Helping Foreign Children to Adjust to Living in a New Country:
Personal Observations

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1. Introduction

This article is not the result of a piece of systematic, academic research. It simply contains an account of my personal experience of bringing up my children in four different countries: The UK, France, Vietnam and Japan. Both of my children were born in Beppu, Japan, one in 2003 and the other one in 2006. The second child only lived in Japan for six months before we moved to Vietnam. However, the first child attended a Japanese nursery school in Beppu from age one. After leaving Beppu, we lived in Vietnam for four years until 2010. We then lived in the UK for five years until 2015. From 2015 to 2016 we lived in Paris, France for one year. At the beginning of 2016, we returned to Beppu and have now lived here for three years. The reason we could live in Japan is because I was a professor working at a local university. However, I retired from my job in 2007 and, subsequently, we could live on my teacher’s pension. Thus we had the flexibility to live wherever we wanted. We chose Vietnam because it is my wife’s country of birth and we chose the UK because it is my country of birth. We chose Paris because both my wife and I are admirers of French history, culture and language. We also wanted our children to have the benefit of living in, arguably, the most beautiful city in the world.

In this article, I want to reflect on the educational and cultural challenges that our children have experienced by living and attending school in four different countries with markedly different languages and school systems. In particular I will describe how each country helps children to cope with learning in a new language by examining the examples of the UK, France, Vietnam and Japan. In addition, our children are of mixed cultural heritage because although both my wife and I are British, my wife was born in Vietnam. The relevance of this is that, in some cases, the language spoken in the school will be the same as the language spoken at home. Also, it is relevant to point out that the age at which a child lives in a different linguistic culture is vitally important.
2. Vietnam

We moved to Hanoi, Vietnam in 2006 after living in Beppu for six years. The reasons we went to Hanoi were, firstly, that my wife wanted to live in the country where she was born and all her relatives live. Secondly, we decided to build a house there and establish Hanoi as our base wherever we travelled in the future. Thirdly, we could afford to be flexible because I had retired from my university job and we could live on my teacher’s pension. The children were aged three and six months when we moved to Hanoi and were familiar with the Vietnamese language through their mother, aunt and grandmother who had lived with us in Japan. My daughter was only six months old, so she didn’t start nursery school immediately. However, my three year old son did. We stayed in Hanoi for four years and my son entered primary school there. At first we considered the local, public primary school. However, we discovered that the school conditions were very poor with classes of sixty children, very old rooms and no air-conditioning. So we decided to send our son to an international school called ‘The Vietnam-Australia School’. This school is fee-paying but tuition is in English and Vietnamese, so it was very suitable for our son. He could speak and learn in the languages of both his mother and father. Thus, no special linguistic provision was required.

Of course, international schools are often the solution for foreigners living in another country and they are widely used by the business and diplomatic community. However, they are very expensive and they are not available in smaller towns and cities such as Beppu and Oita. Also, children enjoy a special educational experience mixing only with other rich foreigners. We prefer to send our children to the local public school whenever possible because we have found that this helps them (and us) to integrate into the local community. We feel that foreigners should learn the local language and culture and assimilate as far as possible. One advantage of both France and Vietnam is that the written script is basically the same as the Roman alphabet, so learning to read and write was not too difficult.

3. The United Kingdom

We moved to the UK because it is my country of birth and we wanted our children to get the benefit of an education in the English language at a young age. When my children moved to the UK, they were aged four and six. Elementary (primary) school children start very young in the UK and so the six-year old could enter the third year of primary school and the four year old could enter the first year or ‘reception class’. UK primary schools extend from age four to age eleven. When we moved to the UK, my children had been living in Vietnam for four years surrounded by Vietnamese relatives and friends. Their ‘native tongue’ was therefore Vietnamese. However, the language used at home in the UK was English. Also, as we arrived in the UK at the beginning of the six-week summer holidays, the children had plenty of time to adjust to speaking English outside of the home, for example to my relatives. They thus adapted to the English language very rapidly and could understand and speak a lot when they entered school in September. As a result, they didn’t need any special help with
English when they started primary school. The lessons I learned from this were that firstly, the language spoken at home is very important. Secondly, it is a great advantage if this is the same language as spoken in the school and the general social environment. Thirdly, if children can enjoy a period of four to six weeks adapting to a new country before starting school, it is of great benefit. Fourthly, if a child is very young (four and six in this case) they will absorb language skills very quickly and without too much conscious effort. Fifthly, as far as reading and writing skills are concerned it is very helpful if they are familiar with the script of the country in question.

Although my children did not require special language help when we moved to the UK, I did enquire at their school about what help was available for foreigners. This was very important in that school because it was located in the centre of a city into which there had been considerable recent migration especially from other countries of the European Union such as Poland. I was told that if a child was having difficulties with English, a teaching assistant would be available to sit with them in their lessons. This system was organised by the Local Government which was responsible for all schools in that area. However, that was in 2010 and there have been vast changes in the British education system since then. The main change is that many schools have been taken out of local government control and funded directly by central government from London. As a result, more power has been put into the hands of the head teacher who can decide how much money to spend on matters such as language help. This transitioning from local government to centralised control is still going on, but I fear that special language help may have declined in some schools.

4. Paris, France

Our family moved to Paris when the children were aged nine and eleven. The nine year old entered primary school and the eleven year old entered secondary school. I could speak a little French but the other three family members could hardly speak any. So we were placed in a much more challenging environment than the UK. However, both France and the UK are members of the European Union, so entry into a local, public French school was guaranteed. The first thing we discovered was that Paris has a very intensive French language programme for newly-arrived foreign children. This programme is available in a few selected schools in each arrondissement or district. It works like this: the students are given eighteen hours a week of intensive French taught by specialist and experienced teachers. All children start off with the eighteen hours in a special foreigners group. However, as their French improves and according to their ability, children are gradually moved into mainstream lessons with French children in the same school. We found that this system worked very well for our children, and, within a few months they were speaking French and moving into the ordinary classes. Of course this system was made possible by the large scale of immigration into Paris. Because there is a constant stream of foreign children coming in, the Paris government could afford to provide the specialist French teachers. In a small city.
like Beppu where foreign children are rare, this economy of scale may be impossible. On the other hand, foreign children from each of the Beppu schools could be brought together in a central place once or twice a week.

5. Japan

As noted above, we have lived in Beppu from 2001 to 2006 and now from 2016 to 2019. The reason that we came back to Beppu is because, after living in many countries and comparing them with Japan, we realised that Japan is an outstandingly civilised place in terms of safety, kindness and respect for others. In addition, during the period 2003 to 2019, two of my wife’s three siblings have settled in Beppu, obtained good jobs and had four children between them. The biggest branch of her family is therefore now based in Japan. In my case, I am also able to teach English part-time and link up with the many Japanese friends I made during my previous periods living here.

However, this latter period which we are in now has been the most challenging as far as the children’s education is concerned. The first thing is the age of the children. When we returned to Beppu my son was twelve and my daughter was ten. We noticed immediately that language acquisition was more difficult than at younger ages. This confirmed my opinion that children can best absorb a new language under the age of ten.

Secondly, the children had to encounter a totally alien writing system for the first time. This makes reading and writing a considerable challenge. It quickly became clear that Chinese children who had settled in Beppu had a much easier time with Kanji. Thirdly, it became apparent that there was no special educational or language programme in Oita prefecture designed to help children learn Japanese and integrate them into their local school. In essence the Japanese system was the opposite of the French system. The Japanese system actually relies entirely on volunteers. Fortunately, there are some teachers in Beppu who come into schools once a week and help foreign children with their language. However, this is completely inadequate when children are faced with learning all the different subjects of the curriculum entirely in Japanese including difficult kanji. One Japanese volunteer teacher told me that she thought that it takes seven years for a foreign child to reach the standard of kanji enjoyed by the average Japanese child.

Fourthly, once they reach Junior High School, Japanese children’s lives are heavily exam and test driven. These test scores are recorded and contribute to the compilation of a detailed academic profile which largely determines which Senior High School they will apply to. The Senior High School entrance exams are extremely important in Japan because, at least in the minds of parents, Senior High Schools are graded according to the number of students they send to prestigious universities. Graduates of the best universities tend to end up working in the best companies. This competitive system is well known to Japanese parents and they will plan a course for their children literally from birth by living near to a good elementary school and Junior High School. It is thus very difficult for foreigners to ‘enter’ this
system half way through. They will have lost ground through ignorance of the housing and educational systems.

Another important factor influencing the education of foreign children in Japan is the educational qualifications, political experience, income and job of their parents. Highly educated parents who can quickly come to understand the system and therefore navigate it, are at a huge advantage. Parents who have a low education and come from poor countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines will struggle especially as those countries are not ‘kanji cultures’. Children of Chinese parents, for example running a restaurant in Japan, will at least have the advantage of better understanding the reading and writing system.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that putting a foreign child into the Japanese education system is a huge challenge. They face all the difficulties and disadvantages outlined above. The problem is particularly acute in the more peripheral areas of Japan such as Oita prefecture. These areas do not seem to have any system in place for integrating foreign children into local schools. They seem to feel that there are so few foreigners in these areas, that investing in a system similar to the one found in France, would not be cost-effective. Although I don’t have any direct experience, I have heard that the situation is a little better in the large metropolitan areas such as Kanto and Kansai. For example, special measures are in place to help foreign children cope with high school entrance exams. However, in 2019 Japan is now entering a new phase of its history in which immigration is likely to be on a much larger scale than before. Many of the newly arriving workers will come with their families and reside in all parts of Japan. It is therefore very important that systems, structures and mechanisms are put into place which ensure that foreign children can be welcomed and integrated as smoothly as possible.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the lessons I learned from all these cross-cultural, multi-national experiences. Firstly, the language spoken at home by the parents is very important. Secondly, it is a great advantage if this is the same language as spoken in the school and the general social environment. Thirdly, if children can enjoy a period of four to six weeks adapting to a new country before starting school, it is of great benefit. Fourthly, if a child is very young, they will absorb language skills very quickly and without too much conscious effort. Fifthly, as far as reading and writing skills are concerned it is very helpful if they are familiar with the script of the country in question. Sixthly, transnational movement and migration is now at its highest in world history. The internet and mobile phones have made people aware of international opportunities. International air travel to anywhere in the world is now cheap and plentiful. Therefore every country should have detailed educational measures in place to facilitate the arrival of foreign children. A child’s school years are vitally important to their future and governments have a responsibility to make the educational
experience as rewarding as possible. In this way, we can create richly diverse and harmonious societies.