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Exploring Intercultural Understanding through 'Small Talk' in Japanese Elementary English Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores integrating intercultural understanding into elementary school English education in Japan, focusing on "Small Talk" activities. Since 2020, English has been established as an independent subject in the fifth and sixth grades of Japanese elementary schools, using textbooks certified by the Ministry of Education. The national curriculum spans 10 years across elementary, junior high, and high schools, aiming for consistent development of English communication skills. There is now a greater emphasis on developing English proficiency, whereas previously, the focus was primarily on developing international understanding. Given the global society children will inhabit, however, there should be a prioritizing of intercultural understanding and communication skills to engage effectively with diverse cultural backgrounds. This study proposes using "Small Talk," a brief interactive conversation approximately 10 minutes in duration, as a method to incorporate intercultural educational characteristics into English education for elementary school students in Japan. By implementing Small Talk activities created for a perspective into understanding religion and culture in two schools, the study aims to promote children's global awareness and analyze teachers' feedback, including children's reactions. The examination revealed that children not only generated new ideas but also gained various insights/awareness *(kizuki)* into intercultural understanding. Many students found English classes integrating intercultural understanding to be interesting, indicating that combining language and cultural learning stimulated their intellectual interest. However, effective learning depends on the teacher's knowledge of different cultures, collaboration with other subjects, and each child's social interest level. Hence, teachers should consistently devise methods to enhance intercultural understanding during English classes.

Keywords: Intercultural understanding, Japanese elementary school, English education, Small Talk, Religion