

Kindy hell?

How not to teach a kindy class

By Sean Minns

I regard myself as being a pretty experienced teacher, having taught just about every kind of class imaginable in over 6 years in Japan. I thought that teaching here held little challenge for me. How wrong could I be, for little did I know that I was about to teach my most challenging class yet.

I started teaching three four-year-olds in April 2003. I had taught many kindy classes before, but had always had native Japanese speakers around to help out. This time I was alone, and so on unfamiliar territory. But how different could it be?

It was very, very different! The first four or five months in and my classes were unpredictable, undisciplined and more often than not failed to get across any of the language we were meant to be aiming for. The periods of concentration and learning were too few and far between. I seemed to be run ragged by just three small children. This wasn't for want of trying to make the class work, but I somehow seemed to make all the mistakes I knew I should avoid.

I started to think seriously about quitting the class, as I thought I would never make progress. The turning point came, when one lesson two of the children spent most of

the class locking themselves in the toilet. I began to look at what was at the root of such disruptive behavior. Where had I been going wrong? I identified three "mistakes".

My first mistake was using Japanese in class. From the very outset I should have played dumb, or at least acknowledged the children in English only. By using Japanese, the real "need" for the children to try and use English was removed. Given the choice between trying to use English or using Japanese, which they knew I understood, they always plumped for the easy option of Japanese.

My second mistake was all too often to give in to the children's desires or whims. If they wanted to climb on me, or wear my glasses, or go outside, I too often let them get their way. Even my sternest looks were usually met with indifference. I realised that when a child was doing something I didn't want him or her to do, I needed to find a balance between my "will" and the child's will.

My third and final mistake was that the activities I had planned for the children were just not active or interesting enough for them, and I relied too much on things I knew had worked in other classes, without thinking about what



would engage these three children in particular.

Now I knew what my three mistakes were, how could I turn the class around? After talking to colleagues it became clear to me that incidents like the toilet debacle were simply a kind of attention-seeking. I decided that rather than draw attention to it, I would ignore it. By “ignore it” I mean I decided not to pander to the children’s attempts to distract me from the task at hand. If I continued with an activity in the face of such attention-seeking, I discovered that the child would usually give up and join in the activity. I also started to reward good behavior or work with stickers, making sure the children understood what the stickers were for. Lastly I concentrated on making the activities in the class more attractive than the mischief-making. I also made sure we kept to some sort of routine, with “Hello” and “Goodbye” songs to start and finish the class, and the last 15-20 minutes given over to a craft-related activity.

I began to introduce a greater variety of simple games, which could be adapted to incorporate a number of different language targets: “Bowling”, “Egg and spoon race”*, “Hammer slam” (*Karuta* with a foam hammer), “What’s in the bag?”, “Treasure hunt”, “Musical slam”*, “Musical statues” (*Daruma san ga korunda*), “Simon says”, “Touch”*, “What’s the time Mr. Wolf?”, “Bingo”, “Magnetic fishing”, “Blindfold target”*, “Pictionary”, “Dominoes”, “Concentration” (*Shinkei suijaku*), “Hopscotch” (*Ken ken pa*), “Snap”*, “*Babanuki*”*, the “Target game”*, the “Fish game”* and so on (*these games are described on page 13). The greater variety of simple games I could call upon, the more flexible I could be in the class and usually the more interested the children would become.

I try to make all the games as non-competitive as possible, having all of the children in one team competing against me (of course I am always the loser), or else not dwelling on who has won or lost.

If I read a book with the children, I make it as interactive as possible, often combining it with a song or actions and

even simple musical instruments. Though their sense of rhythm still leaves a lot to be desired, it always enhances their enjoyment of an activity. Even a simple phrase like “What is it?”, works so much better when I spell out the rhythm using my fingers. The children remember the question far more effectively with the help of rhythm and gesture than by simply repeating the words.

At first I tried to coerce the children into playing the games I wanted them to play in order to keep to my lesson plan. However, after the toilet incident I changed tack. Now, if they don’t want to take part, I don’t force them. I let them sit it out, wait and see if they become attracted to the game or simply change the activity to suit their mood.

I have also reduced the amount of Japanese I use, often pretending to have a Japanese/English button on my neck so I can switch the Japanese off, and at the same time I use gesture more and more in order to get across simple instructions such as “sit”, “stand”, “cut”, and “glue”, while repeating them in English.

Before I tried too hard to “teach”, but I have changed my expectations as regards the children using the English I want them to learn. I hope they will try and use it without the constant prompting I used at first. Prompting is tiresome for the child and the teacher. Instead, by allowing the children to discover and acquire the words through games, activities and practical situations, the language becomes part of their vocabulary rather than something they are forced to learn or say without really knowing why. Now they use numbers and colors in English, for example, when they count the number of cards they have won after a game or ask me for a certain colored pencil during the craft part of the lesson.

If the children bring in English from outside the classroom I make a point of using it myself and trying to encourage the other children to try and use those words where appropriate. One of the children always used “Thank you so much”. At first the other two children thought it was silly, but now they too use it without thinking, due to my repeated use and genteel encouragement.

Is my class perfect now? Far from it. However, we are all working towards a Kindy heaven and the Kindy hell that I went through is now becoming nothing more than a distant memory.

Sean has been an English teacher in Japan for the last 6 years, dividing his time between Hiroshima and Fuji. Before coming to Japan he trained as an elementary school teacher and received his P.G.C.E. from Sheffield Hallam University in 1995. Deciding that the educational climate was not suitable for teaching in the U.K. he set off to see the world and took a job in Saudi Arabia teaching elementary school students. After surviving that assault on the senses he washed up on the shores of Japan. When he’s not teaching he can be found hanging out with friends, watching movies or bird watching around the world.



Kindy Games

The children should be encouraged to ask, as well as answer the question “What is it?”. Questions are just as important as answers and having the students ask the questions means that more children have a chance to participate at any one time. It also frees up the teacher to monitor the games. Any refinements that the children make to games should be incorporated to help motivate them to participate.

“Egg and spoon race”

This game can be played with any vocabulary cards. The children are lined up with (plastic!) eggs and spoons, while the vocabulary cards are laid out in a line some 2 or 3 meters in front of the children. The children ask “What is it?”, I reply with the vocabulary item, e.g. “It’s a dog”. Then the children pick up an egg and carry it as quickly as possible to the target vocabulary card.

“Musical Slam”

Place some vocabulary cards in the centre of the room. Play or sing a song the children like and have them dance around the cards. When the music stops, the children rush to touch the vocabulary item you call out.

“Touch”

Place some vocabulary cards in the center of the room. One child is “it” and stands at one end of the room. The other children stand at the other end of the room, which is a “safe” area that the “it” child cannot enter. The other children ask, “What is it?”. The “it” child answers with the vocabulary item of his or her choice. The other children then race to the cards and try and pick up or touch the vocabulary card and get back to their “safe area” before the “it” child touches them. If the “it” child catches one of the other children, he or she becomes “it”.

“Blindfold Target”

I draw the target vocabulary on the board. Then one of the children is blindfolded, and spun around once. Next the blindfolded student asks “What is it?”, and the teacher says the target vocabulary word. Finally the other students try to direct the blindfolded student to the target, using simple terms, like “up”, “down”, “left”, “right”, “stop” and “go”. This works best with older students, but can be used with kindies who have been pre-taught the terms.

“Snap”

This is a popular English card game. The children are each given a matching set of vocabulary cards. The children place their cards face down on the floor/table. They are then told (using gesture) to shuffle or mix them. On the count of three each child turns over his or her top card

and places it down, saying what the card is. When all the cards put down match, the children slam their hands down and say “Snap”. The first person to say “Snap” wins the round. The word doesn’t have to be “snap”, any word will do!

“Babanuki”

Mix several sets of vocabulary cards and include one odd card from another set. The odd card is called “Baba” (or whatever you wish to call it!). The cards are dealt out so that each child has the same number of cards. The children take turns to take (unseen) cards from each other. The aim is to collect one complete set of cards. The first child to collect a set, puts all the cards down and shouts “finished”. The winner must then go through all the cards in their set. Continue to play until all the sets are put down and one child is left with “Baba”.

“Target Game”

I usually draw the target vocabulary on the board, e.g. various shapes, items of clothing, food etc. The children ask, “What is it?”, and the teacher replies with one of the target vocabulary words. Then the children use sticky balls or magnetic darts to try and hit the target vocabulary picture first. Alternatively, the children can use soft balls or toys to try to hit cards that are standing up.

“Fish Game”

The children first draw and cut out a paper fish from scrap paper. Any animal or object can be drawn and cut out, e.g. a snowman for Xmas. The teacher asks, “What is it?” while showing the students a vocabulary card. Then the students give the answer. Finally the teacher says “ready, steady, go”, and the students blow air under their “fish” using old newspapers to create wind. The first to cross the finish line is the winner.

