

The First Lesson, and Beyond

Here's a sample of what could be done for the first lesson, starting a class of preschool children in Unit A. These suggestions and comments on class routines and methods also illustrate how the worksheets might be introduced and applied.

In all of these routines, the *strategy* is that the kids should be using the language in meaningful activities before they are asked to read it. The *purpose* is to get the foundation of English sounds established first. The *method* is to have fun in real interactions. The *result* is children discovering how to use a new language. The *goal* is not to teach English, but for your students to discover it. The *difference* is everything.

- 1) Play with handing out blocks, stacking blocks, asking for blocks (numbers and play). This gets the kids involved, playing with things, everyone has different numbers of blocks, everyone's busy counting, stacking, talking. Start low, go up to as far as they know, then quit by asking for a few blocks back 'Three, please' until you have all the blocks back.
- 2) Pass out color cards, with no text. 'This is green.' Slip a tough one in, to get 'What's this?'. Once one child gets that all-important question, have him repeat it with gusto, pressing his finger onto the card in question. Get all the kids into this 'What's this?' routine, and expect them to use it from today on. If these first-time students learn only this one simple question in their first twenty minutes (and you should make sure they do), they will have learned more than many other children have after years of 'Eikaiwa'.
- 3) If any of the kids seem too good at colors, give them several cards to produce 'This is yellow, blue, pink AND black.' Most kids are thrilled to get extra cards.
- 4) Gaze curiously at an activity card, say a boy catching a ball. Keep wondering aloud 'What's he doing?' until someone volunteers 'catch'. 'Oh, he's catching!' After a few more, pass various cards out and have them announce- 'He's sleeping', cooking, running, jumping, walking.
- 5) Hand on table. 'ON !!!' Hand in pocket, 'IN !!!' Hand under table, 'UNDER !!!'. Get all the kids into this. The sensation of jamming their own hand into their own pocket while yelling out 'IN!' makes a lasting impression, and connects with the sound of the word. This is exactly what words actually are; sounds that express sensations.
- 6) Play picture bingo. Have them announce the items. If anyone is afraid, just skip over them to give them time to adjust. Most kids have been trained that the teacher gives all the instructions, so it takes time for them to realize that they are allowed (even expected) to ask questions, and announce instructions. As soon as one child gets one bingo, quit. Usually I go to three bingos, but this is the first day. They'll want to play again if you stop the games early this way. After a few sessions of picture bingo, I would try a set of noun flash cards that match the picture bingo vocabulary, having them ask each other around the circle as they hand over a card, 'What is it?'. In a circle of several students, there can be two waves of this exchange going around at the same time. This keeps everyone active and talking about different things with each other.
- 7) Verb miming- put the activity cards in a stack face down, look at one (concealed), mime it and ask 'What am I doing?' until you get a correct response. After doing this for two or three cards, have them take turns acting out various cards, asking the others 'What's she doing?'

Don't bother asking for volunteers- just have them take turns going around the circle. As in all activities, you do it as well.

8) Act out 'Wonderful, Great, Good, Okay, So-so, Not So Good, Terrible' along with matching gestures. Kids love getting into gestures, and real friends don't say 'Fine, thank you'. When you start getting these responses when you greet arrivals (after a few months perhaps), you'll know that they are beginning to learn from your classes.

9) Plastic banana on box: 'Where's the banana?' All you need is 'On', then move it around the classroom, putting it on, in or under various common things. Notice that this activity, and the miming (#7), are actually continuations of earlier targets. One target lesson broken into three five minute activities, with other activities between, is much more effective than a single fifteen minute session that kills the class energy. Break your targets into short chunks, and mix them into the lesson with other short activities.

10) Pass out some colored shapes cards, and have the kids describe them. Because these cards combine numbers, color, and shapes, they are great for hitting a lot of targets, and can also be used for dictation coloring, which prepares them for later dictation writing: 'Three yellow dots!', that also develops plural awareness. As usual, I avoid giving the correct answer to a lazy 'What's this?' question, and might respond casually 'six green lines' and then let the alert ones correct me 'No! That's two red circles!'. Giving the wrong answers intentionally is not only playful, but necessary. Traditional classroom methods where students repeat what the teacher says simply trains the students not to think. With many children, the natural desire to focus and observe must be re-activated before any real learning can begin to occur.

11) Time for this first lesson should be up soon, so now (just before the end of class) hand out the worksheets and crayons, and let them color them... any color they want. **Refuse** to give any instructions. Just let them color as they want, telling them 'Any color is okay!' Many will be hesitant, but once they see their more aggressive classmates going ahead, they'll want to catch up. Limit your comments to things like: 'Oh, a pink bird! How nice! and chatter like that, during this work time.

12) As soon as they all have the idea and are coloring on their own interest, gather up the crayons and tell them to finish the sheets as homework. Usually, they will want to finish coloring, and now they have a desire to do their homework. If any of them finished both sides of the worksheet, check off that sheet number in his work record, and give him the next worksheet for his homework. This means that within a few weeks, all the kids will be working on different worksheets, which is exactly what you want- individuals doing different tasks, thinking and discovering on their own.

13) That's it. No instructions, just color the sheet as you like, as homework. There are no text guides for colors until the fifth sheet, which means that you have two more classes to have them playing activities with numbers and colors and nouns, before they have to look at written color names.

14) Perhaps at the second class, you could give them the A Shitajikis, or a similar color code sheet, and show them how to identify blue red green yellow pink with that handout. Then, when they get the fifth worksheet, they won't panic. Included in the Support Material binder are shitajiki samples that you could color photocopy if you wanted as a handout.

15) From now, when Hanako arrives for class, I would ask her questions about the sheet she's done, basic questions like: 'What color is the dog? How many boys are there? What's the frog doing? Where's the red book?' adjusted to her ability level. Rather than point to a dog and ask 'What's this?' I would ask 'Is this a cat?' or even say seriously 'It's a horse'. When she (or Taro sitting across the table) protest that 'No! It's a dog!' you can just apologize for your mistake.

16) As soon as possible, get the children into the habit of reading the worksheets OUT LOUD. Reading aloud is a tremendous assistance for personal comprehension at this initial stage. A common error is to see (for example) 'A cup on a box' and then draw a cup, with a box on top of it. This is the result of translating into Japanese instead of reading in English. When Taro is asked to read the same direction out loud, he will often instantly recognize his mistake. Reading out loud is an important step away from translation and toward direct comprehension.

17) After Hanako's worksheet is checked, have her put it into her class bag, check off that number on her Student Work Record, and give her the next sheet. As soon as all the students are working on their new sheets, perhaps after ten minutes, gather up all the crayons and pencils, and as the kids put their new homework sheet into the folder with their Work Record and Shitajikis, begin the lesson activities.

18) The purpose of the worksheets is to support the class activities, and not to replace them. In order to establish a foundation of speaking and English sounds, students need to be talking, much more than writing or drawing. Because many children have a tendency to avoid talking, time management is important.

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With best wishes for your classes,
Peter Warner
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