Perhaps it would be better to get the bad news out of the way first: My two teenage daughters, as lovely as they both are, often prefer not to speak to me at all. This is the plight of fathers the world over, which is to say I have some company in my loneliness. The good news, however, is that when they do speak to me, they speak to me in English. My daughters are both fluent English speakers and I believe this has more to do with their Japanese mother’s influence than my own. The key variable, I think, is that my wife and I initially did not pursue a one−parent one−language strategy. Until my first daughter, Hana, went to junior kindergarten, my wife and I both spoke only English to her, and the result was that Hana’s English pronunciation is very close to native. These days, Hana and her younger sister Maya do speak Japanese to their mother when they are alone with her, which is to say that something close to a one−parent one−language policy has developed naturally over the years, but I think that it was the complete English immersion the girls experienced in their early years that made the difference.

My wife, Naomi, graduated from a junior college in small−town Tokushima with a degree in English. Unlike most of her classmates, she then took a big chance: She took a job that actually required English. Naomi took a job as a secretary at a medium−sized English conversation school in Tokushima. At the Tokushima office, there were about 10 foreign teachers (including myself), mostly from New Zealand and Canada, who, combined, could only speak about 100 words of Japanese. Dealing with the foreign staff meant that Naomi, who organized their classes, had to speak English on a daily basis. During her four years in the job, she became fluent in English.

I met Naomi when she was working at the language school. Although, after nearly 20 years in Japan, my Japanese has reached a reasonable level, our relationship, since the beginning, has been exclusively in English. It started that way and has remained that way. For some reason, we both feel completely uncomfortable communicating in Japanese. The trade−off in this is that her English has continued to improve over the years, while my Japanese level has remained fairly stagnant.

Naomi was fearless in raising our children in an English environment. When they were young, she spoke to them only in English. I have a distinct memory of her at a local park speaking to the children in English, surrounded by other Japanese mothers speaking to their children in Japanese. Even as a native speaker, I have experienced feelings of embarrassment speaking publicly to my children in English. Naomi was unembarrassed in her pursuit of English speaking children, and I believe that this is the main reason the children can speak English.

Bilingual Children

Robert LUXTON

ABSTRACT

It is a common misconception in Japan that children with a native English−speaking parent will, without exception, become bilingual English speakers. In fact, many such children speak little English at all. This paper details the lives of two children who became fluent, though not perfect, speakers of English while growing up in Japan. It compares the Minority Language at Home strategy to the One Parent One Language strategy.

KEYWORDS: bilingual, Minority Language at Home, One Parent One Language
Naturally, living in Japan, Hana was exposed to some Japanese before she went to kindergarten, such as with friends and from television. As well, her Japanese grandparents spoke to her in Japanese. However, she was essentially a unilingual English speaker when she started school. I wonder if it was in any way traumatic to begin school essentially unable to communicate with her classmates. It may have been, but from the outside looking in, it didn’t appear to be. Five year olds don’t seem to care that there is a foreign language speaker in their midst. Perhaps it is that playing doesn’t require that much verbal communication. In any case, she gradually developed a second language, Japanese. Hana was reasonably good at speaking Japanese after one year of kindergarten and completely fluent after two. I can’t recall when Hana started speaking Japanese to her mother, but it must have begun during kindergarten or her first years of elementary school. Eventually, Japanese replaced English as Hana’s “first” language.

I have often wondered if a true one−parent one−language policy is achievable, simply because only one language is possible when all of the family members are together. In any case, although my children do speak Japanese to their mother when I am not with them, our family time is almost exclusively in English. On a daily basis, this basically means that our evening meals happen in English. The children probably only speak English for 30 minutes each day, but it seems to be enough. Thirty minutes a day can function as a maintenance dose of English. They only speak English when I am at the table. If I leave, even momentarily, the children and their mother quickly slip back into Japanese. When I return to the table, they return to English. (It’s nice to know that I still have at least some influence on the children.)

My wife Naomi is quite good at English. Her pronunciation is fairly natural, and she has an enormous vocabulary. We’ve been speaking English together every day for twenty years. However, her English isn’t perfect. For example, her intonation is sometimes incorrect. I don’t think that this has had a negative effect on the children, however. The girls’ accents and intonation are like mine, for some reason, and not like their mother’s. It’s a bit of a mystery as to why this is so, but it is a fact. I don’t think the native Japanese speaker in a couple should worry about imparting less than perfect English to his or her child. It seems to work out in the end.

Although for both girls Japanese is by far their stronger language, I have never been tempted to converse with my children in Japanese. At first, when they were younger, this was because I wanted them to speak English. These days, their English is so much better than my Japanese that it would be pointless. Their English is so much better than my Japanese that it would be embarrassing to try and speak Japanese to them. Occasionally, I know the Japanese meaning of an English word that they don’t know, and if this is the case, I tell them the meaning in Japanese. It doesn’t happen very often, and when it does, I only speak one Japanese word to them, but it wouldn’t be quite honest to say that I never speak to them in Japanese.

Spending a month in Canada every summer has certainly helped as well. This has been possible because, just after Hana was born, I lucked out and got a job at a small university in Tokushima. Although the management of the university has sometimes complained about me taking long holidays (I take the longest continuous summer holiday of anyone at the school, and I think everyone knows it) I have persevered and spent the money to take the family back home every year. Both children become much more talkative in English as the summer holiday progresses. In fact, after a week or two, they usually begin speaking English to their mother,
which never happens in Japan except at the dinner table.

Going to Canada every year also means that they have made friends in Canada. Now they don’t have to speak English only because their father does but because their friends do, too. The influence of their Canadian friends has been that they don’t necessarily speak English like a middle-aged Canadian man, but like Canadian teenagers. Perhaps this is both good and bad. They intersperse “like” into many of their otherwise concise sentences, as Canadian children are apt to do, which can make me a little crazy. It’s authentic but a little annoying. Having Canadian friends has helped Hana and Maya become completely comfortable among Canadians, which I think is a sign that they have become bicultural as well as bilingual.

As many parents raising bilingual children have found, reading English books and watching English television and movies have undoubtedly had a positive effect on the development of our children’s English, especially on their vocabulary and listening abilities. Hana has always been an avid reader of English books, and I think her English has improved immensely because of this. There may be a downside to this as well, however. For some reason, Hana’s test scores at school in “kokugo” (Japanese) have never been that good. Is this because she spent so much time reading English books instead of Japanese books like her classmates? This is an entirely plausible explanation. Another explanation might be that she simply isn’t very good at the subject or that she simply doesn’t work hard enough at Japanese. It’s impossible to know, but the fact remains that while Hana is completely fluent in Japanese, she isn’t as successful as many of her classmates when it comes to tested Japanese.

Knowing English well has been helpful at school. Hana, who is sixteen, is now a first-year junior high school student. Hana was not particularly challenged by the English curriculum in junior high school, but I do not believe it was a complete waste of time. Junior high school English teachers are often not very fluent English speakers, but they usually know English grammar quite well, and I believe Hana probably benefitted from this. There was another benefit as well, though, and I think this was essentially confidence. Because she was able to get the highest English mark in her class consistently, I think it helped her to believe that she was a good student. Japanese junior high schools rank students according to their test scores, and thanks to her high English scores, Hana often found herself at the higher end of the ranking. Not having to study for English tests also gave Hana more time to study for other subjects.

I have referred to Hana and Maya as both fluent in English and bilingual, but this is to some extent a judgment call. How good is their English? They both sound Canadian when they speak, but they also both make frequent mistakes. These mistakes are often not grammatical but simply poor word choices. Hana complained recently that she would be “passing” six days of classes because she was going to Canada for the summer instead of saying “missing”. Mistakes like this reveal insufficient input, which is to be expected when it is only their father, for the most part, who is speaking to them regularly in English. What I have always wondered about is how a full year of living in an English speaking country would affect their English levels. I suspect, or at least hope, that a year abroad would raise their levels to near native. On the other hand, some of their mistakes are probably fossilized. We’ll see. If they go to Japanese universities, my hope is that they will either do a study year abroad through the school or take a year off between their third and forth years to live in Canada. In the Japanese system, it is nearly impossible to take a year off af-
ter university before getting a job because companies like to hire people while they are still in school. Taking a year off during school to live in an English speaking country, or participating in a study abroad program, would be very beneficial I think.

I’m not sure if either of my children is strong enough in English to do well at a Canadian university. Their English is good, but I’m not sure it’s that good. University in Canada is very challenging for native speakers, after all. The Japanese school curriculum is so different from the Canadian one as well. Where Canadian schools stress essay writing and independent thinking, Japanese schools stress testing and memorizing without ever questioning authority. I have doubts that my daughters could thrive if suddenly put into the Canadian education system. On the other hand, Canadian universities have large numbers of foreign students, so perhaps it wouldn’t be impossible.

Hana and Maya are not perfect English speakers. They make poor word choices and are still unsure of some of the more complicated English grammatical structures. On the other hand, both of them speak with Canadian accents and it is possible that, through greater exposure to English, they may eventually come close to being native English speakers. Speaking English at home on a daily basis, reading English books, and yearly trips to Canada have all been essential to this outcome. However, I believe that it was the early complete English immersion that was the most important element.

Some children in Japan with a foreign parent do not develop into fluent English speakers. Having a single English speaker in the house, particularly a father who may spend far less time speaking to his children than the children’s mother, is simply not enough in many cases. If the second parent also speaks English, at least a little, the outcome seems much more assured. If both parents can speak English, it is possible to immerse the children in English when they are young, which is very difficult to achieve if only one parent speaks English. That our children did become fairly fluent English speakers is basically a result, I think, of having a Japanese mother who could speak English.