



MIRAI

INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI
KINDERGARTEN

Montessori, English, computer science of MIRAI and the future

■ 18th April, 2022

Cocone Education Co. Representative Director, Ishiwatar Mai

MIRAI kindergarten has started its 6th term with Professor Emeritus Dr. Tanaka of Keio University as its new director. MIRAI and we have grown with the parents who have supported us every year since our first term. Once again, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who have supported, watched over, and nurtured MIRAI Kindergarten, a new preschool started by an IT company.

Ishiwatari, the representative of the management company, talked about where our five years of progress have led us and what challenges lie ahead with Dr. Tanaka; Ms. Hirayama, the general supervisor; Tom, the headteacher, representing English education; Ms. Matsushima, representing Monte education; and Ms. Yoko Karpelowitz., the Culture & Teamwork Facilitator at MIRAI.



Dr. Tanaka and Ms. Hirayama, general supervisor

English Education Practice We are not "teaching"

■ Dr. Tanaka

It is still April, and the children must be in a period of restlessness. However, when I look at the classrooms, I see that both Montessori (Montessori; is hereafter abbreviated as Monte.) and English environments are functioning well though they are entirely different. I feel that they are connected at the root. The Monte teachers respect the English classes and vice versa, and I think they positively influence each other. How is the English environment?



Montessori Daily Life "Mizukiri (cutting the flower stems in the water) Work"

■ Tom

What I value in my English classes is creating a relationship with students, and that's the first thing I tell new teachers, and it's something I am conscious of on a daily basis.

It is not about "Teaching" nor "Being a teacher."

I believe that the first thing we need in a classroom environment is friendly teachers. Only then do students start communicating in English, thinking, "I want to talk to this teacher" or "I want to tell him/her about something." The children just want to talk to their favorite teachers, and they don't feel that they are actually studying English through that conversation. I think that is what creating an English environment is all about.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

Yes, it is exactly "you don't teach." In MIRAI's English class, I see that teachers are good at creating a place.

■ **Karpelowitz**

Some children enter MIRAI with no English skills, but we've seen them willingly talk to their English teachers.

I think the excellence of Monte is behind it. There is no "teacher vs. student" structure in the Monte classroom. We have the spirit where teachers let children decide what they want to do and assist them gently only when needed. The Monte teacher is not a "teacher," so to speak, but a "part of the environment" for the children. They can pursue what they want to do to their heart's contents without worrying about how others may look at or evaluate them. They don't need to compare themselves with others because they aren't doing the same thing. They are calm and independent.



English classroom

■ **Hirayama**

Monte's methodology does not set a limit on children's behavior, though there are some minimal rules. In principle, the children are free to work on the tasks of their choice, and no one disturbs their challenges. We gently provide something slightly easier for children if we sense that they have chosen the learning tools and materials too difficult for them. We also help children understand how the learning tools and material should be treated. (For example, we do not allow children to throw tools around for fun without knowing how they are supposed to be using them. We show them how to do the work that matches the purpose of the devices.)

Our students have the freedom to make their own decisions and immerse themselves in their own time. At the same time, they need to respect their Montessori classrooms and learning materials. There is a fine balance



between the two.

It's an environment where children can focus solely on their interests without worrying about how their teachers may think of their choice or what other children have chosen to do. I feel that the children genuinely know that they are free to do what they want.

They learn to make autonomous decisions, become more focused and develop a sense of accomplishment through their daily routine of coming into the classroom, choosing the work they want to do, and focusing on that task. They accumulate a series of "I did it, I can do it" successful experiences and gain confidence.

Our students do not draw because they are told to do so, and they do not practice lining up straight with other children because they are told to do so. Our job is to carefully and patiently nurture their inherent individuality, talent, and potential. They spend such important time at Monte, and their base values such as autonomy, focus, and successful experiences are well utilized in the English language classroom.

■ Ishiwatari

So, neither Monte nor English class teachers are on the "teaching" side. Teachers do not decide what to do on behalf of their students. Instead, all teachers respect children's interests (seeing through their sensitive periods) and are trying to nurture them.

Are there any other commonalities between Monte and English classes?

Commonalities between Monte and English

■ Matsushima

In terms of language, at Monte, just being able to read the "hiragana" characters does not mean that you have read them. You properly comprehend them only when you understand the function of the letters. The same concept is applied in the English classes, isn't it?

■ Tom

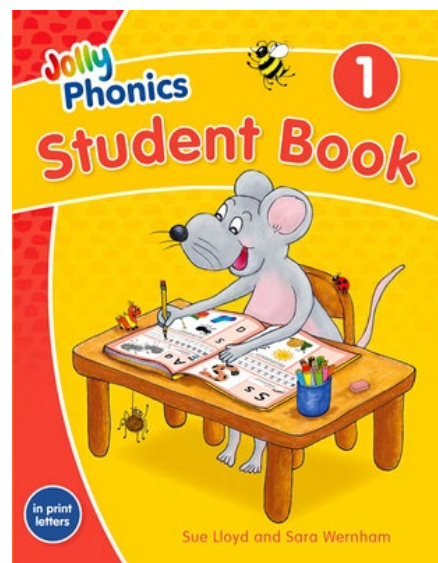
Yes, we are trying to get children to understand words with meaning, rather than just reading every single alphabet.

For example, we use a Jolly Phonics textbook, which allows students to read, write, and listen in the manner just described.

First, students learn only the six most commonly used letters such as "s, a, t, i, p, n" and write words such as "sit, it, sat, at" that they can write with just those six letters. We lead students to get more interested in other words through this learning process.

■ Hirayama

Some children join our kindergarten in the middle of the school year. Some of them can sing the ABC song, but they just have





memorized the whole song. It doesn't mean that they understand the meaning of the words.

Our English learning method guides children to the point where they understand that the letters can form words when combined. They also understand the meaning of those words right from the beginning. So they realize that English words are something helpful. Every word children learn is a success story for them, encouraging them to learn more new words. When they encounter a word they don't know, they think, "I should be able to read it." because of their successful experiences.

It is better to start by learning words with meaning that kids can actually use, rather than just memorizing A to Z. If children could find even a few words they know in a book, they would become more interested in learning other words. The more vocabulary they learn, the more books they will read.



Montessori Culture "Animal Cards by Continent"

■ Ishiwatari

Monte has a workshop where children match the names and pictures of different animals. For example, when they see a picture of a dinosaur, they link it to the word "kyoryu" and its Japanese characters. If they learn the word "dinosaur" in English class, they can further link that information to the Japanese word and letters they already know. There is a synergistic effect between the Monte and English curricula enabling children to utilize vocabulary.

■ Hirayama

Yes, I think children are naturally immersed in the English environment because they are eager to talk about their "favorite things," like dinosaurs. I don't think they feel that they are being led to memorize words.

In addition to learning vocabulary, the Monte curriculum takes care of the basic skills and movements, such as



using scissors, sewing, and buttoning up, which are all part of Monte's job. I think the "English+Monte" environment is creating just the right balance.



English class card matching



Montessori Classroom Culture "Creatures"



Actual English Proficiency

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

I think children are sensitive to sound. Do you think children can hear the subtle difference in sound?

■ **Tom**

I think so. Children will catch the differences between British and American English spoken by their teachers and start making jokes about it.

They know the subtle difference in the intonation of Pizza or the pronunciation of Cannot or Tomato.

■ **Hirayama**

Some children intentionally bring a picture of a tomato and say, "What's this?" to Tom Sensei to hear him pronounce the word.

Regarding English ability, I often hear from parents that their children laugh when they watch English videos on Youtube. We ask English teachers to share their favorite songs from their childhood with their students as this interaction helps them discuss common topics and deepen relationships with their teachers.

■ **Tom**

We are introducing this "Oxford Reading Tree" to our children.

It's like an American version of Magic Tree House. The content shows the importance of having a variety of opinions.





I want to create an environment where children naturally want to speak English while reading picture books or looking at dinosaur cards. So, we don't consider using flashcards or doing drills as critical activities.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

So, kids talk about their favorite dinosaurs or picture books with teachers, sing songs, etc. The children seem to be speaking English without a conscious effort.

When you learn English in junior high school, you are instructed to look at a textbook, and you are forced to read texts like sutras. That kind of learning is boring, isn't it? At MIRAI, however, the children express English with their whole body, so the feeling comes first. When you see their English play, they describe the word "big" with their entire body so that they can scream out the word "BIG" loud. I once again recognize the importance of "naturally speaking English."



■ **Hirayama**

I feel that the second-grade elementary school students who have graduated from MIRAI and moved on to our afterschool are finally starting to become true bilinguals. Those children are beginning to wonder how to translate what they say in English into Japanese. They are beginning to feel that, "If I translate his/her English into this kind of Japanese, it doesn't sound quite right."

I think this is a sign that they understand English in English and are becoming true bilinguals.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

Bilingualism is often thought of as switching languages as if you turn on or off a switch. But I believe that when you master languages, you can use both Japanese and English naturally per the environment. I think that is the true meaning of translanguaging, and it is undoubtedly being practiced at MIRAI.

Pluriculturalism

■ Dr. Tanaka

How do MIRAI's children know when to use English or Japanese?

■ Hirayama

We divided our school into two areas. The second floor is for Japanese and the third floor is for English. However, children will switch to English when talking to an English teacher, even if they are in the Japanese environment on the second floor. They quickly choose their language according to the environment and circumstances, including the language background of their counterparts. This switching between two languages is almost automatic, and they know when or whom to speak in what language. This is possible because, as Tom-sensei said, the kids have established a deep relationship with their teachers. We have managed to create a class environment and teacher-student relationship that are pretty different from general English conversation schools, where students attend only once a week for a few hours.

In addition to two language-environment, I believe that cultural differences also coexist in our school.

For example, a child prowling around is often given a warning, "Please come over here," in a Japanese class. However, the same child will likely receive a simple question, "Hi, what are you doing here?" in an English class.

MIRAI students learn that there can be different approaches even for the same thing. I think children are learning a lot of multicultural behavioral patterns on top of languages.



Art Class in English



■ **Dr. Tanaka**

Actually, it is not multiculturalism but pluriculturalism. Being in such an environment at an early age is extremely valuable.

■ **Karpelowitz**

So, it means that children look at a person, recognize his/her cultural and language background, and then respond accordingly. They can do all of that naturally.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

That's right. Suppose you grow up only in a Japanese environment. In such a case, it isn't easy to sense a person's cultural and linguistic background only by looking at him/her. It isn't easy to respond appropriately and naturally.

But MIRAI students can do that because of their unique daily surroundings. It is a beautiful experience to have in their childhood.

Benefit of MIRAI's environment; Half Japanese (Monte) and half English

■ **Ishiwatari**

What do you think about the half-Japanese, half-English curriculum, Ms. Hirayama, as a supervising director? I remember that when you first came to our school, you felt that half a day was not enough in terms of English education.

■ **Hirayama**

It was only my first impression that we didn't seem to have enough English time. Now I genuinely believe that having time for Monte creates a perfect environment.

Monte creates an environment to get children to feel "I want to do." And the English curriculum motivates children to talk of their own accord. Both approaches are the same, and there is excellent chemistry between the two.

The vocabulary that children learn here is certainly a little less than the kids whose parents are English speakers and who spend the whole day at an international school. However, MIRAI children can ask what they want to know and tell what they want to communicate using their vocabulary. They may not have much variety of expressions. Still, they never think, "I can't say it, or I can't do it." They keep trying without hesitation. Their language competence is improving without a doubt. It's proven by the fact that almost all of the children who have taken an entrance exam for an international elementary school have been accepted. (* English achievement level varies from person to person). Every day, I realize that the Montessori program plays a significant role for children in increasing their "ability to think." It also helps them develop a "learn independently mind" instead of being taught.

Instilling the spirit of Monte (English and computer science, advancing to teamwork)

■ Karpelowitz

English is a tool that children can learn at a later stage. However, their golden age to capture Monte's values is probably up to six years old. The values referred to here are: using hands and fingertips, discovering their interests, cultivating a sense of self-esteem affirming that they will eventually be able to do the things that are difficult for them now.



Montessori "math sticks" work to match quantities with numbers from 1 to 10.



Montessori's "conical bars" Work to understand the concept of 0 by placing the same number of bars from 0 to 9 in a frame.

I have sent my two children to Monte's elementary school and international middle and high schools. The children who have experienced Monte's vertically divided classes naturally believe that they will someday be able to do what they cannot do now. Also, they develop an ability to concentrate on repeatedly doing the same activity of their choice. Since MIRAI children have a strong sense of self-esteem, they can genuinely say, "wow, you are great," to congratulate others on what they can do well. Suppose some adults objectively view our students and may criticize that certain things are not being done well enough for their age. It's not a big deal for Monte students, and they only recognize such things as something they can't yet do well at the moment. Children with a solid sense of self-esteem can accept their own strengths and weaknesses and those of others, leading them to understand the importance of diversity. Acquiring this mindset as a child will be a lifelong treasure.

I also think that the beauty of MIRAI is that it offers a vital computer science education. The Monte philosophy does not welcome digital items as a general rule. Kids are surrounded by wooden learning materials, paper, cloth, and plants in the Monte class. However, once they enter the English class at MIRAI,



they use iPads to program Lego robots to run.

The computer science class adds other values and benefits to a firm base of English and Monte. It seems that MIRAI has it all. The Monte program builds the core value of a human being. English class grows kids' language ability, and science class guides them to the programming philosophy of giving instructions to make things move.

I feel that we at MIRAI are raising children to survive through the future that lies ahead.

I would send my children there if they were little. (laugh)



MIRAI children using LEGO "wedo" designed for elementary school aged students

■ Ishiwatari

Thank you! (laugh)

MIRAI children are already very good at using LEGO wedo, designed for elementary school-aged children. This is partly due to the manual dexterity trained with the Monte education. But, above all, they can flip through and follow the instructions on the iPad all by themselves. Some are lying on the floor and leisurely programming Lego wedo. (laugh)

I think this is also because they decide their daily Monte tasks and explore them at their own pace.

■ Hirayama

The teachers don't say anything even though there are about 50 steps in assembling a robot. If children have a problem assembling, they go back a few pages to see what they did wrong in the previous steps, and then they start over. They don't ask teachers for help right away, but they research independently, not comparing themselves with their friends or feeling rushed. This behavior also comes from their experience in Monte's class, where it is natural for them to decide what they want to do and proceed at their own pace.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

The spirit of Monte has influenced English, computer science, and MIRAI education as a whole.

■ **Hirayama**

MIRAI teachers trained with Monte's philosophy can observe children and carefully see through where their interests and thoughts are. They can naturally apply that skill to every scene. For example, when the teacher finds a child isolated in the corner of the English play, they don't force the child to join. But instead, they first observe if the child wants to join but cannot find a chance or if he/she is not interested in the play that day for some reason. The teacher responds according to that observation. Monte's base philosophy has spread among the teachers and applied to determine appropriate Monte tasks to match children's sensitive periods. It is also used in many other scenes. MIRAI teachers observe their students thoroughly and guide them appropriately according to their curiosity level.

■ **Ishiwatari**

Yes, Monte and English have separate classrooms and different curricula. Still, it appears that the core of each program is merged at the root of MIRAI's environment.

■ **Tom**

The "individual" exploration we promote at Monte advances to teamwork-building when children reach the older (nencho) age group. We have a "project" time where nencho age children build something big together. Last year, the nencho age children made an airplane. They divided and assigned tasks from building cockpits to making passports.



Project: table building (trial and error with a 5-legged table)

They also invited other teams to come aboard.

The kids decide everything by themselves, such as what to build, who is in charge of what, and who should be the leader during the project time. They talk among themselves just like a business meeting.

The team that made a room assembled a large table out of paper. The table didn't stand up very well, so the



group tried to build it with five legs. The photo above shows a table with a fifth leg in the middle.

The teacher does not advise why the table does not stand up but simply watches how kids handle the challenge on their own. The children tried various ideas, made mistakes, talked about them, and made improvements. Finally, they succeeded in reinforcing the table legs.

One team built a hospital with a waiting room, an infirmary, and medical records. This hospital filled the whole classroom.

The project time is a part of English class, but kids would speak partly in Japanese when their discussion gets heated. We leave it as they are.

If the team is discussing something serious, that discussion becomes the highest priority. At that point, it doesn't matter what language they use as a tool.



Montessori's "sewing" work. As a preparation, making holes using a "perforator" to mark the sewing area

■ **Hirayama**

The project's goal is not only language acquisition (English proficiency) but to achieve something together. Incredibly, the children can decide who will do what, and someone in the group naturally emerges as a leader. I feel that this autonomous decision-making process will be the finale of MIRAI's education.

Challenges for 2022

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

What do you think is the challenge for MIRAI this year?

■ **Hirayama**

At MIRAI, both Monte and English teachers have understood what the others are doing and can incorporate each other's strengths in their work. Their synergy effect is ever-increasing, resulting in a higher nencho age group's attainment level.

So, as for challenges, I look forward to even more mutual understanding among teachers to create greater synergistic effects.

■ **Ishiwatari**

It is a shame that we do not have enough communication with the parents, partly because of COVID.



However, it is more disappointing that we have not been able to share this excellent MIRAI environment with the parents and show them all the incredible scenes in our classrooms that we see every day. I realize that we have a responsibility to communicate better with them.

■ **Matsushima**

Many parents were indeed very interested in Monte when we first opened our school. However, recently, they are becoming more interested in English programs. Still, since Monte is a core and basis of our environment, we would like to convey much more about Monte. Let's take sewing, for example. We should share with the parents that their children perform every task all by themselves, from making holes in the cloth to sewing it.



Montessori Classroom

■ **Karpelowitz**

That's why it brings us to the Parent-Teacher communication notebook app, which our parent company is developing. I will explain the app at another time. This year, I would like more parents to know how great MIRAI and Monte environments are.

■ **Matsushima**

Yes, that's right. I would also like the kids' families to know about Monte's unique approaches. Some children who go to Kumon can do multiplication by rote. But they don't really know what it is as a physical experience. Monte uses teaching tools to help children experience multiplication physically.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

So, you are saying that what we do at MIRAI is not just memorizing multiplication or doing repetitive math drills.

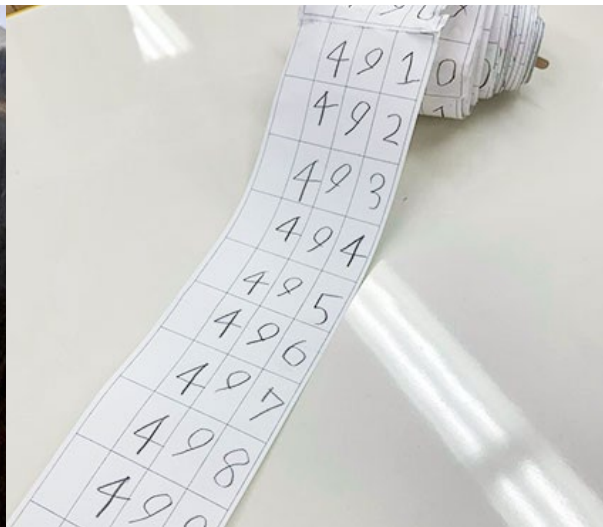
■ **Karpelowitz**

We have some math work in Monte's class, and children start doing things like division with numbers with many digits. Some parents might think, "Wow, my kids can do that already!" but the parents should not force their kids to do math drills or alike. The approaches like drills and textbooks are not appealing for children in their "sensitive period" who are beginning to understand division by experience.

The division is about "sharing" in Monte's world! My daughter showed me how to use the division tools during the observation at school. Seeing that hit me like a bolt of lightning. I realized, "Oh, yeah! The meaning of division is supposed to be sharing something with others!"



Montessori Math "Division board"



Montessori Math "Number Roll" Work on writing consecutive numbers from 1 to 1,000.

■ **Hirayama**

In that sense, we would like to have more questions from parents about Monte and get interested in the program.

■ **Dr. Tanaka**

The Ministry of Education is currently reevaluating the Montessori methodology as it is aiming to implement "problem-solving" and "exploration-based education" in junior high schools.

I believe that Monte's methodology is the best way to break away from the correct-answers-first and textbook-based education. Our students understand math using learning tools and their bodies and fingertips instead of facing paper workbooks and textbooks. We want to share these wonderful experiences with the parents.

■ **Ishiwatari**

Yes, the parents may need to get to know Monte and learn about Monte with us. This year, we want to deepen our communication with the parents and get them to wonder, "What is Monte?" and "What's good about Monte for our children?"

END

Introduction of the characters in the dialogue

■ **Dr. Tanaka Shigenori**

Honorary Director of MIRAI

Professor Emeritus of Cognitive Linguistics, Keio University

He has laid the foundation for MIRAI's philosophy and educational policy as an advisor since the opening of the school in 2017 and has been instrumental in guiding the faculty.

■ **Ishiwatari Mai**

Representative of MIRAI management company, Cocone Education, Inc.

She is a lawyer and a member of the board of cocone Co. which is the parent IT company.

■ **Hirayama Fumie**

MIRAI General Supervisor certified nursery school teacher

Since her arrival as the general supervisor at MIRAI, she has been involved in the development of MIRAI's English education ground up and the training of English teachers. She is currently responsible for the overall guidance of teachers including Montessori as the general supervisor.

■ **Thomas Holding**

Head Teacher of MIRAI

He is British and majored in the English Language at the University of Portsmouth in the UK, and has experience teaching English in the UK. He supervises the English classes and computer science curriculum as the Head Teacher at MIRAI.

■ **Karpelowitz Yoko**

Culture & Teamwork Facilitator of MIRAI

Majored in Education and Communication at the University (U.S.A. & Japan).

After working for the Employment Division at the University of Michigan Business School, she worked as a consultant responsible for employee training at the FAST RETAILING Co. She has had two children attend Montessori and international schools. Her oldest son accelerated to Chiba University at the age of 16.

■ **Matsushima Sara**

Licensed Montessori Teacher (Montessori Education Institute of Japan), Licensed Preschool Teacher

She has been responsible for Montessori classes at MIRAI since 2017.