

THE APPLICATION OF IMMERSION EDUCATION IN JAPAN: RESULTS, CHALLENGES, AND POSSIBILITIES

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In defining and conducting an immersion program, it is important to be clear about what is possible, and it is necessary to choose one's position along a very important continuum. In these remarks, I will briefly describe the possibilities, and then explain the implementation of English immersion at Katoh Gakuen. I will end with some conclusions for English education in Japan.

Content-Based Foreign-Language Instruction

I define *content-based foreign-language instruction* as the integration of content learning with language-teaching aims.

Continuum.

Content-based (Content-driven) -----> Content-related (Language driven)

Content-based programs are responsible for teaching the academic curriculum through the medium of a foreign language.

Content-related programs use the concepts from the academic curriculum to ENRICH the foreign-language program.

In a strong content-based program, the curriculum of the program is based on the academic objectives of the school. The teachers are responsible for teaching content and the students are tested on the content. Because they are concentrating on the content, students are immersed in the language so deeply that they pick up the language by the way. The content of the academic program is the initial focus, and it is where one usually begins planning a content-based program. Thus, common aspects of a content-based foreign-language program include the following:

- The organizing principle of the curriculum is the subject matter.
- Authentic texts and materials are employed. No "let's pretend" materials for the purpose of language learning.

- The new material is learned through the medium of the foreign language.
- The content must match the students' interests and cognitive level.

Having noted these aspects of content-based instruction, I should point out that I have said very little that limits the design of a content-based language program. I have described only the immediacy and potential value of content presented in a foreign language. The main point of content-based instruction, then, is that it can apply to a wide range of teaching situations. Most of you attending this symposium should be able to find yourselves somewhere on the continuum from content-based to content-related instruction.

History and Background of Immersion

The practice of immersion language learning is much older than the title, "immersion." The title itself seems to have resulted from a desire to contrast it with an abstract and intellectualized style of language learning that arose with the formalization of education. Let me explain a little more about the modern use of the term "immersion."

Definition of immersion. The intent of immersion programs is to develop bilingualism and biliteracy in majority-language students. The distinguishing feature of immersion is that most (50% to 100%) of a regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of a foreign language. In an immersion program, the foreign language is not the subject of instruction; rather, it is the medium through which most of the school's academic content is taught. Immersion represents the most intense form of content-based foreign-language instruction.

Models of immersion. There are several forms of immersion, of which the most common are early immersion and early partial immersion. Early immersion begins in either kindergarten or the first grade of elementary school and (often, but not always) continues in some form through high school. In early total immersion, 100% of classroom instruction is conducted in the foreign language during the first two or three years, gradually dropping to 40% to 50% during junior high school. In total immersion, the standard school curriculum (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, etc.) is taught completely in the second language in the primary grades, with students receiving reading and writing instruction in the second language before receiving such instruction in

their first language. First-language literacy instruction does not typically begin until second or third grade in early immersion programs.

A second common form of immersion is early partial immersion, in which approximately 50% of instruction is in the target language and 50% in the first language. These programs also usually start in kindergarten or first grade, and the proportion of immersion is usually maintained throughout elementary school. In partial immersion programs, reading and writing skills in the second language are often introduced after reading and writing skills in the child's first language. The local school makes the choice of which actual subjects are taught in the second language and which in the first.

Variations on the common models of immersion differ along two continua: (1) the age or grade level at which the program begins, and (2) the percentage of time the second language is used in the school.

Total immersion	Early
Partial immersion	Delayed (middle)
	Late

Where does the Katoh immersion program fit in these models?

The Katoh school program is a hybrid partial immersion program. We wanted to maximize English language learning in the early grades in order to allow students to prepare for the increasingly difficult Japanese curriculum in the upper elementary grades. We also wanted students to become fully proficient in their native Japanese, and therefore we conducted the same number of Japanese (*kokugo*) lessons as the students in the regular program received.

Growth of immersion. 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 300,000 students enrolled in French immersion programs in Canada and approximately 33,000 foreign language immersion students in the U.S.A. Forms of immersion education can now be found in all parts of the world.

Description of the Katoh Gakuen Immersion Program

I would like to give you an idea of the form and feeling of the Katoh Gakuen immersion program. In this account I will concentrate on the environment of the program, the decisions that were made and the way the program developed under the resulting conditions.

Number of students in the program. The immersion program at Katoh Gakuen began in 1992 with 28 students in the first-grade class. We now have approximately 340 students, from kindergarten through grade 6, in the immersion program. We do not seem to have attrition, except for a few students whose families have been assigned overseas. Rather, our grade cohorts tend to increase in size because we do add a few children who move into the area and who fit into the ability levels of their age groups.

Partial immersion: 1/2 to 2/3 of instruction is done in English. We are a partial immersion program. At the kindergarten level, approximately half of the students' time at school is conducted in English. In grades one through three, the students spend about 2/3 of their day in English. In grades four through six, about half the school day is in English.

Subjects taught in English. At the kindergarten level, thematic units are designed by the teachers around the events and curriculum objectives of the kindergarten program. In grades one through three, all academic areas except Japanese language arts (*Kokugo*) and some music in grade three, are taught through the medium of English. From grades four through six, *Kokugo*, Social Studies, Art, and Music are taught in Japanese, and Science, Math, Physical Education, and Computers are taught in English. In grades four through six, we also try to incorporate Social Studies units into the English side of the program when possible. When the units are related to the study of the prefecture of Japanese history, we do the lessons in Japanese. But when the unit has an "international" character, we try to do the lessons in English (examples are Southeast Asia Geography in grade four, International Shipping and Trade in grade five, and the study of China and Australia in grade six).

How Do Students Learn Technical Vocabulary in Japanese? We expect all students to know the mathematical, scientific, and technical vocabulary of the curriculum in Japanese. After the concepts of a unit have been introduced in English, the Japanese teacher will often teach the students the Japanese equivalents for the English technical vocabulary. This is necessary because the students must take their academic

achievement tests in Japanese. Technical vocabulary is usually taught during part of the students' *Kokugo* class time. As you can imagine, lining up vocabulary in two languages requires considerable coordination among teachers. This is made easier by close working relationships between teachers who teach in Japanese and those who teach in English.

Dual Track School. Katoh Gakuen Elementary School has two programs within one building: the regular (general) course, and the immersion course. Before the first grade, it is up to parents to choose which program they want for children who have been accepted by the school. There is no special English entrance test for the immersion program; we expect that students will begin the program with little or no English skill. Although there are two programs, the school conducts many school events jointly, so that students in both programs have regular opportunities to play and study together. We try to minimize comparisons of the programs, and emphasize that all students are Katoh Gakuen students, rather than regular or immersion students. An effect is that all students interact with each other mostly in colloquial Japanese--but that all students have at least a basic vocabulary of practical English.

Curriculum. We follow the Japanese Ministry of Education guidelines and mirror the curriculum of the regular Japanese program. There may be some differences in the presentation of the materials, but the curriculum objectives are the same. One difference in the programs is the emphasis of the immersion program on thematic units of study in grades one and two (see the example in the parent handbook). For almost all the materials, students use the same textbooks--but for immersion classes, some of the textbooks are translated into English. For example, the math and science textbooks for grades three through six have been translated into English. Standardized tests, however, are all in Japanese. Immersion students take the same tests as the students in the regular program.

Other Features of the Immersion Program at Katoh School. Some principles help to make school life comprehensible for both students and teachers:

- Immersion and Japanese classrooms are kept separate and distinct. Language territories are established, and children change classrooms for the English and Japanese parts of the day.
- There is an explicit rule for students to use only English in immersion classrooms and with immersion teachers.

- Immersion teachers use only English with the students.
- Content is never re-taught in the students' first language.

Program Goals. Because an elementary school program affects many aspects of students' lives, our goals necessarily address the most important aspects. Our goals are to help students:

1. To be able to communicate in English with native-English-speaking peers, and to function within an English-language academic environment.
2. To maintain normal Japanese-language progress.
3. To master subject content at the appropriate grade level.
4. To acquire an understanding and appreciation of another language and culture while maintaining their own Japanese identity.

Means of Organizing and Planning Instruction. See example in the Parent Handbook.

Junior and Senior High School Immersion. The immersion program will continue into junior and senior high schools. The basic course will start with a "re-immersion" of students in English for one year (grade 7) and then, as students draw nearer to Japanese university entrance examinations, each year will step down English and step up Japanese as the medium of instruction. The junior high school program will continue to follow the Gyoshu Junior High School curriculum, but will incorporate the Middle Years Program, an internationally recognized curriculum for grades 6 through 10. For students hoping to go to overseas universities, we plan to offer the International Baccalaureate Course at the high school level.

How Did Katoh Gakuen Become the First Elementary Immersion Program in Japan? The program came about because of Dr. Katoh's conviction that it would be worthwhile to design an innovative form of education to prepare students for the next century. We were successful in introducing immersion at Katoh Elementary School because the educational philosophy at the school is (1) favorable to innovation, (2) child-centered and activity-based, and (3) insistent on small classes (20 to 25 students per class).

Results (End of Grade 5)

Math Achievement--National and Prefectural Tests. Average scores for students in both the regular and the immersion programs are well above national and prefectural averages. Statistical analysis of prefectural and national test results indicates no difference between the math achievement levels of regular and immersion students.

Japanese Language Development--National and Prefectural Tests. Average scores for students in both the regular and immersion programs are well above national and prefectural averages. Statistical analysis of prefectural and national test results indicates no difference between the Japanese language levels of regular and immersion students.

English. During Grade 6, 31 of 33 students took the *Eiken* test of English (the standard test of English language ability in Japan. 100% of the students passed level 3. Over 50% passed level pre-2. 10% passed level 2. These scores on the *Eiken* test would be typical of Japanese high school graduates, who study English for 6 years in junior high and high school.

In comparison with native English speakers, however, our students' English skills lag behind. Our ITBS scores at grade 5 show vocabulary development and reading ability at approximately the grade 3 level for native speakers in the U.S.A.

Challenges and Possibilities

There are many challenges involved in putting together an English immersion program in Japan. Three of the most important challenges are:

- 1) Finding trained and experienced elementary school teachers willing to come to Japan, and able to adapt to working in a Japanese school.
- 2) The lack of similarities between English and Japanese languages and habits of thought. This lack of common elements makes the learning of English more challenging for students than in programs where the languages share many cognates and have a similar writing system (e.g., French and Spanish immersion programs in North America).

3) Teaching the Japanese curriculum, which is difficult and fast-paced. Foreign teachers are unfamiliar with the Japanese curriculum and all the events and responsibilities that Japanese teachers take for granted.

But, of all the challenges we face in creating this program, perhaps none are more difficult to overcome than some of the common misconceptions about immersion and bilingualism that people often harbor. I want to discuss two of those misconceptions with you.

Two Common Misconceptions about Language Learning

- 1) "In order to accommodate a second language (i.e., English) in a child's limited language-learning capacity, the child's first-language development (i.e., Japanese) is necessarily diminished."
- 2) "If you learn through a second or foreign language (i.e., English), you will not be able to reach the level of academic achievement that you would reach in your first language alone."

The implication of both of these misconceptions is that it would be important not to begin learning a second language before the first language is well established. This is the folk concept (found only in monolingual cultures) that the brain has a limited capacity--if it is filled with one thing, there is no room for anything else. The consequence of this false belief for language learning is that too much learning of a second language may not only interfere with full development of the first language, but may also have adverse effects on cognitive development and academic achievement.

The truth is that language learning is much more complex than the folk concept would allow. More than half the children in the world grow up speaking two or more languages. No limit has been found on the ability of children to learn languages, nor has any limit been found on cognitive capacity as a result of learning multiple languages.

The performance of students in our immersion program helps refute misconceptions about language learning, and offer insights into the possibilities for foreign language education in Japan. At all grade levels, our students demonstrate normal Japanese-language development and normal academic development, while simultaneously acquiring a high level of English ability.

The notion that bilingualism is somehow harmful is insular, and has the effect of restricting future prospects for Japan's efforts to encourage foreign language skills and global effectiveness. It is my hope that the presenters in this symposium will help us better understand the processes involved in producing "additive" bilinguals (that is, bilinguals who lose nothing and only gain something). Our experience suggest that immersion can be a viable option for schools in Japan that seek to improve students' communicative proficiency in English, promote greater creativity and flexibility of thinking, and develop greater openness to diversity and to other cultures and peoples.

It is also true that immersion is only one of many ways in which we can improve the levels of bilingualism and international understanding of children in Japan. The presentations of today and tomorrow will offer a number of means of implementation, all of which have this common thread: they are all part of a movement to help Japan proceed in the direction of greater bilingualism and globalization. We know that we have not exhausted the possibilities. We have, however, demonstrated some things that are possible. Those people whose experiences and convictions allow them to know what is impossible are invited to profit from our examples.