

# The English Program at Murasakino Senior High School

Haruo Minagawa

## Profile of Murasakino High School and Its English Language Programs

Murasakino High School is a municipal senior high school located in the northern part of Kyoto, an ancient capital city of Japan. With a little over one thousand students studying in three grades (from fifteen to eighteen years of age), Murasakino has a distinctive scholastic tradition that makes it different from other high schools in Kyoto. Our school has a number of unique school policies that aim to foster independence and individuality in our students. For example, we do not require our students to wear a school uniform, which is rare in Japan. We also have a number of international exchange programs (see the later section) and unique English programs that place an emphasis on developing students' communication skills, which really sets Murasakino apart from most other high schools in Japan. An important advantage to our students is that Murasakino is located in Kyoto. As one of the major tourist destinations in Japan, Kyoto attracts a large number of international visitors, and this provides our students with many chances to interact with people from a variety of English-speaking backgrounds. We believe these factors work together to help most of our students go on to attend university after graduation.

Murasakino takes part in a regular yearly exchange program with a sister school in Australia named Chevalier College, and our students go overseas in groups composed of an entire class or grade level. Every class in the first grade participates in an overseas study trip in March, with the English Course classes visiting Melbourne for three weeks and the other classes visiting Singapore for about a week. We also send a group of some twenty students to Chevalier College every other year, and accept some twenty students from Chevalier in return every other year, as well. We also host several groups of visitors from various countries.

In addition to these programs, students in the English course also have opportunities to use the Internet or video-conferencing system to interact with young people overseas. Few schools in Japan are involved in programs of this kind.

Over the fifty years of our existence, Murasakino has made a number of innovations that have entailed restructuring our curriculum. In 1993, we started a special English program called the advanced academic English Course in one of the nine classes we offer in each grade. The other eight classes remained unchanged, and the students continued with the regular academic coursework. We have provided the students in the special English course with a unique English education that combines computer and Internet-based programs with opportunities for international exchange. These programs have turned out to be very successful, and led to a three-year designation as a Super English Language High School (SELHi) from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) from 2003 to 2005. Our efforts during the years of the designation were focused on developing the existing English program for the English Course and on improving our English coursework in other classes, using some of the ideas that we have learned from advanced programs in the English Course. In spring 2007 we doubled the number of students we accept in the English Course.

## The Special English Course

In this section I propose to outline the main features of the approach to English education that we employ in our special English Course as these are quite distinct from the ways that English is normally taught in Japan. In addition, what we have learned from this approach to teaching English has had a positive impact on the ways that English is taught in the other courses in our school.

English teaching in our special English Course consists of three major categories:

- 1) Regular English instruction using the textbooks authorized by the Ministry of Education,
- 2) Content-based instruction using self-expression activities through various projects such as the three-day intensive summer English seminar for the tenth graders and varied international exchange programs, and

- (3) Computer and Internet-based programs that promote students' individual studies and encourage online interactions in English with other people both within Japan and overseas.

As a public high school in Japan, we are required to teach all our English courses in a traditional format using textbooks authorized by the Ministry of Education. This is the feature that our English program shares with other programs. However, our approach places much more emphasis on the four communication skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking than other classes. For example, we spend less time on reading comprehension and provide students with follow-up, communicative activities in writing and speaking using the language that they study in the text. In contrast, most high schools in Japan tend to place emphasis on vocabulary-building and reading through reading and listening activities.

Language experts believe that language learning is more likely to take place when learners have more opportunities to use English in actual situations and for actual practical purposes. These opportunities are more likely to occur when students have the chance to interact with their classmates and with others—especially those that prepare students for actual interaction with other people—than when they participate in individual self-study tasks. For instance, our students are provided with the opportunity to interact with people overseas in online discussion forums individually or as a group. A variety of self-expression activities and exchange projects have been designed to provide our students with more opportunities of these kinds.

These are the three features that set our English programs at Murasakino apart from those found in most other schools in Japan. In the next section I will deal with each one separately and describe them in more detail.

### **Content-Based Teaching Using Self-Expression Activities Through Various Projects Such As International Exchange Programs**

English Course students in each grade level take approximately seven to ten English lessons a week. In several of these lessons, we provide students with various projects in which they are required to use English to interact with their classmates. They are also usually able to speak with overseas visitors who reside in Kyoto or use a video-

teleconferencing system to converse with English speakers abroad.

These projects differ in duration. Some, like exchanges with a group of visiting students from overseas, span only a few days, while others last for several months and even up to half a year. For example, our online exchange project with people overseas takes up about four months while the debate project in the twelfth grade lasts nearly eight months. The latter includes step-by-step instruction in the use of debating strategies and exercises in English. It involves small-group debate taking place on different occasions. The best group is then selected to participate in a national debate contest. All these projects are designed with the aim of providing our students with the content that they can apply in actual speaking situations. The aim is to have them use English to interact with people and to produce final products such as papers written in English, oral presentations, and other performances. These combinations of activities make students highly motivated to study English so that they can become better prepared to participate in actual communicative situations.

The English projects also make use of what we call “self-expression activities.” Self-expression activities can take the form of a short-speech, a show-and-tell presentation, a skit, a discussion, or a debate. They offer students useful practice in using English. We regard these as integrated activities that include practice in writing and speaking and, in most cases, in reading and listening, too. In these activities, learners are encouraged to express what they have to say on a given topic. They also provide students with a very intense writing experience that advances them through various steps of the writing process. In preparing a script for oral presentations, for example, they not only work on developing their writing skills, they also have many opportunities to practice speaking. They may start by memorizing their lines, and then proceed to speaking their lines with emphasis, much as they would do in oral interpretation. Ultimately they come to speak their lines as if they were their own words, as if they had just sprung from their hearts.

Another benefit of these activities, especially the presentation-type of activity, is that we can have students with relatively low English speaking proficiency successfully participate, as long as we provide them with good support. By that I mean that we are clear about what they should aim for, provide steps for proper preparation, offer good

examples, and provide plenty of practice and rehearsal opportunities.

These activities constitute a very effective approach to teaching English that in addition to improving students' speaking skills also advances their overall English proficiency.

## The Cultural Workshop

Throughout the year, we accept a number of visitors from overseas to visit us at Murasakino High School. For example, in July 2007 we hosted a group of Chinese students from Hong Kong. In November, we accepted another group of Chinese students from Taiwan, and in December still another group of students from our sister school in Australia. During their stays with us, these students attend a number of classes in our school. A typical activity that we do on such occasions is what we call a "cultural workshop."

A few weeks in advance of a visit, we ask our students to prepare a show-and-tell activity that relates an interesting example of Japanese culture to our foreign visitors. We split the class into several groups of six to eight students and have each group come up with a topic or items to demonstrate. In the following weeks, we have our students prepare their presentations and sometimes prepare a set of questions to ask the visitors after their presentation. Teachers decide how many lessons need to be devoted to preparing for the visit, and this depends on the English proficiency of the class.

When the visiting students are present, they are divided into different small groups. Each group takes a turn at watching a presentation by one of the Murasakino groups. They are free to ask questions and then, when they are finished, they move to the next group according to the teacher's directions. In this way the visitors get to see all the presentations and all the students have time to interact with each other.

The teachers decide how much time they spend in each round, and sometimes toward the end of the entire session one member of a Murasakino group reports about the exchange to the entire class. Using this learning format, Murasakino students have a chance to perform their presentations several times with a different audience, and the visitors get to enjoy several different presentations in one class.

In our experience this activity has rarely failed to please foreign visitors and motivate our students to work earnestly so that they have plenty of writing and speaking practice.

## Computer and Internet based programs

Almost all high schools in Japan are equipped with computer-assisted language laboratories (CALLs). The national government has been heavily promoting effective use of these facilities in recent years. However, only a few schools have actually started to make regular use of these facilities in English study. This is probably due to the fact that using computers and the Internet for English study has not been considered something which schools are responsible for. Ever since the introduction of the English Course back in 1993, Murasakino has recognized the importance and the positive effect of English study using computers and the Internet. As a result we offer English Course students in all grades two to three lessons a week in a CALL.

Our computer and Internet based programs in Murasakino come in two categories:

- 1) Individual learning using either computer software or online courses.

The majority of the tasks we give in a CALL are done using computer software installed in school computers or provided in online courses which students can access on the Internet, such as 'Global English' by the Global English Corporation, or 'Criterion' by the Educational Testing Service.

The learning covers the four communication skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In later grades, however, instruction shifts more towards writing. We give a lot of writing tasks that are linked to the content-based teaching described in the previous section. For example, students can use computer software and the Internet to do research for writing their manuscripts, as well as for class presentations, and review writing. The concept of writing for speaking is one of the most highly regarded by the Ministry of Education in our SELHi studies.

Most of the tasks that take place in the CALL are meant to promote individual self-study for students both at school and outside school. In recent years, it has been a priority for Japanese high schools to promote students' study hours outside of school. In the Murasakino programs, teachers give tasks at

determinate intervals, monitor students' work, and offer necessary feedback. They also provide regular evaluations after each session and offer directions to students to encourage their study.

- 2) Use of computer as a tool of communication in collaborative work projects.

Related to content-based learning projects as described in the previous section, we also have students in the second half of the eleventh grade and the first half of the twelfth grade take part in online discussion forums exclusively designed for the projects that they participate in. In 2007, our students participated in an online forum provided by a university in New Jersey, another provided by a university in Kyoto, and yet another called *iEARN Asian Pacific Learning Circle* provided by International Education and Resource Network, an international organization promoting international exchange among youth online and offline.

Teachers give students step-by-step instructions on how to exchange messages, conduct surveys, and write online reports that can be shared with their international partners who are participating in the forums. They usually have a chance, as a culminating activity, to engage in real-time online interactions with international partners using the video-teleconferencing system.

## **Our continuing efforts to expand and improve our English programs**

In 2005, the second year of the SELHi designation, our English department, comprising sixteen Japanese teachers and three native-speaking English teachers, decided to implement some of the features of the English course programs that had proven so effective in the other special English courses at Murasakino.

For example, two classes in our regular course are now working on an English newspaper project, in which each student writes four articles in English. They then combine the articles into their own newspaper using Microsoft Word. They also make two show-and-tell presentations to the entire class with the use of computers. All students in the other English courses are now given between one and two computer and Internet-based lessons a week. In order to promote study of this kind, Murasakino lets students use our CALL rooms during the lunch hour and after school.

In 2007, we also introduced an innovative iPod program to the English course to enhance students' exposure to English outside school. Students are required to listen to learning materials on the iPod to prepare for their lessons. The learning material, the sound data of their English textbook and an online English newspaper for learners of English that Murasakino subscribes to, are now provided online. Students access our school website and download the data with a given ID and password. We are now promoting this program to the students of other courses.

Since the SELHi designation, the English course students have been taking an English proficiency test called *GTEC (Global Test of English Communication)*, a similar test to *TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)*, in order to make our students aware of their English proficiency level and have a clear goal in their English studies. We now have all Murasakino students take the test once a year. The results of the test are used by English teachers to evaluate and to improve teaching at the school. The results this year show a steady improvement in all courses.