

From Parents' Handbook
for Portland Schools
Japanese Magnet Program
(Richmond School, K-)

Japanese immersion is scheduled to begin in 1995-96. Planning for a high school in 1995-96 with implementation scheduled

Program is, in 1991, one of five Japanese The others are located in Eugene, Oregon (which was first in 1988-89); Anchorage, Alaska; Fairfax, Virginia; and Detroit, Michigan. All of these programs operate on the Japanese/English partial immersion model. So far the Richmond Japanese Magnet Program is the only one to begin with Kindergarten.

INTEGRATED LANGUAGE ARTS

Portland Public Schools teach integrated language arts, also known as "Whole Language". The primary purpose of this approach is *"to keep language whole and involve children in using it functionally and purposefully to meet their own needs"*. Children are personally invited to become involved in the language they choose to learn and about things they need to understand. (Ken Goodman, What's Whole in Whole Language).

Language used in whole language comes from everywhere - especially from the environment which surrounds the student - it's relevant, accessible, purposeful, sensible, real, and, most of all - *it belongs to the learner*.

Learning theory teaches us that children learn through language and about language in the context of authentic speech. We know that language skills are not acquired in sequential order and that teaching children about the rules of language will not make language learning any faster or easier. Children learn the rules of language by trying them out in real life, functional communication. Children's first attempts at language are praised by family members thereby encouraging them to feel free to try language over and over again. Because children have so much opportunity for trying out and testing the rules of language in a virtually risk-free environment, most children acquire and internalize the basic structures of their language by age five.

Whole-language curriculums also encourage language learning through risk taking. Errors are expected as a natural occurrence in language development. Invented spellings and reversed letters are all indications of natural language growth.

Through integrating the language arts curriculum into other content areas teachers have the opportunity to offer rich and varied experiences for children to develop their language skills. Teachers can draw upon the interests and experiences their students have outside the classroom to build listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a meaningful context to the learner.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE NATURAL APPROACH

Building on the scientific and theoretical base of Whole Language is the Natural Approach to second language acquisition. This developmental language model is based on the premise that youngsters acquire their first language as naturally as they learn to walk and talk, and that they acquire their second language in much the same way as the first.

Many of the theoretical underpinnings for Portland partial immersion programs are based on the work conducted by linguist Stephen Krashen. He makes a distinction between *language acquisition and language learning*. When language is used as the medium of instruction and the focus is on the content, children are in a setting to acquire language. In this setting they acquire a second language by picking it up and hypothesizing about rules in much the same way as they acquired their first language. They are allowed to try out the language in a risk-free environment and learn the rules of the language naturally. In the traditional foreign language classroom the focus tends to be on learning rules of the language and attempting to apply them later.

In Krashen's second hypothesis *the Natural Order Hypothesis*, he suggests that grammatical structures of a language are acquired in a predictable order - some structures being acquired early and some late, regardless of what is being taught in a formal setting. In other words, language structures are not acquired in sequential, but in a predictable order.

Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* has direct application in the elementary classroom. He suggests that children need to be exposed to meaningful and *comprehensible input* before the learner begins to acquire language. Comprehensible input is the amount of language the learner can fully understand plus a little just beyond his/her comprehension. In this way the learner is challenged just enough, but not to the point of frustration.

Comprehensible input has also been noted by other researchers through carefully observing parent/child interactions in first language acquisition. Several characteristics they have noted are that parents tend to modify their speech into shorter, simpler phrases combined with gestures or other non-linguistic cues when talking with young children. They also tend to focus on what is important to the child - the here-and-now.

Researchers have also discovered that parents as well as "caregivers" use many techniques naturally in what is referred to as "negotiating meaning" in communicating with children. They slow down their speech, repeat, expand, and model when attempting to get their meaning across with a child. (McLaughlin, 1984)

Children in the immersion setting begin to acquire their second language in many of the same ways in which they acquired their first. They are surrounded by language that is made meaningful by its context and the way their teachers "negotiate the meaning". The students are given time to sort out the language they hear until they are ready to use it for their own functional purpose.

Krashen noted in his research that although language skills are not acquired in sequential order, language acquisition does appear to develop in discernible stages. These include: *preproduction*, *early production*, *speech emergence*, and *intermediate fluency*. Some of the major characteristics of these stages are:

1. Preproduction - Students communicate with gestures and actions and begin to build listening comprehension and vocabulary. This stage includes a silent period during which students sort out the structures of the language.

- 2. Early Production - Students speak using one and two words or short phrases and continue to build receptive vocabulary and listening comprehension.
- 3. Speech Emergence - Students speak in longer phrases and complete sentences while beginning to develop higher levels of language use.
- 4. Intermediate Fluency - Students engage in conversation and produce connected narrative. They use language creatively for their own purposes while developing higher levels of language use and expanding receptive vocabulary.

Each learner progresses at his own rate through the stages of second language acquisition. His/her stage of acquisition may vary by content area or task. Any classroom will be made up of learners at varied stages of language acquisition and cognitive development.

KEY CONCEPTS TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Helena Anderson-Curtain and Carol Ann Pesola, in their book Languages and Children - Making the Match laid out the ground work for the "Ten Key Concepts for Elementary School Second Language Education" so succinctly that we have reprinted them here. These concepts were used in the original proposal for the Japanese Magnet Program.

- 1. Children learn foreign languages best when their native language is not used for instruction.
- 2. Successful language learning programs emphasize comprehension rather than speaking at beginning stages, and use the insights of second language research in the development of all aspects of the program.
- 3. Successful language learning occurs in a meaningful communicative context: social and cultural situations; subject-content

instruction; games, songs and rhymes; experiences with arts, crafts and sports.

4. Successful language learning is organized in terms of concrete experiences; considerable planning should go into the use of visuals, props and realia, and hands-on activities.
5. Successful language learning activities for children incorporate opportunities for movement and physical activity.
6. Successful language learning activities are geared to the child's cognitive level, interest level and motor skills.
7. Culture is learned best through experiences with cultural practices rather than through discussion and reading. Global education must be an integral part of the curriculum.
8. Successful language learning activities are interdisciplinary.
9. Successful language learning activities are organized according to a communicative syllabus rather than according to a grammatical syllabus. Grammar for its own sake should not be the object of instruction.
10. Successful language programs make provisions for the reading and writing of familiar materials as appropriate to the age and interest of the students, even in early stages.

THE CURRICULUM

Children in the Japanese Magnet Program experience a holistic approach to language acquisition in which skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrated into a meaningful total experience in both Japanese and English. Initial stages of instruction in the second language emphasize listening as the foundation for development of all communication skills. Students acquire their second language in a positive, communication-rich environment.