Opening a Japanese Saturday School in a Small Town in the United States: Community Collaboration to Teach Japanese as a Heritage Language

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Abstract

This article addresses the problem of how immigrant parents from Japan can pass on their native language, Japanese, to their children in a location where ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) is low. The case study is an overview of an opening of a Saturday school to teach Japanese as a heritage language. The school is located in a small town in the northeastern region of the United States. Its background, curriculum, and community support, as well as parents' efforts, are described. It is obvious that Saturday schools are one of the most effective ways to teach children a heritage language, since parents' efforts, patience, and resources are limited. Cooperation among parents and community support are essential. The school became not only a place to teach the language, but also a center for the ethnic group to share their values and identity, which were passed on to the next generation in the small community. Factors that contributed to the success of the Saturday school are also discussed.

Introduction

Generally speaking, bilingual education was looked upon negatively until the 1960s, but recent research has indicated many positive and advantageous aspects of bilingualism. The development of heritage language has been found to be positively related to the development of the language of the dominant group (English in most of the studies) and overall academic success (Cummins & Nakajima, 1987; Fernandez & Nielsen, 1986; Nakajima, 1988; Nielsen & Lerner, 1986; Oketani, 1997; Ono, 1989), to concept formation (Peal & Lambert, 1962) and even to visual-spatial abilities (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). Fluency in a heritage language was also positively related to psychological well-being, including self-esteem, more ambitious plans for the future and self confidence (Huang, 1995; Garcia, 1985) and to positive socio-psychological attitudes

towards the speakers' ethnicity and multiculturalism (Oketani, 1997). From the society's point of view, bilingual and multilingual abilities will become increasingly important for a diverse population in the United States, as evidenced by the statements of Cummins and Danesi (1990), "linguistic resources are economic resources" (p. 77), and Krashen, "Heritage language speakers could be an important natural resource; nurturing and developing heritage languages may be a good thing for the economy and the balance of trade" (1998, p. 7).

Aside from these scholastic and practical issues, it is natural for most parents who speak a minority language in the United States as their mother tongue, to want to pass their language on to their children, irrespective of the debates of scholars. According to Noro (1997), who conducted surveys in Canada, there are six main reasons for the first generation of Japanese to teach their native language to their children: (a) to communicate with their children, (b) to preserve parental authority, (c) to have pride in their Japanese ethnicity, (d) to understand both cultures, (e) to have an advantage for a future career, and (f) to communicate with relatives and people in Japan. Ultimately, the children will choose which language will be spoken at home in their own families when they grow up, but at the very least they should be informed as to why their parents want them to pass on their language, and they should be provided the environment in which to study the language when they are children.

However, it is not easy to provide an ideal environment to raise additive bilingual children in the United States. While both the United States and Canada are multi-cultural countries, they are different in their attitudes toward and policies in governing heritage language education. In the United States, bilingual education is aimed at smoothly shifting the minority language to English in order for second-language speakers to become members of society as soon as possible. English as a second language (ESL) classes are offered for this reason, and the children are expected to shift to English as quickly as possible so that they can be transferred into the regular classes to be with their native English-speaking classmates. Therefore, one of the major concerns of parents and ESL teachers is how soon children can transfer out of ESL classes and be accepted into regular classes. This even becomes a competition among parents of the children in ESL programs. Very often parents of children in ESL are advised by inexperienced teachers to encourage their children to use English at home to help their children's English proficiency. This encourages the children's language shift to English and the loss of their heritage language. The emphasis has been placed on the improvement of their English skills, often at the expense of their native language skills (Draper & Hicks, 2000, p. 15). In Canada, on the other hand, language policy and perspectives toward heritage language education are quite different from those in the United States. Heritage language is encouraged and maintained, and

the government establishes heritage language policy, although the policy differs slightly from state to state. The purpose of heritage language education in Ontario, Canada, for example, aims to promote the values of one's inherited language and culture, to promote communication with parents and children as well as the family and the community, and to prepare bilingual people to deal with a multi-cultural society. Therefore, in Canada, children can learn their heritage language in a formal educational setting, even in elementary schools (Nakajima, 1998). Language and culture inherited from parents is a part of children's personal values and unique characteristics, and people who understand their heritage languages, in addition to English (and/or French), are considered to be an asset to the country in Canada. In the United States, however, maintaining a heritage language is totally the family's responsibility under the present educational system. Whether the children become bilingual or not is primarily dependant on the parents' decision and enthusiasm.

However, the effectiveness of parents' effort and the ability of parents to make their children become additive bilinguals has limitations. Baker (1997) states that the existence of opportunities for the language in a community, in addition to parental efforts, is necessary for heritage language education. Giles and Johnson (1987) mentioned that ethnolinguistic vitality (EV)—a concept that refers to a group's ability to survive as a distinctive collective entity in an inter-group setting (Liebkind, 1999, p. 145)—is a factor which affects the maintenance, loss, promotion, or reviving of the language. In larger cities such as Los Angeles and New York, EV is apparently higher than the smaller cities in terms of Japanese. There are large Japanese communities, many Japanese schools, Japanese media and TV programs, numerous Japanese restaurants and stores, and organizations where people socialize and exchange Japan-related information and opinions. Children in such cities are fortunate in this regard, as they are better able to maintain Japanese than those who live in other areas of the United States where there is no such Japan-related network.

This paper presents an example of how parental effort and community support are important to pass our language on to our children as a heritage language in an environment where EV is low. To look back on a particular situation through a case study can help illustrate some general and common problems and ideas regarding heritage language education in the United States.

Establishing a Japanese Saturday School in a Small Town in the United States

The Tanaka Family and Background Information

The Tanaka family moved to a small town in the northeastern part of the United States from Los Angeles because of Mr. Tanaka's decision to work at an American company in that area. He had been working at a Japanese company in Tokyo and was transferred to the Los Angeles branch for a five-

year contract. At the end of the third year, an American company offered Mr. Tanaka a position, and the Tanakas decided to accept the offer. The company was located in an area about 400 miles from New York City, where the population is about 80,000. The town used to be a center of trading business but now is a quiet town with an academic atmosphere. There are many institutions of higher learning, research institutions, and medical-related companies. The Tanaka's only son, Ken, was 8 years old when he moved to the town. Ken spoke both English and Japanese fluently. Since the Tanakas planned to go back to Japan after five years, Mrs. Tanaka taught Japanese at home every day and brought him back to Japan twice a year. Los Angeles was also an ideal place to study Japanese; they had access to Japanese books, videos, TV programs, Japanese neighbors and friends, and so forth, without expending much effort.

Ken became a third grader at a nearby public elementary school. There were no Japanese-speaking children in the school nor in the neighborhood, so Ken spoke only English, except to his parents. Soon after moving, the Tanakas started to realize that Ken's Japanese was becoming awkward. Although the Tanakas still spoke only Japanese at home, Ken's language had obviously started to shift from Japanese to English at home. He started to mix English words in Japanese sentences and started to respond to his parents in English. Ken even started to reject the study of Japanese at home with his mother and no longer wanted to take Japanese foods to school for lunch.

His worried and frustrated parents visited a Japanese woman to whom they were introduced by one of Mr. Tanaka's co-workers when they moved to the town. The Japanese woman, Mrs. Oda, had lived in the town for nearly 30 years and owned a small oriental grocery shop, which sold oriental food, crafts, china, and so forth. Mrs. Oda also taught Japanese crafts in the shop such as origami and doll-making. The shop was literally a salon for Japanese and Japanese American people in the community. Foreign students from Japan even dropped by the shop to seek communication with other Japanese-speaking people. Therefore, Mrs. Oda knew almost every Japanese and Japanese American in the town and in nearby towns. She was also very close to the officials of the General Consulate of Japan in New York City. An official from the General Consulate of Japan in New York flew semi-annually to the town in order to deal with passport renewal and other governmental services for Japanese people. The Tanakas' purpose of visiting Mrs. Oda was to find other Japanese families who were in a similar situation, and who were interested in teaching Japanese to their children. The Tanaka's visit turned the situation in the right direction. Mrs. Oda was very excited to hear the idea of teaching Japanese to their Japanese descendent children, since she herself had always thought about teaching Japanese to her daughters when they were school-aged. She had not been successful due to lack of information and professional advice at that time. Listening to the Tanakas' situation and enthusiasm for

teaching Japanese, Mrs. Oda suggested having a small meeting with other Japanese families to discuss teaching Japanese to their children together. There were four major Japanese companies in the proximity of the town. On Mrs. Oda's list, there were about 200 Japanese-speaking people in the area, including U.S. citizens, permanent U.S. residents, and people with temporary visas (i.e., exchange professors and scholars, businessmen, students, etc.). Mrs. Oda contacted all of the Japanese and Japanese American families that she knew had school-aged children. In response to her call, 15 families who were interested in teaching Japanese gathered together. Of these 15 families, six were Japanese families with temporary visas and nine were either permanent residents or U.S. citizens. Mrs. Oda and several elder Japanese who had lived in the town for years also attended to give advice. The families' backgrounds and situations varied, but an enthusiasm for teaching Japanese to their children was common to all. They all agreed to open a school to teach Japanese on Saturday mornings.

Opening of the Japanese Saturday School

The school could only be opened if there were students, teachers, and a place to teach. However, it was not easy to find a place that was appropriate for teaching. Eventually, a church that one of the Japanese families belonged to offered its facilities on Saturday mornings. Since Mrs. Oda knew several Japanese college students, finding teachers was not a major problem. Donations came from local Japanese companies, which helped in the initial preparation, including the purchase of a copy machine and teaching materials. All parents were assigned specific responsibilities. Mrs. Tanaka, who had graduated from: college in Japan with a teaching credential in math, was assigned as a coordinator, and took care of the curriculum and selection of textbooks, and served as a mediator between parents and teachers. All of the parents were inexperienced in developing an organization, but they had to solve the problems that they encountered one by one. Almost every important decision was made by a vote from every family.

Curriculum

At first, classes were formed according to the age of the children. Children who learned Japanese as a heritage language (HL) (i.e., children of permanent residents or U.S. citizens), and those who learned it as a national language (NL) (i.e., children with temporary visas), were put in the same classes. In addition, there was a class for children who had never studied Japanese, regardless of their age. However, the teachers and parents soon realized the difficulty with teaching classes that included two groups of children. The classes were reformed according to their age and initial Japanese performance, in addition to the group to which they belonged. After a three-month tryout period, the outline of the curriculum was finally established. School was in session every Saturday morning, from 8:30 to 11:30 and consisted of three 50-

minute classes with a 10-minute recess between the classes. NL classes taught included two hours of Japanese and one hour of mathematics, using the textbooks that were used in Japan. In HL classes there were three hours of Japanese instruction. Teaching materials were selected and developed by each teacher, depending on the students' level of performance and age. A Japanese professor at a local university was willing to share her expertise whenever necessary. Japanese cultural events, as well as American ones, were celebrated occasionally. Japanese people in the community often joined in the events and shared their experiences.

Financial support

The structure of the Japanese educational system is 6 years + 3 years + 3 years (i.e., 6 years in elementary school, 3 years in middle school, and 3 years in high school), which is equivalent to 1st grade to 12th grade in the United States; the first nine years are compulsory in Japan. Usually business people do not bring their high school-aged children to the United States, as college entrance examinations in Japan are very competitive. In most cases, only husbands go overseas for business, leaving their family in Japan if they have high school-aged children. The Ministry of Education in Japan financially supports the education of the compulsory-education-aged children during their stay overseas. Since governmental support is for children who will eventually return to the Japanese educational system, the curriculum for these children should follow that of schools in Japan. Since the Tanakas' school had held the classes for these children, the school was qualified to receive financial support from the Japanese government after six months. However, the main source of income came from tuition from parents and donations from local Japanese companies. The parents and Japanese groups in the area conducted various fund-raising activities such as bake sales and yard sales to help the school's budget occasionally.

After three years

Ken, the Tanaka's son who had lost interest in studying Japanese at home since they had moved, started to enjoy Japanese Saturday school. He especially enjoyed the cultural programs in which many members of the local Japanese community participated. After three months of Japanese Saturday school, his negative attitudes toward Japanese disappeared. Ken made Japanese friends at Saturday school, and his Japanese improved slowly but steadily. In the three years since the school was established, some of the original children who left school either went back to Japan or moved to other cities, and new faces joined every year. The school became a center for family gathering and the exchanging of information about Japan and Japanese culture. Japanese Saturday school in this town became not only a place to teach Japanese, but also a place where the parents work together to accomplish the same goal.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above is a typical case of an immigrant family from Japan in a small city where ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) is low. When EV is low, the family environment, in terms of using the native language, should be strengthened (Landry and Allard, 1992). There are many places where chances to use the language outside of the home are limited, and in such areas the language shift to English occurs so quickly that it causes the children to eventually lose their language. However, in reality there is a limit to parents' efforts regarding ability, patience, time, and resources in the long term; therefore community support is indispensable. As Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (1999) indicated, Saturday school is one of the most effective ways to teach children a heritage language and is one way to support children's development in two languages (p. 133). The role of Saturday school is not only to teach Japanese language and culture but also to offer a place to use it through interaction with other children and adults. School is also the place to nurture ethnic identity and friendship among children of the same age or beyond. Cooperation with other parents who have the same purpose, support, and understanding from the ethnic group in the community made it possible. The following factors contributed to the success of the opening of the Japanese Saturday school in this case study.

First, there was initiative to teach the language and leadership to carry out the plan. In this case study, the Tanakas realized the importance of teaching Japanese to their son, and Mrs. Oda played an important role as a community leader in initiating the opening of the school. Second, community support provided the opportunity to use the language and to share the experiences of cultural events. As evidenced by the experience of Ken in this study, community support is important for several reasons. It aids in the development of the heritage language by providing a place for children to use it, and it gives the students a feeling of acceptance, which directly and indirectly helps them increase their ethnic identity and confidence. Financial support was also an important part of community involvement; in this case study, the existence of Japanese companies was meaningful. Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (1999) write: "The first priority is to investigate the matter of funding" (p. 130). Finding a suitable place for a school and qualified teachers also requires help from the community. However, there are many areas where there are no such funding resources. In these areas, state and federal level financial supports should be considered. Third, although they were limited, professional resources such as pedagogy and teaching materials were available for the school through a local university. Many small schools are not so fortunate; therefore, a nation-wide resource center should be organized so that a small local Japanese group can seek the professional advice in all aspects of heritage language education. Fourth,

the reasons for studying Japanese should be clearly explained to the parents, as well as to the children, so that all may cooperate in reaching the goal of bilingualism. As many parents know, additive bilingualism is considered to be a valuable commodity in obtaining better jobs and higher income. However, as Igawa (1999) mentioned, integrative oriented motivation also should be promoted for both parents and children to maintain the language with each generation.

In conclusion, there are several points that parents should consider when they raise their children to be bilingual. Of utmost importance is the fostering of their children's inner motivation to learn the heritage language and the enlisting of support from the schools and the community. A child does not become bilingual spontaneously. Children need parents who want them to become bilingual and who give their effort and patience toward that goal. Saturday school is an example of what parents can do to pass their language on to their children in lower ethnolinguistic vitality areas.

It is also becoming increasingly necessary to gather community support. The community is the place to promote both instrumental and integral motivations to develop the language through utilization and participation in cultural activities, and to foster the family's ethnic identity and value. A child who has positive attitudes toward his/her own ethnic group also has more positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups (Soh, 1992).

Heritage language learners are valuable linguistic resources who will contribute not only to the country's prosperity but also to mutual understanding and respect among diverse ethnic communities, which is a factor that is becoming increasingly important in our society. The importance of promoting heritage and community language learners should be recognized, and we should make an effort to ensure that our children's heritage languages are not lost; this can only be possible with the cooperation of educators, parents, and the community.

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