Educating trilingual children: Two case studies

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This paper aims to discover and discuss some issues and challenges faced by trilingual children in Japan and their parents. The focus is on the experiences of two elementary school children in a bilingual English/French program who are also taking native-speaker classes in Japanese. Data is obtained from semi-structured interviews with their parents.

While both children are quite successful at school, it is clear that they differ in their attitudes and learning styles. The main difference is that one, who was monolingual until he entered school, has a highly intrinsic motivation to learn languages and enjoys studying. The other has been brought up trilingually and although quite fluent, does not enjoy formal study. This has implications for the challenges facing the parents, and it is suggested that an understanding of these differences and related challenges can help in development both of multilingual education and of the identities of the children.

本論は、日本で生活するトライリンガルの子どもたちとその親が直面する問題を知って論じることを目的としている。英仏のバイリンガル・プログラムを受けつつ、日本語を母語とする集団で日本語による教育も受けている2人の小学生の体験に焦点を当てた。データは、子どもたちの親との半構造的 (semi-structured) 面談から得られたものである。

二人の子どもたちは、ともに学校で申し分ない成果をあげているが、一方で、その態度や学習スタイルが異なるのは明らかである。主な違いは次の通りだ。ひとりは、入学するまで母語しか話さなかったが、現在は語学を学習するにあたって、大いに内在的なモーチベーションを持ち、学習を楽しんでいる。一方、もうひとりは、トライリンガルとして育てられ、まことに流暢ではあるのだが、正規の学習を楽しんではいない。親につきつけられた問題に意味があるとすれば、この点でないだろうか。この点で明らかになった違いを理解し、さらに研究を続けその違いの理解を深めることが、カリキュラム開発のうえで重要であると思われる。

There is a great deal of interest in the education and welfare of bilingual children in Japan, and at educational conferences there have been numerous case studies, most of which focus on children bilingual in Japanese and English. The purpose of this short paper is to extend that interest to include the many children in Japan who are trilingual and who are being brought up, and sometimes educated, in a trilingual environment. The presentation of the paper was intended to bring together parents and others interested in trilingual education, with a view to encouraging further case studies and organising more extensive forums and workshops in the future.

The paper is exploratory and intended to bring up issues rather than provide solutions. The two case studies presented focus on the aims, challenges, and experiences of parents of young

trilingual children, and the data discussed here is obtained from interviews with those parents. The paper begins with some consideration of what is meant by trilingualism and introduces the concept of multilinguality and linguistic identity. The main part of this paper is devoted to the two case studies and information is presented in such a way as to facilitate comparison and discussion of possible issues. The paper will conclude with a discussion about issues and possibilities that are suggested by the data and possible ways forward.

Trilingualism: Multilingualism and multilinguality

According to Aronin and Ó Laore (2004, p. 15), "multilingualism appears to be more complex than bilingualism, with qualitative rather than quantitative difference being the departure point." Beyond bilingualism, educational literature tends not to distinguish between the number of languages acquired. Ellis (1994), for example, refers simply to *multilingualism* as being "the use of three or more languages by an individual or within a speech community" (p. 11). However, this paper suggests the possibility that qualitative and organisational effects might depend on the number of languages that are being learned. The question here is not about *performing* trilingually, or even being *raised* trilingually, but on being *educated* trilingually, or more specifically, being educated to be trilingual. Resources have to be allocated to this education: in particular, the limited resource of *time* could be spent teaching and learning other things (or on concentrating on fewer languages). Therefore, this paper refers to the learners in the cases specifically as *trilinguals*, rather than simply as multilinguals.

Another conceptual hurdle is how people are judged as being trilingual: have they reached a certain standard, or is it more of a process? Cenoz and Genesee (1988, p. 2) define multilingualism very widely as "the process of acquiring several non-native languages and the final result of this process," and Ellis (1994, p. 11) points out that "frequently, multilingual people do not have equal control over all the languages they know." This paper is discussing children who are in the process of acquiring three languages, and are clearly not equally proficient in all of them. (See Bialystock, 2001, for a discussion of how bilingual people need not be equally proficient in their two languages.) They are referred to as being trilingual because they are, for the time being at least, comfortable with their trilingual education, and appear to be able to communicate with native speakers of each language to their own satisfaction. If they were not comfortable in these ways, the questions raised would be important, but beyond the scope of this paper.

One concept that might be useful in understanding trilingual development is that of *multilinguality*. Aronin and Ó Laore (2004, p. 17) define this as "an individual's store of languages at any level of proficiency, including partial competence and incomplete fluency, as well as metalinguistic awareness, learning strategies and opinions, preferences and passive or active knowledge of languages, language use and language learning/acquisition." They see this as the *linguistic identity* of the multilingual. There is a kind of individual ecosystem involving not only linguistic, but also both cultural and educational aspects which need to be in balance.

The two cases

Both children are trilingual in English, French and Japanese. They are male pupils in the "bilingual" stream of a French school in Japan. They are taught in the medium of French for 2 days a week, and in English for 2 days, with the 5th day alternating. The intention is to teach both French and English as native languages but, as is discussed later, there is an impression that English tends to be taught as a second language. (In fact, for many of the pupils, although not those discussed in this paper, English *is* the second language. However, although French is

sometimes a second language as it is for Théo below, it is never taught as a second language, as that is the dominant language of the school).

The two boys have formal Japanese lessons twice a week (on the English days). They are in a "native speaker" stream, which follows the Japanese elementary school syllabus. (There is also a "Japanese as a foreign language" option, which would be too elementary for both boys, for different reasons.) Both boys use Japanese in the city community.

Data was acquired from semi-structured interviews with mothers, who have given permission for this data to be used in this research. They were assured that they and their children would remain anonymous, particularly because the children themselves may not wish to be identified. For this reason, direct quotes from the mothers are not used, and the names used are not the real names of the children.

Both interviews proceeded in different ways, but were loosely structured so that a number of basic questions could be addressed. Both conversations began with an account of the child's educational and language history and a general overview of the reasons for him to be learning three languages. More specifically, there was discussion of the reasons for choosing this particular course of education and whether formal trilingual training was actually necessary. (Would it perhaps be better to acquire the languages informally, wait until they were older, or just wait and see if they had either the aptitude or motivation?) The mothers had strong feelings about how their sons were doing and were asked whether they had any reservations about the way they were being educated or concerns about their choice. They were also asked explicitly about the challenges that they themselves faced as parents, and both interviews ended by talking about the future.

Mike (7 years old)

Mike's mother's main language is French but she is fluent in English and has a working knowledge of Japanese. His father's main language is English and he has some ability in the other languages. Both parents have always spoken their own languages with him and English to each other (a natural choice rather than an educational strategy). At home, Mike is equally fluent in both English and French, but outside the home until he was five he only spoke Japanese with his kindergarten friends and English with his many Anglophone companions. His mother was his only Francophone companion, and when he arrived at the French school he found it hard to communicate with his teacher and his new peers.

There was no doubt that he should continue in three languages, as he has two home languages, and he naturally wishes to communicate in Japanese outside the house (and to survive in Tokyo). In the Japanese school, he would eventually study English, but not French, and his parents doubted if he would be motivated to learn French with only his mother to communicate with. Therefore it was decided to send him to the French school. At first, there was no bilingual option, but there was EFL, and his parents thought he would be naturally motivated to learn English from friends and father. When the bilingual option was created by the school, it was chosen as it seemed to suit his development, both emotionally and linguistically. For Japanese, Mike was placed in the native-speaker stream, as he could already speak reasonably well (although his listening was weak), and the nonnative stream would have been far too easy for him.

After 3 years in the bilingual class, Mike seems equally fluent and comfortable in both English and French. He can read very well, and his vocabulary is adequate and increasing rapidly. He also appears to understand nearly all the various accents that he hears. However, he is very reluctant to write, and often does not complete the tasks he is given. His teachers say that he does not

take responsibility for his work and spends a lot of time dreaming. Japanese is a concern. The native speaker class moves very quickly, and his teacher says that he apparently often doesn't understand what is going on. He has an aversion to writing *kana* and *kanji*, although there are signs that this is changing, and he can read quite well. (He recognizes the importance of kanji, as he wants to read signs at train stations.) His teacher is pessimistic about his ability to succeed, but he can communicate well with his friends and understands and enjoys Japanese animation. His private tutor says that he is as fluent in Japanese as any Japanese boy (and equally reluctant to learn kanji.)

There are some basic concerns about the curriculum. It is based very much on worksheets, which Mike dislikes, and the way in which some subjects, such as math, are shared between the two languages often seems rather confusing. There is also concern that his strong oral abilities are not being allowed to develop, not just due to the curriculum but also, in English, because there are only a few native speakers. Most importantly, his parents are concerned about whether he has too many tasks, sometimes duplicated between the three languages, and whether the emphasis on language is taking time away not only from other subjects, particularly math, but also the opportunity to relax and play. For this reason they think it would be better if there were an easier, more relaxed Japanese class for him to enter.

Nevertheless, despite these concerns, his parents think that there is a need for formal bilingual/trilingual teaching and that they have chosen the right path, at least for the time being. He is exposed to all three languages and despite his difficulties, he is still eager and motivated to acquire them. Though he is enthusiastic, if he dropped classes in any one or two of the languages, it is doubtful whether he would have the discipline to learn independently. Being in such a multilingual environment means that he switches effortlessly from one to another and takes his skills for granted. In some educational areas, the level of his skills seems below what they would be for a monolingual, but in many ways that is to be expected, and his parents are reasonably confident that he will catch up.

The main challenge for Mike's parents has always been to ensure that he is happy. If his trilingual education were causing him distress, they would change direction. Generally however, he enjoys being able to read and communicate in all three languages and can switch codes in an instant. Being able to read in both has provided him with a lot of opportunity for stimulation, and he is proud to be able to make friends in three languages (although going to a school at some distance from home means that he has lost contact with his kindergarten friends). The fact that he is so reluctant to do written tasks, however, is making the evenings very stressful, as he has to do both his homework and what he didn't do at school. A lot of time each evening is spent dealing with the Japanese writing, as he is expected to be at the same level as all Japanese children at that age. His mother is reasonably fluent in Japanese, but it is difficult for her to teach him, which is why they have invested in a private teacher (with whom Mike loves to chat). His father also coaches him in math, to compensate for the possible lack of time for it at school.

It is hoped that Mike will continue on this course until he finishes elementary school. At that time, he may enter a French monolingual class, as his parents are confident he will maintain his English as long as he has Anglophone contacts. The main concern is Japanese. If the burden of kanji becomes too great, he would have to drop it and just goof off in that period. Certainly when he enters secondary school, the pressures of the French curriculum might mean he has to drop out of the Japanese native speaker class, but by that time there will be alternatives for him. If the family leaves Japan, Mike will almost certainly drop Japanese. He would also only be able to study English or French as a foreign language in the normal school curriculum. This is one of the reasons that Mike and his family remain in Japan.

Théo (6 years old)

Théo lived in the U.S.A., then the U.K., and came to Japan when he was 4. His mother, an American, is also trilingual in French, Japanese, and English, having attended the same French school in Japan as a child (in a French monolingual class). His father is Francophone, with a working knowledge of English.

Théo's parents decided when he was born that he should have the benefit of being a completely bilingual child. His mother has always communicated with him in English. His father tries to converse all the time in French, although he sometimes found it difficult to do so in the U.S.A. and England. According to his mother, Théo's first language is definitely English, and for a long time he refused to speak French, even though he understood anything that was said to him in that language. This was the case even in France, so when he arrived at the French school, French was in many respects a second language. As for Japanese, Théo knew none until he came to Japan and very little when he entered the French school.

Originally, Théo's mother put him in the monolingual French stream. She hadn't considered the bilingual option as she felt he should concentrate on his French (and she herself became bilingual despite being in a monolingual class). However, his teacher advised that Théo would be more challenged and interested in a bilingual class. On reflection, his mother realized also that she didn't want her son to miss out on American culture, as she had done, and took the teacher's advice. For Japanese, Théo was originally put in the nonnative-speaker class, but after 6 weeks, he had made such great progress and showed such great enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation that the teachers decided to put him with the native speakers.

His mother thinks that Théo is now "perfectly bilingual" in French and English, because he sounds just like a native speaker. She thinks, however, that his first language is still definitely English: he has a greater vocabulary in English, and he finds English text easier to read. However, French will soon be "on par." As for Japanese, he loves writing in Japanese, spends hours with *hiragana* and *katakana*, and is anxious to get going on kanji. He now has Japanese friends and watches Japanese television, so his mother thinks he is "well on the way to being trilingual." Overall, his mother is impressed by how comfortable her son is with three languages and how he can switch from one to the other depending on who he is talking to. Time spent on the three languages seems to be at no cost to other subjects, and he is doing particularly well at math.

Despite her satisfaction with Théo's progress, his mother expresses some concern about what she sees as a huge gap between the ways English and French are taught. She feels that the level in the French class is higher than that in the English class, which seems like English as a second language rather than a native language. In French, they seem to be methodically covering grammar, spelling, and dictation, whereas in English a lot more play is involved, with songs, poems, drawing, and art. However, her son enjoys the English classes, and she admits that this is just her impression of a rather complex curriculum, which has to balance all subjects between the two languages. As for Japanese, she has no reservations at all, as it seems to suit her son perfectly.

For the purpose of learning Japanese, Théo's mother can see no alternative to the Japanese course. He might be motivated enough to be able to learn Japanese from the environment, but he enjoys the course and is intrinsically interested in the language itself. Similarly, she feels he would definitely become bilingual even in a monolingual French course, both because of his linguistic history and because she herself would continue to teach him. However, she feels that there are other good reasons for taking the bilingual course. She thinks he needs and even appreciates the challenge of going back and forth between the languages every day, and it stimulates him to know that he is

very good at it. Such an environment is also, she feels, good for her son's developing sense of identity. She herself used to feel very segregated as an American studying in a French community and feels that the bilingual class provides a sense of belonging, so that he can be more comfortable at school than she used to be. This is something that she realized during the course of the interview.

As she did not herself have the bilingual educational possibilities, Théo's mother appreciates the chance that has been given to her son. However, she feels that her own experience allows her to understand his, and the fact that she herself is trilingual makes him feel comfortable. In contrast to Mike, Théo enjoys studying and doing tasks. However, they do need to provide a stimulating environment. In particular, his mother thinks that the main challenges are for her to continue to speak English to him, and also for his father to be able to find more time to spend with him, speak French, and encourage a French identity.

While the family remain in Japan, they'll carry on with this educational path. If they leave Japan, Théo's mother does not think it matters if he does not enter another bilingual English/French course, but they will carry on encouraging him at home. As for Japanese, they won't go out of their way to find a Japanese tutor. However, they would encourage him to continue with languages, as he seems to have a talent for it, and she thinks that being able to speak other languages will open up many opportunities for him.

Discussion

It is beyond the scope of this short paper to pinpoint all the particular differences between these two cases, as they would require a detailed discussion of attitudes, experiences, and environment. However, it is clear that they are very different. Although it is tempting to then conclude that a multilingual curriculum should somehow take account of these differences, both of those boys are quite successful in their present courses. Despite certain difficulties, both sets of parents are confident that they have taken the right course and that their children will ultimately be linguistically successful. In terms of this paper's definition of trilingualism as being in terms of the children's own satisfaction with their communicative ability, they are already successful. A certain amount of fine tuning might be appropriate to take account of Mike's dislike of written tasks on the one hand and Théo's need for challenge on the other. However, they are certainly happy and the overall impression is that they will learn to cope.

There is undoubtedly more to say about the school and the curriculum, but the main focus of this study was the parents and their efforts to manage (or live with) the developing trilingualism of their children. Mike is trilingual because he was born and lived in a Japanese environment and he naturally communicated with each of his parents in their own, non-Japanese language. Théo started life by preferring the language of one his parents, which was also the language of the environment. He then found himself in an educational environment in which he found that he was required to use the second language but also discovered that he enjoyed learning a third. The primary contribution of both sets of parents to their children's linguistic development was simply to avoid placing obstacles in their paths. After that, of course, was the decision to place their children in a formal trilingual curriculum. They have had to monitor the situation and tend to it. Educationally, both sets of parents recognize shortcomings in their child's educational curriculum and are prepared to step in when necessary: in Théo's case to provide stimulation, and in Mike's case to coach him in the tasks that he never finds the time to do in class. However, they also need to take care of their children's overall linguistic identities, as discussed earlier. Linguistic, educational, and also cultural aspects of the children's development all need to be in balance.

Perhaps the most important point to take from these two cases is that the parents feel that the children belong where they are because of a certain cultural identification. Despite Mike's parents' reservations about the Japanese native-speaker course, for example, it is where he seems to feel he belongs, as he lives in Japan and wants Japanese friends, and therefore the ability to speak and read Japanese is part of his identity. Mike himself seems to recognize this, and despite his difficulties he refuses to take the foreign learner's class. Théo's mother expressed serious reservations about the English/French course, but it was in the course of the interview that she realized that being in that class was good for his developing sense of identity. Théo is multilingual (and bicultural) and he is happy among other multilingual children.

Conclusion

These two cases are the first explorations in what I hope to be a number of similar studies of trilingual children in Japan. The value of these cases will lie in their ability to illuminate the trilingual child in the context of his or her educational, cultural, and family environment. I hope that the discussion of these two cases has shown that such an illumination is possible, and potentially very useful. In particular, one possibly fruitful and interesting line of enquiry, suggested by the comments of the parents in the course of the interviews, might focus on the importance of developing identities in trilingual children.

Bio data

Tim Knowles has lived in Tokyo since 1980. His main research interest is the motivation of teachers, and he holds a doctorate in educational management from Bristol University, U.K. <eigo-prof@me.com>

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