
FUNK UP YOUR JAPANESE WITH A FLASHMOB!

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of a Flashmob in a Junior Primary Japanese program. The Junior Primary years of language learning are the first opportunity for teachers to instil the enthusiasm, confidence, and basic skills upon which all future language learning is based. A Flashmob fosters ideal conditions for language learning for young learners. The basics of the technology required for a Flashmob are discussed, focussing on wireless speakers with Bluetooth connectivity. The chapter concludes that a Flashmob is more than a teaching and learning tool, but also has broader appeal in the school community and is a highly successful medium for advocacy of the Japanese program.

INTRODUCTION

A Flashmob is a valuable addition to a Junior Primary Japanese program. It generates engaged and productive students because the learning is fun, active and physical; uses songs and rhyme, music and movement to aid learning; is student-centred; makes connections to students' reality; and is not reliant on literacy (many students at this level are pre-literate), although thinking about syllables and rhyme aids students' developing literacy skills in preparation for learning hiragana.

WHAT IS A FLASHMOB?

A Flashmob is a group of people in a public place who seem to come out of nowhere and start singing and/or dancing to music which also materialises out of nowhere. Little by little, people who at first appeared to be bystanders then join in the dancing. A key feature of Flashmobs is that the group does not bow or expect applause at the end but just melts away, back into the crowd or to what they were doing before. Of course, the Flashmob participants have all practised and prepared the performance beforehand, usually connecting via social media; at school our preparation is done in the classroom.

THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

The notion of a Flashmob sits easily within the Australian Curriculum. ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, recognises the needs and learning styles of Foundation Years students in the Draft Curriculum for Japanese, stating that in the early years,

Japanese is used in classroom interactions, routines and familiar activities, supported by the use of concrete materials and resources, gestures and body language. At this stage, play and imaginative activities, games, music, movement and familiar routines provide essential scaffolding and context for language development.

(The) initial focus is on listening to the sounds and patterns of Japanese through activities such as rhymes, songs, clapping and action games. (ACARA 2011, 7)

When we tie all these elements together, it seems perfectly obvious to me that it all leads to a Flashmob ... although that may not be exactly what the Australian Curriculum writers had in mind! A Flashmob dovetails neatly with the General Capability of (Critical and) Creative Thinking, by encouraging learners' divergent and creative thinking (ACARA 2011, 32). A Flashmob embodies several outcomes in the Australian Curriculum, including

Standard 1, Socialising and taking action: Outcome 1.3

Students engage in actions and activities such as songs, rhymes, games and performances, using simple scaffolded language (ACARA 2013, 9)

Standard 1, Responding to and expressing imaginative experience: Outcome 1.7

Students respond to imaginative experience through actions and expressions such as (among other things)... dance and simple text creation (ACARA 2013, 11)

Standard 2, Understanding Language Awareness, Outcome 2.22

Students recognise how languages and cultures influence each other, and identify word borrowings (ACARA 2013, 25)

FLASHMOBS AND JAPANESE CULTURE

There is something very Japanese about a Flashmob. The whole group thing. The notion of working together as a team is a fundamental of a Flashmob, and talking about dance moves allows us as teachers to frame a conversation about aspects of Japanese culture in simple terminology that is pitched at Foundation Years. We can compare a Flashmob, which is successful when everyone does the same dance moves, with the emphasis placed on group harmony in Japan – and contrast that with disco, where everyone does their own thing. Of course thanks to Footsteps Dance Class, many children are already familiar with group dances such as YMCA.

WHY A FLASHMOB?

A FLASHMOB IS FUN

For the majority of our students, the Foundation Years are their first experience with language learning. First impressions last. A Flashmob is a great opportunity to foster in our students a positive, enthusiastic attitude to learning Japanese, so that our learners very quickly become self-motivated, one of the key traits of good language learners (Greene 1995, Scholefield 1986). Skills in motivating language learners are 'central to teaching effectiveness' (Dörnyei and Csizér 1998, 207). Positive attitudes to learning help students 'to manage their own learning and develop the requisite skills to become effective learners of that subject' (OECD 2004, 110); 'without positive attitudes and perceptions, students have little chance of learning proficiently, if at all' (Marzano 1992). Preparing for a Flashmob is a wonderful way to foster positive attitudes and student motivation.

A FLASHMOB IS ACTIVE

Movement is 'the key to learning' (Gilbert 1997). This physical aspect is especially important for boys in the Foundation Years, as boys' fine motor skills and reading skills often lag behind those of girls (Simos 2014b). The Australian Government Principals Association's president states that 'young boys... need a lot of movement' (Maiden 2014, 53). It is important to create opportunities for success by incorporating 'large movement' activities in lessons; 'success usually leads to increased confidence, thus stimulating learning' (Ang 2002).

A FLASHMOB INVOLVES WORD PLAY

Playing with sounds and syllables assists students in their development of literacy skills, and is the central idea behind successful English literacy programs such as Letterland and Jolly Phonics. The alliteration, assonance, rhyme and repetition involved in creating a Flashmob are great tools for assisting students' vocabulary retention.

A FLASHMOB USES MUSIC AND SONG

Music evokes movement, readies the brain for reading, helps develop memory, and is a creative experience (Harman 2008). There would be very few of us who learned the English alphabet without the assistance of the ABC song. Songs help students to learn and memorise new vocabulary. Popular songs, songs which students know from the radio or from their association with popular movies, increase interest and motivation in the language learning classroom (Kanel 1997).

A FLASHMOB IS STUDENT-CENTRED

In student-centred learning, students are active participants in their own learning, developing learning-how-to-learn skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking (National Center for Research on Teacher Learning 1999). Creating something such as a Flashmob performance gives students time in which they can reflect on their language learning, and gives them tangible prompts of the target language.

A FLASHMOB CONNECTS TO STUDENTS' REALITY

Junior Primary Japanese learning involves realia of many different types, including authentic items from Japan, alongside familiar toys such as teddy bears, and dress-ups used in role-plays. Connections with students' reality are not limited to what can be brought into the classroom, but can also be made by taking the classroom outside to the students' world of the playground. A Flashmob makes connections to students' reality by utilising the schoolyard and play area, by involving familiar songs, and by utilising props which children have brought from home.

A FLASHMOB UTILISES AGE-APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

My indispensable Flashmob technology is very simple: a good quality wireless speaker, and an iPhone. With modern technology, wireless speakers are increasingly smaller and more lightweight yet still deliver high quality of sound with no distortion. With Bluetooth technology there are no cords to trip over, no wires, adapters or outlets. I create my Music List on my iPhone in the desired running order, and press Play. There is no need to press Play each time for the next song, it's all done in the Music List.

A FLASHMOB IS NOT RELIANT ON LITERACY

Many students in Foundation Years are pre-literate, a crucial yet oft-ignored fact in second language teaching and learning programs. That is to say, many young students do not recognise any letters of the alphabet and cannot form or write any letters (Simos 2014b). So our teaching at Foundation level cannot rely on students being able to read and write words or sentences, much less decipher and follow written instructions. A Flashmob focusses on developing students' macroskills of speaking and listening, and is not dependent for success on any level of student literacy.

CREATING A FLASHMOB

In Junior Primary, I have found a Flashmob works well when around half a dozen classes are involved. I give each class or group a 'signature song', and I like to add one song at the end for the entire group to perform as a finale. With a greater number of classes, it would be best if the classes performed as Year Levels, or buddied up with their Buddy Classes (a great age-appropriate way to discuss the notions of *senpai/kōhai*). The signature song of each class or group is their 'point of entry', the moment they suddenly morph from bystanders to participants in the Flashmob.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SONGS FOR A FLASHMOB

The songs you choose are the key to the Flashmob success. Popular songs are perfect, and songs with an uplifting dance beat are ideal. Choosing the right songs is not difficult. Many teachers already have their finger right on the trend pulse. If not, it is easy to google the sound tracks of the latest children's movies: *Minions*, *Despicable Me*, the *Madagascar* and *Ice Age* movies (in late 2014). This will guarantee that a good proportion of your students are not only familiar with the songs but love them too.

If there happens to be a giant One Hit Wonder, all the better – who could have known that Gangnam Style would be the kindergarten set's favourite...?

My Flashmobs are not about translating any part of the song into Japanese, although that could be a great idea for secondary students. Instead, my other key ingredient in choosing songs is that the songs need to have a clear repeated chorus which **sounds like** some target vocabulary. The key is the number of syllables, hopefully with some similar sound. This will require some hard and at times devious thinking by the teacher. Students in the Foundation Years love this kind of word play, and it will get them thinking about syllables, word sounds, alliteration and rhyme, all of which contribute to their literacy skills both in Japanese and English. Thinking about syllables is a vital precursor to the learning of hiragana and katakana. Students need to shift their thinking from the sounding out of each sound in the traditional phonics approach to literacy to focussing on the syllables of words. Discussing the syllables and the 'sounds like...' word games of Flashmob lyrics gives an excellent grounding for students' conceptual understanding of the Japanese syllabaries.

Students sing only that part of the song which has been changed to Japanese words, and are encouraged to sing very very loudly, to completely drown out the original wording. Young students naturally take great delight in being exhorted to be as loud as possible.

The wording does not need to make any sense, in fact the nonsense sentences created are part of the fun, and part of the learning process. The first class to sing is always the oldest and most mature class for they will have to learn and perform all of the songs and all of the dance moves. One by one each class joins the Flashmob, changing from bystanders to participants; the classes join in at the front so that all students have the opportunity to be the stars of the show. The last class is the youngest class, who have only been required to learn two songs, their class's signature song and the finale.

Here are some examples from my own Flashmobs (it helps if you have the tune in your head as you sing along):

Artist	Original lyrics	We sang:
Queen	We will, we will rock you	<i>ichi ni san shi go roku</i>
One Direction	You don't know you're beautiful	<i>sayonara, ja mata</i>
Taio Cruz (Dynamite)	Ayo! Gotta let go	<i>domo arigato</i>
The Rocky Horror Show	Let's do the Time Warp again	Let's do the <i>konnichiwa</i>
Madagascar's Cartoon Band	I like to move it, move it	I like to <i>sushi sushi</i>
The Chipmunks	Shake your groove thing	Shake your <i>yubi</i>

And of course the crowd favourite was Psy's Gangnam Style, with its most inappropriate lyrics of Hey Sexy Lady, which all good school sing-alongs had already changed to Hey chips and gravy. We very loudly sang *ohayo gozaimasu*.

My first Flashmob was just disparate phrases as shown above, anything that was target vocabulary in the Foundation Years curriculum. It was such a success that I decided to do another the following year, with the added improvement of a theme, in this case Colours, one of the central topics in Junior Primary language programs.

With the Colour Theme, students were asked to bring props. Each class was instructed to bring anything in their song colour, about the size of a Beanie kid. I requested that the item also be soft (no hard edges that might be dangerous when waved around in a group). Students would raise their prop as part of the choreography when they sang the colour. Bringing a prop is one of those wonderful positive things which furthers the link between home and school. There were some very inventive props with our Colour Theme Flashmob: assorted Beanie kids, teddy bears and toys, a football (*aka*), a shower cap (*pinku*), a rubber glove (*pinku*), socks (*kuro*), tennis balls (*midori*) and Easter bunny ears (*murasaki*). What a delightful fun way to foster communication between students, parents and teachers.

Our Colour Theme Flashmob used these songs:

Artist	Original lyrics	We sang:
Pharrell Williams	Happy	<i>aka</i>
Katy Perry	Firework	<i>chairo</i>
Maroon 5	(I got the) Moves like Jagger	(I got the) <i>murasaki</i>
Carly Rae Jepsen	Good Time	<i>kuro</i>
B Roots	Everybody dance now	Everybody <i>orenji</i>
One Direction	I want I want	<i>pinku pinku</i>
Katy Perry	(You're gonna hear me) Roar	(You're gonna hear) <i>midori</i>
Village People	YMCA	<i>momoiro</i>

DANCE MOVES

In my Junior Primary classes, my oldest students are only eight years old, so requiring them to learn numerous songs with multiple complicated dance moves is unreasonable. It is important to keep the dance moves simple – after all, the event is more about the words than the dancing. Each Flashmob song comprised just two dance moves: one simple base move, and one more active move for the key phrase, as listed above. The base moves included: swinging arms from side to side, bobbing up and down, and a marching style movement. In the Colour Theme Flashmob, the key phrase choreography involved holding up or holding out the coloured item.

Our time frame for Flashmob preparation was one school term. Here is where the active part of a Flashmob works so well to enhance learning. Many teachers of Junior Primary and even older classes are aware of students' flagging concentration, when halfway through a lesson the class has become fidgety, and we get them all up for a stretch and a wriggle before settling them back with renewed focus (Maiden 2014, The Advertiser 2014). This phenomenon has given rise to a whole genre of activities termed Brain Breaks (Mugurussa 2013). Preparation for a Flashmob makes that active interlude productive, for this is the time to practise the dance moves. Put on the music, everyone moves and sings... and in three minutes the students are ready to sit down and concentrate again.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SURPRISE ELEMENT

As anyone who has watched a Flashmob on Youtube is aware, a key part of a Flashmob is that it needs an unsuspecting audience who will be amazed and delighted. It is therefore important to brief colleagues, all the while keeping these communications from the students. This has been a major factor in the success of my Flashmobs. Foundation Years students just love this element of 'keeping a secret' and 'surprising' their teachers. Their whispers and giggles are part of the fun. My delightful colleagues have played their part admirably, 'not hearing' when the secret is blabbed, 'not noticing' us practising because they are 'concentrating on something else'. Then on the day, astounded looks of surprise and amazement. Foundation Years students adore melodrama, and delight in these overacted responses.

Parents are invited too to watch their children surprise the teachers. The bigger the audience, the better.

The Flashmob idea was so popular that I had parents ringing the school to check that their planned family holiday wouldn't clash with the Flashmob. What a mark of success – I had sick students complaining to Mum that they didn't want to be kept home because they would miss out on their Japanese lesson.

JUNIOR PRIMARY JAPANESE DAY

I have tied our Flashmob to Junior Primary Japanese Day, a day created especially for our youngest students to celebrate their language learning. Students may come in Japanese outfits, or red and white for the Japanese flag. All sorts of wonderful outfits appear, including karate uniforms (white – and some black), football guernseys (a bit of red?) and many Chinese style dress ups. At this stage, I have never ever let the students know if their fantastic outfits are not Japanese, as I feel that would do more harm than good. There always seem to be some amazing kimonos. Last year one boy came all gelled up as Astroboy, and this year there was a Hello Kitty onesie, a wonderful Ninja outfit and even a Ninja Turtle. It all adds to the atmosphere.

My supportive Canteen Manager allows special sushi orders for students and visiting family members for lunch, and this is a great way to round off the day. Of course we say *itadakimasu*.

ENSURING THE FLASHMOB IS AN INCLUSIVE ACTIVITY

It is important that the Flashmob is an inclusive activity which caters for all students. Arrangements must be made so that students with any disability are not excluded. For example, but not limited to: wheelchair access; positioning of students who have anxiety; adapting choreography for students on the autism spectrum. Discussion with home room teachers and support workers about how best to cater for students with any special needs should be part of the Flashmob preparation so that all students have equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the activity.

CONCLUSION: THE FLASHMOB AS A TOOL FOR ADVOCACY

Last year Junior Primary Japanese Day happened to coincide with a Transition day, that is, a day where kindergarten students and their parents visit the school in preparation for the child beginning school the following term. Visiting parents were blown away with our students' facility and confidence with the language, but mostly with the aura of enthusiasm and positive energy shown by students towards learning Japanese.

The novelty of the Flashmob idea was also picked up by our state's newspaper, *The Advertiser* (Simos 2014a). Japanese concerts, Japanese plays and musicals, Japanese Festival Days are all fantastic – and my school has done them all with great success. But the Flashmob is something else again, a funky reinvention of the concept of a Japanese concert. The unusual combination of Flashmob and language learning sparked the interest of *The Advertiser's* Education journalist. This all feeds in to advocating for the study of Japanese, both within the school and in the wider community.

In conclusion, I highly recommend to all teachers of the Foundation Years, add a bit of zing to your program, and Funk up your Japanese with a Flashmob!

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