

# Kids English Program Visits to a Japanese Kindergarten

— Intentions, Expectation and Results —

## 日本の幼稚園におけるキッズ・イングリッシュ・プログラムの取り組み

— その目的と予測, 結果の考察 —

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**Abstract :** There has been a reported lack of pre-service teacher training given to university students in Japan. In contrast, the Kids English program at International Pacific University (IPU) provides an opportunity for university students to gain experience with young learners. During the visits Japanese and Vietnamese university students interact with kindergarteners in the role of Teaching Assistant (TA) while cooperating to create an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment. Teacher and student reflections are presented as interview responses. The intentions and expectations of the program are considered with respect to current research on teaching English to young learners. A longitudinal study exploring the future job placements of participants may help to understand the benefits of the program in relation to job success.

**要旨：** 本文では、本学にて実施しているキッズ・イングリッシュ・プログラムの実践例を報告する。この取り組みでは、キッズ・イングリッシュ・プログラムとして岡山県内の幼稚園への訪問を行っている。この訪問では、日本人とベトナム人の大学生が准教授の支援を受けて、教員助手 (Teaching Assistant: TA) として英語で幼稚園児童と交流し、外国語としての英語 (English as a Foreign Language: EFL) の環境を作ることに協力した。結果の概要をインタビューとして提示する。

本プログラムの目的と予測は、近年の子どもの英語教育に関する調査を考慮している。継続的な研究のための方向性も示す。

**Keywords :** Assistant Teaching, EFL, Early Childhood Education, Pre-service Teacher Training

## Introduction

In Japan, public schools teach English as a subject from Junior High School. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) guidelines suggest, but do not require, that foreign language activities are taught in English at Japanese Elementary Schools from the fifth grade. MEXT revises the course of study in public school every 10 years to meet changing educational standards and needs. The English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization, introduced in 2014,

calls for revising the current course of study to begin English as a subject from as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (MEXT, 2017). Within this context, English instruction for kindergarten students is non-standard or at least informal.

Because of the lack of formal data, it is difficult to know the extent to which English education is available for kindergarten students in Japan. However, some public schools have begun to introduce English as a foreign language (EFL) as early as kindergarten. This may be due to perceptions that Japanese English speakers have poor communicative ability in respect to the

current amount of time spent learning English (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita, 2009).

To meet the perceived need to improve English ability in Japan, a variety of private institutions offer lessons to public kindergartens. There remains a lack of documentation on the intentions, expectations, and outcomes of the English programs for kindergarten aged learners in Japan.

This paper outlines the current program enacted by the Child Development Department at International Pacific University (IPU). The program provides English visits to Japanese kindergartens in Okayama prefecture. By clarifying the intentions and expectations of the program in respect to current research regarding teaching of young learners the document should assist in the calibration and refinement of kindergarten English programs as they are implemented in the future.

## **Background / Overview**

As part of the Kids English program, special visits with the intent of introducing English to kindergarten students are arranged. They also serve as an opportunity for university students to use English in a practical environment. Furthermore, Students pursuing a career in education are given the chance to visualize themselves as future teachers.

IPU students from Vietnam, who belong to the International Studies department, are asked to collaborate with their Japanese counterparts from the Department of Child Development. A group of 8 to 10 volunteer students is brought to a kindergarten to teach several classes of Kindergarten students ranging between 20 and 40 students.

The volunteers take on the role of Teaching Assistant (TA). Through participation, the students can gain experience teaching younger learners between 3 and 6 years of age.

As TAs, they work with an Associate Teacher (AT), therefore gaining experience following directions and taking instruction from a skilled mentor. The students are given the expectation that English is used as the medium for communication with the kindergarten students. They help to facilitate short 45 minutes English lessons using a variety of songs, stories and activities.

Through interdepartmental cooperation at IPU, this program also provides an opportunity to further cultivate an English environment at the university. An affective benefit of

the program is the chance students have, to make friends and communicate in their second language (L2).

## **Conceptualizing Goals**

Considering the goals of the kindergarten visits, the aims are multifaceted. First, regarding the language benefits for kindergarten students, the visits serve both as exposure to English and as an opportunity for use. However, because the visits are short and infrequent they may register more into the category of exposure than in that of practice.

The popularly referenced critical period hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) is the often-contested belief used to argue that earlier exposure to a second language is better. However, to avoid making broad unsubstantiated claims, it is important to understand the ways in which early exposure relates to second language acquisition.

Earlier exposure has been shown to correlate with a reduction in accent (Fledge, Munro & Mackay, 1995). However, accent is not necessarily a factor that would restrict intelligible communication for L2 speakers (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Though early exposure may help contribute to reduction in L2 accent, without further investigation, it would be difficult to claim that the kindergarten visits help English students improve their English communication ability.

An overview of critical period research shows that “prolonged intensive exposure” gives children an advantage over adults when it comes to ultimate attainment of a second language (Dekeyser & Hall, 2005). Therefore, if the aim that kindergarten students acquire English the visits would need to be more frequent and include more practice.

Second, following the goals of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology (MEXT) for the course of study for students in public schools (MEXT, 2017), the aim of kindergarten visits could also be to motivate students to view English positively.

Using international posture (Yashima, 2009) as a motivational model, as Japanese students are presented another language in an international

context they are theorized to develop a global self-image. This growth is supposedly followed with a desire to learn English and use it to communicate with people from other nations. However, the effectiveness of exposure to English regarding motivation must be weighted with current research on international posture and its application to the young learner environment (Elwood and Monoi, 2015). Also, questions arise to the nature of how students view English at this age or themselves.

If motivation and or skill development for kindergarten students are to be considered goals of the program, further data collection should be considered to validate and understand the program's progress.

Turning to the benefits for university students, typically universities in Japan have little to offer future teachers in the way of pre-service training. This has been attributed to a preference in Japan for the employer to bear the responsibility of training within the hiring school or organization (Hawley and Hawley, 1997). In contrast to the reported norm, for child development students at IPU, kindergarten visits serve as practical training sessions. This is a possible advantage of experience over competitors in the job market post-graduation.

Students who have the goal of becoming future teachers of young learners can use this opportunity to visualize themselves as future English teachers. Weirner (1986) coined the phrase 'attribution theory' which focuses on quantifying success in relation to the participant's self-image'. Though it should be noted that no effort was made to record the participants impressions of self-efficacy, it may be a good direction for future exploration.

Students are asked to interact with kindergartners while practicing prepared activities in English. As shown in the Lesson plan, university students will have a chance to lead activities in small groups. Each stage of the lesson has one group part lead by the AT and then followed by a supporting activity where they have a more active role as a leader. Whitehead (1989) questions the influence of the role of a mentor in improving the learning experience. In this case, students get a chance to see the AT's style and then try it themselves. As an individual, teaching in small

groups, each TA can test their hypothesis on how to instruct and lead. Likewise, while they are working with a partner they can support each other and learn from one another.

One Japanese student suggested it was difficult for her to communicate with her Vietnamese partner while they were TAs. This was not an isolated case; it appeared that many of the Japanese TAs were reluctant to speak freely. This might have been due to their sense of self-efficacy as English teachers, or their inexperience with foreign cultures.



## Lesson Plan

Stage 1 2 minutes in Japanese	Outline of the program will be done by a Japanese student in L1.
Stage 2 3 minutes	a. Hello song one group b. Four groups (hello, what's your name song) Encourage students to use their names. The kindergarten students should have their names written on their shirt.
Stage 3 5 minutes	a. Head Shoulders Knees and Toes explanation and song. b. TPR: Move your head. Shrug your shoulders, IPU students take turns using body parts.
Stage 4 5 minutes	a. Numbers song b. Numbers with fingers c. How old are you? Using hands, I am 5 years old.
Stage 5 5minutes	a. ABC's song. b. ABCD Shapes with body c. walking in a circle. Stop the song and everybody make the body shape of the next letter.
Stage 6 5 minutes	a. reading books in small groups b. questions after each page for example: what colour is it?
Stage 7 2 minutes	a. Goodbye song b. go around in a circle and give each other high 5.

## Reflection on the Teaching Exchange

In the following responses, teachers and the university participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with the kindergarten visit and to also give feedback.



Japanese TA number 1:

*I'm really good experience today's class. I thought my position was easy, but it was so busy. I tried take care of children, but they were so fine. So, I don't know what to do. Book reading is so nervous this time. I*

*couldn't say good things so I try next time.*

Japanese TA number 2

*First, I'm very nervous. Because I was a leader for the first time. But, I was relieved that the children greeted me with a smile. Next, children were shy so it was hard to hear the children's name and old. And I couldn't communicate with Vietnamese partner. So, children were free and didn't listen to me. Teacher is so hard!! But it was fun and I learned. I got a good experience.*

Vietnamese TA number 1:

*I'm so sorry for being late. About last Saturday, that was the first time I joined the activities with kindergarten kids. They are so different from the primary school kids I met before. But that was interesting. I was impressed when the kids read out loud the English words that they have learned. I have read books for kids before, but last week I read the book in front of so many kids. It was not as difficult as I thought. Thank you for a great experience. I hope to have chance like this more. Thank you so much.*

Vietnamese TA number 2:

*I feel so excited and interested about the class on Monday. Playing or teaching English for children is very fun but a little bit tired because they are always full of energy. I hope if I can I want to go more next time.*

Teachers Number 1:

1. The Alphabet song. The KG students enjoyed the stopping and starting and their attention was focused. It was the most energetic part of the lesson where everyone seemed involved

2. Story Time: It was great to see the IPU students get the opportunity to tell a story and the KG students seemed to enjoy the animal sounds comparison at the end. The interaction was free and the storytellers had good teamwork.

3. Group work: Students had fun with the kids, it was well directed and they had support from us when they ran out of ideas. The IPU students were lively, motivated and engaged.

4. Safety guidelines: for the IPU students. I know that some schools are comfortable with teachers picking up students while others aren't. I noticed one of the IPU students was picking KG students up. On one hand, he was connecting with the students, more so even than the other students in his group. However, the Japanese homeroom teacher looked a little uncomfortable with it. Another instance was a student ran up to a KG kid and laughed at his hair cut and started touching the student's hair. Also with students talking to the KG kids while you were reading a book etc. On one hand, it looked like the kids were having fun but on the other hand the IPU students might have done better to support the main activity.

5. Greeting the KG students as they come in. I noticed that you directed the IPU students to stand in the front and were trying to improve this. It was better towards the end, but a few times the students were just talking when the kids came in. Having them wave and greet the kids might get it off to a better start. The Japanese intro was a little deadpan as well.

6. Transitions. It might be a good learning opportunity to teach the IPU students some simple

transitions. Then to delegate a part in the change between activities to them. For instance, when making a circle you say/sing: Tony: Let's make a circle 1-2-3 IPU students: Let's make a circle you and me. When it's time to look at you:

TONY: "1-2-3 eyes on ME"

IPU Students: "1-2 eyes on YOU"



## Conclusion

In evaluating the intentions of the program, it would be beneficial to perform the visits on a regular basis and to gather more specific data to clarify the program goals.

Student and teacher reflections show that the visit was a positive experience for both the university students and the kindergarten students. Providing Japanese and Vietnamese students at IPU an opportunity to work together with the local community, many potential benefits were recognized. Students can use English in a practical environment while gaining experience teaching young learners. As reported this seems to be a unique advantage for IPU students in respect to pre-service teacher training in Japan.

For future visits encouraging TAs to design and take a more active role at facilitating activities may further encourage their leadership roles.

To better conceptualize and refine program goals, there is a need to understand the visits correlation to the English competency of both university and kindergarten students. In addition, the role of



student self-efficacy in regard to the future success of students was identified. Follow-up interviews should be considered to gain better understanding of student self-efficacy.

As the need for teacher training and kindergarten English programs increases in Japan. The Kids English program at IPU should serve as a reasoned model for examining successful refinement and continued delivery of language education programs for young learners.

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