

A Case Study of One Japanese Heritage Language Program in Arizona

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Abstract

This paper has two purposes. The first purpose is to develop a better understanding of the process of starting an after-school program for Japanese heritage language learners. The second purpose is to develop a better understanding of parents' expectations of their children's heritage language education. Interviews with two Japanese mothers whose children attend a Japanese after-school program revealed factors similar to those that Shibata's study (2000) found are essential when opening Japanese heritage schools: (a) leadership, (b) parental and community support, (c) teaching methodology and materials, and (d) motivation. In addition, this study revealed two more factors essential for opening after-school classrooms: social networks and policies.

Introduction

This paper is a case study of an after-school program for heritage language learners of Japanese in the Tucson, Arizona, area. As a teacher in the Japanese language program for the past 2 years and a researcher in the field of multicultural education, I have become increasingly interested in how the program was started, what the Japanese parents think about the classes, their reasons for sending their children to the program, and whether they expect their children to learn just the Japanese language or if they wish their children to learn about Japanese culture as well. The research questions are as follows:

1. How were the after-school classes established?
2. What are the expectations that the Japanese parents have for their children's heritage language education?

Literature Review

Language Maintenance and Language Socialization Theory

Language maintenance is a central issue for heritage language learners. Language maintenance refers to “relative language stability in its number and distribution of speakers, its proficient usage in children and adults, and to retaining the use of the language in specific domains” (Baker, 1997, p. 43). In addition, Romaine (1995) argues that language maintenance, shift, and death are caused by the “numerical strength of the group in relation to other minorities and majorities, social class, religious and educational background, settlement patterns, ties with the homeland, degree of similarity between the minority and majority language, extent of exogamous marriage, attitudes of majority and minority, government policy toward language and education of minorities, and patterns of language use” (p. 40). Although the relationship between these factors is complex, the process of language shift includes three main stages (May, 2000). The first stage consists of increasing pressure on minority-language speakers to speak the majority language, particularly in formal language domains. The second stage consists of both languages continuing to be spoken: a period of bilingualism. The third stage is the replacement of the minority language with the majority language.

Language socialization theory (Ochs, 1999; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin, 1990) argues that parental and community support is essential if language is to be maintained. The theory argues for the effectiveness of acquiring language through the process of sociocultural knowledge. In other words, it is posited that children learn linguistic and cultural knowledge through daily interactions with other members of their social group, in both an explicit and implicit manner (Schieffelin, 1990). For example, utilizing an ethnographic approach, Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) investigated the relationship between child-caregiver communication and culture in three different communities: White middle-class American, Kaluli, and Western Samoan. Findings indicate that children’s interaction with caregivers, most of whom are the children’s mothers, provide values and beliefs that socially and culturally affect the children (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Similarly, Cargo, Genesee, and Allen (1998) revealed that language loss comes not only from the language policies of schools and government, but also from parents’ decisions concerning which language to use with their children. In other words, these studies confirmed the family members’ influence on children’s language acquisition. Regarding schools’ influence on language maintenance, Caldas and Caron-Caldas’s case study (2000) clearly shows such an influence. By investigating the shifting bilingual preference of three bilingual children over a 3-year period in the state of Louisiana, their study revealed that the students’ language preference comes from community immersion in the target language.

Heritage Language Learners

According to a report of heritage language research priorities stemming from a conference recently held at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA Steering Committee, 2001), most minority immigrants coming to the United States are likely to lose their heritage language within two or three generations. The U.S. educational system, which emphasizes rapid language shift of language minorities from their native language(s) to English, has been held culpable for the aforementioned language loss (Draper & Hicks, 2000; Nahirny & Fishman, 1996). Since public schools provide most instruction in English, parents of language minorities must transmit their home language to their children outside the school, through community, parental, and teacher support (Draper & Hicks, 2000). One method is community-established weekend or after-school programs (Draper & Hicks, 2000). Language groups, such as Chinese, Korean, and Russian, have started weekend and/or after-school programs (Draper & Hicks, 2000; Li, 1995; Chao, 1997). Japanese immigrants are no exception (Oketani, 1995; Shibata, 2000). In her case study, Shibata provided an overview of the opening of a Saturday school to teach Japanese as a heritage language. According to Shibata, the school became not only a place to learn the Japanese language, but also a place where parents gathered to pursue a common goal: the passing of their native language and culture to their children. Additionally, for children, it became a place to share their ethnic values, identity, and friendship. Shibata's study found four main factors essential for opening this school: (a) the initiative to teach language and leadership to carry out the plan; (b) parental and community support, including financial support, a suitable place for school, and qualified teachers; (c) appropriate teaching methodology and materials; and (d) motivation to help children become bilingual in Japanese and English.

The present study is important because it seeks to gain a better understanding of the current situation of Japanese heritage language learners in the United States by looking closely at one Japanese heritage language program in the Southwest. Like Shibata's study (2000), the present study analyzes how a select group of Japanese immigrants in one U.S. metropolitan area try to maintain their children's heritage language. Additionally, applying Shibata's study to the situation of Japanese heritage language learners in Tucson, Arizona, will allow a test of the generalizability of Shibata's findings.

Methodology

Profile of One After-School Japanese Heritage Language Program

The after-school Japanese heritage language program was established in September 2001. Classes are held on a church property about 35–40 minutes from downtown Tucson. There are 14 children from a total of 12 families in the

program, which offers three classes for Japanese heritage language learners: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. In the beginner class, there are six children; the intermediate class has five; and the advanced class has four. All classes are held every Friday. The beginner class lasts 40 minutes (3:30–4:20 p.m.), and the other two classes last 50 minutes (4:30–5:20 p.m.). The program currently has two teachers who develop the majority of the materials themselves. There is no formal teacher training.

Profile of Participants

The participants in this study were two Japanese immigrant parents of children who attend the Japanese heritage language program. The first participant was Yumiko, the founder and leader of the Japanese heritage language program. She took the initiative to establish the program and has carried out its plans and activities. Yumiko came to Tucson in 1995. Her family members include her husband (who is non-Japanese), their 6-year-old daughter, and their 5-year-old son. Both children attend the program. According to Yumiko, 30% of the family's daily conversation is in Japanese. However, since her husband does not speak Japanese, and her children interact with their public school peers in English, their primary language is English. When they visit Japan every other summer, her children go to Japanese public school. The second participant was Mitsue (a pseudonym), also the mother of a student. I selected Mitsue due to the fundamental consistency of participants; her family, like Yumiko's, includes a Japanese mother and a non-Japanese father. Mitsue and her family came to Tucson from England when her daughter was almost 4 years old. Her family members are her (non-Japanese) husband and her 7-year-old daughter, Fumiko. They go to Japan almost every year and England every other year. Currently, 80% of their conversation at home is in Japanese.

Data Collection

The general approach of this case study is an ethnography of communication approach (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1982). The interviews utilized teacher research methods (McCarty, 1997). Interview questions were created to overarch the two research questions mentioned earlier (see Appendix). The interviews with the two participants described earlier were conducted in March and April 2002. Also, follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain brief profiles of both interviewees.

Data Analysis

Both interviews were audiotaped, and field notes were taken. The tapes were later transcribed. The analysis of data was an ongoing structured analysis, which refers to a constant analysis of the data throughout the study rather than waiting until the data collection is over (Rossmann & Rallis, 1998). The interview questions were written prior to the interview, thus making this more

of a prefigured than an open-ended study (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The data was coded by categories based on the research questions using thematic analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 1998; Seidman, 1998). Interviews were conducted in Japanese and translated into English by the author.

Findings

I interviewed the founder and program leader, Yumiko, first. In response to the question focusing on why she and her Japanese friend sought to establish the after-school program for their children, she stated that her children were quickly outgrowing the “play group” that was meant to give younger children a chance to associate with other heritage language learners. Furthermore, Yumiko stated:

Comparing English and Japanese, English has stronger influence on my kids [than Japanese]. But, at least, I want them to be able to communicate with my mother in Japan, that is why I want them to get to know Japanese.

Yumiko further reported that the play group was supervised by the parents on a rotating basis; however, when it came to opening the heritage language program, Yumiko thought it would be best if, for purposes of student motivation, the class were not taught by someone known to the children. She felt the children would take it more seriously if the teacher were not one of the students’ parents. Yumiko consulted Tomoko, a Japanese woman living in Tucson, who introduced the first teacher to the program.

After finding a teacher for the program, the next step was to find a suitable place to have the classes. She wanted to have the classes an equal distance from everyone’s home. However, this was not possible due to limited financial resources, and the program became housed in a church 35–40 minutes from downtown Tucson. Although far away, the church has several benefits. First, it does not change rent. Further, it has a playground that children can use, and the teachers have full use of an array of equipment such as a TV, VCR, keyboard, and computer. Desks, chairs, a white board, and markers are also provided free of charge. Yumiko decided that the benefits provided by the church outweighed the inconvenience of the distance from central Tucson.

It is important to note that the only funding the program receives comes from the parents of children who attend the school. The total cost per month is added up and then divided among the parents. For this reason, spending is kept to a minimum. However, despite limited financial resources, I noticed every week that there are a lot of Japanese children’s books in the classrooms. I inquired about these books and where the school obtained money for the texts. Yumiko explained the Japanese books came from an endowment given once a year by the wife of a consul in San Francisco. Yumiko applied for the funds to purchase the books and was granted her request. The books are brought to the classrooms every week, and the children may borrow them.

Yumiko also discussed the challenge of finding teachers for the program. Besides wanting someone who was not a parent of one of the students, Yumiko also preferred someone from the University of Arizona (UA). Knowing that an experienced teacher would require a higher compensation than the school could afford, Yumiko hoped that a student at the university would accept the limited pay in exchange for the experience. This is exactly what occurred.

The next challenge centered on attracting students to the program. Some students came from the play group; however, more were needed. Yumiko put up posters at a Japanese grocery shop and in some Tucson restaurants. Word of mouth also proved quite effective. Yumiko emphasized that most of the students came from word of mouth thanks to two large gatherings in Tucson organized by a Japanese church and the UA Japanese association.

In addition to the after-school class, Yumiko and the Japanese parents try to conduct at least two main activities every year: an athletic event and a Christmas party. The expense for these activities was kept to a minimum through the cooperation of all the parents. For example, the parents make the majority of the equipment for the athletic event.

Regarding rules of the program, Yumiko stated the importance of a few policies to keep it running smoothly. The first centers on an "appreciation day." This is a day on which all the parents are expected to thank the church, which allows them to use rooms for free, by sending a card or a small gift. The second policy states that mothers must take turns observing their children's lessons. In every class, one of the Japanese parents is expected either to sit in the corner of the classroom and observe or to help the teacher. The next policy focuses on student placement. The students are placed into three classes based on their age: a beginner class for the 3- to 5-year-old children; an intermediate class for the 5- to 7-year-olds; and an advanced class for those 8 and older. The beginner class focuses on speaking; the intermediate class is taught how to write Hiragana; and the advanced class is taught Kanji. Yumiko, as the founder and leader of the program, takes children's preferences and their mothers' opinions into consideration, in terms of whether they feel they belong in the class. Also, once a child is placed in a class, Yumiko will not switch the student out of the class based on his or her proficiency. Students have changed classes, but only due to the children's and/or their mothers' preferences.

During the course of the interview, I discovered that problems occasionally arise due to differences of opinion between teachers and mothers in terms of how to conduct the lessons. Yumiko explained that whenever such differences of opinion occur she will listen to everyone's opinion and then make a decision. She always makes sure her decision is known to all involved and that the rationale behind the decision is known as well. As stated by Yumiko:

I told [the children's mothers] that [the mothers and children] should follow the teachers' teaching method, since the teachers come here for us. Then, I said that I would accept their opinions, but I would not accept their complaints.

Yumiko added that she trusts the teachers' teaching methodology, since teachers have learned pedagogy and the Japanese mothers, including her, have not. Most policy decisions are made on a case-by-case basis as problems come up.

When asked about the success of the program, Yumiko stated:

Since [our children] started to come here, we can see their Japanese has been improving. For example, if they get a homework assignment, they are now willing to do [the assignment], they became willing to write [Japanese], and they became to be willing to speak [Japanese]. [It is] not like that one kid is bad [in terms of improving his/her Japanese proficiency], or that only the kid is good, but the whole group is growing up. That is what we can see.

Finally, I asked Yumiko about her future plans for the program. She stated that she hopes to find more students and start another class for beginners.

The second interview I conducted was with the mother of a student in my class, Mitsue. When I asked Mitsue why she sends her daughter to the Japanese heritage language class, she stated: "The biggest reason is that I want to give Fumiko an opportunity to meet Japanese people, and to be in the environment of the Japanese language." When asked whether her child has sufficient opportunities to speak Japanese, Mitsue said that she tries to give her child opportunities to spend time with Japanese children even though it is hard to find the time because of their daily schedules.

When asked about her expectations for the teachers, she emphasized the importance of the students learning not only language in the classroom but also elements of Japanese culture, such as Japanese cultural events, customs, and how to communicate with native Japanese speakers. This balance is the type of education she wants for her daughter.

Regarding the program's curriculum, Mitsue is satisfied. Moreover, she stated she is glad that the classes only meet once a week because it would be difficult to attend otherwise. When asked what she expects of her child as a heritage language learner, she stated:

Basically, as a family, [our] priority is English. We focus on English, because honestly, even if Fumiko lives in Japan, it would be just one year or two years. I do not think Fumiko is going to end up living in Japan for her entire life. Plus, considering that when she enters society, such as schools [in America], Japanese will not be the majority language; English is the priority.

Regarding expectations for her child's language ability, Mitsue stated: "As for Japanese, honestly, I want Fumiko to write it, to speak it, and to be like an 'average' Japanese speaker." Consequently, Mitsue mentioned that she would take her daughter's wishes into consideration as she grows up on whether or not she wants to have an "average" Japanese proficiency. Regarding her child's attitude toward Japanese, she used the term *bilingual*. Mitsue said she is aware that her daughter may struggle with identity issues since she has relatives in England and Japan, and she is currently living in America. Mitsue would like her child's identity to come from both American and Japanese culture; thus, she is grateful for the Japanese heritage language program.

Discussion

Shibata's study (2000) found the essential factors in successfully opening a heritage language school to be leadership, parental and community support, teaching methodology and materials, and motivation toward being bilingual. Similar factors were found in the course of this study. Leadership appeared to be an imperative factor in creating the classes for Japanese heritage learners. Without Yumiko's effort to unify the mothers' cooperation and to make contacts with the other Japanese associations, it would not have been possible to launch the program. Parental and community support also were revealed as crucial to beginning and continuing to operate the program. As in Shibata's study, teaching methodology and materials are important; however, there are some differences. In Shibata's case study, the community members sought professional advice from a university regarding teaching methodology and materials. The Tucson-area program has no professional connection to a university, and the teachers make their own decisions regarding teaching methodology and materials, and books for the small-library system. However, since the teachers of the heritage language classes are students at UA, trained in the teaching of Japanese as a second language, their knowledge base has been influenced by courses they have taken from UA professors and the informal advice received from the professors. On the other hand, because the pedagogy they have learned is actually "Japanese as a second or foreign language," it is questionable whether the teachers' knowledge is a perfect fit with the practices at the heritage language classes, since heritage language learners have special needs that are different from those of students learning Japanese as a second or foreign language. Regarding motivation, this study suggests that mothers have a strong wish for their children to learn more about Japanese language and culture, with the desired goal being bilingualism.

In addition, this study revealed two more factors essential for opening after-school programs: social networks and administrative policies. In Tucson, there are two major Japanese organizations, the Japanese church and the Japanese association at UA. The heritage language after-school program is closely entwined with those organizations in terms of attracting students, conveying information, and conducting Japanese cultural events. In short,

these social networks appear to have been invaluable, not only for starting a Japanese heritage language program, but also in being able to keep the program going. The study also reveals that administrative policies are important factors in the equation. As mentioned earlier, the founder and leader of the program has been acting as the principal well as the source of communication between parents and teachers. Through struggling with the process of problem solving, Yumiko has learned how to make decisions that reflect the opinions of both Japanese parents and teachers. By explaining decisions and keeping decisions consistent, Yumiko has been able to keep the program running smoothly.

Similar to the school in Shibata's case study, the Japanese heritage after-school program in the Tucson area is a place to pass on not only the Japanese language, but also Japanese culture, to Japanese heritage children through both lessons and activities. At the same time, the children gain an opportunity to associate with other Japanese heritage children. Not surprisingly, the students frequently stay before and after Japanese class to spend time with the other students at the church playground.

Regarding the identity and ethnic values of Japanese heritage students, which Shibata's study (2000) also considered, a participant in the present study revealed how complicated of an issue this can be. Even when Japanese-related identity and ethnic values are shared among the children who attend the classes, many individual differences remain. For example, some consider maintaining Japanese proficiency to be a top priority, while others do not. Depending on how each family is constructed, such as the various cultural backgrounds, some families may treat Japanese as their native language while others may treat it as a second or foreign language.

Conclusion

This study reveals how one Japanese community in Arizona began a program for Japanese heritage language learners and what expectations Japanese parents hold regarding their children's education in terms of Japanese language and culture. Parents in this Japanese community, concerned about their children's language maintenance, are trying to transmit the Japanese language to their children outside the public schools. Regarding future studies, there are a plethora of issues that require investigation: What is the best pedagogy for heritage language learners? How should teaching for heritage language learners differ from instruction for second language learners? How does the perceived etholinguistic vitality of a minority language influence individuals' motivation to take the steps needed to maintain minority languages?

This study contributes to the general understanding of the challenges faced by individuals and communities seeking to establish and/or maintain their children's heritage language use. This study, while focused on Japanese as a heritage language, may be generalized to other heritage languages as

well. This study may allow other parents who wish similar education for their children to understand some problems they may face, as well as provide ideas for ways they can start a similar program. It is important for language-minority people to recognize their common desire to have their children maintain their heritage language, and until there is a change to the U.S. bilingual educational system, the community may be the best and only defense against heritage language loss.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How was the Japanese heritage language program established?
 - a. Why did you seek to establish classes?
 - b. Where does the funding for the classes come from?
 - c. How did you find the teachers? Are there any criteria for teachers?
 - d. How did you find learners? Are there any 'community-nets' or associations that the Japanese parents belong to?
 - e. How did you find the place to have the classrooms?
 - f. How did you find and decide on the teaching materials?
 - g. Do you have any other activities besides learning Japanese at the classrooms? If so, what are they?
 - h. What aspects of the class have you changed over time? Are there changes you are planning to make in the near future?
 - i. Are you any rules and/or expectations for the parents? If so, what are they?

2. What are the expectations that the Japanese parents have for their children's heritage language education?
 - a. Why do you have your children come to the classrooms for the heritage language learners?
 - b. What do you expect from the teachers? What do you want teachers to teach to your children?
 - c. What do you expect of your children? What do you want your children to learn from the class?
 - d. What do you expect from the school? Do you approve of the curriculum the school is currently providing?
 - e. What do you think about your children's identity? How important is it to you that your children see themselves as heritage language learners? Do you expect your children to form a sense of community by taking the class?