

# **PROMOTING BILINGUALISM WITH TECHNOLOGY: WEB-PAGE BASED COOLPIX & VIDEOS!**

**David Ockert  
Shinshu University**

## **ABSTRACT**

Teachers and parents of bilingual children face the same two problems: how to increase the opportunities to learn both languages equally and how to maintain the motivation to learn both languages when living in a monolingual society. This paper reports the efforts of a teacher and parent to increase the use of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by his two elementary school age children while living in Japan. For this paper, their first language (L1) is Japanese and their minority language (ML) is English. The intent of the experiment is to increase interest in the target language by introducing technology to enhance interest. In this case, a Nikon Coolpix camera was used to take pictures and the author put them on one the webpage of the children. The same camera was used to take home videos and they were stored on his iBook G4 computer for later use with the DivX video software. The children were asked to look at the pictures and talk about what was happening in them as well as watch the videos and answer questions about the contents. The results demonstrate that not only were interest and recycling opportunities enhanced, but that the children would often use the their ML when talking about the pictures and videos willingly.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parents of bilingual children face many challenges (Gee, 2006). For example, in the case of the author, his two children are being raised in Japan and attend a public Japanese elementary school. Research shows that young learners benefit from games and activities that allow them to recycle target vocabulary; in particular, in Japan where the consonants l & r, and v & b are often difficult to pronounce and cause confusing in understanding certain words and their attendant meanings (Avery, P. & Ehrlich, S., 1992; Ockert, 2006). There are several ways to overcome this nagging problem, of course. For example, reading to your children will provide them with the necessary auditory input. Naturally, having your children read aloud provides them with three requirements for second language (L2) development: the necessary orthographic processing required to become a good reader; the required use and development of the muscles of the mouth required to produce the sounds in English not found in Japanese; finally, the opportunity for the parents to monitor the child's ability to correctly pronounce the specific sounds of the L2. In this paper, the children's first language (L1) is Japanese and their minority language (ML) is English, and will be abbreviated accordingly.

## **YOUNG LEARNERS & BILINGUALISM**

Young learners have several advantages for acquiring a second language. For example, because their brains are still growing, their capacity for learning another language is increased. While researchers do not necessarily agree on the exact age to begin learning another language, most agree that the younger they are, the better (Baker, C., 2000; Barron-Hauwaert, S., 2004). Here are ten methods that experts recommend for raising multilingual children, (Multilingual Children's Association, 2007).

### **1. As parents, agree on bilingualism**

Most families that have the opportunity to raise a bilingual child can come to a amicable agreement whether to pursue it or not. However, sometimes one parent isn't supportive of speaking the other native language to the child. This is very sad but also understandable. There can be a fear of being left out, not knowing "the secret language", or concerns if it's good for baby. Many of these common misconceptions are answered on this site, as well as the key advantages you can list when arguing your case. However, in the meantime, your partner may well come around to understanding your point of view. In this author's experience, most couples find a way that's acceptable to all persons involved, especially the child.

### **2. Know what to expect and when to expect it**

Some people just want to plunge into raising a bilingual child, especially if bilingualism and multilingualism are common in their community. This approach works great, as it means the parents are comfortable and committed to the concept, and this attitude promotes learning. However, for others, multilingualism can turn the prior communication pattern in the family on its heels, so it pays to be well-prepared. Also, informed parents spot warning signs earlier and know what to do when problems arise such as speech and hearing difficulties, one language lagging behind, or the child's refusal to speak a language. Educate yourself about your baby's language milestones, and you will no doubt marvel at these just as you cherish the first time he rolls over, sits up, and takes his first step.

### **3. How many languages do you want your child to learn?**

What do you want to accomplish with multilingualism? Do you want to share the heritage language of your family or just help your child learn a foreign language without the necessity for study? The motivations are many and varied, but the practicalities are similar. First, how many languages you choose depends upon your goals, naturally. For example, can someone within the immediate family provide meaningful language exposure in another language? Do you live in an area where there are plenty of foreign speakers?

Generally, the number of languages within the household is the number of languages baby gets on his plate, maybe with one extra. So, most parents who don't speak a foreign language themselves typically don't go beyond bilingualism for their child. On the other hand, when each parent speaks a different foreign language, they may venture for those two, the community language and possibly one more, i.e. four languages.

Beyond four simultaneous languages, the success rate starts to fall significantly. Researchers claim that a child needs to be exposed to a language 30% of their waking time to actively speak it. Regardless of how many languages, you do need regular exposure and creating a need for baby to use them -- plus the ability to maintain that for at least the first five years of the child's life. If you're able to provide that for the languages you want her to learn, go for it!

#### 4. Decide on a language learning system

Your family should discuss a few issues to make sure everyone is on the same page. Who should speak what language to baby? The two most common and among the most successful language are One Person One Language (OPOL) and Minority Language at Home (ML@H). If you have the opportunity and desire, you could add a language beyond what the family provides through an outside source like an immersion program, a nanny or au pair. This is perhaps the easiest way for parents who don't speak any foreign languages to give early language exposure to their baby. Is there a time specific rule you'd like to apply? For example, both parents will speak the minority language during the weekend even though one parent may only be a rudimentary speaker of the language. This is a perfectly legitimate solution, as well. Actually, there are endless variations

#### 5. Don't wait - Now is the perfect time!

The ideal time to start multilingualism is even before your baby is born. Only recently, with the help of modern technology, have researchers been able to actually see what's going on inside the head of infants. As it turns out, a baby knows important things about language even before birth, and he gains fundamental verbal skills long before he utters his first word. So, why is it a bad idea to wait? It could be said the brain is *primed* the first three years of life with synapses at a peak, busily setting up the optimal neural pathways to mediate language. This construction of the brain's language chip continues, but at an ever-slowng rate until late childhood. Even if you don't start from birth, the earlier is truly easier for both you and your child. By the early teens, a child's early abilities are completely gone. Besides, the younger the child, the less likely they will care about blatant errors. They'll just happily chatter away until your ears are ready to fall off. What better learning conditions can you ask for?

#### 6. Declare your intentions

Before your baby is born, everyone will have an opinion about the names you're considering for your little one. Once the name is given, most people drop the subject. The same is true of multilingualism. Everyone will no doubt have an opinion before you start, but once you begin, they will just accept it. The best tactic is simply to not ask for support or approval from your friends and extended family. We've found it's better to never open the door for negotiations -- simply inform them of your decision. Most opposition you encounter can be politely ignored with a nod or a smile. You might simply say, "That's interesting" or "That's a good point." If it's someone whose opinion you really care about, gently educate them. Well-informed explanations will go a long way. Dispelling common **myths** on multilingualism and show them the **advantages** instead, should help you persuade them.

#### 7. Establish a support network of like-minded persons

It's a good idea to get support from others in a similar situation. Most things are more fun and rewarding if you share them with like-minded people. Not only do you have a peer group to discuss the art of raising bilingual children and benefit from the experiences of others, but you will build a network of other speakers of your minority language. Equally important, it gives your child the opportunity to hear, speak, and interact with other children in the same minority language. This can be an enormous motivator for them. In Matsumoto, the author's hometown, the Dad's of bilingual children regularly gather for breakfast's at Denny's and have even sponsored family get-togethers during the holiday season. The possibilities are as endless as your imagination.

#### 8. Get relevant materials for your children to use

Having books, music, movies, and toys in your L2 is both fun and useful. There are other household items such as place mats, tableware, posters, etc. that also are helpful. We have English language DVD's and the accompanying picture books produced by ECC here in Japan. They are great and our children love to watch the DVD and read the book together. The Curious George books and The Very Hungry Caterpillar are their favorite books, and the Peanuts Classic Holiday Collection remains a year-round favorite.

#### 9. Set your goals, but be flexible with them

Unfortunately, there are many things that can undermine your best efforts at helping your child learn a second language. It's certainly not the end of the world if your child gets less exposure to the minority language for a period of time. Your child will remember what he has learned when you're able to increase the language interaction again. Definitely avoid a situation where your child refuses to speak. In this situation, you'll have to be creative and try to find increased exposure to the minority language. You can still bring the language to active use later, and it will be much easier for your child than for someone without the foundation you have already set. That, in itself is a gift beyond measure. No matter what you do, keep your child in contact with the language in some way. In the author's house, he only speaks English no matter what!

#### 10. Remember to be patient and keep going!

Raising multilingual children does require patience, and there will no doubt be frustrating times. But, of course, parents of monolingual children experience frustration, too! Don't worry if your child doesn't speak his languages as quickly as his friends or with the same proficiency in all of the languages. Reality doesn't always fit our plans. Focus on the success, marvel at what your child can do, and praise, praise, praise! Remember that if you don't try, you don't accomplish anything. Rest assured that when your child says, "I want a hug" in your own language, you'll almost cry with pride. At that moment, it won't matter that it took some extra effort or that you had to wait a bit for the result (Multilingual Children's Association, 2007).

## DECIDE ON A LANGUAGE SYSTEM

While your child may learn another language under chaotic conditions, most families find that having a fixed language system in the home makes it easier for everyone. It minimizes the child's tendency to mixing the two languages, and is the best way to prevent later refusal to speak the minority language (Multilingual Children's Association, 2007). Here are a few of the more common patterns they recommend:

### 1. One person, one language (OPOL):

This means that the parents or caregiver consistently speak only one language each to the child. It is among the most widely used language systems to raise bilingual and multilingual children. Despite its popularity, the method often requires some "language supplement". Examples are playgroups, visiting family or the country, native speaking nanny or au-pair, etc. Regardless, it is always good for the child to hear the language from more than one person. For reference, most researchers suggest that a child needs to hear a language 30% of the time to learn to speak with ease.

### 2. Minority language at home (ML@H)

In this method, everyone speaks the ML at home, and the majority language is used with everyone else. The minority language does not have to be the native language of both parents. As a family language system it is probably the most fail safe method to raise truly native speaking children, because the child will hear and interact in the language with both parents consistently from birth until they leave home.

It is understandable that parents worry about their child having a disadvantage when starting school, but as soon as the child is surrounded by children speaking the community language, he will quickly catch up. If he has the basics in place, that catch up period is rarely more than 6 months. The risk for complete linguistic isolation, meaning the child learns only the minority language, is typically very small. Still, some parents opt to temporarily change to one of them speaking the community language a year or so before school, just to prepare the child for the change.

### 3. Other patterns

Any pattern that works well for your family is a good pattern, of course. Here are a couple of other possible patterns: (1) one language is spoken every day, the other on extended vacations to another country; (2) one language is spoken in a certain location, e.g. if the children attend an immersion program.

It's true that the more consistent you are the better and faster your child will learn, but consistency shouldn't come at the expense of the child or the family. Remember, raising a multilingual child is at least a 4-year commitment to reach basic speaking skills (and obviously, continued exposure for maintenance after that), and the commitment is longer if your goal is full literacy. Circumstances in your family life may *change* during such an extended period of time. It's best not to put undue pressure on yourself, but to find a routine that works for you and can be adjusted as your situation changes.

When deciding on a family language system, it is really all about long-term thinking. Which language will be easy vs. difficult to provide interaction -- now and in the long term? Because, the language situation is likely to change over time, and so will

your child! So, you'll need to adapt. Here are a few of the factors to take into considerations: Over the first ten years of life, how much is your child likely to hear the different languages? The more balanced you can make that, the better. It does not mean 50/50 during the whole period, but maybe 80/20 initially switching to the reverse 80/20 over time.

As parents we must also keep in mind other considerations. For example, can we compensate for a lack of ML during the school years by creating a lot of opportunities to the minority language during early childhood? Are we likely to remain in the current country? If not, think long term and how you can maximize the exposure to the different languages. Can our child get interaction from others than the parents such as playmates, friends, visitors, etc., and how can we as parents encourage this? Can we easily travel to the country of the minority language(s) if our child needs a boost of exposure? (Andersson, 2004; Multilingual Children's Association, 2007).

## **MOTIVATION**

There are several types of motivational theories. However, to delve into them all in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Certainly, we can all agree that most young people – and especially children - are inherently motivated to be active in almost any situation (Ockert, 2004b). Furthermore, they have interests in various learning activities and which types of activities depends on their motivation type (Ockert, 2004a). Also, in the author's opinion, "research results demonstrate that students are more interested in living the language than merely using it in a classroom setting" (Ockert, 2005: 336). However, regardless of their specific inherent motivation for learning a second language, the author's research has demonstrated that games commonly played in the student's L2 can very easily be adapted for use as an L2 or ML target activity (Ockert, 2006). For example, Go Fish, UNO or Concentration are all popular activities that children enjoy and have proven successful in many learning situations.

As parents and educators we can take advantage of this natural desire to play games and be active individuals to steer our learners toward activities that they will inherently find motivating (Ockert, forthcoming). It was this background that motivated the author to pursue the use of technology as a means to enhance interest in his children's ML. The children were definitely interested in both the use of photos on a web-page and especially the use of video to express themselves in their ML.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO AS TEACHERS & PARENTS?**

Parents have several roles, and a language educator is definitely one of them; however, parents who wish to raise bilingual or multilingual children face many obstacles but also have the opportunity to reap the special reward of watching their children develop in a special way. (Harding-Esch and Riley, 2003).

According to Sugimori (2006), the maintenance of language minority children's L1 is often a desired outcome, but previous research has illustrated the difficulties of maintaining this language and shown that bilingual children are unfortunately susceptible

to incomplete L1 acquisition. Therefore, what can parents do to maximize exposure to the ML while also avoiding the possibility of a decrease in the child's linguistic ability in their L1. The author and his wife decided that reading together was one method.

## **READING TOGETHER**

What can we do to offset the potential for negative consequences mentioned above? As stated previously, the author's children enjoy reading together. In reading, scaffolding is the assistance that we as parents can provide through verbal interaction. The term *scaffolding* was introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) describing the assistance that a tutor can provide to a tutee during a task involvement. Scaffolded help is characterized by the following six features: 1) encouraging interest in the task, 2) simplifying the task, 3) maintaining pursuit of the goal, 4) accentuating critical features of the reading task to reiterate the discrepancy between what the child has produced and what he should have produced, 5) reducing frustration during reading, and 6) being a good role-model of the reading task (Tanaka, 2005:23). In the author's house, both he and his wife read to their children using this approach. However, to avoid incomplete development in both languages, the author reads to his children in English and his wife reads to the children in Japanese. Please note that the children request that both parents read to them regardless of the language. IE, the author receives just as many requests to read Curious George in English as his wife does for books in Japanese.

Since reading is definitely story-telling, and a story need not always use a book (Ockert, 2007), the author began looking for ways to encourage his children to express themselves in their ML (English) in other ways. Story-telling seemed an obvious solution. Furthermore, since both children are young learners who enjoy being active like most young people, it was decided that video was the perfect means to allow them to be active while using and learning the language (Ockert, D., forthcoming).

## **WHY USE TECHNOLOGY?**

The author asked himself, "How can I maintain my children's interest in English as they grow older?" In Japan, video games and the like are ubiquitous. In the author's opinion, most of the video games on the market offer little or no education opportunity – least of all in a second and/or foreign language! However, research by Tanaka (2005) has confirmed the link between technology and task work, in this case speaking English. With this in mind, the author brainstormed various ideas before his daughter provided the answer: she wanted her own webpage. Perfect. This would provide us with an opportunity to communicate in English. First, we spent time deciding which pictures to put on her homepage. Second, we proceeded to talk about what would be good choices of places and events to take picture for her homepage. Finally, and most important, we can now go her homepage and view her photos and spend time together talking about them in her ML.

Furthermore, recently several digital cameras come equipped with a movie mode with sound feature (Nikon Digital Website, 2007). This would allow us to record our own

movies in English. On several occasions, the author decided to take videos of his children while he asked them questions in their ML. This proved particularly effective to review their English lessons target vocabulary and grammar. In addition, with the use of a free video software known as DivX, the author could save the videos to the iBook and review them on occasion. The great new is that nowadays, both the Coolpix and DivX technologies are readily available for anyone interested in using them. While the Nikon Coolpix may be a bit expensive, DivX is not. In fact, DivX can be downloaded for free from their website located at [www.divx.com](http://www.divx.com).

## CONCLUSION

Parents who are raising bilingual children face many challenges, not the least of which is keeping their children interested in the target language. There are several reasons why they may lose interest in learning another language: time pressure; the fact that their friends do not use the language; boredom; and other interests, to name a few. However, the use of recent technological advances such as the internet and web-pages, digital cameras, and finally movie mode with sound cameras provide an interesting alternative to traditional educational approaches. The use of technology can capture and hold a child's interest in a positive and active manner as opposed to passive game playing. In the examples outlined above, the author's children used their own pictures on their web-pages as a source of English language conversation material. In addition, they made their own English language videos. Both proved successful motivators for them to communicate with the author in their ML, English.

The author would like to thank the editors and Mark Brierley for their assistance with the original manuscript.

## REFERENCES

Andersson, S. (2004). *Growing Up with Two Languages: A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge.

Avery, P. & Ehrlich, S. (1992). *Teaching American English pronunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Baker, C. (2000). *A Parents' & Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*. Avon: Multilingual Matters Limited.

Barron-Hauwaert, S. (2004). *Language Strategies for Bilingual Families: The One-Parent-One-Language Approach*. Avon: Multilingual Matters Limited.

Gee, R. (2006). Bilingual Child-Raising in Japan. Minority Identity & Marginilization: On being of Chinese descent. *Bilingual Japan* 15(1), March 2006.

Harding-Esch, E. & Riley, P. (2003). *The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Multilingual Children's Association, (2007). Retrieved on February 26 from <<http://www.multilingualchildren.org/>>

Nikon Digital Website (2007). Retrieved on February 27, 2007 from <<http://www.nikoncoolpix.com/main.html>>

Ockert, D. (forthcoming). Utilizing the four skills with one task: Dialogue dictations as communicative classroom activities. *The Language Teacher*, MyShare Column.

Ockert, D. (2007). Iroirona hanashi: Using stories with younger learners. *The Language Teacher*, 31(4).

Ockert, D. (2006). Survey results: Learning about language learners' learning styles. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*, 330-339. Tokyo: JALT.

Ockert, D. (2006). Excuse me? Was that \l\ as in 'Larry'? And \v\ as in 'Virginia'? *The Language Teacher: My Share*, 76-78.

Ockert, D. (2005). Substantive scale verification: A Likert scale analysis and critique of university student pedagogical activity preferences. *JALT Hokkaido Journal* (9), 48-64.

Ockert, D. (2004a). Relationships between intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students and classroom activities. *Temple University Japan Applied Linguistics Colloquium Proceedings*, 75-87.

Sugimori, N. (2006). Effects of visiting enrollment on Japanese-English bilingual children being raised in the U.S. *The Japan Journal of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism*, 12(1).

Tanaka (2005). Collaborative interaction as the process of task completion. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 1(2), 21-40.

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17, 89-100.