



Raising children in two languages and communities

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In order to raise children to be bilingual in Japanese and English, certain factors should be considered and approaches planned. This essay discusses important factors, based on reviews of the literature of bilingual child-raising, interviews with bilingual children, and findings of psycholinguistics related to bilingualism. Children never grow up exactly as parents have planned and hoped, but if parents can understand what is going on, they can make mid-course corrections to keep children on a bilingual path. It is important not to despair in the face of apparent failures, but to persevere knowing the general outlines of what to expect. This essay should be helpful for parents, soon-to-be parents, teachers and students who are interested in the range of practical and theoretical considerations entailed in raising children bilingually.

日本語と英語が自由に使える子どもに育てるためには、いくつかの要素を含んだ方法を構築する必要がある。この論文では、バイリンガル子育てについての蓄積されてきた研究とバイリンガリズムに関連した言語心理学の研究成果に立脚して、その重要な要素について考える。子どもは親の計画や希望どおりに成長することはない。しかし、もし親が、子どもがどのような状態にいるのかを理解していれば、子どもをバイリンガルになるように導くことができるだろう。バイリンガル子育てにはうまくいかないことがつきものだが、それに失望するのではなく、起きると予想される難題を知り、それに対処し、粘り強く継続することが大切である。この論文は、父母やもうすぐ父母になる人々、子どもをバイリンガルに育てる実践的・論理的方法に興味をもっている教師と学生達にとって役立つだろう。

Bilingualism in Japan can be beneficial. If you are a person who uses both Japanese and English as an educated native speaker, you are a part of, and open-minded to, at least those two cultures; you can get information in both languages without much stress; you can easily interact with both Japanese and foreign people; and your job opportunities will be broad. Whether you are a native English-speaking parent or a Japanese parent who uses English, what can you do to raise your children as functioning bilinguals in Japan? What constraints do you and your children have to overcome? In this essay,

I have selected important conclusions that are not easy to find, and never found in one place. These conclusions are likely to be useful for teachers who want to learn about bilingualism and for anybody who wants to raise children bilingually in the “Japanese” context. The conclusions are stated generally enough so that readers can select the ones that are most relevant to their own bilingual child-raising and to supporting bilingual children in more public areas such as schools. Although the factors are described separately for ease of explication, it will be evident that they are interconnected with each other.

Things parents can do to raise Japanese/English bilingual children in Japan

Before the child is born, plan a language strategy that you can continue

According to Gray (2003), if you plan thoroughly before your first child is born, it helps you to choose a method that is easy to implement, easy to continue and effective. There are three methods you can choose: (1) the one parent-one language strategy in which one parent speaks language A and the other speaks language B to their children; (2) the home language strategy, that is, the exclusive use of a language that is not used in school, used at home by both parents; or (3) a mixture of both languages, in which parents mix languages to communicate with children (Yamamoto, 2001).

Yamamoto (2001) reported that the home language strategy especially promotes the child’s active bilingualism because the child not only understands but also produces both languages. The one parent-one language principle

results in either passive or active bilingualism depending on the family. When both languages are mixed, children tend to be passive bilinguals. If the languages are mixed all the time, it is harder for children to get what Leopold called a “speech feeling” (Leopold, 1949), which is a language mode people should be in when using each language and is the most necessary and important factor to be bilingual. Children may wait to hear the stronger language and not try to learn the weaker one. Children sometimes do not try to use the weaker language and just use the stronger one if parents do not force them to use both languages (Nakajima, 2002).

Nonetheless, the most important things are to relax, enjoy and keep offering language (Gray, 2003; Yukawa, 2002) because bilingual child-raising takes time and can not be accomplished without time and effort (Yamamoto, 2001). Keeping active in two languages never happens naturally even within an international marriage. Being bilingual is a dynamic process that changes all the time and is not a static attribute such as gender or race. Even though children are bilingual when they are younger, it does not mean they will stay bilingual when they become adults. Parents need to encourage children to be bilingual/bicultural all the time and give them confidence because children’s efforts are the most effective.

Give your children all the time you can spare until they enter elementary school

You should give your children all the time you can spare, using the second language before they go to elementary school. There are three reasons for this. First, as Childs (2003, July 4) said:

Language learning after birth to about age 6 is a high-speed phase in which the child drinks in knowledge of the world and languages together in great gulps.... The child does not think of languages as things in themselves and they are just part of the activity of communicating with others. (p. 14)

Second, the period from birth to about age 6 is the best time for children to get what Leopold called “speech feeling,” the state of mind in which one is comfortably and naturally using a language without stress (Leopold, 1949).

The third reason for flooding your child with the second language before elementary school is that, as children grow older, their world expands beyond home and family, and controlling their English ability will become more difficult (Gray, 2003). For example, as Yukawa (2002) stated, when her son started inviting his friends from nursery school when he was around 4 years old, he started to speak more Japanese than English at home.

Tips to balance the child's two languages

Expose children to English everyday if possible

When you are living in Japan, it is almost impossible to expose children to both Japanese and English equally (Gray, 2003). Nonetheless, if you expose English to children every day for at least two to four hours, their English ability continues to develop.

Parents' involvement with children using English

Gray (2003) tried to get involved with children using

English as much as possible. For example, he read books in English for children almost every day before going to bed, and watched TV and discussed the contents in English with them. When raising bilingual children, if you can use a minority language, you should talk to your children in that language as much as possible because this is one of the only ways that they learn the language. Yukawa (2002) also spoke to her children in English, read English books for them, and showed them English videos. Regarding reading books for children, she said it is not easy and takes a lot of time. You may not be able to watch your favorite TV programs any more and your own free time will be reduced. When your children are about 1 to 2 years old, they have small vocabularies and their concentration span is short so you also need to read books dramatically by changing voices and using a lot of gestures. For children, language learning is for survival and communicating with people around them; thus, they naturally learn the language that parents use. For this reason, parental involvement with children is necessary to develop their language skills.

Offer an immersion environment

Through interviews with good language learners, Naiman et al. (1996), found that an immersion environment such as contacting native speakers was the most beneficial aid to language learning. Examples of immersion environments include: meeting with other bicultural families, creating an environment where children are forced to speak English, overseas travel, and going to a school where they are concentrating on a second language. Creating immersion environments not only helps to motivate children but also

prevents or solves pronunciation problems. It is possible, for example, that people who are not used to English with a Japanese accent may not be able to understand children who grew up in Japan and speak English (Pauly & Yamane, 1999).

Teach literacy skills formally and English literacy skills before those of Japanese

If you want your children to have good Japanese and English literacy skills simultaneously, important factors are: offering formal lessons as in schools, using authentic materials that are actually used by native speakers in schools, firmly deciding to make your children biliterate, spending as much time for teaching literacy as possible and teaching children English literacy skills before they learn Japanese literacy skills (Noguchi, 1999).

You need to start teaching literacy skills when they are younger; the average is 6 years old, but the most important factor is teaching children English literacy skills before they learn Japanese literacy skills (Noguchi, 1999). Gray (2003) said once his children mastered Japanese hiragana, which is a very easy system to learn, they disliked the struggle to decode written English.

Help children establish a language pattern and pass the 5-to-7 shift

Establishing a language pattern in which children speak both Japanese and English is essential for bilingual learning processes. If children pass the so-called “5-to-7 shift” with an established two-language pattern, they have

more possibility to be natural bilinguals. The 5-to-7 shift means the period from about age 5 to age 7. According to Childs (2004, June 18), Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, called the inability to remember very much about before 5 to 7 years of age “childhood amnesia.” It is after this change that children begin to do at last many of the things that parents and teachers have been wanting them to do, such as taking responsibility for tasks, remembering things systematically, sitting still in school and finding their way home. It is also an occasion for a major upgrade of the thinking process and for losing the ability to retrieve things known before the shift. After they pass the shift, according to Childs (2004, May 21), “in general, prevention of language loss occurs naturally if a language is used occasionally and the memory refreshed” (p. 14). Parents need to offer children an environment in which they always use both languages, and value both languages as equally important (Gray, 1996; 2003) because, in this condition, children continue to develop both languages and do not lose any of them after the shift.

In order to establish the language pattern, Gray (2003) makes his children always speak Japanese to their Japanese mother and Japanese people around them, and makes them always speak English to their father and his relatives in America. The father of a Japanese family whose child goes to an international school buys his child magazines written in Japanese, teaches him Japanese writing and reading at home and gives him opportunities to interact with Japanese children in the neighborhood (Gray, 2000). He tries to create a bilingual environment which is natural and not stressful for the child and family. In the cases above, children use two

languages, but the two languages are not dependent on each other. If each language is equally important in its own way, children regard both languages as important generally, and therefore continue to develop both of them.

Creating a bilingual environment is not easy and some families have to be strict about minority language use (Nakajima, 2002). Children sometimes do not try to use the weaker language if they know that parents understand their stronger language.

Make sure children have positive attitudes towards biculturalism/bilingualism

Bilingual children can easily become negative because they are in a monolingual and monocultural country such as Japan where people want to be similar and try not to stand out. If your children are negative about being bicultural and bilingual themselves, they tend to avoid using the second language. In order to get positive attitudes, essential actions include: parents' positive support toward bicultural/bilingualism, meeting other bilinguals, overseas travel, choosing peers and environment, and overcoming the fear of being different.

Parents' positive support toward biculturalism/bilingualism

Noguchi (2000) and her husband tried to help their children adjust their two languages and cultures. They told their children that they value both. According to Noguchi (1999), some parents teach English for free to their children's friends together with their children in order for all of them to

understand the importance of English. Also, as an example, she reported that one foreign father is active in community service in order for Japanese people to know him as his child's father.

Meeting other bilinguals

Noguchi (2000) established a Saturday school in English for bicultural children, which helps to build their identity because spending time with other bicultural children makes them feel less different from other children. She also said establishing an identity that includes both of their two languages and cultures is important before children reach the upper grades of elementary school. Gee (2002; 2004) said after his daughter went into Nanzan international school where they only accept returnees or children with at least one foreign parent, she doesn't have a feeling of being different anymore and started studying English enthusiastically.

Ihara (2003), a charismatic mother who is running the website "Eigo de Kosodate" ("Raising children in English"), raised her pre-school son as a bilingual, talking to him in English and Japanese. Ihara has met and interacted with bicultural/bilingual families in and outside of Japan with her son. As a result, her son converses with his English speaking friends in English and Japanese speaking friends in Japanese. He is aware of who speaks what language through the experiences of meeting people who speak a variety of languages. Meeting foreign people has certainly contributed to his linguistic awareness.

Overseas travel

Gray (January/February 2001; March/April 2001; 2003) said overseas travel has a very positive impact on children's English speaking ability and biculturalization because children associate English with all the people, places, foods, sights, sounds in the English speaking countries.

Overcoming the fear of being different

Bilingual children need to overcome the fear of being different. Yamamoto (2001) said that a lot of bilingual children overcome the uncomfortable feeling that they are different and start enjoying being able to use English when they realize that the use of the language is seen as advantageous. Gilmour (2005) also said that:

identity is something which an individual develops with life experiences and interaction with others; not a fixed entity, but something we are constantly negotiating.... [I]dentity is something that everyone wrestles with from time to time, and those growing up in a loving environment seem to feel more comfortable with theirs, no matter whether they are raised in one culture, two cultures or a multi-cultural environment. (p. 52)

Thus, parents should always help their children to have confidence about being different.

*Advice for Japanese parents who speak English to their children**Never teach the language itself as an object of study*

Languages around the world have basically the same functions from the child's perspective. Children are concerned with pointing things out (demonstrative function), where things are (locative function), what they are like (attributive function), who owns them (possessive function) and who is doing what to whom (agentive function) (Gilmour, 2005). In order to let children use any language, parents need to talk to them in those languages confidently and naturally considering the five fields above, and never try to teach the languages themselves as objects of study, for example: translating for children or teaching words only without contexts (Nakajima, 2002).

Speak English with your children even though your native language is not English

You should speak English with your children even if your English is not native speaker level. There are three reasons for this. First, you do not have to worry about your bad accent because there are many varieties of English in the world. Yukawa (2002) said that even though her native language is not English, she raised her children using English because English has many varieties. English is used not only in America, Canada, England, Australia and New Zealand, but also in Singapore, India, the Philippines, and so forth, as a native language. English is also used for international business and for that reason there are more people who speak English as a second language.

Second, children's learning ability is higher than you may think. Many people may worry that their children will learn bad pronunciation and use it forever; however, Childs (2004) said that "the notion that a child who learns a bad form is stuck with it for life is unscientific" since "children learn languages by trading up, substituting new and better forms for old ones" (p. 14). Young children are alert to errors in their words and pronunciation, so accents can change and can be changed deliberately.

Third, children will be able to switch between Japanese and English. Childs (2003) said children can learn to switch between two languages naturally if you talk to your children in both languages. Learning to switch is a great benefit since as children grow older it is more and more difficult to switch into another language.

Parents who do not have high English proficiency can make children bilingual

Learn the language together with children

According to Nakajima (2002), if parents' ability in English is not high, parents can learn the language positively together with their children. Kaori Ihara, who has never lived abroad, has been raising her son in English and Japanese since he was born. Her English is far from perfect (when Kai was born, she didn't even know how to say 'diaper') but her son produces complicated English sentences with some mistakes like most toddlers learning English as their first language (Childs, 2003; Ihara, 2003). She reads English books for her son, lets him watch English videos and interacts with families and children who speak English.

Provide an immersion environment

According to Yukawa (2002), the English level of parents will be the limit of children's English level if you are always living in Japan and children do not really have a chance to use English with people outside of the family. Furthermore, even if one of the parents has a high English ability, if that parent has no time to communicate with children, their English level will be limited to the parent with lower English ability. For those reasons, it is important to provide an immersion environment where children use English extensively with a variety of people.

Become a monitor to make children be bilingual

Once children are on the right track, parents should be monitors and plan to help them learn both languages all the time (Nakajima, 2002). When monitoring, parents should expect their children to do well but not too much because pressure can have bad effects on children's language learning. Language learning takes a lot of time, so parents need to relax and keep working at it.

Advice for parents to deal with the child's language imbalance

Be aware of the language shift

For bilingual children, an equal balance of language is rare, and sometimes there is a shift of dominance from one language to the other (Baker, 2006). When Yukawa's (2002) 4-year-old son appeared to shift too strongly to Japanese as discussed above, she feared that her bilingual child-raising

was at an end. In order to cause her son to speak English at home, she took strong action, inviting a British friend to stay in her house for six weeks (Yukawa, 2002). Her friend played with her children pretending he did not understand any Japanese, and eventually her son started speaking English again. Yukawa (2002) also mentioned that if children are very small and parents raise them using English, English becomes the dominant language for children at first and they temporarily acquire English words and phrases used by parents. Nonetheless, when children start to socialize with other children who only speak the majority language (Japanese) their dominant language becomes Japanese and sometimes they even will not be able to use English words and phrases that they could use before.

Interference by the stronger language on the weaker language usually happens when children are brought up using two languages (Nakajima, 2002). However, as the children grow older and both languages develop, their two languages will be more separated and interference will be smaller.

Do not worry about your children's slow language development

According to Gray (2003), each child's language development is different and parents should not worry about it, even though dealing with it in everyday life may be difficult. For example, his son, his second child, used gibberish more than Japanese or English until he was 4 years old. At that point, the boy shifted to a strategy of clear communication in Japanese or English, as appropriate.

The second child is more difficult

Yamamoto (2001) stated that the second child tends to be a passive bilingual because he/she usually gets less minority language input and the first child speaks Japanese to the second child. Yukawa (2002) also stated that the second child is affected by first child's bilingual ability. Controlling a second child's language ability is harder for parents because of the influence of the first child; thus, it is more difficult to raise the second child as a bilingual. I have found no reports in the literature about actions directed at the second child. Clearly, a flood of language is indicated. If playmates in the minority language cannot be found, parents might create activities such as a daily story-reading time.

Child-centered attitude for raising a bilingual child

Offer learning processes that fit each child

Yukawa (2002) said that her son likes to read books so she buys him English books and he naturally improves his knowledge of words and phrases. Her daughter, on the other hand, doesn't like reading books but likes to study so she gives English drills to her daughter to study English. Thus, parents need to know each child's character and find out the best way that their children learn languages.

How children eventually use their language ability is all up to them

Parents should emphasize bilingualism as much as possible; however, how children's bilingual ability will end up and how children will use their language ability is all up to them

(Gray, 2003). Thus, it is best to let children find out what they like and want to do in the future as well as help them develop both languages for their own personalities and purposes.

Conclusion

Raising bilingual children in Japan is hard. It is harder than raising monolingual children because the majority of people do not have to use English for everyday life and you have to devote a lot of your own precious time to teach the minority language to your children. Nonetheless, making your children bilingual is possible if you know what you are doing. I have listed important factors to raising children bilingually and biculturally in Japan, but the most important thing is to always strive to know yourself and your children. You and your children change all the time; you should always question yourself and think deeply how you want to raise your children bilingually. If you do so, even if your plan does not work perfectly, you can accept the way your children are and how they relate to other people in the society, without becoming negative. You can keep raising children bilingually at your own pace and you can be flexible in choosing what is best for your children.

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