

Returnees

by Anna Isozaki

In nine years of teaching at a private language school, I've often been faced with the task of keeping "returnee" children challenged and happy, as have many other teachers throughout Japan. The problem has always seemed to be that their English level was too high to put them in a peer-group class, and yet, still being children, they needed to have child-level topics and an atmosphere that was conducive to fun.

There is no single, simple answer to the question of how to keep these children's English available to them with once-or-twice-a-week classes, and of how to help their English grow appropriately with their own increase in years. I would like to share a few tips and strategies from what has worked in the past for my students — not to provide "answers" as much as to help stimulate other teachers' own creativity and ideas.

Before focusing on the positive, as I would like to, I must share the negative. I've had very little success when these children have been put in a same-age-but-non-returnee children's class. Nor have I had positive results when forced to use, unadapted, any textbook for English as a second or foreign language. If the content was age-appropriate, the tasks were too easy, and if the tasks were appropriately challenging, the content was adult-oriented and boring, or inaccessible to kids.

So now to share the sunny side: Tossing the typical into the trash; mixing ages; including parents and having fun really work. First of all, think back to what you enjoyed as an English student at elementary school. See if you can get some of the textbooks used for your students' age levels at the schools they attended. Contacting their most recent teachers is often a good option. Many of the teachers who have taught these students and said "goodbye" to them as they returned to Japan are more than willing to correspond with you, to share what the student learned and what they liked, and even to help you get good class materials. The short stories in the "English class" textbooks used in elementary schools are often just right for homework-with-parents (bedtime reading) and class discussion, as well as providing material for vocabulary and grammar activities. Many have a wide, interesting variety of topics, types of literature, and themes.

Flipping through a big textbook that had been used 25 years ago in my own elementary school, I was pleasantly surprised at the serious thought, invisible to me back then, that had been put into multicultural inclusivity. Such materials are especially useful for our returnees, who have often come from multi-ethnic classes in, for example, the U.S. Beyond the obvious benefits of supporting multiculturalism in general, it is important to help "our" returnee kids stay connected with as many memories of their time abroad as possible. It is the disconnecting, the severing of a chain of experiences when returning to one's "home" country that can make reverse culture shock so painful and isolating.

Think back to what was fun in recess at elementary school, too. Physical games like "Red Light, Green Light!", "Mother, May I?" or "Red Rover" can be used as a quick break or pick-me-up during class, and the children can teach and lead the games themselves: Good for their confidence.

If you have access to a kitchen, making some of the dishes, snacks and desserts that they enjoyed in their host country can also be valuable and fun. The relaxed kitchen atmosphere can help create the chance to talk more freely than in the desks-and-chairs situation.

Back in the classroom, I found that adapting games from *Finding Out*, *Communicate*, and *Songs and Games for Children* (all by David Paul) worked very well to keep the kids in touch with their natural use of high-level grammar. Blowing up the game boards in the books and making them colorful and durable allowed us to use them to practice all sorts of targets, and the favorite games could be used again and again. Games from Little America were very popular and useful, too, particularly "Clue" and "Guess Who?".

Developing a wide collection of picture books and children's novels is fun and essential to supporting further English development. They can be loaned out to be read at home, or can be read together in class. Single volume collections, like *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* (ed. Janet Shulman) can be a valuable resource to have on hand.

Spending about 15 minutes of each class reading a novel out loud together gives the kids reading and listening practice. Related activities can also provide speaking and writing practice. The sense of accomplishment they get from completing a novel helps fuel the desire to read more books in the future. My students, their parents, and I choose a novel which is appropriate to the median age of the students, and seems interesting to everyone. Each student has their own copy and a highlighter (I think it is important that the kids get to keep the books that they have taken the time and effort to read). As we read through together, a section at a time, they highlight new words and ask me about them at the end (I make sure I have a good unabridged dictionary and children's dictionary to hand!). Once they understand the new vocabulary, they write the words down in their notebooks.

The notebooks, besides being tools for rough drafts of letters, handwriting practice, and homework or in-class assignments, are their own "dictionaries". I explain that since they are not English beginners, they don't need to write down simple words like "dog" and "cat", and they are not adults, so they don't need to carry a huge dictionary with words they won't meet for a while. I just want them to remember the useful new words that they meet in our conversations and their books. This can become quite a substantial glossary, in fact, and I make sure that it is useful: their notebooks become the basis for many vocabulary and spelling games, and the kids often enjoy setting questions for each other in games like



“Hangman”. (Actually, as “Hangman” is rather gory if you think about it seriously, I use this idea I took from a seminar: The students or I draw a monster with an open mouth. The lines for the “missed” guesses lead to the mouth and we try to avoid falling in! [See also the Games section in this issue for more ideas on this—eds.]

I have found it helpful when parents have been persuaded to join the class. If the parents know what targets and materials children are working with, they can reinforce the class-work at home, by speaking, reading, doing homework, and watching English programs or videos together with their kids. Sometimes the English review is good for the parents (and their confidence) as well. Another factor that makes a “family” group class worth considering is that as the family went abroad together, sharing the English challenge and using it as a way to connect and stay in touch with each other as they readjust to Japan can greatly support the children in deciding to keep English in their lives, rather than to throw it away as “irrelevant” to their Japanese surroundings.

A typical class goes something like this:

- How was your week? We pass around a ball and share events.
- We do a puzzle or play a game to review grammar or vocabulary.
- We read together from the novel we chose and go through any new words they’ve highlighted. Favorite authors so far have been E.B. White, Madeline L’Engle, E.L. Konigsburg, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling.
- The students enter the new vocabulary into their notebooks along with easy definitions. These will be used as fodder for games and quizzes in future classes.
- The children write letters to their old friends and teachers (The teachers are most reliable about answering!).
- We play another game if we have time: A physical game (such as “Red Rover” mentioned above, or a scavenger hunt with clues written up on the board) can provide a chance to re-link English with action.

An example of a game that goes over well and involves a lot of vocabulary review is what I call: “Reverse

Crosswords”. Everyone gets a big, colored marker. We start with one long word from the novel we are reading in the center of a huge sheet of blank paper. The student who wrote the word gets a point for writing it, two points for explaining its meaning, and three points if he or she can make an example sentence with the word in it. If the student who chose and wrote the word stops before defining it or making an example, there is no penalty—the word is simply opened to the other students, who can then also collect points. The next person to take a turn chooses a word to fit across the first word, and the next student will then fit a word in, going up or down, and so on. As the teacher you can set the points for a “win” according to the amount of time you want to allot the game in the class, and you can even continue it from class to class.

It would be great to learn what other teachers have found useful in teaching returnees... and what to avoid as well! I would also very much like to learn others’ strategies for helping support these children through the reverse culture shocks many of them face.

In conclusion, I hope that as teachers we can support these children imaginatively, and have fun. Returnees make special students and some of them grow up to tell moving stories about their experiences crossing cultures, in English, of course. ■

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