

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Preschool EFL: From songs, to games, to crafts

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It is necessary for any preschool teacher to create engaging and exciting lessons. Preschoolers have short attention spans and it is important to keep this in mind when organizing a class for them. Lessons must have a routine, there must be variety and continuity to not only get and keep the preschoolers' attention but to also aid in their language acquisition. This paper focuses on introducing English to preschool-aged children so as to create the building blocks for future L2 learning. Different types of language games, songs, and crafts, which are both fun and reinforce language learning, are suggested and discussed with the aim of enabling other teachers to adapt or further develop these ideas for use in their own classes.

幼児教育に携わる教師は、幼児を引きつける刺激的なレッスンを作りだしていくことが必要である。幼児の注意持続時間が短いことを考慮して、クラスを編成することが重要となる。幼児の関心を引き続けながら、言語能力習得を促進していけるように、レッスンはルーチン性だけでなく、多様性と連続性を必要とする。本稿では、将来における第2外国語学習の為の基盤形成を目的とした幼児への英語学習の導入に焦点を当てる。まず楽しく、かつ言語学習を促進する様々な言語ゲーム、歌、クラフトを提案する。そして他の教師がそれぞれのクラスにおいて、ゲーム、歌、クラフトを適応させ、さらに発展させることを目的として議論していく。

Like in any class there are a number of issues to be considered when planning a lesson for preschool-aged children. The first issue is assessing the goals of the class. It is very important the instructors are realistic in what they are able to teach in the amount of time they have each week with the preschoolers. Furthermore, by nature children in this age group have very short attention spans, so the planning of lessons must have continuity and variety in order to engage them. Secondly, at this level, children will primarily be acquiring vocabulary, which is best achieved through actively involving them in the lesson. To spark the preschoolers' curiosity it is necessary to not only keep the interest of the young learner high but also the lesson running smoothly. This paper will address these issues through first

discussing the classroom situation, and then examining the topics of warm-ups, language review, and introducing new language through songs, stories, and creative time. How to create a lesson with the aim of both encouraging the preschoolers to use and acquire English will also be presented.

The classroom situation

Teaching preschoolers English is challenging. Often they may not understand why they are being taught English; therefore it is up to the teacher to foster the preschooler's curiosity and desire to learn. Piaget's theory on the major stages of cognitive development states that between the ages of 2-7 years old children's language ability rapidly increases (Atherton, 2005; Vosniadou, 2001). At this age, small children learn quickly; they are easily able to understand and use language. However preschoolers are also energetic, so a great deal of class time is spent in managing or organizing the class (Vosniadou, 2001). A class for preschoolers accordingly requires structure. Once the structure of a class has been set, it is necessary to frequently change activities within this structure, in order to maintain the interest of the children.

It is important that the instructor is clear in their goals for the class and realistic in what they expect the preschoolers to learn and remember. If the preschoolers only have one English lesson a week the goals of the class could be to get the preschoolers comfortable being with the foreign teacher, to familiarize them with English sounds and rhythms, and to introduce a different culture to them. As Cole and Wertsch (1996) describe from a Vygotskian point

of view, culture is very important, especially through the mediation of action through artifacts in the development of the mind. This is because culture can act as a cushion in a language class. It allows the teacher to demonstrate the similarities between their own culture and that of the preschoolers, or use culturally specific games from the preschoolers' culture in English. In both these situations the teacher would be taking something that is familiar to the children and expanding it, which in turn creates a non-threatening learning environment. While it would be unrealistic to expect the preschoolers to have a conversation in English, many of them, after a short period of time, will be able to recognize certain phrases and words (hello, how are you, I'm 4 years old...). Most children will be excited about being able to communicate in English. Therefore it is important that the instructor encourages the preschoolers by providing opportunities to use the language and skills they have acquired at an appropriate level (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Wong-Fillmore, 1985) and gently corrects mistakes. If the preschooler, for example, should happen to see the teacher at a time different from the normal class time, and say "Good morning!" the instructor might simply respond with "Good afternoon", or depending on the ability of the child, gently inform that we use "Good morning" in the morning, and ask "Do you know/remember what we say in the afternoon?"

There is a wide range of materials and resources available for teaching English to preschoolers. It is important that the instructor adjusts the material to suit their particular teaching style. If the material is too difficult, the children will hesitate and not be able to fully participate in the class, and the

lesson will not be interesting or fun (Becker, 2001). The language used in class must be appropriate for the level and age of the class (Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Spaulding, 1992); with preschoolers the class will primarily focus on aural/oral skills. It is important to slowly introduce new vocabulary and slowly increase the complexity of the language. If the instructor realizes that the children have not grasped the new vocabulary, it will be necessary to slow down and reintroduce the vocabulary in a simpler way. This will ensure that the class runs smoothly, but that the students are also able to learn the material.

It is useful to follow a similar routine each week. The routine will reassure the children, as they will know basically what to expect during the course of the lesson. The instructor must know the lesson plan and have confidence in it (Becker, 2001; Hedge, 2000). Preschoolers easily pick up on feelings of unease and if the instructor is unsure of the lesson this will lead to an unsuccessful class. As the children are young, and interests in different activities will vary week to week, it is also important to be flexible within the basic routine of the lesson. It is a good idea to have some teacher-led activities, student-centered activities, and together activities as this gives variety to the class, appeals to different learning styles, and also helps the teacher avoid being constantly the center of attention and getting exhausted. Having an established format to the class, the children will know the routine, and this will make them feel more comfortable and so they will be more likely to learn more, and the class will run smoothly. A basic lesson plan should include a warm-up, language review, active songs, story-time, and creative time.

The warm-up

The warm-up offers the children a chance to ease into English time. The warm-up could simply consist of two parts: the singing of a song and the taking of attendance. To indicate that English time has started, it is a good idea to start with a song. If the class is in the morning, you might start with the *Good Morning* song. Next, it is important to see who has come to class. While some preschoolers are very brave at the beginning of English class, most are shy therefore I make this a group activity. Each child has a name tag, which can be a simple shape cut out of construction paper and covered with book plastic or laminated. As a group you can ask “Who is here today?” or “Is (name) here?” This would require that the children to answer together “Yes/No”, and then pass the name tag to the child, if present. Having completed a warm-up the preschoolers are prepared to review and learn new vocabulary and language structures.

Language review

The following section explores basic activities for introducing and reviewing vocabulary. The topic of “numbers” will be discussed in greater detail, to illustrate various ways that a topic can be reviewed and expanded upon, once the vocabulary has been introduced.

Depending on the frequency of the class, new language will have to be presented several times before it is remembered. There are several ways in which new language can be introduced. First, the use of familiar characters, either pictures or toys, can take the stress out of a new activity as well as help create a learning situation. For example, when

introducing the concept of possessive pronouns such as “his” and “her”, the use of characters that the children are familiar with, such as Disney or Anpanman characters, will make the activity fun and also enable the children to concentrate only on the new English. When introducing the phrase “What is his name?” you can either hold up a picture of a familiar character or use a doll, elicit the answer from the children, and reinforce the answer with “Yes, *his* name is...”

Secondly, a physical activity that works well with preschoolers is the use of a large, soft color cube ball with a different color on each of its six sides. A simple activity with the color cube requires that the preschoolers stand in a circle, and the ball is thrown either to a child or on the floor. Then ask “What color is it?” and the preschoolers all yell out what color they see facing up. This activity is an adaptation of the karuta game older Japanese children play. Both of these activities draw upon the preschooler’s mental culture, which as Vygotsky suggests, will boost their language acquisition (Cole & Wertsch, 1996).

Lastly, another teaching method that can encourage language acquisition is the use of visual aids. When introducing or reviewing different types of weather, you may choose to start with a song about the weather using pictures. The pictures can be used to help the children understand the song. The pace of the song must also be considered. Many English songs are much too fast for young ESL learners therefore I sing songs a cappella with the children at a much slower pace with pictures. After the children have learnt or reviewed all the types of weather, as a class they decide what the weather is like on the day of the class. The picture is then placed on the blackboard or could be made on a felt board.

Numbers can be introduced in several ways. Preschoolers should be able to count up to ten. However, if they learn to count to twelve, it makes it easier to play games involving time. First, preschoolers should be familiar with the sentences “How old are you?” and “I am ... years old”. When teaching age, I bring pictures of birthday cakes with the appropriate number of candles on them. We then count the number of candles together, with the picture acting as a visual reinforcement. Another common phrase is “How many...?” This phrase can be introduced simply by reading books. When reading the book *Ten Little Monkeys: Jumping on the Bed*, you can ask the children “How many monkeys are there on the bed, now?” This can also be done with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. When the caterpillar is eating different fruit you can ask “How many...?” and count them together. The visual reinforcement encourages the preschoolers to participate in the activity as well as helps them remember the language in use. Finally, there are also many excellent number songs. The classic song “Ten Little Fingers” can be adapted for seasonal variations. At Halloween there might be ten little ghosts or witches, at Christmas there might be ten little Santas, and at Easter ten little bunnies. This song can be sung counting both forwards for review and backwards to help familiarize the preschoolers with number ordering and add a challenge to keep the class exciting. In this way the students have maximum exposure to the topic of numbers, but each activity is different thereby maintaining variety, interest, and challenge in the class.

Songs

Young children especially like to sing songs. Songs are a great way to introduce new vocabulary, speech patterns, or rhythms to preschoolers (Brown, 2006; Medina, 1993). I find that after sitting through the warm-up and language review the children are restless and need to move about. The song “Head and Shoulders” can be used for learning and reviewing body parts. Most Japanese children know this song in their native language. To start with, even when the children are familiar with the song in English, it is always important to review the parts of the body, by asking “What is this?” and pointing to a specific body part. This will help ensure that the children know the body parts independent of the song. After the children know them well, the lyrics can be slowly altered using other body parts, for example starting with head and shoulders, and changing to back and bum, and ending with arms, elbows, fingers, and thumbs. Or, singing the original lyrics, you could have everyone sit on the floor with their legs lying out in front of them and do a stretching version of the song. Other good active songs include “The Hokey Poky” and “My Head is Nodding”. “The Hokey Poky” can be used to both learn and review body parts as well as the concepts of left and right. Likewise, “My Head is Nodding” reviews body parts and introduces different actions associated with a specific body part. The concept of big/little can be introduced with “I’m a Little Teapot”. Before singing this song, show the children a big and little teapot and ask which teapot is big, and which is little.

Stories

Learning language through stories is powerful. Reading is something that children feel comfortable with, because so

much of their own native language was learnt from stories. Accordingly, young children can pick up many second language forms and new vocabulary through stories (Brown, 2006; Elley, 1989). There are numerous ways to use stories in class. To begin with, it is important that the children have a basic understanding of the story. Books with lots of colorful pictures that give them an idea of the meaning of the story work best. Stories that the preschoolers may have had read to them in Japanese also work well, as the children have an idea of what happens in the story already and so they can concentrate on listening to the English. When reading the story out loud, use your voice to help convey the meaning of the story. Next, to ensure that the preschoolers have a basic understanding of the story asking questions as you read helps with comprehension in addition to involving the children in the story. When asking questions it is important to ask the question to the group as a whole, not to a specific child so as to avoid making that child feel uncomfortable. Let the children help each other, as it is just the interest in English that you want to foster. For example, with the story *Cinderella Dressed in Yellow*, you could ask “Who is wearing yellow today?” or “How many kisses did the prince get?” With the story *I Like Stars* you can ask questions about color. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* is an excellent book because of the use of repetition. You can also ask the children “What animal is this?” or “What color is this?” By asking questions, and involving the children in the reading, it becomes an active, not just a passive, activity. Lastly, books that incorporate chanting, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, grasp the children’s attention with the repetition of key words and phrases. *Peanut Butter Jelly: A Play Rhyme* is another chanting book that excites small

children when read with added gestures, and the repetition enforces language acquisition. A fun activity with this book is to actually make peanut butter with the children (see appendix 1). In addition to reading, stories can come to life for preschoolers when they do crafts or special activities related to the stories.

Creative time

Preschoolers love to be involved in the class and there are many ways to accomplish that, including group activities such as using the felt board, singing the ABC song to introduce the alphabet and phonics, or drawing pictures on their own. Whatever the activity, it is important to ensure that there are enough materials for everyone to participate, that the activity is not beyond the skill level of the preschoolers, and most importantly that it is enjoyable.

The felt board is a unique teaching tool that engages preschoolers both mentally and physically in the class. Felt sticks to felt. Each child can be given a large piece of felt, or a mat of felt can be glued to a large bulletin board as the background for a group activity. Then each child is given additional felt shapes to create their picture. If the topic is weather, shapes for each type of weather would be given to the preschoolers, i.e., the sun, white/black clouds, wind, rain, etc. As a group activity, when going over the weather, you might ask the children to come up and create that type of weather on the board; when you review rain, some children will place rain clouds and raindrops on the felt board. After the rain picture has been created, the felt pieces are removed for the next type of weather discussed. The felt board can also be used to depict stories such as *The Very*

Hungry Caterpillar, with each child taking turns to feed the caterpillar. The felt board creates an interactive visual aid for preschoolers, making a simple activity like discussing the weather exciting or bringing books to life.

Young children love to sing the ABC song. Often, preschoolers will say “again, again!” and will happily sing it at least four times. The ABC song is a useful tool to introduce both the alphabet and phonics. Before we begin a craft, in this part of the lesson I always introduce one letter of the alphabet. At most Japanese elementary schools, students are not taught phonics. However, I believe that it is very important that the preschoolers are aware that each letter has its own sound or sounds. In each lesson I present a different letter of the alphabet to the children and say the sound. The children receive a handout with that letter on it and can color it in at some other time during the week. This enables the children to come into contact with something from our English lesson at least one other time during the week. I prepare another activity that is related to the sound of the letter for that week to do together in class. For example if we are doing the letter “i” we might color a picture of an ice cream cone and then we might make ice cream (see Appendix 1). For the letter “v” I have an outline of a vase on a piece of paper to color in, and the children cut out and glue flower petals or make and glue origami flowers to the picture. For the letter “z” the children might color the strips on a zebra in the zoo. While the kids are doing their activities I talk to them constantly in English about what they are doing. The point of this is to immerse them in English and get them used to the flow of natural speech. I also have an English CD or tape softly playing music in the background.

Whenever introducing a song, story, or game it is important to remember that the first time you do something new with your class, it may not go as well as you had hoped. Most young children tend to be shy when being introduced to something new, accordingly even if the activity did not go as well as you had hoped, it is a good idea to try it again the next week, when the children might be more receptive after having tried it once before. Sometimes it takes a few weeks for preschoolers to get used to a new activity or song. Furthermore, while many websites have wonderful ideas for activities and songs to do with children, most were created for older children or for native speakers of English. While some of the activities or songs can be easily done by ESL preschoolers, most are beyond their level. However, with a little creativity it is possible to change the pace of a song or the level of an activity to suit the preschooler's ability and the instructor's teaching style.

Summary

There are many superb ideas available for creating exciting and fun ESL classes for preschoolers. However, not all the ideas suit the teaching styles of individual teachers. Teachers must customize the material to suit their teaching situation and class. In a lesson for preschoolers I advocate that there are five basic points to consider. First, what is the classroom situation? The teacher must consider the goals, the structure, and the routine of the class. Next in the warm-up, the teacher must get the children ready for English class. The teacher must have a signal for the children to indicate that the time for learning English has begun. This signal could be a song or some other activity. In the language review,

the teacher can go over the language that the children have previously learnt through a combination of games, songs, or activities to ensure that all the children are involved in the language learning process. Most young children love to sing and have stories read to them. Both songs and stories are therefore an excellent way to introduce new words and language structures, and should be used as much as possible in and ESL class for preschoolers. Finally, a creative time gives children an opportunity to reinforce the day's topic by doing a craft or picture. At all times during the class it is important that the teacher remains in control of the language learning, which is best achieved by having confidence in the lesson. The teacher must always be comfortable with the material they are covering. Accordingly, I recommend that the instructor takes the ideas presented in this article, closely examines them, and then adapts them to suit their own teaching situation.

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Appendix 1

Recipes

The following recipes are easy to make with small children.

Peanut Butter

Peanut butter is simple to make by putting peanuts into a blender with a little oil and processing them. I bring some peanuts in a shell, and get the children to shell them, as well as some pre-shelled peanuts. Then all the children help to put the peanuts into the food processor and make the peanut butter together.

Chocolate Ice Cream:

½ cup milk

2 cups marshmallows

1 envelope unflavored gelatin

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

½ hot milk

1 cup heavy cream

1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips (or milk chocolate bars broken up into pieces)

Put cold milk and gelatin into a blender and dissolve, add hot milk. Add chocolate chip pieces and mix until the chocolate is dissolved. Add marshmallows one at a time. Mix until the marshmallows are liquefied. Add the vanilla. Pour into a bowl and chill until firm. Then add the heavy cream, and whip until thick and fluffy. Put into a container and freeze.

Appendix 2

Websites

The following websites have many ideas, activities, and crafts to use with preschool aged children.

<www.preschoolrainbow.org>

Activities and lesson plans that aim to give preschoolers choices. While this site was created for native speakers many of the ideas can be used or adapted for ESL classes.

<www.preschooexpress.com>

Many activities and songs, as well as monthly themes. These ideas work great in small classes as well as in one-to-one classes.

<www.first-school.ws>

This site has a wide range of themes with excellent printable activities and crafts. Many of the crafts do not require a great deal of preparation.

The following sites offer many excellent ideas and songs, that with a little adaptation work well with preschoolers. However some downloads do require membership or subscription:

<www.enchantedlearning.com>

<www.genkienglish.com>

<www.booglesworld.com>

Appendix 3

Story books

The following stories are excellent to use with small children.

Brown, M. W., & Paley, J. (1954). *I like stars*. New York: Golden Book.

Carle, E. (1969). *The very hungry caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books.

Freeman, T. (illustrator). (2004). *Ten little monkeys: Jumping on the bed*. Swindon: Child's Play Ltd.

Martin, B. Jr., & Archambault, J. (1989). *Chicka chicka boom boom*. New York: Scholastic.

Martin, B. Jr., & Carle, E. (1992). *Brown bear, brown bear what do you see?* New York: Henry Holt & Company.

Westcott, N. B. (1992). *Peanut butter jelly: A play rhyme*. New York: Puffin Books.

Williams, R. L., & Fujisaki, T. (1994). *Cinderella dressed in yellow*. Cypress: Creative Teaching Press.

Appendix 4

Songs

Young children usually enjoy singing. Here are three songs that work well with young ESL learners.

“Good Morning”

Good morning, good morning,
Good morning everyone.
Good morning, good morning
Come let’s have some fun!

(Lyrics by the author)

“My Head is Nodding”

My head is nodding,
Nodding, nodding,
My head is nodding
Just like this.

My eyes are blinking,
Blinking, blinking,
My eyes are blinking,
Just like this.

My arms are waving,
Waving, waving,
My arms are waving,
Just like this.

My feet are running,
Running, running,
My feet are running,
Just like this.

(Numerous body parts and movement combinations can be added.)

“I’m a Little Teapot”

I’m a little teapot, short and stout
Here is my handle [one hand on hip], here is my spout [other arm out straight]

When I get all steamed up, hear me shout
Just tip me over and pour me out!

[as song ends, lean over and tip arm out like a spout]

I’m a clever teapot, yes it’s true
Here’s an example of what I can do
I can change my handle to my spout [*switch arm positions and repeat tipping motion*]
Just tip me over and pour me out.