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# Immersion Language Education: A Model for English Education in Japan

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## イマージョン ランゲージ エジュケーション： 日本における英語教育モデル

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要旨：

Immersion language education, originally developed in Canada, is one of the most thoroughly researched areas of second language acquisition. Its proven utility in producing high levels of second language competence while simultaneously supporting first language academic development has resulted in its widespread popularity and adoption in bilingual education programs around the world. The spread of the immersion language education model has also extended to Japan, where due to the successful results of pioneer immersion programs, many schools are now considering it as an alternative. Due to a current push for English education reform in Japan, particularly towards the promotion of communicative competence, the immersion language education model represents an alternative worthy of consideration for adoption. This paper will provide a general overview of immersion language education, present examples of successful immersion programs in Japan, and finally consider its feasibility in the wider context of English language education in that nation.

キーワード：Immersion language education, Canadian immersion programs, Japanese immersion programs, content-based instruction, second language learning

### 1. Introduction

Over the years the manner in which second and foreign languages have been taught and learned has evolved in keeping with advances in educational research, theory and practice. While many methodologies have come and gone, several have become well-established due to their proven utility. Of the methods commonly employed, "immersion language education" has emerged as an approach which has proven itself in terms of language acquisition and broad applicability in both local and national settings. Since its introduction as a local experimental program in a single

Quebec high school, immersion language education has spread across Canada, and around the world. The reach of immersion has also extended to Japan where, since the early 1990's, immersion programs have gradually established a positive reputation and expanded. Immersion programs now serve as a paradigm for English language education in Japan, and represent a model towards which the teaching and learning of English in that country should aspire.

## **2. Defining Immersion Education**

Immersion language education was born out of grassroots initiatives put forward by parents who demanded better language education outcomes for children who required L2 skills to function in bilingual areas of Canada. The first immersion program was introduced in St. Lambert, Montreal in 1965 (see Lambert, W.E. and Tucker, R. 1972). Since that time, the term "immersion" in second and foreign language education has been applied loosely to a variety of educational programs and contexts. However, in professional literature concerned with bilingual education, the term "immersion education" refers to the specific second language (L2) educational model originated in St. Lambert.

There are several defining features of the immersion language education model, the most important of which is that the L2 is not taught explicitly as a 'language subject', rather it is used as the medium through which curricular content is conveyed. Another central feature is that L2 content instruction must consist of a minimum of 50 percent of the total curriculum (see Genesse 1987). It is through this massive amount of L2 input, usually linguistically graded to learners at various proficiency levels throughout the program, that implicit acquisition of the L2 is attained. According to Johnson and Swain (1997), other key features of immersion programs include: the L1 and L2 curriculums should be parallel, the L1 exists in a supportive environment, programs aspire towards additive bilingualism, L2 contact is primarily within the program, immersion instructors must be bilingual, and the classroom culture reflects L1 customs and practices (for further explanation see Johnson and Swain 1997:6-8).

While complying with the parameters above, immersion programs can be typologically defined based upon the percentage of curricular content covered in the L2, and the time at which the program is initiated. Programs in which the entire curriculum is taught through the L2 are classified as "full immersion", whereas programs delivering less than 100 percent of the curriculum through the L2 (but maintaining at least 50 percent) are defined as "partial immersion". In terms of time of initiation, programs can be classified as "early immersion" (beginning in kindergarten or first grade) "delayed immersion"/"middle immersion" (later primary school), or "late immersion" (secondary school) (see Baker 1993). While not as prevalent as the previous three types, "late late immersion" (beginning at university level) is a further categorization that has been well-researched and documented (Burger, Wesche, and Migneron 1997).

In the forty years since the establishment of the first immersion program, a variety of studies have sought to ascertain its effectiveness. In fact, according to Baker (1993), the rapid growth and expansion of immersion programs has resulted in well over a thousand studies being directed toward it. According to Krashen,

"Canadian immersion is not simply just another successful language teaching program--it may be the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature. No program has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no program, to my knowledge, has done as well" (cited in Berthold 1995:3)

Research into the early immersion programs such as St. Lambert produced largely positive results (see Swain 1980, Tucker & d'Anglejan 1972). In an overview of the results of several studies into Canadian immersion programs, Batens-Beardmore summarizes that:

...bilingually educated children gradually outpace their monoglot peers on several levels of home language skills...particularly in reading comprehension and knowledge of vocabulary...(and) almost without exception the bilingual children performed as well as their monoglot counterparts on both computational and problem-solving tasks in mathematics and equally well in science and social studies. (1986:115)

Recent Canadian studies have illustrated where current immersion students have continued to exhibit similar results, some illustrating where immersion students in fact surpassed non-immersion students in academic performance (Allen 2004). While the studies above must be tempered against factors such as the generally higher socio-economic backgrounds of many immersion students (Allen 2004), the results strongly indicate that immersion language education presents an opportunity for students to gain high proficiency in a second language without hindrance to the L1 or other academic development.

### 3. Immersion Education in Japan

Canada, as a country with two well-supported national languages, represents an ideal context for instituting immersion programs. The country's language policies (particularly the *Official Languages Act*) have ensured the promotion and use of both languages across all levels of society as well as in the media and government. Considering this uniquely supportive environment, it is important to be cautious when considering the applicability of immersion results of one particular socio-cultural context like Canada to others (Baker 1993). That caveat aside, immersion education has been successfully adopted in a variety of nations for a variety of purposes (mainly L2 language instruction, language maintenance, and language revival). Japan is

one such country where immersion has experienced success and growth in recent years, primary for the purpose of L2 instruction.

The first documented language immersion program in Japan was established in 1992 at Katoh Gakuin in Numazu, Shizuoka. This partial immersion program began with a mere 28 students, and currently enrolls over 570 (Katoh Gakuen 2006). The success of the Katoh program has been widely documented in the popular press and professional literature (Yomiuri Shimbun 2005, Cummins 2000). The program has not only been successful in promoting high levels of English proficiency, but has also been documented to have promoted in students "more positive attitudes towards another culture and heightened sense of their own cultural identity" (Downes 2001:178). Graduates of the Katoh Gakuen immersion program have gone on to study at top universities both in Japan and abroad. The ability of its graduates to enter either English or Japanese-medium institutions of higher learning speaks to the high level of language proficiency attained through this particular immersion program.

Following the success of the Katoh Gakuen immersion program, other schools in Japan have adopted similar approaches to bilingual education. One such example is Gunma Kokusai Academy, a private school supported by the Ota Municipal Government which began a partial immersion program in 1995. This program centers on the provision of almost 10,000 hours of English content instruction between the first and twelfth grades (Japan Times 2005). Another example is Seiko Gakuen in Tokushima, which has been gradually expanding its partial immersion programs from primary through to junior and senior high school levels (Daily Yomiuri 2005). A further model is that of Uji Ritsumeikan High School in Kyoto, which has been operating an immersion program since 2000. Students entering this program with TOEFL scores in the range of 350 to 400 go on to achieve scores in excess of 600 upon graduation (Arai 2006) – a proficiency level well in excess of the 525 to 580 range required for entry into most universities in English-speaking countries. Ritsumeikan has also developed a university unique within Japan, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, in which university content is delivered in English to a student body consisting of over 40% foreign students. Other immersion programs are currently in planning stages in Chiba (Asahi Shimbun 2006) and Hokkaido.

### **3.1. The State of English Education in Japan: Immersion as a Means for Improving**

#### **Outcomes**

Despite being highly ranked internationally in academic achievement in areas such as math and sciences, Japan's English language education outcomes have lagged in comparison with other developed countries. In the 1998 TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) worldwide results, Japan ranked 180<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries (cited in Gottlieb 2005:67), while a 2004 TOEIC (Test of English for International Communications) worldwide test takers report placed Japan second from the bottom in the world in "mean test performance" (beating out only Vietnam and Saudi Arabia) (ETS 2005). Considering that Japanese children study English for six years during

junior and senior high school, plus an additional two to three years in university, these results are somewhat bewildering. Furthermore, with a 30 billion dollar (US) private sector English education industry providing English conversation and test preparation courses across the nation (Gottlieb 2005:68), Japan seemingly appears ideally equipped to produce high levels of English language proficiency. However, as the above results indicate, English education in Japan continues to fall behind the rest of the world.

The nation's weak results in English language education are often attributed to the outmoded teaching methodologies currently employed across the nation. Specifically, the persistent use of the "grammar translation approach" is often identified as a barrier to meaningful language learning and acquisition. As the nation's English language education has been primarily focused on the grammar required to pass university entrance exams, the English language has become reduced to a decontextualized grammar game which is presented without consideration to practical utility (for further discussion see McVeigh 2002). The result of such an approach has been students with isolated knowledge of discreet grammar rules, but with little or no practical competence in using the language despite the six to eight years of study.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has recognized this problem. In an age of globalization, particularly with English currently employed as the worldwide lingua franca for business, technology, education and research, MEXT has declared the current level of English in the nation as "inadequate" (MEXT 2002). To remedy this situation, MEXT launched its 'Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities'. The main focus of this plan is to produce junior and senior high school students with the ability to communicate in English, and university students with professional workplace-level English proficiency (Gottlieb 2005:73, MEXT 2002).

The successful immersion programs in Japan serve as a model for realizing just the kind of English language outcomes desired by the Ministry of Education. Programs such as Katoh Gakuen and Ritsumeikan Uji High School illustrate that immersion programs can be successful in Japan. While staffing such programs may initially be difficult, a slow and sustained buildup of immersion programs would produce teaching candidates with the experience and bilingual abilities required to staff new programs. While Japan's educational system and curriculum has traditionally been highly rigid and centralized, the establishment of 'special educational zones' provides increased flexibility in curriculum and program structure (Arita 2003). It was within such a zone that the aforementioned Ota Kokusai Academy was established.

In contexts where a full immersion program may not be feasible, the core method of immersion delivery, 'content-based instruction' (the use of the L2 as a medium of conveying content information) could also be adopted in lesser degrees. The learning of language through content-based instruction promotes high levels of cognitive processing while simultaneously fostering motivation through the intrinsic nature of engaging new content (see Grabe & Stoller

1997). Individual subjects from the curriculum can be selected and taught in English, or special English content courses may be developed around themes of particular interest to students. While not 'immersion' by definition, lesser content-based instruction allows for realization of many of the same benefits with greater ease of implementation.

#### **4. Closing**

Immersion language education, as one of the most thoroughly researched models of L2 education, has proven its efficacy in the development of additive bilingualism. The research and examples alluded to above have indeed illustrated that immersion language education provides an opportunity to gain professional-level fluency in an L2 with neither harm nor hindrance to L1 development or any other academic impediment. The fact that immersion programs have been successfully implemented here in Japan should be encouraging to a country seeking ways to improve upon its English language education outcomes. The ongoing successful adoption and expansion of immersion programs in Japan should serve as an example of what is possible in terms of L2 learning in that nation.

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