

Primary Advice

By Helene J. Uchida

Q: How long should a lesson be for a preschooler? And what kind of activities do you suggest for a 3-year-old?

S.K., new teacher
Kagoshima

A: Opening a new world to preschool children through sight, sounds, touch

If your lessons are well-planned and filled with interesting activities, I think 45-minute sessions should work fine. Since preschoolers are taking their first steps into the world of second language acquisition, there are several components worth considering.

Appeal to their senses through sight, sound and touch to create an easy-to-follow structure they can dip into without explanations or instructions. This can be accomplished by using colorful posters, flash cards, puzzles and theme-focused grab bags that draw a response from the children's sense of sight and touch. Make use of songs to reach them through rhythm and rhyme. A dance is a fun way to end the lesson and guarantee that everyone leaves the classroom smiling.

The English universe is new to them, so they have an intrinsic desire to attach a name to things they encounter in real life, especially the concrete things they come across during their daily routines. Exposing them to images of fruits and vegetables along with various kinds of food, zoo and farm animals, clothing, vehicles, and kitchen and bathroom items never fails to fascinate them and give them the thrill of being able to name things in English.

Since they also derive pleasure from putting things in order, teaching them alphabet recognition, how to put things in ABC order, how to count, the names of colors, and how to assemble puzzles helps make them feel challenged yet secure in the English world.

Tempo should be established and maintained through songs, chants, rhymes, dance and lively activities that keep their attention on the activities at hand and leave no time for pauses, which invite young minds to wander.

Repetition of concepts and activities triggers recognition, satisfaction and confidence in the classroom. Being able to predict what will happen gives students a sense of security and comfort in the English zone.

All children enjoy make-believe. A quiet, peaceful activity like reading a picture book with everyone seated on the floor around the teacher is always an intimate ex-

perience. Sharing a soft fleece blanket to cover everyone's legs makes it even cozier.

I taught a new preschool class last week, consisting of a pair of 3-year-old students and one observer. The two who had attended the class twice previously were already familiar with our class format and could follow the flow of the lesson with ease, but the newcomer experienced culture shock for the first 15 minutes.

He just sat in his little seat with his eyes wide open, watching me and his classmates do all our activities. Fortunately, he did not cry, as he did not feel threatened. About one-third of the way through the class, he started to join in and by the end of the class he was smiling and feeling good about being with us. This was accomplished with no explanations or instructions on my part.

Thus I encourage you to create a chain of easy-to-follow and easy-to-do activities, enabling the children to take their first steps on their English journey with pleasure and comfort.

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Readers are encouraged to send questions to Helene J. Uchida on any themes related to teaching English to younger learners — particularly those at the primary school level — to jn-edu@yomiuri.com with "Primary Advice" in the subject line. Questions to Uchida are also accepted via postcard at "Primary Advice," The Japan News, 1-7-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo 100-8055. Questions should preferably be written in English, accompanied by your name, occupation and the area in which you live.



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The next installment will appear on July 24.