



A Guide to Teaching AGO Aqua to First Year English Students

Using AGO Keywords

By Leon Butchers

If taught well, most elementary aged students can master AGO Aqua in their first year of English study!

This is not a boast, or exaggeration. In fact, it requires little more than using AGO judiciously for 10-15 minutes each week in class, practicing the keywords, setting a little homework, and having an effective phonics system in your curriculum to help bring reading skills up to speed over the course of the year.

AGO is fun, so chances are your students will be highly motivated and up for the challenge!

The questions practiced are staples of many EFL children's books and tests, and tie in nicely with almost any curriculum. AGO is really just a way of presenting information to children in an easy to process and interesting manner; AGO leverages children's inquisitiveness, and competitive nature - so that they are happy to continuously review it! Mastery of AGO Aqua within one year is an ambitious, but manageable goal well worth setting for your students. And of course, this rapid start to English will lead to bigger things!

There are 74 different words used in AGO Aqua from which the 36 'keywords' were selected.

Though these words represent less than half of the total vocabulary, they account for 83% of the text on the cards –i.e. students get most benefit from learning to read these words first!

The four pages of keywords are sorted by difficulty and frequency.

The first two pages feature phonically regular short words; the last two pages feature high frequency words (words that appear at least 5 times each) some are longer, or have phonically irregular sounds.

Students can play AGO once they are able to read these 36 keywords, (albeit with a little prompting).

From this base, students can naturally learn to sound out and recognize the remaining words over coming months as they continue to play and practice.

Stage 1: The Beginning:

The key to mastering AGO Aqua is developing these three skills to their required level:

- 1. The ability to read the AGO cards.*
- 2. The ability to understand and answer all the questions.*
- 3. Being able to do all of this fluently and naturally (and use the language without the aid of the cards).*

Of these skills, reading is the most difficult and time consuming to acquire. It can also be hard to develop the other two skills without students first being able to read. Ultimately, you can speed things up a lot by working around this reading skill 'bottle neck'. The following are some ways to do this:

Option 1: Using AGO Aqua with Kana as 'Training Wheels'(with Japanese students):

An easy (though unconventional) way to get around the problem of reading slowing overall progress down, is to use the **AGO Aqua with kana** edition cards in class for the first few months. These cards feature the same text and pictures as AGO Aqua, but also have katakana subtitles lightly shadowed under the English text, which elementary aged children can read well. Hence, most of the AGO games become playable in class (though it's best to start with easier games!)

Warning: Katakana does not model English sounds well, and the sooner you are able to move beyond this deck, the better, so teaching the keywords is still very important. However, when used in a disciplined manner, with lots of phonics, and the keywords drilled elsewhere in your lessons, Aqua kana seems to be the fastest way to get students to their goal.

Option 2: Starting off Simple(without using Katakana)

Some schools like to keep their classroom katakana free, which rules out AGO with Kana. If so, allowances need to be

made to make AGO manageable for beginners, so that they can still practice skills 2 and 3 (i.e. their question comprehension, and fluency skills). A good way to do this is to play the game ‘**Quiz Show**’ for 5-10 minutes in class.

How to Play Quiz show:

The teacher selects appropriate AGO questions cards to read and ask the class. If required, the card’s face is revealed. Students raise their hand to answer, and win the card. The player with the most cards at the end, wins!

Note: At the beginning, you may wish to let several kids answer the same question, awarding each a point - this allows for more practice, and gives students more time to process the same grammar point (you can give away ‘Action cards’ as points to other kids that answer the same question). When students become stuck, try not to hand feed them answers, as they get most benefit and satisfaction through figuring the answers out for themselves – it’s better to provide increasingly easier hints that lead students to the answer, than to give it away.

Over a number of weeks, expand the number of cards used in Quiz show. Naturally, you should find the speed at which questions get answered increases as well. Some cards (such as ‘What time is it?’) require other skills (such as being able to count up to 60, and tell the time) to answer, and thus take more practice – but over the course of a year, this can still be done. In the meantime, don’t be afraid to put the harder cards to one side.

Drilling the AGO Keywords:

Teaching the keywords is the necessary yet not so exciting part of teaching AGO to first year English students. There are many ways that you can drill the cards in class. The following are a few tips that I’ve found work:

- Progress through the keywords one page at a time. They are graded by difficulty, and nine words at a time is an easy to deal with chunk.
- Do some warm up phonics exercises before practicing the keywords. (MPI’s phonics ABC song, and David Paul’s phonics builders are great).
- Drill the keywords out of sequence. (i.e. shuffle the flash cards).
- Sound the cards out phonetically, slowly at first.
- Keep it short: Five minutes of quality practice is enough.
- Time students. Record their times, and challenge them to improve each week. ***(Note there is an Award card included at the end of this book made expressly for this purpose).***
- Give students their own copy of the keyword cards to practice at home. (Read through your keywords three times, or get your time under 15 seconds for next week’s test, are easy homework tasks).
- Teach what the words mean – not just how to say them! (A good way to do this is to challenge students to make sentences using the words that are being practiced (and rewarding them with points, if they do). i.e. if the word is ‘can’ see if they can use that word in a sentence. You may have to give them lots of hints at the beginning.

Stage Two and Beyond:

After several months - once students have become familiar with the questions on the cards, and are beginning to read them without kana (albeit with some assistance), the focus shifts more towards setting things up, so that children get enough good quality repetition to cement their understanding of the language. This can be as simple and enjoyable as playing AGO in class once a week. However, the surest and quickest way to get students from here to the goal is if they own their own deck of AGO cards. Why? Chances are they will desire their own set to proudly play at home with – whether or not you set it as homework! It also helps to enrol parents into the process of helping their children learn English, which is hugely important. Besides that, try playing a variety of games in class. They each have different strengths and weaknesses, and this keeps it fresh. Good Luck!

An article on how best to get students from here, towards fluency of the AGO Aqua language is forthcoming. Stay tuned!



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Aqua Keywords Award Card Name: _____

Speed Reading 1			
Level 1 words	20 seconds	15 seconds	Under 10 seconds
Level 2 words	20 seconds	15 seconds	Under 10 seconds
All Level 1 & 2 Words	25 seconds	20 seconds	Under 15 seconds

Date Level Best Time / Notes

Speed Reading 2			
Level 3 words	20 seconds	15 seconds	Under 10 seconds
Level 4 words	20 seconds	15 seconds	Under 10 seconds
All Level 3 & 4 Words	25 seconds	20 seconds	Under 15 seconds

Special Awards			
Top Effort	Bronze	Silver	Gold
Big Improvement	Bronze	Silver	Gold

This Award Card is designed to challenge students to test and improve their reading of the AGO Aqua Keywords.

After practicing the keywords in class, time students individually.

Students record their best times each week, and win stamps for fast times.



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