



International Exchanges at the Elementary School Level



by Kim M. Takeda (Keio Yokohama Elementary School, Japan)

Introduction

When I first came to Japan in 1988 on the JET (*Japan Exchange and Teaching*) Program, international exchanges for elementary school students were very limited. For many students, interacting with an Assistant Language Teacher was the only chance they had to speak with someone from a different country. Students had few opportunities to communicate with overseas students close to their same ages. As technology has progressed, schools are now able to host video conferences, webinars and most recently Skype sessions with other elementary schools.

The Japanese schools I worked at arranged exchanges with other international schools and military schools within Japan to provide more interaction between children from different cultures. These exchanges were successful in promoting positive meetings between students, yet these one-day events didn't really challenge students to step out of their comfort zone and experience an international exchange to the degree that parents and teachers hoped for.

Common Problems of Children's Exchanges

After participating in several international exchanges through the JET Program and as a native English teacher with the Kawachi-Nagano Board of Education, I observed several common problems that Japanese students were experiencing. I was able to observe other areas of concern after being one of the teacher chaperones for Katoh Gakuen Gyoshu Elementary School's two week study trip to Utah and Oregon, and for Gunma Kokusai Academy's three week study trip to Perth. Among the areas of concern were the following:

1. **Shyness / Lack of confidence** Students were hesitant to ask for help and were too nervous to express their feelings, opinions, requests or worries.
2. **Limited vocabulary** Students relied on memorized patterns and vocabulary learned from textbooks or English classes to communicate. If real-life conversations did not follow the classroom patterns, students became flustered or immediately assumed that their English was not being understood.
3. **Not enough experience with conversational English** It was challenging for many students to keep a conversation flowing.

Students were able to ask and answer simple questions, but had trouble reacting to answers, transitioning between topics and initiating or finishing conversations. This wasn't necessarily a language problem. It depended a lot upon each child's individual personality and social skills.

4. Culture shock and difficulty to adapt

Everyone expected young children to feel anxious about being in a foreign country without their parents, but sometimes it was a surprise as to which students adapted easily and which had trouble adjusting. The students who seemed to have the most difficulty adapting were the ones who expected everything to be exactly as it was in Japan. These children saw cultural differences as being negative rather than accepting what was different and reacting positively.

5. Fear of making decisions and of expressing oneself

Most children in Japanese elementary schools are encouraged to stick with the group and to go along with the majority. How can teachers prepare students to become more independent and more confident in their ability to make choices?

6. Homesickness vs Japan-life sickness

Many students were initially ecstatic to depart on a study trip abroad, especially when they were at the airport and traveling with their classmates. Some students never experienced homesickness until the moment they were separated from their classmates and placed in their homestays. Although a lot of students missed their families, Japanese home-cooked meals and their own bedroom, teachers discovered that more students missed their Japanese lifestyles. Students shared that they missed texting on their cell phones, Japanese TV, Japanese comics, Japanese snacks and vending machines!

After taking these concerns into careful consideration, can we say that students at the elementary school level are ready to participate in international exchanges abroad? I believe that the answer is yes. The key question for me was: How could we teachers better prepare our students to have a more positive and successful international exchange experience?

Preparing Students for Overseas Exchanges

One of the first things we wanted the students and parents to be aware of on both the Katoh and GKA (Gunma Kokusai Academy) study trips were that these trips were international *exchanges* and NOT sight-seeing resort vacations. As part of a cultural exchange, students need to be able to appreciate and share their own culture. It is just as important for students to share their culture as it is for them to learn about a new one.

We prepared several activities in advance to help the students successfully share things about Japan with their overseas homestay families and new school classmates. Here are some of the recommended and successful projects that we've done at both Katoh and at GKA:

- **Posters / Presentations about Japan**

Students chose an aspect of Japanese culture, geography, history, etc. to create a short 3~5 minute presentation for their overseas host school/class. They also made a display poster, not only to go along with their presentation, but also to give as a souvenir to their host class. Students were encouraged to share something they were interested in so that they would be able to talk freely and easily about the topic whether it was a Japanese baseball team, a singing group, the train system, food or a Japanese holiday.

- **Mini booklets about student's family, neighborhood, house, school, prefecture, interests, etc.**

Many students didn't realize how easy it would be to talk with their new host family if they brought along a small photo album or a memory stick of photos. We encouraged the students to take and bring photos of their family and their house or apartment. Host families really appreciated these booklets.

- **Cooking a meal for their host families**

We encouraged all students to learn how to cook at least one Japanese dish before going on their study trip. Okonomiyaki, tempura and curry rice proved to be the most popular. Cooking lessons were integrated into the Home Economics curriculum so students felt very comfortable offering to cook a Japanese meal for their host families.

In addition to these projects, students prepared a number of Japanese activities to share with their overseas host families and their classmates at their host schools. Popular games and toys included *kendama* (very popular), spinning tops, *hasami shogi*, paper sumo, *karuta*, and origami.

Summer Homework Assignments

Over the summer vacation, we had some special homework assignments that we asked students to challenge. At first, the students (and possibly their parents) laughed at these assignments but there were good intentions behind each one.

- **Pack and re-pack a suitcase by yourself.** This was a skill that most students could not do well!
- **Take a shower or bath in less than 5 minutes.** We wanted students to be aware that some areas overseas have water shortages and to practice water conservation.
- **Eat a food that you don't like.** We wanted students to develop a positive and perhaps more adventurous attitude towards their meals.
- **Help your parents by doing 3 chores.** Homestay families may or may not expect or request Japanese students to help with house-hold chores. We wanted our students to build positive relationships with their host families

Practicing Scenarios Through Roleplays

Prior to the overseas study trips, teachers spent a lot of time in class preparing the students using various role-playing activities and scenarios. These included the following:

- Airport Procedures: Security / Immigration / Customs
- Airplane Travel: Manners / Eating
- Meeting Home Stay Families
- Home Stay Scenarios: Asking for help / Offering to help / Asking for permission

We also realized that Japanese students sometimes had difficulty making decisions or expressing their own opinions. One of the frequent comments we received from host families is that they weren't sure whether their host children were happy, troubled or disappointed.

For example, one host family pondered whether to take their host child to a fancy Italian restaurant or a nice Japanese sushi restaurant. They wanted the child to choose. The child became quite stressed and felt a lot more pressure than the host family intended. When the chaperone teachers talked with the student, he explained that he really wanted to choose the Italian restaurant, but thought that maybe the host family wanted to eat sushi so he chose the sushi restaurant. Because he was so worried about his choice, he became quiet and the host family misinterpreted that he was unhappy with the quality of the Japanese food. It was all a simple misunderstanding.

Practicing Choices and Decisions

To help build the students' confidence when making decisions and expressing themselves, we played a lot of short communication games during lunch and in our English classes. At GKA, I introduced these games in the fourth grade so that the students would become more comfortable by the time they reached Grade 6 when faced with choices and decisions in the overseas study tour.

- **Either-Or Game** Students practiced making quick choices to express their likes, dislikes or preferences: (*Meat or fish? Basketball or baseball? Cats or dogs?*) These questions can gradually be taken up a level to: (*Which do you like better, ice cream or cake? Would you like the blue one or the orange one? Do you want to take your bath before or after dinner?*)
- **Would You Rather...?** Students practiced quick replies: (*Would you rather go shopping or go to the museum? Would you rather go camping or stay in a hotel? Would you rather eat Chinese or Greek food for dinner tonight?*)

It also helps if students can be exposed to popular slang and colloquial phrases that are commonly used in the country they're visiting. At GKA, we were fortunate enough to have a teacher from Australia to consult with. We kept a bulletin board of phrases such as "How are you going?" and "No worries." Teachers printed out menus from the host schools, popular restaurants and fast food eateries to allow students to practice making decisions and ordering things on their own. Math lessons included some practice for the students in dealing with Australian currency. Students practiced working with decimals and planning a budget. Some students enjoyed learning how to convert yen into the local currency so they could compare prices with those in Japan.

Goals, Purposes and Support

There are a number of travel agencies and organizations that will assist and support schools in planning overseas study trips. If teachers can work together with these agencies, any potential problems can immediately be addressed. Teachers may rely on the expertise of these organizations, but it's very important that teachers find out as much as they can about what's expected of their students while studying abroad. Any suggestions or advice should be listened to carefully so that teachers can plan lessons accordingly.

The following goals and purposes outlined for both the Katoh and GKA overseas study trips summarize why a successful international

exchange at the elementary school level can be so rewarding for the children who participate:

1. Linguistic:

- To immerse students in a 100% English speaking environment
- To communicate in English with peers their same age in authentic settings

2. Cultural:

- To develop open-mindedness by experiencing day-to-day life in a multicultural setting
- To gain a better understanding of (*country*) society / culture and develop deeper tolerance and respect for differences and other ways of thinking
- To develop a curiosity about the world and broaden personal horizons

3. Independent Growth:

- To develop a greater sense of independence, maturity and self-confidence
- To learn patience and flexibility
- To encourage students to be independent through their homestay experiences

Conclusion

Providing elementary school students with lessons, activities, language scaffolding and information to make them more globally aware, culturally sensitive and confident in their communicative skills will hopefully increase the students' chances of having a more positive and successful international exchange. The opportunity for personal growth at this young age level can have a very positive and rewarding impact on their future studies and on their future interactions with people from other cultures.

International Exchange Study Trips

United States (October 20 - November 2, 2007)

- To: Zion Canyon, Utah and Portland, Oregon
- School: Katoh Gakuen Gyoshu Elementary School (Grade 5) in Shizuoka
- Partners: Universal Language, Inc. / Portland Public School District

Perth, Australia (Oct. 17-Nov. 7, 2012 & 2013)

- School: Gunma Kokusai Academy (Grade 6)
- Partners: Gold Intercultural Learning
www.goldil.com.au/ and Ryugaku Journal

Kim Misao Takeda

English for Global Communication Teacher
Keio Yokohama Elementary School, Japan
E-mail: <kimtakeda@gmail.com>