

Brief Introduction to Multi-grade Teaching in Japan

Hokkaido University of Education
Research Institute for Remote and Small School Education
(HUE RISE)

Preface

Developing Multi-grade Teaching around the World

This English booklet is a simplified version of “the Guidebook for Multi-grade Teaching in Remote Areas” (2019), published in Japanese by Hokkaido University of Education - Research Institute for Remote and Small School Education (HUE RISE). Originally the Japanese guidebook was designed for teaching our university students and assisting their internship programs. It has been downloaded many times by students, in-service teachers, and education administrators not only in Japan but also in many other foreign countries.

Multi-grade classes can be seen everywhere both in industrial and developing countries. Some are small-sized, and some are bigger due to the degree of remoteness and/or the availability of teachers. Every country has their own creative ways to manage multi-grade classes based on their educational policies and culture. However, many teachers tend to struggle to manage multi-grade teaching particularly, in developing countries. Educational development projects implemented by JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) and NGOs focus on teaching and managing multi-grade classes and they sometimes request us to make professional contributions. We sincerely hope this Japanese style of multi-grade teaching will be helpful to other countries, however, no system is perfect and so we hope to continue to develop and learn by cooperating and sharing knowledge and techniques with all nations.

This document only contains basic ideas, however, further detailed information including examples of teaching plans will be published in due course.

We hope this publication will be useful to anybody who is involved in multi-grade teaching around the world.

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Ayumi Kawamae
Deputy-Director
Research Institute for Remote and Small School Education
Hokkaido University of Education

The full Japanese version of this booklet is available at the link below.

「へき地・複式学級における学習指導の手引」北海道教育大学へき地・小規模校教育研究センター，2019.3

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https://www.hokkyodai.ac.jp/edu_center_remoteplace/public/duplex_guide.html

Contents

1.	Introduction to Teaching Multi-grade Classes.....	1
1.1	The Compulsory Education System in Japan.....	1
1.2	Multi-Grade Classes.....	2
1.3	Remote Schools.....	2
1.4	The Teaching-Learning Process in Multi-Grade Classes.....	2
2.	The Basic Principles Behind Multi-Grade Teaching.....	4
2.1	Characteristics of Multi-Grade Teaching.....	4
2.2	Turning Disadvantages to Advantages in Multi-Grade Teaching.....	4
3.	Types of Multi-Grade Teaching.....	6
3.1	The Grade-based Approach and the Common Unit Teaching Approach.....	6
3.2	Characteristics of the Multi-Grade Teaching Approaches.....	6
4.	Grade-based Teaching and the Teaching-Learning Process.....	7
4.1	The Four Sections of the Teaching-Learning Process.....	7
4.2	Zurashi: Combining Different Lesson Stages for Two Grades in One Class....	8
4.3	Zurashi for a Whole Unit.....	9
4.4	Factors to Consider Concerning Zurashi.....	10
5.	Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching.....	10
5.1	Definitions of Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching.....	10
5.2	Factors to Consider Concerning Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching.....	11
5.3	Watari: Moving Back and Forth between Grades.....	12
5.3.1	Teaching Evenly to Both Grades.....	12
5.3.2	Weighing Direct Teaching More Heavily to One Grade.....	13
5.3.3	Combining Direct, Indirect and Simultaneous Teaching.....	14
5.4	Factors to Consider Concerning Watari.....	15
5.5	Factors for the Teacher to Consider and the Role of the Students.....	15

References

Bibliography

1. Introduction to Teaching Multi-Grade Classes

1.1 The Compulsory Education System in Japan

To understand multi-grade teaching in Japan, it is necessary to take an overview of the Japanese education system. The period of compulsory education in Japan is 9 years (6+3, 6 years in elementary school and 3 years in junior high) for students from 6 to 15 years old. The Constitution of Japan provides free education during this period.

According to 2019 statistics from MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology), there are 19,432 public elementary schools and 9,731 public junior high schools. The standard class size for one monograde classroom is under thirty-five pupils for grade 1, forty for Grade 2 to 6 in the elementary school, and forty for every classroom in junior high schools.

Multi-grade classes consist of a maximum of sixteen students combining 2 grades and a maximum of eight students if they have any students from the first grade. 1,912 elementary schools have multi-grade classes which are 11.8% of the 19,432 schools in total, and 382 schools among them have no monograde classes at all (100% multi-grade schools).

Under the Act of Promotion of Education in Remote Areas (1954), 1,758 elementary schools (9% of the total) and 932 junior high schools (9.6% of the total) are registered as “Designated Schools for Remote Areas” and they maintain good educational standards. The Japanese government curriculum guidelines define all learning evaluation and teaching content so that various education services are accessible to all students anywhere and in any size of school in Japan.

Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture of Japan, has higher percentages of remote, small schools and multi-grade classes. That is the reason why Hokkaido University of Education has set up the Research Institute of Remote and Small School Education to contribute to training teachers to meet local education needs.

1.2 Multi-Grade Classes

A multi-grade class can be described as a class combining students from different grades, generally made up of students from adjacent years, for example, a class of grade 1 and 2 students or grade 3 and 4 students. In recent years, due to the decrease in numbers of students in rural areas, we have seen multi-grade classes with an extremely small number of children (e.g., a class of two students, one from grade 3 and one from Grade 4) or unorthodox multi-grade classes (e.g., a class of grade 3 and 5 students).

1.3 Remote Schools

Multi-grade classes are mostly in remote schools located in disadvantaged areas in terms of transport links, location and cultural conditions, and these public elementary and junior high schools are designated by the following local government ordinance.

“...remote schools mean public elementary schools, junior high schools, and compulsory education schools...located in mountainous areas, remote islands, and other areas that are not blessed with [adequate] traffic conditions and natural, economic, or cultural conditions.” (Article 2, the Act on Promotion of Education in Remote Areas, revised on July 15, 2015)

1.4 The Teaching-Learning Process in Multi-Grade Classes

According to the Enforcement Regulations of the School Education Act, one lesson is 45 minutes long at the elementary level. Generally, the structure of the lesson has three parts: Introduction, development and summary. However, in the case of multi-grade teaching, the process is rearranged into four sections which are: Recognizing problems, solving problems, complete understanding of the topic and familiarization and application. Moreover, different activities from each grade should be combined in order to make it easier for a teacher to move back and forth between the two grade groups. This technique is called *Zurashi* in Japanese and is described in more detail on page 8.

Chart 1. The Teaching-Learning Process in Multi-Grade Classes



Process	Student's Role
Section A: Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize the day's task and work on learning proactively.
Section B: Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solve the problems by applying new learning and ideas. Make clear and deepen ideas through learning with other students.
Section C: Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try to understand by reviewing the lesson. Check understanding of the lesson content through exercises.



Process	Student's Role
Section A: Recognizing Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize the learning task and develop an idea of how to solve the problems.
Section B: Solving Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on solving problems individually.
Section C: Complete Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange results, review the lesson to understand more fully.
Section D: Familiarization and Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivate to learn more in the next lesson by deepening and assessing the content of the class.



Lower Graders	Higher Graders
Process	Process
Section A: Recognizing Problems	Section D+: Familiarization and Application (previous lesson)
Section B: Solving Problems	Section A: Recognizing Problems
Section C: Complete Understanding	Section B: Solving Problems
Section D: Familiarization and Application	Section B: Solving Problems

2. The Basic Principles Behind of Teaching Multi-Grade Classes

2.1 Characteristics of Multi-Grade Teaching

In multi-grade teaching, it is important to consider the advantages of multi-grade classes, to incorporate the characteristics of multi-grade education in remote areas effectively, and to have a flexible teaching approach. It is summarized in the three basic ideas stated below.

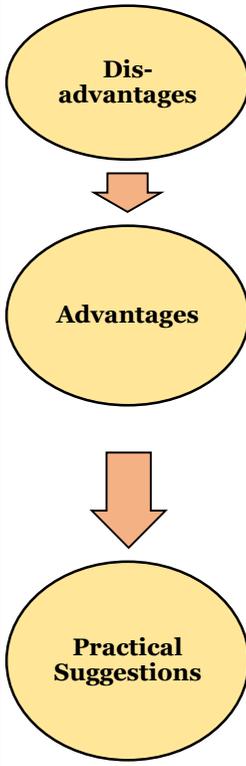
Basic Principles for Multi-Grade Education in Remote Areas

1. To cultivate the joy of learning and accomplishment, and to understand and appreciate the local environment through experiential outdoor activities.
2. To develop positive learning attitudes through enhancing indirect teaching, nurturing how to learn, and deepening human interaction.
3. To promote the enjoyment of life by taking advantage of close-knit communities and different-aged groups, to broaden perspectives, and to increase the powers of thinking, evaluating and expressing.

2.2 Turning Disadvantages to Advantages in Multi-Grade Teaching

The following three disadvantages are traditionally connected to multi-grade teaching. However, as chart 2 outlines, these negative assumptions do not hold true if the multi-grade class is taught effectively.

Chart 2. Turning Disadvantages to Advantages in Multi-Grade Teaching

	Point 1	Point 2	Point 3
 <p>Dis-advantages</p>	Students have less chance to experience a wide range of views and deepen learning content through discussions.	Both grades have less time to receive direct teaching.	Because the class consists of two grades, members of the class tend to change every year.
<p>Advantages</p>	In a small class, a deeper understanding of the basics of learning can be achieved by attentive teaching depending on individual needs.	The self-learning experience can develop the ability for students to become independent learners.	Both higher and lower-grade students can cultivate the attitude to help learning beyond the grades.
<p>Practical Suggestions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preparation of teaching materials, handouts, etc. depending on the learning activities of individual students. ● Understanding of the learning conditions of individual students in the learning process to enhance instruction. ● Sharing the joy of progress and growth of individual students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establishment of a learning environment, in which a student or a group of students can engage in learning activities independently. ● A flexible approach towards the combination of learning processes for both grades. ● Incorporation of ideas concerning teaching methods that can lead to independent learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development of leadership skills among higher-grade students. ● Cultivation of aspiration in lower-grade students to improve themselves to reach the level of understanding of the higher-grade students. ● Cultivation of a spirit of cooperation and recognition through the establishment of opportunities to let students contact each other beyond the grades.

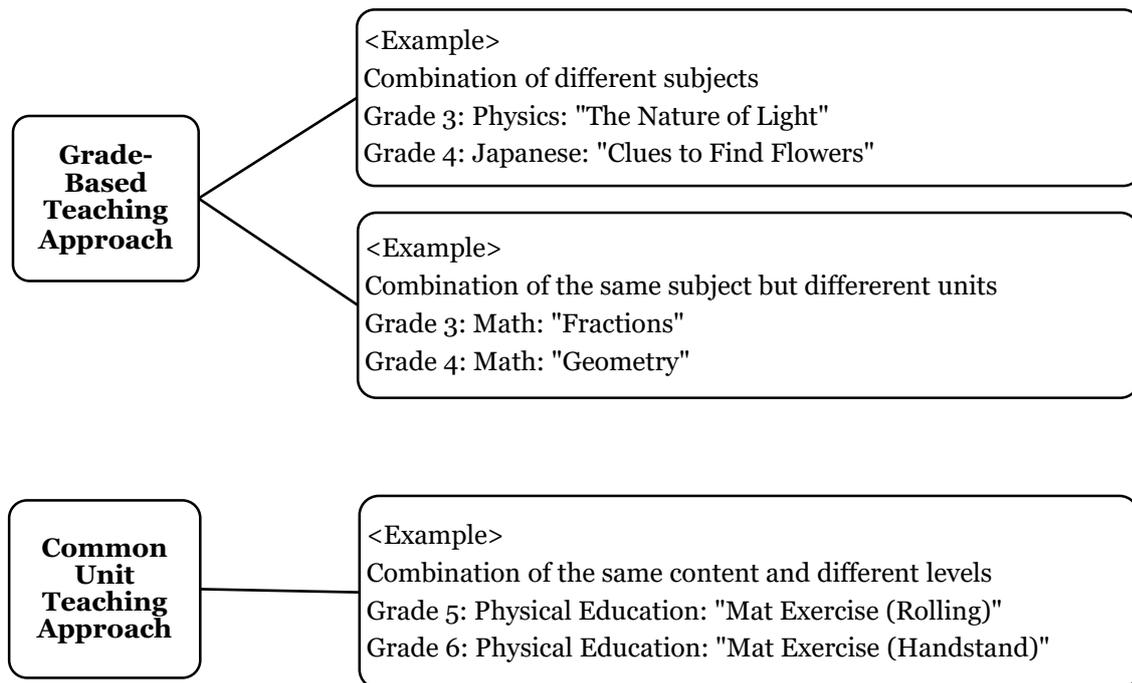
3. Types of Multi-Grade Teaching

3.1 The Grade-Based Approach and the Common Unit Teaching Approach

To carry out effective lessons in multi-grade classes, it is necessary to design lesson plans while considering the actual conditions of schools and students, target subjects and content. There are two major types of multi-grade teaching: The Grade-based teaching approach and The Common Unit teaching approach.

The Grade-based teaching approach is a teaching method where each grade is taught separate topics in the same classroom. On the other hand, the Common Unit teaching approach is a teaching method where both grades are taught the same subject at the same time with minor variations for the different ages but using the same material. Chart 3 shows some examples combining subjects and units in both teaching approaches.

Chart 3. The Two Major Types of Multi-Grade Teaching



3.2 Characteristics of the Multi-Grade Teaching Approaches

These two approaches both have advantages and issues teachers should consider when they design lesson plans for multi-grade classes.

Chart 4. The Characteristics of the Two Teaching Approaches

	Grade-Based Teaching Approach	Common Unit Teaching Approach
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is easy to follow a student’s learning development process and the planned curriculum structures for each grade. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cooperative learning and communication are enhanced. ● The sense of unity between the two grades is increased.
Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not to interrupt the students’ learning activities, the ability to learn nurtured and a learning environment established. ● Students understand learning steps and methods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning activities are conducted according to levels of understanding of content learned and development stages. ● Obstacles should be removed to achieve the objectives of each subject. ● The structure of each subject should be considered.

4. Grade-based Teaching and the Teaching-Learning Process

4.1 The Four Sections of the Teaching-Learning Process

As already mentioned on pages 2 and 3, the teaching-learning process generally consists of three sections (Introduction-Development-Summary) in monograde teaching, but to teach effectively four parts are suggested for multi-grade classes. Since a teacher must teach two grades at the same time, it is important to set up a well-organized teaching-learning process for both grades and to proceed in a different order for each grade by shifting the lesson stages.

Chart 5. The Four Sections of the Teaching-Learning Process

Teaching-Learning Process	Student's Role
Section A Recognizing Problems ↓	Recognize the learning task and develop an idea of how to solve the problems.
Section B Solving Problems ↓	Work on solving problems individually.
Section C Complete Understanding ↓	Exchange results, review the lesson to understand more fully.
Section D Familiarization and Application	Motivate to learn more in the next lesson by deepening and assessing the content of the class.

4.2 Zurashi: Combining Different Lesson Stages for Two Grades in One Class

Chart 6, shows how the flow of each grade could be combined in one lesson (45 minutes in primary schools) this shift is called Zurashi in Japanese. This technique involves the teacher switching between the grades after each section of the lesson. During the time when the teacher is working with one grade the other studies independently. One important point to be mentioned here concerns the “Familiarization and Application” stage for the higher-grade students, which is the first section of their lesson. This is actually an independent review of the previous lesson and not connected to the new content they are about to be taught.

Chart 6. Zurashi - Combining Different Lesson Stages for Two Grades

Lower Grade	Higher Grade
Teaching-Learning Process	
Section A Recognizing Problems ↓	Section D+ Familiarization and Application (previous lesson) ↓
Section B Solving Problems ↓	Section A Recognizing Problems ↓
Section C Complete Understanding ↓	Section B Solving Problems ↓
Section D Familiarization and Application	Section C Complete Understanding

4.3 Zurashi for a Whole Unit

The technique of Zurashi can apply not only for one lesson but also for a whole unit. In particular, it is useful when a thorough explanation is necessary at the beginning of the unit. Chart 7 shows an example of when a teacher puts more attention on the beginning of a unit for each grade while practicing Zurashi. In this case the teacher spends an entire lesson introducing the unit. It is assumed that both grade 5 and 6 students will spend 5 lessons to complete each unit.

Chart 7. Zurashi for a Whole Unit

Grade 5	Grade 6
5 - Ending of Unit I	1 - Beginning of Unit II
1 - Beginning of Unit II	2 - Unit II
2 - Unit II	3 - Unit II
3 - Unit II	4 - Unit II
4 - Unit II	5 - End of Unit II
5 - End of Unit II	1 - Beginning of Unit III

4.4 Factors to Consider Concerning Zurashi

When teachers apply Zurashi for one lesson and/or one unit, the following considerations should be noted:

- A continuous learning process should be provided for students.
- It is not completely teacher-focused at the beginning or end. It is essential to keep a good balance between teaching and letting the students think independently.
- Based on the aim of the day's lesson and each student's actual situation, time allocation for direct teaching and indirect teaching should be considered. (Direct teaching and indirect teaching are explained in the following section.)

5. Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching

5.1 Definitions of Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching

Direct teaching and indirect teaching are defined as:

Direct Teaching: The teacher attends and teaches one grade group directly.

Indirect Teaching: The teacher gives instructions to one grade group to enable them to study independently.

In multi-grade teaching, teachers always face time constraints, especially in direct teaching. It is important for teachers to understand a student's learning situation, communicate with them clearly, and encourage them to master the topic thoroughly. Teachers should have clear ideas about how to combine direct teaching and indirect teaching and spend time with students of both grades.

Chart 8. Teacher’s Movement Combining Direct Teaching & Indirect Teaching

Lower Grade		Higher Grade	
Teaching-Learning Process	Teacher's Movement		Teaching-Learning Process
Section A Recognizing Problems ↓	Direct Teaching	Indirect Teaching	Section D+ Familiarization and Application (previous lesson) ↓
Section B Solving Problems ↓	Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching	Section A Recognizing Problems ↓
Section C Complete Understanding ↓	Direct Teaching	Indirect Teaching	Section B Solving Problems ↓
Section D Familiarization and Application	Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching	Section C Complete Understanding

5.2 Factors to Consider Concerning Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching

To implement direct teaching and indirect teaching in multi-grade classes, teachers should consider the factors stated in Chart 9.

Chart 9. Factors to Consider Concerning Direct Teaching and Indirect Teaching

Approaches	Factors to Consider
<p style="text-align: center;">Direct Teaching</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Motivate students to facilitate self-learning ● Make clear lesson topics by choosing teaching content and arranging the learning steps and conditions carefully ● Teach fundamental knowledge to support self-learning ● Check and praise what students have learned to motivate them to continue learning independently
<p style="text-align: center;">Indirect Teaching</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Motivate students to develop self-learning habits ● Give clear instructions to students so they understand the learning objectives ● Help the students develop study skills so they continue to self-study and/or learn in small groups ● Prepare well for the next session of direct teaching

5.3 Watari: Moving Back and Forth between Grades

To conduct direct teaching and indirect teaching in a multi-grade class, a teacher moves back and forth between the two grades. This action is called Watari in Japanese and there are several patterns to meet lesson aims effectively. Three Watari patterns will be introduced in Charts 10, 11, and 12.

5.3.1 Teaching Evenly to Both Grades

Here the teacher visits each grade in a balanced manner. It makes it possible to supervise the learning progress of both grades effectively.

Chart 10. Teaching Evenly to Both Grades

Lower Grade	Higher Grade
Lesson begins	
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Lesson ends	

5.3.2 Weighing Direct Teaching More Heavily to One Grade

In this case the teacher spends more time with one grade due to the level of the lesson content. It is important for the other grade to be able to learn more independently so that the teacher can pay more attention to the grade who need direct teaching.

Chart 11. Weighing Direct Teaching More Heavily to One Grade

Lower Grade	Higher Grade
Lesson begins	
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Lesson ends	

5.3.3 Combining Direct, Indirect and Simultaneous Teaching

In this case the teacher conducts simultaneous indirect teaching intentionally for both grades. This provides independent study time and also makes it easier for the teacher to attend to students who need individual assistance.

Chart 12. Combining Direct, Indirect and Simultaneous Teaching

Lower Grade	Higher Grade
Lesson begins	
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Indirect Teaching	Indirect Teaching 
Direct Teaching 	Indirect Teaching
Indirect Teaching	Direct Teaching 
Lesson ends	

5.4 Factors to Consider Concerning Watari

To conduct Watari, teachers should note the following considerations:

- Before moving to the other grade, the teacher should confirm that students in the direct teaching session are ready to solve problems by themselves.
- The teacher needs to move according to the lesson plan. Moving many times is not always effective.
- Setting up a time for indirect teaching simultaneously if necessary, and the teacher should encourage students to solve problems independently.

5.5 Factors for the Teacher to Consider and the Role of the Students

In the final part of this introduction to multi-grade teaching, it is important to mention the factors the teacher should consider and the students' role in the learning process. (Chart 13) Taking into account this information, a conceptual framework for multi-grade teaching in one lesson is described in Chart 14.

Chart 13. Factors for the Teacher to Consider and the Role of the Students

	Factors for the Teacher to Consider	Student's Roles
Recognizing Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Present problems and let students discover them ● Let students organize what they have learned and experienced ● Clarify points to study in the class ● Let students confirm methods and steps to solve problems ● Let students speculate on results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarify the task ● List points of uncertainty ● Understand the lesson's aim ● Understand the differences from the previous lesson ● Think of methods and steps to solve problems ● Speculate on results
Solving Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let students work based on the steps to solve problems ● Let students write down points of importance and uncertainty ● Demonstrate, present, and advise the students ● Let students compare their results with expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work based on the steps to solve problems (self-learning, group learning with a subject leader) ● Think carefully and study persistently ● Organize points of importance and uncertainty
Complete Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let students present and compare the results with others ● Extract important points from individual students and share with the whole class ● Let students summarize what they learn in their own words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Present results to all ● Grasp similar and different thoughts and results of other students ● Organize ways of thinking and finding solutions ● Check the thinking process and solutions learned in the lesson
Familiarization and Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let students work on memory retention. ● Let students conduct supplementary exercises ● Let students apply what they have learned to their daily experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apply what they have learned to other cases or problems ● Understand how they could possibly apply what they have learned to other situations

Chart 14. Factors for the Teacher to Consider and the Role of the Students in Each Section of the Lesson

Lower Grade				Higher Grade		
Teaching-Learning Process	Teacher's Considerations	Student's Role	Teacher's Movement	Student's Role	Teacher's Considerations	Teaching-Learning Process
Section A Recognizing Problems ↓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Present problems and let students discover problems ●Let students organize what they have learned and experienced ●Clarify points to study in the class. ●Let students confirm methods and steps to solve problems ●Let students speculate on the results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Clarify the task ●List points of uncertainty ●Understand the lesson's aim ●Understand the differences from the previous lesson ●Think of methods and steps to solve problems ●Speculate on results 	Direct Teaching Indirect Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Apply what they have learned to various cases or problems ●Understand how they could possibly apply what they have learned to other situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students work on exercises for memory retention ●Let students work on the supplementary exercises ●Let students apply what they have learned to their daily experiences 	Section D+ Familiarization and Application ↓
Section B Solving Problems ↓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students work based on the steps to solve problems ●Let students write down points of importance and uncertainty ●Demonstrate, present, and advise the students ●Let students compare their results with expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Work based on the steps to solve problems (self-learning, group learning with a subject leader) ●Think carefully and study persistently ●Organize points of importance and uncertainty 	Indirect Teaching Direct Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Clarify the task ●List points of uncertainty ●Understand the lesson's aim ●Understand the differences from the previous lesson ●Think of methods and steps to solve problems ●Speculate on results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Present problems and let students discover problems ●Let students organize what they have learned and experienced ●Clarify points to study in the class ●Let students confirm methods and steps to solve problems ●Let students speculate on the results 	Section A Recognizing Problems ↓
Section C Complete Understanding ↓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students present and compare the results with others ●Extract important points from individual students and share with the whole class ●Let students summarize what they have learned in their own words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Present the results to all ●Grasp common and different thoughts and results of other students ●Organize ways of thinking and finding solutions ●Check the thinking process and solutions learned in this lesson 	Direct Teaching Indirect Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Work based on the steps to solve problems (self-learning, group learning, with a subject leader) ●Think carefully and study persistently ●Organize points of importance and uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students work based on the steps to solve problems ●Let students write down points of importance and uncertainty ●Demonstrate, present, and advise the students ●Let students compare their results with expectations 	Section B Solving Problems ↓
Section D Familiarization and Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students work on exercises for memory retention ●Let students work on supplementary exercises ●Let students apply what they have learned to their daily experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Apply what they have learned to various cases or problems ●Understand how they could possibly apply what they have learned to other situations 	Indirect Teaching Direct Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Present the results to all ●Grasp similar and different thoughts and results of other students ●Organize ways of thinking and finding solutions ●Check the thinking process and solutions learned in this lesson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●Let students present and compare the results with others ●Extract important points from individual students and share with the whole class ●Let students summarize what they have learned in their own words 	Section C Complete Understanding

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Brief Introduction to Multi-grade Teaching in Japan

Author: Ayumi Kawamae (Deputy Director, Research Institute for Remote and Small School Education, Hokkaido University of Education)

Translator: Takehiro Ono (Part-time Lecturer, Hokkaido University of Education)

Copy Editor: Andrew Ryan (Global Education Leadership Program Advisor, Hokkaido University of Education)

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Address: 1-15-55, Shiroyama, Kushiro, Hokkaido 085-8580 Japan

Phone: +81(0)154-44-3291

E-mail: kus-hekiken@j.hokkyodai.ac.jp

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