

First immersion students graduate

On a cold November afternoon in 1991, there was a surprise announcement for parents of 60 children who had been accepted into the first grade of Katoh Gakuen's Elementary School Numazu, Shizuoka Prefecture. Katoh would begin an English-language immersion program with the start of the school year in April, 1992. Parents could choose to put their children through either the English immersion program or the original Japanese program for which they had been accepted.

"English immersion" meant students would learn in English the content of Ministry-approved classes, but their education in Japanese would not be slighted. The immersion program director would be Michael Bostwick, who had never run an immersion program before. Bostwick held an MA degree in educational psychology, but at that time had not yet earned a doctoral degree.

Parents were asked to make a decision that would profoundly affect their children's lives. Based on trust and hope, 29 parents entered their children in the immersion program.

In March, 2004, the pioneer class of immersion students graduated from high school and began to finalize their plans for college. Of the 17 graduates, eight will attend Japanese universities and nine will attend American universities. Not just any universities, either. In Japan, four students were accepted at Aoyama Gakuin (in a total of 7 departments), one at Keio, one at Waseda and one at Utsunomiya. Other accepting universities in Japan include Chuo, Dokkyo, Hosei, International Christian University, Kogakkan, Musashi Kogyo, Nihon University, Ritsumeikan, Shibaura and Tokai.

As of this writing, acceptances and scholarships are still rolling in from America, but so far the 9 students who applied have been accepted at some 28 universities including Harvard and Yale, and also Bowling Green University, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, Harvey Mudd University, Michigan State, Oklahoma State, Texas Christian University and University of Georgia.

Many of the immersion students have been accepted at more than one university and now are making their

choices based on academic programs and other considerations, especially scholarships.

I was a member of the college division of Katoh Gakuen for nine years until this year. Although I did not work in the immersion program, I often heard about its exploits. Last week I interviewed Bostwick and John J. Maher, who has served as adviser to the program from its beginning.

Entering Japanese universities

Bostwick and his staff assumed that the students' selling point for Japanese universities would be that they had completed the world-renowned International Baccalaureate (IB) program in English. IB high school requirements include a 4,000 word graduation report, 150 hours of extra-curricular activities including community service, and three courses at college level (the immersion students took Chinese and scored above average on the IB test).

The strategy, then, was to apply to Japanese universities through the Admissions Office (AO) process. Ruefully, Bostwick discovered that the AO labyrinth is much more complicated — and much less receptive to new academic programs — than he had thought. In the end, no student was accepted through AO.

When the AO disaster became clear, only a few weeks remained before the national test for university admission on January 17 and 18. Immersion students did not have the advantage of the two- or three-year exam prep course that their fellow (non-immersion) students did. But bilingualism seems to bring with it increased intellectual power. To the surprise of everyone except perhaps themselves, the immersion students, using their general knowledge, did very well. Most students scored 70 percent or higher on the Center Exam, well enough to take and pass exams for universities such as Waseda and Keio that had rejected them as AO applicants.

Many students are entering programs with “international” in their titles, ranging from international politics to international environment. In their graduation speeches, these students made it clear in Japanese and English that they want to be a part of Japan's taking greater responsibility for the world we live in.

I have written previously that one effect of the English immersion program has been to heighten the students' sense of Japanese identity and appreciation of Japanese culture. This observation is perhaps borne out by the fact that two students have chosen university programs that are uniquely devoted to Japanese culture. One will study Japanese history at Tokai, and another will study Shinto philosophy and theology at Kogakkan.

Academic trajectories

From the beginning, the English immersion course was a unique experience. In 1992, one of the original 29 students developed measles and missed the first 10 days of school. When she came into the classroom, her classmates were happily chattering in English. She felt so lost that she was soon given a compassionate transfer out of the immersion course. Her story reminds me of the little lame boy in the tale, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin."

Some gains and losses of students are to be expected. After elementary school, some students sought new horizons and a wider circle of friends. After middle school, families tended to look carefully at possible high school programs. Some students had specific interests, such as science or medicine, best handled in specialized programs.

After middle school, some students' families were satisfied with the level of English their children had already achieved (TOEFL scores of 500, on average). They encouraged their children to go to Japanese universities and not stray too far from home.

In the pioneer class, because of transfers in and out, the middle school enrollment was once as high as 29. Twenty-six students completed the IB middle school diploma. By the time of high school entry, for various reasons, only 11 of the 28 first-grade students remained. They had been joined by 7 new students (one of whom later dropped out), so that 17 completed the IB program. Bostwick points out that students who completed only part of the immersion program have also done well academically.

Remarkable success

Success was not a foregone conclusion for immersion students. In Japan, no other English

immersion program before or since has had this degree of success. Parents who elected to trust Bostwick did so on the basis of his evident honesty and confidence, but even they had no inkling of the level of excellence his program would achieve.

As director, Bostwick had to exert a wide range of skills from recruiting a highly effective staff to personnel management to curriculum design, to textbook translation, and especially to intramural negotiation with a variety of functionaries who seemed determined to limit the spread of English in the school. The immersion program not only stayed alive (there are now about 585 students in the program) but also demonstrated that it can produce students of remarkable intellectual ability.

Remember that the students in this first class were not initially enrolled for English immersion. Once in it, however, they responded to the program and developed abilities much sought by universities in Japan and abroad. Parents who withdrew their children had legitimate doubts, and the program was in no position to guarantee success.

From now on, however, an atmosphere of excellence will suffuse the immersion program, at least as long as the present staff is there. Initially, almost any student who applied was accepted. In subsequent years, even in the small city of Numazu, alert parents beat a path to the door. This year there were 82 applicants for 45 places in the first grade. Now that the 12-year results are in for the pioneer class, admission is likely to become highly competitive. We can only imagine what the demand might be if an English immersion program of this quality were to open in Tokyo, Yokohama, or Osaka.

This series of columns attempts to reconcile the views of language teachers, theorists and bureaucrats. Send e-mail to childs@tuj.ac.jp or letters to The Daily Yomiuri. The column will return on May 21.

Childs, Ed.D., teaches in the Graduate College of Education and is a lecturer and program coordinator of Continuing Education, at Temple University Japan, Tokyo.