

English immersion and the Japanese mind

One hears an occasional rumor that English language dilutes the purity of Japanese students' minds and crowds the Japanese language out of its rightful place. The best way to counter a rumor is to provide information. In this case the best information will come from the most intense English studies we can find: immersion programs in which Japanese children learn English because it is the language of instruction in school.

The idea of education through language immersion began almost 40 years ago in Canada. Educators had noticed that children do not think it strange if people in school speak differently from people at home, so some schools began to teach children of English speakers entirely in French.

Before the first immersion programs showed their success, there were various worries and prejudices. Many people thought that bilingual people can never learn two languages as well as monolinguals can learn one. Some believed that bilingualism reduces intelligence. Research into the effects of immersion programs has shown that the opposite is true in both cases.

We must answer three questions about English immersion. First, does success in English detract from success in Japanese? Second, does early learning of English confuse Japanese minds (for instance, does it lower intelligence)? Third, does English immersion weaken the student's Japanese identity?

Immersion at Katoh Gakuen

I have been privileged to see immersion in action because I work in the Katoh Gakuen school system, home of the first and most successful English immersion program in Japan.

Katoh began its immersion program in Numazu in 1992 with a first-grade class. The program has grown one year per year, and now the first class is completing the third year of junior high school. Along the way, Katoh added kindergarten immersion and gained International Baccalaureate

status for its junior high program.

Katoh immersion classes follow the Education Ministry's prescribed content, the only difference being language. At first, English is not taught as an academic subject. It is simply spoken (and later written) during classes such as math, science, computers, PE, music, and art. Some subjects, such as Japanese language and some areas of social studies, are naturally taught in Japanese. As these increase in number, the use of English declines from about 65% of classes in the first grade to about 40% in junior high. The high school program, which is designed to conform to International Baccalaureate standards, will be about 80% English.

Standard tests are given in Japanese. An interesting discovery is that immersion students are able to express their knowledge in either English or Japanese, as long as they know the words. Therefore, during Japanese language arts class, they learn Japanese words for necessary concepts (such as "triangle" and "animal kingdom") that they have learned in English.

Katoh Gakuen is in a good position to gauge the effects of immersion because it has comparable groups of students in a regular Japanese program and in the immersion program. A great deal of public information about the immersion program is available. The program director, R. Michael Bostwick, has written several articles and a doctoral dissertation about it, and the school has held two symposia and many special sessions.

Both regular and immersion students at Katoh surpass the prefectural average in annual tests of Japanese and math (you would expect this in a learning-oriented private school). As the years go by, it is clear also that scores of immersion students do not suffer in comparison to the regular students — average scores are consistently the same or, for Japanese, even a little higher than those of regular students. In addition, of course, immersion students have English. As junior high school students, their TOEFL scores are in the middle 400's.

Why doesn't Japanese language ability suffer from the presence of English? The answer is that languages do not work like balloons in an

enclosed space where if one gets larger the other must get smaller. Instead, people's minds produce patterns of responses to fit situations, and there is no obvious limit to the number of patterns and situations in a person's repertoire.

Neurologist Wilder Penfield wrote in 1965 that his children accepted their French immersion school as a simple fact. Walking in the door of the school was like turning a switch in their heads, and they commenced immediately to speak French. He called the switch a "conditioned reflex" that allows "freedom from confusion." In recent years, the switch metaphor has come to seem a bit mechanistic, but the principle that the brain can change rapidly from one linguistic mental state to another remains sound.

Intelligence

In studies of immersion there is a tendency to show a gain in cognitive functioning on the part of immersion students. This is true also of the immersion students in the Katoh program. Measures of general intelligence are always subject to criticisms of their methods, but the consistency of reports of gains in many immersion programs and with many different measures of intelligence is a strong indication that something good happens in the minds of immersion students.

Several writers have suggested that bilingualism heightens "metalinguistic awareness," meaning that bilinguals think about language more than their monolingual friends do. I suspect that the "meta" awareness extends to more than language. Bilingual students have at their command two slightly different ways of perceiving the world. An American visitor likened their experience to stereoscopic vision that lends a special depth and richness to their perceptions. That seems a good metaphor for describing heightened mental flexibility and creativity.

Having two languages apparently helps in learning a third language. There are frequent anecdotal reports of this effect, and also a few confirming parametric studies, but I have seen no adequate description of the mental processes underlying it.

Japaneseness

Some parents and educators fear that knowing the English language too well could destroy the Japaneseness of Japanese youth. An extensive study of this issue by Simon Downes of Tsukuba University found that Katoh immersion students have a stronger identity with Japan than their non-immersion counterparts at comparable all-Japanese schools. Immersion students also develop a greater understanding of English-speaking cultures, but this greater understanding is in addition to, not at the expense of, their own culture, and demonstrates what Downes calls their “flexibility in thinking.”

A Japanese friend of mine who is fluent in English said the reason for increased Japanese identity should be obvious. Just as you never really know the grammar of your own language until you study another language, she said, an intimate knowledge of a foreign culture is likely to heighten your appreciation of Japanese culture. “And anyway,” she added, “I don’t trust people who think Japanese identity is so weak that it can be easily displaced.”

I hope that these observations about immersion programs can help reduce fears about the effects of English on Japanese minds. Rather than confusing students’ minds, bilingualism seems to make Japanese students better people: it sharpens up their academic achievement, their cognitive skills, and their Japanese identity.

This series of columns is an attempt to reconcile language teachers, theorists, and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send letters to The Daily Yomiuri or e-mail to mrchilds@tokai.or.jp

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