

Winging it!—tips for teaching the very young

I've been asked by friends, other teachers and even parents what I use as a curriculum for my very young classes. I never know quite how to answer, and I usually say that I use the same curriculum I use at home with my 2-year-old daughter. Some people think I'm joking, others think that I am trying to be evasive and protect my "secret" curriculum, but in a nutshell, that's what I do.

Friends have asked on occasion if I would let them sit in on a lesson or two so they could understand what "the same thing I do at home" means in classroom application. And after the class, they say to me, "So basically, you just wing it."

The fact that they thought I was just "winging" my classes was a big shock, but after having thought about it, I can see how one WATCHING the lesson could easily think that. From the teaching side, however, I can assure you that truly "winging it" would probably be disastrous in classes with very young learners. So this brings us back to the original question: If I'm not "winging it," what IS the curriculum I use with small children, and would I recommend it to others?

BOOKS

With children under 4, I tend not to use textbooks at all unless the students have been in my school for over a year. I think that storybooks are great, and I have a large collection of my own original stories, Eric Carle books, Dr. Seuss books, and so on. I teach four 50-minute lessons per



month to each class, and I try to have story time in at least 2 of them.

Repetition of the same book is OK with small children, and in my classes they are pretty good about helping me tell the story the second time around.

SONGS and FINGERPLAY

My classes for very young children include a lot of songs. We start every class with my school's "Hello song" (inspired by "Hello, how are you?" by Richard Graham at Genki English) and sing one or two additional songs during the lesson. The kids love songs which include fingerplay, and I think the use of hands and gestures helps to make the meaning of what they are singing more understandable. The songs we use are all pretty much what you would sing at home if you had a young child. The youngest classes started out with "Patty cake" and "This little pig" and now they sing songs like "Itsy bitsy spider" and "The wheels on the bus."

I try to introduce one new song each month, but how many times we sing it after that is primarily up to the children.

TOYS ! TOYS ! TOYS !

Having seen my daughter's language use and acquisition at home while she played with toys and watched "Blues Clues," I really can't stress enough how useful toys are. I know a lot of schools use flash cards and textbooks, but I try to avoid them as much as possible when dealing with children under 4. Instead of using a set of animal cards, I have a big tub filled with as many different animals as I could find. I have similar tubs with fruits, vehicles, big Lego blocks, a different set of connectible cubes for colors and counting, kitchen sets with food that can be cut, and of course, about 4 or 5 Mr. Potato Head dolls with all the parts thrown into a big tub.

So instead of using cards, and making my students repeat English words *ad nauseum*, I just let them play with the toys. The catch is that



they have to ask for what they want and play in English. If students begin to converse in Japanese, I stop and smile, and say, "Oops! You spoke Japanese. Time to clean up." And we switch activities. If the students like the song they are singing or the game they are playing, they will try VERY hard not to use any Japanese. If they start using it, it's a good indicator that it's time to switch the game before the students really start to lose interest.

The language that I've seen students develop in a short time by just allowing them to PLAY is incredible. They quickly learn words that are essential for playing with the other children and me. Words and phrases like "What's this?", "Please" and "Thank you" are acquired almost instantly. These are followed by other general patterns like "This one" and after that vocabulary that arises from the toys.

CRAYONS and PAPER

Small children are in a very special stage at the point when they have developed basic sensorimotor skills and are entering the preoperational stage. This is when children begin to realize that objects still exist, even when not in sight. They are able to use symbols to represent items. This is a wonderful stage of a child's development and it should be exploited in the language classroom as much as possible (which as far as actual drawing or the construction of something they can take home goes, translates to about once a month at my school).

I have a number of sets of pattern blocks with which the children occasionally make animals, etc. Watching them arrange the blocks and then explain to everybody else what it is that they have made is really incredible. And when they color, it's usually impossible to tell the difference between a carrot, their mother, or a lion, but the fact that they know it's a lion and they say "lion" is an important step. They are also not allowed to take materials for themselves from the middle of the table, so they end up asking me or other students for crayons, paper, etc. in English (and if they don't know the color, they ask "What's this?" and then ask for the crayon). This is all done in a very interactive manner. Not taught, but acquired. I make certain that I am also asking for the crayons I want, and sometimes pretending to have trouble with the color so the students will help me.

Recently the students have begun praising each other's work in class: saying things like "That's great" or "Wow! A lion."

Total Physical Response (TPR)

There is a lot of room for debate as to the usefulness of TPR in an EFL environment. While I would not suggest that teachers should use it every week, I think that exposure to action words and kinetic motion is far superior to using flash cards. In my classroom we sing "Head Shoulders Knees and Toes" and follow it up with some TPR games like "Please" ("Simon Says" with additional useful target English). If it stopped there, the students would remember for a few days and likely forget by the next lesson because they had not had a chance to use the language and internalize what they learned.

The main way around this that I have found is to encourage my students to give me (or other students) commands. There are times in class when I pretend to fall asleep and wait for one of the children to yell "Wake up!" at which point I open my eyes as wide as I possibly can. On a good day another child will smile and tell me to

sleep. This will go back and forth a few times and then somebody will tell me to jump, etc.

We also have a group TPR game in which each child gives the next child a command, who (after performing the action) gives the next child a command. That game worked very well until the children mastered "No!"

Putting it all together

So, having at my disposal story-books, songs, toys, art, TPR etc., how do I develop a curriculum I can use with young learners? Flexibility is the answer.

By flexibility I don't mean that it's OK to "wing it" I actually mean that you should have a plan which is thought out well enough to conform to the children's moods and desires in any given lesson. I go into each class with one of these basic lesson plans in mind (see Figure 1 below).

Within this basic schedule, I am very flexible as to which songs we use and what toys the children play with. I never say "OK, let's play with fruits!" but rather "Let's play with some toys!... What do you want to play with?" I leave the decision up to the class. While I do go in to each class knowing which toys I want them to use, I am willing to change that if all the children want to do a different activity. The main goal is not to teach them the names of the various fruits as much as it is to teach them to interact in English, which I can do regardless of what toys they are playing with. I am also pretty good at stacking

the toys throughout the room so that the ones I am planning on using are in plain sight while the ones I wasn't planning on using are not. That in and of itself is almost enough to guarantee that the students will choose for themselves what I want to do. I also target my question towards children who always want to play with the toys I want to use.

SOME HINTS

While I hardly consider myself a leading expert on teaching small children, I do feel that this approach has helped me to develop classes with kids who genuinely want to come and play, and speak English. They don't think of it as study, and neither do I. To keep the play atmosphere manageable, however, I would like to make a few suggestions:

1. Keep the numbers small—I allow a MAXIMUM of 6 per class (4 if they are 1- and 2-year-olds)
 2. It is good to let the mothers watch and even participate to some extent, but don't let the child sit "with" their mother the entire time.
 3. Avoid being "disciplinary." Try to control students with a smile. If a student is being particularly bad and the mother is in the classroom, I ask her to help. You don't want to be seen as the one who stops all the fun or is always angry.
- The best advice I can give anybody who wants to teach small children is to think about the way you would play with your own child, and intensify it. If that makes your fellow teachers, friends, and the parents suspect that you are "winging it"—so be it.

Figure 1. Basic Lesson Plans

TIME	1ST WEEK	2ND WEEK	3RD WEEK	4TH WEEK
2 mins	Hello Song	Hello Song	Hello Song	Hello Song
3 mins	Basic greetings	Basic greetings	Basic greetings	Basic greetings
5-10 mins	New song	song	TPR	song
5-10 mins	TPR	TOY 1	TOY 1	TOY 1
5-10 mins	TOY 1	ART	Song	Physical activity
5-10 mins	Song	Song	TOY 2	Song
5-10 mins	TOY 2	TOY 2	Song	TOY 2
2 mins	Goodbye Song	Goodbye Song	Goodbye Song	Goodbye Song