



## Mari Nakamura

The *Young Learners* column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editor at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

Email: <young-learners@jalt-publications.org>

# A Quest to Foster Literacy Independence: How It All Started

Mari Nakamura

*“My students are learning to communicate orally, but I have no ideas how to promote their reading skills.”*

*“I teach my students only once a week. How can I teach them reading and writing when I barely have time for conversation activities?”*

I can genuinely relate to these sentiments frequently shared by teachers at teacher training workshops, I myself have been struggling to find ways to promote children’s literacy skills since I founded my English language school over 20 years ago.

I founded my school, English Square, in a northern city in Japan in 1993. The first classroom was just a tiny *tatami* (straw mat) room in a small apartment where 6 small people could barely fit in. At that time I had virtually no ideas as to how to teach English to children and had only a few textbooks. There were very few resources for teachers of young learners on the market those days, and living in such a remote area, I had very few contacts with other professionals. Remember, it was the pre-Internet era. The best teacher trainers for me were the children in my classrooms. Teachers of children must know that children’s innocent yet brutally honest comments such as “Boring!” and “Again?” can sometimes make you feel like a failure!

Over the years, I have accumulated some skills and knowledge through numerous trials and errors in class with those little critics while learning theories in SLA, TEFL, developmental psychology and neuroscience through reading and later on online courses. Joining ETJ (English Teachers in Japan) and JALT, and collaborating with fellow teachers has empowered me in many ways as well. I have gradually learned to see things from children’s

perspectives and started to see my students’ deeper engagement and active oral interaction during the lessons. However, there was one challenge that seemed insurmountable for me: To develop their literacy skills so that they can be lifelong learners.

Positive literacy education can give children a window to the world. How nice would it be if Japanese children could expand their world by being exposed to new information by reading books written in English, and furthermore if they could express their thoughts and imagination in English? At that time it felt like a dream to me given the circumstance where I could see them only once a week for instruction.

Then, around 2005 several major ELT publishers started to create and promote leveled readers, simple picture books for young ESL/EFL learners, and graded readers in Japan. Very fortunately, I was traveling around Japan to do teacher training those days, and I could learn how to use leveled readers and graded readers from some experts firsthand. I felt like I finally saw a light at the end of the tunnel. “Maybe, just maybe, I can do my share in developing children’s literacy skills!” I thought.

Since then, day in and day out, I have studied methodologies in literacy education while trying out some new literacy activities in class. I was amazed at how children enjoy shared reading experiences and absorb the language as a result. I chose the picture book based curriculum design in young EFL classrooms as the theme of my dissertation for a master’s degree, and learned further on the relevant theories and practice.

My quest for the development of a literacy instructional model for my students has continued, and in 2010, I finally created a three-stage literacy program for children from kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> graders. It is still a work in progress, and it might end up being a totally different program after several years. However, I would candidly like to share where I am at now in the quest with you, welcome your questions and input, and continue to grow myself as a teacher and curriculum designer.

In the following section, I will illustrate the classroom environment and the summary of the three-stage literacy program.

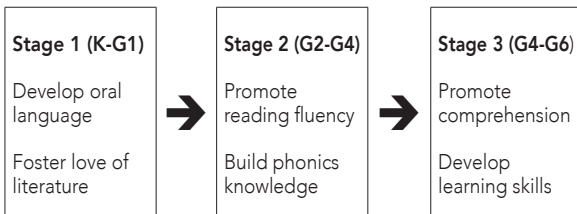
## Classroom Environment

As I briefly discussed earlier, I teach at my own private English language school that specializes in teaching children and teenagers and in training teachers. Kindergarten classes meet once a week for 50 minutes while the elementary school classes meet once a week for 60 minutes. The maximum number of students per class is six. Most of the students begin to study English at my school when they start kindergarten. At my school, all four skills are taught in an integrated manner with more emphasis placed on oral language development among young children, from K to G2, while more instruction time is spent on literacy skills development in older children's classes. The goal is to cultivate learners' confidence in using English as a communication tool, and also to foster learner autonomy.

## The Overview of The Three-Stage Literacy Program

The diagram below illustrates the overview of the three-stage literacy program to be discussed in the later installments of this column in detail.

### The Three-Stage Literacy Program



The key principles in this literacy program are:

1. Throughout the program meaningful content and engaging activities are utilized to keep children motivated and to accelerate learning.
2. The classroom is a safe place where children experiment and learn new linguistic materials and skills through trials and errors with appropriate level of challenge and support.
3. The practice of literacy skills is integrated with the other skills' practice to reflect the multifaceted nature of language.
4. Oral language development is valued in the early stage to take advantage of young children's innate ability and willingness to hear and mimic sounds. They use the oral language as resource for later literacy activities.
5. As children's higher order thinking skills mature, activities that require logical thinking and

problem solving become integral elements in instruction.

6. With the aim to foster literacy independence, making choices and developing learning skills are promoted throughout the program in developmentally appropriate ways.

One thing to be noted is that these stages are not independent from one another. Rather, the diagram above intends to show how the focus of instruction shifts gradually from Stage 1 towards Stage 3. For example, phonics is taught all through the stages, even though it is indicated in the Stage 2 frame in the diagram. Phonemic awareness activities and some basic phonics rules are introduced at Stage 1 to prepare children for the systematic instruction of phonics at Stage 2. They also have ample opportunities to apply their phonetic knowledge while engaging in various literacy activities at Stage 3. In addition, the information on grade levels specified in the diagram is only used as a rough guide, and the timing of moving from a stage to the next depends on the students' profiles.

In the following installments of this column I will guide you through the three stages of the literacy program with theoretical backgrounds, practical ideas and issues I have been facing along the way. I would like to hear your experiences in literacy education, and exchange and explore new ideas together on JALT Teaching Younger Learners SIG Facebook page. <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/jshsig/>>

See you there!

**Mari Nakamura**, the owner of English Square <<http://www.crossroad.jpe/es/>> in Kanazawa City, has been teaching English to young learners, and has been providing teacher training workshops for over 20 years. She has earned a master's degree in TEYL at Aston University.

Her publications include *English Land* (Pearson Japan, co-author), *Phonics Farm* (MLH) and *Lily and the Moon* (ELF Learning, co-author). Her main interests are in literacy education and learner autonomy. She can be reached at <mari-@pop02.odn.ne.jp>.



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