
A WHOLE-OF-SCHOOL APPROACH TO PROMOTING JAPANESE INVOLVING STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges facing a Japanese teacher is advocating to the school community the importance of learning Japanese. This chapter outlines different strategies implemented at a secondary school in Melbourne which aim to promote the importance of learning languages and encourage students to continue with their Japanese study from the compulsory years into the elective years. The strategies outlined in this report can be adapted and modified to suit different school contexts.

INTRODUCTION

One of the dimensions in the "Professional standards for accomplished teaching of languages and cultures" (AFMLTA 2005) developed by the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Associations is advocacy. The Advocacy Standard outlines that "accomplished languages and cultures teachers are advocates for language learning, intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity, linguistic and cultural diversity. They are advocates for languages both with and for students, schools and communities and engage with the wider community to promote languages" (AFMLTA 2005, 6). This chapter will outline the advocacy initiatives implemented at St Columba's College which have involved the whole school community and have assisted in raising the profile of the languages department within the school, thereby encouraging more students to continue with their language studies past the compulsory years.

BACKGROUND

THE LANGUAGES PROGRAM AT ST COLUMBA'S COLLEGE

St Columba's College is a Catholic secondary girls' school in Victoria. The College offers three languages: French, Italian and Japanese, to VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) level. These three languages are the most widely taught in Victorian schools. As noted by Joe Lo Bianco, "Traditionally the domain of languages education, the secondary school, really operates as two distinct sub-domains: the compulsory years and the post-compulsory years" (Lo Bianco 2009, 48). Prior to entering the College, students in Year 6 choose one of the three languages on offer and they are required to study this as a compulsory part of the school curriculum from Year 7 to Year 9. Language learning becomes an elective from Year 10, and with this transition the challenge for the languages staff is to encourage students to continue their language study into the post-compulsory years.

There are six core classes of approximately 29 students in the Year 7 cohort each year. Either two or three of these classes will be French and Italian, with only one Japanese class. There are a number of possible reasons for the relatively greater popularity of French and Italian. There is a strong Italian community in the area surrounding the College. Most of the feeder primary schools teach Italian, and students choose to continue studying Italian from primary school into secondary school. The romance element of French seems to appeal to students in an all-girls school. Often students cite reasons on the Year 7 online language preference form such as an interest in fashion or a desire to travel to France as their motivation to study French. The perception that Japanese is difficult, requiring study of three alphabets and imposing a heavy workload, would be the main reason why students choose French and Italian over Japanese.

The parent body at the College is supportive of language learning. The high number of attendees at the language related events (detailed below) is evidence of the positive support offered by parents. The terms of that support are suggested in a quote from one of the parents in the evaluation of the Year 9 languages dinner: "I believe that given the school has gone to the effort of hosting a language event it is my responsibility to attend and participate in my daughter's learning." The Asia Education Foundation conducted an Australia-wide online survey on parent attitudes to learning Asian languages, and the data and findings were presented in the report "Parent attitudes towards Asian language learning in schools" (The University of Melbourne and Education Services Australia Limited 2015). The report highlights the importance of engaging parents in their child's learning. The College supports this and believes that learning is a partnership between teachers, students and parents, and consequently the range of language advocacy initiatives it has undertaken have sought to involve parents in their daughter's language learning.

ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

Given the above context, advocating the importance of studying languages is an important role of the Languages Program and the team of languages teachers at the College. Although the initiatives outlined below focus on Japanese, they are representative of the activities undertaken in all the languages offered at the College.

The initiatives to raise the profile of Japanese within the College have been categorised into three areas:

- value-adding to the educational experience provided at the College: events for students
- value-adding to the educational experience provided at the College: events for parents and students
- simple initiatives

VALUE-ADDING TO THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE PROVIDED AT THE COLLEGE: EVENTS FOR STUDENTS

To ensure students receive a rounded education, a number of events for students are provided outside normal classes which value-add to their educational experience and are "highly significant in providing a focus and motivation for learning" (de Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010, 52). Study tours to Japan are offered to senior students on a cyclical basis, once every three years, and are available to students studying Japanese in Years 10 to 12. The College is fortunate to have a sister-school relationship in Kumamoto. A teddy bear project was initiated a number of years ago to further strengthen the sister-school relationship and to ensure the relationship was ongoing and not just limited to visits to either school. A teddy bear was exchanged between schools, and the students took photos of the teddy bears in various locations around Melbourne and Kumamoto. The students uploaded the photos onto a blog which was set up for the project, and a caption was written in Japanese to accompany each photo. Students from both schools were able to view the blog, and this task enabled the students to practise writing in Japanese, from which they could see a real application for their Japanese language skills. The photos also served to introduce the Japanese students to life in Australia, and the St Columba's students to life in Japan.

Immersion full-day and afternoon opportunities have been offered to students in Years 9 and 11. These year levels have been strategically chosen. For Year 11 students it provides a revision experience prior to commencing Year 12 Japanese. As Year 9 is the final year of compulsory language learning at the College, offering an immersion experience strives to motivate students in their language learning and encourage more of them to continue their language studies into the post-compulsory years. During these days students have engaged in a variety of language-based and cultural activities. These opportunities are valuable for students to work with other students who are studying Japanese. They see that they are not alone in their Japanese learning journey.

A Languages Week is offered at the College each year, scheduled to coincide with the Victorian Multicultural Commission's Cultural Diversity Week. During this week students engage in many language-related activities including daily quiz questions, lunchtime films, games, and sampling food from Japan.

Term-based competitions also encourage and motivate students in their language learning. A different competition is offered each term. A poster competition is offered in Term 1; students design a poster based on the Languages Program theme for the year. The winning poster is used to promote the Languages Program for the whole year. An art-based competition is the focus for Term 2; in it, students are invited to create an artwork that reflects Japan. In Term 3, students are invited to record a song in Japanese for the singing competition. A cake-making competition has also been offered, where the students design a cake that reflects Japan.

Excursions throughout the year form a part of the Japanese curriculum and aim to connect the students' learning of Japanese to the community. As the College is located in metropolitan Melbourne, excursions to places in the city area with links to Japan – for example the Japanese Consulate and Japanese restaurants – can easily be organised. Students in Year 8 also connect to the community by visiting a local primary school where Japanese is taught, and here they read out the short stories they have written in Japanese. In regional areas where access to Japan-related places is perhaps limited, opportunities for students to practise their Japanese in authentic contexts using the local environment can still be offered. For example, at a regional school, at Year 10 level each year when the students learn to describe the location of objects, they visit the local shopping strip opposite the school and complete a language exercise which provides an authentic context for practising the location of objects in Japanese. Students answer questions in Japanese; for example, "What is in front of the bakery?". Furthermore, students at Year 9 visit the local community radio station and record their weather report speaking task.

At St Columba's College, a few years ago an inquiry unit was implemented at Year 10, for which students researched the question, "Where can I take my Japanese?" As part of the work for this unit students completed a "city experience". The day was divided into three parts. Firstly, in small groups the students walked a designated street or shopping centre in Melbourne and took photos of the evidence of Japan. Students took photos of Japanese signs, restaurants and Japanese products they could see in shop windows. Secondly, students completed a treasure hunt in Japanese which took them to Japan-specific locations in the city. Lastly, the students visited a Japanese company and interviewed an employee in Japanese to find out about the company and the work that is done there. The unit is designed to be modified and used in schools in both metropolitan and regional areas. For example, in areas where there are no Japanese companies, advances in technology have enabled interviews with Japanese speakers to be conducted online through services such as Skype.

VALUE-ADDING TO THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE PROVIDED AT THE COLLEGE: EVENTS FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS

"Building and sustaining parental support for language learning remains a challenge for Australian education" (The University of Melbourne and Education Services Australia Limited 2015, 4). It has been reported that many Australian "parents do not see the relevance of learning languages" (Australian Council of State School Organisations 2007, 22). With this in mind, the College initiated two languages promotional events which involve parents in their daughter's language learning. At the start of the year parents of Year 7 students are invited to the College to experience a lesson of Japanese just as their daughter does. The event lasts an hour, and at the commencement of the evening parents gather to enjoy Japanese food and to collect language promotional materials. The parents then move to the classroom and experience a short lesson of Japanese. It is a valuable experience for parents to experience language learning in a secondary school setting and the contemporary approaches to learning and teaching, which are no doubt different to the way languages were taught to them during their secondary school days.

The second event is a "Languages and Careers Dinner". The evening commences with a cultural performance, and for the past two years Dr Russell Cross from the University of Melbourne has provided an opening address focusing on the importance of learning languages. The attendees then enjoy food reflecting the languages offered at the College. After the main course, three former students representing the three languages offered at the College talk about their journey in language learning past secondary school. (For the purpose of including former students in such an event, it is important to ensure the school maintains a database of former students and tracks their pathways beyond secondary school. This will make it considerably easier to locate former students to be guest speakers.) The dinner is advertised as a "Languages and Careers Christmas in July Dinner" and the College Hall is decorated in a Christmas theme for the evening.

These events are strategically placed in the College calendar. The Year 7 evening aims to encourage parents to support their daughter's language learning from the commencement of their secondary schooling. The Year 9 dinner is held around subject selection time in July for Year 9 students going into Year 10 in the following year. The aim of the Year 9 languages dinner is to encourage students to continue their language studies into the post-compulsory years through listening to the stories of young people, and to gain the support of parents in encouraging their daughter to continue with her language studies. "Encouraging their child to study the target language and communicating positive attitudes about the language and culture are two important dimensions of this support" (The University of Melbourne and Education Services Australia Limited 2015, 4). It is hoped that listening to the speeches on the evening will prompt conversations at home about the importance of language learning, and the students will decide to continue their Japanese studies into Year 10 when the subject becomes an elective. The feedback from these events has been overwhelmingly positive, and parents have appreciated the opportunity to be a part of their daughter's learning.

SIMPLE INITIATIVES

At the Orientation Day for new Year 7 students they each receive a showbag of information about the College. Within this bag, material to promote the languages program is included. This includes an "I ♥ 日本語" pen, a languages bookmark with the artwork designed by a student and information about the College's Japanese program. In response to questions at parent-teacher interview nights about ways parents can support their child in learning Japanese, a languages fridge magnet was designed. This magnet outlines strategies parents can use to support their daughter as she commences her study of Japanese in Year 7 and is also included in this showbag.

Around the school there is a strong presence of languages. This presence begins at the entrance to the College Reception where a "Welcome to St Columba's College" sign has been translated into Japanese, French and Italian. Mini flags of the countries of the languages offered at the College are also on display in the front office. Buildings have been labelled in both English and Japanese, French and Italian. Inspirational quotes on language learning have also been displayed around the College and translated into the three languages.

In the Catholic tradition, a prayer for the Languages Department was written by the faculty members, and has been translated into Japanese, French and Italian and displayed in all classrooms around the school. This prayer is used at languages events throughout the year. The Japanese flag is also raised at the front of the College during significant events, for example during the visit by the College's Japanese sister school.

The College has invested in a Japanese classroom to create a sense of Japan when students are learning Japanese. The walls are adorned with posters and other materials from Japan and there is also a small tatami mat area in the corner. Detailed information on the College's languages program is also available on the College website for parents and other members of the community to access.

IMPACT ON STUDENT RETENTION THROUGH IMPLEMENTING THE ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

Surveys and focus group interviews with students to measure the success of these initiatives in motivating them to continue their language studies have yet to be undertaken. The number of enrolments in Japanese at the post-compulsory level each year fluctuates and depends greatly on the cohort for that year. Some cohorts are particularly strong language-learning cohorts and others are not. A range of factors contribute to students deciding to continue with their language studies or to discontinue them. Incentives and disincentives for students continuing with language study have been highlighted by de Kretser and Spence-Brown (2010). The greatest measure of the success of these initiatives at St Columba's College has been the increased profile and presence of languages within the school community and the positive feedback received in follow-up surveys conducted with parents on the two initiatives at Years 7 and 9.

CONCLUSION

The initiatives outlined above have sought to increase student retention in Japanese from the compulsory years of language learning to when learning Japanese becomes an elective. These initiatives have also raised the profile of languages not just amongst the students and staff at the College, but with parents and the wider community. The importance of involving all stakeholders in languages education has been highlighted by Scarino and Liddicoat (2009, 13) who write that "the professional stance adopted by teachers to their role and work will recognise parents and other community members as active contributors to learning". The teachers in the Languages Program at St Columba's College are committed to continuing the process of communicating the value of language learning to all members of the school community.

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