

# The International School's Japanese Track

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Several years ago, many international schools in Tokyo received applications after a famous Japanese singer, Hikaru Utada, released her CD in the U.S and her recognition became worldwide. It was all because she learned English in the American School in Japan. Since learning English is indispensable in the world today, it is understandable, from the Japanese parent's point of view, to feel that it is very important to teach English to your own child. I remember I used to blame on my parents, "if only you had put me in an international school, I would be able to speak English better." I assure you that no child can learn a foreign language unless the parents provide "the environment" to begin with.

The International School provides a multi-language immersion program, teaching Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish. From the Japanese point of view, this is a completely different approach: the classes are not held in English, but in the target language. Before my visit to this school, I always thought that Japanese language is only taught as the second language, while regular classes are taught in English. However, that is not the case here: the child learns everything in Japanese (the target language) starting from preschool. Elementary students learn subjects in Japanese, except when they go to art, PE, music, and English classes. In other words, students are "fully immersed" in Japanese school life in the U.S. That's The International School.

I was so surprised to see how fast the class was taught when I visited the fourth and fifth grade combined class during a science experiment. An "only Japanese" rule was enforced. I saw students' notebooks written with all different forms of hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Not only did they look like any other Japanese students' notebooks, but they also reminded me of my own childhood in Japan.

The curriculum at The International School goes by the Japanese national curriculum and the Core Knowledge. Teacher Yukako Owen, with nine years of teaching experience, says, "Students do especially well in math and science. Because of our small class, everybody gets extra

attention and classes go two times faster."

You might wonder how your child could manage multiple languages. Indeed, children are capable of adapting themselves in such an exciting environment. "Even though preschool children might not have any Japanese background, they have the ability to absorb the language by everyday repetition," says Hideko Hanabara, a preschool teacher. Not all the children come from Japanese speaking families, but to me it was apparent that all the children seemed to be enjoying and interested in learning the subject content through the foreign language. How wonderful is it that children this young do not make a barrier between different languages. It is our common knowledge that to learn a language and to be fully aware of its cultural implications, one needs to start from a young age.

Being a private school, the school accepts new students at any age at anytime (starting at age 3). Unlike many public schools, this school provides individual attention and care depending on the child's needs. Having some background in the target language, Japanese, and passing a language test are mandatory if the child joins the school in first grade. However, even if the child has no Japanese background, he or she could still start in first grade by working individually with a tutor.

For example, Mieko, the first grade teacher, has had a case where a student with no Japanese background entered in the first grade. The student's family and the school agreed that the teacher and parents would work collaboratively and fully support the child. In spite of Mieko's concerns, the student has demonstrated tremendous improvement in her Japanese. Of course, this success story could never have happened without the child's own efforts, teacher's great devotion to her instructions and tutoring sessions after school, and mutual understanding between the family and the school. Moreover, the warm environment that classmates created must have been another important factor that supported the student both emotionally and academically. Seeing how fast children can adapt and absorb information was really astonishing to me.

Now you might wonder about students'

English skills. English classes are divided by levels as a result of an English placement test. Those students with limited English skills can receive individual tutoring as well. Even the first graders already have a six-period schedule, starting at 8:15. Each classroom teacher arranges his or her schedule, but usually math classes are held in the morning when students can be more focused.

The word, "international", does not apply only because children from all tracks - Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish - share the same environment and play together during recess. The word applies also because students from the different tracks share specialty classes and study together. Meeting friends who speak a language other than English is not rare. This school enforces diversity. Each student rather easily accepts that he or she is a part of a harmonious environment.

In addition, on campus there is an "outdoor classroom", which was built two years ago. This cob house with a round-shaped bench, which reminds me of Antoni Gaudi's Park Guell, is used when the weather is nice out. Next to the cob house, there is a garden where kindergarten and first grade classes do part of their science curriculum. The Stearns Hall, which is a new building opened this March, is located on the only flat area on campus and has eleven classrooms including a large music room. The tall ceiling provides an extra open space.

Because The International School is a private school, the tuition is not as cheap as you might think; however, you might want to remember that a financial aid program is available as well. Please feel free to contact Linda, the marketing director, at any time. I assure you that what you give to school will always be returned for both the child's and family's benefit.

All the teachers are devoted teachers who truly enjoy their teaching. Masami, a new second and third grade combined class teacher, says, "I truly enjoy teaching here". I recall the smile she gave me. I truly recommend you to talk with the teachers who are fun and caring.