How Families can Collaborate on English Education

Although many people believe that children in Japanese/English bicultural families can easily acquire both of their parents’ languages, this simply does not happen in many of them (Yamamoto, 2001). Using Japanese both at home and at school, social pressure to conform to majority language use, and the lack of an English-language peer group all discourage children’s acquisition of English (Baker, 2011; Yamamoto, 2001). While parents fight against some of these problems, the last one can be difficult to solve because children often have few opportunities to interact with people who are proficient in English. Long lasting benefits can be gained when bilingual families to work together to create a Japanese/English community for themselves and their children through activities such as bilingual playgroups, learning circles, and pen / key pals.

For families who live near other bilinguals, face-to-face meetings in playgroups for young children are ideal. Forming a playgroup for preschool aged children is an effective way to build a long-term language community. It can lead children to form long-term friendships with English-speaking peers. Bilingual families can find each other through work and social connections, by advertising locally in online newsgroups or publications, or through social networking sites like Facebook. Experienced playgroup and learning circle leaders (Desrosiers, Provenzano, Rankin & Thompson, 2007; Rankin, 2011) say that such groups allow parents to pool and share costly educational resources, and that they provide valuable social support for each family’s ongoing work at home to build strong minority language skills. For children, they offer the opportunity to play and explore with peers who share their unique language skills. This can have a strong effect because it makes the scope of English language communication much wider for these children. As Tse (2001) found in her study about heritage language loss, being a part of this kind of language community greatly increases the chance that children will keep their minority language skills.

Once children enter the Japanese school system, many families find that their children spend the majority of their time in a Japanese language environment. Homework and extra-curricular activities add even more time spent using Japanese. To support the development of English literacy in such an environment, learning circles are a good option. Some parents may hesitate to spend a lot of free time working on English; however, if children develop strong ties to their learning circle friends, it will be less difficult to convince them to apply themselves to this extra-curricular study. Having learning circle classmates helps motivate children to do English homework, too (Provenzano & Provenzano, 2013). Furthermore, learning circles allow children to be exposed to a variety of teaching styles and approaches when parents share teaching duties. Lessons in such groups often a focus on critical thinking skills, hands-on projects and cross-cultural experiences (Desrosiers, et. al., 2007), which can enrich the children’s overall educational experience. Gathering a core group of like-minded families to work together on minority language education clearly has far-reaching effects.

One option for children without bilingual peers nearby is written communication, either by post with a pen pal or online with a key pal. Establishing ties with a peer who is also developing literacy skills in English gives children the opportunity to use the minority language for real communication rather than simply filling out pages in a workbook. Rankin (2011) describes a version of this activity that she calls a “Notebook Exchange”, where the pen pals communicate with each other via a diary-like notebook, with each child adding a page or two before sending it back to her partner. Rankin notes that she specifically wanted her daughter to communicate with another bilingual child in Japan in a situation very similar to her own (2011). Indeed, in Japan’s relatively monocultural society, it can build confidence in children when they make friends with others who have similar bi- or multi-cultural backgrounds. Such relationships can lead to deeper friendships and interactions via video conferencing or, for enthusiastic families, face-to-face visits.

It is clear that the lack of a minority language community can inhibit the full development of a child’s bilingualism, but collaboration among bilingual families is an effective way to address this problem. The collaborative structures outlined in this paper include parent-led playgroups and learning circles. In addition, written communication between key or pen pals was also suggested as a motivating way to develop literacy skills in the minority language. No matter the medium of communication, it is clear that working together with other families can have a variety of positive effects. For children, these include expanding the minority language community, developing positive peer pressure to study and learn, and establishing relationships with other bicultural children. This last point can be a way to build confidence and strength of identity in children who do not otherwise have a chance to interact with children like themselves. For parents, collaboration can be a way to share planning and teaching responsibilities, to pool teaching resources, and to find moral support for the ongoing challenge of homeschooling in English. Especially in the Japanese context, where support for native-level Japanese/English bilingualism and biliteracy is still widely lacking, the effort to establish such connections is clearly worthwhile.

References
