

Raising tots to be multilingual

“One day when I was playing in the park with my son, I noticed a very strange sight,” said Simon Downes, President of Simon BEAR School in Bunkyo Ward, Tokyo. “A lady in front of me who appeared to be Japanese was speaking English to her son. ‘Can you kick the ball to me?’ ‘Is that fun?’ ‘Wow, what’s that?’ etc. This woman seemed to be alone, but I thought she must be married to a Westerner or something. Then I saw her husband. He was Japanese, too. So I asked her what she was doing.”

The mother was Kaori Ihara, and what she was doing was deliberately speaking English to her son, Kai. She has been doing that since Kai was born. Her purposes are to broaden his horizons and make English easy and natural for him, rather than let him suffer “the mental stress which kids get from studying second languages” in schools.

Ihara has never lived abroad and says her English is far from perfect (“when Kai was born, I didn’t even know how to say ‘diaper’”). But she and her husband decided that speaking English in their daily lives would be one of the best ways for Kai to be bilingual and, in the process, for them to improve their own English. Kai speaks English at home about two-thirds of the time, and Japanese the rest of the time and with his Japanese friends.

Now Kai is almost 2 years and 9 months old. Like most toddlers learning English, he produces complicated English sentences with some mistakes. Examples are: “Mommy, I scared him because he was on the trampoline.” “The first driver was waving to us and the two driver was waving to us, but the third driver wasn’t waving to us.” “The ball is under the couch. Can you get it? I can’t reach.” Many Japanese high school graduates would be proud to speak English that well.

Grassroots movement

The Ihara family is not alone. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Japanese families are deliberately raising their children to be bilingual in English and

Japanese. This is a grassroots movement (meaning that it did not come from any government or other formal group). Perhaps it is even a reaction against the poor results of official efforts. It is a strong movement, and it is growing.

Ihara is a communicator. She operates a web site, <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/eigo/kosodate/> (in Japanese). She has an e-mail mailing list of 300 members who exchange views and information, and she writes a monthly magazine that she sends to 800 members. She also teaches two twice-a-month classes, limited to 10 mothers per class.

Ihara's friendship with Downes led to his offering "Eigo de Kosodate" (raising children with English) classes at Simon BEAR School. In 9 months, participation has grown to 3 weekly classes with 4 families per class. Whole families attend — not only mothers and young children, but also siblings, fathers, grandparents and other relatives.

In general, Downes said, parents want their children to add a new language without losing the first language or any part of their cultural identity. They want to "teach the enjoyment and naturalness of English by themselves, using videos, reading picture books, and some speaking in their daily lives." The emphasis in Simon BEAR classes is not so much on teaching English during class as it is on showing parents how they may use English with their children in a fun way during daily life.

The grassroots growth of raising children with English requires a lot of communication among parents. This is taking place through the creation of "circles," loosely organized groups for mutual information and support. Ihara's web site is the center of one circle. Downes estimates that there are more than 80 children's English circles in Japan.

Multilingual children

Many Japanese parents worry that learning English too well and too early may limit their children's mastery of Japanese language and culture. That worry is typical of members of monolingual societies contemplating bilingualism. Multilingual parents do not seem to have such qualms.

Earlier this year, after writing "What parents need to know," (*The Daily Yomiuri*, June 6) and "Learning languages before age 6" (July 4), I heard from some parents who are raising their babies to speak several languages. I will describe two such cases.

Ryusei, now 14 months old, lives in Belgium with his Japanese mother and Belgian father. At home, Ryusei's parents speak Japanese, English and French. Ryusei's father also speaks Italian, Dutch, and some Arabic. Ryusei hears Italian and Japanese songs, enjoys a CD of Peruvian legends in French, and watches TV programs in Japanese (Okaasan to Issyo), English and Dutch (he loves "Nijntje" — Miffy — in Dutch). He also hears a lot of classical music and jazz.

At first, Ryusei's parents intended to adopt the rule of "one parent, one language" (a popular notion although it is unsupported by research). But then they realized that "since we naturally talked to each other in either Japanese, English or French, we ought not to try to stick to 'one parent, one language.' Not being natural would be totally inappropriate!"

Ryusei's mother uses a lot of gestures when talking with him, and that helps him understand; she also reads a lot of books to him.

Ryusei began to talk when he was 10 months old. He used some single words, such as "Maman" (French for Mama) and "iya" (Japanese for no). He used to say "nemu" (sleepy) but now, at 14 months, he has switched to "nenne" (go to sleep). Also, his father reports, Ryusei speaks "incredibly long sentences in his own language, explaining what he has seen or done and making a lot of gestures."

Linguists have commented on this style of learning. In addition to piecemeal learning of individual words, many children practice the sound and melody of whole long utterances, even before they are able to populate the utterances with comprehensible words and expressions.

Presumably, Ryusei is practicing several kinds of what we might call melodic lines for each of the languages he is hearing. It is this melodic sensitivity that will help him frame an utterance consistently within the spirit and syntax of a language.

Another multilingual child is Alexis, whose father is Japanese and mother is "Kiwi Chinese," a New Zealander of Chinese parentage. Alexis was born in New Zealand and moved to Japan when he was 11 months old. His father speaks Japanese and English to him, and his mother speaks English, Chinese, and Japanese. Now almost 3 years old, Alexis speaks English, Chinese, and Japanese. He knows the English and hiragana alphabets, 30 other Kanji characters and numbers in three languages.

But that is not all. Around age 1, Alexis spent 3 months in Malaysia with his grandmother, who spoke the Foochow dialect of Chinese. He quickly learned to understand everything she said, and was picking up Malay as well by the time his family moved to Japan.

Alexis attends a Japanese toddler's playgroup once a week, and attended an English playgroup for 9 months. His mother spends a lot of time with him, not following any theory but just doing what he wants to do, which includes "a computer that he can control, using English games from a British Broadcasting Corporation website, other kids' sites, songs, story books (he loves *Maisy*), toys, homemade toys including my kitchen tools, VCDs, videos, flash cards, outdoor recreation, etc."

I conclude from these success stories that, whether children are raised to be bilinguals or multilinguals, one common element is that they are having fun. For them, language learning is not drudgery. There is no pressure, no atmosphere of stress. The children are doing what they want to do: communicating with important people around them, and finding fun new ways to communicate.

This series of columns is an attempt to reconcile views of language teachers, theorists and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send e-mail to **mrchilds@tokai.or.jp** or letters to The Daily Yomiuri. The column will return on December 26.

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