

What's the Time Mr Wolf?:

Age-Appropriate Teaching Strategies for Children in Japan

by Katherine MacKay

EFL for children is undergoing phenomenal developments in Asia and around the world. Here in Japan, as education boards in the public sphere recognize the benefits of L2 exposure in the elementary years, in private language schools children can now begin learning English whilst in the belly! These changes have spurred the development of approaches and materials specifically for young Japanese learners. Rote-style, teacher-centered drills have been replaced by child-centered approaches, making English a creative, fun-filled experience for our children.

Many people come to Japan either untrained as children's teachers, or untrained in teaching a language to children, and are thrown into a class of 40 kindy kids, or a one-on-one with a 9-year-old and ask "What do I do?" Step back and children will show you how they learn.

In our English classes, we should provide an environment which is familiar to the children. A functional grammar syllabus presented to the children through themes/topics carries meaning and is fun. Practice of the target language, paced with high and low energy activities, keeps our children on target. Games, singing, chanting, dancing, Total Physical Response (TPR), and puzzle-solving activities motivate our children to learn.

This type of active learning is encapsulated by the buzzword in today's EFL world, Howard Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences (MI). An awareness of MI, or multi-learning styles, helps us to understand what type of learner a child is, and to find out what clicks for each child. It can also help us create a lesson plan guide. MI's categories offer us an immediate variety of 8 different activity types for any single lesson.

Have you ever had a particular activity work fantastically with your 6- and 7-year-olds but not with your 9- and 10-year-olds? There are clearly defined intellectual stages that children go through (Piaget, in Ellis and Brewster, 2002). The age of our children affects what they will and will not do, let alone what they can and cannot do, based on their intellectual, social and physical capabilities. While children within any given age group excel at different times, in different areas, and we have to accommodate these differences, as a general guideline for teaching children, change the task according to the age of the learners.

Fun and Games

Simply drilling a target does not mean children remember the words and patterns later. Children are natural learners, sensory learners, and active learners. A young child learns to say, "Juice, please" because s/he wants juice, not because s/he's practicing a form (Claire, 1998). As children grow, engaging them in a "thinking" process (Paul, 2003) enables them to "discover" the meaning of a word (Bruner, in Ellis and Brewster, 2002). This recognizes the need for personalization and developing learner strategies for concentration and memory skills, which help with recall later.

Very young children need concrete associations to help them remember (Ellis and Brewster, 2002). Teaching through themes can help, and vocabulary support can be provided through picture or action associations. Big, colorful picture flashcards provide a visual association and TPR, a physical association. These tools also allow the children to speak when they're ready, whilst in the meantime showing you they understand English through gesture or movement.

Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children need structure (Bruner, in Ellis and Brewster, 2002). In these classes you need to maintain a routine. This does not mean that you have the students listen and repeat or do the same activities every lesson. It means that you establish clear classroom language (with facial and body gestures), use puppets for modeling dialogues and set up activities in stages. Understanding where these little learners are at in terms of the physical development of motor-skills and hand-eye co-ordination, the intellectual development of cognitive thinking and the ability to sort and classify, and the social move from private to public groups helps us to develop effective routines.

Many of us teaching young children are visiting kindergartens or elementary schools with classes of 40 children. First, work with the whole group. This meets the needs of their stage of social development, with all the children participating and opportunities for peer teaching. You can set up activities that allow the students to practice basic language



and repeat simple question forms without them getting bored.

A tried and tested activity from the kindy classroom for re-enforcing theme vocabulary is to have 4 children each hold up a flashcard at the front of the class, flash and then hide their card. The teacher (and after modeling, a child) calls out one of the words and the children have to remember where that word is and line up in front of the child holding that flashcard. Children have great fun trying to remember, jumping from one line to another, following their friends and excitedly waiting for the card to be revealed. In a second round, it's fun to add an additional challenge and get the children holding the flashcards to change places, and then repeat the line-up activity with the whole class. Strategy-wise, this helps the children to develop memory skills. Also note that at this age some children love to be your little helpers and take great pride in being asked to hold the flashcards.

Two favorite whole-class games are "Mr. Wolf" and "Mr. Crocodile." Move the desks—you need space! "Mr. Wolf" practices numbers and time. The entire class stands at one end of the room and chants, "What's the time, Mr. Wolf?" One child with a clock stands at the opposite wall and replies "It's 3 o'clock." The class takes 3 steps forward. The game continues with Mr. Wolf changing the time, until it comes to 12 o'clock, when s/he calls "Lunchtime!" and then runs to catch another team member for lunch! The "caught" student becomes Mr. Wolf and the game starts over. Similarly, "Mr. Crocodile" practices colors and verbs. One child is Mr. Crocodile and stands in the middle, while rest of the class stand at one end of the room and chant, "Please Mr. Crocodile, can we cross the river?" The crocodile replies, "Only if you're wearing red." The children wearing red attempt to "cross the river" without being caught. The child who is caught either becomes the crocodile or helps the crocodile in further rounds.

Successive rounds of these types of games provide repetition of a structure in a fun way. The chants allow for substitution and of course you can change the animals to characters in your course book and/or adapt the language to your lesson target. In "Mr. Wolf" instead of "What's the time..." you could have the students chant "What time is it?" In Mr. Crocodile, "Can we cross the river?" could be simplified to "Can we jump/skip/run?" Or completely change the language. For example, in "Mr. Wolf," instead of focusing on time, the question could be: "How many blue fish can you see?" Keep the children's favorite game format, but grade or change the language, theme, or characters to match your lesson targets.

By early elementary children want to take more control (Ellis and Brewster, 2002). Pairwork can be set up as team games which require the children to organize themselves through asking questions, for example using comparatives. Add variety by changing the team dynamics with activities that require participation from one, some, or all members. For example, one member from each team takes it in turn to compete on behalf of their team to answer a question/challenge. A whole team works together to sequence cards, word-order sentences, or unscramble words. Turn around a

typical miming game where a team member mimes a word or an action and the whole team guesses, to the whole team miming to one member, who then has to guess the word.

All levels of elementary children love playing card and board games, and these are great for getting them to practise words and patterns over and over again, without drilling. For example, some traditional games that can be used are "Snap," "Go Fish" and "Memory Match." Consider the level of understanding the rules and concepts of a particular game demand. Pick games that match the children's intellectual development. What ages of child can conceptually understand "Snakes and Ladders," "Battleships" or "Monopoly"? Different games will suit children at different ages.

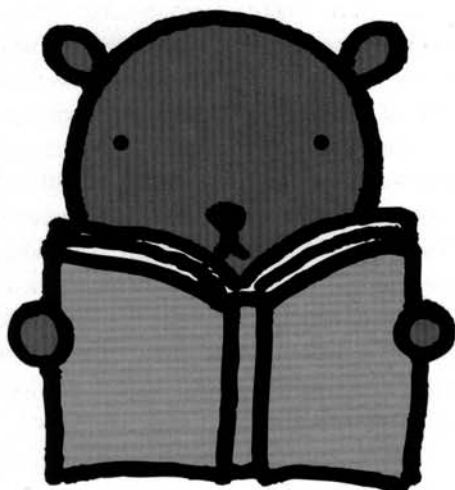
Songs and Chants

Very young children are still learning to develop their physical co-ordination. From 2 years to early elementary, most children enjoy movement, actions, and dance. Provide a basic action/dance routine, but encourage the children to come up with their own gestures to personalize the meaning of a word association. This personalization empowers the learning experience. And, of course, the children are likely to have more creative ideas than you, so while you guide, let them lead!

Children have to be able to listen to a song before they sing it. This gives them time to catch the melody on which to hang the words. But don't expect your younger children to sit and listen attentively. Pre-listening needs to be active. Here's my variation on "Man Overboard" called "Watch out!": All the children choose a sea-creature to role-play with movement. One child is the "shark." You play the music you want the children to listen to while they swim around as their sea-creature. When you stop the music, the child who is the "shark" shouts, "Jellyfish—Watch out!" and then tries to catch a "Jellyfish". To protect themselves from being caught, each child has to find a partner and join hands with him/her. As with earlier suggestions, this is the basic game format and you can change the theme, character, and target language to suit your lesson.

To help children learn the rhythm, and specifically, the words of a song, adapt this simple 4/4 beat clapping-chant activity (Ellis and Brewster, 2002). Start with one word for each beat and add an extra word with each round. For example, in the first round, clap and chant "dress, pants, shoes, socks." In the second round, keep 4 beats, and add another word, for example *and*: "dress *and* pants *and* shoes *and* socks." In the third round, add other words, for example, colors: "*pink* dress *and blue* pants *and red* shoes *and green* socks." In the 4th round, add a final word, here: *the*: "*the* pink dress *and the* blue pants *and the* red shoes *and the* green socks." All the time we've kept the 4/4 beat. Without explanation children learn that English is a stress-timed language (compared to Japanese which is a syllable-timed language) as we squeeze 4 words per beat, where originally there was only one. This provides a structured build-up of chunks of language and can be used as a basis to break down any song.

As children get older, sensory learning decreases



(Berman in Ellis and Brewster, 2002). In mid- to upper-elementary, the desire to sing and/or dance may disappear. If this happens, don't stop using songs but instead change the task. You could have them use songs as a listening exercise with text gaps they fill in. As they move into upper-elementary, and/or as their English ability improves, get children to write their own verses. As they start to express specifics about what kind of music they like, go with it—get to know your students. At the very least, from time to time, be sure to play music in the background to provide examples of pronunciation, intonation and the rhythm of English.

Stories

For storytelling, repetitious structures are great for the early years. Try choral reading, with big books, where you read and the children join in at various points. Berman shows that children at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten stages are moving from private to social speak. As with songs, shared reading provides a social context, where children can participate as a group. Using actions can help to convey meaning, as well as make it fun. Also, you're sowing seeds for future language development. The children are learning chunks of language which they may not study grammatically for years. And intonation and pronunciation are covered without drilling.

To check comprehension, start by asking simple yes/no questions about content and the sequence of events. With young learners, make asking questions active; if the answer is "Yes," the children run to one wall, if "No," they run to the opposite wall. If you have limited space, ask them to simply jump to the left or the right, for *yes* and *no*. As their English ability develops, ask simple *Wh-* questions. And help to develop their intellectual skills, with predictive questions like "What comes next?"

As they move into mid-elementary children may want to move from shared big books to having their own small books. Discuss beginning, middle and end formats, plots and characters, or design a comic strip, where the children fill in speech bubbles. As they move into upper-elementary, a good task is to encourage them to construct their own storyboard, make up alternative endings or create a series of

choices throughout the story, so that a story can have multiple adventures/endings. "Storybooks and storytelling...create an acquisition rich environment and ideal learning conditions which provide comprehensible input or language a little beyond the child's current level of competence."

(Krashen in Ellis and Brewster, 2002)

Reading and Writing

For early elementary students, decoding activities and visual support can help in developing these skills. To focus on letters and spelling out a word, children decipher a "message" using a code, for example A = 1, or K = blue. For whole words, try text-gap sentences. Use an icon as the substitute in the text-gap sentence and provide a decoding box, where the word is supported by a picture icon.

By mid-elementary children need more challenging tasks intellectually. Try activities that involve playing with letters to form new words, or substitutions in a sentence. For example, to practice substituting nouns and adjectives, group the words for substitution in different colors within a decoding box. By upper-elementary, children are thinking more abstractly (Berman in Ellis and Brewster, 2002) and may not need this support. They can incorporate previously learnt language to express their thoughts, organize information and even make up codes themselves.

A final word! Grade your language and make your gestures expressive. If the children don't understand what is being asked of them, they are likely to lose focus. Set up teams from the beginning of each class. Team organization helps with both student motivation and the teacher's classroom management. Points can be awarded or deducted for behavior as well as for winning games.

While we need to be aware of the child's reality, the adult has a role of influence in the child's world (Vygotsky in Paul, 2003). Be aware of children's intellectual, social and physical stages of development and how these factors shape their language development. Remember your own childhood. Stepping back to watch how our children interact and participate in different activities can help us understand what phase of development they are in, how we can help them learn, and which activities will be most successful for each and every one of our children.

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For more information on activities or ideas presented in this article, please contact Katherine directly through Pearson Education Japan, Longman.

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