

# Building Community-based Bilingual/Multilingual Programs for Children in Japan

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This paper introduces a model for establishing community-based bilingual and multilingual NPOs for children in Japan. The paper is based on the author's two-year involvement as co-founder of one of the first bilingual and non-profit research institutes for young children in Japan, *The Multilingual Education Research Institute*, in Maebashi, Japan. The author discusses the importance of building community-based bilingual programs in Japan, the process followed in establishing the program, and the advantages of being an NPO as well as a community-based entity. The paper also analyzes the stumbling blocks encountered during the process of implementing the program, and offers advice to those planning to establish similar programs in their communities.

**J**apan is not typically viewed as a multi-ethnic or multilingual society. Yet, the percentage of non-Japanese speakers has increased rapidly in the past two decades.

Moreover, demographers predict the population of non-Japanese immigrants will increase substantially in the coming decades as a declining birthrate and aging

population lead to a growing labor shortage, which will be filled partially through immigration. In certain areas of Japan the population of long-term foreign residents already represents a substantial percentage of the local population. In the Takasaki-Maebashi of Gunma prefecture, for example, there are over 40,000 long-term foreign residents, over a third of whom are Portuguese-speaking Brazilians. Since 1996, during the height of Japan's current recession, this population has increased over 50%, and will likely increase substantially in the coming decades as Japan's economy works its way out of recession. Other prefectures with contain relatively large communities of non-Japanese communities are Aichi, Shizuoka and Osaka. The language resources available to these groups in their respective L1s are quite limited.

An additional element likely to contribute to a bilingual or multilingual Japan is the Ministry of Education's long-range plan, currently in the pilot phase, to begin mandatory English beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school.\* Currently, there are over 400,00 residents in Japan for whom English is either a mother-tongue or primary-use language. For many of these residents, there are few appealing bilingual language options available to their children. Most international schools are prohibitively expensive, and Japanese elementary schools lack the resources to provide a dual-language environment. In addition, the

part-time private-language option (*juku*) is insufficient, too expensive, or located outside of their immediate community.

In the fall of 2000, with the aim of serving the language needs of their local community and of promoting early childhood bilingualism in Japan, a group of families in Gunma Prefecture decided to get together to craft an alternative bilingual environment for their children and the children in the community. In April 2001, this group opened one of the first non-profit (NPO) multilingual language programs in Japan, the *Multilingual Education Research Institute* (MERI), consisting of a full-time multilingual kindergarten, an after-school multilingual enrichment program, and a multilingual research center. The three target languages served are Portuguese, English, and Japanese. This paper will describe the group's rationale for starting the multilingual NPO, the steps involved in establishing and implementing the programs, and some of the issues and stumbling blocks faced by the organizers along the way. The paper will also offer some practical advice for people interested in starting similar community-based bilingual programs. The author hopes the Gunma experiment will inspire others to set up educational programs that serve the language needs of their local communities.



## Background of the *Multilingual Education Research Institute (MERI)*

In early 1999, myself and a group of parents in Gunma from disparate language communities formed an informal support group to discuss issues related to the education of our children in Japan. Of primary concern to us was how to promote a high level of bilingualism in our children. Most of our children were enrolled in full-time Japanese kindergartens or elementary schools. At this time we had our children enrolled in a private English enrichment program on Saturdays. Although the program was professionally run, we felt it did not fulfill our long-term needs for a number of reasons:

- the contact hours with our kids were limited to only two hours a week
- the classes involved a fairly lengthy commute
- as a private institution the tuition was cost prohibitive for many families in the Maebashi area, especially for many of our friends in the Brazilian, Farsi and Peruvian communities
- and finally, some of the families in our group wanted instruction in languages other than English, particularly Portuguese, and some expressed a desire to raise their children in a multilingual environment.

In the spring of 2000, our support group, consisting of five sets of parents, decided to begin planning a more comprehensive language enrichment program composed of three pillars: multilingualism, non-profit status, and community-based involvement. We decided to go the multilingual route for two reasons. The largest non-Japanese language group in the Takasaki-Maebashi environs is Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, representing nearly a third of the more than 40,000 non-Japanese residents in the area, and a group that has increased by more than 30 percent in the past year. A second reason was the desire of many parents to give their children exposure to a third language, not only to develop multilingual ability, but also to promote an awareness of and respect for languages outside of the English/Japanese sphere.

There were many reasons for our decision to register ourselves as a non-profit organization (NPO). The Japanese government had recently passed legislation allowing groups to register as NPOs. This law confers tax-exempt status on organizations that provide a needed service for the community in one of a variety of categories, such as education, cultural studies, and environmental issues. The categories are broad and relatively loosely defined, allowing for a wide-range of organizations. Since the NPO law passed, the number of NPO's has grown by leaps and bounds to over 100,000

organizations. The members of our group felt there were many advantages to being an NPO as opposed to a privately-run entity. First, an NPO requires no initial capital outlay. Second, NPOs are eligible for funds from grant organizations. Many of these foundations and government entities have grants targeted specifically for NPOs with international themes. Under the NPO guidelines, the proposed NPO must demonstrate that it will have some indirect or direct benefit to the community, which confers upon the NPO an air of professional integrity. We felt it would be difficult, even counter-productive, to compete with the hundreds of private language programs, all of which were competing for an increasingly smaller slice of the language pie. Under the NPO law there is no need to have a hierarchical institutional structure within your NPO. Each NPO must have at least three co-directors and one auditor. This means that the people who establish the NPO may run it through group consensus rather than as a chain-of-command-type organization. Directors may freely resign their posts, and the organization may add directors as it sees fit. The directors may also work for the NPO as paid staff members outside of their duties as directors. In other words, the directors of a NPO school may also work, for example, as paid teachers, as long as their teaching duties do not conflict with their responsibilities as directors. Budget permitting, NPOs are also permitted to pay 1/3 of their directors salaries

in their capacity as administrative directors. Thus, the NPO law allows for a significant degree of personnel flexibility. For NPO schools with a tight budget and with directors who have full-time jobs and/or a lot of spare time, the directors may choose to run the school on a largely volunteer-basis. Conversely, NPO schools with more substantial resources at their disposal may choose to pay their directors a regular salary. The primary legal restriction on NPOs is that they cannot show an operating profit and that any income must be related to the mission and constitution of the NPO as registered with the Japanese government. In other words, a multilingual community school's income or intake must not significantly exceed its expenditures; however, the NPOs are allowed to maintain a nest egg of savings for future designated projects, as long as this surplus is not deemed excessive by the NPOs designated auditors (kanji).

Our rationale for becoming a community-based organization was based on both practical concerns and educational research. For convenience's sake we wanted to establish our organization as close to our target population as possible, which ended up being roughly equidistant to our members' residences. We also felt it would be easier to recruit volunteers if we were near our target population, which in our case were the English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking communities. In addition, our research into setting up academic



enrichment programs for children pointed to the advantages of small, community-based programs. Much of this research was derived from studies out of the community-based international educational organization *Essentials Schools*, based in Washington, D.C., which shows a high degree of success in small after-school programs based within neighborhood communities.

### Laying the Groundwork for MERI

In early 2000, prior to registering as an NPO, our five sets of international families began the time-consuming but ultimately rewarding planning phase of our project. This involved regular brainstorming sessions, information gathering, and community outreach. After a few weeks of discussions amongst ourselves, we decided on a rough mission statement and the general goals of our organization. Central to our mission statement was the desire to promote bilingual and multilingual language development with preschool and early elementary school children. In addition, we aimed to promote a deeper understanding of and respect for other cultures, as well as bicultural and multicultural environments.

Our initial target languages were English, Portuguese, and Japanese. We decided to establish an after school multilingual enrichment program for children to supplement the L2 language development they received at home. In addition, we decided to establish a full-time

multilingual kindergarten for three to five-year olds. We also decided to establish a professional multilingual research center to monitor and study our programs, and to conduct research and give seminars on bilingual and multilingual education in Japan.

After we drafted a rough mission statement and sketched out a framework for our program, we visited the international division (*kokusai ka*) at the Gunma Prefectural office to talk about the process of filing our NPO papers. In many prefectures in Japan, the international division handles the processing of NPO papers. The Gunma Prefecture's international division was extremely helpful and walked us through the somewhat intimidating process of filling out our NPO papers.

The process, though complicated at first glance, was actually quite straightforward. It's not necessary to go through the minutiae of the process here. I will simply outline the primary information required on the NPO application forms: a mission statement; an explanation of the goal and objectives of your NPO; an explanation of how the NPO fits into one of the NPO thematic categories; the names and addresses of the NPO directors (three minimum); the name and address of at least one auditor (*kanji*); a rough budget, subject to revision; the names of NPO supporting members (*kain*); visa and residency documentation for all directors, both Japanese and non-Japanese. The role of the auditor is to go over

the NPO's budget once a year to make sure there are no improprieties and to advise the NPO on the niceties of NPO legal regulations. It is imperative that at least one member of your NPO be fluent in Japanese because the application forms must be written in formal Japanese.

The next step in the planning phase involved gathering information about the language needs in our area. The international division of the prefectural office provided us with a detailed census of the foreign residents in the Takasaki-Maebashi environs. This census information, available at all prefectures in Japan, provides a detailed breakdown by nationality of the population of foreign residents in each city of the prefecture, as well as indicating recent population trends. The data provided us with useful information about where specific language groups were concentrated in the area. In Gunma, the largest non-Japanese language group is Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, representing over 30% of the total foreign population in Gunma, many of who have ancestral ties to Japan. The cities of Ota and Oizumi are home to large concentrations of Brazilian residents. Ota, in particular, has the highest percentage of non-Japanese residents in Japan, with over 16% of its residents coming from foreign countries, making Ota one of the few multicultural cities in Japan. Other large language groups in Gunma are Spanish-speaking Peruvians, Chinese, Koreans, Tagalog and English-speaking Filipinos, Urdu-speaking Pakistanis,

and people from a number of English-speaking countries.

Most of the Brazilian and Peruvian residents, often referred to as *nikkeijin*, began to arrive in fairly large numbers to Japan in the late 1980's as a result of the Japanese government's passing of immigration liberalization legislation allowing for citizens of foreign countries with Japanese heritage to receive working visas. At the time, the government's aimed to fill a labor shortage, a move which in light of the current recession seems ill-founded, but based on demographic projections for the coming decades actually appears far-sighted as an acute labor shortage is projected in by the middle of century due to a declining birthrate and a growing population of retirees.

The government's rationale for liberalizing working visas for *nikkeijin*, as opposed to other ethnic groups, was the assumption that people of Japanese heritage would have an easier time assimilating into Japanese culture. While this may seem reasonable on the surface, by equating ethnicity or race with culture, the government overlooked the obvious fact that most South Americans of partial Japanese ancestry have very remote ties to Japan, both culturally and linguistically.

After reviewing the census data, we decided to meet with community leaders in the Brazilian community in Gunma. The Jaio director of a full-time monolingual Brazilian-government affiliated school in Gunma, the



Pegasus school, told us that the overwhelming majority of the immigrants were fully-aculturated Brazilians or Peruvians whose families had lived in South America for many generations, often intermarrying with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, most arrived in Japan as monolingual speakers. Not surprisingly, many of the children of recent immigrants from Brazil and Peru have had a difficult time adjusting to the Japanese school system. The census data supported our decision to target the Portuguese-speaking community, as well as English-speaking or bilingual international families.

We also met with other Brazilian community groups, Brazilian language schools, and NPOs to gather information and advice on their planning and promotion strategies.

After a few months of intensive information gathering, and prior to officially submitting our NPO papers, we embarked on the second part of our planning phase, community outreach and program promotion. It was time now to meet with people in the community to outline our ideas and to elicit information on how our program can best serve the language needs of the community. We organized a series of monthly information and orientation sessions (*setsumeikai*) at local public town halls (*kouminkan*), which we reserved in advance and which are free of charge to the local community. We also invited the local press, both Japanese and Brazilian, to these meetings, and they

showed a keen interest in our project and generously reported on our program. After four of these sessions we had a clearer idea of the language needs of the community, and a clearer direction in which to proceed. As our data suggested, most of the participants in the meetings were long-term Brazilian residents. Other large groups were English-speaking international families and Peruvians. Most of the long-term residents were interested in helping their children improve proficiency, especially literacy, in their parents' L1. They were also concerned about helping their children adjust to the Japanese school system. Some of their children had dropped out, and the parents felt it was largely due to a language gap.

### Laying the Foundation

At the end of this process, we decided to focus on the needs of long-term residents in Japan interested in promoting a proficient level of bilingualism for their children. The information sessions gave us a good idea of the number of children who would likely participate in the program. Based on this information, we mapped out what we could realistically offer the community based on our resources and within the parameters of our mission statement and goals. The services were:

1. An after-school pre-literacy program for pre-school and kindergarten children in English and/

- or Portuguese;
- 2. an after-school literacy program for elementary school children in English and/or Portuguese;
- 3. one full-time kindergarten multilingual class in English, Portuguese, and Japanese;
- 4. an in-house multilingual research center.

After this we determined what resources we would need to provide the above services. These initially included: one head kindergarten teacher, two part-time teachers, two part-time assistants, six to eight volunteers and a fully equipped site.

As a result of our research, the informational meetings, and community outreach, we had a more defined road map for our organization, enabling us to clearly outline our goals and objectives, describe our program components and to make a budget based on our program needs. We then included this information in our application papers for NPO status, filed the application with the prefecture, and waited the two to three months for governmental approval.

## Funding the NPO

While we waited for official NPO status, we began the task of raising funds and recruiting staff. We did this in a number of ways. First, each of the five families contributed 200,000 yen to a funding pool with the hope that the money would be repaid at some later date.

Then we organized monthly fund-raising events, potluck parties, Christmas party and a Brazilian dance festival. We recruited members to our organization and charge a nominal membership fee of 1,000 yen per year. Finally, we applied for grants from organizations such as the Japan Foundation and a prefectural grant organization for NPOs, and solicited donations from local businesses. We received one million yen from these organizations and also received a generous grant of ten computers and a million yen from a manager of Yahoo Japan.

As a result of our informational meetings we had procured the services of a number of volunteers and also got a cadre of our university students to volunteer as tutors and assistants. One of our directors ingeniously developed a seminar course on bilingual education at her university with a fieldwork component volunteering at MERI as teacher trainees. In addition, all of the directors agreed to volunteer at least one day a week to the organization. In this way we were able to keep our overhead to a minimum.

We rented a cheap two-story house with a large yard and with the help of our volunteers converted it into a school with three large classrooms and a playground. A number of local pre-schools, kindergartens and elementary schools donated desks, toys and other educational materials and furnishings.

Our main expense was hiring a full-time kindergarten teacher. NPOs are allowed to sponsor visas, and we



decided to hire a credentialed kindergarten teacher from abroad. This turned out to be both financially draining and troublesome for a number of reasons that will be outlined later in this paper.

### Current State of the School

The NPO, the *Multilingual Educational Research Institute* officially opened on April 1, 2001. The institute is comprised of three components, a full-time multilingual kindergarten, an after-school English program for Japanese dominant speakers, both Japanese and non-Japanese residents, an after-school Portuguese literacy program for primarily Japanese dominant Brazilian residents, and Saturday school classes in both Portuguese and English for kindergarten through elementary school children of varying Japanese ability.

The school operates from 9 to 5 Monday through Friday and from 10 to 3 on Saturdays. There are currently 8 full-time kindergarten students and 70 part-time students. Brazilian students make up the largest group, followed by Japanese students. There are also a sizable number of students from international families who have some exposure to non-Japanese languages in the home, primarily English and Tagalog. The programs are currently staffed by part-time English, Japanese, and Portuguese native speakers. MERI also has a part-time administrative staff composed of an office accountant and teacher assistants. A number of volunteers, many of

whom are parents of children in the program, volunteer as assistant teachers and clerical staff.

### Problems encountered

During its first year of existence, MERI has encountered a number of problems and stumbling blocks. Primarily for the benefit of those interested in starting similar language enrichment NPOs in the future, these problems, as well as some possible solutions, will be outlined below.

An attempt was made to locate the site in the middle of our target language community; however, due to limited funds and time constraints, the best we could do was locate the school equidistant from the charter family's residences, which involved about a 30 minute commute by car for all concerned. While the commute was not particularly hard on the parents, we discovered that it was draining for the small children, who often arrived tired and listless. Moreover, by not locating ourselves within walking distance or a very short commute of the students' homes, we constrained their opportunities to socialize and interact after school and on weekends in natural, informal settings. Also, if we had located the site within a short distance of the target language community, we would have been better situated to take advantage of a pool of volunteers whose children or friends were participants in the program. We experienced a fairly high turnover of volunteers coming

from outside of the community; whereas our most stable group of volunteers came from within a short distance of the site.

The location of the site appears to be a crucial factor in the organization's success. Studies have shown that educational programs located physically within the community tend to be highly successful because they draw on human and material resources close at hand and promote community involvement and cohesion. Ideally, language programs should be located in the neighborhoods or local area in which a large percentage of the target population resides. In the case of MERI, it may have been better to find a site in an area such as Ota City, where a fairly large number of our target population lives within a small radius.

Another problem facing MERI was that a disproportionate amount of financial resources went into the full-time kindergarten, which sucked resources from the after-school language enrichment programs. We discovered that it takes significantly more money and human resources to operate a full-time kindergarten than it does to operate part-time language enrichment programs. The full-time kindergarten required a full-time teacher and part-time assistants; whereas the part-time after school language enrichment programs could operate with part-time teachers and volunteers. Moreover, in our case, it was difficult finding parents willing to put their children in a full-time kindergarten

program, even though the tuition MERI charged was considerably less (30,000yen per month) than the average international kindergarten rate. This was partly due to the fact that in the Maebashi area of Gunma, public kindergartens (3-5-year olds) charge only a nominal fee and generally enjoy a reputation for quality pre-school education. Conversely, MERI's after-school programs were quite reasonably priced, between 1,500 and 2,500 yen per session, and increasingly popular. As time went by, the part-time programs increasingly subsidized the full-time kindergarten, and thus a small group of children were receiving a disproportionate amount of the tuition proceeds from the families.

A few suggested ways to redress this imbalance are to increase the volunteer pool (again, this is more effective if the site is physically near target community); offer incentives for volunteer work, such as tuition reductions for parent volunteers; and to offer stipends to people who recruit full-time students. A more drastic solution, and one that I advocate, to those thinking of starting a language NPO is to start with a part-time enrichment program only and wait to add a full-time school for children after the part-time school has proven to be viable and/or after recruiting enough full-time students to make the program financially viable.

Based on the MERI experiment, let me offer a few words of advice that I hope will be helpful to those thinking of establishing similar NPOs in the future.



- Collaborate with people who share a similar educational vision.
- Establish yourself as co-directors from the outset. Do not adopt a hierarchical decision-making structure. Remember NPOs are meant to be grass roots and democratic community organizations, not elitist hierarchies.
- Spend a long time in long time in the planning stages, including information gathering, community outreach and networking.
- Utilize the local press. The Japanese press, in particular, has shown a keen interest in NPOs.
- Include members fluent in Japanese. The paper work, legal issues and budget concerns require a high level of Japanese writing ability.
- Spend a long time recruiting a qualified teacher.
- Avoid sponsoring someone's visa unless it's absolutely necessary. Visa sponsoring is fraught with potential legal hassles.
- Start small with a strong committed base and grow from there.

The *Multilingual Education Research Institute* can point to a number of successes as it approaches the end of its first year of existence. It has provided Portuguese and English language enrichment courses

to hundreds of children many of whom previously had few opportunities to further their bilingual language development and at a cost below that of most private language. MERI has created cultural and educational opportunities for disparate language communities in Gunma and has promoted an awareness of and respect for a number of language cultures in Japan, knitting together communities that otherwise have had limited contact with each other. In addition, MERI has created the first multilingual full-time kindergarten in Japan, developing trilingual teaching environment in which children learn both Portuguese and English as well as pre-literacy skills in Japanese. The effectiveness of this component of the program will not be known until the results of a longitudinal study of the students' multilingual language development are analyzed. In addition, the program has provided a healthy learning environment for a few elementary school Portuguese-speaking students who have encountered difficulties adjusting to Japanese public schools. The author hopes that the MERI experiment will inspire others to set up programs to serve the needs of language groups in their communities.