

# Adapting to Changing Needs:

## A Teacher-led Japanese FLES Program

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When designing a language program, it is often difficult to create a workable balance between a desired ideal and the realities imposed by limited resources. Ultimately, the task is to make the best use of the available materials within the allotted time frame by drawing on the creativity and expertise of the staff. The following is a brief portrayal of how teachers at one elementary school have found a way to create a context-rich environment for language learning by drawing on their own language expertise. Results show that not only are students motivated, but their proficiency increases significantly over the span of one year. Teachers are stimulated and empowered by the nature of the program.

### Background

Clarendon Elementary in the San Francisco Unified School District is designated as an alternative school that offers a special curriculum for high ability students. Their academic performance is one of the highest in the state for elementary schools of this type. In 2003, they were ranked 10th overall and first among schools with similar student populations (California Department of Education, 2004a). Clarendon offers two unique programs. The Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program (JBBP), includes Japanese instruction, the focus of this article, and the Second Community offers Italian language instruction.

Clarendon enjoys immense popularity, with applicants exceeding places for admission by a 7:1 ratio. It is an ethnically diverse school where 38.3% of the students are Asian, 8.8% are Latino, 6.6% are African American, 2.9% are Filipino and 43.4% are Anglo (California Department of Education, 2004b). The Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program was originally founded in 1973 thanks to the efforts of a large number of Japanese-American parents in San Francisco. At the time, there was a pervasive ethnic revival movement that led many groups to work to preserve their ethnic language and culture (Fukuyama, 1996). However, Ukita (2002) notes that the program was not the same type of bilingual education program that was being implemented elsewhere, such as in those set up in the San Francisco school district as a result of the landmark *Lau vs. Nichols* case.

From the beginning, the primary language of the Japanese-American students was English, and they constituted a small minority of the school population. In a parent survey, Fukuyama (1996) found that even twenty years after the program's founding, support was still strong from the Japanese-American and long-term resident Japanese communities. She found that the main motivation for choosing the JBBP was that, more than language ability, parents wanted their children to learn Japanese culture.

For many years, the school employed Japanese native speaker paraprofessionals (hereafter called the "sensei-model") to teach for 40 minutes a day in each class. During this 40-minute period, students were divided into three groups according to their ability in Japanese. The teacher rotated through the groups, so in the original sensei-model children received, on average, less than 15 minutes of instruction per day four days per week. After an in-depth program assessment in 1999, the principal, teachers, staff and parents undertook a bold experiment to restructure the program to better meet the needs of the changing student population and to bring the instruction of Japanese in line with national and state foreign language teaching standards. Over the years, the sensei-model had evolved into Japanese-only instruction for all students with the sensei's rotating through the classrooms. One problem identified with this model was that classroom teachers had very little involvement in the Japanese lessons even though many teachers were proficient in Japanese and had a connection to Japanese culture that they could share with their students.

Early in 2000, a Japanese curriculum coordinator and a Japanese language teacher were hired to assist the staff in transitioning to a teacher-led FLES (Foreign Language Elementary School) program. The teachers began intensive training in the ACTFL-NCATE standards (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2002; 1998), curriculum development and methods for teaching foreign languages, as well as Japanese lessons to refresh their own language skills. The classroom teachers along with a curriculum coordinator developed a vision to guide the process of restructuring the program. This paper will document the results of nearly four years of intensive revision of one of the oldest Japanese language programs in the country.

## Program Vision

The Clarendon Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program delivers a standards-based K-5 Japanese language and culture program to all students. The JBBP community inspires children to love learning Japanese and motivates them to become life-long learners of Japanese language and culture. The student body includes both native and non-native Japanese speakers; the two groups are sometimes separated for language instruction so that instruction can be tailored to their proficiency levels. The main goal for non-Japanese speaking students is the acquisition of a foundation of Japanese proficiency and a basic knowledge of Japanese culture. Teachers integrate Japanese language and culture into daily lessons, as well as throughout the day, using a content-based, thematic unit approach. Native Japanese-speaking students, roughly 30% of the total 329 students, maintain their heritage language skills as teachers extend the Japanese curriculum to challenge them using thematic units that incorporate higher-level vocabulary and spoken and written language, including hiragana, katakana, and kanji.

## Professional Development

Teachers currently on staff or hired into the program must meet the following requirements:

- possess a valid California teaching credential or be enrolled in a formal teacher training program,
- participate in ongoing professional development in foreign language instruction,
- demonstrate proficiency in Japanese language or be enrolled in a Japanese course of study,
- integrate Japanese language and culture into the core curriculum using the standards-based Japanese curriculum developed by the staff, and
- be willing to disseminate the JBBP teacher-led FLES program model and standards-based curriculum to schools in the district, state and nation by presenting at conferences and workshops.

Teachers continue to update and revise the staff-developed, standards-based curriculum to meet the needs of all students. This curriculum includes proficiency assessments as well as a component that calls for students and their families to celebrate Japanese culture through various events during the school year.

## Program Description

Clarendon JBBP is now what is termed a content-enriched Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) program. It can be distinguished from other programs, such as immersion, partial immersion, regular FLES and Foreign Language Exploratory Programs (FLEX), by the amount of time spent in the foreign language per week and the topic of instruction. Immersion programs typically spend up to 80% of class time

in the target language (Met, 1993). FLES classes meet a set number of times each week, usually for less than one hour, with some of the instruction in the target language. Finally, FLEX programs restrict language and culture content to a very introductory level and are usually conducted in the students' native language (Reeves, 1989). A content-based FLES program teaches the language as part of the subject matter and integrates language learning with topics that come from the regular curriculum content areas (e.g., social studies, mathematics, science) so that language is taught in a meaningful context. Content is the vehicle for language learning and is thus much more integrated into the overall functioning of the school (Curtain & Haas, 1995).

However, in an effort to more fully integrate Japanese into the students' perception of language and to make the context for instruction more realistic, the decision was made to include Japanese throughout the day, across the subjects, much as described in Curtain and Haas (1995), and in the daily functions of the class (such as taking attendance and making announcements), in addition to a concentrated class period of 30-45 minutes per day. Of the 15 teachers in the school, there are two native speakers of Japanese and three beginners. The remaining teachers, although non-native speakers, are proficient in Japanese at various levels. All of the non-native speakers are committed to improving their proficiency through professional development. The native speakers of Japanese on the staff are fully credentialed, multiple-subject classroom teachers and do not exclusively teach Japanese; they teach every subject, just like the other classroom teachers. Teachers, especially beginner Japanese learner teachers, are often assisted by native-speaker volunteers, both in and outside of the classroom. The teachers have devoted considerable time, effort, and personal commitment to training in the language and teaching of Japanese.

## Implementation

In 2001, Clarendon JBBP was awarded grants from the U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) and the Japan Foundation to undergo this program shift. The top three priorities were to improve students' abilities to communicate in Japanese, to provide professional development and support for classroom teachers as they took on the additional role of foreign language instruction, and to create a proficiency-oriented, standards-based curriculum to be articulated with middle and high schools and serve as a national model. It is a very large task that Clarendon Elementary School has undertaken, attempting both to build a standards-based curriculum from the ground up and, at the same time, shift the responsibility for instruction to classroom teachers. However, the group of teachers present at the school now have several qualities that have contributed and will continue to contribute to the present successes and the ongoing

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of the program. Most are proficient in Japanese and all are committed to improving their proficiency. They are enthusiastic about participating in this unique program where their skills can be put to use, and they feel empowered by the responsibility, as evidenced by their enthusiastic participation in curriculum development.

### The Curriculum

The curriculum was written by and for the teachers with the assistance of the curriculum coordinator and outside experts in FLES and Japanese language. Even before the teachers began writing, they participated in an intensive national standards workshop, sponsored by the California Language Teachers Association (CLTA) state-level conference, and a separate two-week curriculum development institute. After writing the first draft over the summer of 2000, the teachers met in biweekly grade-level groups during the academic year to discuss the implementation of the curriculum, units and lessons. Grade-level teams also worked together on release days, one per semester, to add more details to the units and lesson plans. The Japanese curriculum coordinator held monthly meetings to discuss the progress of the implementation as well as upcoming events. For two summers the teachers met in a week-long workshop to further refine the curriculum.

The curriculum is based on six thematic units: Self, Family, Food, Nature, School and Home. These topics were chosen specifically because they relate to students' lives and immediate surroundings. Each unit has set language functions, vocabulary, structures, and cultural themes. Jan Ken Pon, a standards-based Japanese textbook for elementary schools published by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS), is both a guide and resource for the curriculum. The program is based on recycling vocabulary and structures to ensure acquisition of productive ability, not just passive comprehension. The teachers have been trained in the five-step lesson sequence (setting the stage, comprehensible input, guided practice, application/extension, and assessment) and use this as a guide in their lesson planning. During meetings and release days, teachers have developed grade-level binders with lesson plans, worksheets, and activities for each unit. While the teachers have their own materials, books and resources, the curriculum office is the central location for thematic unit kits, a Japanese mini-library, authentic language and cultural materials, and other teaching resources and materials.

These kits are one of the key methods by which the curriculum scaffolds the students' work in order to take it to higher and higher levels through the grades. The materials for each unit include a wide range of visual aids and manipulatives, as well as a file of lesson plans and worksheets for each grade level. The kits are constructed as a unit, so there is a clear sense of the progression to proficiency in each area, and teachers

regularly contribute new creations to each file. Several thematic units on topics such as holidays and other cultural events in addition to the main six themes have also been created by the teachers. Most importantly, however, these units are all designed so that much of the language that is central to the theme is included in the materials, often with direct examples. This is a key factor in facilitating effective instruction with teachers who are not native speakers of the target language.

In addition to the daily language and culture taught in the classroom, the program also continues to hold school-wide events such as a Japanese New Year Celebration (oshougatsu), a Culture Festival (bunkasai), and a Sports Festival (undoukai). The students are able to participate in and enjoy traditional Japanese cultural events with the help of many parent and community volunteers. Performing Arts Night is another special event where the students do bon-odori (traditional Japanese dance), play taiko (Japanese drums), perform skits, and sing in Japanese and English. Parents, grandparents, and community guests are invited to enjoy the students' performances. Students often remark that these events are the highlights of their tenure at Clarendon.

### Program Achievements

Clear evidence of the success of the JBBP program at Clarendon Elementary school can be seen in the results of an evaluation that gathered data from various sources. The four data sources and their results are described below. First, the results of two focus group sessions held with teachers show how the structure of the program allows a more satisfying involvement with daily language instruction. Second, an analysis of Foreign Language Oral Skills Matrix (FLOSEM) assessments showed significant proficiency gains in all grades over a six-to-eight month span. Third, Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA) scores also show a similar increase in proficiency over the course of a year. Finally, parent surveys show that children's proficiency gains, as well as increased enthusiasm and confidence, are evident at home as well.

### Focus Groups

Focus groups were held at Clarendon Elementary School in the spring of 2002 to explore how non-native-speaking teachers have adapted to being the main providers of Japanese language instruction, which had previously been the responsibility of native-speaking paraprofessionals (senseis). While some of the present staff had been at Clarendon since before the transition in 2000, there were also several who have been hired since.

The teachers in the focus groups were asked one basic question: How did they adapt the curriculum into their classroom teaching? They were told that the intention of this focus group was to learn more about how non-native speakers of the language implemented the curriculum on a daily basis. In the interest of disclosure,

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a draft report of the focus group session was shared with the teachers and comments were invited. The general attitude among the teachers was that this program change has been a success. In particular, the teachers who had been at the school before 2000 felt that the program was far more effective than the previous sensei-model. They noted that while the teachers had more freedom to incorporate Japanese when or where they felt it was appropriate, the language became much more a part of the natural flow of daily activities, and students did not have to shift gears to “study” it. It became apparent that there were several reasons for this success.

One important factor was the nature of the transition. The teachers overwhelmingly responded that the key to the program’s success was the freedom to control how and when to include Japanese in their lessons. Previously the classroom teachers had very little if anything to do with the language lessons. Several teachers reported that this was frustrating because they saw opportunities to use Japanese in various ways during the day, but did not feel free to do so. Their responses indicated that this freedom was very stimulating and empowering.

Much of the discussion in the focus groups was on how the teachers integrated the curriculum into their lessons, and the cases in which they found it difficult to do so. The amount of material related to other subjects that teachers must teach and the content of the curriculum itself limited what the teachers included in instruction. Integration also occurred in the sense that Japanese is used in areas such as asking for permission to use the restroom or to get a drink of water, as well as in daily routine activities, such as greetings in the lower grades and school lunch counts in the upper grades. One teacher reported that she felt that the students now had real “ownership” of the language. She pointed out that the format allowed teachers to take advantage of the context of the classroom in order to give the language immediacy, so students were able to use the language to accomplish tasks that had “real” results for them.

Also important to success was the collegiality of the staff. When asked about curriculum, the teachers consistently referred to the ability to discuss language content with other teachers in the same grade level. It was quite apparent that the teachers at Clarendon see each other as resources and have opportunities to give and receive advice.

**FLOSEM Assessment**

The Stanford Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix (FLOSEM) (Padilla & Sung, 1999) was used to quantify proficiency gains as a result of the language program. Classroom teachers rated students once in the fall and once in the spring on five scales of six points

each: comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. These scores were totaled to give a single score of 0 to 30. For this assessment, students were divided into two groups: “heritage” learners who, because of their home environment, have a level of proficiency that is significantly different from other students, and “non-heritage” learners, who are learning the language from the basic level. Usually these “heritage” learners are able to speak at near-native levels because they have regular contact with a family member who is a native speaker of Japanese. Students are divided into these two groups for instruction as well, so in order to focus on areas where there may be significant differences between students in similar conditions, these groups were treated separately in statistical tests. Approximately 30% of the 329 students in this assessment were classified as “heritage” learners. It should also be noted that due to the class-size cap of 20 in grades K–3, one split class mixing fourth and fifth grade students must be created each year.

FLOSEM ratings for each group in each grade level were tested using a paired sample t-test. For each total score of the FLOSEM assessment there was a significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) between the fall assessment and the spring assessment for the non-heritage learners and a significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ) for three of the five groups of heritage learners. Tables 2 and 3 (below) list all of the totals.

**Table 2. 2002-2003 Japanese FLOSEM Assessment for Non-Heritage Students**

Grade	N =	FLOSEM Score		Increase	t-ratio
		Fall	Spring		
K	40	6.14	6.90	0.76	-7.53**
1 <sup>st</sup>	39	7.1	7.56	0.46	-4.22**
2 <sup>nd</sup>	41	7.83	8.76	0.93	-5.29**
3 <sup>rd</sup>	43	7.23	9.24	2.01	-9.36**
4 <sup>th</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup>	59	10.24	12.02	1.78	-11.12**

\*\* Significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level,

**Table 3. 2002-2003 Japanese FLOSEM Assessment for Heritage Students**

Grade	N =	FLOSEM Score		Increase	t-ratio
		Fall	Spring		
K	20	14.32	16.85	2.54	-5.01**
1 <sup>st</sup>	17	23.76	23.76	0.18	-0.90
2 <sup>nd</sup>	18	25.39	24.47	-0.92	0.97
3 <sup>rd</sup>	15	26.2	27.33	1.13	-3.90*
4 <sup>th</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup>	18	22.42	23.58	1.17	-3.27*

\*\* Significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level, \* Significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level

## SOPA Assessment

The Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA) measures students' speaking proficiency and listening comprehension and was designed specifically for use in elementary foreign language programs (Thompson, Boyson, & Rhodes, 2001). In an interview format, the assessment consists of four components: identifying and naming; answering informal questions; describing; and following instructions. Two administrators, the interviewer, and the rater assess pairs of students in a friendly, non-stressful environment. Each interview takes about 15-20 minutes and is videotaped. The rating scale consists of six levels modified from the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2002; 1998): junior novice-low, -mid, -high and junior intermediate-low, -mid, -high. Because of the intensive time and labor required with this assessment, a random sample of students from each grade, K-5, was selected for testing. Twenty percent of the non-heritage students were assessed by the curriculum coordinator in May of 2002 and 2003. The results indicate that 67% (33 students of 48) demonstrated an increase in proficiency by one half a level or more and ten of those students improved by one full level or more. The heritage language students were not tested.

## Parent Survey

Parents are an important factor in the success of the program. Clarendon is one of the top schools in the district in regard to the number of parent volunteers (over 400). They plan and participate in events sharing Japanese culture in the classroom and in school-wide events. They were also one of the driving forces behind the program restructuring movement in 1999-2000. A Japanese-speaking liaison on the Parent Advisory Council works closely with the Japanese curriculum office. The curriculum coordinator, Japanese language teacher, and classroom teachers solicit feedback from parents on a regular basis. In 2002, the second annual parent survey was administered as one way to measure the progress of the Japanese program. While there were no previous surveys available for comparison, the results have indicated that parents felt their children's proficiency, interest, and confidence all improved: 68% of parents reported that their children speak more Japanese (a 9% increase from the previous year), 73% said their children understand more Japanese, and 56% said their children read/write more Japanese (a 9% increase from the previous year). Parents also believed their children were more interested in Japanese (65%), and more confident using Japanese (64%).

## Discussion

Five characteristics identified to herald a successful FLES program are community and administrative support; fully-qualified teachers; a well-planned curricula, designed to meet program goals; sufficient resources to

carry out the program; and high student interest and measurable achievement (Reeves, 1989). As demonstrated in this paper, Clarendon exhibits each one of these components. Strong community support is the foundation of the Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program at Clarendon and has been since its inception in 1973. The 15 classroom teachers are fully credentialed, multiple-subject teachers with knowledge of the target language, training in foreign language pedagogy, and a strong desire and commitment to share language and culture with every student. Several outside grants have provided the financial means for the teachers to develop a standards-based curriculum (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2002; 1998) and to participate in ongoing professional development, including language instruction, to help them implement it. Finally, the FLOSEM, SOPA and parent survey results reflect the high level of student interest in Japanese as well as measurable gains in their proficiency under the new program.

Perhaps the most unique and important aspect of this program, however, is the emphasis on classroom teacher-led language instruction. The benefits of having classroom teachers delivering the language are numerous. Teachers have greater classroom control with their own students since they know their behavior and have set routines and management policies. These routines naturally flow into the language instruction when there is no disruption by switching teachers. They are able to integrate Japanese throughout the entire day in addition to the 30-45-minute block of language instruction. For example, teachers use Japanese in their morning routine, in their classroom instructions, and within certain core curriculum lessons when there is overlap between Japanese and the subject being taught. In this way, students are exposed to frequent use of language in real classroom situations and it is embedded in the culture in which it is spoken.

Furthermore, teachers have the flexibility to relate Japanese to the core curriculum because they design and deliver instruction in both. Teachers have successfully made connections (one of the five national standards for foreign language instruction) with the disciplines of social studies, science, and math. Teachers create a safe atmosphere where children feel free to use the target language within the classroom. Prior to implementing this model, students usually spoke only English to the classroom teacher. Speaking the target language to the teacher when she/he did not teach it seemed unnatural to the students. In the case of non-native teachers teaching the foreign language, students who are also non-native speakers are motivated to learn and to communicate in the target language. Students have expressed the sentiment, "If my teacher can speak Japanese, [even though she/he is not Japanese], I can do it, too!" In the case of native-speaking Japanese teachers, the students feel a similar motivation when they see their teacher using

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English to teach. One of the most common scenes in classroom observations is that of heritage students enthusiastically attempting to make use of their ability to speak both languages by translating for the teacher and other students. This excited emulation of the teacher's role is evidence that heritage students are positively influenced by the freedom to speak both languages. Similarly, non-heritage students are encouraged by seeing teachers functioning successfully in a language other than their native tongue.

The importance of the integration of a context for language into instruction should not be overlooked. Daily greetings are a prime example of this. Known as *aisatsu*, greetings serve a special function in the Japanese language and culture. Phrases such as "good morning," "good afternoon," "thank you," and "you're welcome" are given a somewhat different cultural value in Japanese society compared to American society. Traditionally, children are encouraged to give loud, clear *aisatsu*, especially to those in higher social positions. Young adults are often criticized for not giving satisfactory *aisatsu*, and once someone has entered the world of work as an adult, *aisatsu* can make or break relationships. In addition, there are special phrases (which often have no direct translation in English) that are said before and after eating, as well as at the beginning and end of class. Creating a space in which *aisatsu* can be used in the classroom conveys not only language but also cultural information that is central to any experience that these students may have if they visit Japan. Further, extending this space beyond a set 30-minute period every day allows *aisatsu* to be used in much more realistic settings. Jorden and Lambert (1991) discuss this topic making a specific reference to the Japanese language:

"Authentic Japanese is not a translation of the English appropriate to a given situation. That is to say, the student of Japanese must be concerned with language in culture – the Japanese language as it is used within Japanese society, following patterns of Japanese behavior." (p. 4)

Further, they go on to note that this is true of many less commonly taught languages and that cultures in which the language is more "cognate" with English are often more closely related to that of the United States. Thus, when implementing a language program for a "truly foreign language," there is a pressing need for "an awareness of the special requirements for developing a curriculum appropriate for U.S. learners" (p. 5).

## Conclusion

This type of program presents a number of possibilities for curriculum administrators in any language program. It provides an effective way of creating context for the material by taking advantage of opportunities throughout the day, rather than spending time trying to create it in a limited time frame. It empowers teachers by giving them control over their classrooms, thus stimulating new ideas about materials and methods that would best suit the needs of their students. And finally, it gives a workable arena in which non-native speaking teachers can function productively and effectively.

Often, native speakers are simply not available, or there are limitations on their participation in the classroom. However, this type of program provides structures where non-native speakers can capitalize on their own experience as language learners. In many respects, it is clearly superior to immersion programs, which take a significant commitment from the students and substantial skills on the part of the staff, as well as regular FLES models that necessarily lack the linguistic and cultural context that content-enriched FLES provides.

**NOTE:** *Margaret Dyer served as the Japanese Curriculum Coordinator at Clarendon Elementary School from 2000-2003.*

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