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Seigakuin Elementary School English Teacher Training Seminars

Brian Byrd

For three years now, with the cooperation of the Saitama and now the Kita City Boards of Education, Seigakuin University General Research Institute Teacher Training Seminars have welcomed teachers who are seeking new ideas to use in their elementary school English classes.

From warm up activities in which dialog-style songs and action-packed chants and games serve to switch minds into an English mode, and on to activities which introduce Japanese culture and foreign culture in simple English, the seminars are as lively as the classrooms of children from which they originate. Recent topics have included “The Butterfly Life Cycle Song,” where to the tune of the familiar children’s ちょうちょう (Butterfly song), we introduce lyrics that complement the third grade science unit on raising butterflies from egg to adult, and Japanese ABC Karuta, where twenty-six words central to Japanese culture are matched to the letters of the alphabet and arranged in an easily learned chant: A-Anime, Japanese art; B-Bow, Japanese greeting; C-Carp flags, Children’s Day, etc.

The seminars introduce material and methods that we have developed in our Seigakuin Elementary School classes, and in public elementary schools. To our regular, listening based, four skills approach, we add units such as “Momotaro Peach Boy Story and Song,” “Morning Glories Asagao Song;” “Using Chopsticks;” “The Three Little Pigs Story and Song,” “Let’s Make Onigiri Chant,” and many more. All are our original, collaborative work; some have been featured in articles in the Japanese and English news media.

Responses from the participants have been gratifying, and as they take our materials back to

their schools, they spread to other children the fun of learning English. Many request that we keep making and presenting more such materials, as they find our approach easy to use with their own students. Some have visited our classes, which are always open to observers.

Our goal in the seminars is to bring together the latest in academic research and the best in current practice, and to provide visual records of our students’ progress. Along with a review of the trends and issues facing English for young learners today, each seminar includes a video presentation of our Seigakuin children learning and using English. When participants can see an entire class of elementary school students enthusiastically speaking, singing, reading, and even writing English, and this after limited contact time with the language, they see new possibilities for elementary school English.

Compared to its Asian neighbors, Japan is still just dabbling in English as a course subject. The MEXT is hobbled by a lack of finances, minimal contact with the actual teaching situation, and difficulty in moving forward amidst a variety of conflicting opinions among those in leadership roles. Meanwhile, at the ground level, teachers find the added duty of teaching English a formidable challenge, and opportunities for training limited. More effort and inspiration, coordination and imagination are urgently needed to bring this country in line with global standards. Our hope is that Seigakuin can continue to do its part, both through seminars and in practice, in pioneering the field of elementary school English education. We welcome your interest and input in this task.

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