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<td>タイトル</td>
<td>小学校英語教育のためのタスクとアクティビティー (松永 淳一教授 退職記念)</td>
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<td>発表者</td>
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<td>雑誌名</td>
<td>長崎大学教育学部紀要 (教科教育学)</td>
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<td>インデックス</td>
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<td>発行日</td>
<td>2006-03-01</td>
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<tr>
<td>オンラインURL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/7241">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/7241</a></td>
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Tasks and Activities for Elementary English

Implementing an Eclectic Approach

Tony BROWN

1. Introduction
In a previous paper (Brown 2005), I examined various ELT methodologies, with a view to cherry-picking an eclectic approach which might be most effective in addressing the question of how to teach English at elementary level. My conclusion was to agree broadly with the Ministry of Education's view that simply introducing grammar teaching and translation between English and Japanese (MEXT 2001) should be strongly avoided, and activities should be learner- rather than teacher-centred (MEXT 2003). An approach combining Communicative Language Teaching with Total Physical Response (especially in the early stages) seems most appropriate. Activities should be selected for their level of interest to primary-age children as much as for linguistic content, with those based around songs and games being strong candidates for inclusion. English should be used as much as possible, but some use of Japanese for checking of understanding should not be ruled out. Explanations of grammar, however, should be avoided as much as possible. There may be room for audio-lingual type activities if they can take the form of songs and chants, rather than blatant form-focused drills. This paper attempts at discussing the practical implications of such an approach.

2. Children as Learners
In order to maximise learning outcomes, the teacher must find ways of exploiting the strengths of children as language learners. Children are:

• naturally curious (Willis 1996: 127; Harmer 1983:7; Vale and Feunteun 1995:138). By bringing new things into the classroom, by devising activities with an element of puzzle, this endless curiosity can be tapped and channelled into language learning. They also love playing with new sounds (Vale and Feunteun 1995:138), clearly an asset in learning a new language.

• enthusiastic and lively (Cameron 2001:1). Children are prepared to try anything, and will approach stimulating activities, especially games, with greater vigour than older learners.

• lacking in inhibitions (Cameron 2001:1; Willis 1996: 127). They tend to be far less self-conscious than older learners. They are not afraid to pretend to be animals, to jump and dance around to teachers' instructions, and to sing songs. This lack of inhibition
will also, in the long-term, allow them to acquire much more native-like pronunciation.

- keen to receive their teacher's approval (Slattery and Willis 2001:11; Cameron 2001:1). Older learners may be more intent on impressing their peers, but children are extremely motivated by, and respond strongly to, constant praise from their teacher.
- prepared to repeat endlessly something that they like. They will not repeat boring drills, but children are often happy to sing the same song, or listen to the same story, over and over.

On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that children:

- have short attention spans (Harmer 1983:7; Willis 1996: 127), and can lose interest quickly. Teachers need a wide variety of short activities to keep them motivated.
- have less access to metalanguage (Cameron 2001:1). They are generally bad at understanding grammatical explanations, even in their mother tongue.
- may progress slowly, especially in speaking (Willis 1996: 127; Cameron 2001:1). Teachers need to be patient, and not force children to speak, especially in the early stages. It should be remembered that not speaking does not mean not learning.

3. The Classroom

Before looking at the activities themselves, it is worth considering the physical environment in which learning is to take place. The classroom should be brightly decorated and, if possible, have what Carless (2002) describes as an “English atmosphere”. Pictures and posters showing places around the world can help to generate this atmosphere. Willis (1996: 127) suggests changing the items around regularly in order to stimulate the children. Furthermore, pictures and posters that have been created by children themselves will help achieve greater motivation.

School desks and chairs can often seem like a barrier to communication. If it is possible, it may create a better learning environment if children are allowed to work on the floor. Naturally, this means moving around desks and chairs, which may be noisy, but need not be time-consuming. As Vale and Feunteun (1995:185) point out, “change of classroom space should not be ruled out because of inconvenience or lethargy.” Pictures and posters may well also have to be put up and taken down at the start and end of each class (using blu-tak, rather than adhesive tape), especially if the room needs to be used by other teachers and/or for other subjects. This, however, should not be seen as a reason not to do it, but rather as an opportunity for a little Total Physical Response of the “Aki, put the desks by the wall! Jun, move the chairs! Harumi, put up this poster!” nature. Moreover, having learners do it themselves and, for example, choose which poster goes where, helps create a sense of ownership of the learning space, thus further increasing motivation to learn.
4. Activities for Children
We have seen what strengths and weaknesses children bring to the English classroom. Let us turn to types of activity which might make the most of those strengths, while minimising the weaknesses.

4.1 Total Physical Response
TPR is the style of learning which most clearly reflects the way children learn their first language, and therefore might be especially appropriate to very young children and beginners. Moreover it is an approach sanctioned by the Ministry of Education (MEXT 2001) as being appropriate for elementary-level English. Learners are encouraged to respond to their teacher's instructions by actions, rather than words, in the same way as they respond to their parents' instructions.

Perhaps the simplest form of TPR is the game “Follow the leader” (Slattery and Willis 2001:24), in which the children simply form a line behind the teacher and follow her/him. The teacher carries out movements and gestures, describing them at the same time. The children follow behind the teacher, imitating the actions while being exposed to a huge amount of high-frequency language.

The children's game “Simon Says” is a good example of a TPR activity which is also popular with young native speakers. The teacher gives instructions, beginning with “Simon says...”, for example, “Simon says touch your nose! Simon says clap your hands!” The children follow the instructions, duly touching body parts, clapping hands, stamping feet, jumping, sitting standing, and so on. However, if the instruction is not preceded by “Simon says...” (e.g. “Touch your knees!”), then it should be ignored. A child that carried out the instruction is “out”, and has to sit down and wait until the game is over. The last child standing is the winner.

A variation on the game “Twister” can be played with the language of colour, body parts, as well as “left” and “right”. The teacher spins the wheel, and gives the instruction “Hiromi, right hand - green!”, and the nominated child puts her right hand on a green circle. “Jun, right foot - red!”, and another child moves his right foot to a red circle. Vale and Freunateun (1995: 266) suggest a variation using animal vocabulary. This game uses TPR to exploit the lack of inhibition shown by children, producing a game in which the target language is being repeated endlessly, but which at the same time is immense fun. Soon, if learners are ready to speak, they can be put in charge of spinning the wheel and giving instructions, making the activity more learner-centred. In fact, this is true of most TPR activities. Though they are essentially teacher-centred, any child can become a "teacher" when the right time comes (Cameron 2001:107).
Willis (1996: 122, 127) suggests that TPR can be extended by the teacher giving instructions for children to make things (e.g. bingo cards) that can later be used in activities (i.e. playing bingo). There is no doubt that the teacher of children will need to produce a huge amount of flashcards, posters, games, puppets and goodness know what else, in order to keep learners stimulated and amused. However, some of this work can be offloaded to the children themselves, and included in a TPR-style activity. Apart from the bingo cards noted above, children can be instructed in making maru and batsu lollipops. These will have a huge variety of uses. The simplest of these would be a “listen and act” activity in which the teacher makes statements, and the children raise their maru if the statement is true, batsu if it is false. Of course, a wrong response could mean being "out" until the next game.

Slattery and Willis (2001: 32 - 41) suggest several variations on the “listen and make” activity. These include:

- **Listen and colour**: learners are given a photocopied line drawing. The teacher describes the picture, including lots of colour information. The children listen and colour the picture with crayons or felt-tip pens. This could be extended by the teacher asking children (e.g. “Miho, what colour are the clown’s trousers?”)

- **Listen and draw**: The children have a blank sheet of paper. The teacher describes a simple scene. The children listen, and draw the picture. With more advanced children, it can become a standard “describe and draw” activity done in pairs. Carless (2002: 295) points out that little linguistic output may result from “listen and colour” or “listen and draw” activities. However, if exposure to finely-tuned input is the main goal of the activity, then there would seem to be no problem.

- **Listen and make**: like the bingo cards, and lollipops described above, children can listen to their teacher’s instructions and make, for example greetings cards. These can then be displayed in the school, or given to family members or friends.

As has been noted in section 2, TPR can be incorporated into re-arranging the classroom, as well as many other minor chores such as cleaning the board, fetching coats and setting out lunch. Furthermore, scores of children's' songs exist which involve an element of physical response.

### 4.2 Songs and Chants

There are hundreds of children’s songs, mostly intended for native speakers. Many of these are perfect for young learners of English. As noted earlier (Brown 2005), music and song help develop intonation and rhythm, vocabulary or even grammar. Furthermore, they have a strong motivating element, and provide a way of exploiting the strengths of learners with strong auditory sensitivity (Gardner 1993). Cameron (2001: 137) points to the importance of songs, rhymes and chants in building phonological awareness.
With very young learners, songs can be incorporated with TPR by means of using “action songs”. Willis (1996: 128) suggests “The Wheels on the Bus” as an example of this. Initially, learners simply listen to the song, and imitate the teacher's actions. Gradually, it is hoped that they will start singing along, making a strong connection between the words and corresponding action. Other action songs include: “Head, shoulders, knees and toes”; “Incy Wincy Spider” (Vale and Feunteun 1995: 137, 147); “Old MacDonald” (a variation on this is “Old Macdonald had a Zoo”, which allows for a more exciting selection of animals); and “Ten Green Bottles” (Vale and Feunteun 1995: 72).

Many songs also focus on particular themes or give practice on particular sets, thus allowing them to fit seamlessly into a lesson on that particular topic or lexical area. “Old MacDonald's Farm/Zoo”, mentioned earlier, clearly fits into a lesson about animals, as would “I Know an Old Lady”, at slightly higher levels. “Ten Green Bottles” (like many other counting songs) practises numbers. “Sing a Rainbow” is a good choice for when students are learning or practising colours.

It is important to keep in mind that many popular songs for children may be aimed at pre-school age. Teachers need to be sensitive to the level of sophistication of songs (as well as all activities), and consider whether they are suitable for a particular class. It is not only the level of difficulty, but also the content, which is important if one wants to keep learners interested and motivated. Material aimed at older children, such as Jazz Chants (Graham 1979), and all of its variations, may be more appropriate when students are approaching junior high school age. It should also be remembered that some pop songs are eminently suitable for children. The Beatles’ song “Hello, Goodbye”, for example, uses extremely simple high-frequency language, and can give a teacher a welcome break from material aimed squarely at the very young.

4.3 Games
All children enjoy games. Ur (1996:290), while disliking the belittling implication of the word “game”, comments on the “rule-governed” and goal-oriented nature of games, and on the fact that they require children to be active. Vale and Feunteun (1995: 222) also feel that parents may react negatively to hearing that their children have been playing games at school. It is therefore important for teachers to impress upon parents the relevance of these activities to their development. They emphasise the importance of games and game-like activities as “a source of motivation, interest and enjoyment”, but remind us of the importance of seeing the game as a part of the lesson, and therefore linked lexically, structurally or by topic to the rest of the class. They also point out that games should not all be seen as competition, but can also serve to strengthen skills of co-operation, too.
Games that can be adapted to English Language Teaching (as well as those already mentioned) include:

- **Dominoes** (Slattery and Willis 2001:43). This can be used to practise, for example, a lexical set (clothes, animals, food) plus either colours or numbers. Thus, a red hat can match with a blue hat or a red sweater; two dogs can be placed next to five dogs or two kangaroos.

- **Card games**, such as Happy Families and Pelmanism (Willis 1996:129; Vale and Feunteun 1995: 264), to work on vocabulary, and to practise simple structures (“Have you got a (cat)?” “It’s a (banana)”).

- **I Spy** (Slattery and Willis 2001:52). This is useful to reinforce vocabulary, as well as a way of introducing and practising spelling.

- **Snakes and Ladders** (for children who have learned basic literacy). When they land on a square, they read an instruction (e.g. “Stand up and jump three times”, and have to carry it out before re-joining the game.

- **“What time is it Mr Wolf?”** (Willis 1996:129). This is best carried out outside in the playground, but is a good way of practising telling the time.

- **Bingo** (Vale and Feunteun 1995: 264), with cards made by students themselves to work on an unlimited range of lexical sets, and suitable target language chosen by the teacher.

This is just a small sample of popular games which have been successfully adapted to ELT. A perusal of the EFL section of a good bookshop, or an internet search will unearth hundreds of others.

### 4.4 Other Tasks and Activities

It has been noted that the teacher of elementary school English will inevitably spend a huge amount of time making games and cards, recording songs, and so on, in order to keep classes lively, interesting and fun, and to provide regular changes of focus. Vocabulary, for example, needs to be introduced, if not with gestures, then with pictures, especially with learners who cannot read and write. As mentioned, however, much of this production work can be given to the children themselves, and incorporated into activities. Photocopied line art lends itself perfectly to “listen and colour” or “describe and colour” activities. Furthermore, any activities which have an end product, the satisfaction of making something, are extremely stimulating for young learners. Moreover, pictures, posters and greetings cards produced by children can be used to decorate classrooms or taken home to parents. Teachers can add words to pictures; later children can copy from the teacher, and eventually add their own, thus gradually introducing literacy skills.

Story books for children are a huge source of potential material. All children are happy to hear their favourite stories repeated time and again, giving teachers opportunities for repeated practice “through the back door”. As many of these books are illustrated, they come
ready-made with visual support for unknown lexis, and many children’s stories provide for interaction, allowing the learners to become part of the action, and practise speaking as well as listening skills. The subject of story books, however, necessarily begs an important question about literacy, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, and will be the focus of a future study.

5. Concluding Remarks
This paper has been an attempt at offering some practical ideas, based upon the methodological framework suggested previously (Brown 2005). Elementary school children need a wide variety of tasks and activities in order to maintain their attention. In the early stages, TPR-style activities offer them a risk-free environment in which they can be immersed in English, and where production remains optional. Songs, rhymes and chants offer a stimulating form of what may essentially be structural practice. Many games allow learners to use a limited range of structures in a way which is fun, and will hardly seem like learning (though “games” may be described as “practice activities” when discussing progress with parents). Furthermore, stories can offer a teacher-centred introduction to what will be a fulfilling aid to progress when literacy has been successfully introduced.

All good teachers will have a wide range of these activities at their disposal, will be sensitive to which are suitable to the cognitive abilities and level of maturity of their students, and will seek to combine them in a way which offers variety while maintaining continuity. In this way, it is hoped that children will graduate from elementary school armed with a range of useful skills, a broad knowledge of appropriate language, and most of all, a positive attitude towards learning English.

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