

Smiley English:

An EFL Children's Group, Parents Included

by Dawn Shimura

About one year ago, because of my own children's needs, I made the difficult decision to close my private after-school English classes. By doing so, I was leaving the kids in this rural community with a start in English but nowhere else to go to continue their studies. This bothered me, not because I felt that English was a necessity, but because the children enjoyed learning English, had invested time and money in it, and were family friends beyond the classroom walls. With these factors in mind, I volunteered to help the parents start an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) club for kids.

The Making of Smiley

About 8 families met together at our first meeting. A chairperson, treasurer, secretary, and head instructor were elected. Although I addressed my lack of knowledge and skill in teaching large groups of young children, my native English ability won me the position of head instructor. We chose the name "Smiley English" for our group, agreed to hold the class on Thursdays from 3:30-4:30 at a neighborhood community center (free of charge), and agreed to hold a parents' meeting one morning a month to evaluate previous classes and plan future ones. The monthly fee decided upon was five hundred yen, which would be used for classroom supplies. We chose to use the *Welcome to Learning World Yellow Book* (Nakamoto, 1996) because of its bilingual text, simplicity and variety of music and age-appropriate topics. We obtained a workbook and a student book for each student. We also discussed purchasing insurance for the group, but decided against it. The general goals for the group were to focus on the 4-5-year-old age group, to include 3-7-year-olds, and to make the class fun. The planning, preparation, and teaching were to be a joint effort by the parents, one that I would share in equally. In the beginning this was hardly achieved, but it evolved into something that I believe is worth sharing with other EFL teachers of young learners.

My own children were friends with the children in Smiley English and could attend the classes together, so this worked well for them and for me, but starting up this group was not easy. I did all of the planning and a majority of the preparation, and as a result, the other mothers found it difficult to assist me. The classes were quite chaotic. While watching me teach the classes, my daughter sometimes had a face filled with sympathy, to the point of looking as if she wanted to cry. One day, about two to three months into the program, I realized we had to make changes when, in the commotion of teaching seventeen young children, I felt I had two options: give up or scream. To the surprise of all the mothers and the children, I chose the latter. "Dawn-san?" one mother responded, and one child said, "Kowai!"

(scary). It was clear to me, and perhaps to everyone else, that we could not continue like this.

Restructuring to Involve Parents

At the next parents' meeting, I suggested that the mothers do the planning and preparation, and I teach. We weren't quite sure what would come of it, but we decided to try it and came up with a rotation plan. Three mothers would plan one month's worth of classes, the next three would plan the following month's classes, and so on. I will refer to these mothers as "class planners". A journal of each class had been kept from the beginning; these journal entries included both class content and the writer's opinion of that class. The class planners reviewed these journals, and planned and prepared the next month's classes. The class planners and I met together at 3:00, thirty minutes before each class, to coordinate our efforts. The mothers did a wonderful job planning and preparing the classes. This was a new start for me and for the students. I found teaching much more enjoyable, received effective help from the mothers, and felt less pressure to always have a "good class" since it was a team effort. My own children even began to look forward to going to Smiley English!

One advantage to parental class planning is that the parents know their children's interests well and can easily incorporate these into the classes. Activities they coordinated included a barbecue game (using upside down boxes as grills, toy food, and spatulas) (Masuo, 2001, photocopyable resources 6, 8-9), a soup game (using the same boxes right side up, toy food, and ladles), and a shopping game (using toy food, doll clothes, and toy cars of various colors). These activities worked great! The vocabulary was introduced near the start of the class, and the mothers practiced phrases like, "What do you want?" and "How can I help you?" with the children. We then entered a play world of make-believe in English. The older kids naturally took over the parents' role about 10 minutes into the play. Following one of these classes, one mother went shopping with her kids and reported her daughters requesting, "Green pepper, please". She was proud to hear her children initiating English conversation. Kathleen Berger, a developmental psychologist and associate professor writes, "Adults can also provide experiences that act as a scaffold on which to build language skills. Such activities might include looking at picture books together...and pretending together." (1988:213) In addition to pretending together, the class planners also incorporate vocabulary practice, games, music, and workbook activities into many of the classes for variety, all considering the children's interests.

Another great advantage to this parentally-operated class-

room was that the children could observe their own parents actually using English (a rare opportunity in typical Japanese society). Berger states, "While the impulse to engage in master play comes naturally to preschool children, their parents' example and encouragement influence which skills children will master." (1988:190) A parent's display of interest in English and use of English affects young children's learning positively.

Each class varies, because the skills and interests of the class planners vary, but a few things remain the same. As the children arrive for class, they receive a sticker to put on their Smiley English card, designed by one talented mother who was a former kindergarten teacher. The children also receive one of four colored bandanas that most children tie on their heads. The children are then "color-coded" by the bandana color to help break them into smaller groups quickly during class. (The bandanas are brought home and washed periodically). At 3:30 a short video segment is shown to gather the kids together and get them ready to listen (no screaming necessary!). I teach the class in English, according to the class planners' plan, and they are able to assist as necessary. In this way, the planners are more active in facilitating the class and naturally are using more English with the children, especially when we break into smaller groups. The "Clean Up" song (Parker, 1993) is played when it's time to put things away and move on to the next activity (again, no screaming necessary). At the end, I use self-made magnetic phonics cards, modified from a "Curious George" book, to teach a brief phonics lesson and end with a book or three depending on time. Storytime is moved off to a corner of the room, so the mothers can begin putting away classroom supplies, the children can settle down a bit, and I can relax while reading and look forward to the next week's Smiley English club meeting.

Conclusion

There seems to be increased interest in young children's English education in Japan without enough English teachers in some regions, like our Soma Village, to meet the demand. As with any classroom, teaching requires preparation; and as with any child, parents greatly influence them. The Smiley English parentally-operated classroom was a way we could efficiently utilize an EFL teacher's time and involve parents in their children's learning. The group requires an adaptable EFL teacher for the time it takes to discuss the day's class plan prepared by the parents and teach the lesson, and with time to attend regular parental meetings. Because the EFL teacher only needs to facilitate the class using the parents' pre-planned activities, no extra time is involved for planning or cleaning up. Secondly, it requires energetic and dedicated parents who have time for their children after school and are interested in their English education. Parents have to be adaptable to change as the group evolves. Thirdly, it also requires that the parents be able to communicate with the EFL teacher in English or be understood by the EFL teacher in Japanese. In this way we succeeded in our first year of running without too much being expected of any one parent.



Parents and children enjoying English together at Smiley English.

In conclusion, I must give credit where credit is due. I failed when I struggled to coordinate and teach the class on my own; it was the parents, mostly the mothers with sideline support from the fathers, who brought Smiley to life. The parents come with a great variety of skills and resources, from being great pumpkin growers (for our Halloween party) and good artists, to having excellent organizational skills and computer ability. They also know their children and their children's friends well, both their likes and dislikes. This group evolved into an EFL classroom that is cost-effective for the parents, time-effective for the EFL teacher, and learning-effective for these young children. A few older children have dropped out, but new members are joining. One grandmother is bringing her granddaughter now, and in the future we may do joint activities with the older adult group she leads. I don't know where this group is heading, but the parents will lead the way. It's been a pleasure working with them and their children, and I look forward to this next year with Smiley English.

Resources

- Berger, Kathleen S. 2nd ed. (1988) *The Developing Person Through the Life Span*. New York: Worth Publishers
- Masuo, Mieko (2001) *Eigo no Resson Puran*. Japan: Pearson Education
- Nakamoto, Mikiko (1996) *Welcome to Learning World*. Tokyo: Apricot Publishing Co.
- Parker, Philip (1993) *Barney's Favorites: Volume 1* (CD recording) Los Angeles: Capitol
- Rey, H.A. (1998) *Curious George Learns the Alphabet*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

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