



Students practice their new vocabulary using games and songs.

It Takes a Tribe to Raise an English Speaker

The teachers of HELP! English School tell us how, by a process of trial and error, they are helping pre-school children explore their lives in a different language.

We have a few questions for you: How early do you think English education should begin for Japanese children? Does starting early give them a real advantage? How are pre-school students different from elementary aged students? And, if you are faced with very young students, and feel an early English education can benefit them, how should you approach your time with them?

Recently, in newspapers and English teaching circles, there has been much discussion on the pros and cons of early English classes. Some people say it's detrimental to students to teach them a new language before they can speak their own, others claim that only the very young can learn the sounds of a new language properly, and that early exposure is crucial. And yet others say it makes little difference either way, that in the end there is no real benefit, but no harm done.

It's hard to believe that teaching English early, if done sensitively, can be harmful. In most of Europe, North America, and elsewhere, large portions of the population grow up speaking two or more languages.

But sometimes it is hard to see that early education is helpful. Kids often seem to forget as quickly as they learn.

Still, in our school, kindergarten kids have been making up an increasingly large portion of our students - and our teachers are busy teaching weekly lessons at *hoikuen*, *yochien* and community centers. Parents want their babies to get the best start possible, and many see English as a way to do that. So, what do we do?

In some ways, kindergarten children are the same as elementary aged students: they can't sit still for very long, they need to be engaged and entertained by the content of a lesson, and they love to play. But they are different from elementary students in many ways too: they aren't as logical and are easily distracted, while at the same time having the benefits of being less self-conscious, loving to

sing, dance, play with puppets, and generally just be silly.

However, there is so much they can't do and it can be frustrating and easy to see why people claim it's futile to even start teaching English before Elementary, or even Junior High. But then, look at the way returnees can speak and understand English as well as children who have attended international pre-schools in larger cities and have learned in leaps and bounds. With such a head start, an ability to think, listen, and be comfortable in English, they have got an advantage most of our students can't match.

The challenge then, is to create an environment where our students are exposed to large amounts of English often enough to retain it and where they feel the need to produce it, remember it, and use it often enough that it becomes a part of them. How can we create an English culture, where students live, play, and experience their world in English?

Our English tribe:

Faced with these challenges, and



the promise of so much more, at our school we decided to disband all of our in-school kindergarten classes, and consolidate them into one group - a social environment, like a kindergarten, or a tribe. With the time this freed up in our schedules, we created three, hour-and-a-half time slots through the week with two teachers present. There is always something going on and any, or all, of our kindergarten students can show up freely.

We all like the idea. We've all taught enough to develop our own styles, activities and ideas about teaching, and we've all been frustrated at the constraints that time and classroom situation put on students' learning. We wanted to create a more natural communicative environment where students could use English as a language, not as a series of aped responses to a standard cue. Language learning isn't exclusive to the main activities of a lesson - children are free to socialize with the teachers, and each other between activities. This is when some of the best learning occurs. We had a similar style, test run summer school in August and all the children had a great time. Most parents were surprised at how easily their children took to English during the four days of summer school and realized that this was a chance for their children to gain something useful. Many also liked the idea that, for only a little more than they had been paying for forty-five minutes once a

week, their children could come to class for as much as four-and-a-half hours a week.

Other parents were less enthusiastic. Many, and rightly so, were concerned that their children already spent too much time running from lesson, to class, to club.

A developing culture:

Our new preschooler class, 'the tribe' has been going for about six months now. There have been some problems - not surprisingly. A few students quit, perhaps intimidated by the occasionally large numbers, aggressive students, and the lively nature of many of the activities. In response, we are trying to take advantage of the fact that there are always two teachers present. Very often, now, if a child expresses displeasure with the current activity, one of us will take a smaller group aside for quieter activities. This approach demands a certain amount of sensitivity and awareness on our part, but really seems effective. And as children grow more confident, we've seen quiet students gradually take a more active role in the class.

We've also had plenty of new students joining, and we generally have quite ample class sizes (ten to twelve). The children are very enthusiastic about their English lesson, and most parents are very satisfied with the format - especially when they have to look up words in dictionaries when their kids talk to them in English at home. In the previous format, with

short class times, a set curriculum, and limited opportunity for real play, language was presented, practiced, and retained only for a short time. Some stuff was retained, but even things like numbers and colors were scarcely ever used spontaneously. In these classes we had 'problem children' whose behavior was noisy and disruptive or who were withdrawn and which brought the mood of the class down. One of the most wonderful results of the new format is the change we've seen in the way the students interact with us, and with each other. What was previously problem behavior has often become a real resource for the teachers. Noisy, disruptive children have become the leaders - keeping order among the other children, directing games, even correcting and teaching other children when they make mistakes. Children who could not pay attention, and gazed vacantly into space in class have become engaged and active. Quieter children have gained confidence enough to speak - and though they still prefer quieter activities, now know how to ask for them.

The daily life of our Tribe:

Generally, while students are still arriving, time is spent with puzzles or games where children can play alone or together. We require the children to request the games they want, in English. All of them can say "puzzle, please," and many will point and say "This" or even create new sentences like "I want big puzzle" "I want little puzzle" on their own. Often, they spontaneously pick up the toys and cards we use for lessons and in the process of playing with them, rehearse the language we want them to learn, all on their own.

Lessons, given the loosening of time constraints, are much more informal. Old activities are mixed with new, songs with games, and loud activities with quiet. As a result, children don't have a reason to get bored, or overloaded. When they are stressed we move to something they are more comfortable with. When their atten-

tion wanders we switch to something more interesting.

Most of the vocabulary we've taught has been oriented to their classroom life or is easily applicable to the children's world. Requests, weather, big/little, counting, colors. . . anything we've learned the children like to talk about, or will use in the course of the class. Some ideas haven't worked, some required a bit of tinkering, but the variety and applicability of the structures and vocabulary has resulted in an incredible amount of spontaneous use of English.

The children argue among themselves in English now - shouting "Yes" and "No" back and forth, demanding items with "Please!" They have unthinkingly begun to incorporate weather vocabulary, colors and animal vocabulary into Japanese sentences and they follow English instructions readily.

Linguistic hunters and gatherers:

We usually introduce new topics such as classroom vocabulary, within a monthly theme and heavily practice them with games and songs. TPR works well, especially when the children are leading. Songs, both from tapes and CDs, or based on common childrens' songs with words adapted to our needs are also very effective. Guessing games (trying to identify concealed cards, for instance), relay races, scavenger hunts, coloring, hot-potato, modified duck-duck-goose. . . Almost anything can be adapted to the current targets.

The best way to achieve language comprehension and use has been to start from the needs and desires of the students. Little children react passionately with the world around them, and love to talk about it. Listening to them is important. They will teach you what they are interested in, and they are the best guides to their own curriculum. If they really want something, they will learn how to ask for it: they quickly learn to say "Stop" and express ownership of something. They can tell you when they are ready



to start something, when they are done, and ask if what they have done meets your approval.

Reflections:

The change in our students' attitudes and abilities has been remarkable. The loosening of the time constraint helps. There is more time for review and ample opportunity for using the language among themselves. It's hard to overestimate the importance of time spent speaking English and playing in English. The more informal structure has been incredibly beneficial too.

We generally initiate activities, enforce rules, and maintain an interesting pace - but we've come to depend on the students' own initiative and capabilities. And the change of focus in curriculum, one which intimately revolves around immediate utility, communicative value, and the students' interests has greatly aided our efforts. We incorporate the strengths of the various curricula which we've used, teach the content which is most applicable and useful, and try to avoid rote, non-communicative, patterned-dialogue based themes. Maybe children do get something out of role-playing the lives of exotic animals, but we better serve their needs by giving them the chance to explore their own lives in a different language.

This style of teaching is not a just-add-water-and-stir approach. It demands a lot of innovation, trial-and-error, and a certain amount of familiarity with methodology and children. This isn't as impossible as it sounds, though - in doubling up our teachers for these classes, we learn from each other, and more experienced teachers provide a wealth of ideas and experience to benefit newer teachers.

Classroom resources, situation, class make-up, and any number of factors vary from school to school and day to day. What we've tried to do is to use our current resources as flexibly as possible, as tools to meet the needs of our students. We have lots of ideas on where we want to go from here - some will come to pass, some won't. What's important is providing plenty of time, useful language, and the opportunity to enter into genuine play for your youngest learners. In short, creating an English culture in your classroom.

Preschoolers are different from older kids, and need a different approach to English. They don't reason their way into knowledge, they acquire it through living it. If you give them the chance to do this, you are providing them with something real that they can build upon. ■

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