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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE

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“We must be educators before being the teachers of a foreign language.”

Dr. Yasu-Hiko Tohsaku, who is a Co-President of American Association of Teachers of Japanese, said that at a local conference of Japanese teachers. At that time, 6 months had passed since I started to work at Waddell Language Academy and my thought about my role in immersion program had been changing, so I was very impressed by his word, which made me realize something important.

As you know, in an immersion program, children who are native English speakers study subjects, such as math, science, and social studies in Japanese. That is, they receive 70-80% of their lesson in Japanese, and just spend their school life, ‘immersed’ in Japanese. I had been puzzled as to what to do here at first, because I had thought that ‘Japanese teacher’ meant those who taught Japanese as a foreign language. Now, however, I feel confident that the children have a great time here and I would like to share the power of their education in an immersion program.

First, unlike the students who study Japanese as a foreign language who tend to practice Japanese only in their lessons, immersion students are able to express their feeling and thoughts in Japanese spontaneously in daily life, which surprises me sometimes. For example, when I approached the student who was crying in the classroom and asked, “What is the matter?” he replied with tears in his eyes, “指が痛い” (finger hurts). Also, another student said, “お父さんはワークにいますから、お母さんが来てる,” (father is at work so mother is coming) when I asked him if his parents are coming to school. Yes! They don’t learn Japanese grammar systematically, but they sometimes express themselves, using expressions they have heard. However, since their native language is English, they don’t always speak Japanese spontaneously. Dr. Kazuko Nakajima, who is an expert in bilingual education, referred to an example that the utterance in Japanese was only once among 6000 utterances by students of the immersion program in Oregon. Then when do they try to speak Japanese spontaneously? As a result of my brief research about student’ spontaneous utterances in Japanese, they tend to use Japanese frequently when they respond to

teacher's questions and when they ask permission from the teachers (ex:～をください, ～てもいいですか). I would like to continue researching this to find out how to increase the number of utterances in Japanese through the application various tasks.

Secondly, we should not forget that each student is a child who is in a cognitive growth process, before being a learner of Japanese. That is, although they learn subjects in Japanese, they need to gain knowledge and thinking skills about regular subjects just like the students who go to non-immersion schools. The only difference is that immersion students may need to put in more effort compared to their counterparts in non-immersion schools. However, according to Dr. Jim Cummins, thinking and literacy abilities have the same foundation even among different languages, so I think they can gain cognitive abilities if they develop their ability to think in Japanese. Actually, I was surprised when one student said something in Japanese using his cognitive ability. After a teacher read "Three Little Pigs" in Japanese to the students and asked them to take advantage of the wooden house, the student said in Japanese, "ネイルがたくさんありますので、風が吹いたら倒れません" (There are a lot of nails so no matter how hard the wind blows, the house will not fall)> I also think that we might be able to stimulate cognitive growth by providing more opportunities to talk about the contents of the lesson.

As I mentioned above, each of them is growing up as a learner of Japanese and a student who is in a cognitive growth process. That is, they are growing up internally. I also believe they can have a big influence on others, and they must be leaders to compete in the 21st century. As educators, we can offer them more opportunities to communicate with others to improve their communication skills as well as use technology to increase the communication frequency. Actually, I have been encouraged by the message from Japanese language learners. When I was an elementary student, I experienced a big earthquake in Hyogo prefecture, Japan. At that time, some Japanese learners sent messages to the stricken area, and I was impressed by them. As you know, Japan experienced a big earthquake and tsunami last year. At that time, I was working on projects in South Korea to send relief goods to stricken area, and then I saw the following message (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M1PHHg2xJ0>) made by America children for Japan and I became very motivated to deal with difficult projects. Those same messages also supported me in my decision to participation in the J-LEAP program. I was very surprised to learn that the children in the video were from my school, Waddell Language Academy, and I am having a very good time with them now.

Students here have a strong understanding of foreign culture from an early age, so I think they can have more opportunities to be connected with the others, and it is possible for them to demonstrate their influence to others. Their power and potential are so infinite that I cannot write about them all here. I believe their power will contribute not only to U.S. development in the 21st century, but also to the further development of Japan-U.S. relations in the future.

Lastly, I would like to thank the people involved with J-LEAP including the Japan Foundation and the Laurasian Institute for giving me such a great opportunity to learn with these great students. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Abe sensei, all the Japanese teachers here, all the staff at Waddell Language Academy, for giving me great advice and supporting me every day, and the great students for surprising me all the time. Thank you everyone!

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