



Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.

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Welcome to the September/October edition of TLT Interviews! In this issue we have a wide-ranging conversation with Barbara Hoskins Sakamoto, held during JALT2017, on the teaching of younger learners. Barbara has a secondary English teaching qualification, a MATESOL degree from the USA, and is one of the authors of *Let's Go* (Oxford University Press), the first EFL course book for children—a long-term best-seller now in its 4th edition. She has mentored countless teachers around the world in teacher training workshops and through her online presence as the Program Director for the International Teacher Development Institute (ITDi.pro). Barbara was interviewed by Marian Hara, a seasoned educator who started her teaching career in Japan with children's classes in 1975. Marian recently returned to working with elementary students after a long, full-time career in junior and senior high. So, without further ado, to the interview!



Marian Hara: Thank you for agreeing to share your thoughts on teaching younger learners. As a teacher and teacher trainer, what aptitudes do you think help children acquire a foreign language?

Barbara Hoskins: I'm not sure that *aptitudes* is the right word because that implies something unchangeable; either you're good at it or you're not. I see many different pathways. Some students have amazing listening and a clear ability to mimic sounds. I've also had students who have dreadful pronunciation. They can't make an "r" sound, but they're excellent language learners. They're so focused on communicating that they don't worry about what they can't do. Then there's a third type of student that is more analytical. They don't look like they're picking up anything; they might be silent and not answering questions because they're figuring it all out. There are a lot of different paths to communicative competence, and our challenge as teachers is to figure out which path works for each student. The student we think is doing a really

great job is that one with a great ear, and maybe not concerned about mistakes. But that third one, who doesn't seem like he's getting it, might surprise you. Kids are still developing; they're not a fixed thing when they walk into class. The way they are at six is not the way they're going to be at 12. We need to allow space for them to grow and discover their own pathways.

You wouldn't be concerned if a child is hung up on mistakes and therefore hesitant to speak?

We want to work with them, but there are also students who are so focused on fluency that we need to nudge them to care a little more about mistakes. For the ones who are hung up on mistakes, one of the most powerful things we can do is to let them see our own mistakes. I will speak Japanese in class, simply because it makes my students feel way better about their English! Laughing at our own mistakes in front of students helps them to laugh at their mistakes.

How can we help those who struggle to enjoy foreign languages?

It's a hard one! It's possible that they may never like foreign languages. Most kids don't get a vote about being in English class until they get to university. I've met teachers who chose to teach in elementary school because they didn't want to deal with English! Just because I think language is fabulous doesn't mean that everybody needs to like it. But I think we can help our students come to peace with it. When they say "I don't like English," often what they mean is, "I don't like studying *about* language." They're stuck learning English as a subject at school, but usually the foreign teacher gets to do English as communication. It's a great chance to find out what they're interested in, because chances are there's something about that out there in English. For example, I had two students who were huge soccer fans, but not big grammar fans. I borrowed an activity from Scott Thornbury, using two grammar forms, about a player who was currently playing and another who was retired. They had to decide who was who. They were willing to do it because

it was soccer. With a class of 40 it's hard to find a topic they all like, but I'll toss it in the students' laps, saying, "Make a list of things you would like to use English to do," and we can agree on one, whether it's research into soccer or making manga using apps. The same boys loved to use the computer, so that was the carrot I dangled when I needed them to write a story, peer edit, and rewrite three times. Suddenly they didn't mind revising. After 30 minutes of working on the computer to create digital cartoons, they gave me three weeks of writing. You should assume there's more than one way to accomplish the same teaching goals. It's like grinding up broccoli and putting it in your kid's spaghetti. Every parent does that and most teachers, too. If I give my students a voice recorder and say, "Practice as often as you want before we record," they've got no problem rehearsing. It's giving them the power to control when they feel ready. But if I said, "I want you to repeat this until you are fluent," I would get resistance. Also, the element of performance with a real audience makes it English communication, as opposed to just a class subject.

Please share some of your golden rules of good teaching practice.

One is recognizing that kids are bringing stuff to the class. We sometimes assume that we're responsible for everything in the classroom, but they're coming in with different experiences. Even if they're not speaking English in class, for all you know they go to Hawaii every summer. I think we sometimes dismiss student knowledge just because they can't verbalize it. A good example of that is phonics. Most children come into English class in Japan knowing the ABC song. I see programs where the teacher is following a specific phonics program and says, "We don't need the alphabet letters; we're going to start with sounds." If students come into class excited because they can count to ten in English and know the ABCs, and they're told, "We're not doing the ABCs because the sounds are more important," it kind of dismisses what they've brought with them to the classroom.

Another one is respecting the students. That means recognizing that English class for students is on the same level as their piano, Kumon, or swim class. It may not be the most important class for them, or their parents. If we respect our students and understand that they have outside lives, then it's good to get to know them. My fifth graders have been coming into class exhausted and falling asleep. So, I'll say, "Let's do 30 minutes of focused work and then we can play a game." Or I tell them they can use the iPad or just chat. "How was school? You're

doing basketball?" Now I understand why they're exhausted!

The other golden rule is to keep learning about as many things as possible, both teaching and non-teaching, so we as teachers have more choices in what we bring to class. The content of English is huge. We need to choose the content and how to communicate it best to that audience. I think my number one goal overall is doing things that make us feel stupid so we never forget how our students might feel. We talk about how important it is to make mistakes in English, but how comfortable are we talking in Japanese when we're making mistakes?

Many newer methods of teaching children start with phonics. What are your views on using phonics with pre-school and elementary learners?

It's a very effective way of learning to read. Both phonics and the 'whole word' method are necessary, but I see some mistakes with phonics. It's a buzzword that parents recognize and has the cachet of being used in countries where English is a first language. The first mistake is that programs are imported as is. The native English-speaking child of 6 knows 3,000 to 5,000 words; the phonics programs simply help them assign sounds to letters. They already know the vocabulary. Using a phonics program designed for children with a large passive vocabulary involves an extra step when we're teaching children who don't have that vocabulary. Teachers I've asked estimate that their kids know about 300 words by the time they start phonics, aged 6. So, we should start out building a strong oral base, and then introduce phonics using words students have already learned. It's the "native" approach, but using a much smaller word base. Using a phonics approach that builds from the vowels and consonants—the 3-letter words—is backed up by decades of research in the US and the UK. But it needs to be adapted for ESL. You must continue building the oral language as you introduce new phonics patterns. I've seen enough kids learning to read with *Let's Go* that I know it works. There's no reason to bring in a whole bunch of language they're not going to remember.

How should teachers vary their classroom practices to fit the local culture or issues arising from the local language?

There is value in bringing our own culture into class. That's part of learning a language, especially if you're a child. The parties are the best part—unless you're the teacher, in which case it can be Halloween hell! There's also another side to it. In my work-

shop yesterday, the dance had people hugging, but many Japanese people generally don't hug. That's a cultural thing. So, do we force kids to hug? I would say no if it distracts from the language learning process. There's just a shock to the system which they can't get past, like hugging or having to stand up in front of people.

In my early years teaching high school in Iwate, my 16-year-old boys stood and bowed and I said, "No! We're not going to bow. This is America in this classroom, so no bowing!" I didn't realize bowing was simply the signal to start class. By the fourth week of chaotic classes I said, "OK, let's bow," and then it was fine. I was thinking my culture was somehow superior, and I was going to teach them the American way of having class. That was a good lesson for me!

Working with Spanish speakers, it's E at the beginning of every word that starts with S, and with Japanese kids the R and the L are going to be a pain in the butt—and you know third person singular is a nice idea but hard to master! That's also a challenge for course book writers. We had to pick which phonics patterns to have because you can't cover them all. *Let's Go* is sold in 162 countries. We have L and R because we sell widely in Asia where it's an issue. We don't have kids with short sleeves or naked legs. We don't have ham, or people touching dogs, because those are cultural distractions in some countries. In the first edition, you didn't see children wearing shoes in the house because that was an issue for Japanese users. Some teachers would like lessons about Christmas and Halloween, but the books are sold in countries where those aren't holidays. So, you always need to supplement a

course book. With a book that's all stories or topics and functions, you need to bring in grammar. *Let's Go* is all form and patterns, so you need to supplement holidays.

Do you have advice for teachers considering teaching younger learners, which is a growing area in Japan?

It's essential to have reasonable expectations and know what learning myths are not supported by research. If a parent says, "Please teach my 3-year-old to write," we can say, "That's not developmentally appropriate. Until they're holding a pencil in Japanese school, they're not going to hold a pencil in English class." And we shouldn't ask 5-year-olds to raise their right hand unless we're raising ours, too, and facing away from them!

Recognize that you may not do this for the rest of your career. Teachers often start teaching young learners when they are single, young, and new to teaching. If they're dedicated they develop skills, but the lower salary isn't adequate as a married person supporting a family, so many teachers take their skills and move out of teaching elementary, which is a shame.

Lastly, leave yourself open to the possibilities that are in teaching; know that if you want to be a good teacher, it will be a project of constantly learning new things, realizing that maybe what you were doing five years ago could be done better, and acknowledging that becoming a good teacher is going to be a career-long process.

Reference

Nakata, R., Frazier, K., Hoskins, B., & Graham, C. (1991). *Let's Go*. England: Oxford University Press.

[JALT PRACTICE] MY SHARE



Steven Asquith & Nicole Gallagher

We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 600 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used that can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see the guidelines on our website below).

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Hi and welcome to the September/October edition of My Share. As we bid farewell to summer and turn our attention to the new academic term, it is always exciting to envisage how new ideas and projects can be integrated into class curricula. Gems of inspiration can begin forming into concrete plans as new ideas take shape. Personally, I like to think of this as a period

when the ideas provided in My Share can produce the greatest benefit, and I am therefore delighted to announce that this month's authors have provided a truly outstanding crop.

In the first article, Kevin Clark introduces a stimulating idea to get students to think more critically by role playing a town hall meeting. This practical lesson