

## *Teaching English to Children Program at Toita Women's College*

Ivan Botev

Department of International Communication and Culture

### **Introduction**

Teaching pre-school and kindergarten is full of both rewards and challenges. Teaching young learners English as a second language presents a unique set of challenges. Even experienced teachers could feel lost when they first start teaching younger students, and for good reason; young learners are at a completely different developmental stage and running such a classroom requires a unique set of skills and mindset. If you get any of the main points wrong, your students will start misbehaving, crying, and fighting. All of that will create a long and dramatic day. It is also important to remember that young learners—those attending preschool and kindergarten—will not have any personal reason for studying English.

For them, English is simply another subject that they have to study at school or that their parents have told them they need to learn. At this point in their lives, they may not know or understand how important these classes can be. They might view such classes as simply another fun daily activity and that is all right. Even at this early age, you, as a teacher, can encourage them to develop an interest in learning English which will stay with them long after they have completed your classes.

### **What Young Learners Want**

Students at this level are just starting their academic careers; this is the first stage of their mandatory education. School, as a place, may be intimidating for some of the students in your class so, in order to encourage everyone to participate, it is

important to make your lessons relaxed, interesting, and, of course, educational. Young learners will be studying very basic material but you can design creative lessons that get students moving around and speaking with one another. Young learners are generally very enthusiastic about singing songs, especially if they can sing along, and participating in active games. Be sure to provide a lot of encouragement and positive feedback. For your students, you want to create a safe, stress-free environment that everyone can enjoy learning in.

### **How Young Learners Behave**

Keep exercises fun and short because students at this age have short attention spans and are easily distracted. Overacting (exaggerating) and projection (presenting images on a screen or board) will help keep the focus on you. Another important thing is to teach your students how to behave in a classroom by asking them to be quiet while you are talking and raise their hands if they have questions or want to answer a question. This may not be directly related to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) but it is important that students learn good behavior early on. If you teach in a kindergarten, this will also make your students' transition to elementary school easier. Teach them to respond to basic classroom English phrases such as "Please sit down," (see Total Physical Response) etc. because these are classroom commands that they will hear repeatedly throughout their study of English. For students at this age, you are responsible not only for beginning to teach them

a new language, but also for preparing them for their next level of education. Students will perform better in their classes if they behave well and have a good understanding of basic principles.

### What To Focus On

The general focus of your lessons will be on communication and laying a solid foundation for further English studies. Students should practice the different sounds (see The Color Vowel Chart) of the English language and learn material such as the names and pronunciation of basic words, numbers, colors and shapes. You will gradually introduce new vocabulary and may select to study some simple structures that relate to everyday life too. Most probably reading and writing will not be part of your classes but a focus on speaking and listening will help students become more comfortable and confident with English and thus prepare them for the more complex coursework in English in junior high (middle) school.

### More Advice on Teaching English to Children

There are many other things you can do to ensure that students succeed in your classes. It is not necessary to assign homework at this stage but be sure to follow individual and class progress so that students can visually see what they have learned and how they are doing. You could do that by making students write self-reports in their native language (L1) with the help of their home room teacher and review them together as a way to improve your lessons. Encourage students to try their best and create a constructive learning environment where students do not need to worry about making mistakes. Create activities and exercises that are entertaining. Help students learn how to interact with one another as well as how to speak in English. Students will also feel more comfortable if you usually follow a regular schedule. If you decide to make changes to your lessons, implement them over a period of time

rather than all at once. Constantly review and avoid introducing too much new vocabulary at a time. Students may not remember material from one day to the next so repetition is important. The more students are exposed to certain material, the faster they will learn it. Basically, this is how native speakers learn English, by listening to people around them and expanding their range of vocabulary gradually.



Photo 1. *Easy as A-B-C: An English class is held for a third-grade class at an elementary school in Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward. Japan Times/KYODO*

Young learners can be a real pleasure to teach because they generally do not feel stressed by their studies and approach everything with youthful innocence. You play an important role in helping them develop into lifelong learners. As a teacher, it is important to nurture in them a love of learning by creating lesson plans that are appealing and suited to their maturity level, and focus on what will help them excel in future English courses.

### Review of the Practical Tips in the Classroom

#### *Establish Connections with Students*

Young students need to know that their teacher cares about them. They need to feel a connection to their teacher. Learn about your students and how they learn. Show them that you care enough to get to know them individually by talking to each one of them.

#### *Create a Positive Learning Environment*

Students thrive in a positive learning environment no matter how old they are. Aim to create an environment where students receive peer

support. Build their confidence and help them feel self-assured in who they are as students.

#### *Total Physical Response*

Young students have a lot of energy. Rather than trying to suppress this energy, find positive ways to use it in the classroom. Plan fun, interactive activities. As you do so, students will have an easier time focusing when called to do so.

#### *Change Activities Often*

A body of studies have shown that young learners can only focus for a short periods; about 10-15 minutes at a time. If you try to plan activities that last longer than this, you're going to have more classroom management issues. Instead, try to keep activities short and change things up often. For example, have students gather round you when you give instructions. Then, they go back to their desks to complete an assignment. After a short period of time, students can get back up to move. Doing this will help them stay focused on the tasks at hand.

#### *Mix Groups Up*

By planning group activities, students get to see how their peers do things. They can learn a lot from working with their classmates. Make sure that you mix groups up on a regular basis. Give students the opportunity to work with different people (e.g., boys with girls), so they can learn different ways of doing things.

#### *Discipline Consistently*

Classroom management is one of the biggest difficulties for teachers who work with young learners. You need to be consistent, but you shouldn't spend the day interrupting the lesson to address issues. One of the best ways to handle negative behaviors is through hand signals. Let students know what the hand signals mean. When a problem arises, give students the hand signal to address that particular issue without having to interrupt the lesson.

#### *Create Routines*

Young learners need to know what to expect and how to act. That is why you need to implement

routines and procedures. When you have procedures in place and students consistently follow them, you are going to experience less classroom management issues. You can spend more time reminding students about the routine and less time disciplining them.

#### *Have Patience*

Young learners have a lot of personality fit into a little frame. As such, they need to move frequently. They want to share what is on their mind and spend time with their friends. Learn about what to expect for the developmental stage of children at this age. Then, have patience with your students as they learn the procedures, routines, and rules of your classroom.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Because of the role of English as a global language and its potential for providing education and employment advantages to English speakers, English is being introduced at an earlier age around the world. Many children now start English as early as age six or even younger.

While there are many points of view about the best time to start learning another language, there are potential benefits to an early start, especially if optimal conditions occur within the language classroom. Such English language programs can provide more time to learn the language and can lead to better pronunciation and fluency, enhanced intercultural competence, and mental flexibility.

A number of factors affect the success of a Teaching English to Children (TEC) program. These include the choice of program model, the presence of appropriately trained teachers, the availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate materials, and the transition of the English curriculum from elementary to junior high school.

There are a number of models of effective TEC programs. These include immersion, dual-language, and transitional and maintenance bilingual programs. Another way to look at program models is

in terms of their topics and amount of time for instruction. Programs can develop their curricula around traditional topics found in student language textbooks, topics drawn from other subjects, community-based topics, or actually teaching part of the curriculum in English.

Appropriately trained TEC teachers should know how to develop engaging, motivating activities and have adequate English proficiency to help their young learners in learning English. Unfortunately, the growth in demand for TEC classes has outpaced the capacity of many countries (including Japan) to provide appropriate TEC training. There is a limited amount of specialized training programs or courses for TEC teachers.

Materials and curricula need to be culturally and linguistically appropriate. The local and national culture and cultures of other countries need to be included to help children develop intercultural competence and increase their understanding of their surrounding culture.

The elementary and junior high school curricula need to be aligned so that students make a smooth transition in their language learning. Children who have studied English in elementary school (now a government requirement in Japan) will need higher-level English classes in junior high school than those who begin at the secondary school level (as previously offered in Japan).

To be effective, there are a number of other factors that TEC programs need to have in mind. These include scheduling, integrating the English class into the overall school curriculum, and gradually introducing young learner classes, as well as providing appropriate resources and professional development for current TEC instructors.

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