

## In Defense of Greetings

by Lesley Ito

Trends come and go in the EFL world and currently, nothing seems more out of fashion than making children do a standard greeting. “Greetings are boring! Unnatural!” teachers say. Well, I would be inclined to agree if “greeting” means the students mumble the following at break-neck speed to each other while staring down at the table:

Student A: HelloHowAreYou?

Student B: I’mFineThankYouAndYou?

Student A: I’mFineTooThankYou.

Unfortunately, this “conversation” passes for a greeting in too many English classes. This is a wasted opportunity for your students to learn essential vocabulary and skills they need as English speakers. Learning how to greet people properly and make small talk is just as essential as learning grammar or reading. Teachers should take special care to improve the teaching of greetings in their classes and to make their students feel comfortable and confident when using them.

Most of our students are very shy and they are likely to freeze up if faced with having to speak English to someone for the first time. However, if basic greetings are automatic to them, perhaps by the time they get through them, they will be relaxed enough to speak well. Being able to get through the initial greetings means their conversation has a chance to live! You can use this principle to your advantage in class because if the students can “break the ice” using basic greetings at the beginning of class, they will feel more comfortable interacting in English during the rest of the class.

Greetings are also a wonderful opportunity to practice weather vocabulary and verbs in a natural context. Many

cultures around the world discuss the weather as part of the small talk involved in greetings. Talk about everyday activities is also appropriate as part of a greeting. So, the greeting can be a time for them to talk about today’s weather and what they have been doing that week.

When my pre-school and elementary students first come in to class, I motion to my weather chart with arrows on the wall and ask, “How’s the weather today?” After we all agree and set the arrows on the correct weather, I choose two students at random and have them greet each other. It is best to have students greet different members of the class each week to encourage the students to feel comfortable with each other. I think it is especially important not to have the girls greet only girls or boys only greet other boys, or else you will psychologically divide your class in two.

The two randomly chosen students look at each other and begin the greeting. The greeting goes like this:

Student A: Hello, (name of Student B).

Student B: Hello, (name of Student A).

Student A: How are you?

Student B: I’m fine, thank you. How are you?

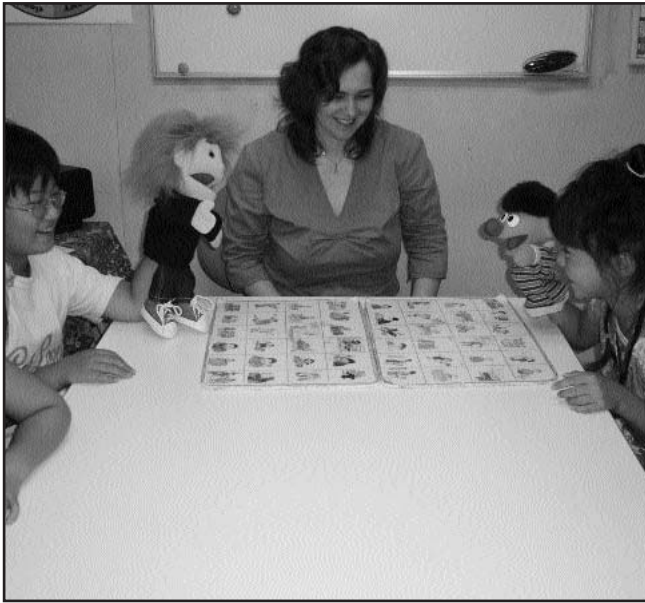
Student A: I’m fine, too, thank you. It is (weather) today, isn’t it?

Student B: Yes, it is. What have you been doing?

Student A: I have been listening to music. How about you?

Student B: I have been watching T.V.

I have the students ask each other, “What have you been doing?”, rather than, “What did you do today?” because at this point, most of the students do not know



irregular past tense forms of verbs.

While the students are talking about what they have been doing, they are looking at the “Verb Boards”. I use these boards because often if you ask children an open ended question about what they did, they will claim that either they didn’t do anything or they don’t remember. They are more likely to answer if given options to choose from. The boards contain many of the actions that an average child will do during the week, from watching T.V. to going to school.

Each board has 24 pictures of animals or people acting out the verbs. I have a total of four boards. The verbs on board number one are quite easy and the verbs on the fourth board are more difficult. My goal is for the students to master one board a year. After the greeting is finished, we often will go over a board. Sometimes we review all the verbs; other times we go over only a few; sometimes we will say the verbs in the simple form only; other times I will take out pieces and dice and we will use the board for a quick board game.

For older elementary students the conversation is extended. Inside the cover of their textbook on the first day of class, they write down “Who”, “What”, “When”, “Where”, “Why” and “What kind of”, along with the definitions in Japanese. After we decide on the day’s weather and before the greeting starts, they take out their books and flip to these question words. They use some of these question words as prompts during the conversation. So, for an older elementary class, the final section of the above greeting might go like this:

Student A: I have been listening to music.  
 Student B: Where?  
 Student A: In my bedroom. How about you?  
 Student B: I have been watching T.V.  
 Student A: What T.V. show?  
 Student B: Doraemon.

After a year or so of using these question words at the beginning of class for only a few minutes, these important

English words become a natural part of their vocabulary. Another advantage is that the children are learning how to extend conversations and to ask for information.

Can pre-schoolers learn greetings? I used to think this was impossible. I would say to the child, “Hello!” and they would say, “Hello!” back. Then, I would ask, “How are you?” and they would say, “How are you?” back to me! That is when I hit on the idea of using puppets with small children. The puppet becomes the one the children are talking to (and sometimes really young children seem to relate to puppets more than to adults!) and the teacher is just the facilitator in the conversation. Since the child is greeting the puppet, the teacher can prompt the child on what to say to the puppet without causing any confusion.

When I start teaching the greeting to pre-schoolers, we stop at the “How are you?” “I’m fine” stage and they only greet the puppet. Later, we add the section about the weather. When they are four years old, I have them greet each other and then we start learning the easiest verb board. Once they are five, they are ready to do the full greeting. Of course, with children this young, lots of prompting is needed.

Puppets can also be useful if you have a class that has been studying for a long time. Bringing out the puppet every once in a while to greet will infuse fresh enthusiasm into the greeting. Either the teacher could greet the students using the puppet, or better yet, have the children use the puppet on their own to greet each other.

As you can see, the greeting, if used to its full potential, can be a great learning tool and a productive way to spend the first five minutes of class. Perhaps it is time to re-examine this unfashionable concept!

*Lesley Ito is the co-owner of Sunrise English School in Nagoya and a frequent contributor on the ETJ Yahoo! groups. She is secretary of ETJ-Aichi and has made presentations for ETJ-Aichi, Nagoya JALT and at the Chubu ELT Expo.*