize and do group activities.

Together with the mother, I communicate with the child using toys, pictures, interactive computers, and other materials that stimulate interest and response. I explain to the mother the rationale behind each activity and suggest ways she could follow up at home. During the first two months, I allow the mother to translate for the child sometimes, but after the adjustment period, no Japanese is allowed in class. This way, the child gets total English immersion. I experiment by using activities with my own children first, then apply whatever is effective in my lessons.

Do you use picture books or storybooks? If you do, then how? (Nina)

DB: Stories are a staple element in my lessons. I change the words to make the story most educational for my EFL infants. That’s the key — they are EFL students. Most English books are written for native speakers. The only time I don’t change the words is when the author has written a lovely rhyming story.

I am really into *shikake ehon* (picture books with moving parts) and *tobi-dasu hon* (pop-up books). These are expensive books, but very much worth the price in my opinion. However, a warning: If you allow kids to touch these books while you are reading aloud to them, two things are guaranteed: They will learn no English from the book and a book’s lifetime will be reduced from five years to five weeks (maybe even five minutes!).



How to keep kids from touching the books is a challenge. I have a great technique for that. The rule is “Behind the line!” All the young kids in my school understand “Behind the line”. They even say it to each other. And I am very far behind the line on the other side. It is fairer to all the students to be far back as that way all the students are seeing the book from nearly the same angle. Sitting close to the kids or not having a line seems to cause more of the “*Mienai!*” (“I can’t see!”) problem. My line is a track in the floor for a folding wall; however, a string or tape would probably suffice.

Here is a list of the books I use in order of popularity (but keep in mind that their popularity among your students depends on your presentation style):

- *The Wheels on the Bus* (Zelinsky, 1990)
- *If You’re Happy and You Know It* (Carter, 1997) (Best though to use David Paul’s wording for the song — see *Songs and Games for Children*, Paul, 1996)
- *Big Red Fire Truck* (Wilson-Max, 2001)
- *Maisy Goes Swimming* (Cousins, 1990)

EH: I don’t use books in storytelling. In the past, using eight-page (or longer) storybooks gave me so much heartache. Who would not feel frustrated if in the middle of storytelling, your student would do something else, ignore you, or even worse, leave the room and end the class early.

A lot of picture books written by authors whose target readers are not Japanese look boring to my students. Ad-libbing and paraphrasing to fit their experiences has so far been making the kids happier.

With a two-year-old, using just two pictures makes the story manageable. Just a picture or two can tell a story. Use exaggerated actions and sounds to narrate an event in just one minute. Dramatic reading and using sound effects help the children to retain what they are hearing, as babies associate sounds with meaning. Between pictures, I sometimes hum or sing a short familiar tune to keep them on track. Have a follow-up game — if, for example, the story is about a mother cooking, play with toy kitchen utensils after story time. Kids as young as two years old learn by motor skills, hand manipulation and repetition.

DB: You can get *kami-shibai* (picture story boards) from the library. These are very successful if you are good at doing voices and sound effects. I go very quickly. Each page takes 5-15 seconds whereas if a *yochien* (kindergarten) teacher were doing the story in Japanese, each page might take 30-60 seconds. A huge mistake that most people make when teaching babies is going too slowly. The pace should be almost frantically fast. People are always saying that babies have terribly short attention spans, but what is left out of that statement is “babies are geniuses.” We show the baby a picture of an apple and we say “It’s an apple” slowly five times but after the first time, the baby is looking at other things in the surroundings so we say “See that! —

short attention span!”. What actually happened is he or she got it the first time. We could have shown him or her five cards during that time span instead of just one.

I am still wondering how to use flashcards with two-year-olds. So far, we have been doing jumping, running, hiding, choosing, hitting with a ball kind of activities. Are there any more creative ways to use flashcards with two-year-olds? I am afraid I might become a real bore just doing the same activities over and over again, even if the children seem to like them. (Nina)

DB: I’m inclined to feel that activities with flashcards with two-year-olds are a negative thing. First of all, for reasons spelled out many times by Chris Hunt and David Paul, competition can be a negative thing. This is especially true with babies. Imagine being the mother of a kid who keeps losing. I’d fear damage to my child’s self-esteem.

Many children that young can’t do activities per se; even if the other babies in the class are getting it and doing it correctly, there’s usually one child who seems clueless. I’d do the simplest activities you can think of. Children that young can’t easily understand activity objectives or game rules (even if I allow their mothers to repeatedly explain in simple baby-Japanese). I feel a bit embarrassed when I start an activity that is obviously way over their heads.

Finally, most two-year-olds bend cards very shortly after receiving them...in addition to biting or even chewing on them. This makes the activity seem negative because I say “Don’t bend the cards OK? These are nice cards, OK?” Then they bend them. I get a tad upset...no good!

I often show cards. That’s it. The Genki English website (www.genkienglish.com) has free cards that match songs (although the songs are made for elementary school children and are awfully fast).

EH: I like using picture cards, flashcards and play cards not only because they’re easy to create, but also because cards are handy and can be easily adapted and incorporated into every lesson.

When using flashcards with toddlers and babies, adding more fun and mess is the key. Because babies can’t follow complex instructions, adjust to their level. Take the lead from the children. And if the kids seem to like the way you play flashcards already, why worry about new ways? Having said that, here are some activities that have been popular with my baby students:

1. Carpet Flashcards: I call this activity “carpet flashcards” because my daughter likes to hide flashcards under our living room carpet. When I’m cleaning, I find lots of missing flashcards under the sofa or hidden around the house.

How do you play this? Use a big hanky or bath towel as the carpet, then hide the cards underneath, one in every corner. Let the children discover the cards, making the sound of the object on the card as they lift the cover. Ah! laughter

and giggles... If you do the first one, the children can generalize that other corners also have something hidden. Kids love to discover.

2. Basketball Flashcards: You need about four baskets (from a 100-yen shop) and lots of plastic balls (red, yellow, blue). Label each basket with a flashcard. Let the children shoot all the red balls into the “umbrella” basket, all the yellow balls into the “raincoat” basket, and all the blue balls into the “rain boots” basket. Have fun playing basketball! Then count aloud all the balls in each basket.

3. Categorizing: Use a pocket chart (with pocket rows) to classify the objects according to their categories, for example, fruits, animals and vehicles. Put all the fruits in the first row or column, the animals in the second row and so on. Kids like to remove or put things in pockets. At this stage, kids are ready to classify, so provide activities that enhance or develop this skill.



4. Piñata Flashcards (left): Hang the flashcards on a piñata-looking mobile (or use laundry hangers) with clothes pegs. Let the child jump and grab a card each time. Then ask the child what he/she got. They’ll love jumping and picking a card in this game.

5. Guessing game: Get a big pouch and fill it with flashcards. Let the child draw the cards one at a time. Ask the child what card/object he or she got. The element of surprise involved in getting something from a big knapsack is what makes this game exciting.

6. TV Flashcards: Don’t throw away your gift cartons. Make TV sets out of them, and use a flash card for the screen. Construct four or five TVs. Cover the screen with a cloth, so instead of “turning on” the TV, you open or lift the cloth to see the screen. This is like a trip to the “Denki shop” where you look at several TV sets, then select one to buy in the end. Two-year-olds like to open and shut the screen.

As Don said, two-year-olds really like to touch or munch the cards, so it’s best to have them laminated. I make the activities fast-paced so the kids don’t have the chance to explore with all their senses.

What kind of songs do you use? Do you have a top ten of the favorite songs you use in your classes? (Nina)

DB: The average baby lesson at my school has six to eight songs per 50-minute lesson. The cassette tape “Songs and Games for Children” (accompanies *Song and Games for Children*, Paul, 1996) is great for baby lessons. Many Disney songs are good too. Songs from the *Tiny Talk Songbook* (Graham, 2000) are good too.

EH: Babies love “London Bridge” as they can pass through an arch of arms, “The Ants Go Marching” because

they can march or stomp, “Six little ducks”, “Skip to my Lou”, “Are you Sleeping/Where is (name)?” and of course, “Old McDonald” and “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” — anything that has funny actions.

Sometimes, it’s hard to find songs that match the theme of the day, but a popular melody with new lyrics can equally spark the kids’ interest. Just substitute the song’s lyrics with the target language you intend to teach on that day.

If you are introducing “food”, for example, you could sing to the tune of “Head and Shoulders”: “Noodles, apples, tea and juice, tea and juice”. Do simple actions as you sing.

Parents should have their own song tapes to play at home. If the kids keep hearing it at home, it’s easier for teachers to teach the actions when they come for lessons.

You may want to check this website for more songs (music and lyrics) for the young and old:
<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/musiclinks.htm>

What other activities do you use?

DB:

1. Puppet shows (you don’t need a stage).



2. Activities with plastic foods, plastic or stuffed animals
3. Blowing bubbles — tie English into it obviously.

English can also be tied into activities with simple or home-made musical instruments. You can also find lots of other useful things at Daiso and Toys ‘R Us.

4. Low pressure *eikaiwa* done in chorus. I ask questions while moving my face from side to side and opening my arms like a preacher. I ask whole group questions and the students answer simultaneously. For example, “How are you?”, “What’s your name?” (I’m opposed to one-on-one questions and answers as it puts pressure on them to perform at too young an age).

5. Have the students together say and dramatically act out words like “stomachache” and “headache”.

6. Learn a simple magic trick and do it in English.

7. Buy or make a “limbo bar” with uprights. Kids under four don’t understand going under the limbo bar “limbo style” even if you demonstrate it twenty times, but you can

adjust the bar to various heights and do “under” and “over”. You can even put the bar about 18 inches above the ground and ask them “Over or under?” regarding what they intend to attempt.

Can you tell us about your lesson planning?

DB: Although I know my thousands of flashcards, hundreds of picture books, 37 puppets, and song collection intimately and keep a log file on each baby’s strengths, weaknesses, needs, fears, likes, dislikes and idiosyncrasies (as well as their mother’s), there are no lesson plans in the usual sense of the word. I do have a lesson plan, but it’s just a list of possible activities with some highlighted to indicate importance/priority. Even if I knew exactly which babies would show up (we run flexible classes), what I do cannot be determined precisely beforehand as I don’t know what their mood will be. A baby can change completely from one week to another.

I say it is more important to write notes after the lesson about what you are discovering about the baby than to work on the lesson plan for an upcoming lesson — as close as possible to immediately after the lesson ends so that everything is fresh in your mind.

EH: Here’s a plan for a typical meeting with a mother and a two-year-old child. The sequence is flexible, could be cut short, or accomplished to the end depending on the child’s mood, likes and dislikes.

1. *Greetings:* Mother and child and teacher exchange greetings at the reception nook at the start of the lesson, of course. The child greets all the fishes in the aquarium placed at the genkan. The child has the chance to use expressions like “Hello”, “How are you”, “Are you okay?”, “Are you happy?” and “See you later”.

2. *Setting up:* Mother or child narrates about things at home, on their way to school, activities outside home, gives feedback on the past lesson. Here, the mother often tells of any achievement. Teacher encourages more success and congratulates them both.

3. *Discovery:* While mother and teacher chat, the child starts to discover whatever is visible in the classroom. The teacher engages the child in a conversation, talking about the things attracting the kid’s attention. Notice here that the child is not ready to read or listen to a story yet, but has embarked on discovering something prepared for the day. Today, for example, I have picture cards of fruit and animals hanging on laundry hangers. The child pulls down the cards, and teacher and child talk about each card.

4. *Visual-verbal analysis/Classifying:* With all the cards already on the floor, the child picks up the apple card, the teacher says “apple”, the child repeats “apple”, they chant “apple”, and then they put the apple in a basket. The teacher encourages the child to pick another fruit card and they continue until all the fruit cards are gathered in the basket.

Then they sing a fruit song with clapping and actions.

Next they pick up all the animal cards and put them in a separate basket.



5. *Roleplay (left)*: Let's imitate Dad and Mom cooking. Let's cook all the fruits! Using the play kitchen, teacher and child "open" and "shut" the oven, "put in" and "take out" each fruit from the oven. We press and say numbers 1-2-3 at the control pad and hit the "start" button to begin the cooking. We repeat the process with the remaining fruits, or for as long as the

child's interest last.

6. *Playtime*: There's a playtime at intervals to energize the child. In today's lesson, the child goes to the adjacent room where a toy car is waiting. Expressions like "where are you going?", "I'm going to the..." and "I'm going shopping" would be applicable. "Why don't you take 'bear' for a ride?" "How about 'panda'?" This is also a time to practice "Goodbye", "Take care", "See you later" and "Have a nice trip".



Playing these puzzles the usual way doesn't look so interesting to this little boy, but putting a puzzle together while playing in the car is a lot of fun.

7. *Snack time*: Here, let the kids "eat their lessons". A fresh fruit salad goes with today's lesson, so a platter of fruit slices for each one would be a good energizer after the "ride". Good chance to use "yummy" and "I like ..." or "I don't like ...".

8. *Story time*.

9. *Activity time*: Something that involves pasting, tearing, smudging or using a stamp can be a hit with these fellows. If there's no activity book that goes with the lesson, creating a simple craft with Mommy is enriching for the child.

At present I am using *I'm Ready for School* (Preschool) (Covey, 2000), a phonics/vocabulary/activity workbook that suits two-year-olds. *Readiness Sticker Workbook* (School Zone Publishing Company, 1998) using toy stickers is also a big hit. There are just two stickers to paste in an activity and you're done.

10. *Closing songs and games*: The favorite song or game of the day's lesson should be used for the closing activity. Using the most effective activity to end the lesson

ensures a happy kid going home satisfied and confident.

I have just started teaching 40-minute, one-to-one English lessons to a two-year-old boy. I am used to teaching children, but I haven't taught one so young alone before and I am not really sure what activities would be beneficial. He is very active and is not really interested in sitting down to have a book read yet. (Karen)

EH: You should have a collection/variety of educational toys around, but use just one toy or game (hide the rest) in each part of the lesson. Introduce a new one if he gets bored, making sure the new activity is tied to the previous one. I use four to five types of toys and varied kinds of activities in different sequence every time. For five minutes or less, we do some action songs with Mom. Continue doing the actions and singing even if the child stops participating and starts to do something else. Don't get annoyed. Kids' attention spans can be that short, and sometimes they want to be left alone. And what do you do? Well, talk to the toys! Teachers of kids always look crazy. Acting is a part of teaching.

DB: In general, people need to be taught to their style — some are visual learners, some are tactile learners and so on. I believe it is especially true with babies that we should not try to force them to adapt to our style. Since it is a private lesson, you can let his interests dictate what happens in the lesson. Experiment with introducing new things to help him discover his own needs and interests.

Since he is so active, you can obviously do *taiso* (P.E.) with the child and be a "play-by-play" sports announcer — "Oh! Now you want to jump! Keigo is jumping! Now I'm jumping too! Oh, now you want to sit! OK, I'll sit too! Now we are sitting". Do something cool with your body, fingers, etc and call out "Look at me! Can you do this?" You can also try various things to draw him into talking too. For example, while the two of you are jumping, say "Say 'Jump! Jump!'" and build on that.

EH: When you get tired, and the boy seems to be enjoying playing on his own, just sit beside him, watch, and give exaggerated remarks — "Wow! That's great! You can hammer hard! You are so strong! That's wonderful! How about this one? Can you do it too?". And laugh a lot. Kids like to laugh aloud in different tones.

Even if he's only hearing 10 to 30 % of what you are saying, he is learning. To save yourself from the embarrassment of being ignored, wear a puppet on one hand that you can talk to at some point, as if it's another member of the class. The child is listening even if he's not looking.

Let the puppet give commands/suggest to the child what to do next, if this helps to attract his attention. You could also try some simple craft where you could rest a little while the child makes a mess, or use a carpenter's toolbox to make a simple project. Try something like constructing a carton jungle house with the boy if you like.



Tell us the truth, do you think teaching two-year-olds is effective? What kind of progress do you see?

EH: I think being a mother myself makes me feel biased towards early childhood learning. It is not a matter of competing with other parents; it's having the "Provider" feeling and trying to make things available for the child. Normally, a child asks questions and reacts to everything in his or her world. There's a need for constant learning, or else, an artificial retardation. Don't stifle the child's growth by depriving him or her of experiences.

In babyhood, kids seem to be just hearing, not listening, but a lot of learning is already taking place. My two-year-old always just listened as I taught her older brother to read. Now that she's two and a half, as she helps tidy up, she amazes me by pronouncing the phonic sound and alphabet name of every letter she puts in the basket. This once-silent river runs deep. Don't underestimate a baby's brain.

DB: Every child is different. Also, a lot depends on the parents. Is the mother helping by showing English videos at home rather than Japanese videos all of the time? Does the mother help make the school's environment feel fun and safe for her child or is she herself terrified of English? I have five-year-old students that can have really good, long (three-to four-minute) conversations with me in English. Then there are other kids who are much older, and have been coming here longer, yet can't communicate well.

Something I have experienced many times is a two-to three-year-old coming here for one or two years, hardly saying a word...and then suddenly — A QUANTUM LEAP. To me, it feels like it all happens in a week or two. Something shifts in that child's universe...things fall into place. Suddenly, whoops! There it is. The child is speaking in sentences. Sometimes they even look at me like "Don *sensei*, I had you fooled all this time; you're about to pee in your pants, aren't you, *sensei*".

Resources

Carter, D. A. (1997). *If You're Happy and You Know It* (Pop-up edition). New York: Scholastic, Inc.

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With many thanks to Nina Hayasaki and Karen Hunter for providing the inspiration and questions that prompted this article, as well as to all the other ETJ listers who contributed to the online discussion.

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Don Block is a graduate of a theatre academy in Dallas, Texas (USA). He is the owner of Eikaiwa BLOCK in Shiga Prefecture and a frequent contributor on the ETJ Yahoo! groups. He is also an ALT in a private junior high school and lives with his wife and seven-year-old son in Otsu City, Shiga. He can be reached at don@eikaiwablock.com

