

Introduction

Anne de Krester, Melbourne Centre for Japanese Language Education

The inaugural National Symposium on Japanese Language Education (NSJLE) was held 1–2 November 2012. It was a wonderful event, celebrating the commitment, expertise, innovation, dedication and generosity of educators and stakeholders in Japanese language education. It was the culmination of a great deal of hard work from a wide range of people and organisations. It was exciting, it was successful and it led to greater national cooperation and collaboration.

In 2009, the Melbourne Centre for Japanese Language Education (MCJLE) was commissioned to write a report titled *The current state of Japanese language education in Australian schools*. The report, written by myself and Robyn Spence-Brown and published in 2010, made six recommendations to the Federal Government. One was the establishment of a national council for Japanese language education to create a national focus on the teaching and learning of Japanese, and give educators, researchers and stakeholders opportunities to share innovations, best practice, research findings, discuss issues, and advocate for Japanese language education. Japanese is the most widely taught foreign language in Australia—and has the highest student participation numbers—but at the time of the report there was no national body of Japanese educators, nor a national voice advocating for Japanese language education in Australia; indeed, this was the first national conference on Japanese language education to be held in decades.

Believing in the importance and necessity of establishing a national body advocating for the teaching and learning of Japanese, the MCJLE and The Japan Foundation, Sydney committed to ensuring the recommendation made to the Federal Government in the report was brought to fruition. MCJLE has had a cooperative and collegiate working relationship with The Japan Foundation, Sydney, which equally determined that a national focus was needed, and so the two organisations began discussions to consider working together to plan and execute NSJLE. Having no experience in organising an event of this scale, the MCJLE was uncertain of what the experience would entail. Organising a gathering of Japanese language educators on a national scale was a huge task and somewhat of a risk. Planning the symposium together with The Japan Foundation, Sydney allowed the two organisations to pool ideas, skills and contacts.

Long before the report was written, there had been many discussions with The Japan Foundation, Sydney about the numerous innovative programs and excellent teaching in existence all over Australia. In addition, we were aware that many Japanese Language Teachers' Associations (JLTAs) around the country were working extremely hard and

effectively to provide professional learning, support and encouragement to teachers in their states or territories. However, we also noticed that there was duplication of information dissemination, professional learning and processes for organisation—and yet, not enough sharing of best practice or successful teaching programs, ideas, strategies or research outcomes that could and should be shared nationally to broaden and strengthen the knowledge base and streamline workloads. The aims of the symposium were to showcase the strengths of Japanese language education, to discuss issues facing Japanese language education (such as falling student participation rates), and to look at what could be done to ensure future growth in numbers and quality of Japanese language education programs in all sectors.

The Japanese teaching community and related stakeholders are famously generous for their willingness to support anything that will promote Japanese language education. All organisations involved were tremendously helpful in promoting the symposium, widely advertising details to ensure that as many people as possible were aware of the event. The Japan Foundation, Sydney and MCJLE were able to use their resources to ensure comprehensive promotion. Hoping that a long lead time for the symposium would result in greater attendance, we decided on early November for the symposium. We were determined to hold it in 2012, a year that did not clash with the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Associations (AFMLTA) conference. After initial planning discussions, our focus quickly turned to matters of logistics: venues, number of participants and budgeting. Having never undertaken such a venture, it was difficult to know how many participants we should expect, so we optimistically booked a venue for 110 people.

With the generous cooperation of state and territory stakeholders from all sectors and levels of education, as well as publishers, booksellers, JLTAs and the AFMLTA, interest, support and enthusiasm from the Japanese language education community was overwhelming and the symposium created a more-than-expected amount of interest from a wide range of people, as evident by the numerous emails that came from all over the country and from overseas as word of the symposium spread.

Once registration opened, attendee numbers grew steadily. I was relieved when the number climbed to 50, and excited when it rose again to 80. Then, over one weekend, six weeks before the conference, the number jumped to more than 150, far exceeding the venue capacity. All of a sudden, we had to quickly secure a bigger venue. November is a busy time for conferences in Melbourne, but fortunately, a bigger, suitable venue was found and, with our panic allayed, we had somewhere to accommodate as many people as were willing to come.

When registrations closed we had 320 delegates, far beyond our expectations. This included Japanese language educators from every level (primary, secondary and tertiary), stakeholders from every state and territory of Australia, as well as delegates from Japan, the USA and New Zealand. Not surprisingly, participants from Victoria made up just under half the registrations, with New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia also strongly represented. Secondary teachers made up almost half of the total delegates, with stakeholders and academics also significantly represented.

Wanting a positive tone for the symposium—and confident that there was much optimism about the future of Japanese language education despite recent participation decline—the title of the symposium was set as *Creating the Future*, and four areas for the focus of presentations were chosen: advocacy in and out of the classroom; innovative structures for changing learning and increasing opportunities; information communication technology; and teacher education and development.

The submissions provided us with an interesting varied, and comprehensive program. In all, we had 42 presentations—the majority were individual, but many were panel presentations. Poster presentations also provided another opportunity for sharing. Wanting the symposium to focus on Japanese language education locally, but also to look internationally for trends and inspiration, two local and two international key note speakers headed the program, all challenging and encouraging educators in their thinking and approaches, providing direction, raising questions and challenging attitudes and approaches.

After a stimulating first day, the symposium dinner was held in Queens' Hall of the State Library of Victoria, a beautiful room reflecting the past of Melbourne and a fitting venue as a symbol of history and learning. The dinner was attended by 110 delegates and invited guests including dinner guest speaker Wing Commander Sonja Halloran, who gave a fascinating speech about her Japanese language learning journey and how that experience and expertise kept weaving its way through her professional career, through language studies with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in Australia, studying at the Air Self Defence Force Command and Staff College in Tokyo and working at the Embassy in Tokyo, culminating in her involvement in Australia's RAAF relief mission to Japan after the March 2011 tsunami. Her message was simple but resonated with everyone. Having Japanese as a second language is a skill which can continue to provide and weave opportunity through one's life; we never know how or when, but it will always be welcome and often exciting. The dinner was a wonderful opportunity for delegates to relax, celebrate the teaching and learning of Japanese, and to network and enjoy time together.

The success of the symposium exceeded our hopes and expectations in terms of numbers and enthusiasm. By the end of the first day, many delegates were asking if there would be another symposium. The number and range of attendees was a welcome surprise, highlighting the strength of Japanese language education in Australia, and how far and wide its influence has spread throughout the country, as well as internationally.

As the symposium was held in the final stage of National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) funding, many teachers benefited from financial support from their sector body. The Japan Foundation, Sydney also provided numerous substantial travel grants to many interstate teachers, which contributed to the large participation numbers and the wide range of teachers able to attend, particularly from the furthest states and territories. The Japanese Language Teachers' Association of Victoria (JLTAV) was also very generous in providing funding to its members to assist with the costs of attending the symposium, and the MCJLE supported teachers as well. When conducting the research for our report to the government, one of the overwhelmingly positive messages that came through was how cohesive the Japanese teaching community was and how supportive, encouraging and sharing they were. This was evident in the organisation, promotion and execution of the symposium where at each stage, everyone involved—whether directly or indirectly—was more than happy to help in any way possible. It is testament to our community and no doubt a key factor in why the symposium was such a success.

One of the wonderful outcomes of the symposium was that there has been subsequent sharing of knowledge and resources between states and territories, schools and individuals. Despite the challenges facing all Japanese language educators at this time when enrolment rates are decreasing slightly, the atmosphere at the symposium was one of excitement, enthusiasm and enjoyment. Teachers welcomed and revelled in the opportunity to network, share and learn from one another and hear about research that could impact their teaching approach or methodology. This was a hope that has been transformed into a real outcome. Such a large gathering of people passionate about their work created wonderfully positive atmosphere and a definite buzz. NSJLE 2012 was the first step to developing a national body for Japanese language educators and developing a national profile. With more work to be done to achieve this, there is confidence and commitment that this will happen.

The symposium was a huge learning curve for all involved. However it was an extremely rewarding experience and the outcome so positive that the inaugural NSJLE will be followed by a second in July 2014, and hopefully many more after that.