

Baby English

by Lynn Dennett

Perhaps few things strike as much terror into the heart of the average English teacher in Japan as the thought of day-long “baby classes”. This article looks at the working style and ideas of a teacher who prefers teaching young children to teens or adults, and is undaunted by full-day classes. Matthew Hoecherl is employed at Emile Kindergarten in Hiroshima, which started an “*Ichinichi Eigo*” (All-Day English) program at the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year. Emile started the program after receiving many requests from parents who wanted to start their one- or two-year-old children in some sort of English program.

The idea behind “All-Day English” is that out of the five days the students attend the kindergarten, one day is completely in English. Hoecherl teaches three classes of three-year-olds, and one class each of one- and two-year-olds. While there is a Japanese teacher in the room to assist with “human” incidentals such as messy diapers and other things, all instruction is done by Hoecherl alone. The Japanese teacher’s English participation is as a class member, singing the songs and joining in activities.

“All-Day English”

“I use roll call because that gets them to respond to me and of course they are saying ‘yes’ or ‘here’ instead of ‘hai’”, Hoecherl says. This is followed by a song, “Hello, Good Morning”, written by Hoecherl and used by the school every morning. Even the older children Hoecherl doesn’t teach sing the song to start their days.

Sometimes the children want to talk after the song and tell their “news”. Hoecherl explains how this part of the class develops: “In April it was all still new to them, so they were kind of shy, but by May a lot of them were talking and you’d have things like ‘*Obaachan no ie ni itta*’ (I went to Grandma’s house). Now, a few months later, it’s ‘*Obaachan no house ni itta*’. So a little English is starting to come up in their speech as they realise they know the word. Sometimes they just want to show me they hurt their finger. It’s a few minutes of interaction that I think is very, very important”.

The next step of the day is practicing the theme language for the month. The themes are based on a natural progression of language acquisition. “I’m from a big family and the oldest child as well. So I had a lot of chances to watch my brothers



Songs and music are an important part of Hoecherl’s classes.



Hoecherl prefers teaching young children to teens or adults. "They haven't set limitations for themselves yet; they're still open to their own greatness."

and sisters and cousins learning to speak. And I remember things about my childhood, too. I just used those ideas when thinking of the syllabus for these classes. It's based on what seems to be a natural thing to be learning at their age and development". Hoecherl has no expectations for one-year-olds beyond asking them to point to the correct card, and with few exceptions, they rarely produce language. Two-year-olds still require a lot of hints but can produce language. Three-year-olds can do it all, asking questions and answering.

Theme time starts with singing the song for the month. The theme song is, of course, based on the target language for that month. Hoecherl has written 13 songs so far for this year's classes and will continue writing a song every month. Current plans are to release two CDs this year with six months' worth of theme songs plus the class opening and closing songs. "I always hated kid's songs that used toy pianos and singers with squeaky voices", Hoecherl says. "When I was a kid, I listened to Bob Dylan and Paul Simon. You know, cool music. So I write songs that are short and catchy and that the children sing even when they are away from the school".

Theme time continues with Hoecherl showing picture cards. He points out that if he has to teach them a new word they might struggle with it all month. But if even one student knows it and says it the first time he shows the card, then the class picks it up immediately.

One card activity for reviewing vocabulary is to have the

children come up one at a time, close their eyes and choose a card. They say what the card is, show the class, and the class says what the card is. In the case of colors, Hoecherl asks the student to point to something of the same color in the room.

Following the cards, the toys come out for playtime. When teaching animal vocabulary, Hoecherl uses toy animals from the 100-Yen Shop. The toys are hidden in a bag. He makes the sound of the animal and the children call out the name. If they are correct, the animal pokes its head out of the bag. "Then I ask, 'does anyone want to hold the cat?'" and several children raise their hands. I choose someone, they come to me and they have to say, 'cat, please', before I give them the toy. At the end of the activity, I ask for the animals, 'cats, please', and the children holding cats bring them up and put them in the bag".

After playtime is lunch. "We sing the lunch song, I take them to wash their hands and get our lunches, then we eat and clean up together", Hoecherl says. "After we finish eating, we play some more, similar to 'recess' in the U.S". This time is very important for the student-teacher relationship. Hoecherl avoids the "teacher" image. "At recess, we play with blocks and other toys, and they realize I can make a cool airplane from blocks, too. So I become one of them, rather than 'The Teacher'. So when teaching songs, it's not 'The Teacher' teaching a song, I'm a friend who just happens to know the words. I also like to sit in circles, I don't like the 'me up front and them in their little rows'



Hoecherl feels the most important thing is to build a sincere relationship of trust with the children.

approach”, he says. “I prefer something more casual. They are usually sitting on the floor so I do, too”.

The next activity of the day is story time. These stories vary from modified existing stories to original ones created to fit the theme. Hoercherl uses the same story all month. He believes this is important because not only does it reinforce the theme, but the repetition also enables students to learn useful common phrases and idioms. As a matter of course he accompanies this language with gestures.

Songs and games finish out the day. “With the remaining time, we mainly do songs, and not only original songs. For example, we’ll do ‘It’s a Small World’. We’ll only sing the chorus, but after that I’ll continue playing and wait for someone to call out an animal, for example, ‘cat’. Then we’ll sing the chorus as cats, ‘meow, meow, meow’, etc. Sometimes they’ll say something like ‘*Harikenja*’ (popular TV characters) and I’ll have to say no because how are we going to sing that? But finally they’ll say ‘people’ and we sing the chorus again to end it”. The class also does songs with gestures, such as ‘Eency, weency spider’.

Philosophy and Challenges

Hoecherl has strong beliefs about teaching reading and writing. “A two-year-old can’t write a letter but they can have a conversation”, he says. “Native speakers learning their language are like that. So why should a second language learner be any different? I think that teaching writing as soon as you start teaching a language is unnatural and simply looking at how English is taught in Japan shows how ineffective it can be. Look at the results”.

To back up his point about leaving reading and writing until a later stage, he relates the story of teaching two elementary school students to read and write two and a half years after they started learning English. He was surprised at how fast the students learned phonics, and noted another important point: “I would write a sentence like, ‘I throw dogs out the window’ and as they sounded it out they would start giggling because they actually understood it. I’ve seen many students that can read almost anything placed in front of them but it has absolutely no meaning for them”.

Hoecherl feels that his biggest challenge when he started at the school was scared kids. “I look different, I sound different, and some were really shy”, Hoecherl says. “I feel the key is, well, loving them. Just liking kids, liking teaching isn’t enough. They need to feel that you are really sincere and really care about them when they show you a hurt finger, not some ‘I’m fine, thank you, and you?’ automatic, programmed response. It’s building a relationship of trust with them, and that can’t be faked. Kids aren’t stupid, they’ll know if you don’t really care”. And it has its rewards. “For the first time in my life I have a job that I wake up and am actually excited to go to”, he says. “I love it”. ■

Lynn Dennett teaches at David English House in Hiroshima. He is a former graphic designer with The McGraw-Hill Companies and in addition to the ETJ publications, is the designer of David Paul’s ‘Communication Strategies’ series.

‘Otsukai’ activity

“I went to a cell phone store and asked if they had a some old cell phones they didn’t need anymore and got a couple of the regular models. I avoided the fold-up types because I didn’t want the distraction.

I start the activity by asking the children who wants to be ‘mama’ or ‘papa’. I select a child and hand them a phone. Then I pretend to call the mama or papa and they answer, ‘Hello’. I say ‘Hello, Aiko-mama. Is Toshiyuki there?’. Aiko-mama hands the phone to Toshiyuki, who says, ‘Hello’. I then say, ‘Hello, Toshiyuki, will you do *otsukai* for me?’. There really isn’t a word in English for *otsukai*, so I just say it to keep the activity going. The student of course agrees to do it, so I’ll ask him to go to the store and get some fruit or something, say one apple and two bananas. The request of course depends on the student’s ability. I watch them as they walk to the table where I’ve placed various props. If they look like they’ve forgotten, I’ll start saying things like, ‘I’m so hungry. I really want my one apple and two bananas’. The student will bring the items to me, I show them to the class, ‘one apple and two bananas’, the class applauds, the phone goes back to the mama or papa and we continue”.