
BEING MINDFUL: HOW THE PYP APPROACH ENHANCES LEARNING JAPANESE

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ABSTRACT

Immanuel Primary School is an independent, co-educational International Baccalaureate (IB) accredited school in South Australia. The philosophy of the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) permeates throughout the school community, including the teaching of Japanese. The Japanese program at this school promotes international-mindedness, and technology helps to assist students' learning. Some examples of her Transdisciplinary and Stand Alone Units of Inquiry that ensure language outcomes are presented.

INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching Japanese to primary school children in Australia since 1988, and during this time I have seen and experienced many changes in policy, curriculum and educational pedagogy in this area. Through these changes, many Japanese language teachers have worked tirelessly to motivate students and create engaging and meaningful programs for their students, even though we have often worked in quite difficult situations. One difficulty is that we are often the only Language Other Than English (LOTE)¹ teacher in the school, making collaborative work extremely difficult. Furthermore, many LOTE teachers do not have a dedicated LOTE classroom in which to teach. Very often we are required to teach hundreds of students, and to provide individual reports, despite having limited face-to-face teaching time. On occasion, there has been a lack of support and understanding from management and other non-LOTE classroom teachers.

When my school became an International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) school in 2004, I thought it was simply another change I would have to adapt to. But now, more than ten years after the implementation of PYP, I realise how much this international curriculum framework has helped to enhance and shape the Japanese language program. My approach has shifted to make my educational goals clearer, and the children's Japanese language learning outcomes have improved. They are not just "having fun", learning Japanese language and experiencing aspects of Japanese culture, but are working towards a "bigger picture" – that of becoming international-minded citizens who make a difference in the world.

In this chapter I will discuss how our Japanese language program promotes this international-mindedness and the way technology helps to assist students' learning, and will present some examples of my Transdisciplinary and Stand Alone Units of Inquiry for ensuring language outcomes.

BACKGROUND

THE SCHOOL AND ITS JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Immanuel Primary is a co-educational school that caters to students from Preschool to Year 6, based on the Lutheran faith and located in the western suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia. The school was established in 1970 and shares a campus and outstanding modern facilities with Immanuel College, a Lutheran secondary school. I established the school's Japanese language program in 1989, at which time it was one of the first compulsory Reception ("R", prior to Year 1) to Year 7 programs in South Australia. I taught all 578 students until 2007; however, more recently, a part-time Junior primary Japanese language teacher is responsible for R to Year 2 students, and I teach Year 3 – Year 6 Japanese, as well as taking a Coordinator's role. Students receive one 45 minute lesson per week from R to Year 3, while Year 4 and Year 5 students have one 45 minute and one 30 minute lesson per week, and Year 6 has two 45 minute lessons per week. Japanese language is a very popular subject at Immanuel Primary. Students retain their interest and positive attitude toward Japanese all through the primary years and many take up the subject at Immanuel College.

IB PYP AND THE SCHOOL'S JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

The school began implementing PYP in 2002, gaining authorization in 2004, with evaluation visits in 2008 and 2013. In 2009 I was selected and trained as an IB workshop leader. The Primary Years Programme (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate (IB) is an international, concept-driven, inquiry-based curriculum. It provides students with a foundation of essential concepts, knowledge, skills and attitudes. It encourages students to act responsibly and to reflect on their learning. A strong emphasis is placed on how students learn as well as on what they learn. The IB programmes encourage students to be reflective, active and lifelong learners and critical thinkers. IB students are forever curious, fully engaged citizens who both embrace their own culture and are open and responsive to other cultures and views.

1 In IB schools, the term used is "Additional Language".

Based on this PYP philosophy, I created an inquiry-based, concept-driven Japanese language program at Immanuel Primary School. Inquiry-based learning is “a constructivist approach, in which students have ownership of their learning. It starts with exploration and questioning and leads to investigation into a worthy question, issue, problem or idea. It involves asking questions, gathering and analysing information, generating solutions, making decisions, justifying conclusions and taking action.”² Moreover, “inquiry, interpreted in the broadest sense, is the process initiated by the students or the teacher that moves the students from their current level of understanding to a new and deeper level of understanding” (IBO 2007, 37).

In practical terms, students develop “international-mindedness” through inquiry into the Japanese language and various aspects of Japanese culture. PYP classroom teachers in collaboration with the school’s Japanese language teacher(s) plan units of inquiry in which strong connections occur. The program fosters in students a positive attitude towards learning Japanese, having fun exploring all aspects of Japanese language learning, i.e. speaking, listening, writing, reading, investigating, drawing, colouring, making, singing, chanting, memorising, dancing, performing plays, cooking, participating, watching. Frequent use of technology also assists students’ inquiry in Japanese.

THE PROGRAM

WHY STUDY JAPANESE? DEVELOPING THE ACTION BOARD

In my Year 3 class, I ask the students, “Why do we study Japanese?” Some answer that “learning new things is good for you!”, others respond, “It’s fun!”, or “Just in case we go to Japan, we can talk to Japanese people”, or “Just in case we meet Japanese people here in Australia, we can help them”. But when I challenge them by asking, “Don’t you already have enough fun in your classroom?” or “What if you never go to Japan, or never meet Japanese people, would that mean you are wasting your time?”, they are shocked into thinking even harder. Then the discussion begins, and it comes to a conclusion that sets us a goal for our learning:

“We are here to become international-minded citizens of the world, open and responsive to other cultures and views, and to make the world a better place. We build our knowledge and share our learning with others and take action!”

With this in mind, I introduce our “Action Board” on my classroom wall. Students are encouraged to share their knowledge with parents or anybody outside the Japanese language classroom, and take action involving anything related to their Japanese language learning by: just talking in Japanese to one another; making a shoebox museum relating to what they have learnt; going to a Japanese restaurant; finding out Japanese words and cultural facts by themselves, from a computer, anime or books, and sharing what they’ve learnt with others. Whatever action the students take, they are encouraged to write it on a post-it-note, and put it on the Action Board for others to read. By developing the Action Board in this way, students are constantly reminded of the “big picture” and of taking initiative and ownership of their own learning. This exercise will also help students to develop a PYP learner profile, such as being Inquirers, Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Open-minded, Risk-takers, Caring, Principled, Balanced and Reflective.

JAPANESE STAND ALONE UNIT OF INQUIRY

The IB PYP curriculum framework is developed within six units or Transdisciplinary Themes:

1. Who We Are
2. How We Express Ourselves
3. Where We Are in Place and Time
4. How the World Works
5. How We Organise Ourselves, and
6. Sharing the Planet.

² See definitions available at www.galileo.org/inquiry-what.html.

Each unit is anchored by a concept or “Central Idea” that is timeless, relevant, age-appropriate and global. Each unit contain a few Lines of Inquiry that clarify the Central Idea and define the scope of the inquiry. When we have a subject-specific unit, we call it a Stand Alone Unit of Inquiry. Here is one example of a Y4 Stand Alone Japanese Unit of Inquiry.

Transdisciplinary theme	Who We Are
Central Idea	People of all countries introduce themselves using their own distinctive and unique mannerisms.
Lines of Inquiry	Characteristics which identify different cultures Specific sentence patterns used in Japanese self-introductions

In the PYP, the use of technologies is integrated as much as possible into student inquiries. Our school has developed The Hub – a collaborative learning space or Wiki (though this is being upgraded to Google Classroom in 2016). I add many appropriate resource sites to The Hub, to allow students to research into different countries and their particular cultural “facts”. Wifi is available throughout the school. Students bring their own laptop computers, provided by the school, to the Japanese language classroom. Students are also encouraged to use a variety of resources, such as books, posters and guest speakers, to find out, as a group, about the different characteristics and mannerisms of the country of their choice. After completing their research, students then plan and compose a Japanese speech to introduce themselves to Japanese people, as if they are from the country they have researched. Students dress up with culturally appropriate clothing and props, and are filmed in front of a “green screen”. Their speech needs to include examples of cultural behaviour, likes and dislikes, and common names from the country. After the presentation, students individually edit their footage using iMovie, and add culturally appropriate backgrounds and music.

The purpose of this unit is to allow students to discover cultural differences and similarities with respect not only to Japan but to other countries they are interested in, which gives them global perspectives and appreciation. Students use their ICT skills, and by repeatedly hearing their own group’s recording as they edit they gain opportunities for revision of, and reflection on, their language work. They are also using PYP Research Skills and Communication Skills throughout this unit of inquiry. Students enjoy this unit because they can share what they have discovered in creative and engaging ways.

TRANSDISCIPLINARY UNIT OF INQUIRY

When we can identify a strong connection with a classroom Unit of Inquiry, single subject teachers (such as Japanese, Performing Arts, PE, Visual Arts) plan and work with each other to make an integrated unit. We have the same Transdisciplinary theme and Central Idea to drive the inquiry. Here is an example of a Y4 Transdisciplinary Unit of Inquiry.

Transdisciplinary theme	Sharing the Planet
Central Idea	To build sustainable human environments, people work together peacefully.
Lines of Inquiry	What is peace? Perspective on peace; the role of the peacemaker

If the classroom as a whole is finding out about Christian perspectives of peace, in Japanese language class we discover how the Japanese think about peace and what actions they take to be a peacemaker. We read the story of “Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes”, with students again using their laptop computers to research about Hiroshima. Using the Japanese language class set of tablet devices, we look at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, find peace-related Japanese words, and learn how to make origami paper cranes, as well as what these paper cranes mean to Japanese people. Since Immanuel has a long-established relationship with Nunose Elementary School in Osaka, Japan, the Year 4 students have an hour-long peace conference each year, using Skype, with Y5 Nunose students, asking questions to find out about their perspectives and how to become a peacemaker. We send our thousand paper cranes to Nunose, so they may take them to the Hiroshima Peace Park together with their own cranes, as a symbol of our friendship and action towards world peace. Students create a Japanese peace page on their classroom website. They write about their discoveries and reflections on their unit. By doing this, students also develop their typing skills in Japanese. Students enjoy this unit as they are making connections with Japanese people of their own age, and are able to speak both Japanese and English.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

These are some of the benefits and challenges I have experienced through our journey of inquiry in the Japanese language classroom.

BENEFITS

Three things I am excited about:

1. Clear purpose

Being in Australia, relatively distant from other countries, I find that many of our primary school students do not have much awareness of the world outside of their own. Beyond the fascination with Japanese cultural festivals and fun craft activities, what is it that makes students pursue life-long (Japanese) language learning? I believe that when students come to understand that learning other languages and cultures opens up many opportunities in their lives ahead, this helps them become global-minded and caring people, displaying qualities such as empathy, curiosity, respect and appreciation. They can make a real connection to their learning, and start to see the “big picture”. When this happens, it’s something that makes me excited.

2. Clear connection

Through the Transdisciplinary Unit of Inquiry, students see a clear connection between the Japanese language classroom and what they are doing in the rest of the school. Through the PYP five essential elements (knowledge, concepts, skills, attitude, action), students can understand that we are all working towards the same goal. As PYP requires a whole-of-school approach, Japanese is now evident throughout the school. This shows how we value language in our learning community.

3. Ownership of learning

Inquiry begins with students’ knowledge and curiosity, upon which they construct meaning and build connections. Inquiry-based teaching takes students to new levels of awareness and involvement in Japanese. As a student-centred activity, inquiry gives students ownership of the learning process and inspires them to become more independent learners.

CHALLENGES

1. PYP LOTE teachers are no longer working on a topic-based program, are no longer simply “the entertainer”

In a topic-based approach, teachers choose a topic (say, Housing), then think about what kind of words and phrases or cultural aspects can and should be taught or used to create fun activities. For many teachers this approach is sometimes easier, as it is unidirectional: students are recipients and not included in the planning of the lesson, teachers are in control and if necessary can make it up as they go. However, the philosophy of PYP challenges this. What can children learn or retain in this way? What must students achieve by the time they graduate? The shift to a learner/learning-centred approach may be difficult for some teachers. Therefore, more support is required to scaffold change if the school seeks to adopt a PYP approach.

2. PYP LOTE teachers do not use textbooks

The concept-driven, inquiry-based classroom can be hard work compared to following textbooks already written for you. The reality is that there is an increase in workload, and some teachers may not like this. However, are all students engaged when using textbooks? Are they as motivated when making connections and having ownership of their work? As a PYP teacher, I am constantly thinking, reflecting and changing, needing to evolve, and so are the students.

3. PYP LOTE teachers need to find time to work collaboratively with other classroom teachers

Some might occasionally complain about the lack of interest and support coming from classroom teachers, and when you do have to work with them, you may find it could be easier to work by yourself than have to make changes or plan work to accommodate their perspectives. Scheduling meeting times can be difficult, especially if you are a part-timer. However, when you think about it from the students’ point of view, they benefit greatly from your collaboration with the classroom teachers who are effectively extending the scope of your limited face-to-face instruction time.

CONCLUSION

Being a PYP Additional Language teacher is a commitment. It's not easy at first, and the work often doesn't seem to get any easier, as you are always required, as a teacher, to "choose, act and reflect", the same as our students must do. It is a very different approach from traditional LOTE teaching. The PYP approach makes you think, and it makes you work. As I stated in the Introduction, more than ten years on I now see the difference in students' outcomes. Before we implemented PYP, I would still say that my students were happy and enjoyed learning Japanese. Now, my students are equally happy, but with a "big picture" in their mind. I feel that I am part of preparing students "to become active, caring lifelong learners who demonstrate respect for themselves and others and have the capacity to participate in the world around them" (IBO 2007, 5). With this in mind, I am very happy to have become a PYP Japanese language teacher.

REFERENCES

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