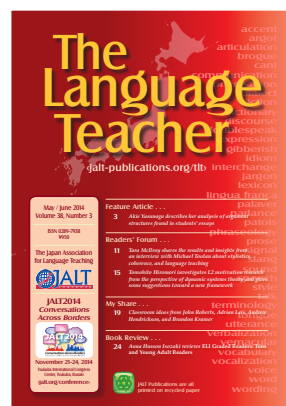


The Language Teacher

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Disclaimer

This article is a shortened version of the article Profiling Mobile English Language Learners that appeared in the April 2014 *JALT CALL Journal*.

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The complicated art of parenting

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Although an increasing number of children are being raised bi-culturally and bilingually, there seems to be little unity in research on the successful “how” of it, especially for languages besides English. Most parents are left at the mercy of trial and error, resulting in varying levels of success. This article relates the visible effects of the one parent, one language (OPOL) method and shows how they vary depending on the time share of each parent with the child(ren). In addition, the article notes how differences in the parents' own upbringing can prove to be an unexpected obstacle. Even so, their ability to act as second-order observers can offer benefits to their children's evolving biculturalism and bilingualism. The author concludes by advocating a shift from a cognitive skill-focused education to developing the intrinsic character and willpower of children.

ますます多くの子どもが複合文化や2言語で育てられているが、特に英語以外の言語での効果的な子育て方法について、一貫性のある研究が少ないようだ。ほとんどの親は、自分たちで試行錯誤をして子育てし、その成果は様々である。本論は、親1人で1言語を話すというOPOL方法は目に見えて効果があることと、子ども（たち）とその親が接する時間の比によって効果が異なるという結果を示す。加えて、両親自身の育てられ方の相違が、思わぬ障害になり得ることも注視する。たとえそうであっても、各親の2次的観察者としての手腕は、複合文化・2言語で学んでいる子どもたちに恩恵を与えることができる。最後に著者は最近の研究に基づいた上で、能力に焦点を当てたスキル重視の教育より、子供に本来備わっている性格と意志力の形成がより重要であると提唱している。

From Flanders to Dazaifu

Throughout Japan, the shrine of Dazaifu Tenmangu is considered *the* place for mothers

SIG Spotlight: Bil SIG

The Bilingualism Special Interest Group's aim is to further research on bilingualism as it occurs in Japan. We also promote mutual support among our members through our newsletter (three time a year), academic publications, and an active email list and Facebook group.



to pray for their children to pass the entrance examination to their university of choice. This atmosphere of learning befits the topic. I am a native Belgian and my wife, Ayuko, is Japanese and grew up in Dazaifu. Before our first daughter was born, a student presented me with the book *Raising a Child to be Bilingual and Bicultural* by Steven Verrier. He and his wife subscribe to the one parent, one language (OPOL) approach to bilingual child raising, and he believes that consistency is key, noting that “if a child has always associated an individual with one particular language, it probably won't occur to the child to speak any other language to that individual” (2003, p. 66).

Since both Ayuko and I experienced a monocultural upbringing, the practical, firsthand advice the book provided seemed to make sense. As a result, from day one I spoke Flemish (which is similar to Dutch in the same way American

English is to British English) to our firstborn, Hanne (now 11), while my wife spoke Japanese. We have tried to do so for the last ten years.

In the early days, I spent most mornings with Hanne, taking her for walks around Dazaifu, reading to her and playing Belgian DVDs and CDs, so her mornings were spent in Flemish. She was also the only one of our three children who attended kindergarten in Belgium in the spring of 2006 when she was three. I was in my final year of business school and needed the time and space to finish up my MBA final project thesis, so Ayuko took Hanne and our second daughter Ine (then one), to Belgium for three months. On the way home from the airport upon their return to Japan, I was excited to hear their stories. I was deeply moved when, for the first time in her life, Hanne spoke Flemish to me in full sentences, using no Japanese at all, as if she had spoken it her entire life. I just sat there in the car, almost in tears, realizing that those first three years of sticking to the OPOL system had laid the groundwork for this progress. I was determined to continue.

Different parental backgrounds

However, after two months of being back in Japan, she had slipped back into speaking mainly Japanese, using only a word of Flemish here and there. It caused me to start reflecting on the process of my own language acquisition. Belgians grow up surrounded by different languages, but that does not mean they are learned automatically. However, I eventually came to speak five languages (three at a near native level, two at intermediate level), despite the lack of apparent need in my environment. I think this was possible because my parents created an atmosphere that would prove very important in stimulating my curiosity to learn.

In *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, Paul Tough outlines the cognitive hypothesis for children's intellectual development, wherein—among other things—fewer words spoken by parents results in a smaller vocabulary for their children, and more math worksheets at Junior Kumon brings better math scores. However, the author contends that it is the non-cognitive skills mentioned in the title of his book that prove more crucial for future success in life. In a similar way, my parents gave me the freedom to follow my own

choices, while constantly supporting me. In retrospect, I believe this was the main reason why I became multilingual.

My wife was raised in a much different environment. She received the typical stoic upbringing often found in traditional Japanese families; as the eldest of three sisters she experienced more scolding, stricter rules for her behavior, guilt trips, and so on. Of course she internalized this, but it was a side of her that I did not know about until we became parents and my wife unconsciously applied the lessons she learned in her own upbringing to the raising of our children. Prospective parents should not overlook this point. They should find out in detail how their spouse was raised as a child and how they felt about it. The way someone was raised by his or her own parents is often considered the “one true way” by that person and can cause no small amount of friction if this is not in line with the other parent's ideas. This is something that same-culture parents may also experience, but the wider the cultural difference gap in mixed-culture marriages, the larger the coefficient effort required to find a middle way.

Exposure, motivation and second-order observation

With my current job at a local university, I am usually out of the door before 7:00 AM and don't get back until 8:30 PM, just in time to give the kids a bath and put them to bed. It may be slightly better than your average *sarariiman* job, but it is far from ideal if you want to raise your children bilingually and biculturally. As a result, our second daughter Ine (8), comprehends Flemish at a level lower than Hanne's, while our son Vigo (5), has the lowest Flemish comprehension level of the three. Even so, he still tries to figure out what I say in Flemish, and when speaking on Skype with Grandpa and Grandpa, the children do their best to make themselves understood.

I don't despair, as I myself only started to learn English in the third year of junior high and steadily improved my skills as I finished my schooling. As a result I feel no restraint expressing myself in English. What I have learnt from my struggles in acquiring other languages is that motivation accounts for 90% of the result, and 10% is the routine of drilling the mechanical skills. The cognitive skills required for developing those mechanical skills may be important

for passing entrance examinations, but they do not guarantee any sort of pragmatic learning. In *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created its Own Lost Generation*, Zielenziger sharply criticizes the modern Japanese school system, saying that while Japanese schools manage to help students pass entrance exams and “drill them to memorize obscure facts and dates, teachers do not encourage pupils to acquire critical thinking skills—analysis, creativity or independent reasoning” (2006, p. 80).

With our children entering and moving through this system, Ayuko and I need to consider this question carefully: How can we teach our children to look for and adopt the best practices of both systems? For mixed-culture families in such an educational milieu, I believe that both parents need to be second-order observers to their children’s development, as they have a unique opportunity to point out to each other (and to the children) approaches to situations and problems from various points of view, and to consider solutions from a wider range of perspectives. Which culture and language becomes (non-) dominant for the children will then be the result of an evolutionary process, rather than something imposed by one parent or the children’s socio-cultural environment, which—in my belief—is a fairer process for the children.

Conclusion

In summary, based on my own observations, there are some basic principles I believe matter most in raising children to be bilingual and bicultural. Ideally the children should have an equal amount of exposure to each parent’s language. Following Verrier’s recommendation, I believe that once a year, the children should visit the non-dominant culture for at least 3-4 weeks, preferably spending time with other children of their age. But more than this explicit pursuit of language skills, I believe it is important to raise children who will have curiosity and strength of character. If you are the non-dominant language parent and you spend a great deal of quality time with your children, it will make a big difference.

Looking at my family’s situation, it is clear that my wife and I have not been able to follow the above principles to the degree that we would like. Indeed, considering the current second language skills of my children, one could conclude that we have failed to raise our

children bilingually and biculturally. But have we really? Through OPOL and our efforts to help our children connect with Belgian language and culture, our children have a healthy interest in Belgium and are definitely not afraid to try and speak Flemish. Even considering their limited exposure, the seeds for growth have been planted. Consequently, I have decided to continue speaking Flemish to my children on a daily basis, in the hope that those seeds will grow into a beautiful flower later in their lives.

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