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# International Education for Youth Development: Report on a Collaboration Program between Athena Eikaiwa & Little Oranges

Tanya Saga<sup>1,3</sup>, Naoko Hino<sup>2</sup>, JoAnn Hayashi<sup>3</sup>, and Karen Pullupaxi<sup>1,3</sup>  
University of Tsukuba<sup>1</sup>, Little Oranges<sup>2</sup>, Active Life<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** *Globalisation has given a connection to the world regardless of the borders and languages. In the Athena Eikaiwa & Little Oranges project, English is the language that connects participants from different countries, and also it is a tool in education for children with developmental disabilities. This collaboration program focuses on promoting the development of language in children applying English education. Also, to make children enjoy the English experience and communicate with instructors from different nationalities. The program demonstrated positive effects on children including promoting the development of language. Furthermore, online resources in education are applied as a tool to develop the quality of the English education program and also to connect with instructors despite the physical location.*

**Keywords:** International education, youth development, English (second language), intellectual disabilities, developmental disorder

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## Background

Living in a globalized world represents a series of opportunities for the population and at the same time a series of challenges to overcome. Globalization and the connection of cultures and countries have created an implicit need for learning a foreign language and the feeling that knowing one's native language only is not enough. According to Smith (2018), the ability to learn a new language, grammatically, is better before 18 years old; and to become completely fluent is necessary to start learning it before the age of 10. In the ranking of languages spoken around the world, English turns out to be the first, even though it has the third position if only native speakers are considered. This is a key to consider when the importance of learning is evaluated. English has turned into a common link between people to connect when their native language is not spoken.

Children are growing exposed to new challenges. This is a general statement that doesn't really consider all children. Society is formed by diverse heterogeneous groups that are not always considered when offering services. However, every human being should have access to quality services regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Developmental disabilities are defined as "the group of

conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas" (Centers for Disease and Control Prevention, 2022). Mostly, the organizations that work for this group tend to have higher prices compared to the market as it requires diverse preparation from the personnel and the facilities. For this reason, Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges decided to collaborate in order to make a program in the field of international education for youth development. Teaching children proper pronunciation of the target dialect can help them to increase their confidence and self-esteem. The program offered by Little Oranges covers needs for children with developmental disabilities and Athena Eikaiwa offers English programs for a variety of groups. The founders of both organizations work towards quality services and accessibility. By working together, both improve their services and extend their reachable audience developing a program in language education for the youth.

In Japan, the number of children with developmental disorders have been increasing. The condition and symptoms of developmental disorder had started to be recognized in 1990s and about 8.8% of children (age 6 to 15) are diagnosed as developmental disorders in the research done by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2022. It showed a 2.3% increase from the previous research performed in 2012.

There are special classes for those children with developmental disorders where they can study in much smaller groups (typically up to 6

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children) than usual classrooms with specialized teachers with certification. Though they are not normally specialized in teaching English. As for teaching English for children with developmental disorders, it is more challenging than other subjects since there is a lack of research or studies. Having both professional skills in teaching children with special needs and teaching English are required to provide English education for children with special needs.

## Collaborators

### *Introduction of Little Oranges*

NPO Little Oranges was established in July 2018 by author NH. Its main mission is to provide educational services in physical activity, sports, and the English language for children with developmental disabilities. The organization's mission and goals are: "Every activity is to enjoy and have fun" and additionally to "Provide each child with or without disabilities the opportunities to be praised, to feel successful and to be loved". Following these ideas, NPO Little Oranges (LOs) manages an out-of-school program<sup>1</sup> that prepares and produces original and unique activities to help children's growth.

NH was born and raised in Japan by her Japanese parents and learned her second language which is English and cultural differences by going abroad. She has teaching experience in English education for over a decade targeting participants in a wide range from 2 years old to adults. With this experience, she realized that the language acquisition process brings dynamic effects in various ways to people's growth. Every individual uses some type of language with or without disabilities and uses the language by listening, speaking, reading, writing, communicating, learning, and even thinking. By learning a second language, those effects will not simply double, but multiply. This understanding of the importance of learning a second language made her confident that providing English education in the NPO service will only provide benefits for children with disabilities.

### *Introduction of Athena Eikaiwa*

Athena Eikaiwa is a language education program of Active Life, a volunteer organization for

social development through sports and language education. Active Life is willing to contribute to international exchange in the community between local Japanese citizens and the international residents in Japan. The English program was established by two certified international teachers who are residents of Japan. TS and JH have a strong relationship with Japan through their family connection and were coworkers in an NPO developing an English program in an afterschool. TS is originally from Ecuador and has 16 years of teaching experience in different areas of language education with students of different ages, including children in kindergarten, elementary school students, university students, adults, and elderly groups. JH is originally from the Philippines and has experience in teaching elementary students from the 1st grade to 6th grade in an afterschool program and as a private tutor of young adults.

The founders have seen positive effects, including progress in language ability and the motivation of their students to learn the language. With that experience, they decided to enhance their capacity to connect and provide the quality of teaching that is suitable to the learning environment by taking training courses and acquiring a certificate in TESOL/TEFL (Teaching English as a Second Language/Teaching English as a foreign language). The idea and goal of establishing Athena Eikaiwa are to help the needs of society by improving the ability to communicate with young learners and adults while learning English.

In Japan, there are some students who attend lessons after school to learn English and pass exams for proficiency. However, some people still struggle when applying English in real daily interactions. Additionally, the prices of eikaiwa English schools are not accessible to all learners. According to Eikaiwa School research (2020), the price market for a 50-minute group lesson is around ¥3000. Besides, there are extra fees of ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 for enrollment and ¥5,000 to ¥20,000 for study materials. The cost of group lessons changes depending on the number of participants, meaning costs increase when the number of students decreases. Considering this, Athena Eikaiwa provides a high-quality service with international teachers at a lower price from the market where learners can see their own progress and be able to apply their language skills

TS and JH established Athena Eikaiwa to apply

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<sup>1</sup>Out-of-school refers to any service provided after the school schedule where children can learn and be taken care of by qualified staff until the parents come to pick them up. This is referred to as 放課後等デイサービス (hōkagotō day service) in Japanese.

the learning methods they used: learner-centered learning method and interactive/participative learning method. Athena Eikaiwa focuses on providing a program with

1. Internationally qualified coordinators who make the syllabus and contents of the program for the progress of students. AE collaborates with international teachers of different nationalities to provide their students with the experience of learning English through diversity.
2. Game-based learning (Interactive and participative style of teaching)
3. Building self-confidence in speaking by working on pronunciation and encouraging them to believe in their abilities to communicate by not being shy and getting scared to make mistakes.

Besides the founders of Athena Eikaiwa who manage the program, there are other teachers collaborating with lessons. JH is the coordinator of the program. She manages the syllabus and contents of the lessons. Plus, she is in charge of following teachers' work and progress to establish an original program of Athena. Also, KP started to contribute to the coordination team as an assistant with the planning of schedules and communication with staff and students. In the teacher's team, we have teachers from Ecuador, India, Poland, El Salvador, and Cuba. In regards to the qualifications, some of our teachers are certified as TESOL teachers and also some of them work for international schools and after schools.

## **Athena and LOs challenges in foreign language education**

### *Foreign Language*

At the time of studying English in Japan, some places generally use the katakana alphabet to represent sounds. However, English basic sounds include 44 phonemes: 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds (Rao, 2015). It is important to note that the combination of letters is not considered in this number. Phonotactics is the combination of sounds and cannot be objectively measured as there are different pronunciations depending on the region where English is spoken. Nevertheless, according to Baayen (2003), there are at least 80 more sounds besides the basic ones. This means that so far there are 124 English sounds. The

number of sounds in English is said to be around 1800 more or less, according to English teachers with experience. This is widely different compared to the Katakana sounds which are about 70.

Having pronunciation from the Japanese language applied to English sounds has been challenging when learners try to speak English to international speakers. Some people feel they cannot communicate and feel English is “difficult”, so it can become a language that is not attractive to learn. It is common to listen to young learners say, “I don’t like English because it is difficult.”

Since many Japanese teachers are not able to pronounce English properly and use katakana at the time of teaching, students learn English with a Japanese pronunciation. Although the students study hard and get good grades on school tests, many of them have a difficult time when speaking with native speakers.

“Katakana is not English. There are so many sounds in the English language that do not exist in katakana” (Serourian & Hackshaw, 2012). It is necessary to teach the language emphasizing the pronunciation of sounds that don’t exist in the Japanese language avoiding the transition to katakana spelling. It can be confusing for new learners when the writing is pronounced in one way and the speaking pronunciation is a different one; it might be easier for them to trust the writing one as it can be read. It is unnecessary to build the habit of writing a pronunciation that is incorrect and that will lead to difficulties in future performance. According to Brown (1997), developing discrimination skills for pronunciation in the language is an ability that cannot be acquired if katakana is used to simulate the sounds. The biggest challenge when developing this Japanized speaking form based on katakana is that English speakers who have never had a relation with Japanese pronunciation will not understand it.

There is also the “native speaker teacher” challenge for the program. Native speakers are seen as a model of teachers in education as they are considered to use language correctly in producing error-free English (Todd, 2006). Athena and the LOs program focus on collaborating with qualified teachers regardless of their nationalities. Also, to provide children with an international environment in which English is a means of communication with the world.

Hence, in Athena Eikaiwa there are no native speakers but there are qualified English teachers who are able to teach English at a native level. Moreover, all of them are the result of learning

English as a second language so they can also apply learning methods that were applied themselves at the time of learning English.

### *Youth development*

Numbers of research results explain the positive effects of acquiring a second language in the neuroscience and cognitive science areas. Also, the success of acquiring a beautiful second language requires consistent language stimulation (Saito, 2017).

In the case of Little Oranges, there are 50 students registered, all of whom have challenges and difficulties in their lives. Six of them were diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), four with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), one with Learning Disorder (LD), two with physical disabilities, and three with developmental disabilities.

The problems that children with disabilities face can be hard and unreasonable. Though, surprisingly, the most difficult part is that others cannot understand their problems at all. Most children with developmental disabilities cannot be defined by their appearance. Their appearance looks like other children, so their behavior due to their disabilities may look like just a lack of effort or just being selfish toward other people.

Each child has a different personality and character so the challenges and difficulties vary on each student. Some of them have to deal with their impulsive characteristics so sometimes it is extremely difficult for them to just be seated in class quietly.

Some others react with more sight predominantly, so they can not follow verbal instructions. Furthermore, children who lack strength in their eye movement can have a hard time copying what's written on the blackboard in front of the class to their own notebooks.

### **Purpose of Collaboration**

The purposes of making a collaboration program of Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges include the following:

1. To improve the language ability by applying English education in children with developmental disabilities
2. To have children enjoy their English experience and communicate with international instructors

## **Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges Collaboration**

### **Project Summary**

Little Oranges, Hōkagotō Day Service in Kanoya City, Kagoshima Prefecture, operates and manages the out-of-school English education program. It focuses on the importance of proper pronunciation for children with developmental disabilities such as developmental disabilities including ASD, LD, or ADHD.

Most of the cost of the Hōkagotō Day Service is provided by the Japanese national health insurance. The careful assessment is provided for children with disabilities and the local government gives the certification to access the service when it is needed. Therefore, parents of these children have less financial load to join the out-of-school education programs. For the collaboration program of English from Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges, LOs pay a tuition fee for each lesson to Athena Eikaiwa and there is not an additional charge to the children or the parents to receive the service.

Little Oranges (LOs) has motivated itself to provide a service with proper English pronunciations since November 2021. From May 2022, LOs started to collaborate with Athena Eikaiwa service with international English teachers through online lessons.

The English lesson has a duration of 40 to 50 minutes, and the contents of the lessons include

1. Greetings and feelings
2. Check the date and weather
3. Introduction of a topic (English grammar or vocabulary)
4. Activity or Game
5. Worksheet or Review
6. Closing Greetings

Athena classes are organized by following a lesson plan from a syllabus made by the coordinators in collaboration with the teachers who have a certificate in education or experience in education in Japan. The contents are based on the needs of the learners. Athena provides two different classes to Little Oranges which are: zero to beginners (Gold) and beginners to intermediate (Gold Eiken) (see Table 1). Each teacher provides a slide of a complete lesson based on the assigned topic. The whole lesson includes greetings and talking about dates, weather, season, feelings, songs, and other

Table 1. Schedule and Lessons

Day	Monday and Friday	Tuesday	Thursday
Level at LOs	Elementary	Elementary to Intermediate	Intermediate to Advanced (Eiken 5)
Level at Athena	Gold (For Fun)	Gold	Gold (Eiken 5)
Main Content	Do not need to “study” the goal is to have fun with English.	Basics of English: phonics, basic writing, reading, vocabulary and structures of daily life	Contents for Eiken 5 and basic communication in daily life situations

topics. Athena applies synthetic phonics to teach children how to read and how to pronounce the words from original English. The phonics does not include katakana or hiragana words or sounds because Athena encourages the children to learn the alphabet sounds in a natural way. The program applies game-based learning to practice and memorize the words.

This method is very effective to let the learners enjoy and interact more. Finally, teachers use worksheets to practice writing and reading comprehension (Figure 1). The worksheet is a summary of the whole lesson which also helps the teachers to identify the level of understanding of learners. Additionally, when reviewing the worksheet, children interact individually with the teacher to get more confidence with their own work.



Figure 1. Gold Class: Showing the answered worksheet to the teacher.

### *Participants and Beneficiaries*

The number of participants registered for the English program is 29. Each session includes two to seven students from six to 15 years old. One teacher from Athena is in charge of the online lesson while two or three teachers of LOs help with the management of the class and support children on site (see Figure 2). The teachers from Athena Eikaiwa only speak English during the entire

class and on-site Japanese teachers help using Japanese only if it is needed. The minimum use of Japanese language gives more chances for the children to listen, speak, think and communicate in English, which is a very unique environment compared to typical English classes in elementary or junior high school classes, which are mainly conducted by Japanese-native teachers.

The total number of LOs teachers is 12. From Athena five to six teachers take the lessons and prepare the contents. Three to four other volunteers help to prepare the online material of the program according to the syllabus and coordination from JH.

From the start of this service in May 2022, we held online lessons by Athena 39 times, in which a total of 246 students participated in the lessons until the beginning of October. This collaboration program, which is between an NPO, LOs, and the volunteer organization Athena, aims to strengthen their working team and make a stronger program to promote and spread the program to more children around Japan.

### *Children’s Development through English Education*

There are specific examples of the development of learners in the program. For instance, one stu-



Figure 2. Gold-Eiken Class.



dent with ADS originally only had a way to communicate by repeating back the same phrase, but he became able to communicate in the way of questions and answers, especially in English. For example, when the teacher said to the boy “What day is it today?” he used to reply, “What day is it today?” After a few months, now he is able to reply to the question, for instance: “Thursday!”

Moreover, students with acoustic hyperesthesia have high copying ability from listening to speaking. They can repeat the teacher’s sound correctly with beautiful English pronunciation. Also, they say it is quite easy to mimic the sounds. Therefore, they feel motivated and are enjoying the process of learning English.

Additionally, when speaking English with Katakana pronunciation, the pronunciation would be using the same facial muscles, respiratory system, and same simulations as speaking Japanese. On the other hand, in our program, students are using English pronunciation with correct phonics, they use completely different facial muscles and respiratory systems and stimulate their brain and nerve systems differently. This is also a great way to improve the stammering problem that some of the students have when speaking even in Japanese.

In addition to these great effects, we observed that the students are able to feel confident and have higher self-esteem by acquiring the proper English pronunciation. Children with developmental disabilities in a typical classroom at school tend to be scolded more often and forced to apologize for their non-ideal behavior. Being able to acquire the unique abilities that the program provides, they have more chances to be praised and be confident which brings higher self-efficiency which could be most valuable for the children.

### Parents’ Feedback

From the total number of LOs participants, there are 50 students registered. A total of 31 of them are enrolled in the English program. 14 parents collaborated with their opinion about the English program. In the reasons for choosing the English lessons, 60% of the parents choose to improve the child’s communication ability, 53.3% chose: (a) the child had an interest; (b) to know

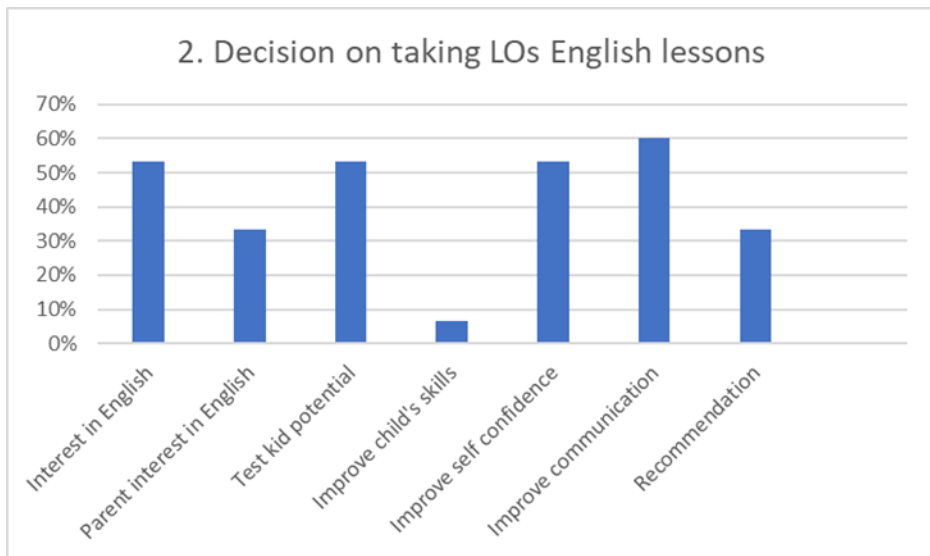


Figure 4. Parents’ Feedback

about the child’s potential; and (c) to give the child more self-confidence. 33.3% of the participants also mentioned that parents had an interest in English or a third person recommended it. 6.7% mentioned improving the child’s weakness. After children were involved in the program, 66.7% of parents mentioned that children enjoy the class and 60% mentioned that children got more interested in English and/or foreign countries. 33% mentioned children acquired English skills and 26.7% mentioned that children became more confident (see Figure 4). English lessons have provided children with an international environment that motivates them not only to join the lessons, but also to apply communication skills in English while becoming more self-confident.

From the school feedback, 33% of parents heard that the English and Japanese pronunciation of children improved. 20% of parents mentioned the school feedback about a) acquiring English abilities, b) becoming more confident, and c) getting more interest in English or/and foreign countries. 13.3% of parents said their communication skills improved.

53.3% of children had experienced a situation communicating in English with foreigners or speaking at home and 100% of participants are considering letting their children take the program.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### Discussion

During the development of this program, children were able to improve their language ability and enjoy the English experience communicating with international instructors. Both organizations

worked on developing the program to make it suitable for participants. Additionally, cooperating in a program using online resources, LOs and Athena faced some challenges, but were able to adjust to maintain the quality of the service and adapt to the students' needs.

Collaboration between organizations is very important for EFL instruction. This collaboration has benefits for improving not only the programs of education for children but also to their social growth through various activities with international ambiance.

Our strength is that being able to work in this program with the same goal of improving the quality of Language Education, we are motivated to learn and adapt new ways and techniques to teach, especially to children with learning disabilities and to all children as a whole. The activities that we have implemented include cooking, dancing, crafts, and physical exercises help them to enjoy and have fun while learning. Having international teachers helps them to see and understand the culture of an outside world. These strengths are not only for our program. This program can be applied in different educational contexts such as afterschool programs.

HN started to see that children are more confident in front of the camera and communicating with foreign teachers. It is remarkable since some of them have anxiety issues talking to others even to Japanese.

Also, HN has seen a child with autism able to communicate with teachers and celebrating saying やったー! [*Yatta!* I did it!] and doing high five with the on-site teacher. In particular, this child is less motivated and spends his time laying down and keeps looking at his hand spinning. These are quite typical gestures for people with autism.

To develop the contents of the program HN, TS and JH had meetings to coordinate the contents of the program regarding the level of children, the availability of time and the staff. They established the Eiken exam as a goal to motivate children and their parents. Thus, children and parents can see the results of the program taking an exam as a goal.

For the content of online lessons, Athena and LOs teachers adjust the program according to children's needs, and provide an original program with a grammar structure, an activity or game, and a worksheet. For children who are beginners, the idea is not to make them feel that English time is study time, for them the purpose is to feel that

English time is time for fun. These lessons focus on vocabulary and games emphasizing pronunciation. For children who join on Tuesdays, the purpose is to start learning the basics of English structure and also enjoy an activity and a worksheet. Finally, for children on Thursdays who are the ones with the higher level, the purpose is to focus on the Eiken exam. Therefore, the content and structures are more advanced than the other lessons.

During the program, online lessons had some challenges due to the distance of the teacher. In order to make children feel a connection with the teacher, organizers consider the importance of asking one by one questions calling children by their names. For this reason, before starting each lesson, Athena teachers require the names of the participants of the day to the LOs teachers. In the end, teachers ask children to present their worksheets to the teacher through the screen. Children have shown more connection with the teacher's thanks to this.

For the length of the program, after receiving parents' feedback, organizers found that the valuable content has not been not seen totally by parents. Organizers are willing to spread the program but it has some limitations in the promotion of the program. Meanwhile, both organizations are strengthening the team and the contents of the program in order to expand it.

This project between Athena and Little Oranges focused on teaching the proper pronunciation of English. It helps children to feel confident and increase their self-esteem. For all learners, it is very important, especially with children with developmental disabilities because they can feel that language abilities give them an opportunity to receive prizes or be recognized at the school for their own abilities.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the collaboration program of English from Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges in international education for youth development has demonstrated positive effects to promote the development of language in children with developmental disabilities. Children's changes in their ways of learning, and acting and parents' opinion showed the inclusion of the English program as an effective tool for language development.

During the program, children not only learn English but also have English as an experience to communicate with international teachers from different countries and nationalities. Therefore, they

have the opportunity to use English as a tool to connect with people from other countries.

As part of the collaboration program, the proper pronunciation of English showed that students felt confident, and their self-esteem increased. This is very important for all learners, however, in children with developmental disabilities it is very important for children because they can feel their language abilities give them chances to be recognized in schools for receiving prizes.

Access to online tools has been a challenge in education, however, in language education, there are online resources that improve the quality of the lessons and make them more attractive for learners. For this reason, learners from this program have demonstrated to be enjoying the learning experience.

Despite there are still doubts coming from the lack of knowledge about the idea of learning from a native speaker, it is possible to make a team with qualified staff able to teach without being native speakers. However, constant training is important to maintain high standards and quality. Thus, even the teachers who are not native speakers can become “certified teachers with native level” Also, it provides opportunities for children to see that regardless of the country English is a tool that can connect them with people from different countries.

## Recommendations

English education, as a tool for youth development in children with developmental disorder has to be constantly tracking and updating. The program needs to adapt to the learner's needs. For this reason, the coordinator's role is very important to follow the teachers' lessons and keep motivated not only the learners but also the working team.

At the time of recruiting teachers, regardless of nationality, it is important to consider the accent and level of English of teachers not to be an obstacle that affects the learners. Students will learn that there are different types of accents in English used around the world, however, it should not be an obstacle at the time of learning.

For non-profit organisations, NPOs, or voluntary organizations, it is very important to keep the team motivated. There are some volunteers contributing and despite the program's aim to be accessible to participants, and to work with qualified staff it is important also to be able to recognize their work and keep them motivated.

Although there are some issues with English

education in Japan, this is an opportunity for projects like Little Oranges and Athena to collaborate and demonstrate other ways of learning a language.

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### About the authors:

**Tanya Saga** is a legal translator, researcher, and educator. Her degree is in sports for development, and her research interests include kendo diffusion, ikigai assistance robots, and multicultural understanding. She has been involved in a number of intercultural programs while also competing as a kendo national player. By leading Active Life, she was inspired to continue contributing to an active society. She is also a teacher at an international school and an English lecturer at Kanoya's National University of Sports.

**Naoko Hino** grew up in Japan and has been teaching English for over a decade. Social inclusion, appropriate physical activity, and English instruction are her specialties. She is the founder and representative director of Little Oranges, a non-profit organization (NPO) for children with developmental problems. Little Oranges provides educational services in physical activity, sports, and English. She is committed to seeking better answers to universal designs and a world of social inclusion, as well as to contributing to diversity on a personal, facility, society, and international level.

**JoAnn Hayashi** is a TESOL teacher. She started to teach English in a sports academy in Japan. Following this, she decided to work with Active Life. Active Life strives to create an effective curriculum that engages both young learners and adults. JoAnn as co-founder of Athena Languages and English coordinator, is in charge of hiring and guiding teachers in order to maintain the program's quality. She is also promoting Japanese culture to the Philippine population in order to improve cultural understanding.

**Karen Pullupaxi** is an Olympic Studies master's student. She is an architect and a national kendo player. Her love of sports and architecture led her to Japan to research urban planning for community development through sports. She works as an English and Spanish instructor with elementary school pupils and young adults. She is the assistant coordinator in Active Life.

