

This edition of Educare focuses on bringing up children in a bilingual environment. We very much appreciate the insights and experiences of the Wilson family who lived and worked in Japan with WEC International. In the article below, Edi has provided a detailed description of how they went about ensuring that the children grew up fluent in both languages. She includes both challenges and benefits and gives helpful advice to parents seeking to do the same. In addition her children wanted their comments to be included in their entirety, and their unique and honest perspective is very valuable. The article is divided into sections according to the questions that we asked.

Edi's story

How important was forward planning - considering the end destination of your children's educational journey?

I think my own background and schooling influenced a lot of our decisions for our own children's education. I was born in 1970 in Japan where my British father and American mother worked as missionaries. I was brought up to speak English with my parents and siblings and with other English missionaries, and Japanese in the church and with the Japanese people around us. I went to a Japanese kindergarten from the age of 4-6 and was then home schooled with a British curriculum from the age of 6-11. At 11 I went to a boarding school for MKs in the UK and later to a British university. I returned to Japan at the age of 22. As a child I felt my parents were very strict with us (my brother, sister and me) about speaking and studying in English at home, and I couldn't understand why that was necessary. However, when I went to school in the UK I saw the great advantage of this as none of us had problems at school with English. In our case, we were linguistically very "normal" due to our parents' persistence.

On the other hand, I saw many other MKs from Britain who struggled in nearly every subject (even sciences) because of their poor English writing skills. I also saw German and Korean MKs who struggled with their own language, so much so that English was their preferred choice, but even this preferred language was incomplete and a great struggle for them. I saw them struggle to fit in and relate to others, often due to linguistic weakness. Seeing others struggle and seeing how their whole life choices were affected by their languages influenced me a lot. I also saw and heard of others who were so immersed in the culture that they were brought up in that they couldn't relate to their parents' country or their passport country. I saw MKs who couldn't talk freely to their grandparents or even to their parents in their parents' native language.

When my husband (British and brought up in Cornwall all his life) and I had children in Japan we were therefore determined to do all we could to prioritise investing in our children's English and to make sure that their English skills would not suffer. At the same time, we wanted their Japanese to be completely fluent. My spoken Japanese is fluent but because I didn't go to a Japanese school or study Japanese, I am almost illiterate.

Did you follow a pre-determined plan, or did you make adjustments along the way?

Our general “ultimate goal” was that our children would have the language ability and skills to choose at 18 which country they wanted to study or live in – the UK or Japan. However, we didn’t really know how we would get there and made many plans and adjustments as we went along. Although we were keen on the children having a really good standard in both Japanese and English, we felt that the spiritual, social and emotional development of the child was even more important than the educational development. In our case, we felt that sending them to a local school rather than home schooling would give them good social contact with other children. We felt that being part of the local community and having friends to play with was more important, even if it meant their schooling would be in Japanese and not English. The advantage of going to a Japanese school was that all three children have very good Japanese. It was free and local. Socially we were all very much part of the community and the children had very good friends locally.

Secondary school in Japan can be very time and peer pressured and we felt there might be other unhelpful influences on the children too. We also realised that the children’s English would need to improve if they were to be able to choose to continue higher education in the UK. We looked at home schooling the children completely for secondary school. This would have given them the experience of the full UK secondary subjects and GCSE’s. However, we still felt that having a community for them to socialise in was very important. So, we looked for an “English” school that they could attend. The only international school near enough and affordable to us was a small bilingual school with a basic American high school diploma (no APs). We knew our children would struggle to get into a UK university with that diploma alone. Because of this, we sent them to the school, mainly for the social interaction and got the children to do A levels at home to get into UK universities.

When did you introduce the other language?

We have three children - Joanna born in 1996, Andy 1998 and John 2003. Before my husband and I had children, we decided to speak to each other only in English when we were alone or when we were with other English speakers. If there was a Japanese speaker around, we would speak to each other in Japanese as much as possible. In other words, the language we spoke to each other in was influenced and determined by the context in which we were situated at that time. We tried to continue this with our children. We therefore introduced our children to both languages at the same time and always spoke both languages together. On the whole, this meant that they heard us speak English to each other in the house or when we were together as a family, and they heard us speak Japanese when we were outside, at church, play group or meeting with neighbours, etc. All three children have always understood and spoken both English and Japanese fluently.

Which language did your children learn to read and write in first?

We had a few English videos that Joanna used to watch when she was small. One of them was a Richard Scarry video of the ABCs. When she was 2 and a bit she surprised us by pointing out all the letters on an encyclopaedia set that we had in the lounge! We quickly introduced her to *Letterland* to make sure that she also knew the sounds of the alphabet

and could begin to learn to read. (*Letterland* publishes resources for teaching foundational literacy skills, phonics, spelling and grammar. These are resources for children aged 4 to 7. For more information, see <https://www.letterland.com/>)

Joanna learnt Japanese a bit later. There is a simple Japanese “alphabet” that is very regular and phonetic. Our boys found that much easier than English so they read Japanese better than English. They wrote both at the same time but were again better at Japanese and had to be encouraged (forced!) to write in English.

What happened on home assignment?

Joanna understood and spoke English and Japanese from birth but we went on home leave when she was 2 and a half. I was again influenced by how I had seen other MKs struggle in the past. Children who had been fluent and happy in Japanese schools would return from home leave and struggle to fit back into the Japanese culture. So, on our home leave I continued to speak to Joanna in Japanese. She wasn’t that keen so I made a Japanese-speaking context or time. This was an allocated time during most days when I would get out her Japanese story books to read them and talk about the things in the pictures with her, and to sing songs or play games in Japanese. When I did this with her using Japanese books she seemed to find it quite natural, as “that was when she listened to Japanese”, but if I tried to do this with an English book she wouldn’t like it. When we returned to Japan when Joanna was 3 and a half she didn’t speak much Japanese but she could understand what was being said, and after 3 months of being in a Japanese kindergarten without speaking much Japanese she suddenly started speaking freely in complete sentences.

We never had another long (one year) home leave so the boys never experienced this. They have always understood and spoken both languages. This was possible because the children and I chose to return to the UK only for the summer or for a longer winter break, and Pete would stay for a few extra months on his own for deputation. A big reason for this decision was to keep the children settled in a consistent schooling/language environment.

How did you continue to develop academic English while they were in Japanese school?

The children didn’t have a language 1 or 2 when they were small. When they were in Japanese school Japanese was probably their language 1 but I think they would all now say that English is their language 1. However, when they are talking with certain people, Japanese is probably their language 1. (Andy says he has two language 2’s).

How did you continue to develop academic English while they were in Japanese school?

For each child, there is a breakdown below of their education at different ages.
Edi refers to the programmes that she used.

For more information about NorthStar Worldwide, go to <https://www.nswlearning.org/>

For more information about Wolsey Hall, go to <https://wolseyhalloxford.org.uk/>

Joanna

Age 0-4	0-4 I was quite fanatical about making sure that she heard English and Japanese every day! She listened to English videos for about 30 minutes to an hour per day, cassette tapes every day in the morning, nap time and before bed, and we read English books together. She watched Japanese TV for an hour a day.
Age 4-6 Japanese Kindergarten	Reading and writing English at home - one hour
Age 7-12 Japanese Primary School	Reading and writing English at home - one hour. Not always easy. We fought over it a lot. I think we only continued as I had seen other MKs struggle when they were older and I was so determined that our children would have good English. One of the advantages of going to a Japanese school was that all three children have very good Japanese.
Age 12-18 International School	International School where there was a Japanese and English medium (stream) for each subject. We could choose which medium (stream) that the children would take the subjects in. For English, she was put in one year lower than her year group for a year until she caught up. She studied History, Geography, Science, Art, Music and Maths in English medium, and Japanese and some History in Japanese medium just as pupils study in a Japanese school. From her second year everything was in English except her Japanese language and literature classes.
Age 14 – 18 Studying at home	At weekends and after school she studied online with North Star Worldwide for IGCSE English Language. This was hard to fit in around her schooling but it meant she grasped a good level of English and achieved an A*. She continued studying with North Star for 2 A levels online after school and at weekends. She self-studied to get an additional Japanese A level.
18 plus	She returned to the UK to study education at the University of York and is now doing a Masters at University College London.

Andy

0-3	I wasn't as fanatical by then... but still tried....he watched English videos for about half an hour a day, listened to cassette tapes every day in the morning, nap time and before bed, read English books together. Watched Japanese TV for an hour a day.
3-6 Japanese Kindergarten	Japanese kindergarten. Reading and writing English at home – tried to do one hour....was hard work
7-12 Japanese Primary School	<p>We got rid of our TV as we realised that the children were getting so much Japanese at school that they didn't need any more input at home. We only let them watch English videos.</p> <p>Reading and writing English at home – I still tried to do one hour, but it was really hard work, some days I did it, sometimes I managed to teach him for a few weeks, but sometimes I gave up for a few weeks and just did more at the weekend. It was always easier to get the children to read, rather than to write in English. Sometimes all I could do was to get them to copy something out. When he was about 10 it was really hard to get him to read and write. I remember talking to a missionary mother with older boys who worked in another country. She encouraged me to keep their minds as “native English minds” by speaking and listening to English at the very least. She said that when you really couldn't get them to read or write you could at least get them to listen to English stories by reading to them, so that when they do need to write later on, there will still be some in their heads. That was really helpful and encouraged me to not give up completely but to relax a bit (on writing) when it was hard work. This meant that I had a lesser, but still vital goal to aim for – trying to get him to hear as much English as possible.</p>
12-18 International School	<p>International School where there was a Japanese and English medium (stream) for each subject. We could choose which medium (stream) that the children would take the subjects in.</p> <p>Because we had struggled to get him to use English at home he was put into an English class which was lower than his school year. In fact, he could read pretty well but could hardly write at all. He begged (with tears) to do most of his subjects in Japanese (as he didn't have the necessary standard of the English language). We allowed him to study Science and Japanese in Japanese medium as in a Japanese school, but made him take History, Geography, Art, Music and Maths in English medium. We believed that the only way his English would improve was to immerse him in English as much as possible. We assured him that we didn't mind what grades he got in his first year as long as his English was improving. His English did improve and he was able to jump a level in English by his second year and he studied everything in English apart from his Japanese class. He continued to improve and gained a B for IGCSE English Language.</p>

	I am convinced that maintaining his “native English mind” by making sure he was hearing lots of English was really helpful. I saw other children in his class who were much better spellers and writers initially but could not progress quickly because their grammar and vocabulary were not at the native speaker level.
Age 14 – 18 Studying at home	He continued to improve and gained a B for IGCSE English Language. Andy studied for two A Levels after school and at weekends, with Wolsey Hall Oxford and with a friend. He self-studied to get an additional Japanese A level.
Age 18 plus	Andy returned to the UK and has just finished his second year at Aberystwyth University.

John

0-4	Watched English videos for about half an hour a day, listened to cassette tapes every day in the morning, nap time and before bed, read English books together. No Japanese TV. I had the choice of sending John to a Japanese kindergarten from the age of 3 as I had done with Andy. However, I felt that this had affected Andy’s English so I decided to concentrate on John’s English by keeping him at home with me, even though all his friends and our neighbours’ kids were at kindergarten.
4-6 Japanese kindergarten	Reading and writing English at home – tried to do one hour. Once a week I sent him to my Japanese friend’s house where she taught English and he practised writing with her, just because it was easier than doing it myself!!
7-12 Japanese Primary school	Reading and writing English at home – still tried to do one hour. We tried really hard as we felt we had let Andy get away with less English and it hadn’t always been helpful. We always read books and got John to read and write, even if it was just copying out from a book. Sometimes we just did more at the weekends.
12-14 International School	International School where there was a Japanese and English medium (stream) for each subject. We could choose which medium (stream) that the children would take the subjects in. When John started there were two school years studying English in the same class so he was able to join his correct school year, although sometimes he was at the level of the year below. We had learnt, from the experiences of our other two children, the importance of being immersed in English by studying all subjects in English so he studied every subject in English except his Japanese class.
14-16	After two years we came home on home leave and he joined a bilingual secondary school in Wales! He is now studying his GCSE’s in English and Welsh.

How would you describe the time commitment and effort needed to make this work?

It's really tough and you really need to be convinced and determined to keep to what you believe. But I really believe it's worth it! My children really are fully bilingual children.

I did most of the teaching of the children but couldn't have done it without Pete's support mentally and practically. Often he would do something with one child while I did "work" with the other(s), or he would cook or shop so I could teach the children.

What advice do you have for parents?

My top tip would be: if you don't do anything else, read to, or get your child to listen (a lot) to the language you want them to learn. Ideally, they would listen to fictional stories and documentaries to increase their vocabulary.

Make language a priority. Children can do amazing things with encouragement from parents. Of course they will try to fight you and want to stop studying a language, like children who are learning an instrument or a sport, but if they keep practising there will only be benefits.

P.S. I've just read my children's comments and they obviously think I was a bit fanatical and strict. I guess I was! But I would do most of the same things again. I think love often needs to be tough.

Children's comments

John

I remember always being able to speak Japanese and English. Writing English was hard and annoying, I could write Japanese better when I was in my Japanese primary school. When I went to the international school and started studying my subjects in English my English became better than my Japanese. I am glad that I can speak both languages normally.

Andy

I don't remember learning Japanese as it was all natural because I went to a Japanese school. It was definitely beneficial going to a local school. As they say, "two cultures double the opportunities". Understanding two cultures intimately has added depth in experience and understanding of the world and an appreciation of cultures.

Is there a better way into the local community as missionaries, than to send your kids into the local schools and try to build relationships through the community that your kids are part of? It can be said that keeping your children from going to local schools may be limiting their chances to grow as a person and experience being unique.

There were contradictions. I felt I was forced to speak English at home, but we got told off in Japanese by our mum.

How do you get a boy whose world is obsessed with football to sit down and study English and read a book that is basically his second language? I didn't care about studying. I must

admit that by the age of 12 I was very good at getting out of reading or writing English with my mum.

Life would have been much easier when I went to secondary school if I could write better in English. I struggled a lot with spelling. But I knew the grammar from speaking and reading so I was able to improve very fast.

It is very useful to be able to speak both languages. Learning Japanese meant: an easy A* at A level, it looks good on my CV, it's a good conversation starter and you get to read the Bible in two languages making it more interesting and comparable.

I would tell other parents: Give your children opportunities to learn at least two languages. But make sure they are not too sheltered and they are not kept in the house too much but get a good balance of socialising. Learning English is important but it's not the most important thing in life.

Joanna

When people ask me how I can speak fluent English despite growing up in a country where hardly anyone speaks English, I always tell them that this is due to my parents' determination and persistence rather than my own effort. From a young age I was often reminded by my parents that it was important for me to learn to speak and write fluently in both English and Japanese, and that that was why I attended a Japanese primary school during the day and studied English with my mother after school and during the weekends. Although I spent a wonderful childhood in Japan, I have a lot of memories to do with fighting, quarrelling and crying over the English work that I had to complete every day with my mother. I hated the fact that it felt like I had to come home every day after school to study English, which seemed utterly pointless at the time. I would often argue about having to do my English work and being corrected when I made a grammatical mistake or used the wrong word when speaking English. Being a rebellious daughter, I complained about my parents to a counsellor at school, who gently reassured me that my parents loved me and were doing what was best for me. Since that didn't work, I then sent an exaggerated and untruthful letter to the Japanese social services claiming that my mother was abusing me, which they thankfully disregarded after I sent a follow-up letter to explain the true situation!

Despite these unhappy memories, I also fondly remember the fun times that I spent with my parents reading English books. I always enjoyed reading, and my parents who quickly noticed this managed to somehow source various English books for children that I could read. Occasionally they would drive a long way to take us to the prefectural library, which was one of the only libraries in the area which stocked English children's books. Even though I disliked working on my English work, I know that my parents made a huge effort to make the experience as enjoyable as possible by playing English board games with us, getting English children's magazines sent over from the UK, making it a family routine to write diaries and send letters to each other in English and giving us pretty notebooks and stationery which would make the learning process fun. I am grateful that they dedicated so much of their time and energy towards our education, especially for such an unwilling student as myself.

I am also extremely thankful for their decision to enrol me in a local Japanese primary school. When I moved to a bilingual international school at the age of 12, I was shocked to meet so many Westerners who had spent their whole childhood in Japan and yet spoke basic or broken Japanese and did not understand the Japanese culture at all. I also met Westerners who had not studied English during primary school and as a result were taking all of their subjects in Japanese and were learning English as a foreign language. In contrast, I spoke fluent Japanese by then and had a deep understanding of the Japanese culture which I had been immersed in as a child. Although my English was not perfect, I did not struggle as much as I had expected to at the international school as my parents had established a firm foundation on which I could build my English skills, which rapidly improved during my time at the international school. Having two cultures and identities that I 'belong' to has been such a precious gift to me as it has broadened my horizons and cultural awareness. It also allowed me to actively participate in my parents' mission work since I could help out at evangelistic events and communicate the gospel with my Japanese friends. My parents were also able to make many contacts with teachers and parents whom they met through my schooling. Although being in a 'foreign' country can be difficult, being able to speak the local language meant that mission was something we did as a family and in which my siblings and I were always involved. This strengthened my appreciation for missionaries and for the work my parents did, which may not have been the case if I had been sent away to a boarding school or had been enrolled in an English medium school from the start.

I am currently studying a master's degree at the Institute of Education, University College London, which is ranked number one in the world for Education. I know that I never ever would be here today if it hadn't been for my parents' determination, persistence and courage to ensure that I would be literate and fluent in both English and Japanese. Although I did not understand everything that they were doing at the time, I know that their hard work has paid off and that they did make the right decisions. I'm so glad that they saw my education as something just as important as their own mission work and something worth investing their time in.

Written by the Wilson family, edited (very little!) by Gill Bryant

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