

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN JAPAN

BY

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ABSTRACT

The following is a proposal for the implementation of a program to promote an additive bilingual program for Vietnamese refugee children in a Japanese elementary school in the Kansai area of Japan. The model to be used would be based on the pluralistic or maintenance idea (sometimes also referred to as the "language shelter model") which promotes language pluralism. In short, this program would entail the use of the childrens' first language (Vietnamese) in all content classes (e.g. math or geography) while the second language (Japanese) would be learned as a subject. The subjects would be made up of two groups- the first comprised of 20 Vietnamese students at one elementary school in the area; and the second, consisting of Vietnamese elementary school age children, at various institutions in the Kansai area. The first group would be given minority language support in the school and the second group would be taught only in the Japanese language. The curriculum would be developed using texts translated from Vietnamese by the Mombusho (Ministry of Education) and currently used at elementary schools throughout Japan. The teachers of the first group would be drawn from the ranks of those Vietnamese bilingual adults currently residing in Kansai. Testing would be conducted in both languages for content skills (e.g. math) as well as general language proficiency in both tongues in order to test the hypothesis that students, given minority language support through the instruction of content class material in their L1 (Vietnamese) would outperform those students without such bilingual educational activities, in all areas. In addition, a self-image and cultural view survey of both language groups will be undertaken in order to see what psychological effects (if any) bilingual education can have in such areas.

INTRODUCTION

"It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue". (UNESCO 1953:11). This claim came as a result of a meeting held in 1951 by the UNESCO specialists on the use of vernacular or minority languages in education. Indeed, based upon psychological and educational research carried out in Canada and the United States it has become more and more apparent that bilingual education may be of great benefit to young children,¹ especially those who are speakers of "low prestige" (Vietnamese in Japan) minority languages.

In recent years, Japan too has found itself facing questions concerned with the benefits of bilingual education. Given its economic power and geographical location, the number of immigrant refugees is increasing and the issue of how best to teach such children, whose first language is not Japanese, is becoming important. The basic strategy up until this time, has been one of "mainstreaming" minority "low-prestige" language children directly into Japanese schools with little or no regard for maintaining or utilizing the childrens' first languages. Hydraulic views of bilingualism being less than desirable have been dominant and the consensus seems to be that the sooner refugee children learn the majority language (Japanese) the better off they will be. Of course, in a heavily homogeneous country like Japan, where conformity is the norm, there are certain advantages in a monolingual population.² However, the developmental demands on children attempting to learn basic cognitive skills are great enough without having the added problem of trying to do so in a foreign language.

Japan would seem to be the epitome of a "subtractive bilingual" environment—that is, one in which the native language of the refugee is lost through its attempts to learn the majority language (Japanese) at all costs. This is more understandable in the case of adults who in most cases already have "developed" in their native language but, in this writer's opinion, is unfair for refugee children. The previously stated situation seems especially true with respect to those languages held to be "non-prestige" by the majority of Japanese people. A case in point is the Vietnamese language spoken natively by many recent immigrants to Japan. Many Vietnamese refugees have come to the Kansai

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region and, although exact numbers are not available, a lot of these are of compulsory school age. These children presently face severe handicaps within the Japanese "Juku" based educational system-an area where even native-speaking Japanese children are in danger of "dropping out" due to the excessive competition factor.³

For the most part, as mentioned above, the Vietnamese are placed directly into the Japanese school system and there is no support for their first language (Vietnamese) supplied there. As a result, they are fast losing their native language skills through attempting to develop basic cognitive abilities in their second language-Japanese. Needless to say, bullying and discrimination are rampant in Japanese language based schools for Vietnamese immigrant children. Indeed, their futures are bleak and many will only become semi-lingual as a result: that is, with very weak language skills in both Vietnamese and Japanese.⁴

While granting that this issue is very political, it is the contention of this author that subtractive bilingualism in Japan must be examined in a new light. By promoting an "additive bilingual education program" (one wherein the second language, in this case Japanese, is picked up without losing the native language-Vietnamese) Japan would give these Vietnamese children a better chance of adapting to a new culture while still maintaining their first language.

Numerous arguments have been put forward in support of bilingual programs. A summary of some of the major ones follows:

"The first language of the child must be used as the initial medium of instruction to ensure that academic progress is not hindered while the majority language can be learned as a subject...

The minority child's general cognitive development will be retarded if he/she does not receive education in the mother tongue, and if the mother tongue is not developed in school...

Minority language teaching is a requirement for a healthy development of the child's personalty and development of a positive self-image...

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Minority language education is necessary to develop the child's first language and this in its turn, is a necessary prerequisite for the successful acquisition of the majority language...

Minority language teaching will help to prevent the forced linguistic and cultural assimilation of minority groups. Cultural plurality can be seen as an enrichment of society as a whole...

Recognition of the language (and culture) of minority groups will improve the social and cultural relations between these groups and rest of society."

Appel & Muysken, 1987:61-62

In order to support a change from subtractive to additive bilingualism (a good change in this writer's opinion), Japan has the opportunity to use some of its Vietnamese refugees in the Kansai area in a controlled experiment in bilingual education. The results of this study experiment would show the effects of an additive approach. Furthermore, it is this author's argument, that Japan has a responsibility to help its new immigrants adjust without robbing them of their first language and their cultural identity.

Readers interested in the differences between subtractive and additive bilingualism are encouraged to read the books listed in the bibliography for greater understanding of bilingual education.

METHOD

The question to be approached here is whether Vietnamese elementary school-age children in a special additive bilingual program will outperform other Vietnamese elementary school-age children in both language proficiency (that is, in both Vietnamese and Japanese) and "basic" content (e.g. math, geography history etc.) tests administered in both languages.

This bilingual program would run for a period of two (2) years and would

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entail the use of a control group consisting of elementary school-age children at various schools in the Kansai area that do not have bilingual education opportunities and a test group of 20 elementary school students. The exact location of this test group would be dependant on many questions that need to be addressed.

Funding for this project would come from a special education grant (either prefectural, national or both). In addition, the subsidies currently available for refugee students would also be utilized. The monies would be used to pay for teacher salaries, testing, supplies, text translations, recordings and administrative tasks.

Testing would be carried out, in order to check the hypothesis that the students in the test group would out-perform those in the control group, as follows: First of all, the students in both groups would be administered language proficiency tests in both Vietnamese and Japanese. These inquiries would test vocabulary, grammar, and perhaps translation ability. In conjunction with these would be content (e.g. math) tests conducted in both languages. It is hypothesized that the scores for the two groups would be very close initially. The tests to be used would be adapted from Mombusho texts and translated into Vietnamese appropriate for elementary school-age children. Subsequent testing would be carried out at four-month intervals throughout the program to get data that could be interpreted from cross-sectional correlations. This could conceivably be done longitudinally, as well, if necessary. In order to test whether bilingual education promotes a more positive self-image, two self-report, psychological questionnaires would also be given in both languages-one initially, and the other towards the end of the project. The students would be asked to comment briefly about both languages and cultures. Of course, the questions would have to be phrased in ways appropriate for child studies.

The teachers to be utilized for the test group in this project would, initially, be drawn from the ranks of adult Vietnamese, possessing Japanese language abilities of rather high degree. For the purposes of Japanese language classes a total immersion approach is recommended with a "team teaching" component involved. These initial Vietnamese nationals to be used as teachers would, ideally,

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have attained a certain academic status in their own country and/or have special skills that would prove beneficial for instruction. True professional teachers of Vietnamese nationality would be welcome if available, but by utilizing only Vietnamese currently residing in Japan, the problem of finding gainful employment for these people would also be dealt with. This would also provide a stronger cohesiveness within the Vietnamese community in Japan itself. In addition, bilingual Japanese staff could be used on a part-time basis should the need arise. This would also help provide a more bilingual atmosphere although the minority language (Vietnamese) would be used as the medium of instruction for the children in the test group and Japanese language classes would be taught as a subject.

Because of the existing attitudes held by most Japanese people towards Vietnamese language and culture, the minority language must be utilized as the medium of instruction. "The minority language itself is not considered a problem, but rather societal attitudes towards the minority language, related to the oppressed socioeconomic position of the group". (Appel and Muysken, 1987: 65). In addition, through the use of the childrens' first language in instruction of content classes, both learning and bilingualism can be enhanced. "The minority language occupies a more important position in the curriculum than the majority language because the weakest language, which has only low prestige outside school, must be supported strongly." (Appel and Muysken, 1987:65).

The curriculum texts, as noted above, would be developed based upon translated Mombusho textbooks and materials that are currently used within the Japanese educational system. This development would incorporate some very basic, and yet, important, questions that must be addressed:

1. Are both languages used during the whole curriculum or only in certain stages
2. Do both languages function as media of communication in the classroom?
3. Is there a one-to-one relationship between subject (like arithmetic or geography) and language, or are both languages used alternately as media of instruction for all subjects except when the languages themselves are subjects?

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4. Are both languages taught as subjects, and is the aim of the bilingual programme literacy in both languages?
5. Do minority children participate in the bilingual programme, or majority language speaking children as well?

Appel and Muysken, 1987:64

We shall now deal with each of these questions as we discuss the curriculum in more detail.

With respect to questions (1) (2) and (3) above, it would probably seem most appropriate to promote the use of both languages in the sense that in an additive bilingual context, both would be acceptable from the student in the content classes although these would initially be taught exclusively in the minority language (Vietnamese) only. The students in the test group could not be completely segregated from the other (Japanese) students, nor, in this writer's opinion, would this be a good idea at any rate. The two groups should interact as much as possible. In best terms, the schedule should be set up to allow the classes to be taught at the same time for both groups. That is, when the majority language (Japanese) students were receiving instruction in, for example, science or math, the Vietnamese group would be also. The only differences would be in the classrooms and the languages used for instruction. That is, they would be in different rooms and the minority (for the Vietnamese students) and majority (for the Japanese nationals) languages would be utilized accordingly. Such a situation would allow Vietnamese students to join the Japanese students in non-content classes-such as art or physical education and consequently not allow a complete segregation. Therefore, the Vietnamese students would be expected to use different languages at different times. It should be kept in mind, however, that in the minority language taught classes, answers given in the majority (i.e. Japanese) language would not be considered "wrong" or "bad" because of the language utilized. However, the opposite case, answers given in Vietnamese in non-content classes would or could not be encouraged.⁵

With respect to question (4) it should be said that both languages would be taught as subject classes for the Vietnamese with the only difference being that

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the Japanese language classes would be taught in a segregated fashion at the school and that the Vietnamese language class would be held at a nearby refugee center (should this be an option) or perhaps at the school itself. The aim would certainly be competency in both languages.

Question number (5) is certainly interesting. Of course, Japanese students would be welcomed and even encouraged to attend the Vietnamese language classes. However, this is certainly an option and the issue of immersion in this case is, at best, problematic and this author does not recommend it at this time.⁶

A Vietnamese cultural festival would hopefully be carried out to help promote closeness between the Japanese and Vietnamese students and their families. Songs, plays, foods, and etc. could be shared and the experience could certainly help to foster better relations as well as a sense of pride on the part of Vietnamese children in their culture and a better understanding of another culture on the part of the Japanese school children.

The control group would not have the advantage of such minority support. These students would be put directly into regular Japanese language classrooms for all their classes both content and non-content. In other words, all instruction would be in Japanese.⁷

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

It is the contention of this writer that the students in the special bilingual program would outperform those students devoid of any minority language support. This would especially be true in the case of content classes. The students who learned content material in their first language (Vietnamese) would also be more bilingual and have a greater sense of pride in being from Vietnam. The self-image of these students from the bilingual program would be far healthier. It is also hypothesized by this writer that through this "study" a greater awareness of "other" cultures and appreciation of them can be fostered in young Japanese elementary school-age children and their families.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to show possible ways that a bilingual education program could be implemented in Japan. Such a program would enable both the Vietnamese children taking part in it and the Japanese children they are in contact with, to benefit. By suggesting an additive approach to bilingualism (as opposed to a subtractive one which seems to be the norm here) it is hoped that education, not only in Japan but also elsewhere, will be able to judge the merits of additive bilingualism and the implications inherent within it for their own schools.

1. There is numerous written material on this subject and related areas. The interested reader is encouraged to see "MIRROR OF LANGUAGE" by K. Hakuta for a discussion of bilingual research in the United States and "BILINGUALISM" by Cummins and Swain for a discussion of Canadian bilingual attempts.
2. See Appel and Muysken pages 62-63 for a complete list of arguments in favor of a monolingual population.
3. Taken from articles about Japanese education and cram schools in "JAPAN AS IT IS".
4. It is assumed that minority language support would help promote a better self-image and sense of identity as well as a more positive view of both languages and cultures. The interested reader should also see "BILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION" by Hakuta and Garcia as well as a report submitted to the House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee (1986) for more discussion of this issue.
5. Complete segregation is not what is desired. There must be interaction between Vietnamese and Japanese children to promote good relations and L2 development for the Vietnamese children.
6. Given the relatively low number of Vietnamese refugees and the lack of respect for other Asian languages by the vast majority of Japanese people, this may be too sensitive of an issue to bring up at this time.
7. The students in this group would be in typical Japanese schools which do not offer minority support. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of their instruction would be in the Japanese language and little or no instruction would take place in Vietnamese at the schools themselves.

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