

## **Overview of the Teaching Environment at a Kumon Center in Japan**

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FLE 5470 Introduction to Study of TESOL

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October 7, 2020

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Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd (Kumon) is a privately-run institution established in 1958, and it runs as supplementary education to the Japanese education system. Toru Kumon, the founder of Kumon, initially developed a teaching method to help his son gain proficiency in high school math. His math teaching method became popular and it was later expanded into a Japanese as a Native Language (JNL) program and an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program. Nowadays, his teaching methodology is known as the Kumon Method. The Kumon Method is a drill-oriented, individualized learning methodology that emphasizes self-learning by completing worksheets and it is delivered through various Kumon Centers (KCs) throughout Japan to children ranging in age from 4 years old and to adults over 18 years old.

In this overview, I will describe three components that implement the Kumon Method as it applies to the EFL program at a Kumon Center (KC) where I work. For reasons of privacy, I will maintain the exact KC location and true demographic information private. First, I will describe the EFL program. Second, I will describe the roles of the senior instructor and instructor assistants. Third, I will describe the demographic profile and the EFL Program lesson frequency and lesson procedure at a KC in Yamanashi Prefecture where I work as an instructor assistant.

### **The EFL Program**

The goal of the EFL program is to develop an advanced level of reading and comprehension ability, and it is designed to supplement the English programs offered at the junior high school and senior high school English programs where the KC learners attend, and as a means for younger KC learners to gain English familiarity. The EFL Program also offers a way for learners to voluntarily assess their English abilities by taking a couple of assessment exams

that are made to resemble the Japanese English proficiency test, known as *Eiken* in Japan, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exams. Both exams are known to be accepted by universities that require evidence of English language proficiency. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Eiken and TOEFL assessments. Below, I discuss the EFL program in greater detail. First, I discuss the materials used and the lessons contents in the EFL Program. Second, I describe the format of the Kumon worksheets for the EFL program.

### ***The Materials Used and the Lesson Contents in the EFL Program***

The EFL program consists of individualized lessons. The EFL program has 4,600 worksheets and they are divided into 23 sections. Each section has 200 worksheets that a learner needs to complete. The 23 sections are organized into five different sub-sections known as levels, with each level presented in order of increasing difficulty as follows:

1. Levels 3A to C (1000 worksheets): recitation and oral reading of words, phrases and sentences.
2. Levels D to F (600 worksheets): writing of words, phrases and sentences.
3. Levels GI to III (1200 worksheets): basic grammar up to junior high school level.
4. Levels JI to LII (1200 worksheets): basic grammar up to senior high school level and reading comprehension skills.
5. Levels M to O (600 worksheets): an advanced level of reading comprehension skills developed through reading English texts.

The EFL worksheets are designed so that learners can study independently. This independent study is supported through the use of an E-Pencil. The E-Pencil is a portable audio device that uses a micro SD memory card. It is approximately 35mm x155mm x 25mm and weights 75 grams. It has an optical scanner on one end and a built-in-speaker and audio jack

socket on its opposite end. Using an E-Pencil, the learner hears English pronunciation from words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that appear in the worksheets. It has controls to adjust the volume, controls to pause and play a recorded lesson, as well as controls to forward and rewind the lessons. The memory card has pre-recorded instructions in Japanese, and pre-recorded English lessons by native speakers. The recording is activated once the learner uses the E-Pencil to scan a section printed on the worksheets and the learner is able to hear the lessons either via the built-in speaker or by plugging in earphones or headphones in the audio jack socket.

### ***The Format of the Kumon Worksheets for the EFL Program***

The worksheets are formatted in a way so that the learner studies at their own pace, regardless of the age of the learner, school grade level, or English experience and the learning becomes incrementally challenging, which is the Kumon methodology that attempts to maximize the ability of each learner.

The format of the EFL worksheet varies depending on the worksheet level. However, typically on the front side of the worksheet words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs are written in English on the top half of the page, and a translated version in Japanese appears in the bottom part of the same page. The bottom part also includes a couple of reading comprehension questions in Japanese that must be answered by writing in English. The reverse side of the worksheet contains fill-in-the blank sentence exercises and a series of reading comprehension questions in Japanese that must be answered by writing in English. The sentences and reading comprehension questions relate to the readings found on the reverse side of the page. The learner can either write the missing words by memory, by deducing a correct answer using provided hints, or by copying the word that correctly completes the blank (see Figure 1).

## **The Role of the Instructors in the EFL Program**

The KC where I work has one senior instructor and five instructor assistants, hereinafter collectively referred to as instructors unless otherwise stated. Although instructors interact with learners in the mathematics, JNL, and EFL programs, the interactions I will describe next pertain only to the EFL program.

The role of the senior instructor is to administer a diagnostic test and a questionnaire, to identify any errors in the worksheets, to track the progress of each learner, and to verify the English pronunciation of each learner. The role of the instructor assistant is to assist the senior instructor. Specifically, to identify any errors with the worksheet, to keep track of the progress of each learner, and to correct the English pronunciation of learners.

The senior instructor administers a diagnostic test and a questionnaire to all learners upon enrollment into the EFL program. The purpose of the diagnostic test results is used to determine a starting point for the learner within the EFL program and it consists of a series of questions ranging in difficulty. The score that the learners receives in the diagnostic test will be used to give the senior instructor a suggestion as to the current English level of the learner. The senior instructor assigns the learner to a specific instructor assistant and decides on a starting point within the worksheet sequence. The starting point typically begins at a lower level than predicted by the diagnostic test, so that the learner has time to familiarize with the Kumon Method as learners work through the worksheets.

The purpose of the questionnaire answers is used to determine the goals of the learner, to make an individualized study plan, and to estimate how much time each learner will take to achieve the stated goals.

The instructors identify errors in the worksheets that learners make by comparing their answers against an answer key. A worksheet without errors receives a score of 100 points, and one point is deducted per error. The instructor and instructor assistants can only identify the incorrect answer and must let the learner infer the correct answer unassisted. The instructors can provide learners with enough hints so that the learners can produce the correct answer but may not give the learner the correct answer. If the learner does not know the answer after the instructors and instructor assistants have provided hints, and if there is a pattern to the errors then the instructors may suggest that the learner re-do a worksheet to help correct future error patterns.

The instructors track progress every time the learners submit a completed worksheet set for grading. Progress includes the date, the worksheet level, the number of worksheets completed, the time taken and the worksheet scores. The instructor can assess whether or not the learner is struggling with a particular set of worksheets by looking at the grades and whether the elapsed time to complete the worksheets exceeds a predetermined time.

Once the learner completes the reading, writing, and listening part of the worksheet, the instructor assistant verifies the English pronunciation of the learner. The instructor assistant asks the learner to read a section of their worksheets out loud while the learner uses a timer to track the time it takes to read the particular section and the elapsed time is recorded. The instructor assistant identifies and corrects any mispronunciations after the learner has finished reading. The learner re-reads the same paragraphs with the pronunciation corrections twice and the elapsed times are again recorded. If the learner is able to complete the reading, writing, listening and pronunciation sections within the predetermined time then the learner is able to advance to the next worksheet.

## **KC Demographic Profile, EFL Program Lesson Frequency and Lesson Procedure**

Kumon has two ways of delivering EFL course content, one is via correspondence, where learners receive instruction materials via post or via the internet. The other way is by attending a physical location known as a KC, where learners receive instruction materials from an instructor. It is at a KC where instructors interact directly with learners to assess if the EFL Program lesson frequency needs to be adjusted. In this section I discuss the KC Demographic Profile and the EFL Program Lesson Frequency. First, I will describe the demographic profile of a KC where I work. Second, I will provide information about the frequency of the EFL program lessons and the lesson procedure.

As of March 2020, Kumon has 16,100 (KCs) and 14,400 instructors in Japan. The KCs are franchisee-operated locations and are run by an instructor and instructor assistants. KCs are open at least twice a week and their hours of operations vary by location and are adjusted as per demand. However, typically they remain open for five hours on any given day.

### ***The Demographic Profile of a KC in Yamanashi Prefecture***

KCs are open to all learners regardless of their current age, school grade, and experience with English. At this particular KC there are a total of 65 learners enrolled in the EFL program. Of the 65 learners, 25 are males and 40 are females. There are 11 learners who are in kindergarten (ages 4-6), 30 elementary school learners (ages 6-10), 10 junior high school learners (ages 13-15), 12 senior high school learners (ages 15-18), and two adult learners (over 18 years old).

### ***The Frequency of the Lessons and Lesson Procedure***

Learners typically study at the KC for approximately 1 hour per day and they typically come to the KC about twice per week. While at the KC learners work on their assigned

worksheets for the day, they write the amount of time it takes them to complete the worksheets and submit their worksheets to the instructor so that the instructor can grade them.

All worksheets must be 100% correct before learners are able to advance to the next set of worksheets, so while the learners wait for the teacher to finish grading the worksheets for the day, the learners can correct any errors they had from homework they submitted on prior days or they can request a new set of worksheets for classwork or for homework if they have no corrections to make. The worksheets are designed so that a learner can complete a set of 10 worksheets within 20-30 minutes.

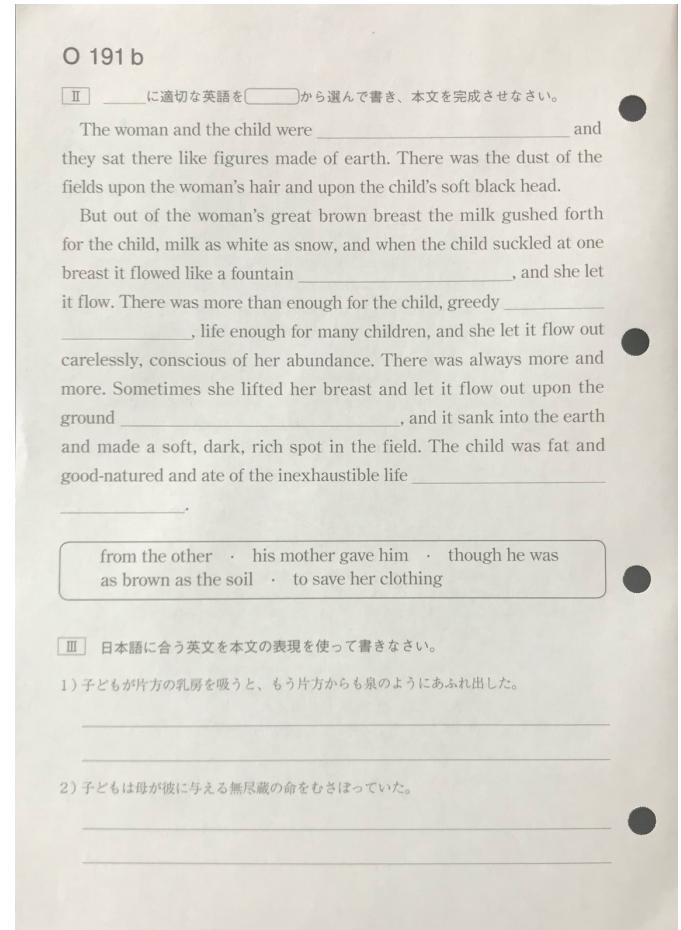
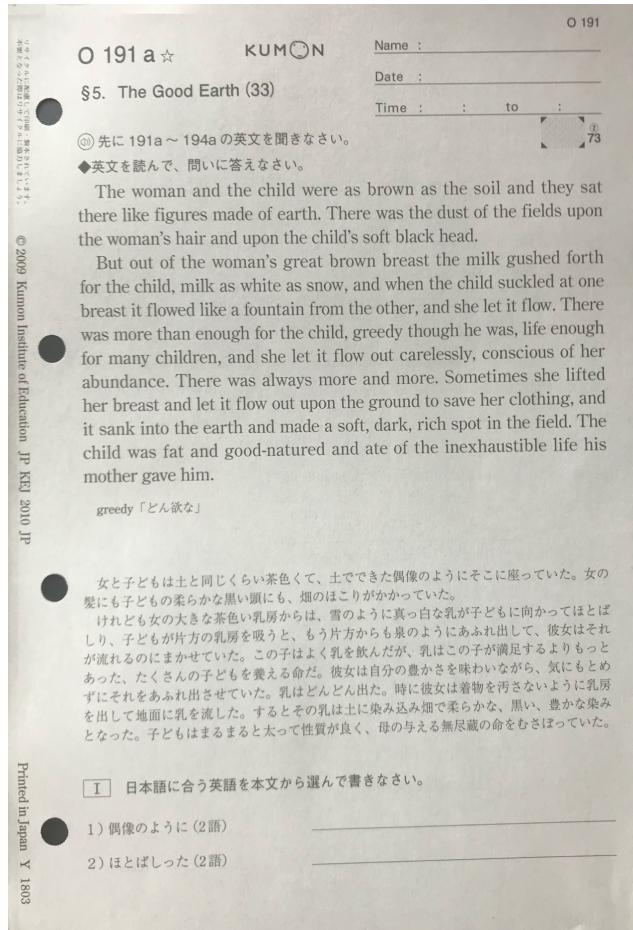
One of the indications that a learner is struggling with the material is if the learner takes longer than 20-30 minutes to complete a set of 10 worksheets. Whenever a learner struggles with the material, the instructor investigates the reason with a private consultation and the instructor determines whether the level needs to be adjusted to accommodate with the current ability of the learner.

## **Summary**

The Kumon EFL Program imparted at KCs is a program for learners of any age and school grade level wishing to supplement the English programs offered at their junior high and senior high schools in Japan. It has an individualized and structured methodology that is easy for both learners and instructors to follow and implement. The diagnostic tests, questionnaires and the monitoring that takes place during the EFL Program lessons are important tools that instructors use to help adapt the program to the need of the learner.

Going forward, it would be interesting to compare the vocabulary found in the Kumon EFL Program with the vocabulary that appears in the *Eiken* and TOEFL exams and measure their similarities and dissimilarities. The results will show any existing gaps and will assist in the

evaluation of vocabulary teaching programs I can implement to bridge such gaps and so that KC learners better prepare for future *Eiken* and TOEFL exams.

**Figure 1***Front and Back Side of Kumon Worksheet Level 0*

*Note.* This represents a typical Kumon worksheet. The story in this worksheet is from the novel “The Good Earth” by Pearl S. Buck.