

# The Merits of Teaching English from a Nursery School: Looking at the measures of Kinder Kids International School

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## Abstract

There are many opinions on the age when children should start learning English. Some people say that earlier is better, and others say after the age of two when they start the Critical Period, and still others say that it should be at grade three when they can learn a language logically. By doing a research on Kinder Kids International School, which provides early childhood English Education from the age of one and four months, we could find some merits in doing so, which might be beneficial to elementary school education in Japan.

In 2020, English activities will be introduced to third and fourth grades, and English will become a regular subject at fifth and sixth grades. The present course of study by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology instructs us to concentrate on teaching listening and speaking skills. The new course of study shifts from this policy to teach four skills in good balance. How should we do that? Kinder Kids International School may have some answers to that question.

**Keywords :** Critical Period; Kinder Kids International School; Childhood English Education; English activities; MEXT's new Course of Study Guidelines

## Preface

It has been 6 years since English activity was introduced into public elementary schools in 2011. According to the survey done by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, many opinions are stated on the actual situation, results, and improvements of the English activity, along with various opinions toward English as a subject. Many people do admit the need of English education at elementary schools, however, they point out many improvements. In 2020, English activity will be introduced to the grade three and four in elementary schools and English will be introduced as a regular subject to the grade five and six. However, it is a bit optimistic to judge that we can expect great improvement in the English proficiency of Japanese people by just lowering the learning age of English. As some of the reform measures, we can learn from the education methods of Korea, China, Taiwan which have started teaching English from the grade three (Higuchi, 2013), and from the immersion education at Gunma International Academy (Shiomi,

2017). However, in this research paper, I will introduce Kinder Kids International School (a shortened name “Kinder Kids” is used henceforth) which operates an ongoing English education in the five years of a nursery school and kindergarten, and its English education system, through which we can find out some measures to be useful for public elementary schools.

As Emi Ueno, the manager of the nursery section, points out, English conversational schools have opened rapidly in the last twenty years. As Yasushi Oribe states in the book titled “English Education seen in the Linguistic Anthropology,” the reason for the movement toward early English education is because many parents who had a difficult time in learning English even in the high growth age, think that their children can have high status positions in society if they learn English at an early stage. In the book titled “Is it better to introduce English education at as early a stage as possible?,” Yuko Butler Goto talks about more important aspects than early education and about who should teach and how they should teach based on the previous researches on language acquisition and age. Through these aspects, I would like to point out some measures of English education at Kinder Kids.

## 1. Establishment of Kinder Kids and the general aspects

In 2000, the founder of Kinder Kids, Kimiko Nakayama, had an experience of studying abroad but she had some difficulty in learning English. So even when she was single, she wished to educate her own child as a bilingual speaker. When she actually had her own children, she visited some international schools in Japan, but she could not find any schools where she could make her dreams come true. So she decided to open her ideal school by herself.

She needed some funds to start a business, and she was lucky to rent a reasonable place. At first there were only five pupils including her own children. In those days, some English conversation schools had begun to open gradually. There were some mothers wishing to send their children to a language school, and three months after that Nakayama was able to open one school in Yao City. At first there was not an appropriate curriculum. So along with her Australian and New Zealand staff Nakayama made its curriculum, cutting and pasting some materials, and keeping only the materials accepted by children. Gradually the school has grown bigger and in April 2016, there were 21 branches including one in Canada and one in Hawaii to be opened in 2017. The number of the Japanese staff is 473, 199 foreign staff, and the students' number has grown to be 2320. On November 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, the foreign staff have come from 28 countries, all of whom speak different varieties of English, and with their own values, which will lead to international understanding. This is what Sandra L.M.(2010) emphasizes in her book.

There are two main features in Kinder Kids education. One is a school activity within a school which I will explain later and the other is outdoor activity. In order to fully learn the contents that they study at school, children go out on field trips about once a month. The five-year-old children in the K3 class go out on a field trip ten times a year. Other grades go out about seven to eight times. They decide their destinations depending on the season or things they are studying in a textbook. Some trips are to look for seasonal food and they study about food there. A long distance trip such

as to Kyoto is limited to twice a year in the K3 class and other classes are limited to once. K3 children can use trains, but in many cases they use school buses. The idea that the English lessons at elementary schools should be authentic (Tanaka, 2009) has already been applied at this elementary, kindergarten, nursery school.

## 2. Admission requirements

There are many applicants wishing to enter this school which has the motto called “Japanese mind with English ability.” At the Osaka head school, there are one hundred people waiting to be enrolled. Those who wish to enter this school come with their mother when they are six months old. They take lessons from a native teacher once or twice a week, singing, dancing, and making craft objects. But mothers are the ones who do activities: the babies are too young to do anything. The purposes for the class are to get up in the morning and attend school, to get used to a language other than Japanese, and to get used to a place like school environment. Then when they apply for an official class at the age of one year and four months, they are required to wean, and to be able to walk alone. Most of the children can clear these requirements. Those who are thinking about enrolling at this school, they are strongly suggested to begin from this baby class. If there is a space, they can enter this school at the age of one and four months, which has a capacity of eighteen students. They can choose from the three different courses: three times a week course, five times a week course, a full day course of from early in the morning till late in the evening.

## 3. Special features of Kinder Kids

The basic differences between this school and other ordinary nursery schools or kindergarten have two aspects: (1) English is used at all times, (2) four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are introduced at an early stage. The present government guideline for teaching English at elementary schools shows that they should focus on listening and speaking from the grade five so that they will not feel a lot of burden. According to the Central council for Education, English education will be introduced to the upper grades in elementary schools in 2020, keeping a balance in the four skills. The new course of study will be renewed with the aspects of “How to study” and “What can they do” in addition to “What to study.” At Kinder Kids, there are many unique projects carried out within a school and outside the school. For example, when they teach the system of body digestion, children pretend to be food, the throat, the stomach, the intestines, and the anus to learn how these things operate in the human body. They study what they learn in books through their own experiences. At Kinder Kids, they make most of the written materials except a few books published by Oxford University Press and they renew them every year. Below is the list of some publications.

Picture books: original books of pictures and stories, with original CDs

Phonics books: match pictures and words, teach rules in pronunciation

Sight word books: 150 words which we use in daily life such as “I, have, like.”

Journal notebooks: write stories on special topics or on free topics

Kinder learning portfolio: a book of the children's records which shows what children have achieved and have not achieved. It is like a "Can do list."

According to Ueno, about seventy to eighty percent of the English language consist of sight words, and by studying sight words and phonics we can read many of English sentences without understanding the meanings. Sight words at Kinder Kids are taught in context with the aim of understanding. They hope to teach fifty words at K1 (three years old), eighty words at K2 (four years old), and one hundred and fifty words at K3 (five years old). They just have to memorize those words which do not follow phonics rules.

#### 4. The meaning of teaching four skills to young learners

Some people might state that it is better for young children to have a lot of activities using their bodies as they should. And some parents have questions on the training of forcing children to learn four skills at their young age. Gross motor skills is a cornerstone of Kinder Kids curriculum and a key part of the company's educational philosophy. Therefore, the staff at the Kinder Kids answer to this question saying that it is their motto to train young children to acquire the English proficiency which will be useful in the future. At this school, children use English in many situations such as arguing with their friends, or being disciplined by the teachers. However, when they go home, they mostly use Japanese at home, and when they go to elementary schools, they will be immersed in the world of English. The ability of children' adapting to a new environment where Japanese is the only tool to communicate is surprisingly great. Those who graduate from this school and go to international schools are just a low percentage of two hundred graduates. Most of the children go to elementary schools. There is a possibility that they may lose their English ability when they go into a world where they don't use English. If they develop the ability in reading and writing in addition to listening and speaking, the percentage of keeping their English ability will increase greatly. They will be able to read English signs, to understand some English sentences in books, to continue learning English if they wish. The staff at this school have realized this through their experiences working here.

Ueno's following example is interesting. There lived two boys in America with their parents for some years. The younger boy went to kindergarten and spoke English without having much trouble. On the other hand his elder brother went to an elementary school and learned reading and writing as well as listening and speaking even though his speaking ability was not as good as his younger brother's. When they returned to Japan, the younger brother lost his English ability and came to dislike English because there was nobody to talk to. His elder brother, however, could continue to learn English because he studied reading and writing as well. Here is another example. Ueno's son, who is in the fourth grade, passed the pre-second grade test in Eiken and he is studying for the second grade test now. He takes lessons once a week at the Grad Club of Kinder Kids (special courses for elementary school to high school students).

Here is Ueno's response to the writing training. At Kinder Kids, lessons are done in English,

bulletins are written in English, newsletters which are sent home are written in English, so that children show their natural interest in written English and want to learn it. There is no need to stop doing that. The children in the Nursery class and Toddler class can't tell the difference between Japanese and English. On the other hand, the children in the K2 and K3 classes can make a difference between two languages. They notice that Japanese and English are different languages. Therefore they understand that things are said like this in Japanese and like that in English. When a teacher tells the children to convey certain messages to their mothers in English, the children can do so in Japanese. On the following day, the children report to their teacher in English saying that they have done the task. At this stage, if the teachers push a little harder to learn written English, the children's reading and writing abilities will improve dramatically. Children find it so satisfactory to be able to complete the whole notebook pages. So they don't have to force children to do written study. I would like to briefly talk about Critical Period Hypothesis. According to the hypothesis, from around two years old to adolescence, human beings are sensitive to stimulation and can learn languages quite naturally. However before the age of two, the brain is not matured enough to learn. After the Critical Period, the brain will lose its flexibility in the language acquisition. Yet, there are many successful examples in learning languages after this critical period (Izumi, 2013). Ueno has an interesting opinion about this Critical Period Hypothesis. Learning a language is similar to learning sports or music. No matter how much children are absorbed in English, some children will become bilingual, and others will become better at English, and still others will become good at Japanese. That is to say, there is an individual difference.

## 5. English Education after Kinder Kids

It is quite interesting to find out how children are continuing to develop their English skills after they receive intensive English training at Kinder Kids. About forty percent of the children will go to private elementary schools where they put much emphasis on English education. Some will go to international schools, and the rest will go to regular elementary schools. Kinder Kids provides a special program called Grad Club to elementary school children up to high school students. There are junior elementary courses for the grade 1 - 3, senior elementary courses for the grade 4 - 6, junior and high school courses for the grade 7 - 12. Each class has a forty-minute English lesson and a forty-minute activity and students can take one lesson a week up to five lessons a week. So they can learn various things depending on their schedule. About seventy percent of graduates will come back to the Grad Club among the grade 1 and 2, and its number slightly decreases as more students decide to spend time in learning other matters and in preparing for the junior high school entrance examinations. The oldest students among the graduates are first year university students from the Kansai area, grade 4 in the Nagoya area, grade 5 in the Kanto area. It is too early to evaluate how much English they are using after graduation, but there are some reports saying that they have become the top students in the English test in their own grades.

## 6. Daily Schedule

(1) Nursery Class (one and four months old to two years old)

- 10:00 Morning Circle Time (Greetings / Today's Weather / Day of the Week) ( Language Concepts: Theme language, Alphabet and Phonics Beginnings, Feelings) (Math Concepts: Counting and Number Recognition 1-5, Size and Shape Language / Classification / Sorting, Comparative Language/ Prepositions)
- 10:30 Toilet and Tea Time
- Morning Activity Time (Outside play, Sensory Exploration / Cooking, Fine Motor Craft, Water Play, 3D / Group Craft, Fine Motor Skills)
- 11:30 Lunch Time
- 12:30 Free Play And Toilet Time
- Afternoon Activity Time (Musical Exploration, Imaginative Play, Gross Motor Skills, Fine Motor Craft, Theme Event)
- 13:15 Afternoon Circle Time
- 13:30 Time to go home

In the Nursery Class and the Toddler Class which will be introduced later don't meet every day. So children can choose which day of the week they wish to attend. Some children choose to attend three times and others go five times. Because there are four activities a day, they can take many activities in a week. It is natural that the more days they attend, the more they can improve their English and the more they develop their self-respect. Therefore, it is encouraged to attend more days if they are thinking of moving on to the next grade.

(2-1) Toddler Class (two to three years old) April - August

- 9:45 Yoga
- 10:00 Morning Circle Time (Greetings / Today's Weather / Day of the week)  
(Language Concepts : Theme language, Alphabet and phonics Beginnings, feelings, Math concepts: Counting and Number Recognition: 1 - 15, Size and shape language / Classification / Sorting, Comparative Language: big and small, Preposition: in, on, under)
- 10:40 Toilet and tea time
- 11:10 Activities: Outside play, 3D / Group craft, Outside Play (Water play - July and August ), Fine Motor Craft, Activity book (one activity on each day)
- 12:00 Lunch
- 13:00 Imaginative play, Musical exploration, Gross motor skills, Fine motor skills, Cooking, Theme event (one activity on each day)
- 13:35 Group reading
- 13:45 Afternoon circle time (Discussion of the day / Songs / Winding-down time)
- 14:00 Time to go home

(2-2) Toddler Class September - March

9:45 Yoga  
10:00 Morning Circle Time (Greetings / Today's Weather / Day of the week)  
(Language Concepts: Theme language, Alphabet and phonics Beginnings, Feelings, Math concepts: Counting and Number Recognition: 1 - 15, Size and Shape Language / Classification / Sorting, Comparative Language: big and small, Preposition: in, on, under)  
10:40 Toilet And Tea Time  
11:10 Activities (Pre-writing, Outside play, Activity book, Theme event, Musical Exploration ) (one activity on each day)  
12:00 Lunch Time  
13:00 Scissor Practice, Fine Motor Skills, Gross Motor Skills, Imaginative Play, Sensory Exploration (one activity on each day)  
13:35 Independent Reading, Group reading (one activity on each day)  
13:45 Afternoon Circle Time: Discussion of the Day / Songs / Winding-down time  
14:00 Time to go home

(3-1) KI Weekly Schedule (three to four years old) Term 1

9:30 Preparation time (Unpack, Submit homework, Read teacher's journal)  
10:00 Hello Circle Time (Greetings, Weather, Calendar, Feelings)  
10:15 Morning Circle Time (Literacy game, Numeracy games, Theme language games and songs, Show and tell)  
10:45 Recess  
11:05 Phonics (and handwriting), Numeracy, Sight Word Readers, Themes (Imaginative Play)  
12:00 Lunch  
13:00 Theme (Outdoor Exploration), Language Development, Physical Education, Theme (Numeracy, Social Skills, Art & Craft), Outdoor Education, Theme (Art & Craft) (one activity on each day)  
14:10 Afternoon Circle Time (Discussion of the day / Story time)  
14:30 Time to go home

(3-2) KI Weekly Schedule Term 2 & 3

9:30 Preparation time (Unpack, Submit homework, Read teacher's journal)  
10:00 Hello Circle Time (Greetings, Weather, Calendar, Feelings)  
10:15 Morning Circle Time (Literacy game, Numeracy games, Theme language games and songs, Show and tell)  
10:35 Social Language, Language focus, Language Development  
10:45 Recess  
11:05 Phonics (and handwriting), Reading, Numeracy, Theme (Science / Sensory Exploration / Cooking), Journal, Theme Event (Once a month)  
12:00 Lunch (Optional Library Time, Library Time)  
13:00 Theme (Outdoor Exploration), Language Development, Physical Education, Theme (Literacy,



Numeracy, Social Skills, Art & Craft, Imaginative Play), Outdoor Education , Theme (Art & Craft) (one activity on each day)

14:10 Afternoon Circle Time (Discussion of the day / Story time)

14:30 Time to go home

(3-1) K2 Weekly Schedule (four to five years old)

9:15 Preparation time (Unpack, Submit homework, Read teacher's journal) (Music Class on Monday 9:15 - 9:45)

9:30 Hello Time (Greetings, Weather, Calendar, Feelings)

9:45 Circle Time (LF), Outdoor Education, Circle Time (LF), Outdoor Theme Exploration, Circle Time (LD)

10:45 Recess (Class Teachers)

11:00 Outdoor Education, Circle Time (NL), Art & Craft, Journal / Theme Event

12:00 Phonics, Theme (Imaginative Play), Theme (Writing), Theme (Science / Sensory Exploration / Cooking)

12:30 Lunch (optional Library Time, Library Time)

13:30 Theme (Art & Craft), Sight Words, Reading, Numeracy, Physical Education, Handwriting / Phonics, Theme (Numeracy / Social Skills), Outdoor Education

14:30 Afternoon Circle Time (Discussion of the day / Story time)

14:45 Time to go home

(5) K3 Weekly Schedule (five to six years old)

9:00 Preparation Time (Unpack, Submit homework, Read teacher's journal) (Music Class :Tuesday and Thursday, 9:00 - 9:45),

9:30 Hello Circle Time (Greetings, Weather, Calendar, Feelings)

9:45 Outdoor Education, Circle Time (NL), Outdoor Theme Exploration, Circle Time (LD) (one activity on each day)

10:45 Recess (Class teachers)

11:00 Circle Time (LF), Outdoor Education, Art & Craft, Journal / Theme Event

12:00 Phonics, Theme (Imaginative play), Theme (Writing), Theme (Science / Seasonal Exploration / Cooking)

12:30 Lunch (Optional library time and Library time)

13:30 Reading, Numeracy, Handwriting / Phonics, Theme (Numeracy / Social Skills), Sight Words, Theme (Art & Craft), Language Development, Physical Education, Outdoor Education

14:40 Afternoon Circle Time (Discussion of the day / Story time), Send Homework home

15:00 Time to go home

In the music class, a Japanese music teacher teaches this subject in Japanese, so that children will learn the same songs as other children who go to Japanese kindergartens. In K2 and K3 classes, they divide the teachers into two during circle time, so that two native teachers teach the two halves of the K2 and K3 students, teaching more intensive English while the two Japanese teachers teach



the other P.E. class and they switch at the end of the activity.

## 7. Textbooks and the Contents

### (1) Development of vocabulary

- ① Nursery class: head, shoulder, hand, leg
- ② Toddler class: face, eye, hear, mouth, nose
- ③ K1 class: nail, eyebrow, toe
- ④ K2 class: parts in the body such as heart, lung
- ⑤ K3 class: internal organs such as small intestine, large intestine, liver, saliva

### (2) Development of contents and expressions

- ① Nursery class: Can you touch your eyes?
- ② Toddler class How many eyes do you have?
- ③ K1 class How are you? I am hungry.
- ④ K2 class How are you? I am exhausted.
- ⑤ K3 class How are you? I am excited, because I am...

Where is your heart? How do your lungs help you?

At Kinder Kids, they have goals in each grade, and learn them in a spiral process. When children graduate, they should be able to read and write at the level of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade native speakers in their own countries. This spiral learning should be applied to the links among elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools and universities in Japan.

### (3) Development in the contents and homework

- ① Toddler class: drills of drawing straight lines, slope lines, circle, half circle in both up and down using a pencil of 6 b lead.
- ② K1 class: uses workbooks from the first week of class, write capital letters and small letters. In teaching [sh] sound, combine the [s] sound in swimming snake and [h] sound in hungry hippo. As for the sight words, they study fifty-four words like up and down. In the area of numeracy, they learn comparative expressions and superlative expressions, such as “tallest.” There are some drills of matching pictures and words such as a picture of a mat and four words : mud, mat, mad, met. Find things with the shape of a square or a triangle in a room. Match the number, writing of the number, the number of the circles. Find the multiple numbers of two or five. Start journal writing such as following the dotted line of “Fin went to a beach” or filling in the blank of a sentence like “Can I play in your ( )?”
- ③ K2 and K3 classes: children write their journals on two topics: on certain themes such as Halloween and buildings in France and on free topics such as weekend events. Children use sight words, knowledge of phonics and new words in writing their journal. Only K2 and K3 have a recess time when children bring their own food such as fruits or vegetables. By eating seasonal food, they can develop the sense of aesthetic sensitivity.

- ④ As for the other materials, children make “My Personal Dictionary” in which children make their own dictionary filled with the words they don't know, some picture books with CDs for the Toddler class. The school provides “Kinder Learning Portfolio” for everybody to write personal information such as the things they have mastered and have not. This is not children's report card but the result of their achievement.

## 8. What Kinder Kids has achieved

Elementary school teachers often talk about the graduates of this school as being friendly and having creativities. Children at this school use polite Japanese such as “Thank you for doing this.” Because they use English at school, not learning slang, they don't have a chance to learn bad Japanese such as “Stupid” “Shit.” Children here are creative because Teachers train students to ask questions and think for themselves and they can propose ideas in deciding things.

## Afterword

By doing a research of Kinder Kids, I have come to the conclusion that Japanese children can develop their English proficiency very much in a special atmosphere with rich English input in quality and quantity. However, the children here have to continue studying English in the following schools and in society so that they can use their English ability in the international world. In order to do that, we have to reform the school systems where they can continue to learn English effectively and children have to continue studying individually as Kumiko Butlar Goto (2015) states. In this paper, my concern was not to mention what Goto points out but to draw out the methods of integral English education at Kinder Kids. As the new course of study points out the important aspects of “How to study” “What they can achieve to do” in addition to “What to learn,” the teaching practice at Kinder Kids can give good examples and suggestion to other schools not only in the intensive English course but also in the field of educating children as total human beings.

A Korean student studying at Kobe Shinwa Women's University explained the reason why Korean students study so hard until midnight. They study so hard, including the first foreign language and the second foreign language, in order to get a good job. Until recently in Japan, we could get good jobs even though we can't speak a foreign language. But nowadays when we meet many foreigners in daily situations privately and at work, the demand for learning English has grown so rapidly. Those who engage in teaching should realize this movement more seriously and try to do their best in teaching English at their school and send them to the next stage. Even when we lower the studying age of English to the grade three, if we teach only games and songs without basic concepts behind these activities, the English ability of Japanese people may not improve as dramatically as other Asian countries. Kinder kids students gain knowledge through songs and games. Kinder Kids staff state that textbooks provide an opportunity to immediately apply that knowledge. The books are useless without the games and songs. It is very probable that we could learn a great deal from the methods of advanced schools in language education both in Japan and other countries.

## Notes

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