

Japanese language education in the global age: new perspectives and advocacy

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Abstract

As globalisation reshapes our world and impacts on every aspect of our lives, education is forced to undergo constant changes to effectively prepare our children to participate in twenty-first century society as productive global citizens. Japanese language education is no exception. Faced with globalisation, we as Japanese language educators need to rethink our goals, contents and classroom practices. This paper will examine how globalisation has impacted on educational policies and reforms, everyday classroom teaching and professional development, and explore the new perspectives and values of Japanese language education. It also has become more and more important for us to advocate for Japanese language education as the vision of Japanese education has been shifting in the twenty-first century. We will discuss how we can develop our advocacy skills and what we can do to advocate Japanese language education to students, parents, school administrators, communities, politicians and other stakeholders.

国際化時代における日本語教育: 新たな視点とアドボカシー

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国際化により世界が再編成され、我々の生活の様々な局面に影響を及ぼしている。その中で、教育は、子供たちが生産性の高い国際人として21世紀社会に参加できるよう効率的に養成するものとなるべく、絶え間ない変化を余儀なくされている。日本語教育もその例外ではない。日本語教育関係者も国際化に対峙し、指導目的・内容・教室での実践を再考する必要がある。この論文では、教育政策・改革、そして日常の教室指導と教師の職能開発に対して、国際化がこれまでにどのような影響を及ぼしたかを分析し、日本語教育の新たな視点と意義を探ることとする。また21世紀社会においては日本語教育の展望が変化し続けているゆえに、我々日本語教育関係者が日本語教育を推奨(advocate)することがこれまでになく重要になってきた。我々日本語教育関係者がそのためのアドボカシーのスキルをどのようにして育成する、また学生、保護者、学校管理職、地域社会、政治家、その他関係者に向けて日本語教育を推奨するために何ができるかについても議論する。

Introduction

Japanese language education is at a crossroads in many countries. While the number of Japanese language students has been increasing in such countries as China and Indonesia, there are many countries that have been experiencing a drop in Japanese language enrolment. In a constantly and rapidly changing globalised world, Japan has been losing the economic power it had boasted since 1980s. From the 1980s to the early 1990s, Japanese language classrooms were crowded with students who were interested in doing business with Japan or gaining employment in Japanese companies. After this economic downturn, Japanese language classrooms have been filled with generations of students who are fond of Japanese pop culture. However, due to the falling status of Japan in the globalised economy, interest in Japanese language learning has evidently been waning in many countries. In the United States where the author is teaching Japanese, people's focus on Asia has clearly shifted from Japan to China. More and more schools have started teaching Chinese, whilst other language courses including Japanese, are scaled back or cut.

Faced with this situation, we as Japanese language teachers must intensify our effort to advocate Japanese language education in order to attract more students to our classroom and maintain our program. In this paper, I will discuss how we should advocate Japanese language education. I will discuss three important factors of advocacy: Vision, Value and Visibility. Then, I will discuss six elements for raising our visibility: Communication, Culture, Connections, Collaboration, Credibility and Community.

Three Vs for advocacy: Vision, Value, and Visibility

First things first: Vision

The first keyword for successful advocacy is Vision. Education without vision is powerless. Likewise, advocacy without vision is powerless.

We face problems including program cuts, cuts of small advanced level classes, lack of good curriculum materials, and lack of professional development opportunities. Those issues are important. However, when we talk about advocacy, the first thing we should do is have a strong vision of Japanese language education.

We are teaching Japanese within each country's education system, and Japanese language education constitutes an important part of that system. The main goal of education is

to help young people develop into productive, intelligent adults. Education means the total development of children. Our main goal must be to help the human development of children through Japanese language education. We should help students grow to be intelligent, knowledgeable, smart citizens who can lead a rich, fruitful, productive life. In other words, we should be educators before Japanese language teachers.

Once the vision of Japanese language education is set, it should be shared among all those who are involved in the profession and everyone should do their best job to make this vision a reality. A strong vision will unite Japanese language teachers and become a foundation for advocacy and will also help us think about how we should solve issues of program cuts and lack of funding. I strongly believe that education without vision is useless.

More than grammar and vocabulary: Value

One of the important goals of foreign language teaching is, of course, to impart knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as well as functional skills and abilities to use the language in the real world. Nowadays, however, this goal may not be sufficient. We have to add more value to foreign language teaching.

The twentieth century society saw change, but the change was rather slow, consistent and predictable. As long as we made an effort, success was guaranteed in our life. Compared with the twentieth century, changes in the twenty-first century are much faster and more complicated. Due to this, the twenty-first century world is diverse, fluid, chaotic, uncertain and unpredictable.

Information created by and available to the general public in the last century was rather limited. Those who had specialised knowledge were respected and held power. The main goal of education was to provide students with knowledge. Thus, the memorisation of information was encouraged. On the other hand, in this century, an abundant amount of information is produced every second, especially through the internet. In this information-rich, information-driven age, the general public can have easy access to information anytime, and having specialised knowledge is no longer considered special. Rather, it is considered more important to have the ability to search for and access information, organise and synthesise available information, and make decisions on issues and solve complicated problems.

Surviving in this complicated, globalised twenty-first century world requires a different set of knowledge, abilities and skills from the twentieth century. The main goal of educational activities now is considered to help children develop the knowledge, abilities and skills that they need to survive the twenty-first century. They are called key competencies (OECD 2003) or the 21st century skills (Partnership for the 21st Century Skills 2006).

Examples of these include:

- Knowledge on current, complex social issues
- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- Creativity, innovativeness, curiosity and imagination
- Problem-solving and decision-making skills
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Flexibility and agility
- Collaborative and leading skills
- Various literacies (information, technology, media, cultural, etc.)
- Cross-cultural communication skills (NNELL 2011)

We as Japanese language educators must design and implement our instruction so as to impart required knowledge, abilities and skills to our students through the teaching of the Japanese language. This way, Japanese language education will become more valuable as a school subject and worthwhile advocating.

In order to have our students acquire these knowledge, abilities and skills in our Japanese language classroom, we have to adopt a new teaching model. The prevalent teaching model of today originated in the nineteenth century. It is called the “factory model”. In this model, a teacher, standing in front of a large number of students, gives a lecture and leads the classroom in mass practices. This model makes it possible to produce a mass of students who have uniform and standardised knowledge and behaviour. This model of education was created in response to the needs of the industrialised age that needed a large number of factory workers who had the same knowledge and skill. However, the twenty-first century requires a different education model to prepare students for living in our

diverse, globalised, complicated world. This is the case with Japanese language education, too. We should adopt such approaches as Project-Based Learning (Markham 2003; La Mer and Mergendoller 2010), Problem-Solving Learning (Jonassen 2010), Passion-Based Learning (Newell 2003), the Thematic Approach (Dirkx and Prenger 1997), Inquiry-Based Learning (Gonzalez 2013) and Content-Based Instruction (Valeo 2013).

The goal of Japanese language education in the global age should be more than the acquisition of grammatical, phonological and lexical knowledge and functional communicative skills. Rather, it should be the acquisition of social and networking abilities; that is, abilities to engage in social activities, to connect with others to develop new communities and societies, and improve quality of life by using the Japanese language. These abilities can be best acquired through social networking activities in the real world. This new approach to language teaching is called the “Social Networking Approach” (see Kokusai Bunka Forum 2012; Tohsaku 2013). By bringing a variety of social networking activities into our classroom, we can easily create learning environments where our students effectively acquire and develop twenty-first century skills in addition to language skills. On top of that, we can connect our language classroom with communities outside our schools and thereby raise the visibility of our education.

The use of these approaches in our Japanese language classroom produces students with global fluency and minds who can survive the twenty-first century world. This is value worth advocating.

Be everywhere: Visibility

One of the important goals of advocacy is to raise the visibility of Japanese language education. To this end, we should consider the following 6 Cs (based on NNELL’s advocacy website):

- Communication
- Culture
- Connections
- Collaboration
- Credibility
- Communities

Communication

We should communicate what we are doing in our classroom to parents, other educators, community and stakeholders whenever possible. We should talk about the short-term and long-term benefits of Japanese language learning. It is important to tailor our information depending on the audience. When we talk with parents, for instance, we should emphasise the benefits of Japanese language learning for their children's future career. When we communicate with local politicians, we should focus on the impact of Japanese language education on the local economy.

Whenever we have a chance, we should highlight and boast about our students' achievement and success. For example, if your student wins first prize in a local or national Japanese language speech contest, you should publicise it through not only your school newspaper and classroom newsletter, but also in your local newspapers and TV stations. Even a small publication is helpful to raise the visibility of your program. It is important for the community and stakeholders to become aware that you and your Japanese language classroom are too good to lose.

In the current information age where social networking services play an important role for information exchange and dissemination, the effective use of social networking services such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and YouTube is key to successful advocacy.

Culture

The uniqueness of Japanese culture can attract many people's attention. Organise cultural activities and events in which not only students but people in the community enjoy and gain the knowledge of Japanese culture. As it is evident that many of our current students are interested in Japanese manga, anime, video games, cosplay and J-Pop, Japanese pop culture has the power to excite young people and draw them to the Japanese language classroom. Also, Japanese pop culture is a good vehicle to keep them motivated for learning Japanese and about Japan. Whenever possible, create opportunities where your students can demonstrate their knowledge of Japanese culture to the community and stakeholders.

Japanese culture has been an influence on life in many regards: industrial design, art, food, technology, fashion, and entertainment. Highlight these Japanese characteristics and emphasise how Japanese language learning will make young people aware of them. This kind of knowledge will make them more creative and imaginative. Such creative minds will help them in their future career.

Connections

Look for opportunities to connect with others and influence them on the benefits of Japanese language education. For instance, if you are asked to give a talk about Japanese manga, never say “no”. Always say “yes”. Whenever you have a chance to talk about Japan, Japanese culture and Japanese education, make yourself available. Make yourself indispensable. Always say “yes” (Rifkin and Haxhi 2012). This way, you will raise your visibility as a Japanese language teacher in your community.

You can use your students to develop connections with your local community. For instance, have your students organise a play or festival that is related to Japanese seasonal events (e.g. *hanami*, *momijigari*), holidays (e.g. *kodomo no hi*, *oshōgatsu*), or Japanese culture (e.g. Japanese hip-hop, Japanese art and craft, *ikebana*) and invite local community people. Or have your students organise a Japan anime night where Japanese anime movies are shown to local children and young adults. Students can explain how popular anime is in Japan and give comments about each anime movie shown.

Your students can work with students in Japan through social networking services such as Skype and Google Talk or through the internet to conduct a cultural exchange project. Get local community people involved in this project by, for example, presenting the outcome of the project to them live or through the internet. Connecting your classroom and students with people outside the school will raise the visibility of your teaching and become a plus for advocacy. On top of that, your instruction will be connected to the real world.

Collaboration

We teachers are always busy and tend to work isolated from our peers. Collaboration with other Japanese language teachers, however, will help improve our teaching and advocacy of Japanese language education. Collaborate with other Japanese language teachers to gather and exchange information, develop materials and develop curricula, and develop articulated programs and organise events. Working together with other Japanese language teachers, rather than working alone, definitely raises the visibility of Japanese language education.

Foreign language education does not have a high status in many countries. Collaborate with other language teachers to advocate the importance of foreign language education for young children. Also, collaborate with teachers of other subjects and let them know how foreign language education can contribute to their subject and education as a whole.

Finally, collaborate with people outside your school. Your presence in this type of collaboration will attract a lot of attention to Japanese language education.

Credibility

While you are involved in advocacy activities, you will be often asked for information and data regarding Japanese language education. For instance, your local politician might like to have your enrolment data or information about the future demand of Japanese language courses. Always make sure that data and information you provide is accurate. Also, make sure that information provided by others is accurate before giving it to others. Once you lose credibility in what you say, what you do, and in the data and information you provide, it will be difficult for you to effectively advocate Japanese language education.

When you engage in advocacy, certain data and information is constantly requested. Try to accumulate and keep them on file so that you can provide them immediately. Also, do not forget to do your own research by using and analysing that data and information, and prepare for presentations and arguing for the importance of Japanese language education using your data.

Community

Try to make you, your program and your students visible in your community. Encourage your students to be involved in the community. For instance, your students can sing Japanese songs in a local festival. If you are teaching at a high school, you can take your students to local elementary and middle schools to recruit your future students. Encourage your students to talk about their experience in your classroom and the benefits of Japanese language learning. Have them make presentations (e.g. sing age-appropriate Japanese songs, perform short skits in Japanese, show *kamishibai* or teach *origami*) to elementary and middle schools, which will excite and motivate younger students about learning Japan, Japanese language and culture. It would be a good idea to contact local newspapers and broadcasting stations about these opportunities. Remember that any photo opportunities are beneficial for advocacy. Also, you can use the photos in your newsletter and have it distributed to the students' parents, other teachers, school administrators, school board members, local politicians and the wider community people.

The students' parents and community always become big supporters when you are faced with program reduction or elimination. The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining!

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have talked about the importance of advocacy for Japanese language educators. In order to advocate effectively, we should:

1. Be visionary teachers
2. Add value to our Japanese language teaching
3. Constantly raise our visibility in the community.

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