

Improving English Proficiency of Students in Remote Areas: Companion English Learning Program Receives High Praise

(By Yu-Hsuan Chiang, Division of Junior High and Elementary Education)



To improve students' English proficiency in remote areas, the K-12 Education Administration of the Ministry of Education commissioned National Taiwan Normal University Professor Hao-Jan Chen to implement the "Distance Learning for English Proficiency and Companion English Learning Program" beginning from April 2021. Students in English-related fields of study from 13 universities across northern Taiwan were recruited to serve as English companions and were provided educational training so that they could accompany students in remote elementary schools in their English learning activities through distance learning. Currently, 227 university learning companions have joined the program, assisting a total of 1,300 elementary school students in remote areas for six to eight weeks per semester online. Summer and winter English learning camps are held between semesters to allow students and learning companions to meet face-to-face and deepen their friendships.

The K-12 Education Administration explained that in order for elementary school students to experience the fun of learning English during the winter and summer English learning camps,

their university companions integrated English into the curriculum and games. They used a variety of handmade materials, creative teaching methods, and the Cool English online English learning platform, which features games, songs, speech recognition, and other resources, to engage elementary school students in an English environment.

Dawu Elementary School in Taitung County held themed teaching activities introducing Asian, American, and European cuisine, while university learning companions introduced special vocabulary for meals and practical sentences for ordering food and sightseeing when traveling. By running simple classroom exercises and a mock restaurant, the elementary school students could apply the new English in no time. In Tainan's Sin-nan Elementary School, "Hands-on Clay Modeling" and "European Battle Royale" competitions were held. Elementary school students guessed which dish modeled from the clay was mentioned during class using the vocabulary and phrases they were taught and answered questions by drawing cards to earn points, engaging in education combined with entertainment. Meanwhile, lower-grade students at He Pu Primary School in Kinmen performed the English songs "Baby Shark" and "If You're Happy and You Know It," while upper-grade students incorporated what they learned at their English camp into scripts and paired them with English songs they learned in the classroom.

The head of Sin-nan Elementary School, Pi-Hua Ting, said that through the rich and diverse classroom games, elements of international education were incorporated into the learning materials, which not only improved the children's English expression, but also expanded their global outlook. The team leader at He Pu Primary School, Yu-Chi Chang, also believed that the fun games designed by the university students during the camp helped the children learn English and overcome their fear of the language.

The K-12 Education Administration stated that the companion program combines online interaction with face-to-face meetings, making learning more personal and genuine. It is hoped that the program will continue to grow and attract more elementary schools in remote areas to join, narrowing the urban-rural gap and helping more students to develop international

perspectives.