JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA TODAY: AN OVERVIEW[1]

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ABSTRACT

In the first decade of the twenty-first century Japanese was the most widely taught language in Australia and Australia had the third highest number of students of Japanese in the world. In recent years, however, the position of Japanese has become less certain. The economic and instrumental reasons for studying Japanese have become less compelling, although cultural motivations are still strong, particularly among senior secondary and tertiary students. At the same time, the educational environment and policies in Australia have also been evolving, with both positive and negative impacts on language education. In an era of globalisation, many of the factors affecting the study of Japanese in other parts of the world also affect Australia, but the way in which they come together here is unique.

This paper examines the changing forces that have shaped JLE in Australia, provides a snapshot of the current situation, and explores implications for the future.

1 This paper is loosely based on an address given in Japanese at the ICJLE conference in Sydney in 2014.

STUDENT NUMBERS

At the beginning of the twenty-first century about 426,000 students (around 10% of all Australian school students) were studying Japanese (de Kretser & Spence-Brown 2010). This was the culmination of a huge expansion in student numbers over the last two decades of the twentieth century which can largely be attributed to the growing economic and strategic importance of Japan, and to policy initiatives at the federal and state levels, building on the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987) and underpinned by the NALSAS (National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools) strategy which provided large amounts of financial support for this expansion over the years 1994–2002.

Since then, however, enrolments have been gradually declining overall, although there have been considerable fluctuations within particular jurisdictions, particularly at the primary level. As the most commonly taught language in Australia, Japanese and its fortunes reflect the fortunes of languages in general, the study of which appears to have been declining overall, at least at the senior secondary level, although this pattern is interrupted by sudden surges whenever new funding is provided or governments change the policy settings. Between 2000 and 2008, numbers of school students of Japanese fell by 16%, with the steepest decrease being at primary level. A large factor appears to have been the end of the NALSAS funding program, but the depressed state of Japan's economy and its overshadowing by China as a trading partner for Australia were probably also significant factors (de Kretser & Spence-Brown 2010).

The following figures are for numbers of students in primary and secondary schools, based on figures provided by state education authorities. The latest comprehensive national figures covering all sectors which we have been able to collect are for 2008 (de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010), but the analysis also draws on more recent figures, particularly for government schools.

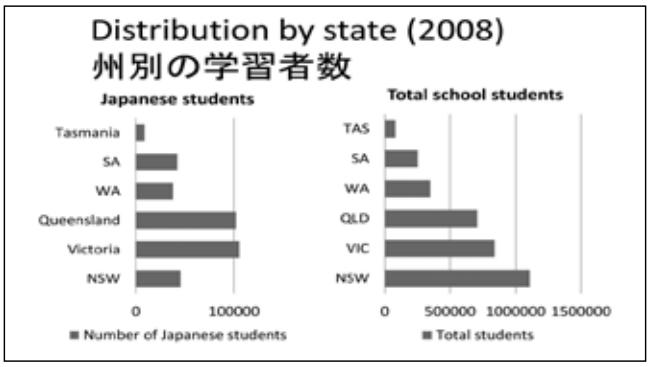

Figure 1: Distribution of students by state (2008)

As you can see from Figure 1, Victoria and Queensland have the highest number of students of Japanese in Australia. In Queensland, Japanese is by far the most widely taught language, with around half of school language students enrolled in it. In Victoria, it is not the strongest language at either primary or secondary level, with enrolments spread across a number of Asian and European languages; the high numbers there instead reflect the much greater strength of language enrolments in Victoria than in other states. New South Wales is the largest state in terms of school population, but it has a relatively small number of language students, including students of Japanese. This is partly because, in contrast with other states, language teaching at the primary level is still not the norm in NSW. Even in secondary school, language is only mandated to be taught for 100 hours, in either year 7 or year 8, and perhaps as a result enrolments post the compulsory period are also relatively weak compared to other states.

RECENT TRENDS

The Japan Foundation conducts regular surveys at both school and post-school levels, which help identify changing trends internationally. Their report on student numbers for 2012 (Japan Foundation 2013) shows increases since 2009 of 13.3% at primary level, 1.4% at secondary level and 1.3% at tertiary level, although their statistics rely on self-reporting by schools and may be affected by fluctuations in response rates. It should also be kept in mind that these are increases in absolute numbers, not in terms of percentage of the school population as a whole (which has increased over that period). No Australian authority collects or publishes national statistics for language teaching, but information we have obtained from the various education authorities suggests that it is difficult to identify universal national trends. Increases in some states and sectors balance decreases in others, although the statistics confirm the Japan Foundation figures in showing a significant increase in primary numbers overall, marking a recovery from the steep falls in the previous decade. After an initial decline in enrolments in Japanese after the close of the NALSAS funding program, a new round of funding (NALSSP National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program) was introduced for the 2006–2012 period by the Australian government, and this appears to have helped recovery and even led to expansion in some sectors. There were changes in some states to policies such as school entry age and to the location of year 7 (from primary school to secondary school) which also affected numbers. In addition, some states have recently expanded primary language provision in preparation for introduction of the Australian curriculum, which assumes 350 hours of learning undertaken across Foundation to Year 6 (ACARA 2014). These general changes in policy, rather than any specific factors relating to Japanese in particular, appear to have been the primary driver for the recovery in numbers, particularly at the primary level.

YEAR 12 STUDENT NUMBERS

Language study in secondary school is generally only compulsory for 1-3 years, and many students then discontinue their studies, with further dropout in subsequent years. While lack of data means that definitive calculations are not possible, and the rate of continuation differs from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, it appears that up to 90% of students discontinue their language study before year 11. The numbers of students studying Japanese at year 12 are perhaps the best indicator of the health of school languages education in Japanese. This is because these students are choosing to study the language, often in the face of pervasive forces acting against language study. Reliable and consistent statistics for completion of year 12 units are also available nationally.

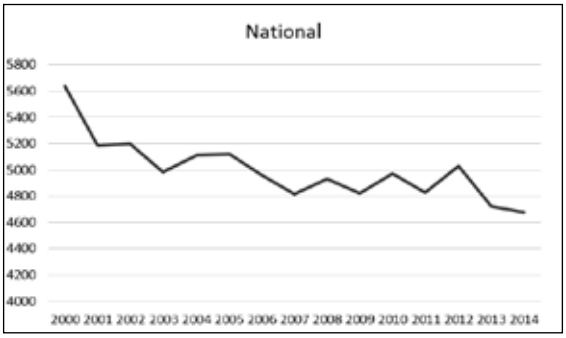

Figure 2: Year 12 completions 2000–2014 (based on data published by state/territory authorities)

Year 12 enrolments have remained remarkably steady, compared to those at lower levels, at around 5000 students nationally. However, recent figures suggest that year 12 enrolments are now starting to erode, with worrying implications for the rest of the system.

All states and territories offer a course for Japanese "Continuers", who have typically completed 3–4 years of study prior to year 11. In the Australian Capital Territory, NSW, South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia, "Beginners" courses are available to students who wish to commence Japanese in year 11; in NSW and the ACT these make up around half of the year 12 enrolments. In most jurisdictions separate courses exist for speakers who have some home background in Japanese, and for those who have completed their schooling in Japan, but the rules for the type of background that disqualifies students from studying in the "Continuers" units vary considerably. The biggest drop in year 12 enrolments has been in South Australia, where a change in the structure of the year 12 certificate and calculation of university entrance scores has encouraged students to study fewer subjects, with consequent drops in enrolments for subjects that are considered to be less "core", such as language study. Despite creative responses in many schools, the year 12 numbers there are now at a critically low level, which threatens the viability of the language at lower levels.

TERTIARY STUDENT NUMBERS

Numbers of students in university Japanese courses are collected by the Asian Studies Association of Australia (McLaren 2011). The latest figures published are for 2009, when there were 27 universities offering Japanese, including all the major institutions. While national comparative data are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that Japanese is still the language of highest enrolment nationally. On the basis of the ASAA survey, and other data which I have been able to access, there were probably between 7000 and 8000 university students of Japanese in 2009. The Japan Foundation survey, which included a wider range of post-secondary institutions, found there were 8,520 students in 35 institutions in 2009, increasing to 9,682 in 2012 (Japan Foundation 2013). Since 2009 two popular programs have closed, and others have been restricted, but several large institutions have changed educational structures in ways which have led to increased language enrolments across the board (see Nettelbeck 2009). Accordingly, it is difficult to discern an overall trend. Many students do not continue beyond one year, primarily because students from across the university enrol in Japanese as an elective, and do not continue to major level. This steep "attrition" has been noted as a problem more generally in language education in Australian universities (Nettelbeck, 2009) but, depending on one's perspective, it can be viewed as positive that so many students decide to take Japanese, even if only for a semester.

FACTORS AFFECTING JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

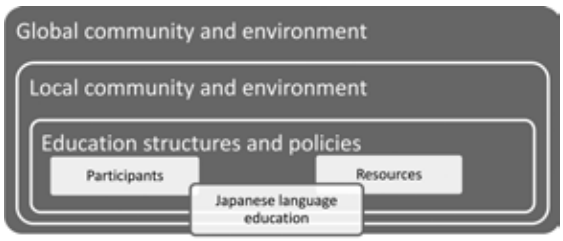

Figure 3: Factors affecting Japanese Language Education

Figure 3 depicts some of the major factors which impact on Japanese language education. Each level impacts factors at lower levels, and all influence the goals, capacities and actions of participants in language education: students and teachers, as well as other stakeholders such as parents. Global factors include the relative decline in the economic importance of Japan, but also cultural factors, such as interest in Japanese culture more generally, and the continuing popularity of Japanese popular culture in particular. They also include advances in information communication technologies (ICT) which have created new communities in which students can participate, new tools to make communication and language learning easier, and new motivations for language learning. These on-line possibilities intersect with and amplify the greater "real world" opportunities for interaction provided by easier and cheaper travel and globalised markets. In general, Australian schools and universities have been quick to embrace these possibilities, at least in part, but they also pose challenges, which teachers are still coming to terms with.

Local factors include what Michael Clyne has characterised as Australia's "monolingual mindset" (Clyne 2005) and the ambivalent attitude to foreign language learning of English-speaking Australians in the age of "Global English". There is no space to explore these factors in detail here, so I will concentrate instead on educational policy and structures.

THE RECENT POLICY ENVIRONMENT

The decline in the numbers of students of Japanese broadly coincided with the decade of John Howard's conservative Coalition government (March 1996–December 2007), during which time the NALSAS program came to an end. In 2007, the incoming Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was a fluent speaker of Mandarin and the author of an important report on language teaching (Rudd 1994); under his leadership a new funding program, the NALSSP program (A$64 million over 3 years), was established, giving Asian language teaching new impetus. This program finished in 2012 and was not replaced. The Rudd/Gillard government also commissioned a White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, which set out policies for Australia's engagement with the growing Asian region for the period until 2025 (Australian Government 2012). The Australia–Japan relationship was acknowledged as important, multi-dimensional and strong, but arguably the main emphasis had shifted to China and India. Policies on language education in the White Paper emphasised the importance of Asian language competence and of Asia literacy more generally. Japanese was reaffirmed as one of four (later five) Asian languages to be taught in schools. The Paper also stated that all students should have the opportunity to study language sequentially (across their primary, secondary and tertiary education), and that universities should be assisted to promote the study of Asian languages and related specialised skills. In terms of concrete ideas about how these goals were to be achieved, the paper strongly emphasised the role of technology (in particular the under-construction National Broadband Network) and opportunities for interaction through sister school programs with Asian schools.

The other significant national policy development during the Rudd/Gillard government was the creation of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA, and the initiation of the development of an Australian curriculum. The confirmation of "Languages" as a key curriculum area, and the building of the curriculum around the assumption of continuous teaching of language from R to 10 sent strong signals about the teaching of languages which had previously been lacking, particularly in some states where provision had been less strong.

However, the educational policy landscape shifted yet again in 2013, when a new (conservative) Coalition government took office. While the White Paper appeared to have been shelved, there is little immediate change in overt policies on language education. There continues to be a degree of positive rhetoric, including the declaration of a wildly ambitious goal for 40% of year 12 students to be studying a foreign language "within a decade" (a number which had not been achieved since the 1960s). However, there is little funding, and few concrete policies for how such a major increase (from current levels of about 11%) could be achieved. There is a continued focus on Asia literacy, study abroad, and technology, and this is reflected in the only funding initiatives to have been announced. One is funding for study abroad in the form of the $100 million "New Colombo Plan", which provides scholarships and mobility grants to undergraduate students for study and internships or mentorships in the Asia-Pacific region. The second is a $9.8 million provision for a one-year trial of computer-based foreign language learning for children in forty-one "early learning services" (preschool programs), the Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) program. Recent reports suggest that the trial is to be expanded, although it is not clear why the extension of language learning down to preschool level has been prioritised in this way, while implementation at primary level is still underdeveloped in many states. Transition issues that restrict students' ability to follow through on language learning across education levels have been highlighted as an ongoing problem and are only likely to be further exacerbated by this extension down into preschool. There has also been some focus within wider programs (such as the teacher training review, and "Teach for Australia" program) on teacher supply, but arguably not enough to address the increased needs in the primary sector and the effects of a rapidly ageing workforce.

There was more significant change in the government's attitude to and support for the Australian Curriculum, which underwent review and change in several areas, while at the same time there was increasing diversity in state and territory policies regarding its implementation.

State policies continue to be of prime importance in shaping language education. In response to the impending implementation of the Australian Curriculum, some powerful new policies were initiated in several states, some with negative and some with positive impacts on language teaching. For example, in the ACT, the teaching of languages was mandated from primary school to year 10, with an immediate impact on student numbers. In Victoria, historically the strongest state for school language teaching, the Coalition government initiated a comprehensive policy review, and also announced that language teaching would be mandated across P–10, sparking a flurry of activity. However, the Labor government which succeeded it took a quiet step back from this policy in 2015, perhaps acknowledging the significant extra resources that would be necessary to implement it properly.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

There is a long history of reports in Australia pointing out basic problems with language education across the country, as Lo Bianco and others have noted (Lo Bianco, 2009). The following include some of the main structural factors which commentators and teachers suggest affect Japanese language education (and in most cases, other languages as well).

STRUCTURAL FACTORS IN THE PRIMARY SECTOR

Compared with secondary schooling, the place in the curriculum, time allocation, and funding for language education are less well defined at primary level, with policies for provision varying widely both within and across the jurisdictions, and largely dependent on the policies of individual schools. Major shifts in government policy have taken place at regular intervals, causing schools to increase language provisions when policies dictate they must do so, or when extra funding is made available, only to discontinue the new programs as soon as the policy wind (almost inevitably) shifts again. One reason for these shifts is that large expansions are almost never adequately resourced, leading to financial and staffing problems, which in turn trigger contraction. I have argued elsewhere that there is a fundamental issue which leads to these problems, and that is that the structures of primary education, largely unchanged since the nineteenth century, do not adapt easily to the inclusion of new curriculum areas requiring specialised teaching (Spence-Brown 2014).

In addition, curriculum guidelines for languages have been broadly worded and subject to very flexible interpretation. Combined with a culture in which each teacher produces their own curriculum and materials, this results in widely differing content and levels of proficiency from school to school. As a result, it is quite commonplace to find that teachers do not know what students have been taught in previous years, and do not have clear targets for what students will achieve by the end of their primary schooling. In fact, it is not unusual to find an over-worked teacher delivering basically the same lesson to every grade – reflecting the fact that there is little attention to cumulative building of grammatical and lexical skills in many programs. Curriculum is topic based, and the language introduced under one topic is often forgotten once students move to the next topic. Guidelines for teaching time, on which official curricula are based, are routinely ignored, forcing teachers to be "creative" in their interpretations of what the guidelines require.

Most teachers are dedicated and resourceful. However, faced with very adverse conditions, teachers typically do not have high expectations of what can be achieved by their students, and often focus on "fun" activities and on interesting but unsystematic snippets of "cultural" content, rather than the systematic development of communication skills and intercultural competence.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS: TRANSITION ISSUES

The issue of lack of continuity of language study between primary and secondary school in Australia is well known (Liddicoat 2007; Lo Bianco 2009). While authorities in some areas have worked hard to coordinate language provision across primary and secondary schools in a district, they have done much less to tackle the problem of high schools working to a "beginners" curriculum that minimises the benefits of prior learning even where it is continuous. Although the National Curriculum has tried to change this situation by instituting both an R–10 and a 7–10 curriculum, in practice there are many barriers to high schools offering separate classes for students with prior learning and for beginners. Unfortunately, by the end of year 7, any advantage of prior study is typically lost.

While efforts to allow students to continue the language they began in primary school are laudable, with the diversity in pathways into high school, and the variety of languages taught, it is unlikely that the issue of mixed classes of beginning and continuing students at high school will go away. However, if the outcomes of primary school language programs have as much to do with generic language learning skills, general language awareness and cross cultural skills as language-specific skills, then all students can potentially benefit from primary school language learning, whether they continue with the same language in high school or pick up a different one, as long as the early years of high school enable them to build on their primary school learning. Perhaps it would be more profitable for authorities to focus less on achieving the unachievable goal of continuity for all students and more on what goes on in the transition years of junior high school, to ensure that both continuing and beginning students find the learning enriching and challenging, instead of the current situation in which both groups are "disadvantaged" in some way.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS IN THE SECONDARY SECTOR

The main structural issues in secondary schools are associated with the number of years during which language learning is compulsory, and with the treatment of Japanese once it becomes elective. There is wide variation across the country with regard to the years when language is compulsory, although two years or less appears to be the most widespread situation. Once Japanese becomes an elective subject, many teachers complain that it is timetabled against other very attractive options which discourage students from continuing.

The high drop-out rate when Japanese becomes an elective, particularly in schools where this occurs after only one year of study, also has a negative effect on the viability of the subject itself, and thus threatens the opportunity to continue for those students who wish to do so. Schools are often unwilling or unable to support small classes, and anecdotally there is an increasing trend to combine small classes at years 11 and 12, and even lower down the school. This situation is very difficult for both teachers and students, and tends to result in even more students choosing not to continue. This can lead in turn to the demise of Japanese as a senior secondary subject in the school. In some states and territories the numbers at senior secondary level are now at a critical low, and this impacts on teachers and their mutual support, on community perceptions of the place and viability of language learning and on student choices.

YEAR 12 ISSUES

Debates about increasing the numbers of students who continue with language studies in senior secondary levels often ignore or sidestep the fundamental fact that subject choices are finite – so choosing Japanese will entail either overloading, or not choosing something else. In comparison to many other countries, the number of subjects studied at year 12 in Australia is quite low: five or six is the norm in Queensland and Victoria, but this falls to four or five in South Australia and Northern Territory, where recent changes served to make it more common for students to decide not to include a fifth subject. This led to an immediate drop in year 12 Japanese enrolments, which, in systems with already very low year 12 enrolments despite healthy numbers in lower secondary school, has serious implications for viability of courses at lower levels as well. Anecdotally, Japanese is the fifth or sixth subject in terms of priorities for many students, so they will take it if the system encourages them to take six subjects, but will drop it if they believe that taking only four or five subjects will optimise their chances of success.

There is much talk about the desirability of language study, but much less about the need to make room for and incentivise language study for more students. In Victoria, for example, there is an incentive to take six subjects, although five is sufficient for completion of year 12 and university entrance, because students gain points towards university entrance for all subjects taken (limited to 10% of the score for the fifth and sixth subject), whereas in other states points gained are limited to the 4 or 5 top subjects completed. My research shows that in Victoria and Queensland, year 12 students of Japanese are much more likely to be taking six subjects than is the norm, although this does not apply in NSW, where the existence of "extension" units incentivises depth of study in a narrower range of subjects rather than breadth. The impact of these different systems on language learning deserves more widespread recognition and discussion.

At year 12, increasingly competitive university entrance, at least for popular courses, leads to subject choices dominated by the need to maximise marks. Teachers report that there is a perception amongst students that Japanese is difficult and requires more work than other subjects to obtain a good mark, and this perception is probably justified. As marks are based on normal curves within the subject, only partly modified by statistical manipulations based on calculations of the relative difficulty of subjects, there is also a problem that if there are numbers of students with some extra background in a language above what is acquired through schooling, then these students will have an advantage and occupy the higher mark ranges, making them inaccessible to students without such background. While there are relatively low numbers of students in Australia with a home background in Japanese, there are increasing numbers of students spending time in Japan and large numbers of students who are literate in Chinese who have an advantage in the learning of kanji. Whether it is justified or not, many students without such advantages feel that they are not on a level playing field, and are therefore discouraged from continuing with their studies.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR

As mentioned above, anecdotal evidence suggests that student numbers in Japanese have grown in some universities, and decreased in others, making it very difficult to discern national trends. On the one hand, in an increasingly austere funding environment, most universities have rationalised the number of disciplines and subjects offered, and this has led to a decrease in Japanese subjects offered in many institutions, and the dropping of the language entirely in a few cases. On the other hand, structural changes such as the introduction of "breadth" units at Melbourne University have supported language teaching. Another structural initiative has been the use of a separate Diploma in Language to allow students who do not have room in their main degree to add on a language major. In 2013 the Australian government increased funding of places in these Diplomas for some institutions, which has enhanced its attractiveness and availability (Lane 2013). However, it must be said that in institutions where numbers have grown substantially, anecdotally most of the growth appears to be in enrolments in elective units, not in students majoring in Japanese.

In summary, it is clear that many of the changes in student numbers at each level are related to policy and institutional factors. Some of these are the result of state/territory and federal government policies on language teaching, or on Asian languages in particular, but many are associated with more general educational policies, usually implemented without much consideration of their impact on language learning. In an environment of competing priorities within a "crowded curriculum", language teaching often struggles for attention and resources. If governments are serious about increasing the number of Australians who are competent in Japanese, more serious attention to language education must be given in all areas of educational policy development, and not just restricted to the planning of language-specific initiatives.

CURRICULUM AND TEACHING APPROACHES

In 2009 the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established and began work on a national curriculum. For Japanese, a "scope and sequence" (curriculum) for years F–10 was released in 2015 (ACARA 2015) and will start to be implemented in some states in 2016. However, decisions about how and when to implement the Australian curriculum remain in the hands of the state authorities, and there is considerable variation in how that is occurring.

In addition, schools and individual teachers have considerable autonomy with regard to specific content and teaching approach. As has been mentioned, in primary schools in particular, curriculum and standards vary widely.

A feature of Australian primary education in general is that cross-disciplinary theme-based learning is encouraged. While traditionally, school cross-curriculum planning has often excluded languages, this feature provides fertile ground in some schools for content-based approaches to language teaching, such as Immersion and, more recently, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning; see, for example, chapters by Howard and Kurihara in this volume). Some state authorities have actively funded and encouraged such developments, and they have been influential in informing the practices of teachers in regular programs as well. Recent developments include the introduction of CLIL initiatives in a range of Victorian primary schools, to complement the 3 "bi-lingual" programs established in the late 1990s, the introduction of primary immersion in NSW and Queensland schools and the first high school immersion program, at Robina High School in Queensland.

In secondary schools, commonly used textbooks and the demands of preparing students for year 12 assessment have led to more standardised and more structured approaches to curriculum design than in primary schools. However, there is still considerable variation in both quality and content, affected by the different needs and backgrounds of both teachers and students, and different policy settings in terms of time allocation and duration of compulsory study. In addition, innovations in ICT are increasingly influential, and allow teachers and students access to a rich range of resources and technologies not previously available. Unfortunately, curriculum design, particularly at the senior level, has not always kept pace with developing technologies and resources, and it is common to hear that while teachers use technology creatively and extensively up until year 10, in years 11 and 12 they go back to more traditional approaches, to prepare students for pen and paper exams.

CHANGING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on cross cultural and intercultural knowledge and skills, in particular the kinds of intercultural skills that are transferrable across languages. As both Australia and the rest of the world become more multi-lingual and multi-cultural there is a recognition that, even where English is used as a lingua franca, intercultural competence is a key to success, and there is an expectation that learning Japanese will provide students not just with the competence to interact in Japanese, but to interact more competently in English with others from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, there is a recognition that learning Japanese can promote language awareness and literacy (including online literacy), and also contribute to general educational skills and personal development. Policy makers and curriculum planners have increasingly focused on these "additional benefits" of language learning, partly because they recognise and believe in them and partly, perhaps, because they are a way of "selling" language to Australian parents, students and policy makers who may not believe the capacity to interact in Japanese is of much use or relevance.
While teachers are generally open to these ideas, in practical terms, despite some exemplary innovations, it is not clear that teaching across the board has yet adapted adequately to reflect the changing goals. Many teachers still find it challenging to add new social and cultural dimensions while still covering the linguistic skills traditionally focused on.

STUDENTS

The diversity in student backgrounds and interests has continued to grow in recent years. For example, in a year 7 Japanese class, there will usually be a combination of students who have studied Japanese at primary school and those who have not. In addition, a few students will have already travelled to Japan, and students who are already multilingual will study alongside students who are monolingual in English. Finally, there will be students who are regularly consuming Japanese popular culture outside the classroom and those who are not, and there may even be a smattering of background speakers. Such diversity provides both challenges and opportunities, and while Australian teachers are generally creative and flexible, they often find it difficult to develop programs which are suitable for a varied student population.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

Despite the emphasis on economic imperatives in official support for Japanese language teaching, this is not always the most important factor in the choices of students themselves. In Australian society, where knowledge of another language is often not viewed as a core competency, affective factors seem to be more important than instrumental factors such as future career use in motivating students to commence or continue the study of Japanese. Recent research which I (not yet published) and others (Northwood & Thomson 2012) have conducted shows that liking Japanese, interest in Japanese culture, and desire to travel to Japan are the most important motivations for the study of Japanese at all levels. Usefulness for employment or tertiary study is a less important, although still significant, factor at school level, and becomes more important at higher levels of university study. It seems to be rare for strong instrumental motivations to be expressed by students in the absence of intrinsic motivations and cultural interest, and this suggests that it is interest in Japanese which is the primary motivator. Students who wish to continue their studies then look around to see if they can make use of them, and at that point they start to consider uses of Japanese in future careers, and build these into their visions of their "L2 future selves" (Dörnyei & Ryan 2015).

TEACHERS

Teacher supply is most often mentioned as a problem in remote and regional areas, or in primary education where new policies have led to surges in demand and conditions for Japanese teachers in some schools are extremely unattractive. In general, teacher skills and qualifications have risen, both in terms of the language competence of non-native speaking teachers (many of whom have spent time in Japan) and the English skills and familiarity with the Australian education system of teachers who were born in Japan. While the majority of teachers are still non-native speakers, the proportion of native/non-native speaker teachers differs from area to area. Language assistants are also commonly employed, either on a paid basis or as unpaid volunteers. Teachers in other languages often comment on the harmonious way in which Japanese teachers from different backgrounds work together in schools and teachers associations, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers' associations exist in each jurisdiction, either as independent associations or sub-groups of the Modern Language Teachers Association. While activity levels vary, in general they play a very important role, in some states being one of the major providers of professional development to Japanese teachers, as well as hosting lively websites and newsletters and running activities for students. Email lists and social networking sites are also very active. In recent years there has been more recognition of the need for associations around Australia to work together, and The Japan Foundation, assisted by the MCJLE, have hosted meetings to facilitate networking and joint activities.

CHALLENGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

In conclusion, I would like to highlight some of the main challenges that Japanese language education faces and suggest some of the responses which will be necessary to ensure that Japanese remains one of the strongest languages in Australian schools and universities. Some of these challenges are shared with other languages, and require action at the highest policy levels to make the education system more "languages-friendly". Other changes must take place in individual schools, and will require action by individual teachers as well as the support of school management and the broader school community. In either case, it is unlikely that change will occur without the various stakeholders joining forces and working to influence the broader agendas in Australia.

REFORMING STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

At the most fundamental level, we need to convince our schools and universities to set aside adequate space in the curriculum and resources for language teaching. One way of doing this is to demonstrate the wider cross-curricular benefits which students can gain from studying a language such as Japanese. We also need to look for creative solutions to the old conundrums of how to find extra time for language, and provide better conditions for language teachers in ways that minimise the extra costs imposed. New ways of structuring primary school staffing, as well as content-based approaches and cross-curricular partnerships are all promising avenues to explore in this regard. Creative solutions to transition issues are also of prime importance, acknowledging that R–12 continuity of language learning will likely remain the exception, not the norm. At senior secondary level we urgently need to find ways of addressing perceived and real fairness issues, as well as to incentivise language study.

REPOSITIONING JAPANESE (GOALS AND "BRANDING")

In order to reaffirm the relevance and appropriateness of the study of Japanese for Australians, policy makers and the general public need to be persuaded not only of the continuing practical value of competence in Japanese, but also of the broader educational roles which the teaching of Japanese can perform so effectively. To achieve this, we need to work on both content and perceptions of our subject. We know that Japanese is a language and culture which engages students' interest, and which can serve as a vehicle for intercultural learning and for language awareness more generally, and also as a gateway to other cultures and languages of Asia, and beyond. We need to both promote these benefits to parents, students, our colleagues and the community, and also to teach in ways that demonstrate them.

RENEWING GOALS, CURRICULUM, TEACHING METHODS

In addition, we face the serious but rewarding challenge of making the study of Japanese at the same time less "difficult", but more "interesting". We need to recognise that sometimes we can engage students better by raising the bar so that they feel that what they are learning is worthwhile, but we must do this in a way that is achievable. To make Japanese less "difficult" for our students, we need to draw on all the affordances of ICT, and encourage students to use these tools to communicate more, and more meaningfully. One thing that all the experts on second language acquisition agree on is that greater interaction in and with a language is the key to learning success. It also needs to be recognised that some of the fundamental skills of Japanese literacy are very different in a digital world to a pen and paper world and that both what and how we teach needs to change accordingly. We can lessen the time-consuming emphasis on the writing of kanji in favour of the recognition skills on which digital literacy depends. We also need to shift our thinking away from aiming for grammatical correctness as the main priority, and focus more on communicative success. It is common to pay lip service to the importance of communication and task achievement, but when it comes to the crunch – that is marking criteria – it is still grammatical accuracy that gets the most attention. While we apply native-speaker standards in judging our students' language production, they will always fall short and fear falling short. We need to value what they can do, and show them its value in doing things they want to do in the world.

A corollary of this is that we need to recognise that many of our students are exposed to more Japanese outside the classroom than inside. While we focus on basic textbook exercises, they are looking up pop song lyrics and checking out the Facebook pages of the friends they met on their school trip. We need to link these activities with what is going on in the classroom. We also need to keep striving to cater for individual differences in our programs, so we continue to challenge the advanced students while keeping expectations for the weaker students reasonable. This will inevitably lead to different outcomes, and how to value them in our norm-driven systems is an ongoing issue which is not going to go away.

An urgent priority, which is now more approachable than ever before due to the advent of the national curriculum, is agreeing on goals and minimum outcomes for the primary years and working to actually achieve them consistently – not just on paper, but in fact. Only when this has started to happen can secondary teachers be persuaded to seriously value what has been achieved at primary school, and to continue to build on it, rather than ignore it. But to achieve consistency of outcomes, we need consistency of inputs in the form of teaching time and teacher quality, and the support of the whole school in acknowledging that these outcomes are important – and for this we need to go back to the structural reforms mentioned above.

At all levels, we need to continue to work on strategies to integrate cultural content and intercultural skills, and to demonstrate their relevance. This is easy to do badly, leading to trivialising and stereotyping or even to confirmation of existing prejudices. It is thus an area where sharing units of work can be particularly rewarding. Japanese teachers are justly proud of being able to produce their own materials, tailored for their own classes, but a readily available core of expertly produced, accurate and engaging materials, which still allow tailoring for individual situations, would be a great boon in this area. We have many materials which deliver cultural knowledge, but fewer that truly develop intercultural skills.

Finally, we should continue to develop approaches which integrate content and language, such as CLIL, or at least modified CLIL suited to Australian conditions (Turner 2013). Sometimes the content will be Japanese cultural content, taught because it is valuable in its own right, and sometimes it will be content from other curriculum areas, like visual arts or maths.

These are no small challenges, but I believe Japanese teachers have the attitudes, skills and mutual support structures to meet them.

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