

【研究ノート】

Problems of Language Education for Immigrant Children from the Supporters' Point of view – The Case of Hyogo, Japan

サポーターから見る外国にルーツをもつ子どもの言語教育の課題—兵庫県の事例を中心に

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on surveying the role of “*supporters*”, foreign part-time educational assistants hired by the local government to help immigrant children at elementary, junior high and senior high schools in Hyogo, Japan. These supporters are bilingual as well as bicultural, and have first-hand experience being in a new country and culture. Therefore, they are supposed to provide effective support in guiding children with their adaptation to school life, along with smoothing communication between the children, their parents and teachers. Moreover, during that process, thanks to their role as intermediaries, the supporters have gained a comprehensive view of problems faced by the children, their parents, and their teachers. We investigate the status of language education for Vietnamese immigrant children in Hyogo as a way to illustrate the risks and circumstances that are potentially shared by other immigrant groups; then, through interviews with the supporters, we specify dominant factors that may obstruct immigrant children’s motivation to learn and process of adapting to their new environment. Lastly, some suggestions to improve the situation will be discussed from the standpoint of the supporters.

Keywords

Immigrant Children, Language Education, Problems, Supporters

I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

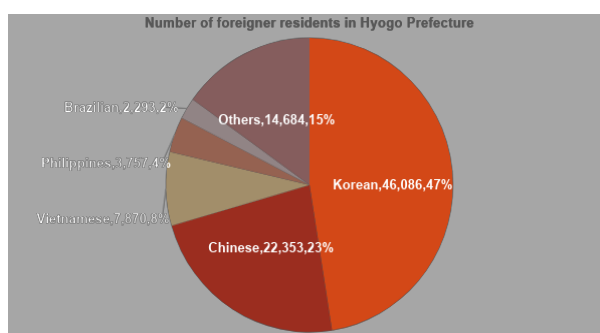
In Japan, concurrently with the recent record high numbers of foreign residents, the number of foreign children who attend public schools is rapidly increasing. This leads to an urgent need for special educational aids for children in learning second language (L2) of the host country, that is, Japanese, and in adapting to a new environment (in everyday life and at school). For this purpose, there are educational support activities such as intercultural support (called ‘多文化共生サポート’ *tabunka kyousei supooto*), providing Japanese teachers, and special selection for prefectural high schools.

One of the key issues is identifying the genuine problems faced by the children, in particular when the language

barrier is high, preventing the children from speaking out for themselves to parents and teachers. In order to assess these problems, we used the questionnaire method to survey the supporters' opinions and ideas. The remainder of the paper is set out as follows. In the next section we outline the support system for foreign nationality students in Hyogo, Japan. Then, we investigate the status of language education for Vietnamese immigrant children in Hyogo by conducting a short survey with foreign nationality supporters about their experiences performing support work. From the results, we then analyze the key factors that may obstruct immigrant children's motivation to learn and process of adapting to a new environment, and estimate their effects. Finally, we sum up with a brief discussion of suggested improvements.

Objects of Research

This study focuses on the intercultural support for Vietnamese students at public schools from elementary, junior high school and senior high schools in Japan, through the case of Hyogo Prefecture, in order to examine the reality of this support system. Hyogo Prefecture, located in the Kansai region, is the seventh most populous in Japan (as of 2011). The number of foreign residents in Hyogo is shown in Figure 1:

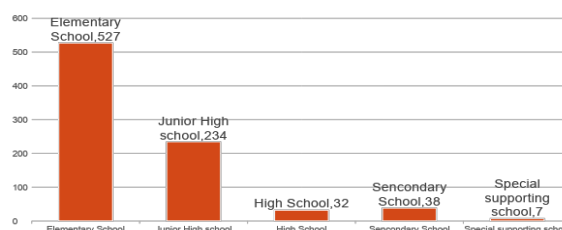


Total: 97,043 Persons (Source: Japan Ministry of Justice, June 2015)

Figure 1. Number of foreign residents in Hyogo

As shown in the Figure 1, the Vietnamese community population ranks the third largest in the Hyogo area, immediately after the Korean and Chinese communities. This distinguishes Hyogo Prefecture from the rest of Japan, as the Vietnamese represent the fifth-largest foreign community in the country as a whole (199,990 persons, 2016) ¹

Also, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Justice, the number of school-age foreign children (6 to 18 years old) in Hyogo is 6,599 children. The number of children in this group who need support with Japanese and study by kind of schools and mother tongue are described in Figures 2 and 3.



¹ 第4表 都道府県別 国籍・地域別 在留外国人[Form 4: Nationality & Regions: Foreign Resident] (XLS). Japanese Ministry of Justice (in Japanese). 1 December 2016,

https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?page=1&layout=datalist&stat_infid=000031559330&lid=000001177523, Retrieved 11 January 2018.

Figure 2. Number of Foreign Children Needing Support (by school type)

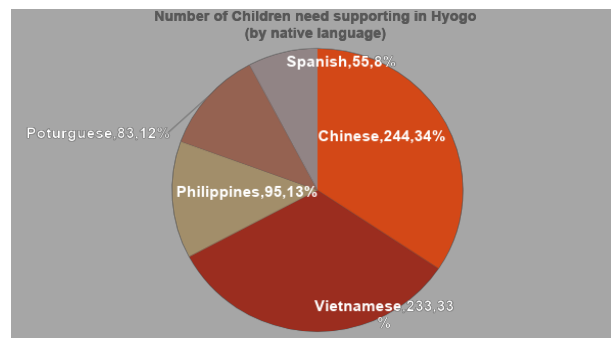


Figure 3. Number of children needing support in Hyogo (by native language)

Figure 3 shows that in spite of the number of Vietnamese residents in Hyogo being only 8%, the proportion of Vietnamese children who need help at school is very large (about 33%, second only to Chinese children).

1.2 Terms

The term ‘immigrants in Japan’ refers to people residing in Japan who are not Japanese citizens, including naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, certain legal nonimmigrants (e.g. persons on student or work visas). In this research, ‘children of immigrants’ refers to children under 18 (this study focuses on children between ages 6 and 17 who attend elementary and high school) born in immigrant families with at least one foreign-born parent. Therefore, its meaning can overlap with the Japanese term ‘外国にルーツを持つ子ども’ *gaikoku ni ruutsu o motsu kodomo*. At present, only children whose two parents are foreigners are recognized as the subjects of education support and very few programs cater to children who have one Japanese parent. In this paper, we only focus on the case of children who are the subjects of the support program at school. In the paper, ‘supporter(s)’ stands for the 子ども多文化サポーター *kodomo tabunka kyousei sapootaa* who are bilingual in Japanese and one other language, hired by the local government to help children with the curriculums at schools in Hyogo.

1.3 Literature review

There is very little research on the topic mentioning the role and surveying the opinions of supporters. Problems of education for immigrant children should be described from the point of view of persons who, like the supporters, are directly involved in the process. In many cases, there is a language barrier that requires ‘mediator-s’ to play the role of connecting the school and teachers with the foreign students and their parents. These persons obviously not only perform translation work, but also support the children in many aspects at school. They are often bilingual, at various levels, and also have experienced migration themselves. Thus, there are many merits to obtaining their support for children and families from the same country of origin.

However, in their work, the supporters have to face many problems that stem from the children, the environment and the supporters themselves. These problems can prevent the supporter system from functioning effectively as well as impede the full development of the children.

II RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. Purpose of research

In this paper, we focus on the role of the supporters whose native language is foreign and the same as that of the children who need support. These supporters have many advantages such as that they are bicultural/bilingual and have

first-hand experience of being in a new country and culture themselves. Thus, they can be the mediator (link/bridge) between children, school, and their family. And through this process, they can see problems from many points of view. There are gaps between the expected vision of the employers and of the supporters, and the reality of support work.

This research aims to identify problems of language education for immigrant children through the case of Vietnamese children in Hyogo, Japan. In addition, it will examine the role of supporters in helping children overcome those challenges, as well as discussing some solutions to improve the support system in order to further help children in an effective way.

This paper focuses on immigrant children who originate from Vietnam as they represent the majority group of immigrant children in Hyogo prefecture. Though Vietnamese residents are only the third most populous community in Hyogo (Figure 1), 33% of Vietnamese immigrants' children at school in Hyogo need some kind of support (2011 data).

Vietnamese immigrant children in Hyogo who receive support include children of immigrant Vietnamese parents who were born in Vietnam (outside Japan). Some had already entered the education system in Vietnam prior to coming to Japan.

The status of Vietnamese immigrant children in Hyogo is as below:

- + Before 2000: parents were refugees
- + Parents migrated for economic reasons (so-called 'economic migrants') first. Then, the children migrated to Japan to reunite with their family

2.2. The language education support for children of immigrants in Hyogo, Japan

According to Hyogo Educational Committee's manual, supporters' duties include the items below:

- Help children to adapt quickly to the Japanese school system
- Help children with insecurity and help them gain confidence
- Support children with their studying at school. Sit with them and help by translating the lectures/instructions of teachers in the classroom (in a way that children can understand easily)
- Help the children preserve their native language and culture
- Help smooth the connection between teachers and parents, as well as the communication of children and teachers
- Report to the teachers about the children's studies, their personal problems and emotions
- Support the teaching of children in other aspects

The role of supporters includes acting as an intermediary between teachers and children, conveying the children's emotions and desires to teachers and schools. They are required to inform the teachers about the children's understanding of the course text.

- + Working time:

Four hour per day on school premises

For children who have been in Japan under 6 months: 2 or 3 times a week; and once a week or once every 2 weeks for other cases.

- + Form of support:

Provide private tutoring on class assignments/subjects: one supporter and one student

Sit next to the student during regular class

III SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Survey Objectives

We conducted a survey and interview on supporters' opinions about the current support system.

- Three senior supporters with more than 3 years of support experience
- Two novice supporters with about 1 year of experience

Social status of the supporters: two researchers at universities, two foreign graduate students, and one housewife (who has a Japanese spouse).

3.2 Methodology

From the perspective of the second language acquisition, and from the standpoint of a supporter, to investigate the challenges of language education for immigrant children.

The survey was conducted using qualitative data including participant comments.

Appendix A contains the complete list of questions.

3.3 Results

The results are broken up by category and listed by problem type.

Problem 1 Problems in performing supporting activities

This refers to the difficulties the supporters have faced in performing their supporting jobs.

All the answerers commented that there is too little time for supporters and children to get comfortable with each other. In many cases, the supporters do not have any time to talk with the children in depth. Next, the limited competence of the child and of the supporter himself/herself in language and social skills were given as problematic.

Other difficulties mentioned in the survey are listed below:

- Being ready to help but lacking tools such as textbooks, a manual guide, knowledge about second language education
- Hesitation about getting into children's family problems
- Hesitation when reconciling differences between school and the children's position/standpoint
- Having no means to act on the children's family problems, which are the causes for children's problems at school in most cases
- Insufficient knowledge about the psychology of children

Problem 2 Challenges of the immigrant children/students

Psychological issues of the children observed by the supporters, which may affect the motivation to learn & process of adapting to new environment, are as follows:

- + Complexity in speaking Vietnamese at school
- + Incompetent usage of Japanese language can lead to trouble with Japanese classmates
- + Over-sensitiveness about being treated unfairly by teachers
- + Recognition of self as different
- + Lack of models at home, lack of persons at home to consult about school lessons or problems at school
- + Impact of change in living environment
- + Influence of misguided thoughts/teaching from parents who have misunderstood about or biased against Japanese culture/living
- Gap between teaching method and content taught at school and the lifestyle at family

- + Psychological states that obstruct the learning process:
Being bullied, shyness, embarrassment
- ↪ Low self-esteem
- ↪ Insecurity about the future and worry due to lack of models

Problem 3 Teachers and Parents

The answerers share a common worry about the inexact perception among adults as to the competence of young language learners. Parents and teachers tend to believe that all children can learn to speak and understand language quickly. As a result, they may not give sufficient support to immigrant children and tend not to follow-up on progress. Also, they may confuse and misunderstand the differences between communicative Japanese and academic Japanese competence that a child needs to acquire. Some parents rely too much on the school and supporters for solving problems at school and even the family's problems.

As a child grows and develops, language skills begin to emerge. Adults such as parents and teachers tend to believe that all children can learn to speak and understand a language quickly, so they may not provide enough support to the children. This may lead to neglecting the learning and maintenance of children's native language or delaying it until it is too late.

In particular, the cases show a very clear parental influence on Second Language Learning. Many immigrant Vietnamese parents show pride about their children's ability to speak L2 fluently. Because of their own lack of ability in the Japanese language, they may feel sidelined in educating their children. And in most cases, the parents perceive Japanese proficiency as the only necessary condition of their child's academic success and future employment success. These ways of thinking may negatively affect the language development of children and give way to social problems in the future (violent tendencies, bullying weaker friends).

IV. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, this paper has introduced briefly the support mode for foreign children in Hyogo with a focus on Vietnamese children as well as the viewpoint of supporters on major issues and problems. The support system in Hyogo is a good idea yet still needs improving and adjustments. Through the survey on supporters, we can confirm the problems that supporters and students are facing on the spot. An example is the time scale and contents of supporters' work. At present, a too-heavy workload corresponds to a too-short working hours, meaning that expectations exceed what is actually being achieved. The supporters need more time working with the student in person and need more help with textbooks, and other teaching tools.

In addition, this survey points to suggestions for improving the role of the supporter and the effects of the support system. First, there is an urgent need for teachers, parents and supporters to acknowledge the psychology of children in order to aid them effectively. The answers of supporters also point out an urgent need to change outdated perceptions of parents about their children's language education. The parents should be encouraged to study Japanese themselves (by going to free Japanese classes at night) with their children and to communicate more with the supporters and teachers at school. It would also be helpful for the teachers and schools where immigrant children are enrolled to know more about the language and culture of the children's original country.

However, this paper's conclusions are based on a small survey population, with only four answerers (one did not reply) who are all supporters for Vietnamese children. In future work, by enlarging the number of survey objects as well as widening the content of the questionnaire, we hope to supplement the data in order to further contribute to

knowledge in this field.

APPENDIX – Survey Text

A. Information of supporter:

Name: Age:

Educational background:

Duration of time as a supporter:year(s)month(s)

Experience of support: (list all)

- From(month/year) to..... (month/year) : supported
.....(boy/girl),.....(age),..... class

B. Questions about supporting Vietnamese children at Japanese schools:

1/ Do you like this supporting job? Why?

2/ Describe a typical day you work as a supporter at school (details of activities, contents of teaching/supporting).

3/ In your opinion, what is the role of the supporter in supporting foreign children in the categories below: (list in details)

- Learning at school:
- Life in Japan:
- Language development skills:
- School activities:
- Social skills:
- Others:

4/ As a supporter, what advantage(s) do you have in supporting the students in those categories?

5/ What difficulties do you meet in supporting work? (When teaching/supporting learning lessons for the student, when communicating with the child in other activities in class/at school, when communicating with teaching staff/principals or with parents; Others)

6/ As a mediating person, supporters support children in studying and life at school as well as communicating with schools and parents in order to give essential support to children. In supporting, what obstacles did you encounter? (To the children (students)/ To the teachers, schools/ To the parents)

7/ In your opinion, how can such obstacles be overcome?

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