

Japanese Immersion: A Successful Program in Portland, Oregon

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Background

According to a 1997 survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics, 31% of elementary schools in the United States offer foreign language instruction, up from 22% in 1987 (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999). This increase reflects a growing recognition of the importance of knowing more than one language, and of the cognitive and academic benefits of starting foreign language study in the early grades (Marcos, 1998).

Elementary school foreign language programs, also known as early-start programs, come in many different forms. Some follow a more-or-less traditional FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) model, in which students have foreign language lessons a few times per week, often taught by an itinerant language teacher who travels from classroom to classroom and sometimes from school to school. Others use an immersion approach, in which some or all school subjects (except English language arts) are taught through the medium of the foreign language. Some programs focus on teaching the language itself; others use the language to teach content-area subjects. Some offer a single language; others offer a choice of as many as four or five.

This article describes a successful early-start, long-sequence foreign language program that was identified as one of seven model programs in a national project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. It is hoped that other schools and districts interested in implementing a new program or enhancing an existing one will find it useful to read about some of the specific features that make this a model program.

Richmond Elementary School in Portland, Oregon

The Japanese language magnet program in Portland, Oregon, is so popular that it always has a waiting list.

Only two new kindergarten classes of 25 students each are launched each year in this partial immersion program, so selection is by lottery. The program, which began in 1989 with two kindergarten classes, has added one grade each year, so by the 2001-2002 school year, it will offer the complete K-12 sequence. Richmond Elementary School is home to the program in Grades K-5.

The Japanese language program at Richmond Elementary follows a partial-immersion model, with the students' day divided in half by language. At each grade level, one class studies in English in the morning and switches to Japanese after lunch; the other class has the reverse schedule. One Japanese teacher and one English teacher share responsibility for each grade level. All Japanese teachers are native speakers of the language. Teachers do not divide the subjects by language (aside from English and Japanese as class subjects themselves); instead, each pair plans thematic units together, deciding how subjects and topics will be introduced and reinforced across the languages. The full range of elementary subjects is taught, from mathematics and science to geography and history. The program follows state curriculum guidelines for all subjects and national standards for foreign language learning.

The program includes many notable features:

- early attention to literacy skills in both languages
- creative approaches to student assessment
- language camps
- visits to Japan
- a very active parent support group

Literacy Instruction in Japanese

Borrowing an idea from public television's Sesame Street, Amy Grover has her kindergarten students focus on a "letter of the day." As she writes on the

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board at the front of the room, Grover speaks slowly and clearly, and the children sitting around her on the carpet gradually learn to recognize the shape and sound of the day's letter. Grover helps them associate the letter with words they know, especially names of animals, leading to a song that features those animals, complete with hand gestures and sound effects. This is how students at Richmond elementary are introduced to the Japanese *hiragana* writing system, learning to read and write their names and a few simple words as they become acquainted with the forms of this new alphabet.

In first grade, they expand their use of *hiragana* and begin to write the more difficult, Chinese-based characters, *kanji*. Next they tackle the *katakana* system, so that by fourth grade, the students are able to write paragraphs using each of the three traditional writing systems correctly. The Romanized Japanese alphabet is also introduced in fourth grade, where it is particularly useful for computer tasks. In fifth grade, students carry out research using English-language resources and write summary reports in Japanese. To assess the students' progress in writing, Richmond teachers have collaborated with a Japanese faculty member at Portland State University to develop tests of writing skills in Japanese. To minimize the burden on Japanese immersion teachers, the tests have been scored by Japanese teaching assistants at the university.

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Student Assessment

Assessment is an area in which this program is exploring innovative approaches. To assess progress in Japanese speaking and listening skills, teachers conduct a one-on-one interview with each student at the end of the school year. This interview is recorded on a blank videotape the student brings to school in kindergarten. The tape is then used in succeeding years to record additional interviews. In the earlier grades, the interviews are simple exchanges of questions and answers, but by fifth grade, the interviews are conducted according to Oregon Japanese Oral Proficiency Assessment procedures, resulting in a 15-minute ratable performance sample. Students take their tape with them to middle school, where at least one additional interview is recorded.

In addition to the video interviews and Japanese writing assessments, the program has adopted a variation of portfolio assessment that uses student work samples. These are the students' performance of classroom assignments mandated by the Oregon Department of Education for each grade level. Each work sample is rated on a 1- to 6-point scale linked to specific criteria stipulated by the state. Achievement test scores at Richmond are consistently above state and district averages. Spring 2000 test results show that 89% of third graders and 85% of fifth graders at Richmond met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading; 92% of third graders and 85% of fifth graders met or exceeded state benchmarks in mathematics (Portland Public Schools, 2000).

Language Camps

During the summer months, elementary students may participate in one of two sessions of *Kurabu*, a 2-week day camp that provides Japanese language immersion experiences through sports, games, field trips, art, and cooking. The program is open to Japanese and non-Japanese children in first through fourth grades who have some Japanese language skills. Each group of 20 campers is supervised by two adult bilingual counselors. The program director is qualified and experienced in Japanese culture, language immersion education, and recreation. In recent years, teenagers from the Japanese immersion program have served as junior camp counselors. Parents provide volunteer support, and the city parks program provides the institutional infrastructure. To celebrate the end of the program each summer, campers join participants in the local Spanish camp, *El Club*, to stage an international festival. They build colorful booths and sell food and crafts that they have learned to make during camp.

An overnight camp, *Shizen Kyampu*, is open to students in fourth through eighth grade. Students from several sites around Oregon and from Sapporo, Japan, participate in this science-focused Japanese language immersion camp, which is sponsored by the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

Visits to Japan

Toward the end of the school year, fifth graders in the Japanese magnet program travel to Japan for 2 weeks, where part of their time is spent in homestays with Japanese families. While providing the students with a firsthand experience of Japanese culture, the trip also motivates them to continue in

the program through middle school. Early in their sixth-grade year, the students return to Richmond Elementary to share reports of their experience in Japan with fourth and fifth graders in the program. Eighth graders also travel to Japan, spending 2 weeks carrying out research and other educational projects. Most of the students' expenses are covered through fundraising; the direct cost for each family is approximately \$500. Oya No Kai, the parent support organization for the Japanese program, offers scholarships for those who cannot afford the fee.

Parent Support

Oya No Kai brings together and serves parents for the entire K-12 Japanese immersion program. This organization provides opportunities for the families involved to develop a sense of community and mutual support. It also contributes to the successful development and implementation of the instructional program. Incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1997, Oya No Kai is able to receive tax-exempt donations. It maintains a Web site (www.oyanokai.org) that describes the organization and provides information about their annual auction. Visitors to the site can donate items, take a chance on a weekly drawing, and order tickets to the auction. There is also an online shopping page with links to commercial sites that sell clothing and books. Oya No Kai receives a commission on purchases made at those sites when they are reached via a link from the Oya No Kai Web site.

With the funds it raises, Oya No Kai has not only subsidized student trips to Japan, it has also purchased bilingual dictionaries for the Richmond school library, funded calligraphy lessons for students in Grades 3-5, and supported field trips to Japanese gardens and to a soy sauce factory. In the fall of 2000, when high school enrollments were lower than expected, resulting in the reduction of three full-time teaching positions, Oya No Kai was able to support a part-time Japanese language teaching position that might otherwise have been eliminated. Every year, the group helps teachers pay for needed instructional supplies and subsidizes transportation and meals for nearly a dozen student interns who come to Portland through the sponsorship of Japanese organizations, notably the New Global Peace Language Institute.

Oya No Kai publishes a monthly newsletter, *JMP Oshirase*, that reports on recent and upcoming school activities and parent organization events, such as PTA meetings, Japanese language classes for adults, and projects funded by Oya No Kai. A continuing focus of articles during the past six months has been an initiative to establish an international middle school in Portland. The most recent issue of the newsletter can be read at the Oya No Kai Web site.

Distance Learning

In addition to the practices and features directly related to the Japanese immersion program, a distance learning program, Moshi Moshi, brings Japanese language classes to over 1,000 other students at 10 elementary schools in Portland. These locally produced, live programs help address the demand for Japanese language instruction that the magnet program cannot meet. The four weekly lessons are 15 to 25 minutes long,

depending on the grade level. The programs, which include skits, songs, and other high-interest activities, are supplemented by worksheets and cultural activities available on the Moshi Moshi Web site (www.moshihola.org) and in monthly packets. Homework can be submitted and returned in these packets. Moshi Moshi lessons are sequenced and the levels are articulated following a curriculum based on the state's Japanese language frameworks and benchmarks. Classroom teachers and parents involved in home schooling may participate in regular teacher-training classes and cultural workshops. In addition, Japanese-speaking university students can earn academic credit by assisting the teachers in their classrooms, conducting games and other practice activities that follow up on the broadcast lessons. Other support is provided via e-mail, telephone, and fax. Initially supported by grants from the U. S. Department of Education and the Omron Foundation, ongoing support comes from county home-schooling funds and contributions made by over a dozen businesses and organizations.

Other Model Programs

The Japanese magnet program at Richmond Elementary School is one of seven early-start, long-sequence foreign language programs described in the book, *Lessons Learned: Model Early Foreign Language Programs*. Published in 2000 by the Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems Co., Inc., *Lessons Learned* provides information on how to develop, maintain, and enhance an early foreign language program through the examples of seven successful programs. The other programs featured are in St. Petersburg, Florida; Glastonbury, Connecticut; Springfield, Massachusetts; Prince George's County, Maryland; Toledo, Ohio; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. (Order from Delta Systems, 1400 Miller Parkway, McHenry, IL 60005-7030; 1-800-323-8270; www.delta-systems.com. ISBN 1-887744-63-0. \$18.95 + shipping and handling. *Lessons Learned: Model Early Foreign Language Programs*, by Douglas F. Gilzow and Lucinda E. Branaman.)

References and Resources

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new products

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Directory of K-12 Foreign Language Assessment Instruments and Resources

This searchable, Web-based directory includes detailed descriptions of more than 200 foreign language assessment instruments used in Grades K-12 as well as annotated bibliographies of the latest assessment publications and Internet resources. This directory is accessible on our Web site at www.cal.org/ericcll/k12assessment.

Foreign Language Teaching: What the United States Can Learn From Other Countries by Ingrid Pufahl, Nancy C. Rhodes, and Donna Christian

This report presents the results of a study designed to collect information about the teaching of foreign languages in other countries. Twenty-two educators from 19 countries responded to a series of questions about methodologies, strategies, and policies in their countries that could help to improve language teaching in the United States. The following implications for U.S. schools were drawn from the study results.

- Start language education early. Most of the countries surveyed begin language instruction for the majority of students in the elementary grades.
- Learn from the failures and successes of other countries.
- Conduct long-term research on the effectiveness of specific policies and practices, such as early language instruction.
- Provide strong leadership at the federal level.
- Identify how technology can improve language instruction.
- Improve teacher education by studying pre-service and in-service professional education in other countries.
- Develop appropriate language assessment instruments.
- Designate foreign language as a core subject. In almost all the countries with successful language education programs, foreign language has the same status as other core subjects such as mathematics and reading.
- Take advantage of our sociolinguistic context by promoting the learning of languages spoken by the many immigrants and refugees in the United States.

The full text of the study report is available at www.cal.org/ericcll/countries.html.

partner news

National Capital Language Resource Center

The NCLRC will offer 5 summer workshops this year in Washington, DC, for foreign language educators. Unless otherwise noted, the cost of each workshop is \$150.

- Coherent language curriculum development (May 31-June 1, Cost: \$350)
- Teaching learning strategies in the foreign language classroom (June 25-26)
- Implementing portfolio assessment in the foreign language classroom (June 27-28)
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For more information contact:

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National Association for Bilingual Education

The last two issues of *NABE News* contain several articles of interest to ESL professionals. In the September/October 2000 issue, Stanford researchers, including Kenji Hakuta, examine possible explanations for the rise in SAT-9 scores in California given the brief time allocated for special English language development. The issue also includes a reprint of the CREDE/ERIC Digest, *School/Community Partnerships—Supporting Language Minority Student Success*. The theme of the November/December 2000 issue is "Serving Emerging Populations." Various articles highlight changing demographics, needs of rural school districts, and the positive and proactive responses from three school districts.

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