

English Fun-day

by Jane Takizawa

Eight years ago, to commemorate the 15th year of our English school, Seikosha, I decided to have what I call an English Fun-day. I got the idea for the name from one of the local high schools that offered an English course, and had an “English Day” once a year. In effect, our English Fun-day is a combination of class presentations, Parents’ Day, and end-of-the-school-year party.



The original purpose for having such a program was mainly to give parents a chance to observe their children. Parents occasionally asked me how their children were doing, but because my classrooms were not big enough for the kind of Parents’ Day that elementary and junior high schools have, I could not invite them to come and see for themselves. Now I use the nearby *kaikan*, community meeting hall, and it is less than 2000 yen for four hours including heating. It has a stage, a microphone, and plenty of tables and cushions. Because it is near my school and located on a main road, even people who don’t live in the area can find it easily.

The program is held at the same time every year—the second Sunday in March from two to four o’clock in the afternoon. There are several reasons why I chose to have the program at the end of the school year: the children have been studying English for at least a year; it is good PR for the upcoming school year; I can announce any changes in the curriculum or materials; I can give out awards for various achievements—the completion of a textbook, the reading of a certain number of books, etc.; and in

general it seems to wrap up the school year on a very upbeat note.

Another reason for starting the program was more personal. Although I adapt textbooks to my own teaching style, and can use my ideas and creativity as I would like, I felt the need for a different kind of challenge, a different outlet for my ideas, something to keep me on my toes, something to show off my students’ abilities. I like this English Fun-day because it has a clear beginning and ending, and there is a tremendous sense of satisfaction among students and teachers alike.

Around the end of December, during winter vacation, I start to plan the program. There are two parts to the presentations, a group activity and individual class presentations. The biggest hurdle is the group activity. I have 7 or 8 classes meeting at different times during the week, so I have to think of something they can practice separately, yet when they come together on the presentation day, they can do as a group. For example, one year all the children made a flag of a country of their choice and, along with a self-introduction, they introduced their country. But basically I have two choices: a song with several verses; or a chant. In the past we have done songs such as “The Wheels On the Bus,” “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” “It’s a Small World,” (Sherman and Sherman, 1963) and chants such as “Chicka Chicka Boom Boom” (adapted from the book of the same name by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault, 2000) and “Going on a Lion Hunt” (In the book *Wee Sing – Games, Games, Games* by Pamela Conn Beall and Susan Hagen Nipp with Nancy Spence Klein, 1998). The children meet for the first time just an hour before the actual program, yet it is amazing how well they work together.

The second part is the individual

class presentations. The very first program I put on was simply an extension of the classroom. That is, I taught a series of mini-classes in front of the parents. We did everything we usually did in the classes: greetings, attendance, teacher-student practice, student-student practice, songs, games, TPR—just like regular class, only much more concentrated, and of course, rehearsed. I realized that it wasn’t much fun for the children. So from the second year, I started thinking of other activities, often using what they had been practicing in class.

The smaller number of children allows me more freedom to choose an activity for a class presentation. For the younger children (kindergarten and lower elementary), a song or chant has proven to be the most fun and the most easily taught. Repetition is the key. The older children are more reluctant to sing in a small group, so they prefer a short skit or some kind of recitation, like a poem or a chant. They also enjoy the acting involved in doing a skit.

Using ideas from a variety of sources, I have usually made the decision as to what the children will present. For the younger children, books like the *Wee Sing* series (Conn Beall and Nipp, 2002) have been helpful. I have also taken a picture book or a low-level reading book and created a chant or short skit from it. To give you some examples, last year my third- and fourth-grade class acted out the story titled “Pierre, the Boy Who Didn’t Care,” (In *Pierre: A Cautionary Tale in Five Chapters and a Prologue* by Maurice Sendak, 1999). This year my 6-year-olds are doing *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* (Christelow, 1998). I also have three books of short plays by Scholastic (Crawford and Sanders, 2001; Pugliano-Martin, 1998; and McCory Martin, 2002). There may be

more available. The length, level of English, and content are very appropriate for kindergarten and elementary school children. I have also gotten ideas from *Jazz Chants for Children* (Graham, 1979). Last year, one of my teachers wrote a skit from a section of the first J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter book for his sixth-graders.

This year, however, I thought it would be good to have the older children help me choose what they would present, so I asked for their suggestions after introducing them to some ideas from the resources I mentioned previously. To my surprise, one class of fourth- and fifth-graders unanimously voted to perform a skit based on the Disney movie "Finding Nemo" using paper puppets. It was a challenge to write a simple script for the children, but the effort was worth it, and they have been practicing with an eagerness any teacher would envy.

When classes resume after winter vacation in the middle of January, there are usually nine more classes remaining in the school year. I like to have one week after the Fun-day to pat everyone on the back for a job well done, which leaves only eight weeks to practice. For the first four weeks, we do the usual study with textbooks for the first half hour, and practice both the group activity and the class presentation for the remaining thirty minutes. During the last four weeks, however, I usually start to



panic, so for the elementary school children, we use the entire class period for preparing for the Fun-day. This includes not only practicing for the group and individual class presentations, but also getting any necessary props ready.

Because the main purpose of the program is for the parents to see how well their children can use English, I don't make a big fuss about the stage, props or costumes. However, a certain amount of scenery and representative items (such as a necktie for Dad, a handbag or apron for Mom) are necessary. I usually have two to four large pictures on the back wall of the stage, related to at least some of the

stories included in the program. They double as the room decorations as well.

To help create the characters in the various songs and skits, I have the children color pictures that have been copied. These are then pasted onto cardboard, and plastic string is threaded through two holes at the top so that the picture can be hung around the children's necks. These pictures slip on and off quickly and effortlessly, even for little children, so they are ideal for practicing and for the actual performance.

Blankets make good beds; cardboard boxes can be used as chairs and/or tables. Sheets are good turbans, ghosts, and stomachs (as in the case of Pierre, who hid under a sheet to portray being eaten by a lion). Just remember how you used to improvise when you were a child, and you'll be able to convey a decent scene.

Fun-day is divided into two main parts: the presentations in the first half and the fun time in the second half. Each part is further divided into two sections. The presentations begin with the group activity, which lasts for 5-10 minutes. This is followed by the individual class presentations. I arrange the program so that songs and skits are performed alternately, and so that the kindergarten children will not have to sit inactive for a long time.



Harry Potter.

These presentations vary from five minutes for the younger classes to fifteen minutes for the oldest class. The first half usually lasts about an hour.

On the day of the program, my Japanese assistant, some of my family members, and I set up the room. I reserve the front one-third of the room for the students, where they will sit while they watch each other's classes perform. Behind that area, we set up low tables and cushions for the parents and siblings. We also have folding chairs for people who have difficulty sitting on the floor. The refreshment tables are set up on one side of the room.

I have the children arrive an hour before the program starts for the one and only joint rehearsal. This is the first time for the children to actually practice on the stage (although I attempt to create the atmosphere of a stage in the classroom). Of course, this isn't enough time to fine-tune the children's performances, but performing perfectly is not my objective. I think just the experience of getting up in front of a lot of people and doing something in English is valuable.

Following the performances, the second half begins with some refreshments. Tables are already set up with the goodies, and it is self-service. Individually packaged snacks and drinks have been the easiest to prepare and easiest for the children to handle. One drink and one bag of snacks plus some chocolate candy for each person comes to 10,000 to 15,000 yen for 100 people when I buy the items at a 100-yen shop. I never charge for this event because I feel it is a kind of promotion for my school. Therefore, I bear the full cost of the

refreshments and the use of the room.

I use the refreshment time to greet all the parents, ask about the upcoming school year, and answer any questions they have about their child's progress. Parents and children can also use this time to have a look at the display I have set up of reading progress charts, classroom materials and work that the children have done in class.

After about twenty minutes, I gather the children at the front of the room to play some games in English. Sometimes I choose the groups ahead

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of time, and other times the first game I play is one to divide the children into groups, such as "Fruit Basket." After that game I tell the different fruits to sit together. One of the children's favorite games is "Treasure Hunt." As I call out items in English, group members get them from their parents, and a representative from each group brings them to a table at the front of the room. Everyone gets involved, and the room is in an uproar. "Treasures" include items such as keys, pocket tissue, pens, pencils, a 10-yen (or other) coin, a 1000-yen (or other) bill, rings, earrings, belts, socks, watches, scarves, notebooks, baby sister (or brother), glasses, gloves, etc. Other games we play are relay races, guessing words from pictures drawn on the board, and folk

dances. What you can do depends on the size of your room, number of people, age of the children, and amount of time you have remaining.

At about ten minutes to four, I have a small "awards ceremony." Finally, a few students say some closing remarks, and people start to go home. Although I never ask, a lot of people hang around to help put the tables and cushions away, and to take down the decorations, so cleanup is never burdensome.

I'll be honest. It does take a lot of time and effort, but the rewards for both students and teachers are great, and worth every minute spent and every ounce of energy expended. If you would like any further information, please contact me at j-takizawa@s-l.s.jp

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