

KIDS' SEMINAR ON CULTURAL AWARENESS: INCREASING INTERCULTURAL READINESS IN JAPAN'S ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Oguri has been organizing a "Kids' Seminar" at Chubu University since 1999, shortly before English language activities were to be implemented in elementary schools in Japan nationwide. The seminar, designed for grade 1-6 students and their families, runs for 3-4 hours a day for three days every August. This year marks the 14th anniversary. The purpose of the seminar is to promote children's and their parents' cultural awareness and readiness toward other cultures. Because of the important role of family in helping especially young children sustain their interest toward the world, the seminar also requires parents, or another family member older than elementary school age, to attend. Each seminar focuses on a selected theme. Themes in the past have included food, clothes, towns, manners, occupations, and schools. The seminar consists of warm-up quizzes, interviews and short talks, games, tasks, research activities and finally short presentations. This paper describes how the seminar has been carried out for 14 years. It presents a collaborative learning approach to cultural education, and discusses ways to help young children be ready to learn more about people and the world.

1 Background

Integrated Studies, or "Sogo Gakushu", was officially introduced at the elementary and junior high school level in 2002. The new curriculum focused on a variety of topics, such as social, artistic, environmental and international issues, and included foreign languages lessons, especially English.

As a part of the set of extension programs at Chubu University, Professor Shuji Ozeki and Seiko Oguri, both based at the Language Center, Chubu University, launched a workshop on cross-cultural understanding for elementary school children and their families, named the "Kids' Seminar -Learning Together", shortly before the official start of the Integrated Studies curriculum at school. Since August 1999, the Kids' Seminar has been conducted at Chubu University campus on a yearly basis: at the end of August, for 10 to 11 hours, and on a variety of topics different each time. The details of the program have been gradually adjusted over the years to reflect the interests the participants might have. In general, we have sought to offer ways to make learning more enjoyable for people of any age. The principles of the workshop have been consistent for 14 years: to learn together to better understand people, including ourselves.

2 Principles of the kids' seminar

2.1 The objectives

When the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology officially announced their Integrated Studies plans, English conversation lessons became the focal point of interest among elementary school teachers as well as parents. Typical Integrated Studies programs regarding international understanding often consisted of one-off events such as special lectures inviting locally resident people from other countries to demonstrate particular aspects of their original cultures. Cultural exploration using sociocultural books and the Internet also became popular.

At elementary schools, English conversation lessons became the most commonly accepted activities for reaching the goal of international understanding. Ozeki and Oguri began to seek ways to provide children with opportunities to enjoy learning about cultures while taking advantage of university facilities, environment and people. We decided to help children build their foundations for these long-lasting journeys of understanding other people and cultures. We placed our priority on providing children with the circumstances that helped them prepare to appreciate differences and similarities between diverse cultures.

The aims of the Kids' Seminar are as follows:

- a) To give participants learning opportunities which can continue after the workshop
- b) To help participants prepare to perceive the existence of the variety of cultures
- c) To help participants become aware of profound human similarities
- d) To provide participants with opportunities to communicate with people of different ages, genders, races, nationalities and social status through collaborative learning

In order to achieve aim a), the Kids' Seminar asks one or more other family members to accompany the children, preferably from those who live with them. Adults can be models and partners of learning, as well as someone sharing the experiences at the workshop, and thus facilitators who can give support when children subsequently experience further cultural encounters after the workshop.

As for aims b) and c), we emphasize developing preparedness toward understanding both their own cultures and those of others'. More effort is put into giving opportunities for the individual's internalization of cultural diversities. As such, the Kids' Seminar is not a training program. We don't teach participants how to deal with people from different cultural communities in particular situations. Instead of simply providing exposures to other cultures, we try to let participants experience the process of accepting a variety of values and thoughts as a cumulative process of continuous exploration and discovery. Especially for elementary school children, the workshop attempts to provide occasions to let them understand themselves and their own culture better.

In order to achieve aim d), we organize programs that include various ways of interaction among participants; family pair games and pairwork, group activities, and also lectures. Since the 8th Kids' Seminar in 2006, we have invited participants who originally come from other countries: college students from Korea, China, Brazil and Peru, and graduate students from Inner Mongolia, Cambodia, Vietnam and Nepal. All have learned about the world together with other participants in the Seminar. In some sessions, they have represented their native countries and shared their own experiences of the real world. Also, each year five students on average aged from 18 to 25 from Chubu University have attended. With the instructors they prepare the Seminar and play the role of supporters and facilitators in activities.

2.2 Phases and themes

As shown below, the Kids' Seminar has experienced different phases reflecting what had been happening in the children's environment, especially at school:

The first phase	[1999-2001]:	Using the Internet as a tool of learning
The second phase	[2002-2003]:	Focusing on presenting own ideas
The third phase	[2004-2007]:	Diversifying learning resources
The fourth phase	[2008-2012]:	Coordinating collaborative learning

For each phase, the themes are shown in the table 1 below. The first phase of the workshop, 1999-2001, focused on the use of the Internet as a tool of communication with people around the world. As the participants were not yet familiar with using the Internet for study, we introduced ways to use the Internet to enjoy communicating with people on the other side of the world. At school, computer labs were being prepared for Integrated Studies or for computer literacy classes at that time. However, computers and the Internet were considered to be something special for some experts. Using the Internet at the workshop, we came to the conclusion that we had to control the duration and the timing of when participants were at the computers. After two years we found the participants seemed to enjoy working on computers more than learning about people and culture using the computers.

In the second phase, 2002-2003, we shifted our focus towards putting participants more at the center of learning. A show and tell session became the final stage of the program, so that the participants could better share what they had learned. We started to have participants returning every year, but from the feedback we learned there were some children who did not want to come back to the workshop because they were reluctant to give presentations in front of all participants.

The third phase, 2004-2007, was marked by a widening of our learning resources. Guest speakers as resources in person were added to our conventional source of information such as books. On specific topics, brief presentations were given in person or, when guests could not be there in person, recorded interviews were shown. On some occasions we invited people who couldn't speak Japanese. Where possible, we asked some non-native speakers of Japanese to talk in Japanese. Our intention was to let the participants feel understanding what they talk about is more important than becoming too conscious about the languages they were trying to manipulate.

Table 1. Years and themes of the kids' seminar (1999-2012)

phases	Seminar number	Year	Dates	Hours	Themes
1	1	1999	8/23-25	9	What is Language?
	2	2000	8/9,17,24	9	Where Do You Want To Study?
	3	2001	8/22-24	9	Where Do You Live?
2	4	2002	8/26-28	9	What Do You Like to Eat?
	5	2003	8/26-28	9	Our Favorite Snacks and Sweets
3	6	2004	8/25-27	9	Bad Manners? Good Manners?
	7	2005	8/24/26	9	How People Work
	8	2006	8/9-11	10.5	What People Enjoy Doing
	9	2007	8/22-24	10.5	What People Wear
4	10	2008	8/28-30	10.5	Many Countries, Various People
	11	2009	8/28-29	10.5	Languages around the World
	12	2010	8/19-21	10.5	Occupations and Roles of People
	13	2011	8/26-28	10.5	Where and How People Learn?
	14	2012	8/27-29	10.5	Celebrations, Festivals and Events

In the fourth phase, from 2008 to now, the program has focused more on collaborative learning processes. Groupwork has become a highlight of the program. Individual, pair and group activities have been deliberately organized from the first minute of the workshop so that even the younger participants (aged 6) can, from their point of view, enjoy learning at the Seminar as much as the older participants do.

3 The learning styles of the seminar

The Kids' Seminar has been organized by a group of instructors for the past 14 years:

- Seiko Oguri [1999-2012], Professor, Language Center, Chubu University (EFL)
- Nobuyuki Ota [2006-2012], Associate Professor, Department of Education, Chubu University
- Shuji Ozeki [1999-2008], Professor, Nagoya University (former EFL professor of Chubu University)
- Yoshimasa Awaji [2001-2004], Tokyo Gakugei University Junior High School (former associate professor of Chubu University)

In addition to the instructors above, Katsufumi Sakai, a high school teacher of English, and Hideki Mizuno, an elementary school teacher, were involved in some programs. From the first to the most recent one in August 2012, the Kids' Seminar has provided forums for elementary school children and their family to help develop awareness and preparedness to accept and appreciate any cultures. As teachers of English as Foreign Language, we have also nurtured children's interests in acquiring communication competence.



Photo 1. Original ambassador game played in two pairs (Kids' seminar 2012)

Games and activities in the three-day programs have been carefully designed. The participants get acquainted with people either sitting next to them or in the same group. We regard this as the most necessary process in breaking down psychological barriers when children meet someone new, regardless of nationality or race. The workshop aims to give the participants relaxed opportunities to experience learning together with people next to them.

We foster learning by anyone from anyone; a 40 year-old mother can learn from some a 6 year-old from another family, a 12 year-old can mind and tutor a 10 year-old participant whom he or she has just met an hour ago, just as a 22 year-old college student can carry out group research with a 35 year-old father. Anyone can be a teacher just as anyone can be a student. Even a 9 year-old who would usually sit back and show his reluctance to get involved in the Seminar with strangers may surprise his mother by showing how much of an active learner he has become in three days. (See Photo 6) Table 2 below shows an example of program.

Table 2. Kids' seminar 2012 program

Days	Activities	Style	Objectives
First day	“Kids’ Trivia Quiz”, an original warm-up quiz on the Seminar theme	Pair/ family	Get oriented
	“Ambassador Game”, an original game to seek some countries (see Photo 1)	Group/ Two families joined	Work together
Second day	Theme presentation talks/interviews	Individual	Be more focused
Third day	Mini group research (planning)	Group /different ages	Incorporating knowledge/information
	Mini group research (practicing) (see photo 2)		
	Mini group research (presentation) (see photo 3)		Designing to show their findings



Photo 2. Mini group research (Kids' seminar 2009)



Photo 3. Mini group research poster presentation (Kids' seminar 2012)

4 Feedback from the participants

The Extension Center at Chubu University has made a great contribution in advertising the Kids' Seminar. The participants apply mostly from local areas. The number of participants so far is shown in the table below:

Table 3. The total number of Kids' seminar participants [1999-2012]

	grade	number	total
Children	1-2	75	226
	3-4	103	
	5-6	36	
	High school	20	
Family members			193
Total			396

The number of children by grade are 75 Grade 1-2, 103 Grade 3-4, and 36 Grade 5-6. We have had 20 high school students who wanted to continue to participate after graduating elementary school. On average, repeaters compose approximately 40% of the participants.

Here are some participant feedback comments from the Kids' Seminar 2012:

I always learn a lot from the group research. I enjoy learning how to make better posters to show what we've learned. Hearing Cameron's Russian and Amy's English,¹ and having

¹ Cameron Smith originally from the U.K. and Amy Stotts from the U.S. are both colleagues of Oguri at Chubu University. They attended the whole program in 2012 Seminar as resource persons.

chances to see coins from other countries were a lot of fun. (High School second year, attended 5 times)

It was very much fun to make the ambassador game posters with Amy. I learned a lot about celebrations and events in other countries. Our group work was time-consuming but it was worth making the world event calendar together. I will be a junior high school student next year, but want to continue participating in the seminar. (Elementary 6th grade, attended 6 times)

The Ambassador Game was once again very much fun as it was last year. It was easier for me to figure out which countries they were this year. I want to attend next year, too. (Elementary 4th grade, attended 4 times)

In the Ambassador Game, looking for the national emblems for our target countries was most fun this year. I want to attend next year, too, and look forward to new games and activities created then. My interests in learning about other countries increased because of the Kids' Seminar. I want to thank the Seminar for that. Every time, I am thrilled to attend because there is something I can look forward to learning (Elementary 5th grade, attended 3 times)

After the Seminar, I always find myself exhausted from concentrating so much in activities. Thank you for the support you gave to my 6-year-old daughter attending the Seminar for the first time. She enjoyed learning about the world a lot, too. (Parent, attended twice)

I get surprised by the energy the small children put together every time I attend the Seminar. I would like to thank the Seminar for giving me and my son chances to be able to share the same learning processes every year, which aren't possible anywhere else. (Parent, attended 3 times)

Every year, I am delighted to observe how my boys have become able to do something new and more difficult. My elder son has gained confidence in collaborative learning activities at the Seminar. He uses the special abilities he has acquired here to be involved with people. Although he had rather been quite and inactive in groups, he now shows good leadership in working with others. (Parent, attended 4 times)

5 Perspectives

A group of people, including graduates of Chubu University and EFL/ESL teachers living in Europe, Southeast Asia, North and South America, gave a great contribution to the Seminar. The most recent diversification we have added this year was the Facebook group we created where we invited voluntary supporters to help us confirm the information we collected from books and web sites. As well as expert speakers on certain specialized topics, special participants of foreign origin, and having ordinary people residing in different parts of the world showing us some aspects of their cultures let workshop participants feel that we are dealing with the real living world. For 14 years, the Kids' Seminar has attempted to provide better ways to bring people together. However, this has only been at the time of the workshop. We would like to open a forum for children to learn together all year round, and with children from different parts of the world.

In the presentation, the activities we have created and used will be shown. Also the participant feedback regarding how the Kids' Seminar affected children in their learning attitude and in building their preparedness for understanding other cultures will be discussed.

Kids' Seminar official web site:
<http://kidsweb.learn-together.net/>

References

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