

One green leaf: Ecosongs and activities for kids

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This presentation focused on learning English and exploring environmental themes with children. Hands-on tips about using song, games and project work with pre-school to elementary school levels in Japan were shared. Green ninja scrolls, animal quizzes, limpets and the magic of songs were shown. Participants followed the story of how and why materials were developed, including theoretical underpinnings. Songs are available free on the Internet at <www.onegreenleaf.net>.

環境問題のテーマを通じて、子供と英語を学ぶことについてのプレゼンテーションです。日本の就学前から小学生のレベルでの、歌やゲーム、プロジェクトワークの使い方を実践的に説明しています。ミドリ忍者の巻物、動物クイズ、リンペット貝、歌の魔法の紹介もあります。これらの教材がなぜ、どのように開発されたかが、学説の裏付けとともに述べられています。紹介された歌は、インターネット（下記）で、無料でアクセスできます。<www.onegreenleaf.net>。

The information on the One Green Leaf: Ecosongs and Activities for Kids Presentation at the national JALT 2005 conference is available on the internet at <www.onegreenleaf.net>. (Suzuki, 1996). What exactly will the reader find there? The site shares free environmental songs and project-work developed to teach English and environmental awareness to an age group of 2 up to 11 years old. It includes hands-on ideas for using song, games and project work with pre-school to elementary school levels in Japan. A photoblog with visual ideas is also available at <onegreenleafecosongs.blogspot.com> (Suzuki, 2005).

Most of the songs have a theme, a basic idea or environmental concept and can be used as a springboard for environmental group-work with young learners. According to Skehan's (1998) description of cognitive processes, the brain is constantly analyzing for meaning over form. It is a miracle of networks to explore, learn, make connections, and make meaning. It therefore seems worthwhile to explore English with young

learners through meaning-making, discovering and exploring a personal relationship with our planet. To this end, *One Green Leaf* offers content-based instruction together with English “conversation in song” (Graham, 2001). Children express the human need to explore and make meaning on all levels, touching, tasting, laughing, seeing, moving, thinking and feeling with all six senses. They interact and link to others with language as one tool in that process, a process which *One Green Leaf* songs and activities are intended to encourage.

There is a danger in seeing English as a language in a vacuum. Glass (2004) points out: “Educators routinely silence certain voices and amplify others through the selection of the curriculum, the design of assignments and assessments, and the structure of the classroom social relationships and learning environment. Each of these seeming pedagogical choices embeds ideological commitments that have real social, economic, and political consequences” (p. 19). In other words, educators can choose to explore the creation of a peaceful world in interpersonal and interplanetary terms in their classroom. Personalized and hand-made materials can be used, bio-regions explored with co-operative learning and “differentiated instruction” (Tomlinson, 2001). Further justification of and approaches to exploration of global issues in education are elaborated in Peaty (2004) and Cates (2004). In a sense, education necessarily involves exploring the environment and how we build our relationship with it. As we move away from the *isms* of the last century, the nationalism, the racism, the sexism, the ableism, the homophobia, rethinking from a new perspective with a new sustainable English becomes paramount.

So *One Green Leaf* songs are written for children and adults in the hope that they enjoy the songs and rewrite verses according to their own environments and English explorations, so they become their very own. These songs can be thought of as kid’s colored blocks: they are not finished products, and the learners cannot do anything wrong with them. The songs are so basic, they invite improvement and improvisation: expand, change, bawl, warble, play, move and explore. The teacher can be a facilitator for the group’s suggestions and help children express themselves in English, helping rewrite songs and making them into a group’s personal environmental statement.

Moreover singing is a fundamentally healthy activity involving breathing and celebrating being alive. While educators may focus on the business of imparting language, we tend to forget that the human voice is sound and body before it is language. Whether it is a baby burbling or someone singing in the shower, there is a natural bent to enjoy and play with our physical being and the breath of its existence. Voice has magic, voice is healing, chanting, conjuring. Kids have a natural bent to magic and an innate grasp of health. Arguably teaching with a ludic exploration of voice, breath, body, sounds and meaning makes sense holistically.

Some children seem not to love nature naturally any more. The channels can be heavily blocked by inexperience and social conditioning. Some young learners have no knowledge of where food originates or what its original shape is. For example, a young child in the author’s neighborhood refused to eat raspberries from bushes. Many Japanese parents see only dirt in earth, and visions of a pile

of dirty washing. Insects are sometimes seen as frightening or threatening and best destroyed. Pouring chemicals into toilets and drains is accepted wisdom. Air conditioning bans any sense of season in urban areas. Near the turn of the century, Bowers (1993) writes: “The challenge now is to become aware of our own taken-for-granted culture, and to evolve new narrative traditions that represent humans as interdependent members of the larger information and food chains that make up the ecosystems.” (p. 79) This ignorance bordering on disregard suggests an urgent need for materials such as *One Green Leaf*.

The title song, *One Green Leaf*, introduces life-cycles. Unfolding the ninja scroll students join in an action song: how growing leaves feed bugs which feed birds, and their poop feed the earth, which in turn feeds the leaves...and on and on, posing to poop with hilarious glee. The difference between an everyday scroll and a ninja scroll is that ninja scrolls are concerned with making magic, secret transforming energy, and are a familiar and traditional object in Japan’s cultural history. And so with recycled rolls from kitchen or toilet, young learners get hands on and make their own ninja magic, changing song colors and animals, or exploring numbers, researching food chains and reflecting on where our own human poop goes. Educators might join kids in exploration outside, looking for crayon box colors in nature and bringing home bits of twig, sand, leaves, petals, stones, discarded gum wrappers, tissue scraps, whatever is there. Sticking all the colored treasures in a poster bar graph embodies how the colors and textures create patterns. Seasonal differences can be explored by making a poster graph at regular intervals.

Although some may argue that we are merely teachers of English language, *One Green Leaf* offers a more fundamental perspective on the question of why we may be in the teaching profession. As an educator and model, the author regards sharing (but not imposing) perceptions, dynamism, enthusiasm, involvement and love as important. Young learners are wise: they perceive the teacher’s personal involvement, and this makes all the difference to them and the energy in the learning space. In the words of Csikszentmihalyi (1977:77 in Dornyei, Z. (2001)): “Young people are more intelligent than adults generally give them credit for. They can usually discern, for instance, whether an adult they know likes or dislikes what he or she is doing. If a teacher does not believe in his job, does not enjoy the learning he is trying to transmit, the student will sense this and derive the entirely rational conclusion that the particular subject matter is not worth mastering for its own sake.” (p. 33). If learning, knowledge and language are collaborative, then sharing will help both teacher and students to grow in a sustainable, healthy way.

The song *Swimming in the Sea* grew from walking Japanese cigarette butt beaches, swimming into a plastic bag with the remains of a lunch, tomatoes, bits of meat and lemon at the seaside. Activities suggested include switching on a sound of waves CD as students close their eyes and visualize exploring sea creatures and the beach. Following the song compare sea creatures in different countries, their different colors and sizes. Interactive pair work invites students to swim along and share what they have seen. Further development of the topic is suggested with read-along, act-it-out storybooks *Sally and the Limpet* (James,

1992) or *My Friend Whale* (James 2004). Students can play a *What's missing?* game with shells picked up on the beach by the teacher, or collect their own to craft shell boxes for gifts. Alternatively learners can make a giant poster, with yuck and wow sea experiences. The song can also be adapted for 'Walking in the Woods', or 'Running in the Park'. Invite students to begin noticing and getting in tune with what makes them feel *Wow* or *Yuck*.

At the website suggestions for project work with older children on endangered species are introduced with *T is for Tiger*. The author was invited to do a three hour marathon workshop at an elementary school one year and worked with the song in various ways. Activities included a guess the animal touch and feel quiz, which led into questioning of which animals are alive and which are dead. A controversial game of musical statues followed, where children were shot with a water pistol if they did not put their hands up and freeze when the music stopped. One sixth-grader student shares what this meant for them: "*Ichiban omoshirokatta no wa dansu o odotte, pitatto tomatte, ugoitara teppou de utareru to iu korosareru kimochi ni nareru no ga tanoshikatta desu. Demo, sekaiju no doubutsutachi ga ikura tomatte mo, yappari korosareru to iu koto ga, totemo kawaiiso de, kowainaa to omoimashita.*" [The most interesting thing was being able to feel what it's like to be killed when we danced and froze, and got shot by the water-pistol. It was fun. But I thought it was scary and really sad that animals on the planet can freeze all they like, and they still get killed.] The class followed up with singing the song, beating thumping rhythms with objects in the room, alphabet games, and a world map of endangered animals.

Cornell's (1979) *Sharing Nature with Children* is highly recommended. Many activities are very simple and can easily be combined with One Green Leaf songs. For instance a *Microhike* (pp.46-7), observing insects and earth minutely through a magnifying glass, hiking along a piece of pegged string as a trail, complements the song, *A Sustainable Conversation*. This song talks about drawing insects; young learners can observe and choose an insect they like, making drawings to share and report on. Alternatively, the website has tips for drawing bugs using alphabet letters. An action song like *The Resource Song* is about thinking up active ways to save resources, and there are many suggestions for just that in the volume *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth* (Javna, 1990).

Furthermore, Sue Roseman, K to 3+ Resources Presenter at <tappedin.org> and Global Education Network Facilitator for Online Professional Development, has made a collection of online environmental resources for educators in a trackstar available at <snipurl.com/ecology> (Roseman, 2004). She has collected gems of sites such as Crayola and the Environment, EcoKids, Greenscreen, National Geographic: Earthpulse and many more sites aimed at exploring the environment with children. These sites are worth investigating.

One Green Leaf has ten songs in all. They have been successfully used in Japanese kindergarten and elementary schools and can be easily adapted for different age groups and interests. Working with children is an incredibly demanding, on-your-toes, whole person career, but also one of the most rewarding, and it is hoped that *One Green Leaf* can support the educator in accessing personal creativity

and inner inspiration along the way. For more face-to-face support and tips the author can be contacted about workshops or presentations. Finally, you are invited to share further ideas for how the songs can be used in order to keep improving the project.

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