

# The Shift toward Language and Content Integration: Immersion as an Alternative to Traditional English Language Education in Japan<sup>1)</sup>

Simon Downes and Kazuaki Sugihara (*Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, 305-8572, Japan*)

While numerous studies over the last 30 years have pointed to the success of the immersion program overseas, Japanese educators and parents hesitate to conclude that the same results are obtainable in Japan. In light of recent changes in the English language education system in Japan, this article describes the concept of immersion within bilingual education, and discusses it as an alternative to the present program of instruction in Japanese public schools.

**Key words:** bilingual education, English language education, immersion program.

## Statement of Problem

In an attempt to increase the communicative nature of Japan's English teaching system, the Ministry of Education has decided to add English language programs to many elementary schools over the next few years. However, specific strategies for the implementation of these new programs have not been finalized. The present programs in junior and senior high schools, although much improved, still focus heavily on grammatical skills in order to prepare students for college entrance examinations. As a result, students do not gain mastery of spoken English (Downes, 1998).

In addition to English language skills being essential for entrance into top universities, a good grasp of English can also be a great advantage in Japanese society, enabling employees to be promoted faster, or enjoy assignments overseas. However, in order to propose changes in the school system, parents, school officials and policymakers will have to become convinced of the necessity and benefits of a more communicative and practical English language program.

## Optimum Age and Style of Program

Research has shown that foreign language learning should be started early. In fact, language acquisition studies suggest that for the child to undergo normal development in the native language, the earlier instruction in the foreign language begins, the higher the level of proficiency the child will attain in that language (Krashen, Long, and Scarcella, 1979).

Significant pedagogical and psychological reasons indicate that foreign language instruction should be part of the regular school curriculum for students as early as possible. At a young age children are cognitively, affectively and socially more flexible than adolescents or adults, therefore, they are said to be more "efficient" foreign language learners. In addition, children who are adequately exposed to two languages at an early age are said to experience certain cognitive gains: they seem more flexible and creative, and they reach higher levels of cognitive development at an earlier age than their monolingual peers (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Hakuta, 1986; 1990).

Probably the most influential theory regarding the integration of second language instruction came from Krashen (1982). His theory suggests that a second language is most successfully acquired when

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the conditions are similar to those present in first language acquisition. That is, when the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form, when the language input is at or just above the proficiency of the learner, and when there is sufficient opportunity to engage in meaningful use of that language in a relatively anxiety-free environment.

Depending on the degree of context available to the individual and the level of cognitive challenge, Cummins (1981) argues that individuals develop two types of language proficiency: basic interpersonal language skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. According to Collier (1987), social language skills can be acquired in 1 to 2 years, but the level of proficiency needed to read social studies texts or solve mathematics word problems can take 5 to 7 years to develop.

### Immersion Education

The Immersion program first began in the Canadian province of Quebec in 1965. Native English speaking parents who wanted their children to grow up bilingual and competitive in the ethnically diverse province of Quebec worked together with psychologists from McGill University and developed a French immersion program (see Lambert & Tucker, 1972). This unique program introduced a total French environment for the children in a kindergarten. Later, the program was developed to continue on all the way through to high school and today, immersion programs can be found in all ten Canadian provinces. The intent of immersion is to develop bilingualism and biliteracy in majority language students and, unlike traditional language education, immersion teaches language by conducting anywhere from 50 % - 100 % of the regular curriculum in the second language. Moreover, the program is also geared towards promoting a positive attitude towards the child's own culture. The two most popular forms of the program are total immersion in which all schooling in the initial years is conducted in the foreign language, including reading and language arts, and partial immersion where approximately half of the school day is conducted in the second language. In partial immersion, reading and language arts are

always taught in the second language. Otherwise, the choice of subjects taught in each language is decided by school districts.

Although grammatical structures are formally taught in the upper grades, immersion is essentially a communicative approach that focuses on teaching content through the learning of meaningful concepts; a practical way to accomplish educational objectives through the medium of the foreign language. The immersion approach itself is not particularly new. In fact, the idea of teaching majority-language students through a second or foreign language dates back centuries. Stated most clearly by Lewis (1976) "Throughout the history of formal education, the use of an L2 medium has been the rule rather than the exception."

In attempting to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy, the goal of immersion is to attain the positive effects of additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975). Although adding a second language at no cost to the normal development of a first language can be accomplished with majority language students attempting to acquire a second non-essential language, negative effects result from subtractive bilingualism, where one's native language is slowly replaced by an attempt to acquire the majority language (Lambert, 1984). It has also been suggested that there are certain cognitive advantages associated with additive bilingualism and cognitive disadvantages associated with subtractive bilingualism (Cummins, 1981).

A Spanish immersion program was implemented in Los Angeles in the early 1970's based on the successful Canadian program (Cohen, 1974). Following the positive results of this program, immersion schools spread across North America, and there are now many target languages including Chinese and Japanese. Met and Lorenz (1997) have presented an overview of lessons learned from twenty years of experience in U.S. immersion programs. To learn about the implementation of partial immersion programs in Japanese, Spanish and French in the United States, see Thomas, Virginia, & Abbott, (1993).

Effective programs in Canada and the United States have demonstrated three important factors for effective second language instruction: 1) instructional approaches that integrate content and

language are more effective than approaches in which language is taught in isolation; 2) an activity-centered approach that creates opportunities for extended student discourse is beneficial for second language learning; and 3) language objectives should be systematically targeted along with academic objectives in order to maximize language learning (ERIC, 1995).

Immersion is content-based education. Because the second language is not a subject of instruction, but rather the means by which the regular curriculum is taught, teachers are able to concentrate more on meaning than on form. Activity-based immersion programs therefore, allow more teacher-student interaction. In immersion, the focus lies on both academic objectives and language proficiency. Because research has shown that language develops together with cognition and social awareness, it makes sense to encourage their development together in a school setting. For a more extensive review, see Genesee & Met, (1994); and Snow, et al., (1992).

Katoh School (加藤学園) is a private school in Shizuoka Prefecture and has the only English partial immersion program in Japan. There are two types of programs, traditional classes that are taught in Japanese, and immersion classes where 50 % or more of the classes are taught in English. The curriculum of both programs is based on guidelines set forth by the Japanese Ministry of Education. At the time of entrance, parents are able to choose between the two programs. The English immersion program was implemented in their elementary school in April 1992 with 28 students. The original pilot class is now in their second year of junior high school. Katoh School created a hybrid partial immersion program where English learning is stressed in the early grades. The immersion program begins with about 70 % of the first three grades taught in English, and then gradually the proportion of English classes drops to about 50 % in the upper grades. For an in-depth review of the introduction of immersion to Japan and results of evaluations, see Bostwick, (1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, in press); and Katoh, (1993).

### **Bilingual Experience and Attitudes towards Bilingualism**

A great deal of studies have shown that bilingual education is effective, and that children in well-designed programs acquire academic English at least as well and often better than children in all-English programs (Cummins, 1989; Krashen, 1996; Willig, 1985). Although it is often thought that immersion, or similar bilingual programs are most suited for students with high intelligence, Genesee (1976) indicated that the role of intelligence in successful second language learning is minimal.

The landmark Peal and Lambert study (1962) compared monolingual children to bilingual children on both verbal and nonverbal measures of intelligence and achievement. Their results found no evidence of intellectual deficiency in bilingual children. The study controlled for socioeconomic status and language proficiency, and therefore corrected errors made in studies by their predecessors who found that the acquisition of two languages in childhood negatively affects intellectual development.

At the Second Katoh Gakuen International Symposium on Immersion and Bilingual Education, Bostwick (1998) commented on commonly held misconceptions surrounding immersion. The first of these is the notion that a child has a limited capacity for language learning and that beginning a second language too early will adversely affect the child's first-language development. The second of these misconceptions is that academic learning through the medium of a second language produces far inferior results than learning through the child's first language. Regarding the fact that these misunderstandings are often held and promoted by the so-called 'experts' in the field, he concluded, "The power of these misconceptions is that to some extent they are intuitively appealing and have a kind of 'common sense' logic to them. This is why they are so hard to extinguish, and why they remain as 'folk wisdom' despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary".

Considering the great language distance existing between English and Japanese, it is understandable why there may be some doubt as to

whether effects of studies overseas can be applied to Japan. At Katoh School, although previous evaluations have demonstrated that the immersion children perform at least as well as non-immersion students on national tests, new parents deciding between immersion and the regular program are still concerned about the effects of immersion on children's academic achievement, first language development, and Japanese identity. (R.M. Bostwick, personal communication, March 15, 1998).

### ***Academic Achievement***

In immersion programs most parents consider academic achievement to be more important than language ability. For more information regarding parent's objectives and attitudes toward bilingual education in Japan, see Bostwick (1999, in press). One of the more important features of immersion to understand is that positive effects are not immediate. Although individual programs differ in their results, research shows that usually four to five years are needed before students start doing well academically. However, studies in both the United States and Canada show that students do so well in fact, that they perform at least at the same level as their non-immersion peers, and often outperform them (Genesee, 1987). Holobow et al., (1987); and Swain & Lapkin, (1991) showed that immersion students consistently do as well as, and may even surpass, comparable non-immersion students on measures of verbal and mathematics skills. Generally, a consistent pattern has been seen in the development of students' oral and literacy skills. Although students reach native-like levels in listening and reading skills in the second language, they rarely reach that level in speaking and writing (Collier, 1992).

Early evidence from findings in the immersion program at Katoh School support findings in other countries that demonstrate immersion students experience no loss in academic achievement as a result of receiving academic instruction through the target language in an immersion setting (Bostwick, in press).

### ***First Language Development***

One misconception associated with the immersion approach – spending 50 % or more of the day

studying through a foreign language – is that it may lead to deficits in mother tongue development. However, research on immersion education has shown that it has allowed students to remain academically competitive with their non-immersion peers while maintaining normal first language development. Evaluations of majority and minority students in bilingual programs have shown that they experience no long-term academic retardation in the majority language (Appel & Muysken, 1987; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Krashen & Biber, 1988). Students at Katoh School performed at least as well on standardized measures of Japanese (Kokugo) when compared with the non-immersion side of the school (Bostwick, 1999, in press), and also scored significantly higher than comparable public school students when tested for knowledge of Japanese vocabulary (Downes 1999).

The linguistic interdependence principal (Cummins, 1981) may be one way to explain this phenomenon. Academic and cognitive literacy-related skills are said to transfer across languages; in other words, skills students learn through taking classes in a foreign language “transfer” to their native language. As Jim Cummins (1998) explains, “The fact that there is little relationship between amount of instructional time through the majority language and academic achievement in that language suggests that first-and second-language academic skills are interdependent, i.e., manifestations of a common underlying proficiency”. For a more detailed profile of evaluations of bilingual programs for both majority and minority students in relation to the interdependence principle see Cummins, (1984); and Ramirez, (1992).

### ***Identity***

Language often serves as an important symbol of ethnic identity- a symbol of who one is and who others are (Genesee, 1984). Piaget & Weil (1951), studying Swiss children, and Middleton, Tajfel, and Johnson (1970), studying British children, found that 6 to 8 year-old children had weak and inconsistent national identities. Piaget hypothesized that only by broadening their frames of reference to include groups and regions other than their own would children develop a cognitive and affective awareness of their own national group. He also

added that the inclusion of two languages in one's ethnic identity might facilitate processes such as decentration and reciprocity, which are crucial for the development of the child's identity. Both studies found that children showed a relatively consistent and pronounced preference for their own group by age 11.

Negative attitudes toward bilingual education have a long history. Diebold (1968) and Lamy (1974) contended that bilingualism is associated with a weak ethnolinguistic identity resulting from a personal and social identity crisis engendered by antagonistic acculturative processes. It was their contention that bilinguals become marginal because they do not identify strongly with either of the ethnolinguistic groups whose languages they know. When considering this finding it is important to recognize that the Diebold and Lamy cases cited occurred in bilingual children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Hammers & Blanc (1989) explain "because development of bilinguality often co-occurs with socialization in a group minority situation, as is the case for an immigrant child, some developmental consequences of this situation have been attributed to bilinguality".

In two similar studies, Genesee (1977) and Cziko, Lambert and Gutter (1979) examined ethnic identity in early immersion. The students in each study were asked to indicate how similar or dissimilar they thought a number of personal and ethnic concepts were to one another. Students were asked to rate their similarity to certain ethnic groups (e.g. French Canadian and English Canadian) on a scale from 1 (very similar) to 9 (very dissimilar). The results showed that the social perceptions of the French immersion students were the same as those of students in regular English programs.

Lambert and Klineberg (1967) in an international study of children's perceptions of foreign peoples and themselves, also stress the importance of "training in national contrasts" for the child's identity. Rejecting nationality as the most important part of identity, their contention is that in countries where different ethnic features such as language, religion or culture exist, children think about themselves in terms of these features. In summary they state, "children of diverse ages and ethnic

origins prefer to use such categories as sex, or being human, children or pupils, to describe themselves and only secondarily categories such as nationality, region or race." Krejci and Velimsky (1981), however, suggest that there are objective and subjective factors in ethnic identity, and consider that "the subjective factor of (national) consciousness" is the most important. They also explain that objective factors are also significant and they isolate five: territory, state, language, culture, and history. Not all of these need to be present, but the more there are the stronger the basis for a consciousness of identity.

As for cultural identity, Hammers and Blanc (1989) define it as the integration of one's culture into an individual's personality. As far as the age at which the feeling of cultural identity comes about, the authors explain that some studies suggest it begins at an early age, and that by the age of 6 children have developed some type of cultural identity.

English immersion students at Katoh School and comparable public schools were assessed with a scale designed to measure their sense of Japanese identity (Downes, 2000). Results of a subscale comparison showed that the immersion students had a stronger attraction towards western culture, a more positive attitude towards English, and a stronger identity with Japan. Here, the immersion students' flexibility in thinking is demonstrated by their positive attitudes toward western society and their heightened sense of Japanese identity.

Overall, conclusions regarding identity development show no negative effects as a result of studying through a second language. Further results from studies on immersion programs for majority language children have also shown positive effects on attitudes towards other language groups and no deficit in their feeling towards their own home culture. These positive attitudes, however, may later change as a result of the attitudes of family, peers, society, etc (Genesee, 1995).

## Discussion

Based on the successful outcomes of programs in Canada and the United States, other countries are implementing immersion programs of their own.

One of the biggest reasons for this shift is the fact that languages taught by traditional methods have not been successful in their teaching goals. Regardless of this movement, however, new immersion programs have not been implemented in Japan, most likely due to the fact that doubts persist concerning whether similar immersion programs in Japanese public schools would yield similar results. Over the years, however, research results from various types of immersion programs have shown a very positive trend. Cummins (1998) stressed that based on research concerning the academic, linguistic and intellectual effects of immersion, there were no negative consequences, and that in fact, the evidence suggests subtle benefits in these areas for bilingual children.

Realistically, implementation of new immersion programs in public schools would pose certain challenges. Concerning the expansion of immersion within Japan, Bostwick (1999) recognized that notwithstanding the difficulties caused by initiating immersion in a language so different as English, other 'practical' constraints would further compound difficulties, i.e., large class size, teacher-centered instruction, and the limited availability of qualified immersion teachers.

In an article addressing the most commonly asked questions about starting an immersion program, Met (1987) explains that in order to maintain the integrity of the immersion approach, classes are usually small (from 20-25), and to allow for attrition, a pilot class should have between 30 and 40 students. In this way, a good class size can be maintained all the way through to the upper grades. She explains that generally, immersion starts in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or Grade 1. The commitment by immersion parents is relatively large compared to regular programs. Although schools do not usually require parental participation, it is usually recommended that before starting, both parents and students have a good understanding of the nature of the program. One of the challenges in implementing an immersion program is finding good teachers. Teachers should be trained and experienced in their grade level, have near native proficiency in the oral and written forms of the language, and it is highly desirable that they have knowledge of the culture. Staff displacement is also

one of the biggest worries that administrators face in beginning a program. One way to avoid this is to convert current staff members into immersion teachers (Met, 1987). In Japanese schools, however, teachers who are able to speak near fluent English are few; therefore, it may be necessary for schools to employ new staff.

### Conclusion

The Japanese Ministry of Education has already taken steps to improve the present system by both increasing listening practice in English classes and increasing the number of foreign assistant English teachers (AET). This has made class time more practical and communicative. It is also to be commended for its decision to implement English classes in elementary schools. This trend has been reflected on national college entrance exams where a greater emphasis is now given to listening portions and creative essay questions, whereas the more traditional pattern of questions required more rote memorization and an almost mathematical understanding of grammatical rules.

Although these improvements are indeed promising, research and practice is showing that greater educational rewards exist for those willing to initiate programs that integrate language and content. As new methods of English language instruction are being considered, this article presents immersion as one possible alternative to the present system. It is hoped that Japan takes full advantage of all that has been learned from successful immersion programs overseas and the remarkable results achieved at Katoh School, the first English immersion program in Japan.

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