

Recipe for success with English immersion

Last month (Dec. 4), I described barriers to English immersion programs in Japan. I said that to succeed at immersion you need the means and will to overcome the barriers. Let me explain in more detail what it takes. In this column again, I am copying ideas from Dr. R. Michael Bostwick, Bilingual Program Director at Katoh Gakuen, and, again, I am doing it on my own responsibility.

I assume that the reader understands the basic principles of immersion. People learn a language most easily when they are using it to communicate about meaningful things. In a school, if children study a significant part of the curriculum through the medium of a foreign language, they will develop fluency in that language with relatively little concentration on the language itself as subject matter. As I wrote previously, immersion does not damage children's learning of school subjects such as math, and seems actually to improve their sense of Japanese identity, performance on tests of Japanese language and general intelligence.

Before beginning an immersion program, make sure your executives and administrators strongly support this innovation even if it threatens their egos. Then make sure you will have the resources for an adventure that is significantly more expensive than a traditional school program. Still with me? OK, here is the recipe. To be successful, an English immersion program must have the proper ingredients (students and teachers) and the proper treatment of them (management and process).

Students and teachers

First, take any Japanese children who are beginning school and enroll them in an English immersion program. The beginning age should be kindergarten or the first grade. At those young ages, children learn quickly and do not think it strange to learn two ways of communicating. Later, children develop a sense of the structure of the universe and of their place in it — and in Japan this image of reality usually specifies that English is a foreign intellectual game, too difficult to learn.

After last month's column, I heard from a thoughtful

high school teacher in Akita Prefecture. He wrote that many of his students would not benefit from immersion because they do not like English. Being Japanese, they say, they will never need to learn English. This is a familiar sad story of students who have failed at English-as-an-intellectual-puzzle and have built their psychological defenses against the failure. Because such disaffection is widespread, I agree that students should not be plunged willy-nilly into “late immersion” (beginning during middle or high school). Late immersion can work — but only for very highly motivated students.

The second ingredient for successful immersion is native English-speaking teachers. Call them assistant teachers because they cannot pass the Japanese teacher certification test. They must be good teachers, fully certified in their home countries and experienced at teaching their subjects to the age group they will be teaching in Japan. They must be flexible: willing to go to an unfamiliar country and function normally while feeling disoriented.

Devote enormous energy and ingenuity to finding good teachers. Give the immersion teachers a rate of pay consistent with their training and experience (not the pay of a beginning teacher in your system). Provide all kinds of psychological and practical support to keep them, because the job of teaching in a Japanese school system is different from what they know. It is in many ways more demanding, more time-consuming, and more frustrating than anything a foreign teacher can imagine before experiencing it.

Management and process

Having assembled the ingredients — students and teachers — you must now mix and serve. Running an immersion program is like staging an opera: it is a complex process of interrelated professional activities, any of which can go wrong at any minute. There are many activities, but I will discuss only designing and following a syllabus, communicating, translating textbooks, testing, and general management.

Whether you are following the Education Ministry curriculum or another curriculum, you must follow a double script, simultaneously unfolding the subject matter and the using gradually more complex language. It takes careful planning and many meetings with teachers to make sure these twin scripts are going right.

English should be a natural and incidental thing, not generally the object of attention. Of course the program syllabus has the hidden agenda of requiring increasingly complex language as the students progress. This is, after all, a school, and even schools for native English speakers must offer formal instruction in the language.

As Bostwick put it, "the best immersion programs find ways to get students to attend to particular aspects (forms) or uses (functions) of the language as well as providing activities that demand longer, more complex and coherent language. So there is an important role for 'focus on form' within a meaningful authentic context of language immersion." Of the 30 weekly periods in Bostwick's immersion elementary school, about 20 periods are taught in English, and 2 or 3 are devoted specifically to "English language arts."

In an immersion program, communicating is very important and very difficult. Japanese and English teachers must work as a team even if they do not have good command of each other's languages. You must make a special effort to help them communicate every detail and every purpose to each other. Native English speakers must also communicate well with parents and other staff members. Translation is often necessary for staff meetings, parent-teacher conferences, school handbooks, memos, and the like.

Translating textbooks is a story all by itself. If you are going to follow the Education Ministry curriculum, you must (with the publisher's permission) make a page-for-page translation of every text. Making, verifying, and reproducing translations is a major task, and it is never finished because textbooks keep changing. Translation cannot simply be hired out because the translators must understand the vocabulary and complexity specified in the syllabus in each grade.

Testing is important both to measure average progress and to demonstrate to parents and the public that students are living up to expectations. Develop a careful testing plan for each grade level. Good (norm-referenced valid and reliable) tests are hard to find. For example, at the end of middle school, most of your immersion students will pass Eiken level 2. But what does this mean? Validity and reliability estimates are not disclosed for this test and, because it is written for beginning college students, many of the concepts are beyond the experience of middle school students even though the language is not. How much better would the students do if the

concepts were at their level? You don't know these things, so you need to supplement popular tests with tests in which you have confidence.

Your immersion program cannot survive without an excellent director. Bostwick wrote that the director functions as (among other things) key designer of the curriculum, overseer of all translation and interpretation, recruiter of teachers, head liaison with parents, chief counselor of the staff (both foreign and Japanese), chief advocate for foreign staff, substitute teacher, chief publicist, program evaluator, negotiator, arbitrator, and cheerleader. The director must possess wisdom, persistence, and patience.

Patience, above all. If the director shows anger or frustration, your immersion program may fall prey to those who are waiting to kill it. I have watched Bostwick sit calmly through willful stupidity or downright hostility that would bring most of us out of our chairs in fighting posture. His mild comment was "Patience enables the administrator to gain understanding and support when a display of anger might be satisfying in the short run, but destructive in building long-term working relationships."

Bostwick says modestly that he thinks the importance of the director's job is third, behind top management and teachers. I suppose it is senseless to argue which position is more important than the others. For the immersion recipe to be successful, all who work on it must be very, very good and must work together very well.

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). The column will return on February 12.

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