

## Enhancing English Proficiency of Junior High and Elementary School Students through International Companions for Learning Program

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To raise students' interest and motivation in learning English, the K-12 Education Administration of the Ministry of Education has commissioned National Taiwan University (NTU) to implement the International Companions for Learning Program (ICL). The program recruits foreign college students studying in Taiwan to serve as learning companions and hold weekly online meetings and one face-to-face gathering every semester with elementary and junior high school students in Taiwan; various activities of such aim to create English exchanges between students of different ages. Over the past seven years, 625 elementary and junior high schools have participated in the program. More than 1,000 college students each year serve as learning companions for over 20,000 elementary and junior high school students.

The K-12 Education Administration explained that the foreign college students participating in the program are students studying for a degree, exchange students, or visiting students from the top universities in Taiwan. Handpicked by the program team, each foreign college student is paired with a local student responsible for communicating with the school before and after the

class and assisting and translating during the class. In addition to weekly online meetings, face-to-face gatherings are arranged between elementary and junior high school semesters to enhance students' English communication skills, raise their interest in learning, and strengthen their international mobility.

In this diversified program, college students use English to introduce the culture, economy, politics, and different aspects of life in their countries. On the other hand, elementary and junior high school students learn to introduce Taiwan's local and indigenous culture in English under guidance. Many elementary and junior high school students have taken the initiative to learn related English vocabulary and presentation skills, and more than 90% of them hope to continue participating in the program, which makes teachers happy about their changes in attitude toward learning.

For example, An-Shun Junior High School in Tainan focused on the local characteristics of the school and held various interesting activities, such as bubble tea making, robot competitions, and the experiment of using liquid nitrogen to turn marshmallows into biscuits. Finally, they enjoyed the beautiful local scenery through images and tasted the local delicacies so that foreign college students could experience Tainan's cultural aspect.

Toyama Elementary School in Taitung invited several local weavers to teach students how to make yarn ball hangings and created lively interactions with all students through indigenous dance, allowing them to build bridges of friendship during the process. According to the teacher of Toushe Elementary School in Nantou, the college students enthusiastically shared their countries' experiences, cultures, and history with the children, creating a happy learning experience with fruitful results. During the pandemic, when face-to-face interactions were impossible, Japanese college students even sent hand-made gifts to Taiwanese teachers and students, which was very touching.

The K-12 Education Administration said that the International Companions for Learning

Program has improved the overall English proficiency of the participating elementary and junior high school students. In the future, the K-12 Education Administration will continue to support related programs to promote the internationalization of elementary and junior high schools and effectively reduce the urban-rural gap in English proficiency.