



# Bilingual Japan

## バイリンガル通信

Autumn 2019/2020 Volume 29, Number 2  
The Newsletter of the JALT  
Special Interest Group on Bilingualism

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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

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- 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

### **Guidelines for Case Study Articles for the JALT Bilingualism SIG newsletter**

The goal of a case study is to show how the process of teaching\* and acquiring a minority language & culture is carried out in individual cases. Writers should clearly explain to the reader the relevant information regarding the main characters of the story, the situation that these characters came from and/or are presently in, and the strategies and methods used to advance toward the stated goal. While a case study is usually written by a parent about that parent's child or children, any contributor who is suitably informed about a particular situation is eligible to submit an article for publication.

Obviously, contributors should keep in mind their audience. Most Bilingualism SIG members (numbering over 200, all of whom receive three online issues annually) have various years of experience in this field. Many joined the SIG when their children were young, hoping to learn how to raise their children to be bilingual, bi-literate, and bicultural. A contributor should strive to contribute to our readers' desire to know and learn, keeping in mind that our members have a wide range of personal backgrounds, current family circumstances, and material and social resources.

\* (Terms such as 'teaching', 'teachers', 'learning', etc. are used broadly in these guidelines and can/do include people, practices, and experiences beyond a traditional school environment.)

#### **Submission guidelines:**

It is advisable to check with the editors before writing your article. It is best to propose an idea or an abstract and then proceed upon the editors' feedback. Reading past case studies is advisable.

Deadlines are the middle of January, April, and September. Articles should be 1500-3000 words, though exceeding the upper cap, within reason, can usually be accommodated. In certain circumstances, much longer articles are accepted but may be split into two parts, appearing in successive issues. Check with the editors on this.

#### **Editorial guidelines:**

Case studies in this newsletter are generally not academic in nature. Rather, they are a focused narrative on the real experiences of people in specific situations. References to research and theory, if used at all, should be used sparingly. Many case studies are fine without such references. However, meandering narratives will be rejected or sent back for revision. Articles should convey a clear story that reveals the efforts and outcomes towards teaching and learning of the target language and/or culture, whether successful or not.

#### **Article structure:**

##### **- Introduction**

This first part of your article should provide the relevant information about the 'teachers' and 'learners' (often the parents and children) – demographics, past and current residencies, education history, language abilities, teaching strategies and methods, lifestyle and social circumstances, etc. Pseudonyms are acceptable but should be acknowledged. A thesis statement of sorts should be included to alert the reader to the direction and scope of the article.

##### **- Body**

This section should clearly deal with the main events of the article. Convey the steps taken to address the problems stated in the (so-called) 'thesis statement' and the results of those steps. This is sometimes the most personal part of an article, and conveying the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the participants towards successes or failures can be powerful. Be fair, be accurate, and be honest.

Typically, there is a third party involved in a case study -- a teacher, principal, a school, family member, a 'Saturday School' board member' etc. It is beneficial to the reader to explain this party's position and behavior adequately and honestly.

Details matter. Explain the methods you use in enough detail to give the reader a sense of how that method worked in those circumstances. For example, methods might include reading English books at bedtime, Skype sessions with cousins back home, Saturday school projects, daily ‘English-only’ periods, or home-school routines. Helpful detail would include any ‘spin-off’ activity *vis a vis* bedtime reading; particulars of Skype sessions, i.e. do the kids just ‘wing it’ or are talking points set up beforehand? What is the proficiency or ‘success’ of the exchanges? What excites kids in Saturday Schools to do mid-week English homework in preparation for the Saturday lesson? What are the social benefits of such an arrangement? For periods where ‘English-only’ is in effect, how does the child respond? Do all siblings, or spouse, participate? To what affect?

- **Conclusion**

Wrap up your article by briefly summarizing the wins and losses, what you have learned, and the path forward in the long and winding road ahead.

In the end, as a case study contributor, you are a storyteller. As always, good stories have drama, suspense, protagonists who struggle, antagonists who thwart, success, failure, humor, irony, courage, uncertainty, etc. Most importantly, good stories always connect with the reader. Your reader will be much like you -- having much on the line, such as a precious child who they dearly want to succeed in life. Your story will resonate with them. Tell it well.

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**Celebrating 30 years of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Japan!**

**Call for Proposals:**

This Special Commemorative Monograph considers all aspects of the linguistic and sociolinguistic competences and practices of bi-/multilingual speakers who have done so in the past and continue to cross, navigate and negotiate existing social and linguistic boundaries, adopting or adapting themselves to new and overlapping linguistic and cultural spaces. We invite proposals in all areas of research in bi-/multilingualism and bi-/multiculturalism, including, but not limited to: *bi-/cultural/multiethnic identity development; stories of bi-/multilingual success/challenges/lessons learnt; third culture kids (TCK) narratives; developing literacy in multiple languages (pluriliteracy); early bilingualism and heritage language development; maintaining and retaining bi-/multilingualism.*

**Proposals:** Several categories of proposals are included in the call:

- 1) **Academic articles** (word length could range from 3.000 to 3.500 including references)
- 2) **Interviews** (2.000 words max)
- 3) **Reflections/Narratives** (2.000 words max)

Articles could include not only the sociocultural factors of the learner’s journey, but also focus on language acquisition process. Contributions from individuals whose stories have previously been documented by our SIG are welcome, along with new narratives that have yet to be told. For ideas and inspiration, please have a look at our past Monograph Issues on the BSIG website (<https://www.bsig.org/>).

**Contact:**

Those who wish to submit an expression of interest, please contact the respective section editor by **September 30, 2020.**

1. **Adults (30s, 40s, 50s and above)** Shaitan Alexandra ([shaitan.alexandra127@gmail.com](mailto:shaitan.alexandra127@gmail.com))

2. *Young Adults (18 - 30 yo)* Christie Provenzano (pcprov@gmail.com)

3. *Adolescents and Children (under 18 years old)* Diane Lamb-Obara  
(dianelamb.ohiojapan@gmail.com)

Within the email, please include a **100-300-word** description of your interest.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Alex, Christie, and Diane  
**2020 BSIG Monograph Editors.**

<b>DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE: January 15th</b>
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## Coordinator's Message

### Dear Bilingualism SIG Members!

Hope this message finds you well despite the busiest time of the academic year! Firstly, we would like to thank BSIG Officers (<https://www.bsig.org/officers>) along with **ALL** our Special Interest Group members who have been contributing to the Bilingualism SIG successful activities through long-term membership, presenting and sharing their research and lived experiences at the PanSIG and JALT Bilingualism SIG Forums, and SIG events related to bi-/multilingualism and bi-/multiculturalism, submitting articles and book reviews to the SIG's newsletter and the JJMM Journal, and other various contributions.

We would like to express our gratitude and thanks to **Diane Lamb-Obara** and **Christie Provenzano** for their engaging presentations at the PanSIG 2020 BSIG Forum that took place online via Zoom platform back in May of 2020. BSIG Forum turned out to be a huge success thanks to the presenters and participants who contributed greatly by sharing their invaluable knowledge and experiences to the discussion.

We look forward to seeing you at the **JALT 46th Annual International Conference** on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition aiming at promoting "Online Communities of Teachers and Learners." The event is scheduled to take place online running from **Monday, November 16 to Monday, November 23, 2020**. This year the BSIG AGM and the Forum have a joint 90-minute slot taking place online on **Friday, November 20<sup>th</sup> 6:00 PM - 7:30 PM**. We hope this scheduling would attract many individuals interested in joining both events.

I hope you will enjoy reading the Newsletter issue showcasing contributions from Roger Grabowski, Matthew Guay, and Alexander McAulay whose stories would surely kindle minds. I gather most of us could find some familiar experiences and/or observations raised in the articles. Thank you very much to all contributors who have expressed an interest in submitting their work to the BSIG Newsletter.

On a different note, we are constantly looking for new members to join our Decision-Making Team (SIG Officers). Please do send your suggestions, questions and proposals related to the BSIG events and activities **to Shaitan Alexandra at alexshaitan@yahoo.com**. Our team strives to provide support and guidance to novice DMT members as much as we can. 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!

Best wishes,

Bilingualism SIG Coordinator,

Shaitan Alexandra.

My wife Misako and I decided to raise our children in both English and Japanese. Like many parents in our situation, we enjoyed the immeasurable rewards that it brought, both to the kids and to us, while doing our best to anticipate and react to the many challenges that arise when raising bilingual kids. However, nothing could have prepared my kids and I for the unimaginable challenge of losing Misako in April 2017, suddenly leaving me a single American father of kids aged nine, seven, and five, living in Tokyo. I could write volumes describing the grief, stress, and disruption to our lives that we have experienced (and still deal with), but my kids' language development has continued to play an important role in our family and has taken on new meaning and importance in our, unfortunately, unique circumstances. Part One of this article describes our family and language use before my wife passed away. Part Two will discuss our lives since then.

### **Our Family**

I met Misako in her hometown of Yokohama through mutual friends not long after I moved to Japan in 1997. One year later I moved back to the U.S. to attend graduate school, after which I returned to Japan and we began our lives together and eventually started our family.

I will describe our life in late 2016/early 2017, right before Misako passed away, and the ways in which we dealt with two languages in our house. We have a boy, Robert, then in third grade of elementary school, and two girls Sayaka, then in 1st grade, and Asami, who was second year in kindergarten. Rob and Sayaka were attending the neighborhood public elementary school, right around the corner from our house in Tokyo, and the kindergarten the kids all attended is fairly typical. So, their school life had been all in Japanese.

### **Mom and Dad's Language**

Misako spoke fluent English and was completely comfortable with it, far more comfortable than I will ever be with Japanese. She had graduated from a foreign language college and then used English working for a trading company before moving to Canada on a working holiday visa. When we travelled together outside of Japan (prior to having our first child), she could go weeks at a time hardly speaking Japanese at all. She actually preferred speaking English in many situations, especially those in which she felt that *Nihongo* hindered her ability to be frank or direct. Her English speaking and listening were certainly stronger than her literacy skills, but she enjoyed reading and challenged herself to read the English translation of several Haruki

Murakami novels after she had finished the Japanese version. To this day, I am still in awe.

My Japanese level in 2017 could be described as intermediate but quite conversational. I had passed N3-level of the JLPT and I was constantly resolving to tackle N2 (I still am), but I was too busy to devote sufficient time to studying for the test. I did what little self-study I could and tried to improve but working in an all-English environment and then coming home and speaking only English to my family has always made it tough to use Japanese on a daily basis. However, I take part in several events in our neighborhood and belong to the father's club at elementary school, so I have been able to use Japanese in social settings.

Our relationship was entirely conducted in English. When we met, I knew almost no Japanese, so that is how we lived our lives together and it would have felt weird to change.

### **Raising Our Kids**

When we became parents, we both strongly desired to raise our kids using both English and Japanese and doing so was never in question. I never spoke Japanese to my kids and they never spoke Japanese to me. (Asami, then age five, would sometimes use individual Japanese words, but did so while using English syntax and sentences) I honestly think that the kids had grown up since infancy just thinking that it was normal and, even today, being old enough to reflect on it and compare

it to their friends' lives, maybe they think that it's usual in the context of our unusual family.

When Rob and Sayaka were very small, they went to international pre-school, giving them a head start in English until age four or so but, since that time the only consistent English-speaking practice any of the kids got was at home. So, in order to maximize that exposure and practice in a realistic way, our approach, which I christened "Daddy's Home", for lack of a better name, evolved. (I invented the name as I prepared to take part in the Bilingualism SIG's panel, "At Home Language Policies and Practices", at JALT 2016 in Nagoya.) Incidentally, their little sister didn't get the international pre-school experience—it's probably typical for little ones to get cheated out of things their older siblings could do when their parents had more time and money. However, Asami got an advantage over the other two: more time with me. When she was one year old, I changed positions at my university to one with a much more flexible schedule and a later start in the morning, allowing Asami and I to spend more time together. When she started kindergarten, I was able to walk her to the bus most mornings, for example.

At our house, the "Daddy's Home" approach was quite simple: when I was around, everyone spoke English with me and was expected/encouraged to speak English to each other. When I was not home, the kids *did* speak English with their mother, but, of course, not as much as they spoke Japanese. It

must be noted that, for all of our efforts to foster the kids' English skills, they are also native Japanese speakers. They were, and still are, more proficient and comfortable in Japanese, the majority language where they have grown up.

To be sure, our "Daddy's Home" approach yielded good days and bad days and I can recall times when dinner table conversation slipped into pure Japanese, to my annoyance. However, at such times, unless someone was particularly tired or grumpy, they would eventually switch back to English and their mom and I would help them if necessary. We spoke English to each other even if we were watching a Japanese TV show or if I were helping the kids with homework. When the kids interacted with each other, it was mostly in Japanese, but they regularly slipped into English, both on purpose and unconsciously—I recall a handful of times watching the three of them playing cards, speaking 100 percent in English, without any prompting to do so.

I was making an effort to read in English with at least one of them in the evening if possible and, if everyone was feeling cooperative, Rob and Sayaka could help me read to their little sister. We amassed a nice little collection of story books for me (and occasionally) their mother to read to them and we introduced phonetic awareness mostly through old favorites like *Hop on Pop* and *Green Eggs and Ham*, then moving on to other kids books and easy graded readers. All three

kids enthusiastically took to the *Brain Quest* series, which provides fun reading practice as well as exercises for writing the alphabet and beginning spelling. By age five or six, the kids were able to recognize and decode basic sounds and easy words and could write the alphabet and their own names. However, I suppose that our attitude towards English literacy was to give them the basics and to focus on it more keenly when they got older, which I have tried to do. I will cover this aspect more fully in Part Two of this article in the next issue of this newsletter.

In addition, we played games, mostly cards, quite often (how many hundreds of hands of *Uno* did I play from 2015-2017?) This all was happening in English, so they were not only practicing the language necessary to play the game, but also using English for all of the arguing, complaining, and trash-talking that goes along with game time in any family. And, of course, we had conversations about other things while we played as well.

One great effect on Robert's English usage and, by extension, his sisters', has been that of sports. When he was seven or eight years old, he watched a few basketball games on television with me and then quickly became obsessed with NBA basketball. In addition to asking me countless questions every day about it, he started watching all of the games on NHK in English and soon figured out how to watch highlights on YouTube and how to check scores on the internet. Even better for

me, in 2016 all three kids got wrapped up in the Chicago Cubs, my favorite baseball team, as they marched towards their first World Series championship in over a century. The interest in sports exposed them to so much more English and gave them a reason to use it with me. In fact, given that they only discussed sports with me, I doubt that any of them would have been able to talk in any depth about baseball or basketball in Japanese.

Outside of the house, their exposure to English was limited. We were friends with several international families and other English speakers, but our busy life did not allow us to socialize with them frequently. We went to Catholic Church on most Sundays, where the kids had English Sunday school. So, again, our system was aimed at maximizing the possibilities they did have, i.e. time spent with me.

Also limited, but immeasurably effective, were yearly visits to Chicago. All of my kids' American cousins are around their ages and I have friends with similarly aged kids, so they were constantly playing in English. Especially when each kid was four or five, there was a noticeable jump in their fluency and vocabulary after two or three weeks in the U.S. For example, the summer Asami turned five, even her grandparents and aunts and uncles could notice her improvement after we returned to Japan. Maintaining those summer L2 gains became another motivation to get them using English

as much as possible in the house when back in Tokyo.

As I prepared to take part in the Bilingualism SIG Panel in 2016, it gave Misako and I a chance to reflect on our language policy and our kids' progress. We agreed that, overall, our kids were about as bilingual as we could realistically have expected, given the circumstances. While not quite at the level of their American cousins and friends, they spoke English fluently and confidently and could code-switch without even thinking about it. They were developing a high degree of meta-linguistic awareness and spoke English with a native-like accent, sometimes even correcting their mother's pronunciation. I will never forget the day when Asami said to me for the first time "Let's go to the park", with a hard *r* sound, instead of "pow-k", as she had before. I made her repeat it over and over and then had her say *car*, *horse*, and *heart*, just to make sure. Wonderful moments like this provided tangible evidence that the efforts we had made to maintain a bilingual family were well worth it.

We also agreed that our relative success came down to two important factors:

1. My physical presence. I have a job that has allowed me to spend more time at home than lots of fathers and my presence meant that English was being used in the house.
2. Misako and I were on the same page. If she, as the speaker of the majority

language, had not “bought into” the plan, it would have been much less successful. When she saw me roll my eyes or get frustrated, she would help me steer things back into English or tell the kids to stop speaking Japanese if necessary. She wanted them to be bilingual just as much as I did.

Misako was freakishly healthy. I can't remember her having even a fever or a heavy cold. (She taunted me for my weak constitution with “Japanese women have to be tough!”) However, we found out that she suffered from a rare vascular disorder and, in fall 2016 she underwent corrective surgery. She was discharged from the hospital in a few days and immediately returned to regular life. She soon found out that she required another operation, which we scheduled for April 2017, during my spring break, so that I could be at home during what we thought would be a

minor inconvenience in our lives. It was a serious surgery, but one with a 96 or 97 percent success/recovery rate. However, while recovering in the hospital, she suffered a seizure, followed by a brain hemorrhage, robbing her of all brain function. Five days later, she passed away.

As I dealt with all the arrangements in the wake of Misako's passing, one thing soon became very clear to me despite my shock and sadness: we had made a very happy life for our family. For the sake of my kids, I resolved to alter as little of that happy life as possible, while acknowledging that some things could never be the same. One thing that would obviously change would be the dynamics of language use in our family. However, I was confident that Misako and I had laid the proper groundwork for the kids to function in both English and Japanese as my family started the next, unknown chapter of our lives.

## 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.

### Westminster by Matthew Guay

I wonder if any other multilingual parents raising children in Japan have had a similar experience to me. I've become fluent in four languages and find deep satisfaction in my career as a language teacher, however, my results with my own children's bilingual development are quite poor. I will lay out below the combination of factors, including our family make-up, environment, and the mistakes I have made along the way, that have led to this somewhat worrying situation. I will then describe and evaluate my daughter's school experience in an American elementary school for one month as a first grader, made in August and September of 2019 in an attempt to reinvigorate her English ability.

#### **Our Family**

The 95 square meters of our two-story home in Fujisawa City is shared between our four-year-old son, seven-year-old daughter, my Japanese wife, her mother, and me. I decided to bite the bullet and buy a house early on as my mother-in-law, a single mother surviving on a meager pension, had nowhere to live. The most economically sensible option was to buy a place where we could all live together. As my wife also works,

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our children were in the local Japanese daycare almost immediately after they turned age one. My wife and mother-in-law don't speak English, and my wife's attitude towards English has been very negative until recently. Concerning her own English education, her attitude is still very negative. Thus, I was unable to benefit from some of the more assured strategies for raising children to be bilingual, one of which is having all or at least some family speaking time in English. I was also not able to ever pretend to my children that I don't understand or speak Japanese. Having them enter daycare from age one also noticeably pushed back on the English I was using with my children as their nursery teachers corrected with Japanese all the English words, I had taught them as they began their social lives in Japanese.

Though I cook most of our meals, and prove my Americanness with my chore performance, my wife has often been offended or upset by my inability to navigate the pragmatic barriers in communicating properly in Japanese. She was very stressed raising our children while working and needed me to be a calming factor in the house. Life is rather

chaotic for all families with young children, but the additional distortions in communication caused by the very divergent pragmatic norms between our languages led to what felt like endless miscommunication as I struggled to create harmony using, in my case, my L4.

Relatively tranquil evenings were frequently ruined by my errors, which included: wrong word selection, too little use of silence and vagueness, failing to read the air properly, disagreeing too upfront and frankly in a way typical of low-context cultures, inability to express in Japanese my feelings, lack of knowledge of the expressions a native speaker would choose to deescalate a situation, and failing to adopt Japanese pragmatic rules for how and when to apologize. Once I overheard a Canadian woman making fun of her Japanese husband for always trying to blame communication problems on language difficulties. “No, it’s just you” she stated matter-of-factly. I suppose it is only natural to assume so if you don’t speak another language or your partner’s L1. It has only been in the last 20 years that scholarly literature has brought pragmatic research to the forefront and many businessmen and women still struggle and suffer today from misunderstandings stemming from pragmatic and cultural differences. Trying to maintain my own sanity as I worked to upgrade my career in order to afford our family and maintain a relationship with my wife required the majority of what attention span I had left

after the daily rigors of life with young children. This was an issue when none of the assured strategies for raising bilingual children were viable and compounded by my wife’s lack of interest or cooperation.

If I wasn’t fluent in my daughter’s L1 (Japanese) perhaps it would have been easier to preserve with some form of the English only policy. As my daughter got older, I began to find that I needed to use Japanese to negotiate with her, set rules, and explain things such as why I would rather be a human than a mermaid. There were and still remain many times every day when being able to communicate with my children seems more important than trying to maintain an English-only policy. I also often wake up on Saturday mornings determined to speak English all weekend only to realize Sunday evening that I have been speaking Japanese the whole time. Studies show that language switching poses a mental toll on the brain. With all the Japanese going on around me through communicating with my wife, her mother, neighbors, the delivery men, and my children, perhaps my mind purposefully blocked me from realizing that I was forgetting to switch into English between all the Japanese. Perhaps I missed some key time when there was a chance to create a positive habit. Our family’s policy of avoiding screen time and technology with our children may have also led to missing out on some beneficial tools. All in all, the situation seemed to slide very naturally into a state of our children being monolingual.

The strategies I employed through most of my children's early years to combat this state of affairs can be briefly summed up as reading books in English most nights, insisting on English when they make requests, trying -- though often failing -- to speak English with my kids, starting English Kumon at age five, and annual trips home for about two weeks around Christmas time. These trips have had some positive effects, but my daughter took quite a while to warm up to my family and rarely made an effort to communicate with them in English. My brother was convinced for three years that my daughter disliked him, unable to see past the obdurate way she reacted to him. In the early years I was more hopeful that my children would learn to speak English by endeavoring at home, but it slowly became more and more apparent that only longer periods of time abroad were going to do the trick, and time was ticking. In the last four years I had managed to get my master's degree and sort out my career, but by then my daughter was already six.

Before going into the American school situation, this interview with my wife, taken about five months after the trip, will underscore some of what has been discussed so far.

(translated from Japanese)

Me: You used to resist family English time, like when I would push for even five minutes of English-only time, but recently you have changed your mind. What led you to do this?

Wife: Well, it's that I've just come to realize that speaking English is an important skill both for my career and for the children. And especially, I've finally grown up myself. I've stopped getting irritated and annoyed when we speak English.

Me: Before, what was it that made you so irritated speaking English during English time? That the kids were really small and...

Wife: Yeah right, there was no time to deal with anything other than just getting through the day.

Me: Okay, so what are the most important things for you in raising our daughter?

Wife: For her to be able to be herself while also having the capacity to avoid bothering other people.

Me: Okay, I see. How important do you think it is for our daughter to be fluent in English?

Wife: Well, it's very important. They have to become fluent in English, considering both that it's essential for current society and their heritage.

Me: Have you felt like that since the beginning or is this something you have come to believe recently?

Wife: Well I guess from the beginning, but early on I didn't really think about how they would learn to speak English. So my thoughts haven't really changed, but back then I didn't really understand what we should do.

Me: I see. Finally, if our daughter doesn't seem to be becoming bilingual with our current strategies over the next few years, what do you think we should do to help her become fluent in English?

Wife: Definitely study abroad. For like two years.

Me: Like for the first two years of junior high school?

Wife: Maybe more like the last year of junior high or in high school. Actually, I suppose they would become more fluent if they study abroad in junior high or high school, but wouldn't just going to university overseas be good enough? I think it is very important for them to understand Japanese culture.

Me: Don't you think that our daughter has a pretty good understanding of Japanese culture?

Wife: Umm, I don't think so. She is still too little.

### **The School**

The school situation in Louisiana is very different from a large portion of the United States, but more common in the

southeast. Baton Rouge is still a city that is mostly segregated with most families of African descent living on the north side above Florida Boulevard and WASP families living below. Often, the closer to Florida Blvd. you get, the higher the crime rate. The line for schools is drawn along the public/private divide with almost all white families placing their children in private schools of a variety of religious affiliations and price points. For example, nestled in a neighborhood far from downtown or Florida Blvd. and coming in at close to \$20,000 per year, The Episcopal School of Baton Rouge is at the pinnacle, whereas Christian Life fellowship just on the other side of the bayou behind our house only costs about \$5,000 per year. My upper middle-class parents sent both me and my brother to Episcopal.

The public schools are left to the city's minority and low-means families. For a variety of reasons, I decided to stick with the public-school system. Our school, Westminster, was in a nice neighborhood, and even though its catchment area was almost entirely in the south of the city, my daughter was the only white-looking student in her class of 19. In accordance with desegregation rules, students of African ancestry have been bussed down since the 1956 historic United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. In response, most WASP families in our schools' catchment area put their children in private schools. Of the faculty and staff at Westminster, only the librarian and

two teachers appeared to be of European descent. For me, this felt good somehow to add some diversity to my daughter's life experience.

The presentation given by the school principal on parents' night summed up the atmosphere and teaching philosophy of the school. They were completely focused on the 'No Child Left Behind' Bush administration program that had been only somewhat modified into Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by the Obama administration. These programs are highly focused on test scores. The school was currently performing at rank D on a scale from A-F (excluding E), and in order to get more funding (and other benefits described during the presentation), their goal was to reach C rank. To do so, they needed to raise all of the kids' reading, writing, and math test scores. Their primary strategy was focused on fostering more parental involvement. There was free soda and cookies for attending parent's night. If your kids were hungry, there was some extra food. A fun teacher introduction was prepared with a soundtrack blasting through a horribly derelict sound system while the teachers flew through confetti one by one to boxing-ring-style introductions and cheers from the audience. The teachers and principal were all very approachable, friendly, and implored that parents take more responsibility in their children's education.

Our teacher, Mrs. Singleton, was very professional, experienced, and devoted to her

job. She knew precisely what the kids needed to learn for the tests and had all the research and program information she needed to reach the school's goals for the students. The school distributed a red folder to each child that included the list of common core words for communication at each grade level, pamphlets on how and why you should help your children with their daily homework, as well as lots of legal documents to sign. This folder was sent back home each day containing announcements, a daily report from the teacher on your child's performance, the daily writing task and arithmetic task, a check sheet to mark that your child had read a book, as well as any additional classwork that your child failed to complete during the day, and a free dress card if they had performed very well that day.

The daily focus throughout the year was on making sure the kids learned everything they needed to improve their test scores. Mrs. Singleton was focused on not letting kids fool around and was really in my daughter's face a lot because my daughter was accustomed to being able to tune out at elementary school in Japan. The ESL specialist, who met me and my daughter twice, said the teachers use a forceful style because the black children respond well to it. At first, I thought the specialist would be helping my daughter more often, but he was only at the school once a week. However, Mrs. Singleton was very keen on figuring out how to reach my daughter and she reached out to me and the ESL specialist. I was pretending we were

going to stay there all year, so I sometimes wasn't sure what to tell her when she would say things like 'I know she isn't understanding a lot of what is going on now, but at the end of the year she will need to know everything we are teaching as it will build up a lot each year. If she falls behind, things will only get worse in second and third grade.'

For the last three weeks of school, my daughter was allowed to spend quite a bit of time under her desk when she got upset or tired of studying, and Mrs. Singleton tried to be a little more reserved with her overall. My daughter's general assessment of each day was that she spent a lot of time under her desk, the teacher was always getting angry, she enjoyed playing at lunch with her friends though play time was too short, and the cafeteria food (though free to all) tasted really terrible. She said she learned how to talk to her friends with body language and hand gestures. Both Mrs. Singleton and my daughter remarked how much she really enjoyed her duty in the cafeteria checking each kid's tray to make sure it was cleared off before being set on the conveyor belt to the dishwasher, though when I interviewed her five months later she said she didn't enjoy the task that much. She insisted that she never wanted to go back because it was not fun at all, and that the whole trip was generally not fun. She said some of the math activities were 'about one millimeter's worth of fun', but that otherwise she didn't enjoy class, though she did make a friend and they often played hula-hoop and

other games together outside. As she mentioned several times, she thought play time was too short.

### **On Her English Improvement**

Writing this article six months later I can really see the impact those six weeks had on my daughter's ability to understand English, including long-term boosts to her listening ability, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but at the time progress seemed pretty slow. I had held hopes that by the end of the six weeks I might be able to converse with my daughter in English as I had heard from a number of other mothers who had done the one-month school-back-home adventure. However, in our case, her progress was at a mostly nonverbal level. She learned to recognize a lot of basic vocabulary, so she could understand me and her grandparents more, but her only speaking achievement was being able to play *Go Fish* all in English. When I would pick her up each day at 3:30 she would instantly burst into splatter gun-rate Japanese as I would drive her to the library, Chuck E. Cheese, or the supermarket.

It was an exhausting trip for me as I tried to make up for how grueling the school days were for her by making the rest of the time as enjoyable as possible. This was in part due to her personality. She can often get very upset and refuse to do anything or explain why she is angry. She was kicked out of both English and Hula dance classes at a studio in our neighborhood because of her behavior and I was worried what might happen if she

became too unhappy. Weekends were spent at alligator farms, zoos, or water parks. I read four or five books to her each night, cooked whatever she wanted to eat, and let her suck her thumb to her heart's content while watching cartoons after her homework was finished. My deepest fear in the beginning was that she would refuse to go to school, so from that perspective the trip was a huge success. Realizing that my son would be ready for kindergarten this coming summer and that another six-week trip with both of my children would really help them start speaking English, I mentioned it to my wife when she picked us up at the airport. My wife spent the next hour in an angry scowl incredulous that I could think of doing anything other than prioritizing attending the 2020 Summer Olympics.

### **Pandemic Update a Year on - September 2020**

Things have changed greatly since I first wrote this article in the beginning of the year. The Corona virus situation in the U.S. is not good and among many factors, the fact that Japan is still not letting permanent residents back into the country means that any plans for another American school experience are on indefinite hold. One positive recently is that my daughter has outgrown most of her behavior problems. Though she refused to sit in her desk for the first week of second grade at our school here in Fujisawa, she no longer displays most of the personality issues that were daily problems last year and she enjoys going to school. We flirted briefly with me

only speaking English on Sundays, but for a variety of reasons that has fallen by the wayside. She has kept up with her English Kumon, but my wife has now lost any interest again in our children's English ability as she is now focused on transferring our daughter into a prestigious school in Yokohama despite it being about 70 minutes door-to-door one-way. The motivation for this is a combination of primarily three factors: 1) biased against public schools based on her own experience growing up in downtown Yokohama, where it is more common for parents who can to avoid the public schools, 2) the fact that my daughter's first grade teacher was unusually poor (she has already been dismissed from the school), and 3) my wife's fears that her daughter will be targeted by trouble makers if she stays in the public system as she gets older. As a result, my daughter now spends about four hours a day studying for the exam in January, and even though I am against her going to private school, she has adapted to the workload for the most part, so I have tried to be supportive.

Another positive is that my daughter's listening comprehension seems to have not faded over the year. English Kumon study is clearly beneficial, though it is interesting how she doesn't connect it with the active vocabulary of the English brain she developed while in Louisiana. In a natural setting she is unlikely to use the Kumon language and more likely to use hand gestures like she did when we were in the U.S., though passively she can

recognize all of the Kumon English. Whether the combination of six-week American school experiences every other year, daily Kumon practice, along with my own efforts, will help her to become bilingual seems a bit of a long shot. More likely it will serve as helpful

preparation for that inevitable year abroad she will most likely have to undertake if she is to be fluent in English. At this moment a year on, improvements in her attitude and ability to control her own behavior suggest that future trips will bear more fruit. To be continued...

**Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two:** Reviewed by Alexander McAulay

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two: The Official Playscript of the Original West End Production* (2016), by Jack Thorne, based on an original new story by J.K. Rowling, John Tiffany & Jack Thorne. London: Little Brown, 343pp.

The ideal reader of this review is someone like me, a father raising a bilingual son who is a reluctant reader. It probably also helps if the son has not read the Harry Potter novels (which may be a given if the son is a reluctant reader).

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* is the eighth book in the Harry Potter series. Unlike the first seven, it is a play, not a novel, and was written by Jack Thorne and John Tiffany, with J.K. Rowling contributing to the story idea (although reading around online suggests there are slightly conflicting views about the exact role division). The story concerns Albus, the younger son of Harry Potter, going off to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry, who is now Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry of Magic, has a slightly fractious relationship with Albus. This isn't helped when Albus becomes friends with Scorpius Malfoy, son of Draco. Old rivalries are reignited, and chaos ensues, when Albus sets out to right some wrongs from his father's time at Hogwarts.

In the summer of 2016, I was astounded when my son Jason, who was then 13, asked me to bring back *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* from the UK. Somehow the hype around the project had reached his ears. My daughter was an avid reader in her elementary school years, but Jason never took to independent reading, and had to be forced,

badgered, and coaxed into read-aloud sessions with me. But the Harry Potter books never featured in the reading history of either child, who are now 19 and 17 years old. They had no interest in reading any book that they had already seen the film version of, and as the Harry Potter DVD boxset was regularly taken down from its shelf in our house, the books were never touched. I always had a pang of regret about this, as the Harry Potter series of books seems to bring so much joy to its readers, and I'm aware of the studies that claim the books help to boost child literacy (e.g. Dempster et al. 2016). When I talked with my son in the summer of 2016, I told Jason that the *Cursed Child* book was a play, not a novel, but he wasn't sure of the distinction and didn't want an explanation. "I asked you to get me a book so why are you complaining?" seemed to be the thrust of his teenage outrage. To be fair, he had a point. I brought the book back and over the autumn in 2016 we read through it in our usual pattern, with me reading aloud and Jason listening, and also looking over my shoulder and reading along about 70 percent of the time. These reading sessions took place mostly in the

evenings or on weekends, but there would be long gaps between sessions. Reading with Jason has always been more impromptu than scheduled. At 343 pages the book is quite long, but the play format leaves more white space on the page than a novel, and we went through the book quite quickly.

Three factors accounted for our brisk reading. First of all, and most importantly, *Cursed Child* is a riveting story. It has all the familiar and successful Harry Potter elements: the magic, the humor, the quirky characters, and the plot twists. There is also some time-travel involved, which made Jason and I remember many episodes of *Doctor Who*, and led to those ‘paradox’ conversations that always arise in time-travel tales: “If character A has gone back in time and killed character B, then why is character C still grumpy, as his grumpiness is supposed to be because character B bullied him, but character B is dead in this timeline, so...” I would deliberately prolong these conversations, to have Jason continue in his extended production of English. In addition, some weighty themes are thrown in, such as the trials and tribulations of aging (with Harry and friends now middle-aged). A key component in the story is Harry’s struggle to bridge the generation gap and communicate effectively with his son Albus. These points in the story often led to Jason and me chatting about our own relationship and communication, prompting us to look back on moments when we hadn’t always gotten it right. These

elements are dealt with skillfully in the story – there is an emotional authenticity in their rendering, and I think that is what makes them good conversation starters.

The second factor was Jason’s incredible memory for detail about the Harry Potter universe. In combination with my terrible memory of the films, this led to rich language exchange, as Jason constantly had to explain to me who a character was, and how they featured in the films. This became a running gag as we read through, with me claiming probably not to have seen that particular film (I’ve seen them all, multiple times), and Jason reminding me in exasperated tones exactly which Christmas we had watched which film, and what I had said that day that *proved* I had seen the film.

The third factor is my job as a researcher-practitioner in screenwriting. This means I am used to reading the dialogue-driven format of plays and screenplays. If you are not familiar with this format you should definitely take a look before parting with your hard-earned cash for a book that has a format your child may not want to read, or you may not enjoy reading aloud. The “visual storytelling” format involves relaying only what can be seen and heard. There is no interior monologue, and no description of how someone “thinks” or “feels”, as the audience in cinema and theatre cannot see this. Most of what you see on the page is the characters’ names, followed by the dialogue they deliver. There may be some stage direction, but this in

minimal. For example, a random sampling of pages 198-199 reveals four characters in interaction. Snape takes seven turns speaking, Hermione takes eight turns, Scorpius takes three turns, and Ron takes one turn. There are five short lines of stage direction, for example: “She nods at RON, who pulls down a map.” With so much dialogue, I suspect younger readers listening to read-aloud might struggle to keep up with who is speaking turn-by-turn. *Cursed Child* is one of the happiest surprises in my reading experience with my children. Jason and I read through it at a brisk pace. We both enjoyed the story and it led to extended sessions where Jason would speak English in order to explain background to me, or to talk about an element of the story that resonated with our own father-son experiences. Finally, when Jason went to Melbourne on a three-month exchange early in 2020, he was given a book reading project in his English class by his Australian school. For his first book, he chose *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, a direct result of having read *Cursed Child*. As he read through, he discovered elements of the book that do not appear in the film. Finding these differences were not part of his project, but when we video chatted

while he was in Australia, he would tell me each time how his reading was progressing and what new differences he had discovered. This was undoubtedly part of a new stage of psychological development that he reached on an eventful sojourn abroad (see McAulay 2020). Finally, at 16 years of age, he was reading independently in English, and these days we have good conversations in English about the differences between the books and the films. He is now reading *Chamber of Secrets* and plans to work his way through the whole series. I never would have thought it, but thanks to *Cursed Child*, the Harry Potter magic is finally happening in my home, too.

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