



An Interview with the Japanese Program Coordinator of the Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program at Clarendon Alternative Elementary School

Juergen J. Bulach

I conducted the following interview with Yu Goji, the Japanese Program Coordinator of the Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program (JBBP) at Clarendon Alternative Elementary School in San Francisco, California. Part of the uniqueness of Clarendon Elementary is that it offers children the opportunity to study in Japanese or Italian language and culture programs in two separate programs, the JBBP and the Italian Second Community Program. The JBBP was originally founded in 1974 as a heritage language program to maintain and nurture the language and culture of the many Japanese and Japanese-American residents of the city of San Francisco. Although the JBBP is still designated a heritage language program, the majority of the students (75%) are now from families of non-Japanese backgrounds. Clarendon's JBBP has developed into a program that is primarily designed to enrich the multicultural educational opportunities available to children in grades K-5 in the public school system. However, it continues to adhere to its original goal of instilling in students a love of learning Japanese (JBBP Brochure).

What is your background?

I was born and raised in Japan and came to the US in 1998 and entered the graduate program at SFSU where I got my Master's in teaching Japanese. During this time I started working as a student volunteer here at Clarendon and helped to develop the curriculum materials. Actually, I went into classrooms a lot to show classroom teachers how to teach Japanese. I worked with Margaret Dyer when she was the Curriculum Coordinator and I was the assistant. There was a second coordinator after Margaret left, Naomi Okada. She is now teaching at one of the high schools. I took over the coordinator position about three years ago.

What is the main goal of the JBBP?

Our goal is to get students to enjoy learning Japanese so that when they choose to study a foreign language later in junior high school they will choose Japanese. We want to send them off in a positive manner about Japanese, so that they will become life-long learners of Japanese language and culture.

When was the JBBP established?

We were established in 1973 some time after the Japanese Speaking Society made a request to the San Francisco Unified School District to form a Japanese language program.

How many students are enrolled at Clarendon?

Clarendon has an enrollment of about 550 children. Actually Clarendon is a popular school so we always have more applicants than seats available. In general about 900 students apply to get into Clarendon, but that's not only into the JBBP but also into our other general education program, Second Community.

Do most of these children try to enroll in the JBBP?

Well, some parents still think that having Japanese is still too much at the kindergarten level, but we advocate that Japanese is part of our curriculum and culture. Yes, it is academic, but it won't be a burden on children learning new things. We're always saying that, but still there is this rumor or myth that bilingual education sometimes prevents children from learning new things. So that's why it's not always the case that all the parents prefer the JBBP program.

What is the enrollment number of children in the JBBP?

Approximately 250 children are presently enrolled in Clarendon's JBBP program, which is a little less than half of the whole student body.

Do some parents choose to withdraw their children from the program once they have entered it?

That almost never happens. Once they get in and see how Japanese is taught and implemented in the classroom, they usually like it and stay there. There were some cases where children from the Second Community Program in kindergarten or first grade requested to come to the JBBP, but not often. We co-exist with the

General Education Program, which we call the Second Community Program. They offer general education and Italian as a foreign language.

Has the number of students increased or decreased over the years?

Our school is a popular school so the school district wanted to assign us more students and so they put up these bungalows. Because of that, we had too many students for such a small campus and so there wasn't physically a place for the students to play. And so several years ago, we decided to ask the school district to downsize the number of students. Before we had three classes for each grade level in JBBP and two classes in Second Community Program, so we had five classes for each grade level in total. That came to 100 students per grade level. At the most we had 600 students on this campus but since the space issue, we decided to get rid of one JBBP class and that's why now the present format is two classes per grade level per program so there are now 80 students per grade level for K-5.

Who worked on the JBBP curriculum originally?

In the academic year of 2000-2001 Margaret Dyer started as the curriculum coordinator. She collected the materials and worked on developing the curriculum together with our teachers. The curriculum coordinator can come up with the ideas but sometimes we cannot see how doable it is in the classroom. That's why we need the teachers' input. Ultimately this program is lead by classroom teachers. If they don't find this doable, then there is something wrong with this curriculum. That's how we came up with this curriculum.

Did you have a different curriculum prior to the year 2000?

Prior to 2000 we actually had a different curriculum because of a difference in teaching philosophy. At that time, we had Japanese language teachers called *sensei*. We called this the sensei system in which they took out the foreign language standard from the college level and broke down the parts for novice learners carefully and then incorporated the national standards for language arts by the *Monkasho* (the Ministry of Education) and then made the Japanese curriculum. College curriculum specialists came to the classes 30 minutes a day, but this arrangement conflicted with our regular teachers and their teaching. The good point was that the sensei system was consistent and offered a guaranteed 30 minutes chunk of Japanese teaching a day. However, the demerit was that these specialists

did not know the students as well as the classroom teachers did. The regular classroom teachers know what is best for their students, so we decided to go with our own classroom teachers teaching Japanese. They can implement the curriculum best whereas specialists do not know the students that well. When a specialist comes only 30 minutes a day he or she may not know the mood of the class prior to the language session. On any given day, the students may be in a good mood or may be too excited so it is easy to do something inappropriate for the class that day. For example, a competitive activity may not be suitable for students on days when students are already too excited. That may seem to be a minor thing but that can be important in overall management of the classroom. Therefore, we decided to go with the regular classroom-teacher-lead Japanese instruction system. But, also, the sensei system makes sense too. We still have a sensei system at Rosa Parks Elementary School near Japan Town in San Francisco. It's a JBBP Program too and we share the same goal and that is to get kids to like learning Japanese.

Where did you get your curriculum materials?

We started with the benchmarks for an immersion elementary program developed by the University of Oregon. They made a textbook titled *Jan Ken Po* in the mid 1980's from which we borrowed ideas to implement our standard curriculum base because we are not immersion. Also, in 1998 ACTFL started making a K-12 nation-wide foreign language standard and we looked at elements of this and combined these with the parts we took from the Oregon program and came up with our curriculum. We are always trying to improve our curriculum. The State of California made the framework for foreign languages more for middle schools and high schools, but we took the first part of that framework and then broke it down and saw elements we could use for our K-5 curriculum purposes.

How do you find the teachers for the JBBP?

That's an interesting question. Whenever we have an opening in our program, the school district advertises the position as a position in a Japanese bilingual program. All teachers should have all taken second acquisition and foreign language courses because we have so many ELL (English language learning) students. So teachers are familiar with second acquisition and foreign language and English teaching, but also, whenever there's an opening in this program there is always a note that this is a Japanese bilingual program so you would be required to have some

knowledge of the Japanese language and culture. We then interview interested applicants.

How many teachers and classes are there in the JBBP?

We have 11 teachers so there are 11 classes in the program with a set maximum number of 20 students in the kindergarten to third grade classes and a set maximum number of 33 students in the fourth and fifth grade classes. There are two classes for each grade level with one split-level fourth/fifth grade class.

Are the JBBP teachers rotated to other schools?

No, the San Francisco Unified District allows teachers to stay at a school as long as they want.

Is there a Japanese language proficiency exam for non-Japanese origin teachers?

No. Since our program is not exactly an immersion program per se. There were such cases when they came here (new teachers) they had almost no background in Japanese so we worked together with the new teachers. Now they are able to conduct classes in Japanese. We want the new teachers to be eager to learn Japanese. If they are from here (the USA) there is no limitation that you have to have a Japanese background. Actually, our experience has shown that it is better to hire someone who is more enthusiastic about teaching than just being fluent in Japanese. Sometimes it's hard to find really good, qualified teachers who are interested in teaching and also speak Japanese. Since the JBBP is a Japanese program, we tend to go in that direction (Japanese language ability) now, but we also look at other strengths too.

You don't teach Japanese as a skill, so do you give the students a language proficiency exam?

Our assessment is called a student oral proficiency assessment but we can't assess everybody because that takes a long time. Instead we pull out 4 or 5 students from a class at random. The results are not put on their report cards but some families can be shown them upon request. The data is used as a way of checking the effectiveness of our teaching.

Do you receive support from the Japanese Ministry of Education?

I would say we get support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is a Japanese language class that the Ministry of Education supports. Their original purpose is for Japanese students who are here temporarily and who will eventually return to Japan. They take lessons offered by the Ministry of Education every Saturday and these students use this class to catch up on their Japanese. These classes implement the Japanese national curriculum so they are just packing five days of class work in one day. That's what the Ministry of Education supports. We have a good relationship with the Japanese consulate general in downtown. I think the support we're getting is indirectly from the *Gaimusho* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). For example, last year we got a *shamisen* player to come here and play. The support we get from them is more cultural than language instruction support. We make our own language materials but they give us maps and guidebooks of Japan which are awesome. They also have displays of cultural events, and the students can go on field trips and we participate in their speech contests.

How does the JBBP attract Japanese families to send their children to Clarendon?

Japanese kids can learn English more comfortably when they know teachers can understand Japanese. Once you get rid of that anxiety, they feel really free to speak English. That's our benefit. Our ELL is really good. We always mention that to the school district. We don't just teach Japanese. Our background helps Japanese students learn English. Little things like bringing *obento* (boxed lunch) to the lunchroom is popular here. Because it's popular, Japanese kids won't feel so different.

Do the local high schools offer Japanese?

Yes, there is a foreign language requirement but there are maybe only three public high schools that offer Japanese. In the middle schools Japanese is being cut lately. Chinese and Spanish are becoming more popular languages. Students can go to any high schools so they can study Japanese at specific schools. The neighborhood residency requirement is only for elementary schools.

When Clarendon Elementary JBBP students enter middle school and high school are they at a higher level than their counterparts who have never studied Japanese?

Of course they are, but not so much because high school language classes are usually based on teaching writing and reading skills. All we do is have them master *hirigana* and *katakana* while some high schools require them to master *hirigana* and *katakana* in the first week. Maybe their cultural knowledge is more advanced than those who started studying Japanese for the first time.

What about their pronunciation skills?

Well, that is actually the beautiful part. Even at the kindergarten level, the students can't even read *romanji* so all they can do is imitate the sounds. Yes, pronunciation is a skill in which our students have a lot of advantages for learning Japanese in the future.

References

The Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program (2007). [Brochure]. JBBP Parent Advisory Council.

