

Challenges Arising from Strict Regulations in Face to Face Elementary School Classes During the Pandemic

Natsuki Suzuki

Aoyama Gakuin University (MA Candidate)

Natsuki Suzuki teaches at a public elementary school in Tokyo and is on the cusp of being awarded her master's degree from the English Department of Aoyama Gakuin University. She researches the type and nature of motivation that is most effective for supporting children's successful learning, both in the classroom and beyond. Her research interests also include storytelling, music and magic as ways to teach, inspire and make children smile.

This paper summarizes the author's contribution to the LLL SIG-sponsored forum "Bridging Social Distances in Online Learning" that was presented at the JALT 2020 Online Conference, co-presented with Andrew Reimann, Joseph Dias, Catherine Takasugi, Jonathon Campbell, Fraser Gould, and Kazuko Namba.

Introduction

The following will introduce, some strategies and efforts for making both effective and affective classes from the elementary school perspective. Although face to face classes have been allowed since June, the classes tended to become monotonous due to new rules such as wearing masks or face shields, sitting facing a blackboard all the time, no singing, and no interaction (neither in pairs, nor in groups).

Singing songs or interaction between children using English has always been an effective, enjoyable and popular activity, however such methods have been cut. As a result, the classes tended to follow a monotonous teaching style where most interactions were limited, teacher centered or passive. In English classes, group and spontaneous interaction is an important element for children to learn English effectively and positively. Subsequent regulations and restrictions have diluted the key elements that make the elementary English classroom communicative, interactive and heartwarming.

In this new age of social distancing the challenge for the elementary school English teacher is to create activities and opportunities which (1) lower the affective filter, (2) expose children to diverse, robust and repeated examples of English, and (3) make meaningful and memorable interactions. The following will describe

methods and materials for meeting conditions favorable to interactive and communicative language teaching as well as adding color to an otherwise demotivating and monotonous classroom characteristic of social distancing restrictions.

Memorable moments that put smiles on children's faces

Lessons usually start by cheerfully singing a song that is performed in a way for lowering children's affective filters. Due to restrictions, songs that create a positive atmosphere but can also be performed or enjoyed alone were introduced. A good example of this is the song "Hello Around the World" (KizCastle, 2019) that allows children to try to say hello in 15 different languages.

Another effective introductory activity is starting the class with a small quiz. Some quizzes such as "How Many Triangles?" (TIMEMIXOR, 2013) that captures children's interest are available on YouTube, and can be put on PowerPoint slides as an easily conducted introduction, for generating motivation and also facilitating children's switch from Japanese to English.

Other strategies for creating a communicative environment involve making materials that reflect the children's world. Observing children, spending time getting to know them between classes, considering their learning environment and trying to see English lessons from their perspective can provide valuable insight into improving the overall atmosphere and rapport of the class. For example, when children are in charge of doing magic, gestures, fortune telling and riddles, their motivation and willingness to interact improves.

As a teacher, in a socially distanced environment, it is important to involve students and stimulate autonomous learning. Some activities related to this include simple magic tricks such as turning a magic yellow handkerchief into a white egg. Here children can enjoy the trick but also engage in incidental learning of the target phrases and expressions such as "What's this? - It is a handkerchief! What color is it? - It is yellow!"

Choosing clothes or costumes which compliment lesson themes can also be effective. For example, when learning English through the story Goldilocks and the three bears, deciding to wear clothes which were color-coordinated to look like a bear or wearing

blonde wig, made children smile and gave them the motivation to persevere when learning difficult expressions. Other than clothes or role playing, similarly related or themed artifacts such as bear stamps for checking assignments can be inspiring.

Maximizing English exposure in the classrooms and beyond

A further method for learning English happily and effectively, requires using the five senses as part of the activity. Some examples include secretly placing food samples or real food in a box and getting children to guess what they are by their sense of touch alone. Some hints can be given to broaden their knowledge about concepts and also develop memory retention.

According to Cameron (2001), “Learning words is a cyclical process of meeting words and initial learning, followed by meeting those words again and again, each time extending knowledge of what the words mean and how they are used in the foreign language” (p. 74). Children became addicted to this activity even during recess, allowing children to repeatedly learn the words autonomously while teachers could give more explanation or relevant knowledge.

In order to provide opportunities for children to review a story in the classroom, original YouTube clips were created and introduced. Children could review what they had learnt in a classroom and also view teachers not wearing a mask, with a full array of facial expressions. This helps strengthen teacher-children relationships and creates a positive attitude.

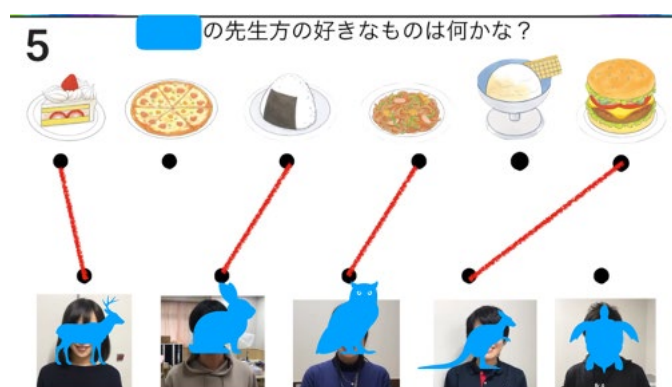
To produce a video that children can enjoy watching, teachers can role play characters by wearing a blonde wig to look like Goldilocks or wear brown clothes to look like bears. Using pictures depicting scenes from the story and illustrated by each child also adds relevance, creativity and personal investment. This further works as a way of building positive motivation when each child can see their own creation in the video.

Comments from children show how their motivation is affected. “I can retell the story very well because I have watched the video every morning. I cannot stop watching it because it is so fun!” Such comments are evidence of how the material reached children.

Maximizing English exposure in the classrooms and beyond

Opportunities for children to use the language for meaningful communication and relationship building is also limited. To counter this, listening material can be modified as an activity to demonstrate getting to know somebody in the real world. Original materials (see Worksheet 1) were introduced where homeroom teachers whom children are familiar with role play various scenarios. This also shows children how English is useful and therefore became one of the most popular activities.

Worksheet 1



Conclusion

The strategies mentioned herein were the innovative product of necessity and would probably not have been developed in regular times. These methods and materials reached children's hearts and they started to participate willingly even outside of the classroom. In this regard, one of the most important jobs for teachers is to promote the motivation and willingness to learn autonomously.

Another important realization is that teachers should always be sensitive to children's needs and interests, and that children should be involved in directing the course and nature of their language learning. Children are good at adapting to new and unfamiliar situations without any stress. In this way they can also give teachers ideas to make better materials for learning English. By placing ourselves in the shoes of our students and seeing the classroom from their perspective, we can create the best methods

and materials, accommodate challenges, difficulties, differences and distances.

References

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.

KizCastle. (2019). Hello around the world: Say hello in 15 different languages [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=472AnCrHYVs>

TIMEMIXOR. (2013). How many triangles can you find? Puzzle Trick!!! [Video]. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9cxM_DQMXI