



# Bilingual Japan

## バイリンガル通信

Spring 2019/2020 Volume 29, Number 1  
The Newsletter of the JALT  
Special Interest Group on Bilingualism

### In this issue...

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Coordinator's Message .....   | 4  |
| Bilingual Case-Study.....   | 5  |
| <b>English-language Aims, Strategy and Outcomes in a Japanese-British family - The Youngest Child</b> by Stuart Brison..... | 5  |
| <b>Bilingual Childraising in the Time of COVID-19</b> by Christie Provenzano .....  | 9  |
| <b>Three Keys to Our Son's Bilingualism/Biculturalism</b> by Josh Norman .....  | 13 |
| Young Adult Book Review.....  | 19 |
| <i>Skellig</i> , David Almond (1998), London: Hodder Children's Books, 170pp. Reviewed by Alexander McAulay .....           | 19 |
| Feature Article.....  | 22 |
| <b>The Bilingual Abroad in the Time of Corona</b> by Alexander McAulay .....  | 22 |
| Resource Column .....   | 29 |
| <b>Resources for Increasing Quality of Minority Language Input</b> by Joshua Rappeneker.....                                | 29 |
| <b>English Language Resources for an American Father Raising Bilingual Children in Japan</b> by David Truxal .....          | 34 |



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## Contribute to *Bilingual Japan*

*Bilingual Japan* is the official newsletter of the Bilingualism Special Interest Group (B-SIG) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). The purpose of this publication is to provide B-SIG members with articles and reports about bilingualism research and bilingual child-raising in Japan. *Bilingual Japan* also provides information about recent B-SIG activities.

**The content of this newsletter depends on contributions from its readers.** All SIG members and other interested parties are invited to submit articles or reports for inclusion in these pages. Start by writing about your family's experience or something about bilingual parenting that concerns you. Even if you feel that what you have to say is trivial, there is always someone who will be interested. Everyone has a story to tell, and we look forward to hearing yours.

### Regular Columns

- Consult the description at the top of each of the Regular Columns in this issue.
- Length: 1500 - 3000 words

- Submit articles to the respective column editors.

**Feature Articles**

- These articles are longer and/or deal with topics not covered by the Regular Columns.
- Length: Up to 3,000 words or longer.
- Submit articles to the editor at e18d1101@soka-u.jp

**DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE: September 15th**

Coordinator's Message

Dear Bilingualism SIG members!

Hope this message finds you and your loved ones well despite the unfortunate global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Please do keep safe and healthy wherever you are.

As you are already aware, **PANSIG 2020** was to be held at University of Niigata Prefecture in Niigata City on May 30-31, 2020, but due to concerns over the Coronavirus pandemic, the conference has been **cancelled**. However, **PANSIG 2020: Presentations available online from June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020**. Please do check the information related to online presentations by following the link (<https://pansig.org/>).

### ***BILINGUALISM SIG FORUM ONLINE!***

**Due to the current global health pandemic regarding COVID-19, the 2020 PanSIG conference will be held asynchronously online! Fittingly, the topic of our BSIG forum this year will deal with how bilingual/multilingual families are coping during this crisis! Our forum will include four Pecha Kucha-style presentations from university lecturers and families raising bilingual children in Japan. The first will be from Christie Provenzano, regarding the results of an informal survey she conducted online, followed by three reflections from local families. All presentations will be hosted on the PanSIG2020 YouTube channel! We hope all of our members are healthy, safe, and strong - and have been able to find successful strategies for coping during this turbulent time as well!**

**Christie Provezano: Associate Professor, Chikushi Jo Gakuen University  
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**Diane C. Obara: Adjunct Lecturer, Rikkyo University  
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**David Truxal: Adjunct Lecturer, Rikkyo University**

**Joshua Rappeneker: Adjunct Lecturer, Rikkyo University**

On a different note, we would like to remind you of the call for papers for the **BSIG JJMM 26th Issue**: Submissions are now being accepted for Volume 26 of the Japan Journal of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism, which will be released in November, 2020 (<https://www.bsig.org/callforpapers>).

We would like to thank David Truxal, Stuart Brison, Christie Provenzano, Alexander McAulay, Josh Norman, and Joshua Rappeneker for their contributions to this newsletter issue. The articles, book reviews, and resources highlight the timeliness of the topics which should be rather helpful and interesting for BSIG Members.

We are constantly looking for new members to join our Decision-Making Team (SIG Officers). Please send your suggestions, questions and proposals related to the BSIG events and activities at [alexshaitan@yahoo.com](mailto:alexshaitan@yahoo.com) to Shaitan Alexandra. Our team provides support and guidance to new members along with the JALT executive officers. **We are now looking for an individual who would like to be involved in 'shadowing' our SIG Coordinator to ensure a smooth transition once the current coordinator's term has finished.**

We thank you all for your support and look forward to hearing from you.

Stay safe and healthy,

Best wishes,

Alexandra Shaitan, BSIG Coordinator.

## Bilingual Case-Study

### ある家庭におけるバイリンガリズム

In each issue, we present a case-study of a bilingual individual or family. We especially want to encourage our members to write up their own case studies of their bilingual families. The column editors would be happy to help authoring your stories. You may also request an outline of suggested items to include. Also, if you know of a family that could be featured in this column, please contact the column editors: Ron Murphy, Ehime University, English Education Center, 3-bunkyou cho, Matsuyama, 790-8577. t: 089-927-9358 email: [murphy@ehime-u.ac.jp](mailto:murphy@ehime-u.ac.jp); or Alec McAulay, GSISS, Yokohama National University, Tokiwadai 79-3, Hodogaya-ku, Yokohama 240-8501 t: 045-339-3553 (w) email: [tokyomcaulay@gmail.com](mailto:tokyomcaulay@gmail.com)

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| <b>English-language Aims, Strategy and Outcomes in a Japanese-British family - The Youngest Child</b> by Stuart Brison |
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This is a follow-up to a two-part case study, "English-language Aims, Strategy and Outcomes in a Japanese-British family." The two parts appeared in the Fall 2010 and Winter 2010/11 issues of *Bilingual Japan*. It concerned the four children of the Brison family (British father / Japanese mother), who were at that time 14;8 (Ian), 12;8 (Sean), 11;2 (James) and 7;8 (Erica).

Time has (of course) flown by, and the three older children, all boys, are all wholly (Ian) or partly (Sean, James) through university, whereas Erica (currently 15;6) is now in the first year of senior high school. This part of the case study will mainly focus on her.

#### **The Boys - Briefly**

Ian (22), Sean (20) and James (19) have all become adequate users of English as a second language. There is a noticeable gap between their native-level Japanese and English, and still a significant number of relatively common words they don't know. However, as was mentioned in the initial case study, Ian and Sean, followed by James, realized that a good knowledge of English was a very useful weapon in the battle to get into a well-known university, and so their enthusiasm for learning the language increased, and time with the father and examination preparation studies fed off each other. The positive effects of this are of course twofold - a good score in school and examination English is semi-guaranteed, and the very substantial study time that most

Japanese students have to devote to English can be partially diverted to other subjects.

Now that they have got over the university entrance hurdle, it is questionable how interested they really are in putting much effort into improving their knowledge of the language, and it may be they are in a phase of stagnation or even decline. However, there is no backsliding in that they never attempt to speak to their father in Japanese and are able to switch to English when required. They don't give the impression of having complexes about English.

#### **Erica - Her Background**

The goals set for Erica are in theory the same as were set for the boys - namely to achieve a

good command of the English language, of a higher level than the vast majority of their Japanese contemporaries, while accepting that it will not be at the level of native speakers.

Unlike her brothers, who had some years after birth living in the UK, Erica has never lived outside Japan. Also, her formal education has been purely through the Japanese public school system. She has over the years had several trips to the UK to visit family, and although never alone, clearly these visits gave a reasonable amount of practice in English and the necessity to use it. The trips notwithstanding, Erica probably does not identify very strongly with being Scottish or British, as this has never really been insisted on in the family. She does not particularly exhibit high interest about things related to the country or its culture.

She is the only girl in the family and three and a half years younger than her closest brother in age. The gender and age differences, and resultant differences in interests and understanding, has meant therefore that she benefited less than her brothers from listening to and partially participating in sibling conversations with the father, for example at the dinner table. These conversations were no doubt for her both difficult to follow and uninteresting. On reflection the topics were perhaps both too academic and too “male”, including such things as history, football, and science. (This may well be the father’s fault, being brought up with only male siblings, and not really aware of what young girls want to

talk about!) Also, the age gap no doubt made a difference - the youngest of Erica’s brothers being three and a half years older, even a conversation aimed at his level or slightly lower was presumably difficult for her.

Erica probably suffered from becoming “academic” later than two of her brothers (Ian and James), who decided during junior high school to aim at a highly-rated senior high school, thus meaning they turned earlier towards wanting to achieve very good results in English. (Sean, although also less academically inclined at junior high school, was innately the best at English.)

On the brighter side, Erica has always been graded quite highly in the various aspects of school English.

### **The Current Situation**

Erica is now the only child at home, so more time can (in theory) be devoted to improving her English. In practice, our family runs into various obstacles such as non-availability of the father due to work and other commitments, and non-availability of Erica due to school extracurricular and other activities. However, within these limitations, the English sessions between daughter and father take place regularly, usually about five times a week.

Erica, too, is now also becoming more aware of a world extending beyond the age of eighteen, which must be prepared for through examinations, a key one of which is English.

## **Methods Adopted to Improve Erica's English**

Erica's mother has a good level of English, and so can help Erica with many things, including school English, but the overall home-based improvement methods have been nearly all decided and implemented by her father.

**Reading.** The standard method employed is regular reading sessions which take place most days, and usually last from twenty minutes to half an hour. The books are usually abridged versions of old favourites such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wind in the Willows*. Being abridged, these are presumably the level of book a reasonably competent eight-year-old native speaker could manage, but they do unearth a lot of words Erica does not know, or knows only imperfectly.

**Noting Vocabulary.** While doing the above reading, new words are noted down in a vocabulary notebook. There is a compromise in that not all words are written down, as this would probably make the reading too slow and boring, so some words are merely explained verbally or passed over completely. The policy is not to write down too many, as then a large proportion just end up being forgotten. Often a short example sentence is written down, too. So, for example, not just writing down what "to speed" means, but writing below it, say, "the car sped away."

Meanings of new words and phrases are written down in English where possible - so *overjoyed* would be *very happy*, or in Japanese

where that would be difficult or inconvenient. It is rather more difficult to explain 'explosion' in English than just using the single word Japanese equivalent, for example.

At nearly all reading sessions, either at the beginning or the end, there is a little vocabulary revision time, composed of looking at recently encountered new words and also a random selection of older ones. Sometimes this is merely such a question as "What does *set out* mean?" At other times it would be - after showing Erica the word and its meaning - a request to make a sentence using it. She does this latter exercise without as much difficulty as might have been anticipated.

Possibly in the future, taking one of the examinations such as the Eiken may be a spur to further vocabulary building, but so far this has not been considered.

**More Conversations in English.** There has never been an "English only" policy in the household, but an "English when talking to your father" rule has been strictly applied over the years. However, other conversations between family members are almost all in Japanese. Now, to aid Erica's development, pressure is being applied on a reasonably frequent basis to use English even when the father is merely a passive listener in a conversation. This does seem to be bearing some fruit, and is not meeting with as much resistance from Erica as might have been expected, perhaps as she realises that often

with a little thought, and help with the occasional word, she does have the vocabulary to carry out these conversations.

**Skype.** Erica also has the occasional Skype conversation with family members in the UK. Compared to the past, she is less reluctant to do this, but does insist on no one else listening to her talk. It would seem the conversations go quite well, so this is encouraging.

### **Lessons to be Learned from Erica's Experience**

It does seem possible that in Erica's case, differences in gender (both to her siblings and to her native speaker parent), age, and academic inclination have combined to disadvantage one child. Clearly a sample of one person is not enough to draw conclusions with any certainty, but this potential problem is one that other parents in similar situations may want to factor into their considerations.

### **Overall Conclusions**

It may also be a good idea to introduce other sources such as video, but the current methods will be continued with for the moment. Erica's level of ability does seem to be getting higher, and she shows more curiosity about learning new things in English. There have been false dawns before, but it is hoped this will be the real one!

The past weeks have brought many unusual and challenging circumstances to families around Japan and the entire world as we respond to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The Japanese prime minister asked Japanese schools to close from March 2 in a move that caught many families off guard, leaving some scrambling for childcare and plunging everyone into a homeschooling situation. However, with the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics and recent pleas from the governors of Tokyo and some other major cities that people stay in rather than celebrate the cherry blossoms or go for their weekly dose of karaoke as they might otherwise do, it may well be that Japan is in for the lockdown that many countries all over the world are already experiencing. So, with an eye to the positive and in an effort to share ideas for families who have been and may continue to be home together for some time, I have been gathering ideas from friends and acquaintances in addition to putting a very informal question out to families on various social media pages asking these questions:

How are you using this time, particularly as it relates to bilingual development and/or biculturalism? With the kids at home, are you doing something language- or culture-related that you wouldn't normally have time to do? Has this extra time been a boon? Or has it been a confounding monkey wrench in your usual language- / culture- related activities? Have you found any great opportunities (online or otherwise?) to share with other families? Homeschoolers – is anything different for you or is it just business as usual?

### **Re-connecting**

Several parents noted that they found this time at home presented them with the opportunity to “check in” more closely with their children’s linguistic and academic status. One parent finds herself supervising the homework packet from her son’s Japanese elementary school and, now that her son’s after school English program has also been shut down, she has been filling in the gap with English activities. She writes, “It’s been good because working with him has given me better understanding about where he is academically in both languages.” Under normal circumstances, it is sometimes hard for busy parents to find time to understand deeply where children are at in their academic development. For parents who have time to work with their children during this at-home period, it can be a great chance to reconnect.

Other parents have reported increased communication among their children’s school community – teachers, administration and families. One respondent notes that parents in some grades at her children’s school have made Facebook groups to support each other and share ideas and activities. Some school administrations – but certainly not all – have made a concerted effort via e-mail or homepages to keep families updated with information that is changing from day to day and week to week. My own daughter, a high schooler who was studying abroad in Costa Rica at a school with students from over 80 different countries, was suddenly sent home when it became apparent that countries would be closing borders and students could be barred from rejoining their families. The school administration has moved instruction for all classes online and continues to send

daily e-mail updates to all families to help the school community stay connected as we support each other through this uncertain time.

### **Time for Minority Language**

When I posed my questions, I wondered if I would hear of parents seizing the chance to spend more time on activities in the minority language at home, and, indeed that seems to be the case for many. While a few parents report that there are homework packets from school that need attention, they have certainly not required full days of study to complete, leaving families more time to work on English or another minority language. I received reports of lots of minority language book reading, craft projects, workbook activities and many recommendations for online learning that I will list at the end.

One family shared a fun language learning idea: “We’ve decided to learn a new (to us!) language as a family.” Having grown up as dual bilinguals, the children have never experienced the difficulty of learning a new language from scratch, so the family decided to embark on learning Korean via the popular Duolingo app. The parents report that it is fun and motivating for all the family members to start on a level playing field.

This same family is taking advantage of this time at home to connect with extended family overseas, too. Cousins overseas are also on self-isolation, so the families have been getting together on video chats to do school related activities together. One parent from this family reports that the get-together started so she could help her overseas nieces and nephews

with schoolwork because their own parents were also struggling with supervising children while teleworking. It has worked out as a great chance for the cousins to spend time together, and for the parents to support each other from afar.

### **Life Skills**

In our usual busy family lives, when everyone’s schedule is full of work, school, club activities, and housework, it can be hard to carve out time to spend teaching our children basic life skills like sewing, repairs, and carpentry. The unexpected school shutdown has been seen by many as a gift of time to share that kind of knowledge with our children, with the added bonus of doing it in the minority language. One parent reports that during the unexpected school shutdown, her industrious family has “painted a fence, planted a vegetable garden, planted flowers from seeds, pott[ed plants], repurposed a side table, laid a stone path, [and] cleaned/organized a workroom”. Another family has been learning to sew by making face masks to share with the children’s classmates for when the children go back to school.

Online pursuits can commandeer so much of our time and attention, so redirecting the focus of both adults and children in the family to more hands-on activities can be an excellent way to turn off the 24-hour COVID-19 news cycle firehose, while providing an engaging way for families to share knowledge about practical life skills (in any language).

## **IT Enrichment**

As a professor now getting ready to implement online instruction in my university classes, my biggest worry is that my students do not have the skills or experience with IT – beyond the use of their smartphones – to smoothly transition to distance learning. MS Teams, Zoom, and other meeting software that can allow me to continue to help my students make progress in their language learning may be difficult for students who lack basic IT skills to access, not to mention those students who do not have computers or even Wi-Fi at home. Substantive IT instruction is rare in most public schools in Japan, which means many of my students arrive at university without the advantage of basic IT literacy, highlighting the hole in their primary and secondary education. While an informal survey of families connected to international schools in Japan shows that, for the most part, such schools have switched to online learning relatively smoothly, public schools are simply not equipped to do so.

Therefore, some families sequestered at home in these COVID-19 days are finding it a wonderful opportunity to bridge the IT gap in the public-school curriculum. Respondents reported assigning their children online typing activities, web scavenger hunts, MS Office tutorials, and even coding lessons (in Japanese) via a local science museum. This time at home can be a great opportunity to help children to become comfortable and proficient with various IT tools and skills, which will prepare them for life in the real world. Again, the sudden “bonus” time

afforded by school shutdowns gives families time and space to address that shortfall, and for bilingual families it is a chance to access an even broader array of activities and websites, across all their family’s languages. For parents of children and teens who are IT savvy, it is an equally good chance for learning to flow from child to parent. We can learn about the latest apps and shortcuts that our “digital natives” can use with ease.

## **The Silver Lining**

As COVID-19 continues to spread worldwide, families wonder and worry what the next weeks and months will bring. Uncertainly is stressful; however, as my informal survey shows, however, one silver lining of school closures and social distancing is that many families can spend more time together. That means bonus hands-on time for the learning of many important skills, including time spent immersed in a minority language. Bonus time for card and board games, cooking together, and conversation. Bonus time to help with homework and for reading together. Bonus time for virtual exploration of new activities and places. Bonus time to reconnect and support each other. If you have found activities to do with your family that are instructive, rewarding, calming, fun, or otherwise useful, consider sharing them on the BSIG’s Facebook page. We can all get through this with each other’s support.

## **Websites Recommended by Respondents**

It is not exhaustive, but here is a list of the websites suggested by various survey

respondents, in no particular order. Again, if you have some resources that you recommend, please share them on the BSIG's Facebook page.

- **Prodigy:** Math for grades 1 – 8  
<https://www.prodigygame.com/>
- **Brainpop:** Various subjects (science, social studies, English, engineering & tech, etc.) <https://www.brainpop.com/>
- **Happynumbers:** Math instruction  
<https://happynumbers.com/>
- **Raz-Kids:** English reading for grades K-5 <https://www.raz-kids.com/>
- **Time 4 Learning:** Online learning for K-12 (homeschooling website)  
<https://www.time4learning.com/>
- **Teachers Pay Teachers:** Good place to get supplementary worksheets for concepts that you are working on  
<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>
- **Duolingo:** Language learning app  
<https://www.duolingo.com/>
- **WOW English (Youtube):** Videos with English activities for younger children  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCx1xhxQyzR4TT6PmXO0khhbQ>

### **Three Keys to Our Son's Bilingualism/Biculturalism** by Josh Norman

In this case study I would like to share the story of my son Kai (9:0) and the experiences our family has had thus far living in Kumamoto City in helping him in his ongoing journey to becoming both bilingual and bicultural.

My wife Mie and I married 12 years ago in March 2008. We had first met several years before at an English conversation school where I taught once a week. As an avid practitioner of hula dance, she had been to Hawaii several times before first meeting me, thus her interest in learning English. On the other hand, after participating in the JET Program in Kagoshima Prefecture from 1997-99, I received a government scholarship for academic studies at Kumamoto University, which I attended from 2000-06. I had had to study Japanese intensely and pass level 1 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test before entering Kumamoto University, so my level of Japanese was already much higher than my wife's English. Because of this, the language dynamic between she and I from the beginning was that of using Japanese almost exclusively. Even before my son was born in March 2011, my wife and I had had several discussions about what we planned to do for communication at home. She understands the importance of English as a global language and was onboard from the beginning regarding my insistence on me wanting to use English exclusively with our son. As is the case with many other families in our same situation, we decided that our goal would be to be as natural as possible, which meant her communicating with Kai mainly in Japanese, me in English, and using mostly Japanese with each other. So basically, we adopted the OPOL (One Parent-

One Language) policy. Much research has been done on this topic and the benefits it can have for mixed-nationality families.

After the birth of my son, things progressed smoothly for the first few years as we used the OPOL policy we had both decided on together. Since both my wife and I work full-time, we put him in a Japanese nursery school (hoikuen) from the time he was two months old until he turned two, when we enrolled him in one of the many local private international pre-schools to give him more exposure to English on a daily basis. Since I was the only real source of English input for him during his first two years of life, I put a lot of (sometimes unnecessary) pressure on myself to only speak English when around him and also read to him at night on a daily basis.

Since Kai has been very young, he has almost exclusively addressed my wife in Japanese and me in English. It has never been much of an issue until recent years. Because Kai knows I speak Japanese proficiently, he recently has sometimes responded to me in Japanese when my wife is around (i.e., dinner table talk, etc.), perhaps out of consideration to make sure that Mie understands our conversations more completely. Although this irks me at times, I have come to accept it and just keep my utterances to him in English, and everyone seems to be okay with that arrangement. He is also at the age now where he is getting more self-conscious of having to use English with

me when around his Japanese friends. I have caught on to that and make limited utterances to him in Japanese at those times.

One source of contention between my wife and I in the early years of Kai's life had been her use of katakana-sounding English utterances, which seemed unnatural and unnecessary to me because of our OPOL policy. She insisted on using whatever words would help her communicate her message to our son, whereas I firmly believed that getting natural input in both languages (no matter how tough not being understood would be in the short run) would be his best chance to becoming bilingual. Looking back on it now, it all seems a bit silly that I had been so often stressed about it all those years and the resulting tension it caused between my wife and me. With that being said, I still do strongly believe that it is essential for couples to clearly communicate their expectations regarding language use and also be willing to compromise when the circumstances call for it.

During the years when my son attended an international pre-school (ages 2-6), his English ability increased dramatically due not only to continual exposure to English during the daytime hours, but also from continued bedtime reading at night and his use of a paid subscription service website called IXL.com. Throughout the years many great resources for raising bilingual children have been mentioned in this bilingual case studies column. I would like to add to that list by encouraging everyone to check out IXL.com. Originally intended to be used as a resource to help parents

homeschool their child(ren), I ran across IXL by doing an Internet search for something general such as "online resources for English study". The strong point of IXL is that it has different academic subjects (math, science, language arts, etc.) offered that can all be learned in English and academic standards are based on each country's education system. For the U.S. version of IXL, the language arts section of IXL has materials for pre-K (equivalent of 4 years old) through 12th grade (18 years old). This website has been especially helpful as there are not any international academic study groups for children set up here in Kumamoto City that I know of.

I first had Kai start using the website around the age of four as a way to encourage him to learn English through means other than just reading books, watching videos, and talking with me. Having a rewards system in place is the key to getting a young child to study of their own free will, and the way we have done it in our family is for him to be able to watch a video of the same length of time he has been studying. (For a movie which is about 90 minutes long, I am a bit more lenient and reduce the amount of necessary study time to just 60 minutes.) For the first few years, Kai went gangbusters and even was able to clear skills that were several grades above his age level. He was quite interested in learning math in English as well, so there was plenty of material on IXL to keep him busy. But as the years have passed (and especially during his time living abroad), it has been getting harder and harder to get him to do work on the

website as his school life and extracurricular activities have taken on a bigger role in his life. Even so, I have been renewing the IXL subscription every year as I really feel it is such a great value. I believe in the power of the website so much in fact that I started using it in my private English lessons several years ago, as well as at my university for first-year required English classes just last year.

As Kai was in his last year of preschool and the start of elementary school was quickly approaching, I started to experience a new, unexpected fear: was my son's Japanese ability good enough to be considered at a "native" level? I had been noticing at the time that his reading (i.e., academic) and communicative ability in English were so much better than that of his Japanese. I think that this situation came about mainly due to my wife's work schedule with the business she owns and operates. Time was (and still is) very limited for her to read books to him in Japanese, so I think that has been a bit detrimental to his acquisition of natural Japanese. I often found myself alone with him on many weeknights and most Saturdays. Of course those times spent together were all in English, so I began to wonder if he was really getting enough Japanese input. (It was a strange thing to find myself pondering considering we had lived in Japan since he was born and the dominant community language here of course is Japanese.) Although some of you reading this might be saying to yourself, "Oh, he's just a kid. I'm sure he turned out fine!", for me it was (and still often is) a serious worry because I don't want him to

stick out any more than he already does just for being biracial.

Even with this concern about my son's acquisition of the Japanese language in the back of my mind, it was at this time that my wife and I started considering the possibility of her and him living in the U.S. (Oregon) with my parents so that he could experience U.S. school life and she could have a chance to study English abroad. We figured that the best time to do such an ambitious thing would be while Kai was still in the first years of elementary school, as the rigors of academics are not as stressful as we knew they would become in later years as he approached junior high school. We agreed that this "experiment" would likely be for just one year; two years at most if things went really well.

As mentioned before, since my wife owns her own business, she said it would be possible for her to run her business from outside Japan. However, I knew that it would not be possible for me to go with them to the U.S. without quitting my full-time university position, so we decided it would be okay to live apart and communicate daily on Skype or Facebook Messenger, while also having me take extended vacations in the U.S. during university breaks. It was quite a tough decision, but in the end we made our plan a reality in the summer of 2017 after Kai had attended first grade in our local Japanese elementary school for only about four months. Thankfully the transition into a new home and new schools for both my wife and son turned out to be much smoother than I had been anticipating. I give credit to everyone

involved, including my parents and U.S. school staff, for being positive and welcoming. I also got a nice surprise when Kai tested straight into second grade (instead of first based on his age alone) due to his strong reading and math skills, which I attribute to his use of the IXL website as well as all of our nights reading together. It really made me feel that all my efforts up until then for his English education had really paid off. And although it was tough to coordinate schedules at times, I always made it a point to read with Kai every night before he went to bed (30-45 minutes) by video chat, which also gave my wife some much needed down time of her own. I found it difficult at first to adjust the camera to show the pictures in the books while also concentrating on trying to read, but as the saying goes, where there's a will, there's a way! My son and I agreed to read on a 50/50 split, so that he could get practice reading and yet not feel pressure to have to read for the whole time.

To keep up his Japanese skills as much as possible while in the U.S., my wife and I decided to enroll our son in a Japanese school that taught only the subjects of Japanese (kokugo) and math every Saturday. Although we had heard the homework load for the school was hard (since it kept up with Japanese school grade level standards), we knew it would be worth it. And it definitely ended up being a good choice, not just for the academics, but also for the sense of community my wife and son found by being around other Japanese families in the local area. Kai managed to make many Japanese

friends through his Japanese school and my wife tells me that the kids almost always played together in Japanese due to that being their mother tongue.

After almost a year of life in the U.S. had passed, my wife and I had a long discussion one night about where our family was at. Although being apart was hard, we both agreed that a second year of life in the U.S. would benefit them both a lot. My wife and son returned to Japan for summer break and Kai was able to attend his local elementary school for about six weeks, which was a godsend for my wife and I since we both have full-time jobs. We then all traveled back to the U.S. in mid-August for them to start their second year there. I was fortunately able to spend about four weeks together with them before having to get back to Japan for the start of my university's fall semester. Even during their second year of living abroad, I still made sure to make time for reading.

After my wife and son moved back to Japan for good in June 2019, our regular family routine returned to normal surprisingly quick. I enrolled my son into the local elementary school right away, while my wife went back to running her local small business full-time. It was so great being all together again, as I had honestly gotten a bit tired of having to talk/read online all the time. It had also been quite stressful to try to discipline my son from thousands of miles away, whether it had been regarding his actions/behavior at home or at school.

Although my wife and I had never worried about the social aspect of him transitioning

back to school life here in Kumamoto because of his outgoingness, we had wondered what would happen with the academic side of things. For what it's worth, Kai made the transition back into Japanese elementary school life very seamlessly, perhaps partly due to his having attended Japanese school in Oregon for the two years while he lived there. Even with Kai's extracurricular activities schedule now being a bit more loaded than I would like, my work schedule here in Japan affords me the time to read with him at night, a tradition that so far has continued and he hasn't balked yet about having to do. However, he doesn't like to read out loud to me anymore (perhaps because of his older age), so I am the one mainly doing the reading at night. (He does do a lot of reading on his own still in order to get time to watch video and/or play video games.) Sometimes I wonder how long this special nighttime ritual of ours will continue, so I will just try to cherish it while it lasts. I figure that if I can instill in him a love for reading on his own (and not to do it just for school studies, which is what is basically was for me growing up), then I will have been successful. Looking back on the first nine years of my son's life, I can say without a doubt that there have been three main factors that have contributed to his current English ability: 1) reading time, 2) his use of the IXL website, and 3) talking with him in English exclusively. It's extremely difficult to put these three factors in any particular order, although most readers of this column who have already raised their own child(ren) bilingually would likely

say reading. That is what I had kept hearing from friends and reading about in past issues of this BSIG publication and in research articles.

Another factor that has been quite influential has been yearly trips back to the U.S. (during the years when my wife and son had not been living there). Having a strong connection to family members and hearing the language being spoken around you (and consequently having to use it to communicate as you get older) is certainly a big motivator for a child to learn any language. Kai only has one cousin back in Oregon, but he is quite talkative and enjoys the time spent with his grandparents as well as local neighborhood kids, several of who he became close with during his two years living abroad there.

When he was a toddler, we utilized the facility Gymboree Play & Music, a nationwide U.S. chain that has classes aimed at newborn to kindergarten-aged children. They have wonderful classes and lively instructors, and I highly recommend them to anyone in the U.S. on vacation. The manager at the location we went to was very flexible in making a plan that fit our short summer-only stays (and gave us a nice discount for taking multiple classes). In the future, our family plans to continue making yearly trips back to the U.S. (usually summertime) and hopefully find some good camps for my son to be able to participate in. I do not have much information about such camps yet because there are just so many of them available in the U.S., so that will likely be my next big online adventure. In future columns, it would be great to hear from fellow

readers about both their positive and negative experiences regarding summer camps.

## Young Adult Book Review

***Skellig*, David Almond (1998), London: Hodder Children's Books, 170pp.** Reviewed by Alexander McAulay

On a visit to the Edinburgh International Book Festival in the summer of 2019, I wandered over to the Young Adult section looking for a book to read with my 16-year-old son Jason. David Almond's *Skellig* caught my attention because it was a Carnegie Medal winner, was set in the UK, and the back-page blurb suggests a tale with just the right amount of weirdness and magical realism – ingredients common in the stories of Paul Jennings, Jason's favorite author. My 2018 review of Paul Jennings is available in *Bilingual Japan*, 27(1).

The protagonist of *Skellig* is Michael, a 10-year-old boy who has a lot to deal with. His family has just moved to a house that needs a lot of work, especially the decrepit garage that is too dangerous to enter. At the same time Michael's baby sister is born and is kept in intensive care, close to death's door.

Curious about the garage filled with junk, Michael enters and finds a winged creature, who is sickly; surly; and fond of eating dead spiders, flies, and Chinese takeaway food.

Michael eventually confides in his neighbor Mina, a girl who is home-schooled and fond of quoting William Blake. Together, they befriend the creature.

Jason, unlike his older sister, has never been a great reader of novels. He likes manga (in Japanese), and video games, but will not pick up a book alone and read for pleasure. This means that we read books together, taking turns to read aloud to each other. Probably

around 80 percent of the time, it is me reading to Jason. Over the years, my book selection has been hit and miss, but through trial-and-error I have worked out the list of conditions for an appropriate book. *Skellig* has worked well for our sessions because it meets all of the criteria.

First of all, it is a compelling story with mysteries at its heart. Who exactly is Skellig? What exactly is Skellig? Will the baby survive?

Second, the prose is simple, everyday language, devoid of florid literary passages. (Apparently, Almond cites Raymond Carver as one of his influences). By way of example, here is the opening paragraph of Chapter 11:

Next morning, Dad said he could hardly move. He was all bent over. He said his back was killing him. He was stiff as a blinking board. "Where's those aspirin?" he yelled down the stairs.

Mum laughed.

This is six short sentences, the longest eight words long and the shortest two words. This makes the story easy to digest by putting a relatively light cognitive load on Jason. This extends to the organization of the whole novel – it is 170 pages long and divided into 46 chapters, meaning the average length of a chapter is less than four pages. This is important because Jason is a reluctant reader. "Let's do just one more chapter" is a lot more

persuasive when he can see that the chapters are short.

Third, the story is recognizably British without being too culture-bound. Sometimes British authors will refer to TV shows, celebrities, sports teams or foodstuffs that Jason is not familiar with, and his inability to access such 'codes' puts him off further reading. Almond generally avoids such devices, a point made by one reviewer:

Almond's books seem to exist in their own otherworldly universe, outside all the trends in modern publishing, yet resolutely of the now.

(Allan 2014)

Last of all, the story throws up themes that lead to further discussion with Jason. The baby's ill health led to us discussing hospitalization and Jason's own experiences having a broken arm operated on (twice) and having his appendix removed. The trigger for this discussion was the word 'anesthetic.' Jason did not know it when it came up, and talking about his own hospital anesthesia experiences was a good way to teach the word. Through the character of Mina we could discuss home-schooling, and at other points in the story we were able to talk about topics such as the stress of moving home, weight gain, Dad-humour, and maintaining friendships. When we finished the story, we had a long talk about the parallels we found with other stories, notably *My Neighbour Totoro*. Both stories involve young people

dealing with the ill-health of a loved one (the mother in *Totoro*, the baby in *Skellig*), and encountering other-worldly creatures who help them realize we do not have to fear the unknown.

Despite his simplistic style, *Skellig* does have its high-brow elements. Mina likes to quote and talk about William Blake, for example, and the myth of Persephone is featured prominently towards the end of the story.

Mina also teaches Michael about archaeopteryx, a creature reputed to be the transitional fossil between dinosaurs and birds. Furthermore, the ambiguity of Skellig's nature is left unresolved. Is he an angel? An evolutionary throw-forward or throw-back? An owl? Jason and I never discussed these denser aspects of the book, but some readers with intellectually curious children may want to use these sections as jumping-off points for further learning.

The unresolved ambiguity in the story does make *Skellig* more 'arthouse' than the usual fare Jason and I read, but the fact that, at heart, this is a simple story, well-told, with engaging characters, is what made it work well with Jason and why I recommend it to *Bilingual Japan* readers. There is no romance storyline, no kissing, no profanity, and the adult characters are as multi-dimensional and realistic as the children. The pastiche and pantomime villains who populate many children's novels are nowhere to be seen here.

The book seems to be marketed as teen and young adult, and many reviewers note that it

is one of those rare books that blurs the lines between children's and adult literature. Considering Jason's interests and reading proficiency, 16 was the right time for him to engage with this novel. His older sister, a more precocious and voracious reader, could probably have handled *Skellig* at 13 years old. Given the book's huge success and lofty reputation, I suggest that it is one a broad range of *Bilingual Japan* readers may want to investigate.

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## Feature Article

Readers are encouraged to submit articles related to various other topics or issues related to language learning, identity, education, or child raising. Please contact the editor Risa Hiramatsu at e18d1101@soka-u.jp for more information.

### **The Bilingual Abroad in the Time of Corona** by Alexander McAulay

At the beginning of 2020, my 16-year-old son Jason was preparing to leave our home in Yokohama to visit Australia as an outbound exchange student, studying in Melbourne from January 26<sup>th</sup> to April 4<sup>th</sup>. The plan was he would live with an Australian homestay family and attend a private high school in the west of Melbourne. With apologies to Gabriel García Márquez for the title, this article is about that 10-week sojourn, which was intended to be one thing, warped into a quite different thing because of an incompetent broker, and then turned into a different thing again because of the coronavirus crisis. I had hoped to write a research paper about the gains in English-language proficiency and intercultural competence that Jason achieved. Instead, I offer here a cautionary tale to *Bilingual Japan* readers considering sending their child on outbound exchange through a for-profit broker.

#### **Background**

Jason is our second child and speaks native Japanese and has high competency in English. I have documented Jason's progress in the case study column in *Bilingual Japan* over the years (Hill 2015, 2012, 2011, 2006). In those articles, I note that Jason has suffered a little in comparison with his sister who has always engaged more with English and has higher proficiency. A noticeable feature of Jason's bilingual journey over the years has been his quite considerable resistance to English. Were it not for a one-year stay in the UK in 2011, Jason may well have been a passive bilingual by this point.

Annual summer sojourns to school in Scotland stopped when he was 12, in the last year of Scottish primary school. His sister, who is three years older, went to secondary school in Scotland every summer for six years, but Jason made it clear that he was not interested in summer schooling in the UK beyond primary. By the time he entered the first year of his private Tokyo high school, his only English interaction beyond the irregular lesson times with me was occasional viewing of the TV programme *The Thundermans*, and learning the lyrics of songs by Ed Sheeran, Maroon 5, and some other bands.

It was somewhat surprising, therefore, in the spring of 2019, that Jason started to be curious about the international exchange programme offered by his high school. He brought home the information packs and we discussed the three options on offer: Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. As he has matured, Jason has realised that proficient English is something that will give him an advantage in life, and as a hafu with a Scottish Dad, he has an opportunity to get ahead. The desire to go on this sojourn overseas was, I think, an attempt to make up for lost time, and to take a more positive attitude to acquiring English.

And so, we attended the ‘setsumeikai’ information session run by the school in October 2019. It quickly became clear that the programme was run by a private broker, ISA, and not directly by the school. Melbourne emerged as the preferred destination. The cost of 1.2 million yen was prohibitive, and so Jason applied only on the condition that he would go if he received a Tokyo Metropolitan Government grant of 550,000 yen, which he successfully applied for. In November 2019, we received word that Jason was one of three pupils selected to go to Melbourne.

### **Pre-departure**

With Jason’s departure approaching in mid-January 2020, our main concern was the bush

fires raging in Australia. Although Sydney seemed to be bearing the brunt with daily images of the city shrouded in smoke filling TV screens, on one day in January the wind shifted and it was reported that Melbourne had the worst air quality of any city in the world. This was a worry as Jason is asthmatic and has been hospitalized with the condition in the past. I sought and received reassurances from Dermot, a friend living in Melbourne, and downloaded the AirVisual app that gives global air quality readings. Writing now, only two months later, it is hard to believe that bush fires were salient in our thoughts and the corona virus was a secondary concern.

The briefings and communication with ISA to this point had been fine, but I was wary. A lot of my university work is in Study Abroad and over the years I have heard some disturbing stories about international education brokers. My colleague is an ex-high school teacher who was also heavily involved in international student exchange. She did not have a good word to say about brokers.

The first problem we had with ISA came on the evening of Wednesday, January 22<sup>nd</sup>. They called to say that the Melbourne school required a medical assessment of Jason’s current health in relation to asthma. This certificate would have to be in English. I told them that Thursday was the day clinics in

Yokohama were closed, and on Friday my wife and I had work, and Jason had school. Their reply was that, in that case, Jason would be taken to a Melbourne clinic when he arrived, and we would have to pay for this medical examination.

I complained vociferously. Both ISA and the Melbourne school had had Jason's medical details for over two months. The bush fires had been in the news for over a month. And yet they were calling me three days before departure to tell me to arrange a medical examination in a clinic that could produce English documentation? I told them Jason would not be going to a clinic before he left, and we would not pay for an examination in Melbourne. Someone more senior contacted me the next day to say the examination would be arranged by ISA staff in Melbourne and would not cost anything.

However, what actually happened was Jason arrived in Melbourne, and asked his host family about the examination. They had not been told by ISA, and simply assumed Jason wanted to see a doctor. They took him for an examination, and it cost him 40 dollars. This turned out to be a waste of time and money, as it was not what the school required, and no medical certificate was produced. The medical saga continued but I will end here as it does not relate to bilingualism – but it does illustrate the dubious competency of the broker.

### **Weeks 1-3**

Jason arrived in Melbourne on Sunday, January 26<sup>th</sup> and started school on Thursday, January 30<sup>th</sup>. His homestay hosts were an Indian family with two children aged 9 and 6, who provided lots of English interaction for Jason. They took him to the beach one weekend, and he got to attend the final of the Women's Cricket World Cup which was contested by Australia and India. Jason was more than satisfied with his homestay experience.

Unfortunately, the school experience was less than satisfactory. The information given by ISA about borrowing a school computer and uniform turned out to be wrong. These were minor issues, however, compared to the classes that were offered. Jason had gone to Melbourne believing he would be in mainstream classes with local pupils, studying alongside them in regular classes. What actually happened was that he was put in a dedicated EFL class of ten pupils – Jason and his two schoolmates from Japan, and seven Chinese pupils who had also just arrived in Melbourne.

This was a disturbing turn of events for a number of reasons. First of all, we were told Jason would be in mainstream from day one – there was no mention of an EFL class exclusively for exchange students. Second, the school gave no details on whether or not

Jason would be joining mainstream later. Third, the class was aimed at the false beginner proficiency level typical of first-year high school students in Japan, a level totally inappropriate for Jason.

I spoke to Jason on Friday, January 31st, and was reassuring and encouraged him to make the most of the whole experience by getting what he could from the classes and working to improve his English outside of lesson time.

Privately, I was furious. I called the Tokyo school on the following Monday morning and was reassured by their initial comment: “This is not what we were promised.”

Unfortunately, all they did was pass this information on to ISA, whose response was that they had no idea that this would happen.

For over three weeks, from January 30<sup>th</sup> to February 21<sup>st</sup>, Jason attended the EFL class. He kept a good attitude and tried to make the most of the situation, but he was clearly frustrated that the level was beneath him and he was not in classes with local pupils. The only contact he had with local pupils was in after-school football games. The other boy who had gone from the Tokyo school was a friend of Jason’s. They had agreed before departure that the best thing for their English studies was to not hang around with each other. However, as they had no opportunity to make mainstream friends, they fell into a habit of spending time after school and on weekends with each other. (The third

Japanese pupil, a girl they did not really know, ended up joining them by week 2 as she was in the same boat, and Jason and his friend felt sorry for her). During that time, I was in contact with ISA trying to find out if, or when, Jason would move to mainstream. The answers from ISA were vague and noncommittal. Jason asked his Melbourne teacher when he would be moving to mainstream and was told: “Be patient.”

#### **Weeks 4-6**

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, it was decided that Jason – and only Jason – would move into mainstream. The change in his mood was immediate. He enjoyed the challenge of encountering new vocabulary in all the classes, which consisted of English, Geography, Science, Maths, Computer, History, Sports, and P.E. In the mainstream English class, they were reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is a novel I know well and looked forward to discussing with him. I also knew that Holden Caulfield’s idiolect and the cultural context of the novel would be difficult for Jason. It would have been challenging had he started the class in tandem with the local students. Joining three weeks late, with 70 pages of reading to catch up on in one weekend, made the task Herculean.

Jason joined mainstream classes on February 24<sup>th</sup> and the other exchange students were moved into mainstream the following day.

ISA emailed me a long explanation that involved miscommunication between the Melbourne coordinator, and two members of staff at the Melbourne school, one of whom was regularly absent and difficult to contact. However, no reason was given as to why the students did not enter mainstream classes immediately, or on the timing of the decision to move them out of EFL and into mainstream. Reading between the lines, it seems obvious that had I not complained, Jason would never have left the EFL class.

With the move to mainstream, it felt like Jason's study abroad had finally started in earnest. He made Australian friends in his classes, and learned about topics he would not have the chance to study in Japan, such as Australia's role in World War I. He had met my friend Dermot in Melbourne. Dermot and his family lived in Yokohama a few years ago and knew Jason as a child. He re-connected with them and enjoyed barbecues at their place on the weekend. He was still hanging out with his Japanese friend after school, but that friend lived with a host family very close to the school. The family was very accommodating and would talk in English to the boys after school and told Jason he was welcome in their home any time. The bush fire situation was coming to an end and no longer a threat. The corona virus was proving a concern in Japan but had still not affected Australia. In retrospect,

weeks 4-6 were the peak of Jason's sojourn. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, however, the situation shifted again.

### **Weeks 7-9**

On Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, Jason told us that his school was closed till the following Tuesday because it was suspected one of the pupil's had contracted the coronavirus. His school lessons shifted to online, and the next morning Jason logged onto the borrowed school computer and engaged with his virtual lessons. This was deeply frustrating for Jason, who had enjoyed less than three weeks of regular classes. I am proud to say he handled it in a mature manner and took a pragmatic view of the situation.

On March 16<sup>th</sup>, we were relieved to hear that the school was opening again. Jason returned, but the joy was short-lived. The school announced on March 17<sup>th</sup> that they would be closing on March 20<sup>th</sup>. The term was due to end on March 27<sup>th</sup>, and they would be shifting to online teaching for the last week of it. Jason went in on March 19<sup>th</sup> expecting that the rest of his time in Melbourne would be spent doing online lessons. However, on that final day the school told him he had to return his borrowed computer, which meant he could not take part in the online lessons. This abruptly brought to an end his affiliation with the school. He was sent back to his

homestay hosts, effectively abandoned by the school.

On the evening of March 19<sup>th</sup>, Jason and I talked, and he said that he wanted to stay until the scheduled departure date of April 4<sup>th</sup>. He was still having a cultural experience and was looking forward to an upcoming visit to Dermot's home. By this time Melbourne also had corona infection, and shops, cafes, gyms, etc. were closed. I told Jason I would prepare English lessons for him. Instead of learning online with the Melbourne school, he would be learning online with me.

Although there was talk of international flights being halted, we were not unduly concerned. Dermot had said Jason could stay with him indefinitely if there was a crisis, an option we in no way wanted to take up, but which also gave a certain degree of peace of mind. (As it turns out, at this time Dermot was hosting a German high school student in Melbourne on exchange, who ended up stranded there. As I write, she is still living with Dermot).

However, it occurred to me that Jason may have been putting a brave face on things. He seemed bored. His school in Japan was also closed by this point, but maybe it would be better that he was bored at home than bored in Melbourne. I told him that, if he wanted, we could fly him home early. On the day I

made the offer, March 19, he refused. That night, however, he changed his mind, and when I woke the next morning, I had a WhatsApp message from him saying he had changed his mind.

My plan that day was to organize a flight for him as soon as possible. However, events overtook us once again and Qantas announced that they would soon be suspending all international flights. Jason was booked on a Qantas flight on April 4<sup>th</sup>, but ISA emailed to say they would be bringing Jason home early and had booked him a flight on March 26<sup>th</sup>. Jason left Melbourne at 04:30 on March 26<sup>th</sup>, on what turned out to be the last day that international flights left Australia before a government-imposed shutdown.

## **Conclusion**

You will notice that there is not a lot of mention of bilingualism in this article – and that is the point. Jason's trip to Melbourne was intended to be a 10-week English immersion adventure where he would test himself in mainstream classes, make new friends, and greatly enhance his English proficiency, intercultural competence, and self-reliance. What he got was an immersion experience of under three weeks, no new friendships, and an atrophied cultural experience. Before departure one hope I had for the sojourn was that it would test his self-

reliance, and indeed it was tested. He passed with flying colours.

The positives are that Jason's English does seem to have improved slightly, and he is much more confident. The conversations we have had about his experience reveal he has a wealth of material now for storytelling in English; stories he will be relating to his grandchildren.

I stated at the outset that this is a cautionary tale. While the effects of corona could not have been predicted, the experience of a for-profit broker failing in duties of communication and pastoral care are all too familiar. For *Bilingual Japan* readers considering similar high-school exchanges, I would urge healthy degrees of caution, asking around of previous participants, and online research regarding the broker and host institution. Between the two of them, Jason and his sister have over a decade of experience in short-visit immersion in

Scottish schools. The comparison between those experiences, arranged by me, and Jason's Melbourne experience, arranged by a for-profit broker, are night and day. The bilingual abroad in the time of corona will prove, one hopes, to be a singular experience. The bilingual abroad in normal times will tread a well-worn path, and parents would do well to heed previous warnings.

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## Resource Column

A column about books, magazines, and other resources for bilingual children in Japan, including: reviews and recommendations, information about where to get the resources, offers of resources to exchange, or give free to a good home (no sales, please) and calls for help from B-SIG members interested in producing their own children's resources. Please send submissions to the editor, Diane Lamb at [dianelamb.ohiojapan@gmail.com](mailto:dianelamb.ohiojapan@gmail.com).

### Resources for Increasing Quality of Minority Language Input by Joshua Rappenecker

When my son K was 20 months old, he entered an English-only daycare. From then until just before his fifth birthday the majority of his language input outside of the home was in English. At home, we have maintained the one-parent-one-language (OPOL) approach since birth and have been relatively happy with its success. He was able to interact with his English-speaking cousins without difficulties and have conversations with English-speaking adults (he liked to order his own food in restaurants and would often chat with the wait-staff). However, after K joined a Japanese language kindergarten around age five (21 months ago), I started to notice asymmetric language development, which left me somewhat worried.

As K spent more time with Japanese speaking peers, and in various Japanese language after-school activities, his Japanese began to develop much more quickly than his English. Apart from yearly trips overseas to visit his extended family, I am his only source of in-person English input. With that in mind, I wanted to increase the quality of language input to maintain an additive environment. I put together a list of activities and approaches to try and maximize the quality of his language input without turning English speaking into a chore. I have listed them below

in three broad categories: games, screens, and daily activities.

#### Games

K loves games, especially any games that he has a chance to win, so they provide their own intrinsic motivation and require no particular persuasive effort to get him to participate. The rules-based nature of games also means that there is little resistance to artificial limits on language use, which can otherwise be met with understandable opposition. Without the structure that games afford, it has been my experience that children can chafe against strictures in which they only speak a given language in certain environments. I have listed three of the many games we play here in our home in order of time required to play:

***Tell Me A Story.*** This is a very simple and yet remarkably enjoyable game, published by *Eeboo*. It consists of a deck of cards, each of which depicts some fanciful fairy-tale-like scene (e.g. an owl carrying a letter; a princess speaking with a squirrel.) The standard rules of the game are that each player is dealt a number of cards, and then players take turns playing a card and using it to create the next part of the developing story. Our variation on the game is that the player who plays the final card must retell the story from start to finish in both Japanese and

English. (Somehow K always manages to play the final card.)

One of the advantages of this game in particular is that its difficulty naturally scales with language ability. When K was younger, he was, as might be expected, much less proficient in describing sequences of events, and therefore in English relied almost entirely on ‘and then’ to place events in order. Now that he has access to much more sophisticated time-phrases, his stories have become similarly temporarily sophisticated.

Me: Who wants to start?

K: You

Me: Okay (looking through cards). Once upon a time...there was

K: A raccoon

Me: Ha ha. Do you want to start?

K: Yep. Once upon a time a raccoon had a treasure map to a real surprise (K plays a card with a picture of a raccoon holding some paper)

Me: Oh. A raccoon has a treasure map to a real surprise? (I play a card with a picture of treasure chest). And the surprise was a treasure chest full of gold coins.

K: But a squirrel, a ginormous squirrel, always stole the treasure before he could get it. (Playing a card with a picture of a squirrel holding a diamond ring)

... (later in the game) ...

K: Meanwhile, the queen and the pig were having a chat time.

Me: Yes, they were chatting about how to help the raccoon find the treasure....

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

(K in discussion with the author, January 2020)

*Catan. Catan is a strategy board game for 3-4 people in which players must compete in settling colonies on an island. The rules state that it is suitable for children 9 and up, but K was able to play it from 5 years old. It has a strong social element, as players negotiate trade deals for resources, and convince other players not to block their progress into the island.*

Whilst the competitive nature of the game usually engenders a spirit of secrecy, in our version of the rules we encourage openness and communication between players: each turn, players discuss their current strategy and any upcoming possibilities in the game, and make trade requests to other players. We make sure to ask each other questions when strategies are unclear, and offer each other advice. This openness does have the one drawback in that K seems to win disproportionately often, but it's still an enjoyable experience for the adult players as well.

Me: What are you thinking?

K: I want to build a road

Me: Okay, do you have enough stuff?

K: No. I need wood. Who has some wood?

Me: I have some wood, what will you give me?

K: I can give you iron or sheep.

Me: Okay, I'll swap my wood for some iron.

K: Thanks. Now I'll build a road.

(K in discussion with the author, February 2020)

**Tabletop Roleplaying Games (*Dungeons and Dragons*).** *The original, analog versions of roleplaying games can be played with just pencils and sheets of paper. A ‘game master’ (in this case, an adult player) acts as the arbiter of a world in which the other players adventure. The majority of the game is performed through speaking – either by players talking to characters in the world (voiced by the game master), or by them describing the actions they would like to attempt (dice rolls and the game master decides if the actions succeed or not).*

I bought a starter set for Dungeons and Dragons (the most popular tabletop roleplaying game) early last year (it’s available from major online retailers for just over ¥2,000), and since then K and I (and occasionally my wife) have played it for tens of hours. His excitement for the story and for his character’s advancement in the world provides him with ample incentive to play, and there is a great variety of the input he receives from playing (for example: planning, making conversation with other characters, describing his actions, and reading scrolls that I’ve designed). It’s also a lot of fun! Anyone interested in starting role playing games with their kids can find instructional resources on YouTube by searching for ‘D&D with kids’ (the top result as of this writing, ‘5 Tips for Playing Tabletop RPGs with Kids,’ is a good starting point).

## Screens

Screen time is, of course, a contentious issue for parents of young children due to so much

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

conflicting research on its potential benefits and drawbacks, and it’s not something that I’ve completely come to terms with. However, there are some great benefits to be had from monitored screen-time, especially the variety of input types and opportunities for learning.

**Netflix.** *Access to curated, child-friendly content in multiple languages makes Netflix a very attractive option. Amazon Prime does not have the same content controls as Netflix, and so it requires a lot more supervision (I don’t have any experience with Hulu). K tends to watch three types of programs on the service: competition shows (e.g. *Ultimate Beastmaster*, *The Final Table*), children’s dramas (with a preference for Australian shows, e.g. *The InBESTigators*, *Little Lunch*), and Japanese anime.*

I monitor his *Netflix* usage in two ways. First, I try to make sure that at least 50% of the programs he’s watching are in English. This isn’t usually received with any resistance. Secondly, I ask him to give me a quick summary of what he’s watched when he’s done (e.g., ‘What happened in today’s episode? Why did they do that? What happened next?’). This is to confirm the suitability of the content as much as to encourage him to think about what he’s watched and hopefully integrate some of the language he’s been exposed to. Apart from that, *Netflix* is usually consumed passively whilst I’m cooking or doing some other house work. That being the case, he clearly picks up quite a bit of vocabulary from *Netflix*, which is made apparent when he refers to my wife and I as ‘*contenders*’ and himself as the ‘*reigning champion*’ whenever we play a game.

**Reading Eggs/Maths Seeds.** *This is an app/website produced by ABC Australia (the Australian national public broadcaster) and designed to teach children to read (and do mathematics). K started using it in earnest around four years old, and achieved a seven-year-old reading level (according to the app itself) by the time he was five, through unsupervised learning on his iPad. It's not free (as of writing it's approximately ¥1,000 per month), but in our case it was very successful.*

The software works by providing students with units made up of short lessons and practice exercises, which culminate in a unit test. Each lesson or exercise a student completes provides them with 'eggs' which can be exchanged in the app for cosmetic items to modify the student's avatar, or to play certain games within the app. The website also provides worksheets and guides for parents to print out. Finally, there are hundreds of graded readers developed for and available within the app, divided by genre and with associated quizzes. K read a lot of these (probably one or two a day before he stopped) in order to win 'trading cards' within the app (these cards seem to exist separate to the 'egg' system, but to be honest I never really understood how it worked, only that he liked it).

There are two possible drawbacks for the software. Firstly, the majority of narration is done in an Australian accent. Like all varieties of English, Australian English has its own vowel sounds (and, unusually: phonemic length distinction for vowels), which means some of the phonics lessons may be confusing for children of

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

people with different varieties (such as those that have undergone the cot-caught merger, or the father-bother merger; i.e., large parts of North America). The second is that the more advanced lessons (for students 7-13 years old) are less interesting than the earlier lessons (at least they were for K), and so the program may not be as suitable for older children. Even so, for younger students (~3-6 years old) learning to read English, it is an excellent resource to consider.

**Messaging / FaceTime.** *I encourage K to send messages to his extended family from his iPad, or contact them directly via FaceTime whenever he wants. This is an attempt to maintain daily English use with people other than me, and also to give him concrete benefits to reading and writing English in Japan. Whilst the bulk of his messages to relatives overseas consist almost entirely of emoji, he does stay in regular contact with his grandmother and aunts and reads their messages in English.*

### **Daily Activities**

This section is a list of a few simple day-to-day things we have found to be effective in increasing (bilingual) communication in the house:

**High-low.** *After dinner each night, we go around in a circle and talk about the high point and low point of our day. For high points, we usually discuss why it made us so happy, and for low points we often discuss how it came about, or how it might be avoided in future (depending on the nature of the 'low'). As K is six years old, he is able to do this activity without any eye-rolling*

or annoyance. Time will tell whether we can continue this into his teenage years.

Me: Okay, let's do high-low. Do you want to start?

K: Yeah. My high was eating *katsu*.

Me: Haha. Why did that make you happy?

K: Because it was so delicious.

Me: I love *katsu* too, unfortunately! What was your low?...

(K in discussion with the author, February 2020)

**Schedule Negotiation.** *Each afternoon when K gets back from school, he and I negotiate and write down his afternoon timetable before his mother gets home. We break up the remaining hours until her return into thirty minute blocks, and then list the things that need to get done that day (e.g. study, doing the dishes, tidying) and the list of things he'd like to do (invariably: watch tv, use iPad). We then negotiate what we believe is a reasonable timetable that includes all these things. Surprisingly, the timetables end up different each day, depending on his mood, or the things he has to do.*

**Bedtime Reading with Discussion.** *Each night before bed, I read a few chapters of a book to K (we've already read most of Roald Dahl's books, all of the 13 Story Treehouse series (Andy Griffiths), and are currently reading the Bad Guys series by Aaron Blabey). After finishing the chapter, we discuss what happened, ask him about characters' motivations and what he thinks will happen next. I then let him read the title and some of the first page of the next chapter. This seems to help him maintain his excitement for the next night's reading.*

### Conclusion

Providing compelling, quality input for the minority language can be difficult when you are the sole language speaker. Integrating language input into games, screen time, and household activities can be a helpful boost to communication and can prove quite fun for the parents as well. For caregivers anxious about the disproportionately small quantity of minority language input, focusing on short, meaningful activities may prove effective in addressing the unbalance.

For the past thirteen years, my wife and I have been raising our three children in a bilingual/bicultural home. It has no doubt been one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences I have had in my life. Despite the difficulties, it has been especially interesting to observe what kinds of resources have helped to contribute and develop my children's English language proficiency. What's even more fascinating is to think about how significantly the times have changed and that several of the resources that I will describe below did not even exist when I was a child. In short, the accruing of the following resources has not necessarily come from a strategic approach from either one of us. Instead, it has most definitely been developed from a combination of discovering things by ourselves, encountering them at work (as an educator), or by getting information from talking to other individuals we know in our communities (work, school, etc.).

Our family consists of five people: myself, my wife, and our three children. The oldest, son S, is a first-year junior high school student and is thirteen years old. The middle and the youngest, both daughters, A and N, are currently fourth and second-grade elementary school students. They are ten and eight years old, respectively. All three children attend local public Japanese school. S was born in Chicago in the United States. We moved to Japan when he was 22 months old. A and N were both born in Japan. At home, we have no strict language policy for our

family. In general, we are flexible, and are of the view that language is a resource that should be used however the user sees fit. The primary language I speak to all three children is English. My wife is Japanese and mainly uses that with all three children at home. Both girls predominantly use English with each other and their brother. If they are talking about something school-related, S will use Japanese with them. Looking back on this early childhood and elementary school period of raising three bilingual children, the following is a list (in no particular order of importance) of what I consider to be the most influential English resources for our family.

#### **Trips to the U.S.**

Although these trips have been infrequent (i.e. three times in eleven years), they have been extremely important in not only helping to develop the children's speaking fluency, but have also helped to foster a strong interest in English and American culture. Especially for A and N, before actually traveling to the U.S., they had a hard time making the connection between the place itself and the language. A has been to the U.S. twice, when she was seven and nine, and N has been once, when she was seven. At these ages, they were able to express some of the things they felt about their experiences. One of the things they felt was how interesting it was that everyone around them was suddenly speaking English! They were very happy to speak English with relatives and family friends.

### **Japanese Mother Speaking English**

I am not exactly sure if this is exactly a language resource per se, but the fact that my wife is very open to speaking English to her kids makes me think that it has been valuable. I believe this has undoubtedly helped to create an environment where the kids are fully linguistically supported by their parents. We have never had a strict or, better said, consistent language policy in our home. So if the children ask their mother a question in English, she will answer in English and vice versa for Japanese. While this might seem like common sense, in my experiences in talking to other international families, it is often the case that when presented with a question in English, the mother will respond in Japanese. In a sense, it seems that these families are operating on more of a one-parent one-language policy.

### **Interactions with other International Families**

Working at a university has put me in touch with many other international families, often times ones with children as well. Though not too numerous, the exchanges and interactions we have had have been influential in helping to reinforce my children's bilingual/bicultural identity. Some of these exchanges and interactions have included barbecues at my house or picnics in the park. Seeing kids who are also bilingual/bicultural, has allowed them to realize that there are many other people who are similar to themselves. In daily life they usually only get a chance to speak English to their family, so in these interactions, they are able to speak English with non-family members and this has been eye-opening for them.

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

### **Bedtime Stories and Independent Reading**

Since the children were young, book time has always been something that they have enjoyed and was a time that was treasured by everyone. Usually this time was before they went to bed. I would read to each of them part of a book/story. I did this starting from when they were about three years old and continued until quite recently, at least in terms of with the girls. S was about four and a half when he took off on phonics and began reading books by himself, such as *BOB Books* and the earliest *I Can Read* book. His reading did not take too much monitoring after that and he is now reading at a similar level (or possibly one year lower) as native speakers of his age. A definitely developed later and started reading simple books (*BOB Books*) when she was about six. N was somewhere in between the two of them, reading simple books independently when she was about five. Both A and N have been progressing quite well and enjoy reading very much. Now that they are improving in terms of their own independent reading and also because everyone has become busier in general, I have been reading books less to them before bedtime. However, because the routine was well-established, they still have a number of different books at their bedside and they often read in bed. They read books both in Japanese and English before bed. Some of the English books they read are *I Can Read* books, *Dr. Seuss*, *Oxford Readers*, and *DK Readers* to name a few.

**BOB Books.** This is a series of books that I stumbled upon when I was teaching at an international kindergarten. In the books, Bob is

the main character and he has a group of friends, all of whom have simple, three letter names like Sam, Peg, Mit, and Ruff. At the beginner level, the books have one to two-word sentences with a simple picture illustrating the words. For example, “Mat sat.” has a drawing of the character Mat sitting down. The books advance in difficulty for each level with different vocabulary/grammar themes such as word families, complex words, long vowels, and sight words. The beginner set also has an “11 hints for teaching your child to read” card that is very helpful for parents. Since the lower-level books only have about ten pages, one of the reasons they seem to be so effective is that beginner readers can read an entire book by themselves. Kids can get a sense of completion by reading the whole book rather than just part of a story. It’s a definite confidence booster and has kept my daughters motivated and interested. I introduced these books to the girls primarily (as S was reading at a higher level than these books when I encountered them) when they were each about five years old. At first, I would read them to the girls, then we would read them together, and then they read them on their own.

### **Phonics and Reading DVDs**

There are a number of popular phonics and reading DVDs on the market (e.g. *Leap Frog Letter Factory*, *Meet the Phonics Letter Sounds*, *Meet the Sight Words*) that have been useful in helping my children to understand phonics and to help in reading sight words. When teaching phonics in the home, unless the parent can make things interesting enough for the child to stay engaged, the learning can get a bit boring for

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

both the parent and the child, and the child can quickly lose motivation. These DVDs are able to hold the children’s attention as they are amusing to watch, as well as educational at the same time. We usually used them at home and we did not do anything very structured as I did not want to make it too serious. They watched them just like they would watch any other DVD.

### **Movie and DVD Subtitles**

My children don’t watch as many DVDs as they used to when they were younger (the reason is that they have now become much more interested in YouTube and Netflix), but one of the things that I have always insisted on when they do watch anything on a DVD is to turn on the English subtitles. The programs they watched were primarily animated Disney, Pixar, or DreamWorks’ movies, or DVDs such as *Dora*, *Little Einstein*, and *Sesame Street*. Before they were able to read, I think the subtitles got them used to the idea that the words they saw on the screen were related to the voices they heard. Now that they are reading, they often get excited to read the words when they see the subtitles appear. What great simultaneous reading and listening practice!

### **Apple TV**

This facilitative device is included on this list simply because of the fact that it has made using the internet for the two girls much easier. Before we had this device in our home, the children were only able to use the internet on independent, mobile devices. However, after purchasing it, they are able to watch shows together on TV, which provides chances for

interaction and communication with each other. Often they will talk about the shows they watched together or repeat/act out some of the scenes they saw or language they heard.

### **YouTube/Netflix**

Unquestionably, there are many opinions about children watching YouTube and other streaming services. Concerns over safety are definitely a very real thing and it can be quite scary as a parent if we are not closely monitoring what is being watched. That being said, our family has not had too many issues with our children encountering inappropriate material. There have been times when I have had to step in and tell them that they should not be watching something. Yet overall, it seems that YouTube and Netflix have especially provided them with a lot of natural English vocabulary that they would not have gotten without having watched them. Netflix has especially provided plenty of material that they can access safely. While I wouldn't watch the majority of things they watch on YouTube, (like *Annoying Orange*, *Lizzy Capri*, or *Collins Key*), there are many shows/series that we can watch together on Netflix, such as cooking/food shows, nature programs, and movies.

Considering the fact that they are surrounded by Japanese outside the home on a daily basis and they don't have English language support from peers, by viewing English shows and movies on these two applications, they are learning words, phrases, and aspects about culture that they couldn't have otherwise. As for S, he does not watch much TV these days, but he does watch YouTube on his cell phone and reads novels and

29.1 • Spring 2019/2020

National Geographic, so he is learning vocabulary and Western culture in those ways.

### **EIKEN Tests**

Finally, as my children are all in local, public Japanese schools, they do not receive much formal English instruction or practice in school. Since S is in his first year of junior high school, he now has an English class at school and is getting some formal English instruction. A and N, however, do not have English class at their elementary school, so they are not receiving much formal English language instruction. Lately, I have been doing EIKEN test practice with all of the children. Basically I will give them a test and have them complete it. We then go over any incorrect answers. Thus, the EIKEN tests have provided both reading and grammar practice for all three children, and since EIKEN offers tests at different proficiency levels, they all can have a sense of accomplishment. While my son has passed Pre-2, he will need to read a more extensive variety of materials to encounter a wider level of vocabulary in order to pass Level 2, Pre-1 and Level 1. His goal is to pass Level 1 before finishing junior high school and therefore realizes that he will need to read more and practice his essay writing. He is now taking the actual EIKEN test at his junior high school (cost ¥5500). The girls have been practicing with Levels 5, 4 and parts of 3 and have enjoyed the experience. There is no writing task until Level 3, so they will need to especially improve their writing to be prepared for the higher levels. Overall, the tests provide invaluable grammar and reading practice for children who are not getting much otherwise, and as they complete

and pass a level they are incredible confidence boosters as well.

In conclusion, it is quite amazing the amount and variety of language resources available for parents raising bilingual/bicultural children these days. Of course several of the resources I have mentioned in the above list have existed until now (e.g. traveling to other countries, interactions with international families, etc.), but the video-based and online resources growing up in the 1970's and early '80's were either very few (e.g. VCR videos, *Sesame Street*) or were completely nonexistent (e.g. Apple TV, DVDs, etc.). For me, people are by far the most important resource when trying to improve the language proficiency of bilingual/bicultural families and children. However, as an American father raising three bilingual/bicultural children outside of the United States, these newer video-based resources have been especially invaluable for helping to foster their English language proficiency as well as for raising their awareness of Western culture. It will be exciting to see what new resources will arise in the future!



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