

English for Very Young Learners:

Playing With Dollhouses

I have been teaching English to young learners for almost seven years now. In that time, I have tried many new games, materials and techniques in the quest to find my “teaching style”. In teaching children under the age of four or five, I have found that “coached” playtime, where the children know that speaking Japanese means it’s time to clean-up, has been incredibly effective. One of the most versatile toys that I have introduced into playtime at my English school this past year has been the dollhouse.

Initial Experience

I was hesitant to purchase a dollhouse at first. I had bought other toys or games before, only to have them fall short in an EFL environment. I decided I needed a trial run before spending the \$500 or more for the durable, but basic, set I had seen in a catalogue. Luckily a kindergarten teacher I knew was willing to let me use his school’s dollhouse for a month or two. I was so excited the first day I was able to use the dollhouse, and when my students

came in the room their eyes lit up (they can spot a new toy within a millionth of a second) showing that they were excited to try this new toy as well. The excitement on my part faded quickly, however, as half of my students sat clutching their dolls in a semi-catatonic state, watching the other half move their dolls silently from room to room.

It was a nightmare. I wanted to put it away then and there, but I have a deal with these kids, and (since they were for the most part silent...) none of them were speaking Japanese. They would answer my doll’s questions when prompted, but they weren’t engaging each other. I was so happy I hadn’t bought a dollhouse, and I was looking forward to calling my friend and having him come and pick it up. But then I figured that as I would have it for at least a month, I’d take it home and let my daughter play with it.

Watching my daughter play with the dollhouse, and sitting with her as she did caused me to completely re-think how I could use a dollhouse in class. Dropping the entire house in

front of them, already set-up, was not going to work from the beginning. This is one toy that needed to be broken down into bits and pieces at first (not pre-taught, mind you, but just presented in digestible chunks).

Second attempt

When my students came for the next class they immediately asked me where the dollhouse was. Perfect! They still wanted to play with it. So I took out a small box that contained only the family members. We each chose a character pretty quickly (as they were already familiar with family) and they started talking amongst themselves:

“Hi, Mommy”,
“Hi Grandpa”,
“How are you”,
“I’m sleepy”

And then one of the children asked me again where the house was. I pulled out another box filled with furniture and let them start setting up rooms on the classroom table. To make this more of a learning activity, I set a few pieces of furniture at a time on the table and gave them to students who asked for them. My students have played with enough toys in my class to know that they have to tell me what they want, and the phrase “What’s this?” was among the first they learned in my class, so getting them to ask questions wasn’t a problem.

I think it’s important to note that at no point in this process did I ever begin by holding up each piece of furniture and having the children repeat the English word. The children were playing at their own pace and asking the teacher for the words they didn’t know as they needed them. They set up their own “rooms” on the table based upon the furniture they were able to get and we played for about another ten minutes.

In the next ten minutes, my feelings about the dollhouse (although we actu-

Dollhouse dos and don’ts

DO...	DON’T...
Allow the children to explore the dollhouse in its entirety.	Set a dollhouse in front of your students and expect it to help their communicative ability all on its own.
Give the children freedom to interact and play with the dolls on their own, with little interference.	Think of this as your break time. Facilitation is essential.
Take the time to expose the children to each part of the dollhouse and piece of furniture individually.	“Teach” the children all the words and then try to use “play” as a review for your teaching. Let them discover as they play what words they find necessary. If you as a teacher notice words they are not using, your job as a facilitator is to make those words necessary.
Give the children enough time to play out a number of small scenarios.	Give them too much time. The first time students get tired of an activity is the last time they really want to do it.



ally didn't use the house that day) changed completely. During the course of play, my students began interacting with each other imitating the voices of their respective dolls. Grandmother became sleepy and tried to take a nap in the bed, but Father kept saying "Wake up!" Mother was busy getting fruit for Brother (who asked for about 10 different kinds of fruit—all of which were decidedly "YUMMY!"). Grandfather walked around the house and said hello to everybody and asked them their name. I, as Sister, kept trying to steal other dolls' furniture, which earned me some stern "NO!"s.

Over the next few lessons, we began to put the furniture in the dollhouse. This gave us a great opportunity to practice rooms of the house and what goes in each room. Students were quick to link this to other aspects of language and, when I asked Grandpa where Mommy was he told me "Mommy's kitchen". It wasn't grammatically correct, but I was excited. The children playing Mommy and Daddy also began using words that they had learned in TPR when telling Brother and Sister what to do.

Things to consider when buying a dollhouse:

1. DURABILITY. There are many

inexpensive dollhouses you can find in toy stores and online, but I would caution against buying them. On two separate occasions I have had students try to stand or sit on the dollhouse. If you plan on investing in a dollhouse, make sure that it can handle being played with.

2. REALISM. While the dollhouse doesn't necessarily have to be detailed, try to make sure you have all the basic rooms available. A kitchen, bedroom, living room, and bathroom are really the bare minimum. If you can find a way to have an extra bedroom, or a dining room, or an office, it definitely adds to the language skills you are able to teach.

3. SIMPLICITY. Try to avoid expensive, fragile dollhouses which are designed to be admired. The dollhouse in my classroom, along with the dolls and most of the furniture are all made out of wood. Look for something simple and hard to destroy, yet recognizable.

4. ACCESS. One mistake I made when I decided upon which dollhouse to buy was not considering student access to the dollhouse.

When children play with dollhouses at home they do so alone or with 1 or 2 friends. An open back is sufficient in such a situation, but is a major logistical problem in a classroom with 4 - 6 children. Try to find a dollhouse

with large doors and windows on the front and sides as well, so that children can access it from all sides.

Perceptions so far:

A dollhouse is a unique tool in an English classroom. A well used dollhouse will allow children to "explore" their language skills in a very child-centered way. It gives teachers many opportunities to observe students' levels, facilitate when necessary, and participate in such a way as to expose the children constantly to new words and patterns. This can help to promote both independent and cooperative thinking. Using the dolls as a medium, children are able to explore and express themselves without reservation. I have only been using a dollhouse for about six months, and I have already seen children who are normally shy develop very outgoing doll personas.

I am still amazed at the various patterns of language and large amounts of vocabulary that I have been able to incorporate into my students' playtime by using the dollhouse. I am even more amazed at how well it seems to bring so many language skills together in one activity. But mostly, I am pleased with how much fun my students seem to have when we play with it.