

Stop Teaching your Pre-schoolers

by Nicola Oshima

Children come to our school from age two upwards, sometimes even younger, for 'English immersion'. I find it to be a challenging, tiring, sometimes frustrating, yet totally invigorating experience!

What has grown into 'Nicky's English School' started four years ago when mothers in my local area asked me to teach their young children. My eldest daughter was the same age and so I teamed up with another well-known, experienced local teacher, Kiyoko Hasegawa, and we began a small playgroup with six children. This has grown over the years, and whilst still small, we now have 90 children. However, the basic philosophy is unchanged—offering children a chance to enjoy hearing English through music, play, stories and simple activities. We have never tried to be a 'school' with children in this age group as our experience as mothers told us that it probably would not work that way. We have always been a playgroup and I firmly believe that this is the reason for the group's success. FUN is the key!

Class organisation

We divide our groups by age-range. This is only a rough guide, but we try to keep to it as much as possible because four year-olds can do things that two-year-olds can't and vice-versa.

The groups are divided into two- to three-year-olds, three- to four-year-olds and four- to five-year-olds. Siblings are welcome too as mothers often cannot participate if involvement would mean having to leave another child at home. We try to support parents who want their children to join the group as much as we can.

We meet twice a month for approximately one hour. The maximum number of children in each class is sixteen, plus parents, and there are always two 'teachers'. This may sound like a lot of people, but conversely I find that larger numbers work quite well as the children usually enjoy participating with their friends and can self-regulate their level of class participation. If they want to come and hold my hand they can but if they would be more comfortable sitting with their Mum then that is fine too. I want to offer 'challenges' to each child to help them realise they can achieve almost anything if they try, yet at the same time it is important that each child feels free to take up the offer or decline with no judgement on my behalf. The group environment should be safe and comfortable to encourage participation. My goal for each class is that the children are eager to return next time.

What Do Children Find Interesting?

This is what I am constantly asking myself when trying

to plan classes! Luckily my two daughters (ages six and three) are a constant source of inspiration.

Music Children love to sing, listen and be absorbed into this world. It is also a great way to introduce them to English and the rhythm aids memorisation almost effortlessly. Playing music loudly is also a great way to grab children's attention when it may be fading.

Books An absolute essential in any classroom and obviously for pre-schoolers too. Sadly, so many children do not seem to be read to by their parents and so I see this as a chance to give these children a glance into the magical world of stories. How can you expect a child to want to read in later years if he or she has no understanding of the joy of reading in the first place? Without an interest in reading, it will be a difficult task for the child in the future when he or she is faced with the challenge of learning to read in English.

I find that books for native-speaking children work better than those for non-native readers. I usually reword the stories to make them more appropriate for the children's level of understanding. I find that books that are vibrant, give the children a chance to express themselves and have topics relevant to their everyday lives usually work best.

Play A very obvious inclusion but not always so easy to incorporate into a class without it getting too out of control! A good way to manage this is to have a good balance of physical (or 'upper') and calm ('downer') activities. A quick activity turnover rate is also essential to keep the children's interest. It is best to make the activities as child-centred as possible, to allow the children to participate in the class actively.

Props Again, a great attention grabber and they often work well to coax a more nervous child to come and participate more fully in the group. It also helps understanding of the song/activity being introduced if the child can see it being acted out.

T.V. I do not use this in class; however, I often watch children's programmes to give me ideas to use with the groups. I find that NHK Educational (Channel 9) is the best source for me, particularly 'Okaa-san to Issho' and 'Inai-inai-ba!', which are mainly aimed at pre-schoolers. They are a good source for learning how children in Japan are used to being 'managed' and also how to keep them occupied and happy over a set period of time. For older groups, I sometimes use the content of programmes they are likely to be watching to help them understand a point I'm trying to make. For example, last year I used 'Jyu Game' (then being aired on Channel 9's 'Nihon-go de Asobo') to help them grasp the meaning of 'Oh no!', and later 'I did it', by first



The usual class environment. The children are singing and bouncing to the 'Rainbow Song'.

pretending I couldn't recite the 'Jyu Game' poem and then finally doing it correctly a couple of weeks later. The children loved it and our room echoed to the shouts of 'Gambarre, Nicola-sensei!'

Characters I stay away! The turnover rate is incredibly high and as I am not prepared to re-make my materials every year, I find it's really not worth the effort. There are many more stimulating ways to achieve the same goal and I refuse to support the 'characterisation' of the globe in our playgroup.

Parental Support

We try to teach the parents of the children who attend our groups from the beginning that if they back up at home what we do at the playgroup, their effort will be repaid in the long run. We do not expect them to go home and start speaking English to their children—often their reason for choosing to join the playgroup is that they had a negative experience of English themselves and so maybe do not feel at all confident. Instead we recommend listening materials, usually songs or song-related, so that the children will want to listen as often as possible. We also suggest that if watching TV or movies, they switch the language to English

when the option is available and generally try to create an environment where their children can see that the parents are happy to learn alongside them.

Problems

The two main causes of potential problems seem to be either the children or their parents!

Children Running around in class. I say let them! To try to stop them is not only wasting your much needed energy but also your and the rest of the children's time. From an adult's viewpoint, it may seem that the 'runners' are not paying attention to you, but remember children learn in a very different way to adults. I am often amazed by the output from a child who otherwise seems to be happy just to run a marathon during the playgroup. However, regarding more 'serious' offences such as those involving other members of the group and potentially stopping or interrupting their enjoyment, it is necessary to set a standard of acceptable behaviour from the start that is recognisable to both the children and their parents.

Parents Many parents expect output in English from their children incredibly early. However, if you turn the situation around and get the parents to think how long it took

their child from birth to produce intelligible Japanese, more than likely on a diet of Japanese and nothing else, I find that they will soon see that they are being unreasonable to expect English output on two hours per month. On the other hand, I always point out that should their child continue learning to the point where they join a smaller class of about eight students (usually when they are five or six years old), they will more than likely produce intelligible output much faster than children of the same age who have had no previous exposure to English.

Concrete Ideas

I have found the following activities work consistently well for me and, most importantly, require little preparation.

Two- to three-year-olds

1. *Music* We use it as much as possible, especially nursery rhymes covering class topics (colours, animals, numbers etc.). Recycle the same song into different activities. For example, 'Rainbow' (on 'MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants', [Matsuka Phonics Institute]) can be sung by the children looking at a picture of a rainbow, holding up a colour card relating to the colour name sung or by arranging the children, and their cards, into the colour gradations of a rainbow and singing. By recycling the song, they get more chances to internalise the content yet do not get bored.

2. *Books* Attractive books or topics related to the child's immediate surroundings or interests seem to work the best. For example, *Five Little Ladybugs* (Gerth, 2003), *Once upon a Potty* (Frankel, 1980) or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What do you See?* (Carle, 1970).

3. *Play* Colour Bowling. Divide the group into two teams. Use a medium-size but light ball and milk cartons weighted inside with newspaper and covered in many different colours. The game is useable for both colour and number-related activities.

4. *Active Participation* Allow the children to choose one magnetised animal stick-on and as 'Old Macdonald Has a Farm' (on 'Wee-Sing: Children's Songs and Fingerplays' [Conn-Beall and Hagen, 2002]). is sung, they come to the front of the room (hopefully making the animal noise) as their animal is called and stick it onto the farm picture.

5. *Props* I wear a clock hat and have somebody make a toy mouse run up my arm as we sing 'Hickory Dickory Dock' (on 'MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants' [Matsuka Phonics Institute]). 'Round the Garden Like a Teddy Bear' is far more enjoyable with the help of a real teddy.

Three- to four-year-olds

1. *Music* We continue to use music as the main theme but vary the content to include more challenging songs. For example, introducing the concepts of left and right ('Right Hand, Left Hand' (on 'Wee-Sing: Children's Songs and Fingerplays' [Conn-Beall and Hagen, 2002]) or Genki English's 'Left and Right, Forward and Back' (<http://genkienglish.net/start.htm>). However, we also include a

large amount of review of the songs used in the previous group as children forget just as quickly as they learn. Active songs such as 'The Hokey Pokey' (on 'MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants' [Matsuka Phonics Institute]) or 'Looby Loo' (on 'Wee-Sing: Children's Songs and Fingerplays' [Conn-Beall and Hagen, 2002]) are a gentle introduction to necessary vocabulary as well as being great fun.

2. *Books* The books used with the previous group are still great favourites but the children also enjoy stories that can be linked to simple activities. For example, *From Head to Toe* (Carle, 1998) can be brought alive with the use of Matsuka Phonics Institute's text-related CD of the same name. There is a wonderful, active song to support the story contained within.

Other stories such as *Wheels on the Bus* (Raffi, 1988) also lead into activities such as an English version of the Japanese favourite '*Janken Densha*', where the children gradually make a bus, rather than a train. Each child goes around the class doing the 'Wheels on the Bus' actions as music is played. The teacher stops the music and each child finds a partner to do *janken* with. The *janken* loser goes behind the winner and holds the winner's waist. The music starts and off we go again doing gestures to the music but this time as a pair. Again, when music stops, the child in front does *janken* with the child in front of another pair. The winning pair continues at the front and the losing pair goes to the back so now we have a 'bus' of four (two groups of two joined together). Continue until there are just two long 'buses' left and the last *janken* match takes place. The winner then gets to say where he wants his/her bus to go and we play the music one last time with one long 'bus' going around the classroom).

Play We start to link to themes the children will become increasingly exposed to from now on. Instead of just singing 'The Alphabet Song' (on 'MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants' [Matsuka Phonics Institute]), we jump on large foam letters as we sing or use our bodies to make letters. Mats with removable letters (available from many 100-yen-shops) make great maxi-jigsaws perfect for smaller hands to handle easily and experience the shape of the letter

2. *Active Participation* We try to give the children many chances to help out in the group by holding up items as they are called, being the group leader and deciding which card to call next, etc.

3. *Props* Still a great way to keep, or retrieve, everybody's attention. 'Incy Wincy Spider' (also known as 'Itsy Bitsy spider') becomes a far more intelligible rhyme with the help of a cuddly spider.

Four- to five-year-olds

1. *Music* We tend to use this more as a tool to aid memorisation by this stage. Pam and Ted 1 (Matsuka Phonics Institute, 2003), with a chanted version on CD to accompany the text, helps our students to become familiar with simple phrases very easily with the use of rhythm and music.

They learn their names and addresses every year without



Myself and my daughter modeling 'This is the way the ladies ride' in class.

difficulty thanks to the use of a song covering the same content ('My name and address' on 'Wee-Sing: Children's Songs and Fingerplays' [Conn-Beall and Hagen, 2002]).

2. *Books* Stories that can be related to activities are still great favourites at this age. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen, 1989) is a wonderful example of a book, where, thanks to repetition and the wonderful use of onomatopoeia, the children soon understand the main thread of the story. They also love to act out the actual bear hunt for themselves.

3. *Play* We gradually transform this into fun 'activities' during the year and also try to use this time to introduce cultural themes from English-speaking countries or Japanese festivals in English. Easter-egg hunts, Santa mobiles, Trick or Treat Bags, 'Beaning' (As in *Setsubun*), and so on.

4. *Active Participation* 'Ten Fat Sausages' (on 'MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants' [Matsuka Phonics Institute]) is a great favourite, especially if the children get to be the sausages jumping out of the pan! Learning can

also be very active. We gradually introduce the concept of phonic pronunciation of letters through sounds linked to gestures. The children are therefore up and moving around whilst learning to shape their mouths and make sounds they may never have been exposed to before.

In conclusion, I think it is important to expose children to as many different stimuli as possible from an early age, and English can sit quite legitimately within this framework as long as it is dealt with in an appropriate way.

We try very hard to make our playgroups fun above anything else as children are like animals and can sense tension or unease. If the teacher is not truly having fun, they will feel this and either act upon it to make his or her life even more difficult or simply not enjoy the group at all. It is therefore essential to create an atmosphere that is enjoyable and comfortable for both those leading the activities and those taking part. The atmosphere must also be such that each child can feel free to express him or herself freely and with confidence. They must never feel wrong. They will misbehave occasionally but I find it far more enlightening to look for the cause of the misbehaviour than just blaming the child and moving on. Inevitably, if the cause can be found, the class will probably be a better one because of it.

In a phrase, we aim to educe as much as we can from each and every child.

References

- Carle, E.(1970) *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?*. U.S.A.: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, Inc.
- Carle, E. (1998) *From Head to Toe*. London: Penguin Books. (A CD of the same name to accompany this can be obtained from Matsuka Phonics Institute)
- Conn-Beall, P. Hagen, S.(2002) *Wee-Sing: Children's Songs and Fingerplays*. U.S.A.:Price Stern Sloan. (Christmas & Halloween versions also available seasonally). (This is a CD/cassette and songbook package).
- Frankel, A.(1980) *Once Upon A Potty*. U.S.A.: Harper Festival.
- Gerth, M.(2003) *Five Little Ladybugs*. U.S.A.: Intervisual Books, Inc. Matsuka Phonics Institute *MPI Best Selection Songs and Chants* (CD and songbook available).
- Matsuka Phonics Institute.(2003) *Pam and Ted 1*.Tokyo:M.PI (with CD).
- Raffi (1988) *Wheels on the Bus*. U.S.A.:Crown Publishers Inc.
- Rosen, M.(1989) *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*. London: Walker Books.

I have provided references for those songs I have on CD; however, a number of the songs are sung from memory. These are well known songs and can be found easily by doing a search on the internet using the title of the song.

Nicola has been teaching various age groups in Japan since 1991 and is the co-founder and owner of Nicky's English School. Her particular field of interest over the last 5 years has been making English accessible to pre-school children. She is also an active member of ETJ Aichi and can be reached at nicolaoshima@yahoo.co.jp.