

A case of preschool English immersion

It's all done with hats. Here are scores of uniformed Kindergartners running around, some in the English immersion program, some in the regular Japanese program, and all further subdivided into particular classes. At first glance, I wondered how anybody knows which kids are getting which treatment. I soon learned: students wear hats of different colors and the hats indicate program, grade and section. A color-blind teacher could not work here.

"Here" is the Katoh Gakuen Kindergarten in Numazu, Shizuoka Prefecture. Here is where 3-year-olds can begin their lifelong experience of English. Here is where 5-year-olds can converse with you in natural English. Here is one of the most effective pre-school English immersion programs you will find.

The Kindergarten English immersion program began in 1994, two years after the elementary school immersion program. I reported on the first high-school graduates of that program in an April 23, 2004, column, "First immersion students graduate."

My hosts at the Kindergarten were Dr. R. Michael Bostwick, director of the Katoh bilingual programs, and Geoff Parmenter and Mari Nakagawa, co-coordinators of the Kindergarten immersion program. They explained that, at each of the three grade levels in the Kindergarten, there are two immersion classes, each presided over by a team consisting of one native English speaker and one native Japanese speaker. The Japanese teachers are bilingual in Japanese and English.

Bostwick said that in a Kindergarten immersion program, the first language is not in jeopardy. Educationally speaking, 100% English immersion would not in any way damage the Japanese-language development of 3-year-olds. The Japanese identity of Kindergarten students is also firmly fixed. In this program, however, about half of each

student's day is conducted in English, and the other half in Japanese.

In rooms used for English-speaking classes, teachers speak only English. Children hardly notice what language they are speaking, it just seeps in naturally.

Activities are what you would expect in any Kindergarten. There are songs, games, storytelling, and of course much work with paper and crayons, as well as plenty of playground time. I watched with interest as a large group of 4-year-olds worked on their hula hoop technique.

Not all of the activities take place on the school grounds. There are frequent field trips. The big calendar in the teachers' room listed: Sweet Potato Digging K1, Recycling center K3, Fire Station K2, K3 Summer Camp (2 days, 1 nights), River Play K2, Fuji Safari Park K2, Gekko Observatory K3, Pottery Class K2, Flower Shop K2, and so on.

English and global-consciousness

A strong element of international awareness is noticeable. Some students are at least partly non-Japanese. Foreign countries figure prominently in the activities. In some classes, student teams take the names of countries. In one class of 5-year-olds, for example, team names were drawn from all over the world: U.S.A., Brazil, Greece, Panama and Fiji.

Students grow used to overseas trips. The Kindergarten organizes a 10-day homestay each year with Kardinia International College in Australia. Some of the students go on half-year homestays in English-speaking countries.

When I visited, the weather was pleasant and the sliding doors were open. A sparrow walked into a classroom for 5-year-olds and began searching for crumbs. "Oh," said the teacher. "Here is our friendly bird. See the bird?" Most students watched the bird, and no one made any frightening gestures. The teacher said, "Tell him, 'Don't poop! Don't poop in our classroom!'" Some students did not react, but others looked at the bird with new interest. A few murmured, "Don't poop, bird."

In another class, I knelt by a 3-year-old to see what she was doing. Using crayons, she was

coloring between the lines of a picture with English labels "car" and "cat." "Oh," I said, "a pink car. And what color is good for the cat?"

"Pink," she said.

"Do you like pink?"

"Yes. I . . . pink." And she began work on pinking the cat.

This child, I reflected, had begun hearing English only six months ago, but she understood a stranger perfectly and spoke English calmly while concentrating on her art. Her mastery included returning the pronoun "I" for "you" (not common at this age in Japanese) and creating the form of an English sentence, although she got stuck on the verb "like. Not quite able to plug it in on the spur of the moment, she left it out, but checked my face to make sure I understood.

Before enrolling their children in an English immersion Kindergarten, parents have to know what they can expect from the program. Katoh Kindergarten makes it clear that, like every Kindergarten, the most important goals are the emotional, social, physical and cognitive development of children.

Parmenter pointed out that an additional goal is for children to accomplish this development in two languages as well as they could do it in one. Nakagawa added that yet another goal is for children to understand and accept unique cultural differences.

I pressed Parmenter and Nakagawa to generalize about the average skill of Kindergarten graduates. They politely refused. They said Kindergarten is to build receptive skills. Everyone develops basic abilities to express needs and wants in English as well as Japanese. Everyone knows how to ask properly to do something in the classroom and, for that matter, to go to the toilet. English goals include such productions such as "I live in. . .," "Is this yours?" "My . . . hurts," "What day is it today," and forms of adjectives such as "small", "smaller" and "smallest."

When they graduate from Kindergarten, some learners' development is limited to the above skills, although, as Parmenter cautioned, "you never know

what amazing changes one month will bring.”

Between 30% and 40% of the students are “excellent language learners,” Parmenter said. “All of our children’s receptive skills are fantastic, but also their productive skills are gratifying. They can have a relaxed, ordinary conversation with a native speaker.” Waving his arm, he continued, “They are using language — you know — they are just throwing it around.”

This column aims to harmonize views of language teachers, theorists, parents and bureaucrats. Send e-mail to childs@tuj.ac.jp. The column will return on November 12.

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