

1

Cultivating Bilingual Oracy and Literacy in L1 English-speaking Children Raised in Japan

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THIS IS AN account of raising my two Australian daughters, Elizabeth and Annabel, while they attended local Japanese schools from kindergarten through to the first year of high school. We were an Australian family of four from monolingual English-speaking backgrounds, who had moved to Japan to work in Matsuyama, Shikoku. After eight years in Matsuyama we moved to Tokushima, by which time Elizabeth was in the first year of middle school and Annabel was in the fourth year of primary school. The early stage of the elder daughter, Elizabeth's, biliteracy in Japanese and English has been previously documented (Stephens and Blight, 2002; 2004). This account will describe the development of bilingualism of both daughters, and include the development of their biliteracy until the present.

Although attaining balanced bilingualism would be ideal, I considered it to be unrealistic; it was more likely that one of the languages would be dominant. My aim was for them to achieve a good level of Japanese oracy and literacy, and the equivalent levels of English oracy and literacy to their Australian peers, so that they could return to Australia to resume their studies whenever necessary. I was among the fourth generation of English literacy educators in my maternal line; my mother, grandmother and great grand aunts Agnes and Frances had taught children to read English in schools in South Australia, and I was not about to let my own children down, simply because of a relocation to Japan.

Oral Language

As a background to their literacy development, I will explain the importance I attached to the development of their spoken language. One of the most important writers to inform my thinking was Frances Christie:

Oral language is of primary importance and (the point may seem obvious, but it cannot be overestimated) no child could learn to read or write without a very well-established oral language (1984, p.65).

Once we were in Japan I made every effort to ensure our daughters maintained a firm foundation in oral English. The family language was English, television programs were in English, and most of their free time happened to be spent playing with other bilingual children. However, I stopped short of insisting that they speak English. I wanted them to learn to choose which language to speak, and with which interlocutor, by themselves. I did not wish to imply that one language was 'better' than another. After a long day at school Elizabeth would come home and address me in Japanese for the first few hours, gradually making the transition to English as the evening progressed. I made no comment about language choice, and replied to her in English. I did make sure we devoted a lot of time to conversing in English, albeit without labouring the point, to make up for the lack of English input from the society.

It was more natural for our second daughter Annabel to speak English, being the youngest in a family of English speakers. Even in Shikoku, and with no particular encouragement from me, Annabel managed to find best friends who were English speakers. In Matsuyama, she spoke English most days with her best friend Alice. In Tokushima, her best friend in middle school was from Kenya, and they spoke English whenever they were together, except when the teachers reprimanded them for it.

The long school day was conducted entirely in Japanese. The reason why I was not particularly concerned about their English literacy when they were attending Japanese primary school was that I had taken Frances Christie's (1984) explanation above to heart. My responsibility was to give them the best oral foundation possible, and I assumed that the literacy could be learnt later when they were in a community in which English literacy was necessary (see Gee, 2014).

It was not enough to simply converse to our daughters in English. We had to provide the foundations for early literacy by exposing them to the kind of literary English which is not found in everyday conversation. This was in the pre-digital age, and before leaving for Japan in 1999 I sought information from JALT's Bilingualism Special Interest Group. I learnt what a struggle it could be to maintain children's English when they attended Japanese schools. I therefore armed myself with six months of video

tapes of a high quality Australian children's television program called *Play School*. Once in Japan, we had to buy a special video player to play these videos on the alternative format. *Play School* was an ideal entry into literacy, because it featured rhymes, songs and other language awareness activities. It was almost as enjoyable for parents as for children, and my English friend Joyce, soon became a bigger fan of *Play School* than her bilingual pre-schooler daughter, Alice. The reason I was aware of the importance of providing pre-literacy input was because of the writings of the acclaimed children's author Mem Fox (2013), who has alerted parents to the importance of reading to their children. I was particularly struck by her advice to read three stories a day to babies from birth, and that children needed to hear one thousand stories read to them before they started to read. Fox also stresses the importance of rhyme, rhythm and repetition. These were exactly the kind of activities that were featured on *Play School*.

Nevertheless, children cannot learn all they need to learn by being plunked down in front of a screen. I brought a range of children's books with me from Australia, and tried to put Mem Fox' advice into practice by reading aloud to them. My friend Joyce had similarly brought many children's books to Japan from England, and we enjoyed exchanging children's books and videos. Years later I became familiar with the writings of Bryant and Bradley (1985), which confirmed the value of having my children listen to rhyme and having books read aloud to them. Similar to Christie (1984), I considered that it was hearing the sound of the language that mattered, rather than simply decoding the print on the page: 'Measures of children's sensitivity to rhyme and alliteration predict their progress in reading, and teaching them about rhyme and alliteration enhances that progress' (Bryant and Bradley, 1985, p. 66). The timing of developing sensitivity to rhyme is critical; Bryant and Bradley explain that the awareness of rhyme children develop before starting school is predictive of their reading and writing skills after they begin school (p. 50). My awareness of the importance of listening to the sound of literary English was prompted by having read Christie (1984) and Fox (2001), but it was later confirmed to me by Bryant and Bradley's (1985) study.

Another study that confirmed to me the value of rhyme, well after my children had finished pre-school, was Cook's (2000) *Language play, language learning*. Cook explains the function of rhyme and rhythm as 'an aid to, even a precondition, of literacy' (2000, p.26). Concerning nursery rhymes, Cook explains: 'rhythmic breaks not only coincide with linguistic boundaries, they also emphasize those boundaries much more than they would be emphasized in everyday speech. Grammar, rhythm and actions all echo each other.' (p. 15) Leading figures such as Wolf (2008) concur: 'Tucked inside Hickory, dickory, dock, a mouse ran up the clock and other rhymes can be found a host of potential aids to sound awareness- alliteration, assonance, rhyme, repetition. Alliterative and rhyming

sounds teach the young ear that words can sound similar because they share a first or last sound' (2008, p. 99). I have become so persuaded of the importance of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration for the development of English literacy by my own children that I have been advocating it in the L2 English classroom in Japan ever since.

Cross-Linguistic Transfer of Literacy

I was not particularly worried that acquiring literacy in Japanese would be detrimental to my children's English literacy. Rather I believed that the acquisition of English literacy could be facilitated by positive transfer from Japanese. This was because I had been influenced by Jim Cummins's work about the positive transfer of literacy skills between languages. This was the topic their father and I had explored in the 2004 (Stephens & Blight) study, and it informed my decision to encourage my daughters to acquire Japanese literacy.

Therefore, Cummins's (1979) claim that reading skills could be transferred between languages was pivotal: 'the ability to extract meaning from printed text can be transferred easily from one language to another' (p.234). As for writing, it has been suggested that the skill of spelling is language specific and does not transfer to languages which are not related orthographically (Cummins, 1991; Genesse, 1979; Gray, 1986). Nevertheless, underlying discourse competencies may be transferred (Cummins, 1979; 1984a). Having come from monolingual English speaking backgrounds, relatives in Australia expressed concern that we had chosen to educate our daughters in a different language. I stubbornly persisted in the hope that insights from Christie (1984), that I should provide a firm foundation in oral English, and Cummins (1979), that literacy skills would transfer from one language to another, would prove my decision to bring them up bilingually, to be the right one.

Maintaining English

Despite being fluent in English, Elizabeth and Annabel were not granted an exemption from the study of English at school. As a teacher trainer, I am committed to progressive methods of language education (eg., Mickan, 2013), so it was difficult to restrain myself from commenting on the language teaching methodology of reading passages followed by comprehension questions, and fill-in-the blanks exercises, consisting of lists of sentences out of context. Nevertheless, I belonged to the school as a parent and not as a professional, so I made no comment on the content of the English classes.

I was influenced by Kamada's (1997, p. 57) findings that frequent or long stays in the home country facilitated bilingualism for children brought up

in Japan. In order to maintain their English, we returned to Australia in both the spring and summer; Elizabeth and Annabel attended the local primary and then high schools. These periods enabled them to attain a level of spoken English that sounded completely natural. I attribute this to the influence of their peers; the time spent playing with their Australian friends enabled them to use the vocabulary of the peer group, and socialize them into the use of Australian English. After making friends in Australia their spoken English became almost indistinguishable from that of their peers. Nevertheless, traces of my idiolect of English are also apparent, a result of the many hours of conversation we enjoyed in Japan.

Middle School

I chose to send my daughters to a Japanese middle school firstly because I wanted them to maintain and develop their Japanese, and secondly because there was no ready alternative. The nearest international schools were in Kobe, and this would have necessitated boarding. A further reason was the opinion of another parent of a bicultural child, that children would not attain an acceptable standard of Japanese literacy unless they attended a Japanese middle school.

As many readers in Japan will understand, the middle school experience was characterized by extensive testing. Indeed, years later, this is my lasting impression of middle school. Every term students were tested regularly and provided with an assessment record of their grades in each subject. Furthermore, children were ranked against all of the other children in the school according to these grades. Some parents would threaten their children that unless they came within the top fifty they would take their cell phones away from them.

The threat of poor grades in these regular tests prompted me to send my elder daughter to a *juku*. The first *juku* she attended was run by a very strict teacher who told her that even if she managed to get into the high school of her choice she would not survive there. At the second *juku* she was enrolled in a program where she had to complete worksheets. She was having trouble understanding and so I advised her to ask the teacher. Nevertheless, she was chided for asking questions. As an educator, I considered questions to be at the very heart of learning, or at least of the Socratic technique of which I was so fond, and so I withdrew her from this *juku* too.

On the advice of one of the members of the Bilingualism Special Interest Group, who was then the editor of the educational column in the newsletter *Bilingual Japan*, I decided to enlist the help of a home tutor. I asked one of my top former students to tutor Elizabeth. Because he was a student and I had been his teacher, I was in a position to educate him in the methodology I required him to use. I requested him to teach through

dialogue, questioning, providing reasons, and not through lecturing and having Elizabeth fill out worksheets. This worked out very successfully. Although we had been warned that it would be almost impossible for Elizabeth to get into the top high school in Tokushima, thanks to the help of her tutor, she indeed managed to pass the entrance exam.

The wait to receive this happy news however was excruciating. There were more applicants than available high school places. I found this troubling, because I come from a state in Australia where the compulsory schooling age has been raised to seventeen. Meanwhile in Japan, students could only apply for one school, and parents had to guess how many spaces would be open and the likelihood of gaining entry to the school. The newspaper published daily reports of the number of openings available in each school. Those who did not manage to enter a public high school could attend a fee-paying private school instead, attend a distant public school in the countryside, or the special public school for those who had not managed to get into another school. The pressure was intense. Because my daughters were English speakers, they had one fewer subject to study than everyone else. However, because Japanese was not the language of the home, they had to work harder at Japanese than their peers in the other four subjects.

High School in Japan

Because I was employed in Japan I was keen to continue to educate my daughters here. There was no international school within commuting distance, so with considerable trepidation I had them sit for the entrance exams to local high schools. Although they gained entry, neither of them lasted the first year of high school.

As already mentioned, Elizabeth gained entry into a prestigious public high school. Again, there was regular testing and ranking against the class and the entire year level in the core subjects. English continued to be compulsory, so she had one fewer subject to study than the other students. She was particularly challenged in *Kobun*, or classical Japanese, but the teacher kindly let her off because she was a foreigner. I was not tempted to complain of discrimination, and was rather relieved that she had been given special treatment.

The homework and testing were onerous, and Elizabeth began to lose motivation, in a similar way to some of my students at the university. Not only were there school tests, there were also national tests administered by a private educational company, and her grades in the three core subjects of Japanese, Maths and English were plotted on a graph against the school and national average. Her grades began to suffer. I was reluctant to have her follow the same stressful path of cramming for another entrance examination, this time for university. The time was approaching when

it would be the beginning of Year 11 in Australia. I reluctantly decided to send her to a school in Australia, a long way away from Tokushima. She sat for the entrance examination in Maths and English at a university-based senior school, and passed. I attributed her success at least partly to the kind of transfer of literacy skills between languages that Cummins (1979) described.

Three years later, her younger sister Annabel gained entrance into an agricultural high school a few kilometres from home in Tokushima. The most fun event was the volleyball. The sports teachers were enthusiastic and attentive, and Annabel thrived at volleyball. Nevertheless, possibly because of conflict between the players, the volleyball club was disbanded, and the one pleasure Annabel had at school was gone. It was a long cycle to school in heavy traffic. Several of the girls in her group of friends stopped attending school, and it seemed that non-attendance was acceptable. Annabel stopped attending too, and then I decided to send her to Australia to complete her schooling.

High School in Australia

It had been a very hard decision to send Elizabeth to finish high school in Australia, and the Japanese school kindly held her place in case she wanted to return. From the first day at school in Australia, I kept asking her if we had made the right decision, and every time she responded 'yes'. At the time, she was more comfortable in Japanese than English. She preferred reading books in Japanese to English, and expressed concern about having to read books in English. She was initially uneasy at having to speak English with her Australian friends.

Year 11 was a challenging year academically, as Elizabeth made the transition to English-medium schooling. It was perhaps compounded because her appearance suggested she belonged to the mainstream, whereas she had been hitherto educated in public schools in Japan. The teachers were confused because her spoken English conformed to that of the majority and yet she had not achieved the standard of literacy that was typical of her Australian peers. Nevertheless, at age 16 she still had the potential to catch up, and by Year 12 she was able to choose the mainstream English subject rather than English as an Additional Language. By the time she was half way through her Year 12 course she appeared to have caught up with her peers, and the following years at university she managed to achieve good results.

Annabel faced very similar challenges when she relocated to the Australian high school. Again, the teachers were confused, because first impressions suggested she was a local Australian teenager, when in fact she did not have the literacy foundation that her peers enjoyed. In Year 11 the teacher suggested that she take English as an Additional Language rather

than the mainstream English subject in Year 12. I was taken aback at this because, despite having brought her up in Japan, we had made considerable efforts to maintain her English. Instinctively I felt that she would be able to manage with the mainstream English subject, and so I ignored the teacher's advice. Annabel did in fact manage to do well in the Year 12 mainstream subject known as 'English Communications'. Christie's (1984) insights of providing a foundation in oral language, and Cummins's (1979; 1984a) notion of the transfer of discourse competencies across languages, had proven right.

Maintaining Japanese in Australia

The Australian curriculum offers separate language courses for first and second language speakers. In order for Elizabeth to maintain her Japanese in Australia, she enrolled at the School of Languages in Adelaide for weekly Japanese lessons. This public school offers 28 languages, including Indigenous, African, Asian and European languages. Elizabeth enrolled in Years 11 and 12 'Japanese for Background Speakers'. On her first day when she entered the classroom the teacher was confused because of her appearance, and advised her that the Russian class was across the corridor. Similar confusion ensued on the day of the fire drill, when all the students had to group outside according to their language groups. Elizabeth lined up with her other class members, who were mostly international students from Japan, and who had chosen Background Japanese in order to maintain and develop their L1 Japanese during their sojourn in Australia. Elizabeth was conspicuous as a member of the Japanese class, and attracted attention from students in the other language classes. Apart from these isolated incidents, the class members soon became used to her, and she really enjoyed reverting to her Japanese self during the lessons. Thanks to the School of Languages, Elizabeth was able to maintain her Japanese literacy in the Australian educational system.

Similarly, when Annabel returned to Australia, she also enrolled at the School of Languages. Like her elder sister, she really enjoyed the opportunity to make friends with Japanese exchange students. She could find a part of herself that couldn't be expressed in the mainstream English language culture, and looked forward to the weekly lessons. Speaking Japanese with her Japanese peers enabled her to relax in a way that was difficult in English, and she particularly enjoyed their distinctive Japanese sense of humour.

Influence on English from Japanese

The most noticeable influence on their English literacy from the years of living in Japan has been their spelling. When Elizabeth took the Litera-

cy and Numeracy (LAN) test in Australia which was then conducted in Years 3, 7 and 9, she scored higher than the state average for all aspects of literacy other than spelling. Presently both of them are completing their education in Australia, but neither has caught up to their peers in terms of the accuracy of their spelling. They rely on a spell checker to complete their essays. Apart from spelling, reading and writing skills have not suffered from their neglect during the time in Japanese schools. The interdependency of literacy between the languages, identified in Elizabeth's early years of primary school, arguably continues to exert an effect. The only noticeable difference from their peers in spoken English is the occasional use of singular pronouns in object position instead of plural ones. In response to the question, 'Where are your socks?' they may answer, 'I can't find it.' No-one has ever remarked on this however, either because my daughters speak so quickly and naturally, or out of politeness. This error remains a question for psycholinguistic research.

Influence on Japanese after relocation to Australia

First I will discuss the transition of dominance from Japanese to English of my elder daughter Elizabeth. When she was in Japan she preferred to read in Japanese to in English, and it was an achievement for her to read a novel in English. In the Australian high school, she was required to read novels in English, and this initially posed a challenge to her. After the intense reading requirements of senior secondary school in Australia, her preferred language for reading switched to English. This trend continued during her time at the Australian university. This has had implications for her knowledge of Japanese vocabulary. Her knowledge of academic English vocabulary expanded rapidly whereas that of Japanese remained stagnant. She returns to Japan in every southern hemispheric summer, and although still fluent in Japanese, displays gaps in her knowledge of vocabulary. Recently while visiting a doctor in Tokushima, I was surprised to hear her code-switch to English for the term 'side effects'. Elizabeth is concerned about maintaining her Japanese, and colleagues at my current university welcome her to visit their lectures, and answer her questions about them afterwards. She is also determined to read my colleague's books in Japanese. On her latest visit Elizabeth purchased additional Japanese books and shipped them back to Australia.

As other parents of bilingual children will testify, the trajectory of bilingualism is not identical for siblings. This is because the children are likely to have arrived in Japan at different ages, and had different experiences from each other once in Japan. Annabel's pattern of linguistic dominance and preference differed from her elder sister's. When we lived in Matsuyama, the children went to school every morning with the designated group, known as *tokohan*. When I moved to Tokushima for em-

ployment, Annabel was in fourth grade primary school and Elizabeth in middle school. There was no *tokohan* in Tokushima, and instead children walked to school with their friends rather than with a designated group. Although few children were accompanied to school by their parents, I acted as I would have done in Australia, and accompanied Annabel to and from school daily. I have been afflicted for many years with a condition my Japanese students tell me is called *shokugyobyō*, which refers to the need to extend your working habits into every sphere of your life. This condition is not limited to Japan, and indeed my forebears who had been teachers had had serious cases of it. Accordingly, I acted as Annabel's English teacher during our thirty minute journeys to and from school. I may have been too successful, because Annabel was in the unusual position of being dominant in English despite having attended Japanese schools since kindergarten. Annabel may have sounded like a middle-class teacher when she got back to Australia, but since arriving there has largely managed to pick up the new register of 'teenager talk'.

Besides English input from her mother, Annabel had two very close English speaking friends in Japan. In primary school Annabel played most days with her bilingual friend Alice, and in middle school she spent most of her time with her Kenyan friend. Both of these friendships were conducted in English. This was not due to my influence; Elizabeth also had a close bicultural friend, but they nearly always spoke in Japanese. Because Annabel had always had a preference for English, she did not need to switch language preferences once she relocated to Australia.

Conclusions

In total, my daughters spent three years of kindergarten and nearly ten years of primary and middle school in the Shikoku education system. I am grateful for the insights from researchers such as Christie and Cummins because even in a remote part of Japan they were able to develop and maintain their spoken and written English while being educated in Japanese. In retrospect, I think the effort devoted to the development of oral English that has provided the foundation for the later development of their literacy, and that discourse competence in written Japanese has played a role in supporting their written English.

As for their Japanese, their proficiency is due to the many hard-working, professional and dedicated teachers who taught them from kindergarten through to the first year of high school. In Shikoku we were very unusual, because we came from English speaking backgrounds. Although English speakers may sometimes be excluded from the need to speak Japanese, the local teachers took the task of educating Elizabeth and Annabel in Japanese extremely seriously. In primary school in Tokushima the children had to keep a daily diary entry, which the teachers responded to

daily. Their proficiency in Japanese was due not only to their homeroom teachers, but to all the teachers of sport, music and art, and the principal who unfailingly greeted the children at the school gate every morning come rain or shine. All of these teachers who gave them individual attention contributed to their Japanese oracy and literacy. Being part of the local community, and having a sense of belonging and inclusion, provided the necessary background to their learning of Japanese.

Achieving a balance between the proficiency in the respective languages has been a difficult objective to attain. The environment of the society exerts a huge influence on their proficiency in each language, and since returning to Australia the pendulum has swung towards English. In their mid-teens issues of identity became increasingly important for my daughters. They began to identify more keenly with peers in their country of origin, Australia. Perhaps for this reason, their spoken and written English is flourishing and their Japanese is suffering from some degree of attrition. Although I have not been able to ensure that they attained balanced bilingualism, it is at least possible to demonstrate that English oracy and literacy may be developed and maintained for children up to the first year of high school in the Japanese educational system.

Note: Pseudonyms have been used for friends and family members, other than great grand aunts.

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