# Japanese-English bilingual children's perspective

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# オーストラリアの日―英バイリンガルたちから見た日本語習得

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This study examined the experiences of 10 children learning Japanese and English in Australia. Studies on one parent-one language families have focused on parental accounts of bilingual child rearing. However, children may make their own decisions regarding language choice. They may be happy to continue what the family has been practising, but they may react negatively in a bilingual situation. Thus, it is important to incorporate the child's own perspectives in dealing with two languages and cultures to understand such families more comprehensively.

This study found that children whose Japanese mothers reinforced Japanese as a language for communication among themselves and used Japanese regularly had developed a clear understanding of the role of the Japanese language in their lives. The comments from the children indicated the sensitivity of these children to their parents' desire to pass down Japanese to them and these children seem to have accepted the expectations regarding the development of Japanese placed on themselves.

本稿ではオーストラリア在住の10人の日―英バイリンガル児たちの日本語習得についての経験を調査した。国際結婚における二言語併用家庭で、子供に対して親が母語のみを使用する言語選択方針「一親一言語」を使っている家庭を調査した学術論文のほとんどは、親の視点からのものである。子供たちが大きくなると言語選択に様々な意見を持つようになったり、親主体の「一親一言語」方針に変化が見られるようになるようである。国際結婚家庭での少数言語保持をより総合的に理解するためには、子供たちから見た二言語、二文化習得を調査する必要がある。

親子間で日本語使用を明確にしている家庭では子供たちが日本語の大切さ、日本語の役割をはっきりと認識し、親からの日本語の保持への強い期待を把握していることがわかった。

According to the 2006 Census by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than three million people reported that they speak a language other than English at home (ABS, 2006). Community language is a widely used term to refer to immigrant languages in Australia (Clyne, 1991). Studies on intergenerational transmission of community languages in

Australia have found that the family is the most crucial and important unit to explain language maintenance and shift (Clyne, 1991; Borland, 2006; Pauwels, 2005; Takeuchi, 2006a; Yoshimitsu, 2000). For migrant families, the family remains the main domain for their native language use, while for cross-language families (parents with non-shared ethno-linguistic backgrounds), the children's use of a minority language (non-societal language) is largely limited to their interaction with their minority language-speaking parents.

Migrant parents and parents who come from different language backgrounds generally view the ability to speak more than one language beneficial and wish to transmit their native languages to their children (Takeuchi, 2009). Motivated and well-informed parents in previous studies reported that they used many techniques and resources to maximise the likelihood of passing down their native languages to their children (Döpke, 1992; Lambert, 2008; Saunders, 1982, 1988; Takeuchi, 2006a). These techniques include initial information gathering and planning, consistent language choice, frequent interaction with the speakers of the community language, trips to their homeland, audiovisual resources, and enrolling their children into supplementary community language classes.

Nevertheless, parental efforts do not always seem to result in successful outcomes as originally hoped. For example, one of the many challenges Japanese parents reported in my studies on Japanese-Australian families in Australia is their children's unwillingness to respond in Japanese (Takeuchi, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). This is despite the fact that the parents wished to transmit Japanese to their children and the parents spoke Japanese with their children. Why do some children cooperate with their parents in terms of language choice initiatives, while others do not? It is likely that children see their bilingual experiences quite differently from what their parents or other adults imagine them to be (Kanno, 2003).

Family bilingualism has previously been investigated based on parental accounts. Young children's primary motivation to speak their parent's native language seems to come from extrinsic need for communication and emotional bonding with their parent (Taeschner, 1983). It also relates to attainment of external and material rewards such as praise and social acceptance (Lambert, 2008). As children become older, intrinsic aspects also play an important role in the continuous use of the parent's native language. As Lambert said, "wanting to learn the community language is a key part of the process" (Lambert, 2008, p. 48). Children need to be interested and self-motivated to maintain their parent's native language. They need to be convinced of the value of bilingualism and find it meaningful (Baker, 1995).

Although parental strategies may be well thought out, they can be undermined by the negative feelings of their children towards their parent's native language and the bilingual situation (Mills, 2001). Bilingual children are said to be capable of making language decisions at a very early age (Taeschner, 1983). They may be happy to continue what the family has been practising, but they may become reluctant to speak the parent's native language, avoiding participating in conversations, limiting responses to one word answers, or changing conversational topics (De Houwer, 1998). Thus, it is important to incorporate the child's own perspectives in dealing with two languages in order to understand family bilingualism more comprehensively.

This study examined the experiences of 10 children (aged between 6 and 13) learning Japanese and English since birth in Australia. I will report their attitudes towards the Japanese language and culture in relation to their actual use of Japanese. I will discuss motivational factors likely to sustain the use of the Japanese language by these children.

## Methodology

The major part of data for this study came from semi-structured interviews with 10 children (aged between 6 and 13) who were exposed to Japanese and English in Australia. It is drawn from my larger study concerning Japanese-Australian families in Australia (Takeuchi, 2009). The interviews covered the following areas, which are a modification of research questions addressed by Mills (2001) and Pauwels (2005):

1. The Japanese-Australian children's attitudes and feelings towards Japanese and English in a variety of life domains in Australia,
2. Expectations which have been placed on the Japanese-Australian children by their parents, by others, and by themselves in maintaining the Japanese language,
3. Japanese literacy development, and
4. Friendship groups and ties to Japan in relation to the children's Japanese language development.

Table 1 below summarises the participants' profile and current language use within their family. The interviews were conducted in Japanese with the exception of the child Lily. The other nine children seemed to understand the researcher's questions in Japanese and these children answered in Japanese, although a varying degree of English borrowing was present. Lily preferred to answer questions in English. Although the children in this study were relatively young, their views were clearly expressed in their answers.

The language use pattern of children and other family members is based on reporting by the children. It is consistent with their Japanese parents' reports. The Japanese-speaking parents were all mothers in this study. As you can see from Table 1, the level of consistency in the use of Japanese by the Japanese parents varied at the time of interviews, although all of them had tried the one parent-one language approach. This is the most commonly adopted approach among cross-language families, in which each parent speaks his or her native language to the child from birth.

### Table 1. Participants' language profiles

| | Name | Between parents | J. parent to child | Child to J. parent | Other parent to child | Between siblings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Reiko (8) | E | J | J* | E | J/E |
| 2 | Emma (7) | E | J | J* | E/U** | J/E/U |
| 3 | Josh (6) | E | J | J* | E | J/E |
| 4 | Karin (11) | E | J | J* | E | n.a. |
| 5 | Kelly (9) | E/J | J | J* | E | J/E |
| 6 | Ken (7) | E | J | J*/E | E | E |
| 7 | Ann (9) | n.a. | J/E | E/J* | n.a. | E |
| 8 | Lily (8) | E | J/E | E/J* | E | E |
| 9 | Mia (9) | E/J | J/E | E/J* | E | E |
| 10 | Joe (13) | J/E | J/E | E/J* | E | E |

* Japanese sentences with varying degree of English borrowing
** Ukrainian—the father was born in Poland and migrated to Australia at the age of 10. Although he usually spoke English to his children, he sometimes spoke Ukrainian to them.

## Discussion

### *Children's attitudes towards Japanese and English in Australia*

For all the children, the vast majority of Japanese input came from their Japanese mother, as none of them had Japanese rela-

tives in Australia. Nevertheless, it seems that using Japanese and English was a normal part of life for most of the children interviewed for this study. This view was shared amongst the children regardless of the level of consistency in the use of Japanese by the Japanese mothers. As can be seen in Table 1, six children reported that their mothers had spoken Japanese to them consistently. All but one child (Ken) felt at ease with their mother's language choice. Karin said that her mother spoke Japanese because she was a Japanese and it was all right for her mother to speak to her in Japanese in front of her English-speaking friends. Reiko gave a clear reason why it was important for her mother to speak Japanese to her.

> Reiko: My mum needs to speak to me in Japanese, otherwise I can't learn Japanese.

Four children reported that their Japanese mothers mainly spoke Japanese, but sometimes spoke English to them. These children liked their Japanese mother's language choice, both Japanese and English. None of these children felt that their mother should speak only in English to them.

However, with regard to the children's own language choice, there were clear differences in preference. Five children whose Japanese mother spoke Japanese consistently with them spoke Japanese with their mother. They reported that they liked doing so and were proud of their ability to speak Japanese. The comments from these five children strongly indicated that the Japanese mother-child relationship had been firmly established through the Japanese language-only policy. Thus, it was almost unimaginable for these children to use English for conversation with their Japanese mothers. Karin shared her view:

> Karin: When we went to see Australian grandparents, my mum sometimes spoke English to me as they couldn't understand Japanese. I felt funny. I kept speaking Japanese to my mum.

It is interesting that these children also spoke Japanese to their siblings when the Japanese mother was present.

> Reiko: I speak Japanese to my sisters. Because if I don't teach them Japanese, they won't be able to speak Japanese with grandparents in Japan.

In her study on children's Japanese language maintenance in Melbourne, Yoshimitsu (2000) found that children's Japanese use with their siblings strongly correlated with their Japanese maintenance level. My findings support Yoshimitsu's study and suggest that the expansion of the Japanese-only policy between the Japanese mother and child into siblings seemed to be important for the child's continuous use of Japanese.

Ken, unfortunately, expressed his strong desire not to speak Japanese to his Japanese mother. He also preferred that his mother speak English to him. He said that no one spoke Japanese in his family with the exception of his mother, thus, it was not necessary for him to speak Japanese. He repeatedly mentioned that his Japanese mother had a strong focus on his Japanese literacy development. His comments suggest that he was overwhelmed by the amount of Japanese reading and writing practice and seemed to identify Japanese as a burden rather than as a tool for communication.

The other four children also preferred to speak English to their Japanese mothers. Their Japanese mothers spoke in both Japanese and English to them. These children did not dislike speaking Japanese and felt good when they spoke Japanese. They were able to communicate with Japanese people who were unable to speak English. Nevertheless, they did not routinely speak Japanese with their Japanese mothers, or with their

siblings. These children gave a lack of proficiency in Japanese, vocabulary in particular, as a reason not to speak Japanese with their Japanese mothers. These children did not reject the use of Japanese, but were unable to freely express themselves in Japanese.

> Ann: I don't study Japanese a lot, so I can't speak Japanese that well. When I have to speak Japanese, I will have a headache. I feel embarrassed, too. Besides, my mum can understand English.

> Lily: I like speaking Japanese to my mum. I feel good. But it's easier to speak English. I can say things quickly.

> Joe: Sometimes I start speaking Japanese, but I forget that I am speaking Japanese, and then I notice that I am speaking English.

## Expectations placed on the children in maintaining Japanese

All the children in this study were sensitive to the expectations their parents placed on them to maintain the use of Japanese. They were aware that their Japanese mothers wanted them to speak Japanese and doing so would please their Japanese mothers. The consistent use of the minority language came from the minority language-speaking parents' strong motivation to pass down their native language to their children (Döpke, 1992; Lambert, 2008; Takeuchi, 2009). The children whose Japanese mothers made the Japanese-only policy explicit made an effort to communicate in Japanese.

The children also understood that they were expected to learn Japanese reading and writing and it was incorporated into every child's Japanese maintenance plan. However, not every child liked the literacy-related aspect of Japanese. The workload was overwhelming for many children, and some children seemed to be frustrated by their slow progress or felt that they would not be able to meet the standards expected.

However, the parents' efforts in fostering their children's interest in Japan seemed to reflect on the children's positive attitudes towards Japan. Going to Japan was naturally very important for the children's Japanese language development and helped them to like Japan. The children reported that they enjoyed communicating with Japanese relatives in Japan in Japanese. One of the interesting views that emerged from the children's comments was their sensitivity to the contexts and consideration of the feelings of those who did not have proficiency in English. They were able to gauge other family members' level of proficiency in English and would speak Japanese to them if it was necessary for communication.

## Japanese literacy development

Formal Japanese studies were incorporated into all of the children's Japanese language development plans. Six children (Reiko, Karin, Kelly, Ken, Lily, and Mia) attended the Melbourne International School of Japanese, a supplementary Japanese school (*hoshuu-koo*) held on Saturdays. The school followed the same curriculum as the school curriculum in Japan. The school taught Japanese as a first language and also taught mathematics for a total of 5 1/2 hours weekly. All of these six children enjoyed the company of their Japanese-speaking friends at school. Some children found hoshuu-koo important for their Japanese learning and were committed to attending every Saturday.

The children enjoyed "study time" with their Japanese mothers and this regular study had become part of their routine. However, the schoolwork was demanding for most of the children, especially for the children who were not using Japanese routinely.

Mia: I don't like hoshuu-koo very much. I can't remember all the kanji. We get lots of homework. My mum gets angry when she helps me with my homework. I don't like it.

Ken: I hate hoshuu-koo. I don't want to go to school on Saturdays. My friends don't go to school on Saturdays. I think it's just too much homework. I don't want to study Japanese.

Two children, Ann and Joe, studied Japanese at the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) on weekends. They had been studying Japanese as a second language for 3 hours per week. In addition, Joe had been studying the Japanese language as a LOTE (language other than English) at his English-based secondary school. Joe was older than the other children in this study. He thought that Japanese was the easiest among all of his school subjects, and understood that learning Japanese would give him an advantage in gaining high marks in the examination to gain a university place. He seemed to be happy studying Japanese as one of his school subjects. Two other children, Josh and Mia, also studied Japanese as a LOTE at their school.

Emma joined a weekly study group with Reiko and other children. The Japanese classes were conducted by their mothers, who were qualified Japanese language teachers, using Japanese textbooks provided by the Japanese Government. The classes had been running for more than 5 years and the children had formed a strong friendship group with other Japanese-speaking children.

All the children in this study experienced Japanese schooling when they visited their relatives in Japan. The immersion experiences ranged from 1 week to a few months at a time. It was important for not only their Japanese language development, but also meeting Japanese-speaking children of a similar age. The children talked about friends they made at schools in Japan.

## Friendship groups and ties to Japan

All 10 children developed interests in Japan and had warm relationships with their Japanese relatives, particularly similar-aged cousins. They enjoyed trips to Japan and talked about their most recent trips fondly. The frequency of trips to Japan was on average once every 1 or 2 years. The children said that they would like to go to Japan more frequently, if it were at all possible.

There was a great variation among the children in this study with regard to the type and frequency of contact with other Japanese-speaking children in Australia. Interestingly, children who used Japanese regularly with their Japanese mother tended to have Japanese-speaking friends and had regular contacts using the Japanese language. Reiko, Emma, Josh, Karin, and Kelly met other Japanese-speaking friends for play on the weekends or during school holidays. They enjoyed playing with their Japanese-speaking friends whom they had met through hoshuu-koo or study group. As the use of Japanese was strongly encouraged at hoshuu-koo and study group, the children tended to speak Japanese when they met outside these schools. Josh had a few Japanese-speaking friends in his grade at his English-based primary school. These children spoke in Japanese and developed a strong friendship, socialising outside school.

By contrast, the children who did not speak Japanese actively with their Japanese mothers did not have the same level of contact with other Japanese-speaking children. When they met Japanese children for play, they spoke in English.

## Future plans

The children who spoke Japanese actively with their Japanese mothers commented that speaking Japanese with their mothers was important for them and they would continue to do so. They said that they were half Japanese and half Australian, so it was natural for them to speak both languages. They also wanted

to maintain a good relationship with their Japanese relatives, grandparents, and cousins in particular, who had little proficiency in English. These children seemed to have a clear understanding of the role and the value of Japanese in their life, which may have been fostered by a strong relationship to speakers of Japanese. They seemed to be motivated to pursue Japanese language maintenance.

There were different opinions regarding future Japanese use among the children who did not speak Japanese regularly. The Japanese language seemed to have become a burden rather than a communication tool for these children. One child, Joe, said that he would continue to study Japanese as a LOTE at school in Australia. He reported that he would see himself as an Australian as he lived in Australia and used mainly English. However, he was aware of the benefits of the ability to speak Japanese and would like to maintain some level of proficiency in Japanese. Lily also viewed Japanese studies as one of her extra-curricular activities and would be happy to go to hoshuu-koo to learn the Japanese language and Japanese culture. On the other hand, the three children would be happy to discontinue studying the Japanese language. They clearly identified Japanese as extra work, which they were more than happy not to have to endure.

## Conclusion

The interviews with the children from Japanese-Australian families showed that there were differences with regard to their attitudes and feelings towards the Japanese language. The children whose Japanese mothers reinforced Japanese as a language for communication among themselves and used Japanese regularly at home seemed to have developed a clear understanding of the role and value of the Japanese language in their lives. The comments from the children indicated the sensitivity of these children to their parents' desire to pass down Japanese to them, and these children seem to have accepted their parents' expectations regarding the development of their Japanese. They also viewed Japanese literacy development as part of their Japanese studies and were happy to cooperate with their parents' initiatives. The children reported that they would continue to speak Japanese with their Japanese parents, siblings, Japanese-speaking friends, and relatives in Japan.

On the other hand, the children who no longer spoke Japanese with their Japanese mothers did not seem to identify the Japanese language as the language of their relationship with their Japanese mother. They did not speak Japanese to their siblings, either. The function of the Japanese language was shifted to study, not communication. Some children reacted negatively and struggled to continue Japanese study. Only those who could see the benefit of Japanese as a study subject at school were happy to continue.

The comments from the Japanese-Australian children reinforce the importance of the Japanese-only policy at home in relation to children's continuous use of Japanese. It is important for the Japanese parents to maintain a continuous use of Japanese with their children and to create and expand the need for the children to speak Japanese.

## Bio data

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