

After 30 Years:

The Immersion Experiment Arrives in Japan

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Immersion Defined

With well over 1000 research studies and nearly 30 years of experience, immersion education has been an educational experiment of unusual success and growth and has influenced second language education around the world (Baker, 1993). Many researchers have argued that immersion education presently provides the most effective school-based approach to learning a foreign language (Genesee, 1983; Snow, 1988). Krashen (1989) describes immersion education as "not simply another successful language teaching program—it may be the most successful language teaching program ever recorded in the professional literature. No program has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no program, to my knowledge, has done as well" (p. 57).

The distinguishing feature of immersion is that a majority (50%-100%) of the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of a second language. For example in Canada, an immersion teacher for a class of English-speaking students uses only French (the foreign language) to teach math, science, social studies, art. Language learning is therefore integrated with the academic curriculum of the school. Since the first immersion program in Canada in 1965, immersion education in North America has grown rapidly. According to recent estimates by the Canadian Parents for French and the Center for Applied Linguistics in the U.S.A., there are currently over 292,000 students enrolled in French immersion programs in Canada and approximately 28,000 foreign language immersion students in the U.S.A.

Extensive research has documented the positive effects and benefits of immersion education in North America, and it is not my intention here to review the findings in detail. (Readers interested in a more extensive discussion of the research literature on immersion should refer to: Genesee, 1994, 1987, 1994; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain, 1984; Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Snow, 1986.) Four general findings can, however, be drawn from the research on immersion:

- Students attain high (often near native) proficiency in receptive language skills.
- Students show equal (and sometimes superior) performance to their monolingual peers in measures of subject-content mastery in math, science, and social studies.
- Students in early immersion programs perform as well as or better than their monolingual peers on tests of first-language

achievement.

- Students demonstrate more positive attitudes toward other languages and cultures after being in an immersion program.

General Description of Katoh Immersion Program

The immersion program at Katoh Elementary School started in April, 1992, and is based on the highly successful immersion programs that have been implemented in many schools throughout North America. We are a private Japanese school, accredited by the Monbusho (Japanese Ministry of Education) and the Shizuoka Board of Education. All of our students (with a few exceptions) are Japanese, and nearly all of them started the program with little or no English ability.

The elementary school houses two programs, the traditional or regular school program and the new English immersion program. Students entering the school in first grade may choose either the regular or immersion program. Both programs follow the Monbusho Course Guidelines. The objectives and academic goals of the immersion program are the same as those of the regular program, the main difference, of course, is the language through which instruction occurs. The immersion teachers are teamed with a Japanese teacher and work together in planning lessons and activities for the students. The immersion teachers carry out all the instruction done in English, while the Japanese teacher is responsible for the Japanese part of the curriculum. We are now into our fourth year of the program, and last year we expanded into the kindergarten with an English Immersion Program for the three, four, and five year olds. There are currently approximately 255 students and 10 foreign teachers in the immersion program.

In our program, all content instruction (math, science, social studies, music, art, physical education, and computer) in grades 1-3 is taught in English. *Kokugo* (Japanese reading and language arts) and one period a week each of music and math are done in Japanese. This results in ten 45-minute periods a week conducted in Japanese and the rest (approximately 20 periods) done in English. Therefore, approximately two-thirds of the instructional day is conducted in the students' second language. From grades 4-6 the program becomes 50% English and 50% Japanese. The percent of time in English and Japanese for our school was based upon experience and research from North American immersion pro-

grams. We wanted our students to graduate from the program fully literate in their first language, yet proficient enough in English to conduct their studies in the second language.

Planning and Development: How the Program Got Started

Our inquiry into immersion began in the spring of 1991 when Dr. Katoh, president of Katoh Schools, formed a committee to explore the possibility of establishing a bilingual secondary program. At that time I was not a member of the Katoh School staff, but I was invited to sit in on the committee as an outside consultant to help draw up a blue-print for such a school.

All of us on the committee charged with finding a better way to develop English proficiency turned to immersion as a possible solution. It soon became clear to us, however, that such a program should start in kindergarten or elementary school, because it would give children time to develop the second language skills they would need in high school to deal with the more difficult, abstract concepts in the second language. Our goal from the beginning was to develop a program that would enable students to conduct their academic studies in two languages. It was also believed that if students were strong in two languages, we could offer immersion students classes in a third language in high school. By the summer of 1991, the planning began to shift from a secondary bilingual program to a K-12, early partial immersion program.

It was during this time that intensive research into immersion education began. I was astounded by how much literature there was on immersion. While back in the U.S.A. on vacation, I and John Maher, another member of the committee, visited the Japanese Immersion Program at Richmond Elementary School in Portland, Oregon. By early October, Dr. Katoh had also visited the school, and impressed with what he saw, made the decision to start the elementary immersion program.

Dr. Katoh wanted to start the program as soon as possible, and while many of us advised that the school be given at least a year to plan and prepare for the program, he was eager to start in the spring of the next school year. That left us approximately six months to plan and design a program, present and explain it to other Katoh School teachers and parents, hire immersion teachers, outline a curriculum, and order materials (most of which come from North America and take two or more months to arrive). It was at this time and with great excitement (and not just a little apprehension) that I accepted the position as director of the program.

One of the first things we had to do was explain what we were planning to the teachers already teaching in the elementary school. Understandably, they had questions and concerns about how the program would affect the school as a whole, and how their

roles and responsibilities might change. Much time was spent with teachers, in and outside of school, going over how the program would operate. To this day I continue to be impressed with the professionalism and support of the Japanese staff.

By this time the school had already completed its entrance test for the following year and had accepted 60 students for the first grade beginning in the spring. In late October, we met with these parents and explained the choice before them: enroll their child in the regular program or select the English immersion option. Over the next three months, we held a series of meetings with parents explaining the immersion program to them and sent a small group of parents and teachers to visit some of the Japanese immersion programs in the States at our school's expense. Most were generally very impressed with what they saw in America. The parents and teachers reported their impressions and observations to the entire group upon their return to Japan. In the end, approximately half of these parents chose the immersion option.

Constraints and Recommendations

There were many challenges in starting an immersion school, some of which I have already mentioned. The first is overcoming the teachers' and administrators' misunderstanding and skepticism of this type of program. Immersion is virtually unknown to Japanese educators. Getting someone high enough in the educational bureaucracy willing to commit significant resources to starting an immersion program is a formidable task.

Second, the Japanese Ministry of Education requires that teachers have a Japanese teaching license. This requirement alone could eliminate this type of program. Teacher certification is not an uncommon problem in the U.S.A., but many states have provided foreign immersion teachers with provisional teaching certificates, thus allowing them to be fully licensed teachers in their schools. I hope that the Ministry of Education will someday take similar action, but until then, we have come up with a way around this restriction by defining the immersion teachers as assistant English teachers and assigning one Japanese teacher as the head teacher for both classes.

The Japanese curriculum and school year are also unique challenges. The students are expected to cover a great deal of information, and the heavy emphasis on passing entrance tests puts enormous pressure on teachers and students learning through a second language. It is challenging enough preparing for these tests in their first language. It is also true that *juku*-type cramming for entrance tests would not be particularly appropriate for an immersion program, as it relies so much on decontextualized lectures and rote memorization. The 5-1/2 day school week and the 240 day school year are also not easy adjustments for foreign teachers.

Finding well-suited teachers for the program is another a difficult task. When starting the program, I sought teachers with elementary classroom teaching experience, some language teaching background (ideally a masters in TESOL), and at least intermediate level proficiency in Japanese. I have since also learned that, above all else, a positive, flexible personality is critical for the teachers successful adjustment to working within a Japanese school.

There were a number of positive things going for us that helped to make the implementation of this program successful. Other schools considering starting an immersion program would be well advised to keep some of these points in mind. First, the school already had in place an educational philosophy that encouraged more experiential-based, child-centered learning as opposed to the more traditional teacher-fronted, "chalk and talk" style common in most public schools. This philosophy more closely matched foreign teachers' teaching style and was a more appropriate ground in which to plant the immersion seed.

Additionally, we had a talented and supportive school principal. This is extremely important for the success of an immersion program. So many decisions must go through the principal that the program could be killed before it ever got started without someone who understands and strongly supports immersion.

The school was also willing to commit financial resources to establish the program and to maintain a class size of approximately 20 per class. Immersion would be next to impossible with class sizes of 35 or 40 students—typical of most public school classrooms in Japan. There are fairly substantial start-up costs, but within two or three years, the school should be able to recover most of these expenses.

The dual-track nature of the school was and is both its strength and weakness. Because the school houses two programs, there are competing priorities and agendas. A school that was dedicated only to immersion would create a clearer message to the students of the importance of English and would enable the school to provide a more focused English environment. This would have positive effects on the students second language development and make the administration of such a program much easier.

At the same time, the immersion program definitely benefits from being paired with a strong regular program. However, overall, having one program in one building would enable parents, students, and teachers to focus on the same outcomes and not worry about what the other side was doing.

The Results So Far

Students in the immersion program were given the same achievement tests as the students in the regular program. In first and second grade, these tests are comprised of math and *kokugo* (Japanese). Third grade includes math, *kokugo*, and science. These were the same standardized tests that other schools in the prefecture used to evaluate students academic achievement. It should also be noted that the tests were administered in Japanese, despite the fact that for the immersion students, most of the math and science instruction was done in English and that they spent much less of their instructional day in Japanese. Statistical analysis of the scores revealed no difference in math, *kokugo*, or science achievement between the regular and immersion students at all three grade levels. These results are consistent with general findings in North America and our own earlier study (Bostwick, in press). The tests clearly indicated that the students academic achievement was in no way impaired by having the instruction done in English. In fact, on the standardized achievement tests administered, both groups are performing well above the national average.

The English proficiency was also impressive. A battery of English tests were given to all the students in the program. I shall report here only the results of the *Monbusho Nintei Ei-ken* (STEP) test given to the students in the elementary program. The *Ei-ken* is one of the most widely used English tests in Japan. Below is the percent of students passing at each level.

Obviously, we are encouraged by the results so far, but also realize that we still have a long road ahead of us. Until our first group of students graduates from our elementary program and heads to junior high, we will not know just how successful we have been. At the same time, parents, staff, and students have been clearly pleased with the program.

Table 1: Results on *Ei-ken* Test for Immersion Students at Katoh Elementary School.

Katoh School	Test level & % of students passing test	Grade level test is normally used in Japan.
First Grade:	Jido <i>Ei-ken</i> (level 1) = 100% passing	late elementary school
Second Grade:	<i>Ei-ken</i> (level 5) = 88% passing	junior high
Third Grade:	<i>Ei-ken</i> (level 3) = 67% passing	junior high graduate

Conclusion

Based on our experience, I believe that immersion is a viable option for other schools seeking to improve second language proficiency for their students. The greatest challenge for those seeking to start a program is simply getting inside the door. Unfortunately, although the Japanese Ministry of Education is aware of immersion in North America and has even visited some of the programs there, no one is actively promoting it here in Japan.

In North America, immersion is found predominately in public schools with typical class sizes of 22 to 28 students. I am convinced that immersion education will eventually develop strong roots in Japan as well, but it will be the private schools that will be in the best position to introduce it to Japan. Immersion is not likely to find a comfortable home in the public schools with their large class sizes and the more textbook-oriented, entrance-test driven curriculum. The smaller class sizes and more child-centered philosophy of education at Katoh Schools made it an ideal place to start an immersion program. In my mind, however, immersion is ideally suited to address some of the most often mentioned shortcomings of public Japanese education.

- Inability to develop communicative English proficiency in students
- Too textbook-oriented, with excessive memorization of low-level knowledge
- Too little time spent on developing higher-level thinking skills and creativity
- The need to develop greater openness to diversity and other cultures/people

For those schools seriously seeking to address these problems, immersion education is aptly suited to facilitate change in this direction.

In any case, I believe that immersion is on its way

to Japan and that by the twenty-first century other schools will be turning toward this form of education to meet the needs of students in the coming global era. Japan has struggled with English education and internationalization for many years, and these issues continue to be at the center of most discussions on Japanese educational reform. However, should these early experiments in immersion succeed, immersion education will be ideally suited to assist Japan in making this exciting transition into the global community of the twenty-first century.

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