

The English Program at Seigakuin Elementary School

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Through years of discussion, study, and debate, Japanese public elementary schools have gradually been increasing the time devoted to English instruction. Grades five and six have had weekly classes for several years, and from the 2020 school year they will have English twice a week. Grades three and four will have classes once a week. Schools across Japan are struggling to implement these government mandated changes. Classes are being taught by homeroom teachers, foreign English teachers (ALTs, or Assistant Language Teachers), Japanese teachers who specialize in teaching English, and combinations of the above. Approaches vary among schools and districts. A curriculum has been roughly determined, and a number of officially approved textbooks and other materials are being published to meet the new needs.

Seigakuin Elementary School, on the other hand, has long offered twice a week English classes for all students in grades one through six. What can be gained from this experience that might be of use for elementary schools now in the process of setting up English programs? This report discusses, grade by grade, the English program at Seigakuin Elementary School and reflects on what might be accomplished during these formative years of a child's English education.

Grade 1

Students enter grade one with a range of English backgrounds and experiences. A growing number of students have had some exposure to English, ranging from the twenty-minute weekly lesson at Seigakuin Kindergarten to time at an English or bilingual kindergarten that have proliferated in the

Tokyo area. A few have lived abroad or come from homes where English is spoken part of the time. For some, English is their third language. Parents and often their children have a high level of interest in English, one factor in their choice of Seigakuin. Even so, we need to start at the very beginning to include all students in the adventure of learning English.

How do we welcome and encourage these six-year-olds? Two forty-five-minute classes each week provide space to engage children in listening, speaking (or singing and chanting), reading and writing. To improve the quality of this time and give all students the opportunity to succeed, we provide listening materials (*My English Land* and the accompanying CDs). Students listen regularly at home and turn in listening cards each week that they have colored in to show the times they practiced. This home listening routine gives students a strong base, training them to hear and speak English naturally from the start.

Chants and songs from *My English Land* introduce the alphabet and basic phonics; we then carefully guide students to mastery in writing well from memory their names and the capital and small letters. Students take ABC tests in February, working hard until they have met this challenge. They then receive a certificate and gain confidence for further study. Classroom games such as Color Monster, *Karuta*, Bingo, and Thumbs Up motivate children to produce target language while having fun with classmates. Reading picture books helps vary the pace of class activities and stretch the students' imagination. We break down and adapt the text so that students can repeat as they participate line-by-line in the telling of each story.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) forms an integral part of the English curriculum at Seigakuin. We take content matter from regular subjects taught in Japanese and create materials that let the students speak, sing, chant, read and write in English what they learn and experience as they study the same content in Japanese. Our Morning Glories project is one example of how the CLIL approach can be applied. In schools across Japan, each first grader plants and cares for a pot of morning glories, taking it home for the summer and bringing back the seeds in the fall. Our grade one students learn the *Morning Glories (Asagao) Song* verse by verse as they observe the growth of their plants from seed to leaves, buds and blooms to the dried plants and then the seeds they pick to pass on to the next year's first graders. They also do related worksheets and learn short dialogues to discuss the progress of their plants.

At Seigakuin, students practice introducing various aspects of Japanese culture in English to others. They learn hands-on how to make onigiri (rice balls), matching their actions TPR (Total Physical Response) style with our *Onigiri Chant*. Popular Japanese finger plays and clapping games such as Rice Cracker, *Rice Cracker (Osenbei yakatta kana)*, *Look That Way (Achi muite hoi)* and *Ocharaka Hoi* (I won; I lost; It's a tie) also become easily memorized vehicles for active learning fun that students can play together and teach to foreign friends.

We collaborate with the music teacher to help students learn gospel songs for the school music festival in November, translating songs into English from the Japanese original or vice versa. Students also practice singing with good English pronunciation the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel's *Messiah*. Grades one through six sing this masterpiece in three-part harmony each year at the Christmas Program.

Grade 2

Grade two students continue on with this 4-skills, CLIL, game and music/chant centered approach. Each week they receive an eight-page book from the Scholastic *Sight Word Readers* series. After going through the book as class, students practice at home, listening to the accompanying CD as they read. They read the books as a class, in groups, and individually, with the goal of reading aloud all twenty-five books by themselves. They also combine reading with writing practice, copying each book neatly in their notebooks.

Popular games in grade two include a participatory version of *Simon Says* that has students repeating English and doing actions following the teacher and apps where the class employ their enthusiastic voice commands in directing the teacher to control the movement of characters on the screen. CLIL lessons in grade two focus on the *Growing Soybeans and Making Tofu* project that continues over several months in the Japanese Integrated Studies curriculum. Students sing our original song with gestures and illustrate and write mini books that describe the soybean growing process and the way of making tofu. They add to their song repertoire with our *26 Fun Songs* book and CD. They also learn popular songs such as *Hey, Let's Go* (from the *Totoro* movie). Grade two students build confidence as they present these songs and materials before parents and guests.

Grade 3

Grade three students listen to and read a book of sixteen short, patterned stories (*Super Easy Reading 1*, Compass Publishing). They study short-vowel phonics in three-letter words with a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern using *Sounds Fun 2* by Compass Publishing. They also continue singing and learn to read the lyrics for all of the *26 Fun Songs* they began in grade two. The lyrics of these song often lead to question and

answer practice about the weather, feelings, pets, age, and more. CLIL lessons for grade three include *The Butterfly Life Cycle* and *The Frog Life Cycle*, where students sing, act out and read the stages of growth of the butterflies and frogs. This parallels what they observe and study in science classes (and in the great outdoors!).

Grade 4

Grade four students listen to and read the patterned stories in *Super Easy Reading 2*. They also use graded books from the *Oxford Reading Tree* series, enhanced by a new app developed by the teacher, Justin Nightingale, that allows the teacher to zoom in on the books (scanned in Pdf files) so the class can focus together on the screen on details and words in the well-illustrated texts. Each class also chooses songs to learn and sing such as Disney's *A Whole New World and Mickey Mouse March*, *Country Roads* and *Heal the World*. CLIL study continues with units we have developed including Japanese Map Symbols, Japanese Prefectures, Japanese ABC *Karuta*, Momotaro Peach Boy, and Sushi English. Details of these CLIL units are available on request as we seek to further develop this novel approach to using familiar topics and areas of study to create new English chants, songs, and activities. This allows students to encounter and consider the content material twice, first in Japanese, then in English. Our CLIL projects thus both reinforce learning and provide ways to present content in simplified, memorable English.

Grade 5

Students in grade five begin a two-year step-by-step study of grammar based on *My English Book*, *CDs*, and *Workbook*, teaching materials created to cover the grammar points in the first year of junior high school. Card games and short dialogs help make the content communicative. As students learn the logic of English, they make connections between the rules of English and the language they have

encountered to this point.

Students also practice in pairs *Seigakuin English Questions*, questions and answers arranged in six levels by order of difficulty, a total of 50 short dialogues. They continue to listen to and read patterned stories in *Super Easy Reading 3* and the *Oxford Reading Tree* series.

CLIL study in grade five connects to the English Camp held at the Radisson Hotel in Narita, where students in groups of nine work with guest foreign teachers to create and put on a skit. Students also invite flight crew members who are arriving at the hotel to rest between flights to have dinner together, a special occasion for students and guests alike. After dinner, students lead their guests in playing Japanese ABC *Karuta* and *Fukuwarai* (lit. Happy Face Game, played like Pin the Tail on the Donkey).

Grade 6

Study of grammar continues with the *My English Book* materials and *Seigakuin English Questions*. Students also do various pair and group work speaking games and activities. They watch the British comedian Mr. Bean, for example, perform his silent routines. They then complete worksheets retelling the minidramas in English.

Grade six students like to take responsibility for their own learning, play together in groups, and play competitive vocabulary games on the board as a class. We introduce games, and students also prove quick to adapt and make their own games using cards, for example. To capture this enthusiasm and provide the English necessary to play requires vigilance.

Music videos of Christmas songs matched with fill-in listening and comprehension practices introduce popular singing groups (the acapella group, Pentatonix being a favorite) and songs like *Little Drummer Boy*, *Silent Night*, and *Joy to the World*. Making (and eating) a South American banana dessert using English and learning through skits

and games the history and fun of Saint Patrick's Day finish off the school year.

Throughout the English program, we look for opportunities to invite guests from abroad to share about their country and culture, expanding horizons for students and giving them real opportunities to use their English.

Conclusions

This report has outlined the material and approaches that Seigakuin Elementary School uses to help students like and learn English. Keeping students of different abilities and English levels engaged and

motivated to learn requires energy, innovation, and teamwork. The challenge never really ends, and issues of class management also call for patience and creative diligence. If our experience can be of any value to other on the same path, we would love to be of service. Making new ways for children in Japan to engage in English will remain a vital venture and one to be shared for some time to come.

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