

# Introducing Children to Other Cultures Using English: Cultural Interaction in English in the Kids International Program

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Kids International (KI) is a program for children to experience other cultures using English; its purpose is to develop the base for children to become global citizens. Guests from foreign countries introduce their culture and customs in a fun way through songs, chants, dance, and cooking. As children communicate using English with guests and enjoy their contact with other cultures, they both deepen their understanding of the culture and develop interest in English study. Not only children, but all involved in the program can learn much. This paper discusses the KI concept, describes an actual KI program, and suggests ways to adapt KI to other schools.

キッズインターナショナル(KI)は英語による子どものための異文化体験プログラムであり、子供たちが地球市民になるための基礎を育成することを、目的としている。異国からのゲストが、自国の文化や生活習慣を、歌やチャンツ、クラブト、ダンス、料理などを通して楽しく紹介する。子供たちはゲストと英語でコミュニケーションをとり、楽しみながら異文化に触れることにより、異文化理解を深め、英語学習に興味を示す。また、子どもだけでなく関わったすべての人々が多くを学ぶことができる。ここでは今までに行ったKIプログラムの一部を具体例を挙げて紹介する。

## Introducing Children to Other Cultures Using English

Children benefit from significant and enjoyable contact with people from other countries and their culture. When English is part of this experience, children are motivated to learn both English and about other cultures. How, then, can we provide children in Japan with nurturing, lifelong learning inspiring contacts with our world neighbors? Kids International (KI) is our answer.

## The KI Program

KI is an intensive, multicultural English experience for children aged 4—12. It is run in four or five hour sessions for between three and five days during school holidays. Four to six groups of eight to ten students rotate through a series of activities directed by foreign presenters and teachers, and supported by staff and volunteers. Each program features three to five countries. Over 40 countries have been introduced over the ten years of KI. Children have learned a Maori rhythm song and a Ghanaian song, dance, and legend, made authentic Mexican tacos and a Columbian banana dessert from scratch, transformed a classroom into a Costa Rican rain forest, played environmental awareness games, learned about the German school system and way of recycling, and much more.

The program requires the support of many. The presenter introduces his/her culture through various activities—greetings, songs, dance, cooking, crafts, games, stories, geography, nature, and social studies. The presenter and teachers prepare these activities so children can participate in them using easy English. The staff and volunteers play important roles in preparing and running the program. The parents participate in part of the program with children so that they can enjoy doing the activities at home.

To help clarify our concept and describe our program, we developed the following chart.

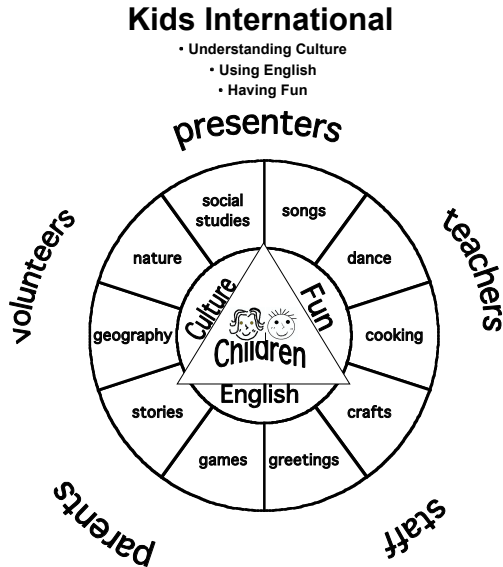


Figure 1. Kids International (KI) Chart

## Understanding Culture, Using English, Having Fun

In KI, understanding culture, using English, and having fun are the three mutually supporting and indispensable sides to the triangle describing the aim of the program: preparing children to be citizens of the global community. Many agree that the teaching of English should help children develop cultural understanding, and that children who are given the opportunity to communicate with people of other cultures and to enjoy learning something of those cultures will grow in cultural understanding. Goto (1995) claims

One of the aims of English education for children is the understanding of other cultures. Children have stronger curiosity and are more accepting of other cultures than adults...Through English, using songs, dance, and games, children receive new stimuli appropriate for their age, and feel the difference with their own culture. This experience will eventually become an important motivator leading children to international understanding (p18, Author's translation).

Cates (2004) affirms

One of the most important tasks for educators in the world today is to help students learn about the rich variety of people in our multicultural world and the important world problems that face our planet. English language teachers have a special role to play in this important task (p33).

Teachers of English to children have a vital role to play. Encountering other cultures while young opens minds. Compared with peers without such experience, students

who had a foreign teacher in elementary school were more familiar with, and more strongly felt, the importance of being open to other cultures when they were surveyed in junior high school (Mio & Kitsudo, 2004).

Yoshida (2003) asserts that intercultural communication starts with interpersonal communication. Tatsuki (2003) charges us to be interactive in our presentation of culture: “To conceptualize about culture without providing learners with opportunities for meaningful interaction using the target language will facilitate inter and cross-cultural learning in only limited ways because it is all one-way information” (p5).

Frolich-Ward (1991) tells us to have fun, because for children motivation comes mainly from the enjoyment and pleasure they experience in the learning situation. A personal, interactive and enjoyable encounter with a foreigner and with that person’s culture is the heart of KI.

Selected activities introducing 3 Latin American countries follow.

### **Bringing the Costa Rican rainforest to the classroom**

Since I can’t take my class to the Amazon, the next best thing is to bring the Amazon to my classroom. (Cates, 2004, p.33)

Our guest from Costa Rica wanted to introduce his country’s eco-tourism. Starting at the children’s level, he first introduced the birds and animals in the rainforests preserved by the acclaimed park system of his country. For resources, we borrowed a video and were given posters from the embassy tourism office, gathered simple books,

and found other material on the rainforest from the internet. The children were captivated by the sounds and antics of the wildlife and impressed by the vibrant colors they saw in the video and books. After learning the names of various rainforest animals, they chose the ones they wanted to draw or cut out. TPR accompanied the production: *cut, paste, tape, color, and fold*. The students then arranged their animals on a rainforest mural and mobile to decorate the classroom. They also made *banana trees* from rolled up newspapers. We made a simple chant to help us interact with our new tropical environment:

*I see a monkey, monkey, monkey. I see a monkey.  
Where? In the tree.*

*I see a blue frog, blue frog, blue frog. I see a blue  
frog. Where? In the water.*

*I see a toucan, toucan, toucan. I see a toucan.  
Where? In the sky.*

Younger students playfully rearranged their animals and made new verses. Older children asked questions about the rainforest, and discussed what could be done to help preserve the endangered plants and animals. The memories and crafts they took home may help Costa Rica find a place on their mental maps.

### **Making a Colombian snack**

Our guest from Colombia welcomed the children to her classroom kitchen wearing her native dress. She told of the fruits and dishes of her county showing pictures. The dish she had chosen to make was *banana calada*, a typical

snack eaten almost daily throughout the region. It is made by cooking bananas with black sugar, butter, lemon, and cinnamon, then served as is or on bread. It can be made in a saucepan or in a microwave. The cooking process is simple, and lends itself to TPR. Songs and chants make TPR memorable, so we chose a traditional Spanish song, “La Cucaracha,” and set our TPR lyrics to music (see below). Step-by-step pictures of the cooking process were used to introduce the activity, and served as prompts for the song. After learning the vocabulary and song, we were ready to cook—using the freshly taught English.

*Banana Calada Song* - to the tune of “La Cucaracha”

*Banana calada, banana calada/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

*Banana calada, banana calada/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

*Peel a banana/Cut the banana/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

*Black sugar on/Butter on/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

*Squeeze a lemon/Shake cinnamon/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

*In the microwave/Wait 3 minutes/Yummy, yummy, yummy treat.*

When the treat was ready, children served their waiting mothers and siblings, and taught them the song. *Banana calada* did not stay in the classroom. Even at home, children

and mothers now say they make this dessert, singing the song as they do. Inspired by the children’s satisfaction, our guest from Colombia has gone on to repeat the performance on many occasions, sharing her life and culture with Japanese friends.

### Making and breaking a Mexican piñata

*Piñatas* are part of so many festivities in Latin America. We made *piñatas* using paper bags decorated with strips of colored paper and filled with candies. Our guest from Mexico taught the Spanish song which is sung as the players take turns blindfolded swinging a pole to hit and break open the swinging *piñata*. Again, TPR accompanied the activity: *cut, put in, Can you see? Don’t look! Hit it now!* The scramble for candies when the *piñata* finally broke sweetened another memory of fun encounters of the cultural kind. Watching mothers, taken with the lively atmosphere of our Latin party, took the *piñata* idea with them for their children’s parties.

### Responses to the KI program

Children leave each KI with increased understanding and respect for newly encountered cultures, and with desire to learn both English and about the world. They become more sensitive to the news. Some make actual visits to other countries. They experience joy in communicating, lower their affective barrier, and become more aware of their own culture. The quotes that follow are a sample of specific responses to the program from parents.

“My child said that if she could speak English, she could speak with people from many cultures.”

“My child enjoyed communicating in English, and wants to study English more.”

“My child tries now to greet the foreigners he sees in English.”

“Since my child learned the songs and cooking TPR, we make *banana calada* at home, singing and using English.”

“When the presenter’s country appears in the news, my child checks the map and shows interest. She wants to visit that country. She has interest in foreign countries now.”

Foreign presenters gain tools and inspiration for sharing their culture with others. A student presenter was encouraged to seek a career in teaching children. Lasting friendships develop between presenters and other staff. As parents participate in part of the program and see their children’s enthusiasm, they replace vague stereotypes of unfamiliar cultures with acceptance of and interest in them. A common question is, *When is the next program?* Over half of the students attend repeatedly. Volunteers, presenters, and teachers also ask to continue in the program.

### Adapting KI to an elementary school classroom

We introduced the Costa Rican rainforest and made *banana calada* in our 2 classes of 41 and 42 sixth grade elementary school students. Our guest from Costa Rica raised the students’ interest. He presented his country using a map, flag,

and pictures, and students asked many questions about the rainforest, the bright colors of the jungle animals, and the guest’s personal life. In another session, we split the class into groups of 4 or 5 and made the Colombian snack, *banana calada*, together, using the song introduced above. Students recalled these sessions in a survey where they were asked to write freely their comments on these cultural interactions.

Of 83 students, 83% responded that they enjoyed learning English in this way. 12% said they could understand a different culture and food culture. 8% said they were interested in the country and wanted to visit. 7% said they wanted to learn more of other cultures and their food. 6% wrote that the song was interesting, and that they sometimes sing it now. 4% each said their English ability or motivation increased because of the experience. Students also noted “if I could speak English, I could speak to people from any culture,” and that “it was interesting to hear the talks of people from various countries.” There were no negative opinions expressed. From this survey, we can see that students appreciate a program where understanding culture, using English, and having fun are combined; some students express deepened understanding and interest in both English and cultural understanding.

### Tips on trying KI

How do I start? Who can I invite? Presenters can be foreign language teachers, foreign students, or foreign people in your community. Check with embassies, or the international section of your city office. Use the experience of Japanese who have lived abroad. Use contacts through students and families. (If you cannot find a presenter, do it yourself: use your own travel experiences, etc.)



Take time in advance to find out what the presenter wants to share. Possibilities include: greetings, writing, counting, map and flag, animals, plants, climate, history, school system, photos, picture books, storybooks, money, traditional clothing, toys, simple cooking, crafts, songs, dances, and popular children's games.

Work out with your presenter how best to help children connect in English with the culture. Children in our classrooms usually have limited English experience, or none at all. We must be intentional in preparing games, songs, TPR, chants, and pictures. The input must be comprehensible (Krashen, 2004) if we wish to make English part of introducing a presenter and culture. Prepare the whole class to participate, and plan your activities with reference to children's varied learning styles and interests.

Do give your own version of KI a try. It is worth the effort. First children, but also presenters, teachers, volunteers, staff, and parents benefit. Opened minds, expanded horizons, and the desire to further understanding of both English and other cultures are the fruits of Kids International.

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