

Japanese speech night at the primary school level: Advocacy through language learning

Mariel Howard, Kalamunda Christian School

Abstract

Every year at Kalamunda Christian School, students are invited to take part in a Japanese speech contest. The contest is held in the evening in the school gymnasium, with family and friends as the audience. Speeches are based on the topic for their year level. Students use topic-related phrases they have learnt to plan their own talk. It is then checked by the teacher before the students practice it to the point of fluency. Most students know their speech by heart, although reading of hiragana script on the day is allowed. The number of participating students has increased steadily over the contest's history. In 2008, 22% of the students studying Japanese took part. By 2013 the number had grown to 37%. The evening is highly anticipated by students and parents alike. It has improved student motivation and changed the culture of language learning. In addition to advocacy, the contest has greatly improved student learning. Students who enter the competition every year have approximately 60 phrases in their long term memory. By changing the vocabulary, the number of sentences they are able to create in the future is enormous.

Keywords

speech contest; Japanese; primary; language advocacy

初等レベルの日本語スピーチコンテスト:言語学習を通じたアドボカシー

マリエル・ハワード、カラマンダ・クリスチャン・スクール

要旨

当校の生徒は、毎年日本語スピーチコンテストに参加することができる。このコンテストは、学校の講堂で夕方、家族や友人を招いて行われ、子どもたちは、それぞれの学年に見合ったトピックに基づいてスピーチを用意する。低学年の生徒なら、自分や家族、あるいは住んでいる家について話をし、高学年になれば、買い物に行く設定でスピーチをしたり、友達と出かける計画について話をする。生徒は、トピックに関連した言葉遣いを覚えて各自のスピーチに盛り込む。出来上がったスピーチは先生に添削してもらい、すらすら言えるようになるまで練習する。本番でひらがなの原稿を読むことも認められているが、ほとんどの生徒がスピーチを暗記している。コンテストに参加する生徒は年々増えており、2008年の参加者数が日本語を学ぶ生徒の22%であったのが、2013年には37%にまで増えている。親子ともに非常に楽しみにしているこのイベントは、生徒の学習意欲を高め、言語学習を取り巻く環境に変化をもたらした。スピーチコンテストによって日本語教育が推進されたことに加え、子どもたちの日本語力も大きく向上した。毎年コンテストに参加する生徒が確実に覚える構文の数は、およそ60と考えられており、名詞や動詞を別のものに置き換えて同じ構文を使えば、学習者の作文力は無限に広がっていくだろう。

キーワード

スピーチコンテスト、日本語、初等レベル、言語教育のアドボカシー

Introduction

Kalamunda Christian School is an independent Christian primary school which, since 2008, has run an evening Japanese speech contest in Term 4 for Years 1-6. At Kalamunda Christian School, all students from Pre-Primary to Year 6 receive 60 minutes of Japanese instruction per week. In 2008, 22% of the students in Years 1 to 6 took part in the contest. By 2013, the number had grown to 37%. Over its six-year history, the speech contest has considerably improved student motivation and skill and changed the culture of language learning. In 2009 to 2011, I also ran the speech contest at Swan Christian College Junior School (until 2010 called Midland Christian School), where the results were similar to those at Kalamunda Christian School.

At the contest, the students present a speech or role-play based on the topic they have covered in their Japanese classes that year, as follows:

Year 1	Self-Introduction
Year 2	Describing family
Year 3	Describing own room, garden and house
Year 4	Shopping role-play
Year 5	Arranging an outing with a friend
Year 6	Inviting a friend to a birthday party (2008-2012) Biography of favourite artist and explaining processes used to create own artwork (from 2013)

Aims of the speech contest

The contest was born out of a desire to motivate the students in their language studies. The plan was also to ensure that learnt expressions remain relevant throughout the year, form a usable chunk of natural conversation, get revised often and go into the students' long term memory.

The contest was also planned to overcome some of the challenges of language education in primary schools: namely, lack of time allocation; lack of information and communications technology (ICT) and other resources; and frequently changing teachers. All of these factors combined means primary school language teachers must make effective use of all the time and resources available, and plan programs that are embedded into the curriculum, providing continuity even if the language teacher was to change.

Another aim of the speech contest was to create an “open-ended” activity to recognise not only individual students’ abilities but also their capabilities, thus focusing on each student’s potential. The structures for both the speeches and role plays provide an opportunity for extension, as students are able to add as many new words and additional phrases as they are capable of memorising.

A speech contest also provides a communicative purpose to improve accuracy and fluency in the language: “Learning is about personal meaning-making ... Interaction needs to be purposeful ... about something ... have[ing] value in its own right” (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009). Both speeches (real communication) and role-plays (pretend conversations) provide practice for real impromptu language use. This communicative purpose can and should be created in a regular classroom, but is naturally reinforced in a wider context when the audience grows to a couple of hundred people.

It can be argued that neither the actual speech contest nor the practice for it provides an opportunity for real spontaneous conversations. In order to address this issue, Year 6 students at Kalamunda Christian School study art through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) pedagogy, where real communication is ensured by studying another subject (art) in a foreign language (Japanese). On the other hand, a typical tourist to Japan is not likely to make an art project but has a need to buy some food and souvenirs. A speech contest provides a perfect opportunity to revise and memorise high-frequency, everyday expressions for future use.

Finally, a speech contest increases the profile of languages in the school community, especially if press, and guests from outside of the school, are also invited. The audience also has an opportunity to learn about the culture of the country. At Kalamunda the audience gets to sample Japanese food, see the judges dressed in kimono and watch videos clips about Japan.

Steps to a successful speech contest

1. Effective teaching of the content during the year

The success of the speech contest relies heavily on the effective teaching of content during the year. As time is limited, opportunities need to be maximised by making learning interesting, fun, relevant and age-appropriate, and above all, instilled with a real communicative purpose. Far too often primary school children are taught lists of nouns with no sentences to communicate with. Japanese children are not likely to walk

around pointing out all the colours they can see, but “What is your favourite colour?” is a common question among this age-group and provides real communication.

A variety of methods and activities need to be provided in order to maintain interest and ensure a variety of language uses. There are many language learning resources available to purchase and many more to download, but as any good educator knows, simple everyday items like blankets, dice, balls, card, puppets and pictures are a great and cheap way to engage student interest. As Scarino and Liddicoat say, “The key is to have resources which open up multiple possible uses and allow for flexibility and creativity in teaching and learning” (2009).

“Music is the most effective memory strategy as emotional experience is readily recalled” (Alford 2010). Some of the songs learnt at Kalamunda Christian School match the topic they are studying at the time, while others are sung during the last 5 minutes of the lesson. These “filler songs” are often real Japanese children’s songs on YouTube, which are played in order to increase the students’ vocabulary and understanding of the Japanese culture. Even if students do not understand all the words, the songs will improve their intonation and provide a calm multi-sensory learning environment. As revision, students are also encouraged to sing along to songs they have previously learnt as they trace new characters.

The power of revision cannot be underestimated. It is especially useful to expose students to the same words in different contexts and by different methods. You can cater for each student’s preferred learning style by revising the same words in a variety of ways: visually, kinetically and aurally. By using plenty of movement in sports, role-plays, games and gestures you can engage the power of “motor memory” (Alford 2010). Getting students to think of their own mnemonics for new words will help them recall the words later. Changing location can also help weaker students, as “teaching a concept in a different location assists students to recall it through episodic association, i.e. utilizing the associative emotions they develop” (Alford 2010). Teachers should also use emotions to engage learners’ “brain compatible learning” by modelling an optimistic state (Alford 2010).

All Japanese assessments at Kalamunda Christian School are open ended, and students are given a rubric to help them achieve their goals. Students also practice their speaking assessments with a friend, ask for help if needed, and get assessed when they believe they are ready. This ensures that students know their speeches or role-plays well before the contest, as the speaking assessments are the same or similar to the speech they are required give in the contest.

Finally, target language should be used as the mode of delivery whenever possible to maximise the time available. As any second-language speaker knows, it takes the brain a moment to get used to the new language environment and start not only understanding but also producing more language. My own experiences, as well as observations of my students, show that constant swapping of language does not allow the learners to enter this new language “zone”. In addition, by using the target language only, the students are likely to become familiar with everyday expressions like “well done”, which were not even included in the intended learning outcomes for the lesson. This “incidental language learning” adds to both speaking and listening skills and improves the students’ fluency in the language. At Kalamunda Christian School all students from Years 1 to 5 start their lesson with a 20 minute “Japanese-only time”, in which previously learnt expressions are revised and new expressions are introduced and practiced. Year 6 students listen to and speak only Japanese during their 60 minute CLIL art lesson.

2. The role of script in effective teaching

Kalamunda Christian School has a “no romaji” policy in order to ensure correct pronunciation and to remove the crutch that often prevents students from advancing in their hiragana reading and writing ability. The Japanese script is sold to the students from the beginning as a “secret code” that their family cannot read, which creates mystery and intrigue.

Students learn each character as it comes up in the new expressions they are learning. The characters get revised regularly as they come up in new words, and each lesson revises some old characters and introduces new ones. The written language supports the spoken language and vice versa, as the expressions students have memorised help them read and write new script, and their knowledge of the script helps them learn new words. This method also ensures that any new students get a chance to learn the characters as they are being revised by others.

Over time, students progress at their own pace, moving from individual character recognition to being able to read words and eventually whole sentences. All hiragana tests and other reading and writing assessments are similarly scaffolded to cater for students at various levels of reading and writing proficiency.

3. Good marketing of the event

As is the case of any event, good marketing is essential to create excitement and hype. Students are reminded about the speech contest at the start of each year, and quite often they are already asking what their new topic is in their very first lesson. They are reminded of the benefits of taking part: improved Japanese and public speaking skills, improved confidence and an opportunity to impress their parents and friends. The event is also a permanent feature of the school calendar.

Entry into the contest is invitation-only, based on their speaking mark. This makes the invitation to participate highly desirable and ensures that students work hard to get a good mark in their speaking assessments. However, if a child really wants to participate but has not made the mark, they are given extra help to reach their goals. Often this extra attention helps deepen the relationship between teacher and student, and ensures that the student stays motivated in their Japanese studies for years to come. Once a student has indicated their desire to take part and permission has been received from the parents, the student is not allowed to change their mind. This supports the school's values of commitment and resilience.

The principal, Mr Gavin Nancarrow, always attends the speech contest in order to show his support for the event and languages in general. Every year, other language teachers in the area are also invited to see the event either as judges or as members of the audience. The event is made as "official" as possible, with students wearing formal school uniform, standing one by one on the stage, speaking into a microphone and bowing at the beginning and end of their speech.

The hall is decorated with Japanese posters, Japanese video clips are shown during breaks between year groups, and Japanese food is offered at the event. In 2013, speech contest students even sang a Japanese song and performed a Japanese dance on the stage. Every year the contest improves, with new things to showcase to parents.

4. Planning and practice of own speech

Students are given ample examples of speeches and role-plays. Students particularly enjoy the subliminal method, which I first experienced as a student of Swedish in my native Finland. Students are asked to put their heads on their desks and close their eyes. The teacher plays relaxing Japanese music, and after a while starts giving example speeches and role-plays while the students are still resting.

Students base their own speech or role-play on the structures and expressions learnt throughout the year. Depending on the level of ability, they are welcome to add new words or expressions. If they struggle to memorise the whole conversation, they can also delete some of the phrases. This happens particularly closer to the speech contest itself as some students run out of time to memorise the whole speech. Often the winner is not decided only by correctness or fluency, but also by how many expressions the student has managed to include in their speech. Students are not upset even if their speech ends up shorter than originally planned. The joy comes from being able to stand on stage and show their parents what they have learnt. On the other hand the ability to add new words and expressions enables students to make their speech their own and allows able students to stretch themselves with an open-ended task.

The teacher writes down English translations of students' speeches as a PowerPoint presentation in order to provide a translation for the audience. The students get a copy of this speech and meet with the teacher one-on-one to ensure they can say the expressions correctly. In most speaking activities, real and practice, communication and fluency are more important than accuracy. However, as students are likely to use these phrases as a framework for future spontaneous communication, it is essential that they are memorised correctly. Once students can recall each expression, they practice in pairs and at home to improve fluency. Students who have already learnt their own speech are happy to help others, which improves learning outcomes for both students.

Actual contest

Students compete in their year groups. The two invited judges, one a Japanese teacher colleague and the other a native Japanese speaker, are given a copy of the English translation of the speeches so that they can follow them, tick off correct sentences and write notes if necessary. They are also given a list of all students with space after each student to write notes on the judging criteria of pronunciation, accuracy, fluency and variety of expressions.

The judges have time to deliberate after each year group and find consensus on the winner and runner-up. During this time the audience learns more about Japan by watching a short video clip. The results are announced at the end of the contest, and engraved medals are handed out at a future assembly. All participating students are given a Japanese trinket or treat as a thank you for taking part.

In 2012 and 2013 we had to separate the evening into a junior and a senior contest as the number of contestants grew to 65 and 73 respectively. Japanese supper was served between these contests.

Evaluation

As pointed out by Scarino and Liddicoat, all programs and activities need to be evaluated: “Evaluation is an integral part of the process of curriculum renewal. Evaluation involves making considered judgment about a program to ensure that what is being done in teaching, learning and assessment is worthwhile, effective and sufficient” (2009).

Evaluation for the speech contest is done every year by asking students about their experiences straight after the contest. I have also asked for feedback from principals, parents and stakeholders about how to improve the contest in future years.

Evaluation of the speech contest has resulted in many improvements over the years. As the number of participants increased, the contest was split into junior (Years 1–3) and senior (Years 4–6) sections with a shared supper between the contests. As access to technology improved, short video clips on Japan were added to entertain the audience while the judges deliberated.

Student evaluation

According to surveys, students enjoy taking part in the competition and most of the students come back to compete in following years. Classroom observation has proven that those who have participated in the contest continue to be highly motivated in their Japanese class and can recall expressions learnt in previous years. They are able to remember both the topic-related vocabulary and the key sentence structures and phrases used in their speech or role play. Altogether, the school’s Japanese program in Years 1–6 covers over 60 phrases and sentence structures as well as hundreds of individual words. Children who take part in the contest every year have the potential to retain all of these in their long term memory and thus be able use them in their own Japanese conversations in future years.

The contest was awesome. I like it because I get to talk in front of people. My Japanese gets better and I can still remember last year’s speech too. (Isla, Year 2 student)

Principal evaluation

The following statement was made by Gaye Entwistle, the acting principal of Swan Christian College Junior School. After receiving positive feedback from her after the first contest at the college in 2009, I asked her to write down her impressions so that I could include them in a professional development session that I ran in Perth in February 2010:

The Japanese contest was a new idea for the Junior School. Mariel was really keen and saw it as a great way to grow the profile of LOTE in the school and also challenge the children.

The planning and prep that went into the evening was great and the kids loved to have the extra sessions of coaching. There was a great up take of kids for the evening.

A large group of parents and friends arrived at the event and were treated to a sample supper of Japanese food. The atmosphere was exciting.

The delight was that we saw our children perform who were very competent but also those who managed to really persevere and push through the fear of performance. The standard of presentation by all children was really impressive.

Parents were delighted, and all the apprehension I felt leading into a public competition for the younger students quickly disappeared as I saw the pride and excitement as they competed and were encouraged and rewarded. It was a wonderful event we would really like to build into our regular program for the year.

Parent evaluation

I have also conducted informal oral surveys with parents after each contest, all of which have been positive. The following parent was asked to write down her impressions so that I could include them in subsequent professional development presentations on the topic.

A wonderful opportunity for the students to speak Japanese in front of an audience, to “force” them to converse yet with a thrill of competition.

The subject was “real life communication” about themselves, which will be useful later in life to speak to any Japanese speaker. The competition gave my daughter confidence, not only in her Japanese speaking but in speaking to a group of adults (parents) in a safe small atmosphere.

It was set up beautifully and carefully introduced to be a safe place. The PowerPoint behind each student enabled us non-speakers to understand what the child was saying.

Overall, a carefully thought out, carefully managed, delightful evening for parents and students alike. (Michelle Plaistowe, parent of a Year 5 student)

Conclusion

At the start of 2008 there were many disengaged students in the Japanese classes at Kalamunda Christian School. The purpose of the speech contest was to provide motivation and goals for the language learners as well as improve their language skills. In terms of improving motivation and Japanese language skills, the speech contest is the most significant addition to the Japanese language program at Kalamunda Christian School.

The number of participating students has increased steadily over the contest’s history. In 2008, 32 students (22% of the students studying Japanese) took part. By 2013 the number had grown to 74 (37%).

The evening is highly anticipated by students and parents alike. As envisaged, it has improved student motivation and skills and changed the culture of language learning. In addition to advocacy, the contest has also greatly improved the students’ language skills. Students who enter the competition every year would have approximately 60 phrases in their long term memory. By changing the vocabulary, the number of sentences they are able to create in the future is enormous.

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