

# THE LANGUAGE CONNECTION

## EDUCATION RENAISSANCE

# It takes a village to raise an English speaker

*The following is an article from The Yomiuri Shimbun's Education Renaissance series. This installment, the third of five, focuses on local cooperation in teaching foreign languages at municipal primary schools in Osaka-Sayama, Osaka Prefecture, as English becomes compulsory for fifth- and sixth-graders nationwide starting this month.*

**By Shoko Okuda**

Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

**O**SAKA-SAYAMA, Osaka—Back in January, sixth-graders at one particular elementary school in Osaka-Sayama, Osaka Prefecture, had three teachers when they studied English.

In addition to their full-time teacher, they have a foreign assistant language teacher and Mika Miyazono, who was dispatched by a nonprofit organization assisting the city's primary schools with their English lessons.

The students' teacher, Akitoshi Ikeda, had his students repeat the target phrases in unison with the ALT: "I get up at 6:30."

"I eat lunch at 12:30."

As they did this, Miyazono walked around the classroom, watching each of the students. She would approach any student who looked lost and say the phrases along with the child.

The Osaka-Sayama Shogakko Eigo Katsudo Shien no Kai (Osaka-Sayama elementary English booster club) was inaugurated last year at the behest of the city. Its mission is to find people in the community who can assist in English instruction in primary schools.

The group has 32 members, all of them living in the area. They include former middle or high school teachers as well as people teaching at institutions such as private English schools. In September, 23 of the members—the



Mika Miyazono answers a student's question during an English class at Nishi Primary School in Osaka-Sayama, Osaka Prefecture, in January.

youngest in their 30s and the oldest in their 60s—started assisting in fifth- and sixth-grade English lessons during foreign language electives at municipal primary schools after receiving the relevant training.

"The important thing for them is to keep an eye on the students' development and get involved with them on a continuing basis, so I thought the most effective method would be to get involved with an NPO that would also

train the assistants," said board of education official Tomomi Nakata.

"We also can have them act as a bridge between teachers and assistant language teachers," Nakata, 51, said.

Miyazono, who offers English conversation classes at home, decided to join the group because she wanted to make the most of her teaching experience in the public education arena.

"At first, I was a bit unsure of myself, but I talked to some of the former teachers in the group and gradually found my footing. I'm glad I can be of some help to these teachers," she said.

The teacher Ikeda, 27, says he is thankful.

"Whenever I have a hard time communicating with the ALT, Miyazono-san steps in and helps. I can ask her to spend time with students individually, too; it's been a great help," he said.

The NPO's teachers get ¥1,000 an hour, paid out of a municipal subsidy and other funds.

"This project probably became reality because the city is determined to get its citizens involved in the city's education," said Shigemitsu Ishii, the deputy chairman of the group. "Through our community's efforts, we hope to foster students with an international mindset."

In its new guidelines for the primary school curriculum, the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry urges communities to "have locals participate in the instruction of foreign language, when circumstances make it possible." However, a fiscal 2009 ministry survey shows that locals were involved in only 16 percent of the annual hours spent on foreign language activities at primary school and involving assistants—including assistant language teachers.

Kanji Watanabe of Bunkyo Gakuin University in Tokyo, an expert on foreign language instruction at primary schools, warns of the following problems with bringing community members into the classroom in this way.

"In many cases, these people have received insufficient training or only attend class sporadically," Watanabe said. "The boards of education, and not the schools, should be playing the central role in hiring and training those people."