

My class

by Shelley Spencer

Class size: 8 children
Ages: 7 - 11 years
Frequency: one hour per week

I'd like to share some of my thoughts about my teaching work with young children. I don't pose as an 'expert,' but in my classes I've managed to maintain the freedom to experiment and to follow my own thoughts and intuitions about teaching.

The focus of my class is vocabulary building and conversation. I figured as the kids would soon be learning to read and write in school, I could offer them something different by encouraging communication. To start to achieve that aim I abandoned the textbook they had been rigidly following, because it wasn't helping them to speak, and set about experimenting with other ideas.

At first, the Director and parents wanted to see a curriculum for the year, but I wanted to let the class evolve with experimentation and flexibility as the key. I was surprised and pleased by how quickly they saw the benefits of this approach.

During the lesson, the Director and I listen to the kids' banter. The Director hovers in the background, particularly to listen to what the kids are saying in Japanese. This gives us

ideas for the next lesson, and also allows us to pick up on common Japanese expressions the kids are using, which we then teach them the English for. I have to admit that the Director and I recently tired of constantly having to create lesson material, and went in search of a textbook. However, most emphasize phonics and reading which we had decided not to delve into. We eventually found a series we particularly liked, *Let's Go!* (Frazier and Nakata: Oxford University Press). We decided to continue our approach of using a mix of resources and to stick with our general plan of focusing on vocabulary building, conversation and communication.

Initially, I had some shy kids and some noisy kids. Within a few weeks, they all became noisy kids! At first, I pondered 'to discipline or not to discipline?' I decided I didn't want the stress of constantly disciplining and creating a 'me versus them' battleground, and decided to let the class atmosphere build up as we bonded. This has meant I've become not an authority figure, but a teacher-friend.

As a result, the class is still noisy at times, but the noise is related to learning. They are noisy in English and excited about learning English.

Most importantly, the kids are free to be themselves and to let their personalities come through. The lessons are like 'sitting around the kitchen table having a good time.' I've decided I prefer noisy kids with spirit, to shy kids with no sense of adventure! Sometimes I appoint a leader, and they do a good job of keeping the others under control.

The kids are learning to speak, but I realize that they can also forget easily. To help prevent this, I try to create some realistic moments where they 'need' to use the English (e.g. in a paper-cutting activity, the kids need to say 'Pass the scissors please').

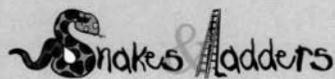
Overall, the kids are an active bunch, who need regular changes of activity. My basic philosophy is to keep them so busy that they don't have time to dream up mischief! Of course, I will continue to experiment. Just when I think I've found the perfect lesson format, the kids become restless, and I know I have to change something again.

For me, it's important to teach according to my strengths and preferences and my students' needs, and not according to any 'expert opinion.' I have to have the courage to listen to my inner voice guiding me on what's right for me and my pupils. •

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ETJ

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