

Partially immersed

日本語を話しますか

If the characters above got rendered properly in your browser you should see Japanese writing. The proper response for me would be, say what? Of course, if I knew what that said the real response should be:

すみません、日本語は話せません

Sorry, I guess you probably don't know Japanese either. The first question was, "Do you speak Japanese?" The response was, "No, I do not speak Japanese." When encountering a Spanish-speaking classroom, I always start with, "No hablo español, solamente inglés." (I don't speak Spanish, only English). It's fun to see the kids' reaction, especially if I add a little bit more from my severely limited Spanish vocabulary. With Japanese, I can't even begin. Three times in the space of two weeks I found myself in dual language classrooms- twice for Japanese, once for Spanish. What kind of class is this you may ask? I will answer. Once upon a time the way to teach kids a foreign language was to offer it as an elective in high school. Then, someone learned that the best time to learn new languages was as a young child, so they added the classes to the junior high curriculum (in some cases making kids take five different ones in sixth grade!). This trickled down to intermediate grades with one language twice a week like gym. Still not happy, the powers-that-be started dual-language classes allowing children as young as six to start learning a different language, and that is where we are today. In such a class, the younger grades slowly learn the language, and then they start instructing in that language as they get older for a sort of immersion experience. In the Japanese class, this means that for the entire afternoon teachers and students use only Japanese. The teaching assistant took over this duty of course since I would be unable to converse in or even understand Japanese. It was an experience not unlike working in a deaf classroom as I have done before, but knowing that I could converse with the students in English when necessary. This was sixth grade, so

they were on their sixth year of this. They seemed pretty proficient to me- having read Japanese books for starters and giving a book report in Japanese. When it came time for me to instruct, however, we all went back to English.

The Spanish class was 4th grade, so they weren't as proficient in their second language as 6th grade was in theirs. There were no book reports or the like in Spanish, though of course it could have just been the day. When trying to read the Spanish social studies book, it became clear many did not understand very well. Unfortunately I did not have a Spanish-speaking assistant at this time as I did for Japanese. When math time rolled around, the Spanish-speaking assistant finally arrived and I expected she might take over for a bit, but she didn't so we did the subject in English as I could do little more than the numbers and operations in Spanish. As it turned out it was probably a good thing we did it in English as they had a difficult enough time with the topic in their primary language.

So what's next, dual language French? Italian? I guess I may find out. It's odd that this is the first year I have been in this sort of classroom in all my years of subbing. Bilingual and regular foreign language classes yes, but not dual-language. This may mean then that the chances of doing it again are somewhat remote, so we'll see.