

Which came first...the baby or the student?

From this issue, Chris Sato and Ben Shearon will have a regular column in "Snakes and Ladders" focusing on the business of running a school with children's classes, and keeping us in touch with matters that are discussed on the ETJ online list for school owners.

The online forum dedicated to school owners has been running for three years and membership has gradually increased to the current total of 206. There have been many interesting discussions as well as sharing of information pertinent to running a language school.

The general sense of cooperation and goodwill was typified by a recent discussion about teaching very young children, as prompted by this call for help: "I have 2 moms who want their 1-year-old babies to begin to 'study' English. I'm speechless. They're not even speaking Japanese yet and I can't see the sense of doing anything in a class with babies."

The initial responses offered practical tips about teaching such young children, like this: "I've taught many 1-year-olds (and some even younger than that). What I would recommend is having the mother and child come together and gear a conversation based class towards the mom." Another offered this advice: "Play with them. Lots of songs and movement. I do not gear the class to the mother but I do require the mothers to attend and follow along with the kids." The next was even more specific with suggestions of activities: "I recommend structuring your lessons around one theme or idea. For example, have the theme for the month be 'blue', or some other color, and get as many blue things as you can get your hands on."

Soon, however, the tone of the discussion shifted, with some questioning the value of teaching students so young, strongly worded in this message: "Having children that young in English classes is a waste of time and money. The mothers never think through the implications of starting

that young." Another poster echoed this and went further: "The whole idea seems dubious to me. I mean, who other than the teacher and the child's mother benefits?"

From here the discussion divided into two separate camps, with one side believing there was much to gain educationally from starting so young. One proponent pointed out that the nature of the class is different, "I don't think of it as conversation classes for babies. I think of it as early childhood education in English". Another suggested students who start early are better motivated later on: "I

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can say that mothers (and fathers) of my students who started early tend to be more involved with their English education, buy more English videos and books to use at home, and tend to STAY at my school for a long time."

Another reiterated that for many parents the purpose was not purely to learn English: "An English lesson, particularly one that is game and activity based, will provide young kids with a different type of experience than they might have by staying home, playing only in Japanese and so on, which might not result in a life long fluency of English, but might have other positive effects." Similarly, someone else highlighted the wider benefits at home: "I am sure that mothers participating in

an English class for young ones might feel the process of learning English is de-mystified a bit and they feel more confident speaking (limited) English with their child and it becomes part of their family life.

The messages from the other side, however, doubted whether the children were actually getting ahead, as with this: "My experience has been that children who start from zero at the 3rd grade level can very quickly catch up with those who have already been studying for many years." One teacher shared his own unrewarding experience of such classes: "I used to take on 2-year-olds (plus mums) but I gave up on this because there were too many tears and blank faces." Indeed, there was perhaps an undercurrent throughout the whole discussion that many school owners are simply horrified at the prospect that they might have to take on such classes themselves if they begin to catch on.

One other message inferred that there was even a social danger in encouraging mothers and children to "get ahead" from such a young age: "...increasing signs of distress...rising crime...classroom collapse... hikokomori... pressure to succeed in school... this is all just contributing to the situation."

Looking back, the exchanges were heated, enlightening and frank but the tone never became threatening. Perhaps there was a recognition that at the end of the day the lines between running a business and staying true to one's own beliefs are blurred, as with this message: "From a business point of view I can see some advantages of teaching very young children. From a practical point of view I cannot."

One solution to this conundrum was perhaps put forward by this short message: "If a child is able to follow the kind of fun and games teachers incorporate into their lessons, then I think that age is no barrier." So, I guess that means that the lesson comes first...?