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ESL Teaching Ideas Focusing on Phonetics, Enunciation and Creative Autonomous Learning Methods

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An Overview for Non-English Speaking Japanese Elementary School Teachers

The number of books, articles, Internet sites and various other resource materials concerning ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching is overwhelming. For native English speakers, or high-level ESL speakers, who have had training and experience planning ESL lessons, the task of researching and choosing applicable lesson materials can be daunting at the best of times. Imagine what the reaction would be from a non-English speaking, or non-English language-trained teacher who has been informed that part of their teaching job will soon include having to teach English in their classrooms. For the majority of these classes, the teacher will be alone, without the benefit of an AET (Assistant English Teacher).

[Japan's teaching guidelines for primary schools were revised earlier this year. English will be made compulsory for 5th and 6th year students beginning April 2011. The subject will be allocated 35 class hours of lessons per school year, or roughly one lesson a week⁽¹⁾]

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The teacher's personal opinions and experiences with ESL will be a direct influence on how ESL will be dealt with in their classrooms. This is a highly stressful situation for the teacher. Whether the teacher's opinion / reaction is positive or negative, the problem remains—How can non-English speaking teachers successfully create engaging, interesting ESL lessons which are pertinent to the students' ages and cognitive abilities?

This overview will outline some ideas and methods for ESL teaching, focusing on the main points of phonetics and autonomous creative learning. The non-English speaking teacher may find these ideas useful, as some of the teaching methodology is reminiscent of traditional Japanese educational techniques, with which the teacher is already familiar.

1. PHONETIC BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'phonetics' (phonetically=adv.), as, 'the study or representation of vocal sounds and / or the writing or spelling according to pronunciation'⁽²⁾. Another word also used in conjunction with 'phonetics' is 'phonic'⁽³⁾ (phonically=adv.), which is defined as 'of sound; of vocal sound'. Phonetics and phonics are seen to be used interchangeably in many educational resource materials. The phonetic method teaches students how to take a logical, active role in decoding English words. It is also a successful method for increasing reading and spelling competencies.

Learning phonetic units ('phonemes') and the rules of phonetic usage is a considerable task. The first few lessons are not easy situations for the student. The positive point of this methodology is that it starts with basic single phonemes and, in logical steps, builds upon previously learned information. When students can grasp the idea that once they learn the correct phonic enunciation and phonetic spelling rules, they can then apply these rules for over 85% of words in the English

language⁽⁴⁾. They have the ability to decode new words correctly and also use autonomous learning skills.

By using the phonetic rules and applying logic, the student actively learns how to 'sound out' longer and more difficult words without panic and stress. The teacher can present the phonemes and phonetic rules as similar to a puzzle. The student first gains mastery over the basic single units, progresses through the various pairs, blends, or other groupings of sounds, and then applies this knowledge in endless combinations to recognize new words. With practice and application, the students' active vocabulary will increase and spelling should improve.

Why is this approach a good idea for a non-English speaking teacher? Phonetics is very logical and is similar to traditional Japanese education methods for learning the Japanese language. Both approaches methodically build on what the student has previously learned. The teacher can apply his or her own Japanese (first language) learning experience towards introducing English as a second language.

To succeed in the phonetics approach to ESL learning, the teacher will first need to assess and categorize the students' English knowledge. It is likely that in a class of 30-40 students, there will be a wide range of exposure to, and experience with, spoken and written English. This is referred to as a 'multi-level' classroom situation, and may be a challenge for the teacher. Some children will have previously studied at an English conversation school, a juku, or some other private language institution. Some of the students may have been studying since a very young age. Some students will be quite confident and proficient with their ESL skills. Other children may have had some ESL exposure through a native English teacher visiting their kindergarten or elementary school a few times a year. This 'limited visit' style is also known as an 'entertainment ESL' lesson. A minority of students may have had very limited exposure to spoken English and may be reticent to speak out in class.

To effectively teach an ESL class, the teacher will need to plan and implement four language learning skills. These skills are, a) speaking, b) listening, c) writing, and d) reading. The four skills need to be presented in a balanced manner, taking into consideration the students' ages and cognitive levels. The teacher must act as an enthusiastic, energetic role model when introducing ESL. Enthusiasm and energy is of utmost importance, no matter what the teacher's personal opinions are about second language learning. Students are extremely quick to learn and copy the behaviors of their role models. The interest level of the teacher will directly affect how the students react to the ESL classes.

The first step for the teacher to introduce English into the classroom will be to present an informal test for upper and lower case letter recognition and phonic recognition. Most students will know the 'names' of the English alphabet letters, having been taught the 'ABC Song' at some time during their preschool experience. However, it is likely that many students will not know the phonic sounds or will run certain letters, such as 'L, M, N' together. Mispronunciation of letter sounds, the inability to match upper and lower case letters, and the transposition of letters such as 'b / d', and 'p / q' will also occur. All age groups of students will have these problems. A basic review and test will be useful for the teacher to decide if the majority of students' are able to decode single letter phonemes. This will be the starting point for teaching phonetics.

The basic unit of phonetics is the single letter. There are 26 letters in the English alphabet, but there are about 42 different basic sounds associated with these 26 letters. This can be confusing, as the same letter can be a different sound, <for⁽⁵⁾ example, all vowels have a long and a short sound>. The teacher must explain that a letter will have the same "sound" in both upper and lower case writing. Emphasis on "non-katakana" pronunciation should be a priority. It is recommended that there is a classroom alphabet chart with consonants and vowels color coded or otherwise differentiated. This chart should always be accessible to the students for reference.

One question a non-English speaker may ask at this point is, “How am I supposed to teach students “English” sounds which do not occur in Japanese and which I have no experience in pronouncing in a native English speaker manner?” Also, the teacher may not be able to differentiate between the different sounds. For many Japanese native speakers, the most problematic letters are "l / r", "b / v", "z / s", "z / th"; also the vowels "a / u", and "e / i". The teacher can try to explain the different positioning of the teeth and tongue for the letters. If the teacher feels unsure, there are many pronunciation charts available which can be used as reference, and a CD of a native speaker can always be used for the students to have an opportunity to listen and try to differentiate between the letter sounds.

There may be difficulties trying to hear the difference between a native English speaker pronounced sound, <ex. "b">, where there is no added vowel at the end of the sound, and <"ba">, the sound which occurs in Japanese.

There is a natural tendency for second language learners to apply the rules and sounds of their first language to the learning of the second language. The “English” pronunciation will have to be reviewed daily in class so the students can practice and remember. A 45 minute class, once a week, is not enough time for the students to progress as rapidly as they might if given bi-weekly or daily language instruction. As the number of hours for English instruction are in competition with limited teaching time for all the other school subjects, a quick daily review of about 5-10 minutes will, at least, help with retaining the knowledge previously learned.

Once the single letter sounds have been mastered, consonant blends without “katakana” pronunciation will be introduced. As Japanese characters are based on consonant/vowel pairings, many students will want to add a vowel when pronouncing consonant blends. For example, “br” will very likely be pronounced “ba-ra” by a Japanese speaker. This is not the correct pronunciation and is a poor habit for future, more complex language study.

Incorrect pronunciation should be gently dissuaded. If students are constantly

reminded during the daily review, most students will improve their enunciation skills over the course of a school year. Verbal practice of the sounds is very important to give the student the opportunity to get accustomed to the differences which create so many problems when speaking and writing.

A consonant blend consists of 2 or 3 consonants which are said together following regular phonetic pronunciation.⁽⁶⁾ It must be clearly explained to the students that these consonants are NOT pronounced with a vowel sound between each consonant. For example, “str” will not be pronounced “su-tu-ra”, etc. This is a key point for the students to understand, as it affects both pronunciation and spelling competencies.

Short and long vowels will be the next topic of phonetic learning to be introduced. The “short” vowels can be explained in one-syllable words. The teacher can explain that if a short word has only one vowel, then the vowel sound will be short. The student can associate these two “short” points so that it is easier to remember this rule. After the short vowels are understood, the “magic ‘e’ ” rule can be explained to the students. This is one of the indicators of a long vowel sound in a word. The silent “e” at the end of a word makes the other vowel “say its’ name”, This is NOT the same sound as the previously learned “short” vowel rule.⁽⁷⁾ This is an easy rule for students to apply to many common words. There are many mnemonic devices that can be used to help learn the phonetic rules for enunciation and spelling.

The above three steps are a very logical and step-by step method of introducing the first basic rules of phonetics. Once the students have mastered the first three categories of units, they can be introduced to vowel/consonant pairings such as ‘an’, ‘it’, ‘ed’, etc; with the explanation that consonant/vowel pairings will almost always have the same sound. The teacher will need to stress the left-to-right sounding out of ‘short sound’ vowel, one-syllable words. It might be a good idea to list words with the same endings as being in the same family, such as bat, cat, hat, rat, etc.

It isn't necessary for students to know the definitions of all the words they encounter at this time. Definitions for phonetically regular, yet rarely used words (ex. bib, cog), can be searched out after the students understand how to decode words accurately.

To increase the students' awareness of what they successively learn in each class, the Japanese teacher may write out the phonetic rules in Japanese, with key words illustrating the points. It is a good visual reference for the students if another chart is prominently displayed in the classroom, showing consonant blend groups, and the short and long vowels.

The next phonetic steps are a bit more difficult and will require constant review after being introduced. The difficulty for the non-English speaking teacher is that the more difficult English sounds have very little in common with Japanese language sounds. It might be easier for the teacher to get some good CD's and perhaps plan for short writing reviews when studying the next three phonetic groups.

Consonant digraphs are a special type of consonant grouping. Digraphs are two consonants which make one sound, BUT the sound is NOT pronounced in a regular phonic style. <Ex. "th", "ch", "ph"⁽⁸⁾>. These sounds will have to be memorized. If the teacher is extremely interested in English, it might be a good idea to give some background history of where the sounds originally came from, for example, Greek, Latin, Norse or Old English. This explanation would be done in Japanese. Fifth and sixth grade students might be interested in simple world history and the ideas of geography and language could be discussed. If English language learning can be introduced along with other courses, the students may start to view English as a less isolated topic and begin to relate it to other subjects in their lives.

Vowel digraphs are two vowels which make one sound. In regular vowel digraphs, the first vowel is long and the second vowel is silent. <Ex. "ai", "ay", "ee", "oa",

"oe", etc.> A mnemonic device to use with vowel digraphs, "When two vowels are a-walking, only the first vowel does the talking."⁽⁹⁾ The mnemonic phrases work well in English, as the rhymes involved help to create rhythm to help in memorization. However, some modification may need to be applied when translating these ideas into Japanese for the students. Illustrations with explanations may be useful for these situations.

There are various irregular groupings of vowels and vowel/consonants which do not follow the basic steps. The students will have to memorize these rules. In total, there are about 118 basic English phonetic combinations.⁽¹⁰⁾

The non-speaking English teacher may be horrified at this knowledge! The way to organize and successfully teach all the steps and rules is, 'Simplify the information'. Go back to the puzzle analogy. Piece by piece, the teacher can break down this information to its basic, manageable pieces. With review and application, students become confident of their ability to logically understand these steps. They can then apply their knowledge to decode more difficult combinations, and longer and more complex words with a high degree of success.

The final part of phonetic learning is the introduction of prefixes, suffixes, and syllabication. As students learn how to put together and take apart the 'pieces' of the word 'puzzle', they gain confidence when faced with new words. The explanation of how prefixes, suffixes, and syllabication are used when added to a known 'root' word allows the student to actively increase English vocabulary and improve spelling. The teacher can use prefix and suffix recognition, as well as syllabication, to introduce the students to more complex English words; similar to the technique applied when learning complex kanji characters.

As enunciation, phonetic rule memorization / application are understood and used, each student will be better equipped to have ESL studies as a part of the daily or weekly learning routine. The students can move methodically through simple one-

syllable words to more complex words, simple sentences to more complex grammar patterns which the students can then use to communicate their own individual ideas. The most important point is for the students to gain complete understanding of the points before progressing to the next set of phonetic rules. After the students have learned how to decode words by applying the phonetic rules, they are ready to begin actively applying their new language skills.

2. CREATIVE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING for ESL

'The elementary education experience should be filled with activity, imagination, curiosity and wonder'⁽¹¹⁾. Learning activities should be child-centered and authentic'⁽¹²⁾.

This means that the students will be using their ESL skills to communicate about something that interests them. Teachers will need to balance the use of the four language learning skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading in their ESL classes. Scheduling ESL only once a week <or less, depending on the school's decision about subject/time management>, may reinforce the idea that ESL is less important than other "core" subjects such as science, social studies, math, and Japanese. Dependent on the total number of English classes to be taught in one year at a particular school, ESL <or other second language teaching>, should be considered to be a serious subject, not a "fun and games" or "novelty" time. The emphasis on ESL needs to be serious, but also useful and enjoyable for the students. The ESL class should not be viewed as an alternative P.E. class.

The teacher may view this situation as yet another source of problems to be added to their already existing long list of duties. One problem might be that if there is too much emphasis on English classes instead of another subject, parents will be certain to complain. The non-speaking ESL teacher may need to spend part of their <already very limited> free time doing self study to prepare for one English class. An understandable attitude from the teachers may be, "How much extra work is this <year long> ESL class going to create?", "Is it really in the students' best interests

-will they ever be able to communicate well?”, and “Will the majority of students be motivated to learn ESL when, in reality, they will be able to live contentedly using only Japanese ?” Should the 35 hours be used to study another subject ?

The above concerns are valid. As a non-speaker, who is not trained in ESL, the teacher will need to be very creative in presenting English as a positive subject. To help succeed in ESL studies, ALL the teachers at a particular school must plan out and agree to a syllabus which has a grade-by-grade, age-appropriate “checklist” of the ESL skills. The students must demonstrate mastery and understanding of certain skills during the school year. Taking a similar approach to how other “core” courses are presented, there should be very clearly stated “English Goals for the Year” displayed in the class, along with the phonetic charts mentioned earlier. Creative, original use of the topics and vocabulary that the students learn in an ESL class can be applied, in an active manner, to increasingly complex communication in English. Subjects covered in the ESL class should progressively use information learned in earlier lessons. Students could demonstrate their mastery and understanding of the subject material in the form of small school recitals for the students in a particular grade, or senior (year 6) students helping out the junior (year 5) students.

If the curriculum is well-planned, the teacher can introduce English alongside other subjects, for example social studies or Japanese language arts classes. If the curriculum is not well-planned, the result will be either repetition, or missed information gaps in the ESL subject material. Repetition and/or gaps will delay the students’ skills, perhaps ultimately leading to disinterest in learning ESL.

Consideration must also be taken as to not ‘push’ the ESL on the student, but to motivate the student to *learn how to actively and creatively learn*. The ability to be active and creative; to implement and retain knowledge, is much more meaningful and useful to the student than having to endlessly memorize information, take a test, then promptly forget the topic of study. Encouraging students to develop their other

interests in ESL demonstrates that ESL isn't only something to study, but is useful in 'real' life.

For elementary school level ESL teaching and learning to be successful, the teacher must be very specific in outlining, a) the specific language goals and skills for that particular school year, b) what the teacher expects the students to do to meet the language goals, c) the acceptable levels of homework and class participation the student needs to meet in order to pass the class.

Educational psychology relating to ESL studies state, "that the most important point to remember when planning an ESL class is that communication should be authentic and child centered."⁽¹³⁾ This means that topics or themes chosen for study should be interesting and engage the students' attention. The ESL classroom can become more manageable if the teacher allows the students to incorporate creative, autonomous learning methods while beginning to develop their English second language skills.

The teacher can bring English into their classroom in many ways. The first is the phonics reference charts and English Goals for the Year. These should be placed in the class so that the students must look at them, if only for a short time, every day. An "English Board", could also be developed, where students read the summary of the last week's lesson, check for the next assignment, homework, etc. Some teachers might want to start by putting information on the board in both Japanese and English, and then slowly decreasing the Japanese during the year. The idea is to get the students actively seeking out information they need. This is beneficial in developing the students' self-reliance as well as confidence. The teacher needs to be clear that it is the student's responsibility to master the year's ESL goals to the highest possible level.

Dependent on how a particular school sets up its ESL program, there may be more than the 5th and 6th year students studying ESL. If this is the case, the same

general planning and goals would be implemented, but with appropriate age-related teaching methods for the lower years. It would also be beneficial to the students to review all phonetic rules every year.

How is this possible? In the ESL resource book, 'Children Learning English', by Jayne Moon, there is a useful checklist for the teacher for any age or year level:

Prepare children carefully for the activity.

Organize them in ways appropriate to the goal of the language-learning activity.

Structure the activity carefully so there are clear working procedures and outcomes.

Show them how to do the activity.

Involve them in your demonstrations.

Be positive about their efforts.

Loosen your control of the activity gradually.

Engage their interest through having a clear and meaningful purpose for the activity.⁽¹⁴⁾

Most important, with some creative thought and good planning, the teacher can repeat similar activities for each new learning goal. The students will appreciate the familiarity, but the teacher also has make certain the students don't get bored or disruptive. The teacher must continuously create a learning environment in which the students can pursue their interests with respect to what the ESL lesson is for that particular day or week. Any negative phrases and complaining should be firmly banned from the classroom. Phrases such as, 'It's troublesome', 'It's difficult', 'I can't do this,' etc., should not be tolerated. There is a difference between not wanting to be successful at language learning and not being able to be successful. Success can be measured in different ways, and different learning methodologies can be used in a creative learning environment. Howard Gardner, in his study of multiple intelligences, cites at least seven different kinds of 'thinking/problem solving'. These are: linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, spatial

bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal.⁽¹⁵⁾ It is ineffective to think all students in a classroom will learn in the same manner.

Every student learns differently and every teacher has a different style of classroom management and subject presentation. Each student should be encouraged to think of the ways which are best for their own individual learning style. The goals are to get the students to think, remember and apply phonetic knowledge, and use the required or planned class materials for the students' use and benefit. The learning style decisions help the student become autonomous and give a sense of control over their individual learning. Multi-sensory instruction is a valuable way to teach ESL. By using visual, auditory, verbal and motor skills, the teacher can engage the students who may not be as strong in visual learning. Students can use their stronger learning skills to communicate as effectively as possible. For example, some students will excel at memorization, others at physical activity and still others at music or drawing. As long as the student retains the knowledge, and uses the ESL information, the student should be praised and encouraged, no matter what learning styles the student decided to use.

The teacher can also maximize the help of students who are confident in using English to assist the not-so-confident students. These students may not be 'perfect' in their language skills, but if they are willing to speak and do the required class work, it helps to create a positive class atmosphere. The idea must be stressed that, while learning a second language, it is permissible to make mistakes and learn from them.

It is sometimes difficult to get basic, beginner-level ESL materials which will fully engage the attention of all the pupils. Instead of allowing the not-so-interested students to either sleep or be disruptive, the teacher will need to plan to use multi-sensory instruction in a variety of creative ways until the majority of the students feel confident about the particular class goal.

To develop the use of creative, active learning, the teacher can plan part of the final grade for the ESL class to be some sort of presentation using what the student has learned during the school year. The teacher will decide on the language parameters, length of the presentation and whether or not the student must work individually or with a partner. The students can focus on a topic that is of interest to them and develop their ideas to use both their strong learning skills and develop their weaker learning skills. This method will get the students' interest as well as develop some autonomy. The student will apply the phonetic skills learned during the year to design their communicative project.

In addition to the major project, throughout the year, the teacher might plan to use different learning techniques such as: speed drills, slow reveal, role play, composition, reading and reading comprehension, drawing, spelling, dictionary reviews, songs, information gap, team or pair exercises, etc., to get the students to react in a positive manner. Students will learn how to think logically and arrive at an answer rather than being bored by endless repetition.

Having learned enunciation and the phonetic rules, the students should also learn how to use a dictionary. Some teachers may think that this is perhaps too advanced for the student level, but, it is actually an excellent habit to help review how to use and spell words. There are many excellent junior dictionaries or picture dictionaries available for the young ESL learner. Class work planning is a double-edged sword —oversimplify and the students lose interest; make the course work overly difficult and the students will decide they don't want to put in the effort. If a variety of ideas can be presented to the students, and they know they have some decision-making power as to how they need to learn the information, the overall response should be positive. Focusing on their individual strengths to solve ESL problems are also useful skills which can be developed and applied to other subjects, not only ESL.

The students can actively engage in searching out words that interest them. Most elementary age students are curious; dictionary use may be viewed as enjoyable and somewhat exciting. This skill needs to be presented in a non-threatening, step by step manner similar to how phonetics was introduced to the student. If a picture dictionary is used, the style is friendly, child-centered and non-threatening.

An alternate idea would be to have the students create their own dictionaries. Due to limited weekly class time, it is recommended that 'dictionary-building' be used as a homework assignment over the course of the school year. Dictionary use will help develop vocabulary, review phonetics and can be a way to introduce thematic lessons.

Non-speaking English teachers may find these ideas too ambitious. There may be a tendency for the teachers to instead use the communicative approach which has been used for many years in Japan. The communicative approach has positive points as far as getting students to actually speak in an ESL class, but the question arises as to how much knowledge is retained after the activities. By over-use in the classroom, students may tend to focus on the 'game' rather than the language point. Quieter students may also experience stress at engaging in sometimes loud, boisterous 'games'.

The history of language learning in Japan could be compared to a pendulum; swinging from one extreme to the other. Neither the grammar/translation, nor the communicative approaches seem to have had wide positive results over the years. Perhaps, if the focus of language learning moves towards the middle of the pendulum arc, incorporating some of the rules and strict, traditional-style learning necessary for phonetic application, as well as giving freedom for creative, active learning and communication, Japanese ESL students will gain the necessary confidence to use a second language as an intrinsic part of their communicative abilities.

Endnotes

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