

MULTILINGUAL ACTIVITIES IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN YOKOHAMA, JAPAN: AN ATTEMPT TO OVERCOME INSTITUTIONAL MONOLINGUALISM

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Abstract: Foreign language education in Japan is becoming increasingly oriented toward 'English monolingualism' from the time of the introduction of English in primary school and earlier. This tendency has grown in tandem with the earlier starting age of English education in school, which disregards the need for a proper sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity and is a matter of concern for the education of children. This paper reports on the goals and implementation of a multilingual activity project in one elementary school in Yokohama, Japan. This project, inspired by and planned in accord with the Swiss and European multilingual project EOLE (Multilingual Education in Schools) and EVLANG (Awakening to Language), includes languages such as French, Chinese, Korean and Japanese Sign Language. The project considers how children can be enlightened by the concept of multilingualism while advocating the importance of a multilingual approach to the Japanese foreign language education in a system where English monolingualism prevails.

わが国の外国語教育における「英語モノリンガリズム」は近年ますますその傾向を強めており、開始時期も低年齢化している。このような傾向は世界でも突出しており、言語や文化の多様性に対する無自覚さ・無神経さには子ども達の将来を危惧させるものがある。本発表では、ある小学校で開始した「多言語活動プロジェクト」について、その企画の意図および実践結果を報告したい。このプロジェクトはスイスやフランスの多言語教育プログラムであるEOLE（学校での多言語に開かれた教育）やEvlang（ことばへの目覚め）に触発されて企画され、フランス語・中国語・朝鮮語・日本手話を導入したが、多言語に触れることを通して、子どもたちに何を与えることができるのかについて考察を深めたい。

Key words: Multilingual activities, primary school, English monolingualism, language education in schools

INTRODUCTION

Japanese society, once considered mono-cultural and monolingual, is now progressively diversifying. Nevertheless, the English language-centered policy for foreign language education in schools in Japan, directed by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science (MEXT), is now being further intensified. The gap between the needs of a newly diversified society (including classroom curriculum and activity) and language education policies is ever more widening.

In this paper, in an effort to suggest a commendable direction for Japan's foreign language education policy, particularly at primary education level, I will introduce the experimental multilingual activities implemented at an elementary school in Yokohama. I argue that

what the Japanese society urgently needs, especially in education, is a multilingual and multicultural approach that encourages students to embrace diversity and to nurture a positive attitude in order to function as a member of the diverse society that surrounds them.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN JAPAN

English monolingualism evidenced in MEXT official documents

The recent ‘New Course of Study for Elementary Schools’ in Japan, enacted in 2008 and implemented in 2011, introduced “foreign language activities” in 5th and 6th grades, once a week, for a total of 35 units per year. It must be noted that, in spite of naming this curriculum “foreign language activities”, there is a stipulation that “in principle, English be introduced.” As if this stipulation alone is not enough, MEXT has made commonly available, learning materials such as the “Eigo (English) Note” (renewed as “Hi, Friends!” in April 2012), available to all schools on request.

The MEXT Course of Study has changed over time but English monolingualism has not only been consistent but has also, increasingly, been reinforced. At the secondary level, the former Course of Study for Junior High School, enacted in 1998 and implemented in 2002, made two major changes. Firstly, it made foreign language education “obligatory”, and secondly, it stipulated that “in principle, *English should be taught* in junior high schools.” Until that time, for more than half a century since the end of World War II, English had never enjoyed such a special treatment vis-à-vis other languages in education.

At the higher education level, the University Curriculum Regulations were deregulated in 1991. It used to be that the majority of universities in Japan distinguished the mandatory 1st and 2nd foreign languages : the 1st being, in most cases, English, and the 2nd being German, French, Chinese, etc. Liberalization, however, changed the status of second foreign language education from “mandatory” to “optional”, and whether or not to impose the second foreign language requirement was left to each university’s discretion. Needless to say, many universities dropped a second foreign language requirement and kept only English as a foreign language.

What can be termed MEXT’s ‘English monolingualism’ is also evidenced in its officially published documents. Three documents, published in the past ten years, are particularly marked in this respect. The first was ‘A Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities’ published in 2002, immediately followed by ‘An Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ (2003). In both documents, MEXT expressly specified how to improve the entire system of English education in order to ‘cultivate’ Japanese people’s ‘English proficiency’. The document best displaying this commitment is the “Five Proposals and Concrete Measures thereto for Improving Abilities in English, the Common International Language” (2011).

Yokohama is not an exception

The City of Yokohama is a major port city, a populous municipality of Japan, located south of Tokyo, on Tokyo Bay. Historically the base for foreign trade in Japan, from the Meiji Restoration onward, Yokohama was the entry point for many Western and other Asian influences attracting a substantial immigrant and sojourner population. This is the reason why the city developed its original curriculum on foreign language and intercultural education (‘Yokohama Edition Course of Study’) according to which, English education

starts in the first year of elementary school. In addition, an intercultural education program called Yokohama International Communication Activities (YICA)² is being provided. Foreign residents of Yokohama City are recruited by the City and sent to YICA classes as International Understanding Instructors (IUIs or “*Kokusai Rikai Kyōryokuin*”). In many respects, Yokohama City has been progressive in foreign language and intercultural education compared to other parts of Japan. However, IUIs are encouraged to use English for YICA courses *even if their mother tongue is not English* !

WHAT ARE THE REAL NEEDS?

Proficiency in English may be useful and beneficial to Japanese citizens, but the possibility that every Japanese is proficient in English does not alone suffice to meet current and future needs of Japan, both nationally and internationally. Japan has become increasingly multilingual and multicultural in the last two decades. No doubt the economic globalization played the major role, but the Immigration Control Law amendment enacted in June 1990³ has also contributed to this change. The number of officially registered foreign residents of Japan exceeded 1% of the total population for the first time in 1992. In 2006, it rose to 1.63%, a 3.6% increase from the previous year and an astonishing 47.3% increase from the 1996 figure⁴. The economy, information technology (IT), environmental issues, and many other factors have forced all of us to become members of the global community. Every country is now required to deal multilaterally with every other part of the world, diplomatically, commercially and even on an individual basis. Japan is definitely no exception.

Why, then, does the “English monolingualism” trend continue to prevail notwithstanding the reality of the changes in the Japanese society? Erikawa (2009) and many others’ researches have confirmed that it is in fact the industrial/business world’s needs that are driving Japanese educational policy towards that direction. It is also addressed that the parents have strong wish for their children to be proficient “in English”.

It is generally known that “all English” or “English First” advocates routinely insist on “learners’ needs”, namely, that it is students that wish to learn English. However, there is ample information to attest otherwise; students are interested in learning not only English but also other languages, and there have been efforts made to meet such needs. Diagram 1 shows the steady increase in the number of high schools, both public and private, that have established courses for foreign languages other than English over the last 15 years. Compared to 10 years ago, the number has more than doubled. Diagram 2 shows the increase according to language: Chinese shows a significant increase, followed by Korean. French has also marked an increase.

In addition, there is other evidence that demonstrates students’ desire to acquire languages other than English. At Musashi Junior and Senior High School in Tokyo, a private boys’ school, a 2nd foreign language beginning in the 3rd year of Junior High School has become mandatory since 2003. Students are to choose from German, French, Chinese and Korean. However, even before 2003, 90% of the students voluntarily chose to learn a 2nd language, said Mr. Yamazaki, a school master.

Likewise, Kanagawa Prefectural Yokohama High School of International Studies (formerly ‘Senior High School Affiliated with Kanagawa Prefectural College of Foreign

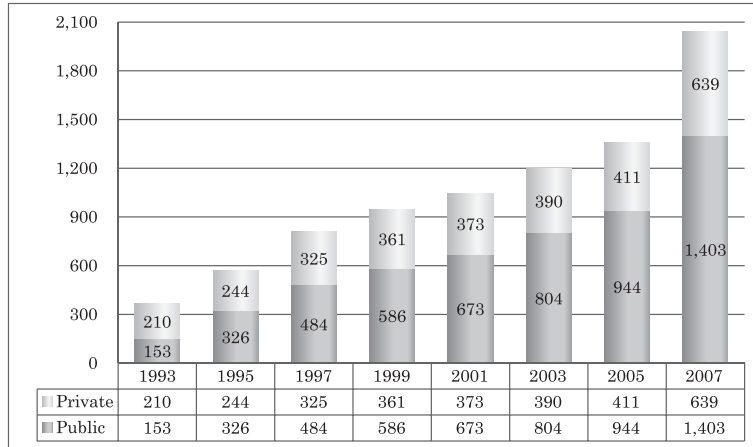


Diagram 1. Transition of Non-English Language Courses Established in High Schools (# of schools)

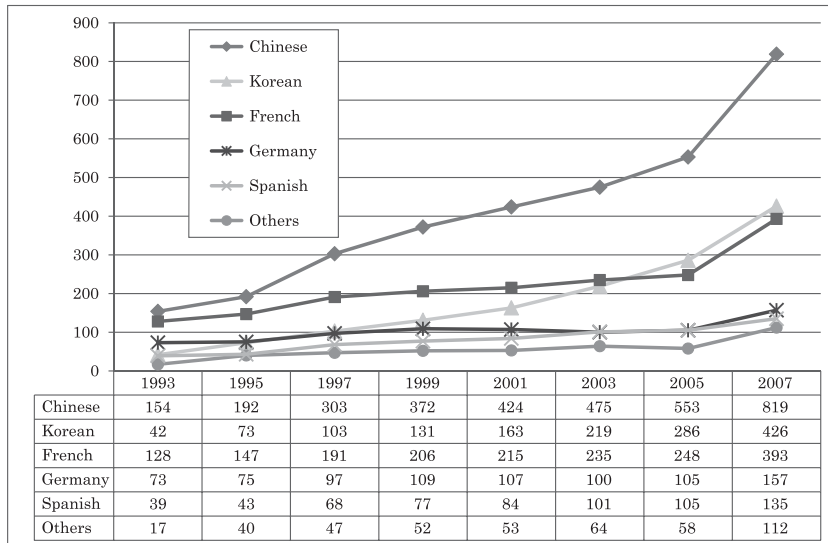


Diagram 2. Transition of Non-English Courses Established in High Schools (by language)

Studies’). In this public high school, a 2nd foreign language is mandatory. This school specializes in the mastery of foreign languages, but Ms. Suzuki, a language teacher at the school, found the following interesting results from a survey of those who applied to the school. The results showed that 2nd foreign language requirement is what has attracted potential students. Ms. Suzuki states, “Students not immediately facing university entrance exams have true desire to learn not only English but also other languages”.

Whilst emphasizing that information on various languages is critical for students to become interested in other languages, and eventually in choosing to learn them, we cite the third case from Keio University ShonanFujisawa Campus (SFC). Since the campus opened in 1990, SFC has provided students with a mandatory two-month-long course

titled *Sôgô-Kôza*, *Shokokugo-gaisetsu*, or the General Course on Various Languages, in which the students are provided with information about different languages and cultures. This course has completely changed the “needs” of students from the first year it was offered (1990). The numbers ‘speak for themselves’; there have been significant changes in the choice of languages by students before and after completing the *Sôgô-Kôza*. The percentage of students who selected English as the language of choice decreased from 86.6% to 50.3% from the very first year.

Table 1. Needs and Choices of SFC Students ⁵

1990	Before <i>Sôgô Kôza</i>	After <i>Sôgô Kôza</i>	Actually Registered
English	86.6%	50.3%	56.2%
German	4.2	17.2	13.7
French	5.7	14.0	11.6
Chinese	2.8	9.2	9.8
Korean	0.3	5.8	5.7
Indonesian	0.4	3.5	3.0

Table 2 shows the 1993 figures in which the percentage of students who chose English sharply dropped after completing *Sôgô Kôza*. Again, the figures show dramatic changes. Providing information on what students do not know helps arouse practical interest in the new subjects and languages.

Table 2. Needs and Choices of SFC Students

1993	Before <i>Sôgô Kôza</i>	After <i>Sôgô Kôza</i>	Actually Registered
English	71.8%	21.4%	43.2%
German	8.2	20.9	14.9
French	10.6	20.1	17.5
Chinese	5.5	25.1	13.8
Korean	1.3	7.6	6.9
Indonesian	2.7	4.8	3.6

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION?

I believe that Japan has much to learn from Europe in terms of foreign language education policy making and direction. The European Union consists of 27 member countries, and their official languages amount to 23. I would like to highlight here the philosophy that is the backbone of this “multilingual principle.” The EU is determined to preserve this principle in order to protect linguistic and cultural diversity of all members, and to assure the European citizens of freedom to directly participate in European politics. We must also learn from the “mother tongue plus 2 modern languages” policy in EU language education. The importance of learning from the foreign language teaching principles of the Council of Europe must also be highlighted. The goals of these principles of language education are: Plurilingualism / Pluriculturalism⁶, Linguistic Diversity, Mutual Understanding, Democratic Citizenship and Social Equity.

Language Education (including mother tongue education) is, in general, an important part of school education. Not only does language learning provide a tool to communicate with others, it also helps to develop knowledge, experience, logical thinking and new ways to express emotion. What, then, is the major role of foreign language education? What can be attained only through foreign language education? According to Byram (2011), foreign language education fosters learners' "intercultural competence" which leads to a true "intercultural citizenship". Kawada, a Japanese anthropologist, stresses the importance of "defamiliarization experience from one's familiar language", or an experience of distancing oneself from the mother tongue, (Kawada, 1997) which allows persons "to free themselves from ethnocentrism" (Perregaux, 2007).

MULTILINGUAL ACTIVITIES AT AZALEA HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

"Evlang" and "EOLE"

Before discussing Azalea Hill Elementary School project, the origins of this project must be mentioned. The source of inspiration for these multilingual activities have been European "Evlang" (Eveil aux langues/au langage, Awareness of Language/Languages) prompted by Candelier and colleagues, and "EOLE (Education et Ouverture aux Langues à l'Ecole, Education and Opening to Languages at School) promoted by Perregaux and her colleagues. According to Candelier (2003), the goals of the Evlang approach were: (A) Cultivation of open minded attitudes towards pluralism of languages and cultures (*attitudes, savoir-être*), (B) Cultivation of metalinguistic aptitudes (*aptitudes, savoir-faire*), and (C) Cultivation of ability to understand/appreciate linguistic cultures (*savoirs*) (p.23). We were certain that this educational focus was urgently needed in language education in Japan, where "dual monolingualism" (Perregaux) of the Japanese and English languages strongly prevails.

The start

The project began with the encounter with Naho Nakazawa, a teacher of the 6th grade (class 3), at the time. She expressed some doubts about implementing merely "once a week English activities" and contacted me to ask if we could organize multilingual activities. I was pleased to cooperate because, in general, it is relatively difficult to go into schools, especially a public school, and be involved in their curriculum. We found out that we shared the same goals and ideas regarding multilingual activities. We discussed our ideas with the school principle, and by the end of the school year, March 2010, a demonstration session was scheduled for May. The success of that session led to the approval of the multilingual activities project for the fall semester for the entire 6th graders in 3 classes. Typically, like our case, new initiatives are started by individuals.

Implementation: language choice, methodology, instructors, materials

The languages proposed for Azalea Hill were French, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Sign Language (JSL), each chosen for a particular/specific reason. French, the only Western language other than English, was chosen because it was the language by which the project was originated; Japanese language borrows many French words especially in the field of cuisine and fashion. Chinese and Korean were chosen for their regional proximity. We included JSL because we wanted to show students that it is a language like any other, and that non-hearing people should not be perceived as disabled but, instead, as a group of linguistic minority people inside Japan.

We had nine 45-minute sessions for this project during the fall semester. We decided to use two consecutive sessions for each language (please refer to the actual schedule below). For the 9th and last session, we lined up all four languages for children to choose the language of their preference.

French	September 24 and October 8, 2010
Chinese	October 29 and November 5
Korean	November 12 and December 17
JSL	January 17 and 21, 2011
All 4 languages	February 14

As for instructors, we asked specialists (either native or non-native teachers) to design a program for each language. We did not seek complete uniformity of content, but requested that “numbers” (at least up to 20) and daily greetings be included. The learning of writing was not required, but the Korean alphabet writing was introduced in the project because the encounter with Korean alphabet in public places in Japan has become quite frequent.

Contrary to the approach of Eulang or EOLE which promote the use of several languages, or more precisely the use of “words” or “expressions” of several languages (at least in more than 2) at a time, we introduced only one language at a time, along with the cultural elements associated with each respective language. We chose this manner of teaching because (1) we did not have enough time to develop rich teaching materials like those used by Eulang and EOLE, and (2) we believed that by concentrating on one language at a time and covering broader topics on each language (as compared to words or expressions in Eulang/EOLE), the pupils would have some sense of “having learned” multiple languages. This approach is probably more suitable to the Japanese schoolchildren whose exposure to multiple foreign languages in daily life is quite limited.

I should mention how we succeeded in allocating nine sessions of multilingual activities to the existing curriculum. This project was assigned as part of the *Sôgô Gakushû*, or Integrated Study Time of the curriculum. *Sôgô Gakushû* as a subject was introduced, alongside mathematics or science, for the first time when the previous Courses of Study were enacted by MEXT (1998 for elementary and junior high schools, and in 1999 in high school) and implemented progressively since 2002. The objective of this subject is to encourage interdisciplinary and integrated study. Its contents may be determined by teachers and pupils according to their local needs and interests. In elementary schools, almost 3 hours per week are allocated to *Sôgô Gakushû* which features four major recommended fields: International Understanding, Informatics, Environment and Welfare and Health. In many schools, English activities are categorized as International Understanding; the term “international” being used as equivalent of “intercultural” in Japan.

ASSESSMENT AND RESULTS

Ideally, the effects on students’ transformation in various aspects, including attitudes and aptitudes (A, B and C on p.64) would be assessed. However, according to Eulang, students must have a minimum of 35 hours of sessions of multilingual activities in order to show any effect. Therefore, from the beginning, it was not our intent to obtain quantitative assessment. We limited ourselves, therefore, to obtaining reactions from students and teachers through questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires to students (1)

In May, five months before the implementation of multilingual activities, we asked students a small number of questions on their basic feelings about countries and languages in the world. We asked which country/countries they liked and disliked and why, which language/languages they wished to learn, which country/countries they wished to visit, and why, etc⁷. The objective of this set of questions was to establish a base line in order to see if one semester of multilingual activities would have any effect on students' feelings about countries and languages. Naturally, we did not entertain high expectations at that point in May. However, the results were somewhat surprising and some made us uneasy.

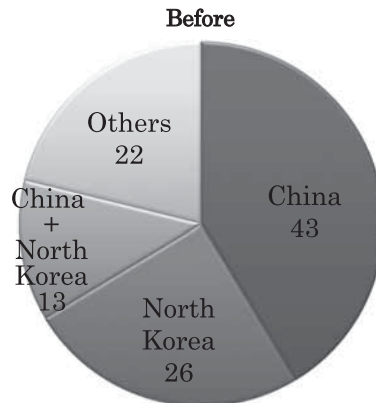


Diagram 1: Questionnaire “Country/countries I dislike” (May 2010)
Response Total : N = 104, Total of China + North Korea = 82%

Diagram 1 shows that 80% of the students chose China, North Korea⁸ as their country/countries of ‘dislike’. The reasons most mentioned were related to the “poisoned *gyōza* (Chinese ravioli) incident⁹” for China and the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea. Both researchers and teachers, were astonished to find that students’ answers mirrored public opinion in the Japanese media at the time. As for the “country I like”, 40% of the students replied “Japan”. The reasons were Japan’s cleanliness, safety, etc. We were, at first, somewhat puzzled by this answer; that they would choose their own country was unexpected. Would this be the birth of ethnocentrism? Moreover, the students dislike for neighboring countries, worried us. It foregrounded the importance of the role played by foreign language teachers.

Diagram 2 shows the results of the questionnaire asked in February after the multilingual activities. In terms of ‘country dislike’ (Question 2), we did not observe significant differences before and after the multilingual activities.

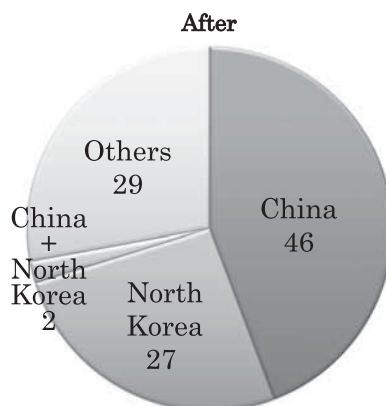


Diagram 2: Questionnaire "Country/countries I dislike" (February 2011)
Response Total : N = 99

As for the country liked (Question 1), please refer to Diagram 3. The result shows that the number of students who answered 'Japan' as the country liked decreased from 40.38% to 27.27%, a statistically significant diminution. It is our hope that the learning experience with unknown languages and cultures had opened the students' minds. More data are needed in order to attribute this result solely to our multilingual activities.

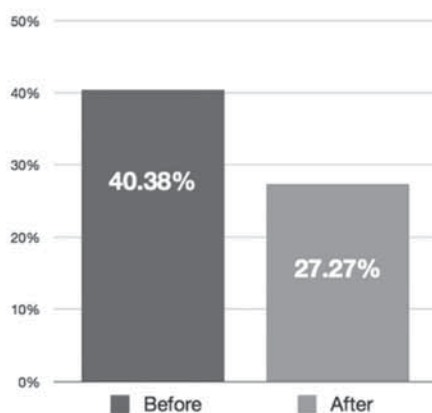


Diagram 3: "Country/countries I like" (May 2010 and February 2011)

Questionnaires to students (2)

After the multilingual activity sessions, we added two new questions, (Question 6 and 7), to the original questionnaire conducted in May.

6. *What are your thoughts after participating in the French, Chinese, Korean and Japanese Sign Language activities?*
7. *Which language did you choose on your last day of the Multilingual Activity (Feb. 14) and why did you choose it?*

The students' overall reactions were positive. Key words that appeared in many responses were: "good", "enjoyable", "interesting", "easy to understand", "useful", "hope to use it",

“informative”, etc. Some used the word “difficult”, but this was coupled with positive impressions like “It was difficult but I enjoyed it” or “It was difficult but good”, etc. Asked about their impressions after the encounter with new languages, many said they were surprised, or found the similarities and differences between languages interesting. Some explained that they were made aware that they were surrounded by many languages, or that learning them was unexpectedly easy.

What follows are samples of students’ feedback that may well represent the feedback as a whole. Comprehensive analysis of all responses remain a future task.

Student 1: *The common lesson I learned from learning all (languages) was the “importance of communicating with others”. Even if I couldn’t speak English or couldn’t hear, I felt it is important to send out messages to communicate with others.*

Student 2: *I was amazed to learn that there are so many languages other than the one I use daily, and that within the country, there is a language that I don’t even know.*

Student 3: *Because I participated in Multilingual Activities, I get to know many things “for the first time in my life”.*

Student 4: *At the beginning, I was only superficially interested. However, halfway into the course, I started to recognize the “importance of languages”.*

Student 5: *I learned various languages, but I thought learning Japanese is the toughest. It made me really wonder why we all live on this same planet, yet the languages vary so much.*

Interview with teachers and a student assistant

Finally, I would like to refer to the feedback from the teachers who participated in the Multilingual Activities. They explained how they were made aware of the many different languages in everyday life. They realized that they had been unconsciously led to believe that only English was important to children and were impressed by the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world. Some said that their perception of Korean and Chinese residents in Japan had changed, and that such a change of perspective would definitely affect their students. Teachers also made surprising discoveries about their students. Though a cliché, it was, nevertheless, astonishing to see firsthand how easily children adapted to new languages. Teachers also found how children were talented in their way: some liked Chinese and being good at it, while others enjoyed JSL. They thought that, given freedom to choose from multiple languages, students with difficulty in English might have another chance to be good at mastering an alternative: an opportunity for students to rid themselves of an inferiority complex toward English and language learning. Here are the impressions we received from two of the teachers and a student assistant.

Teacher 1: *Both students and I were made aware that there are so many kinds of languages, and many are around us! I feel that our awareness towards people from Korea and China has changed. In classes, I was surprised to find out how receptive the students are to languages, sounds and voices, and how quickly they absorb them. I think by being exposed to various languages, each student’s individuality was cultivated. They certainly enjoyed it.*

Teacher 2: *The conventional way to learn about other countries has been to compare our culture, food, etc. with theirs, find out what are similar and what are not. I think learning other cultures through languages led us to new crosscultural understanding. Some students now wish “to converse with people from a*

particular country”. To me, this is the first time that I witnessed such reaction from my students.

Student Assistant: *I truly enjoyed it!! The preparation was a lot of hard work, but the experience of teaching students by using materials I created “revolutionalized” me. I tried to think from the students’ perspective when teaching. I then witnessed students going ahead with guessing from the information we provided, absorbing them, voicing them, starting moving their bodies.... It was a wonder for me to see students as if they were absorbing (the experience) with their entire body. At the same time, I felt the weight of responsibility as well as joy of being able to make differences in students. Through this experience, I renewed my aspiration to learn more about education. From this school year, I am enrolled in the teacher-training course.*

CONCLUSION

The importance of a multilingual approach in Japanese foreign language education, where English monolingualism strongly prevails, cannot be stressed sufficiently. Judging from the feedback we obtained from participating students and teachers, the experimental project at the Azalea Hill Elementary School was a great success. Unfortunately, however, this experimental project ended abruptly after the initial implementation (one semester) because the school principal changed in March, 2012. In Japan, elementary school principals are given substantial authority that can affect the educational policies of each school. When the principal changes, so do the overall, individual educational policies, in many instances. Our multilingual activities ended up as one such “change.”

To conclude this paper, let us stress the issues identified through these experimental multilingual activities. More work is needed on the following issues in order to further a multilingual approach in Japanese foreign language education.

- Reexamination of methodology
- Development and accumulation of materials
- Diffusion of multilingual activities
- Securing and nurturing human resources
- Development of assessment tools
- Securing budget

NOTES

- 1 Until then, foreign languages had been taught in almost all junior and senior high schools without being required officially by Course of Study or in any other official documents.
- 2 This program was launched in 1987 under the name *Kokusai Rikai Kyōshitsu* (KRK = class for international understanding”).
- 3 The number of South Americans has increased enormously since the revision of this Law that permits *Nikkei-jin* (people of Japanese ancestry) to work in Japan while other foreigners are prohibited entry if the purpose is to engage in simple manual labour.
- 4 The breakdown by country of origin is: Chinese (31.1%), Koreans (26.5%), Brazilians (12.2%), Filipinos (9.7%), Peruvians (2.6%) and Americans (2.4%). (<http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000049970.pdf>, access July 27, 2012)
- 5 Koishi (2005, pp.46-49)

- 6 Reflected in *Common Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and Assessment* (CEFR).
- 7 See the Appendix for details of the questionnaire.
- 8 Please note that it took place before the territorial conflict between China and Japan (September 2010) and the bomb attack of South Korean islands by North Korea.
- 9 Some imported *gyôza* from China were poisoned, causing several casualties.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire to students

- [1] Asked before, in May: no.1 through no.5
- [2] Asked after, in February: no.1 through no.4, and no.6, 7
1. Which country/countries do you like, and why ?
 2. Which country/countries do you dislike, and why ?
 3. Which country/countries do you wish to visit, and why ?
 4. Is there any languages you wish to learn, and why ?
 5. Have you ever lived abroad ? Where and how long ?
 6. What are your thoughts after doing French, Chinese, Korean and Japanese Sign Language activities ?
 7. Which language did you choose on your last day of the Multilingual Activity (Feb. 14) ? Why did you choose it ?