

On the Foreign Language Maintenance of the Japanese Returnee Students

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Introduction

The maintenance of foreign language of Japanese students who have lived abroad for several years and have acquired the language of the country of their stay is an area which has received very little attention in the public schools which accept the returnee students. Consequently, many of them, in spite of their effort to maintain the language by various means, lose their foreign language ability rapidly after they return to Japan. Both the returnees and their parents have long requested that some appropriate measures be taken in the schools. As Japanese enterprises are doing business world wide, and more foreign companies are operating in Japan, it is evident that human resources capable of intercultural communication based upon deep understanding of other cultures and high proficiency in language are in demand. Returnees can be nurtured into such human resources with the implementation of effective foreign language maintenance and enhancement programs. It is evident that social and individual needs are there, but public schools have not responded to the need.

To bring the issue of need and demand into focus, research was conducted in the summer of 1988 by Japan Overseas Educational Services (hereafter JOES) in collaboration with the author to gain quantitative data on how the returnees and their parents feel towards the maintenance of foreign language, what kind of maintenance activities are actually being carried out and also to find out what kind of wishes they have of foreign language maintenance class offered at private language institutes. The statistical data obtained from 1500 returnees was supplemented by actual observation of maintenance courses as well as interviews with returnees, their parents, teachers and education board members.

The present paper is a summary of the portion of the report which was written by the author (Yashiro 1989). The report was published in Japanese by JOES in 1989.

Education of the Returnees

Before going into the presentation of questionnaire results, background information on education for the returnees will be given. According to the statistics released by the Ministry of Education, the number of returnees from elementary school age to senior high school age for the year 1990 was 12,737. Approximately 60% of these students are of elementary school age, and 24% are junior high school age. Most of these students, especially the elementary school age children, enter public schools upon their return to Japan. Many enter "ukeirekou", a school with a special adaptation program for them. The adaptation courses usually consist of guidance in Japanese language and culture, other school subjects in which the returnees are behind, and adjustment to school life (Tokyo Gakugei University Oizumi Elementary School 1987).

The Ministry of Education stressed the importance of enhancing international understanding in 1974, and ever since, the schools have carried out programs aiming to increase knowledge and awareness of other peoples and cultures. It has been the Ministry's policy to utilize both returnee teachers and students in enhancing the program. Under the circumstances, the school people tend to confuse the programs for the returnees with the programs aimed at increasing international understanding of the students in general. Though the returnees are expected to play an important role in "internationalizing" the others, they are not encouraged to maintain their so called "international qualities" which refer to proficiency in foreign language and adaptability towards different cultural values and ways of life.

Obviously the programs aimed at the general students are not going to be effective for retention and development of returnees' ability in foreign languages and cultures. The reasons the schools give for not attending to the need of foreign language maintenance vary. Some argue that public schools are obligated to teach the children to adapt to Japan but not obligated to look after their foreign languages. Some argue that, pedagogically speaking, foreign language maintenance is detrimental to adapting to Japan. Some even go so far as to say that the returnees come from elitistic families whose main interest is to get their offsprings enter first rank schools, not foreign language maintenance. Some schools admit the fact that there is the need but confess that they neither have teachers nor finance to start such program.

To counter the passive attitude of the schools, massive data on how the returnees really feel towards foreign language maintenance, and what kind of maintenance activities are being pursued were believed to be necessary.

Research Method

The research was conducted by (1) extensive review of previous research and materials published in the area, (2) administration of questionnaires to returnees and their parents, (3) observation of maintenance classes of private institutes, and (4) interviews with returnees, their parents, teachers, and education board members. The present paper focuses on the questionnaire phase of the research.

The questionnaires were distributed to elementary and junior high school returnees living in greater Tokyo and Osaka areas. Altogether over 3500 questionnaires were distributed and 1500 were returned. 1447 were used for the analysis. The questionnaire was designed to find out what the returnees and their parents thought on (1) the desire to maintain the foreign language, (2) the conditions which make foreign language maintenance possible, (3) the relation between foreign language maintenance and adaptation to Japan, (4) the effect of foreign language maintenance, (5) actual maintenance activities pursued, (6) amelioration of existing private maintenance classes, and (7) strategies for foreign language maintenance.

Results and Interpretation

1. Desire to Maintain the Foreign Language

Ninety seven percent of the parents want their children to maintain their foreign language. There were 20 different languages involved. Ninety two percent of the returnees want to maintain their foreign languages. Ninety percent of the returnees who want to maintain their foreign language think it is a shame to have to forget what they already know. Eighty three percent say that they like the country in which they stayed and 78% want to continue friendship with friends they made during their stay. These results indicate that the returnees want to continue to have contact with the country of their stay as well as continue their friendship by means of communicating in the respective language. Thus it is proven that overwhelming majority want to maintain their foreign language.

However, maintenance of some languages are more difficult than others. For example, it is easier to maintain English than Indonesian, since English classes are offered at many places. Moreover, it is believed that a language such as English is socially more rewarding to maintain. Contrary to such expectations, returnees' desire to maintain their foreign language is not influenced by such consideration. The duration of the stay in foreign countries, availability of maintenance classes, and the social status of the language have no significant influence on the desire to maintain the language. Those

very few who do not want to maintain the language are those who did not acquire the language or those who have already forgotten most of it.

2. The Conditions Which Make the Foreign Language Maintenance Possible

The question of condition is approached from three aspects; personal condition, school condition, and social condition. The top three conditions concerning returnees themselves selected by the parents are (1) interest in the language (selected by 89% of the parents), (2) exertion (selected by 62% of the parents), and (3) positive feeling towards the country (selected by 47% of the parents). Age of the returnee and proficiency of the foreign language are not considered to be more important than the returnees' motivation and attitude. So far many academic studies have stressed the importance of age and proficiency factors in language maintenance (Cummins and Nakajima 1985; Ono 1989). However, the results indicate that the parents think that motivation and attitude are more important.

The top three conditions on the part of the school are (1) presence of understanding towards foreign languages and cultures (selected by 70% of the parents), (2) foreign teaching staff (selected by 65% of the parents), and (3) extracurricular courses in foreign language maintenance (selected by 47% of the parents). One way to fulfil the conditions is to have assistant native English teachers who are employed by the school district board to teach the maintenance courses at a school in the district once or twice a week. Nerima district in Tokyo started such a program a few years ago, and now more districts are considering the same kind of arrangement (Nerima Educational Board 1987, 1988).

As for the conditions of the society at large, parents selected (1) allowing the coexistence of various values (83%), (2) allowing cohabitation of various nationalities (59%), and (3) strict conformity not forced on returnees (38%). The parents view the monolithic nature of Japanese society as hindrance to foreign language maintenance. In 1980, Higa described how negative Japanese society was towards returnees by pointing out that many people, even some educators, call them missfits. The strict conformity which used to be forced on the returnees has eased considerably in recent years. However, Japanese society is still far from being open to various peoples and cultures.

3. Relation between Foreign Language Maintenance and Adaptation to Japan

On this question, the striking fact is that there is no parent who considers the maintenance of foreign language detrimental towards adaptation to Japan. Overriding the advice given by some educators based on previous studies which seemed to indicate

that greater retention correlated with slow adaptation (Ono 1989), the parents believe that maintenance does not have adverse effect on adaptation.

4. Effect of Foreign Language Maintenance

Sixty four percent of the parents believe that foreign language maintenance and understanding of values other than Japanese will contribute to the formation of a well balanced and all rounded personality. Forty three percent value the fact that the children will continue to understand the language and the culture of their stay. Thirty eight percent believe that language maintenance is effective in nurturing a world view and deeper appreciation of other cultures. These results indicate that the parents value the effect the foreign language maintenance has on personality formation, value system, and world view. The similar results were obtained by Niekawa (1985) from interviews with twenty two adult returnees on the effect of overseas experience on their personality development, values, and management of human relationships.

5. Actual Maintenance Activities Pursued

Eighty five percent of the returnees are pursuing some kind of foreign language maintenance activities. The most prevalent strategy is to attend foreign language maintenance classes offered mostly at private institutions. Sixty eight percent of the respondents attend such classes. Thirty six percent continue writing to foreign friends. Thirty two percent subscribe to foreign magazines or read foreign books on regular basis. Twenty one percent tune in on foreign language programs on TV or radio or use video materials to study the language. Six percent participate in activities conducted in respective foreign language with Japanese students. Five percent have native speaker tutors. Five percent speak foreign language in the family. Only three percent associate with foreign children living in Japan. It is clear that there is very little chance of maintaining the language through direct interfacial communication with foreign friends.

The responses to this section show considerable difference between those who attended Japanese school overseas and those who attended native schools or international schools. Seventy four percent of the non-Japanese school attendants participate in maintenance classes while only forty seven percent of the Japanese school attendants do the same. In all maintenance activities Japanese school graduates show significantly lower participation.

6. Amelioration of Foreign Language Maintenance Class

Sixty two percent of the returnees who are attending the maintenance classes want it to be an opportunity to associate with foreign students. At present, all the maintenance classes are limited to Japanese students. Therefore, there is no chance of meeting foreign students in the class. Forty percent want the classes to be adapted to language proficiency, not age. Forty percent want the classes to be nearer to their residential area. Most of the existing classes are in the downtown areas. Many students commute over an hour to come to class by train.

If the district schools offer maintenance courses, the problem of commuting time will be solved to a great extent. Another advantage is the possibility of having assistant native English teachers who are employed by the district. On top of that cost for space will be minimized by using public school buildings. The question of opportunity to associate with foreign friends within the maintenance class is a difficult one. However, exchange programs with overseas sister schools and international schools in Japan can provide such opportunities outside the maintenance classes. Furthermore, as the number of foreign students enrolled in Japanese schools is slowly increasing, the chances of intercultural encounters within the school is on the rise.

7. Means for Foreign Language Maintenance

The returnees were asked to grade the means which they thought effective for language maintenance. Eighty two percent believe associating with foreign students to be effective. Having foreign students in the same school is considered to be effective by seventy three percent of the returnees. Together with the response to the previous question concerning the measure to ameliorate the maintenance classes, it is clear that returnees believe genuine face to face communication to be the best way to maintain their foreign language.

Conclusion

It is proven by the present survey that the overwhelming majority of the returnees want to maintain their foreign language because they think it is a shame to forget what they have acquired and also because they want to continue the friendship which they have cultivated abroad. An overwhelming majority of the returnee parents want their children to maintain their foreign language because they believe it to be important for the formation of personality, value orientation, world view, and human understanding. Maintenance classes offered by private institutions are the most prevalent means employed for retention of the language. However, these classes have several shortcomings which the returnees want ameliorated. The strongest wish of the returnees

is to maintain the language through direct face to face communication with foreign students.

The difficulties and disappointment experienced by many returnees can be solved to a great extent if the public schools decide to take responsible actions by starting foreign language maintenance programs. The present study provides statistical evidence of the strong demand and need for foreign language maintenance programs existing among the returnees and their parents.

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