

**CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION  
FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING  
THROUGH ENGLISH IMMERSION CAMP (EIC)**

**The Asian Conference on Language Learning**

# **CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH ENGLISH IMMERSION CAMP (EIC)**

**ABSTRACT:** Generally speaking, most Japanese learners of English have a stereotyped view that they should learn to use flawless English like native speakers does or pick up a British or American accent. However, we would have to say that the predominant view should be altered to eliminate bias against other varieties of English.

Applied to English in elementary school, the idea means that if more non-native speakers with various backgrounds were involved in teaching, children could focus rather on the importance of English as a communication tool than on studying it as a school subject.

In order to challenge the educational status quo, we audaciously launched a short-term English program, Kumon English Immersion Camp (EIC), in 2001 with instructors from 17 different countries and 30 elementary school students aged 10 to 12. Held annually or twice-yearly, the program has improved to a great extent over the past 11 years, providing fruitful learning experience for 1,483 children and 251 instructors from 62 countries or regions around the world.

This paper focus on what we have obtained from the program. We will discuss about how effectively a short-term English camp allows children to have successful communication with the use of English, and to realize the importance of understanding each other in a communal life with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

### *1.1 World Englishes and Japanese People's Preconception of English*

English has spread and been spoken by more and more people globally. According to Crystal (2003) the number of non-native English speakers overwhelmingly outnumbers the native speakers by a ration of 3 to 1. This means nowadays English is playing a crucial role as a lingua franca in the world, where the global diaspora of English has led to the development of new English varieties that are influenced by people's own identity and different cultural background.

The use of English has spread in many countries and regions throughout the world including Japan. The period after Meiji Reformation in 1868 has been marked as the ending of Japan's national isolation. It was the time when Japan started to embrace its diplomatic relations and foreign trade with western countries such as Britain and The

United States of America which also became a great influence for Japan. Therefore the Japanese government has been putting emphasis on the importance of English education for more than 100 years. In spite of acknowledging the importance and the vast spread of English, learning a foreign language such as English from an early age has been long debated in many countries including Japan. In Japan, there has been a discussion whether to make English as an official subject at public elementary schools or not for at least the last two decades. Finally from April 2011, English has started to be taught as an official subject at Japanese public elementary schools.

Although it is compulsory for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grader at public elementary school to learn English, there has been a serious concern regarding a low motivation to study English for these Japanese children. Children have to understand that English is not just a subject that they have to learn at school, but it is a communication tool to promote international understanding. Moreover in spite of the vast spread of English and the emergence of World Englishes, most of Japanese people still have a stereotyped that English has to be spoken with American or British accent. The stereotyping has caused many Japanese people who study English to have the fear to even try to use English unless they are able to speak flawlessly with certain accents that they think is right. How can we change these facts?

### *1.2 Ways to change The Stereotype of English in Japan*

One of the ways is to raise people's acknowledgment of World Englishes. English is used globally and influenced by multicultural backgrounds in different regions of the world. As has been initiated by Smith and Kacru that neither British nor American English can be used as a standard (Alatis, 2005: 32), it is not necessary for Japanese people to have to imitate neither of those two accents. It is essential for Japanese people, especially the ones who are studying English to acknowledge that there are people out there in this world who speak English with different types of accents. The fear that is built up by the pressure of having to speak only with certain accents should not stop Japanese people to try to communicate in English.

The other way is to promote international understanding at school. In order for children to understand the importance of English, it is important to raise children's awareness and knowledge about the world. There are certain attitudes that can be created in order to be successful in making our children internationally minded. Teaching about geography, history, foreign languages, foreign cultures, etc will help to raise such awareness and knowledge of the world. So what is the best way so that these attributes can be cultivated by the students at the school? One of the most essential things that have the strongest influence on the student is the teacher or instructor. In order to develop international understanding, school should systematically take

advantage by the multiculturalism in this world, such as having English teacher or instructor that are not necessarily native speakers of English with different cultural backgrounds.

## **2. KUMON ENGLISH IMMERSION CAMP: An Effort for Our Future Leader**

### *2.1 The Beginning of KUMON English Immersion Camp (EIC)*

English has undoubtedly become an essential tool of communication in the world. Under such circumstances, a sense of crisis is increasing in Japan, because of the fear of Japan being left behind in the world. In 2001, Mr. Yoichi Funabashi, the writer of “Aete Eigo Kouyogo-ron” and a columnist from Asahi Newspapers, contacted KUMON and said, “If we don’t take any measures, the whole Japanese education system will collapse. Why don’t we think and work together to make changes.” Later, Mr. Morihiko Hiramatsu, the former governor of Oita prefecture, Mr. Kazuichi Sakamoto, the former president together with the staff and students of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Professor Kensaku Yoshida and students of Sophia University, and an international journalist, Ms. Reiko Kinoshita, joined us, to enable us to achieve the idea of an English Immersion Camp. As a result, the English Immersion Camp was born as the first long-term camp held in Japan.

The aim of KUMON English Immersion Camp (EIC):

- To allow children to experience successful communication, using English as a global language.
- To allow children to share a communal lifestyle with people from different countries and regions, learning about their cultures and ways of thinking, and realizing the importance of understanding each other as members of the global community.
- To allow children to have confidence and the strength to actively challenge the unfamiliar, in addition to heightening the will to apply effort to strive for higher goals.

### *2.2 Introduction of KUMON English Immersion Camp (EIC)*

KUMON’s English Immersion Camp (EIC) started in 2001, aiming to nurture individuals who can make a contribution to world peace by using their ability to communicate in English. In this camp, children who are enrolled in elementary school grade 4 to grade 6, who have passed EIKEN level 4 or above or studying KUMON

English level I1 or above take on the challenge of spending several days in an entirely English-speaking environment with people from different countries and backgrounds. By joining the camp, the participants will understand that English is spoken not only by natives but people from different mother tongue languages throughout the world and it is considered an important tool not only for communicating with people of different languages, but also for understanding differences in cultures and for respecting one another.

While gaining a global perspective and learning about current events around the world, children become more confident and come to believe in their potential by taking on new challenges without being afraid of making mistakes. There are two key phrases used as a slogan at the KUMON English Immersion Camp, “Don’t be afraid of making mistakes. Let’s try communicating in English”. The intention of these two phrases is to tell our children how they have to be ready for entering into the world of English. What is important for them is not to use English without making mistakes, but to use English without being afraid of making mistakes.

### *2.3 Diversity in the Camp*

The camp also put emphasis on embracing the difference that we have in this world. Throughout the program, the children are accompanied by camp leaders who come from different parts of the world. Their backgrounds are diverse and not all of them are native speakers of English. In fact, most of the camp leaders speak English as their second or third language. In other words, the program was saturated with World Englishes (Kachru, 1992). By having a chance to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, children can broaden their horizon of the world, understand the importance of English, and raise their confidence of communicating in English.

Not only from the camp leaders, this camp also put effort in making programs that focus on international understanding. Diversity, awareness, confidence and understanding are some of the themes that we have for each activity. The diversity of our camp leaders also has helped us in making an effective program for the kids to understand about diversity. One of the activities that take advantage of having camp leaders from different backgrounds is “Travelling Around the World”. It is a program where camp leaders will have a two ways explanation about their home countries to the children. With camp leaders coming from different countries, each presentation is unique in their own ways. Another example of the program is an activity called “Cultural Understanding” where children will watch a skit prepared to promote international understanding. Some of the specific themes that we have on the skit are

the difference in the way people in different countries greet each other, or the difference in the way people eat, etc. This activity has an enormous effect on broadening children’s view of the world and motivating them to learn more about the English and the world.

Below is an impression of the camp by a 6<sup>th</sup> grader participant.

*English is very important. If I can speak English, there are so many things that I can learn about the world. Before, it was hard for me to accept cultures that are not similar to Japan. When I heard about that, I would think “it’s so weird!” or “I can’t believe it”. But in EIC, I realized that I am not alone, Japan is not the only country in this world! I felt that it is important to understand about people from different countries, and for that, I need to study English harder!*

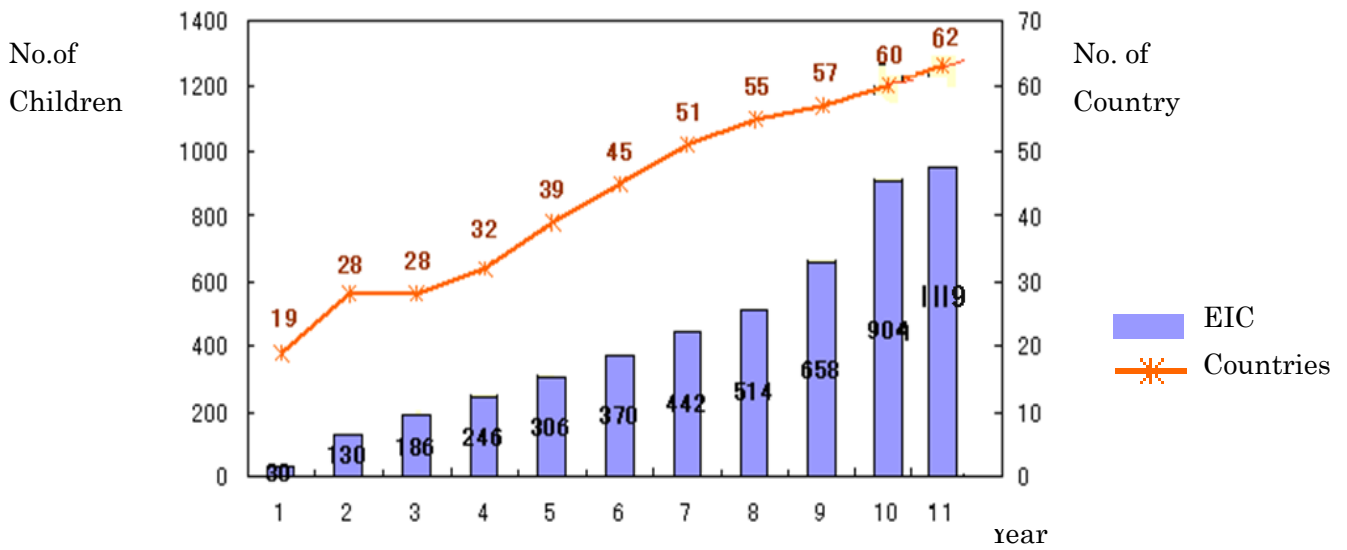
#### 2.4 The Growth of KUMON English Immersion Camp & our Children

Since it first started in 2001, KUMON English Immersion Camp (EIC) has been trying to make improvement every year. Some changes were made in order for us to improve. Some of the changes including the change of place, the number of days for the camp, and change of programs are among those points that we try to improve continuously.

Year	Days	Place
2001	12	APU, Beppu
2002	14	Yokohama
2003	10	Yokohama
2004	10	Yokohama
2005	10	Yokohama
2006	10	Yokohama
2007	10	Yokohama
2008	10	Hachikogen
2009	7 (2x)	Yokohama & Hachikogen
2010	7 (3x)	Shiga
2011	7 (3x)	Shiga

**Table 1: Changes of the camp place and days of the camp yearly**

As a result, the number of participant has been increasing every year. Besides the increasing number of participants, the number of countries has also expanded to 62 countries in total in 2011.



**Figure 1: Growth of EIC network yearly (no. of people and country)**

1. Australia	20. Ghana	39. Myanmar	58. Uganda
2. Bangladesh	21. Hungary	40. Nepal	59. USA
3. Belgium	22. India	41. New Zealand	60. Uzbekistan
4. Bolivia	23. Indonesia	42. Nigeria	61. Vietnam
5. Botswana	24. Ireland	43. Pakistan	62. Zimbabwe
6. Brazil	25. Iran	44. Peru	
7. Bulgaria	26. Israel	45. Philippines	
8. Cambodia	27. Jamaica	46. Poland	
9. Cameroon	28. Japan	47. Russia	
10. Canada	29. Kazakhstan	48. Romania	
11. China	30. Kenya	49. Samoa]	
12. Colombia	31. Korea	50. Singapore	
13. Czech	32. Lithuania	51. Sri Lanka	
14. Egypt	33. Malawi	52. Syria	
15. England	34. Malaysia	53. Taiwan	
16. Ecuador	35. Mali	54. Tanzania	
17. Ethiopia	36. Malta	55. Thailand	
18. Finland	37. Mexico	56. Tonga	
19. Germany	38. Mongolia	57. Trinidad and Tobago	

**Figure 2: EIC network (countries & regions)**

From the figure above, it can be seen that the network KUMON English Immersion Camp has expanded throughout the year. In figure number 2, it shows 62 countries and regions which are mostly the country of our camp leaders. From the 62 countries, it is obvious that not all the camp leaders in KUMON English Immersion Camp are from the “inner circle” (Kachru, 1992). Some of the camp leaders are from the “outer circle” and most of the camp leaders are from the “expanding circle”.

### 2.5 The Growth of EIC Children

In KUMON English Immersion Camp, we believe that every individual has unique potential. It is our role to help bring out their potential to the max. There are not many opportunities to use English in today’s Japan. So, prior to the camp, many children felt this way: “Although I am studying English everyday, I am not sure whether or not I am actually able to use English and make people understand me. Still I want to give it a try”. However once the camp started, children enjoyed their daily communication, saying “Everyone was kind to me and was eagerly listening to my English. As the camp leaders repeatedly taught me in an understandable way, I gradually gained my confidence”.

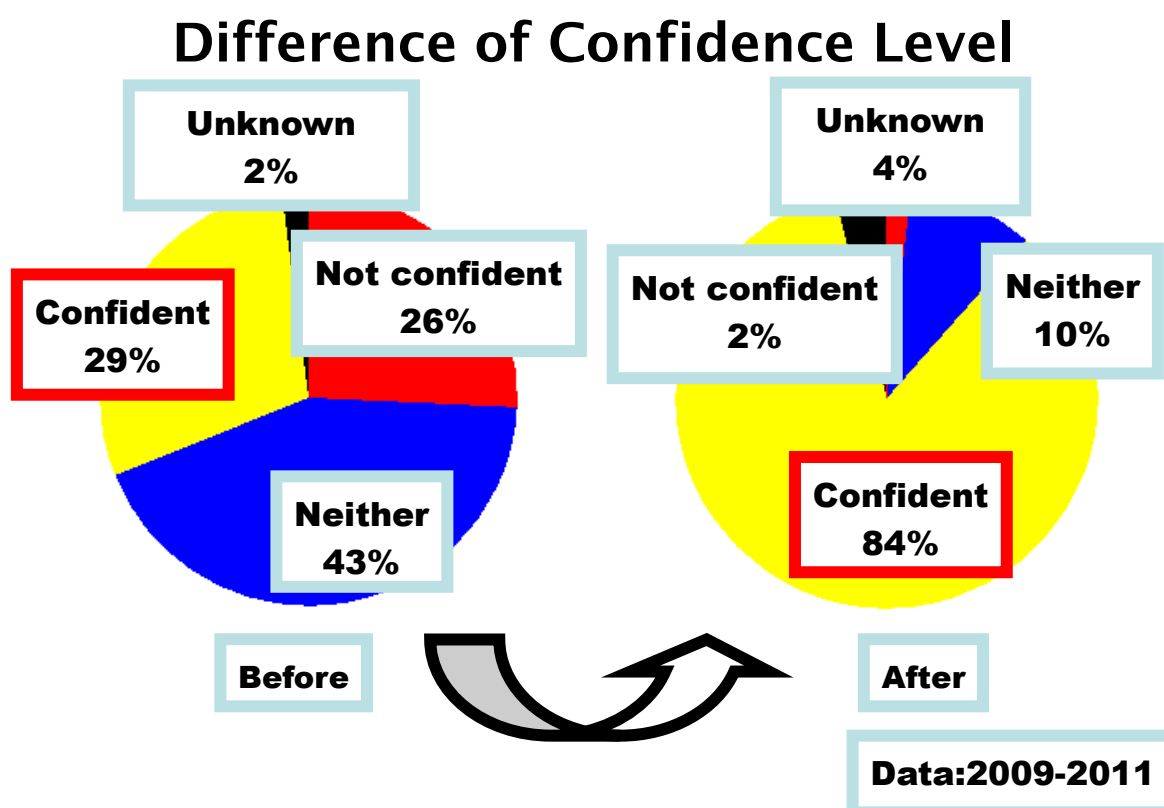


Figure 3: Confidence level in using and speaking in English before and after the camp



From the figure above, we can see such a big difference of confidence level of the children before and after the camp. With camp leaders and staff coming from different nationalities and background, as well as the camp slogan “Don’t be afraid of making mistakes. Let’s try communicating in English.” the participants could grab the real meaning of English as a communication tool as well as gaining confidence. Throughout the camp, not only the children were able to get confidence but also they were able to learn about the reality of the world including acknowledging the importance of taking action to contribute to the world problems.

Below is an example of an impression written by a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who participated in KUMON English Immersion Camp:

*"Before I join EIC, I was really excited about it but I did not have confidence in communicating in English and writing skills. But soon all my worries were gone. And I was able to have a communication with camp leaders. While talking to the camp leaders, there were English words which I could not understand too, but by doing gesture, we were able to communicate. In EIC, I realized that if I use English I can communicate with camp leader who came from different countries From now on I want to work even harder in English and communicate even more to many people.*

*Through EIC, besides English, I was able to learn about environment problem and unprivileged children too. The eco-bag that we made and also the chopstick that we got in EIC, I am thinking of using them. I was sad to know that in this world there are children who cannot drink clean water and also children who were forced to go to war. Therefore I will do the things that I can do. I will continue to collect bottle caps, like we did in the camp, and help to get vaccine in return. I will treat seriously the importance of water and try not to have likes and dislikes.*

*Up until now I want to be announcer but after joining EIC, I have additional dream. I also want to work in the international related field. It was an enjoyable and valuable experienced of 7 days in EIC. The things I felt and experienced in EIC I want to treasure it from now on. Also from now on I will try even harder in English.*

### **3. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE HOPES**

#### *3.1 Conclusion*

Most of the Japanese people have a preconception about how English should be spoken, which has become one of the biggest reasons to a low confident level in speaking or using English. To help Japanese people especially the young generation to be more motivated in learning English as well as to have the confidence in using

English, it is very essential for them to acknowledge the vast spread of English throughout the world including the fact of the fast emergence of new varieties of English. They have to understand that English is not just a subject to learn at school, but most importantly it is a tool of communication that people use globally.

In order to have a good understanding of those crucial points, it is important to have a real example of the use of English by people from different countries, not only the people whose mother tongue is English. One of the examples is having English teacher or instructor from different backgrounds and nationalities. It is important for the children to understand that it is ok to embrace the differences that we have including varieties of English accents. In KUMON English Immersion Camp, the children have proven that one could acquire the ability to use English as a communication tool as long as there was a “place” for them to use the language comfortably, which contributed enormously to children’s motivation for learning.

### *3.2 Future Hopes*

For the future, we are hoping for Japanese school especially elementary school to emphasize more on the importance of international understanding. By having English teacher or instructor for different nationalities and backgrounds can also help promote international understanding among the students.

KUMON English Immersion Camp also hopes to be able to contribute more to children’s education, especially English and education for international understanding. We are hoping to broaden our network and hope to cooperate together with school and organization to the betterment of children and future.

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