

## **Japanese heritage language learners and the NSW High School curriculum: Eligibility criteria and other hurdles**

Noriko Shimada, HSC Japanese Committee Inc.

Paul Moore, University of Queensland, School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies

### **Abstract**

As parents of Japanese heritage children, we explore issues related to the development and implementation of a heritage Japanese course in the NSW high school curriculum. We first provide a definition of “heritage language learners” and draw on recent case study research (Oguro and Moloney 2010) and local research into heritage learners (Oriyama 2010). The research findings highlight the issues of eligibility criteria as well as the challenges of providing appropriate educational choices to heritage language learners, who are a diverse group of students. We identify major issues related to the use of so-called “eligibility criteria” which determine the students’ eligibility or non-eligibility for entry into the various Japanese courses as well as the limited opportunities, both in schools and in the community, for heritage Japanese learners to explore and develop their unique linguistic and cultural skills, awareness and identities. We then provide a historical overview of the development of the NSW courses, including the heritage language courses, followed by the experience and perspective of a heritage language learner. Our paper concludes with suggestions for a balanced approach to establishing eligibility for the various courses, reflecting the diversity of heritage language learners.

### **Key words**

eligibility criteria; heritage language learners; Australian curriculum; heritage language courses

## 継承語としての日本語学習者のニューサウスウェールズ州中等教育カリキュラムにおける扱いについて:履修資格基準やその他の障害

嶋田典子、HSC日本語対策委員会

ポール・ムーア、クイーンズランド大学言語比較文化学科

### 要旨

HSCの日本語ヘリテージ・コースが、ニューサウスウェールズ州の中等教育カリキュラムの中でどのように開発され、実施されるに至ったかについて、継承日本語話者を子どもに持つ親の視点を踏まえて考察する。まず、最近の事例研究(Oguro and Moloney 2010)や、特定地域の継承語学習者に関する研究(折山 2010)に基づき、「ヘリテージ・ランゲージ・ラーナー」とは何かを定義する。これらの研究結果で見えてくるのは、ヘリテージ・コースにまつわる履修資格基準の問題、そして多様な背景を持つ継承語学習者に対して、各々に見合った継承語教育を提供することの難しさである。次に、様々な日本語コースがある中で、生徒がそれらを受ける資格があるかどうかを決定する、いわゆる「履修資格基準」の主な問題点を洗い出し、継承語として日本語を学ぶ生徒にとって、学校やコミュニティで自らの言語面、文化面でのスキル、意識やアイデンティティーを模索し、開拓する機会がいかに限られているかという点に目を向ける。その上で、他言語のヘリテージ・コースを含むニューサウスウェールズ州のコースがどのように開発されてきたか、その歴史的経緯を概観し、実際の継承日本語話者が自らの経験談と考えを述べる。本稿の締めくくりとして、いくつかあるHSC日本語コースの履修資格基準を策定するにあたって、継承語学習者の多様性を反映したバランスの取れたアプローチを提案する。

### キーワード

履修資格基準、継承語学習者、オーストラリアのカリキュラム、ヘリテージ・コース

## **Introduction**

The New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC) is a credential awarded to secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school studies in NSW. The results of the HSC examinations are used to determine admission rankings for universities. The Japanese Background Speakers course was formerly offered to native speakers and heritage speakers who were deemed to have a background in Japanese, but was far too difficult for the vast majority of heritage students. On the other hand, eligibility criteria applied to the Japanese Continuers course meant that most heritage Japanese learners were deemed ineligible for the Continuers course and therefore had no choice but to give up studying Japanese altogether for the HSC.

In 2007 and 2008, the HSC Japanese Committee lobbied the NSW Board of Studies (BoS) to remove the eligibility criteria. This coincided with the announcement at the end of 2008 of national funding for the Board to develop so-called “heritage language courses” in Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Indonesian (de Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010). In 2011, heritage language courses were introduced for these four Asian languages in NSW, and HSC examinations for the new courses were implemented in 2012 for the first time. Fifteen students took the examination for Japanese Heritage course that year, and 18 enrolled in 2013. The Board notes that the role of eligibility criteria is twofold: to place students in courses that are appropriate to their level of proficiency; and to not advantage students who use the language for sustained communication outside the classroom (personal communication, 17 April 2012). The position presented in this paper is that heritage learners vastly differ in language proficiency, and that eligibility criteria which treat them as a homogenous group prevent them from undertaking courses more suited to their level of proficiency. Eligibility criteria are still applied to language courses, however, and fundamental issues are therefore still unresolved.

This paper explores these issues by first providing a contextualised definition of the heritage language learner. It then presents issues related to the focus on language proficiency in determining eligibility criteria for this group of learners with diverse experience and proficiency in their heritage language, including a case study of a heritage learner.

## **Definition of heritage language learners**

While there are several interpretations of the term “heritage language learners” or other related terms (see Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2009, for a discussion of the various terms), we follow Oguro and Moloney who, in the context of the school system in New South

Wales, define heritage language learners (HLLs) as

school children who are being educated primarily through English but who also have contact with other language(s) through their family or community. This group may include children born in Australia or those who have migrated to Australia, and may include children who have one or more parents or carers who use the heritage language with them. (2012, 71)

In their research, Oguro and Moloney (2010; 2012) found HLLs to be diverse in terms of linguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural awareness, and competence in their heritage language (see also Oriyama 2010; Moloney and Oguro 2012). As a result, Oguro and Moloney (2012) argue that HLLs are either placed in courses which do not match their abilities, or discontinue their study of Japanese in senior years. As one student lamented: “I was denied the opportunity to advance my Japanese during secondary school” (78).

In contrast to the variable abilities found in the research above, the definition of a Heritage Japanese speaker provided by the NSW Board of Studies focuses on the language proficiency of HLLs as a group:

Heritage Japanese language students are typically those who have been brought up in a home where the Japanese language is used and who have a connection to Japanese culture. They have some degree of understanding and knowledge of Japanese, although their oral proficiency is typically more highly developed than their proficiency in the written language. These students have received all or most of their formal education in schools where English (or another language different from Japanese) is the medium of instruction. They can therefore be considered to some extent bilingual, with English or the other language being the predominant language. (BoS 2010, 5)

The focus on language proficiency is further marked by the use of so-called “eligibility criteria” to determine which course students of Japanese are (in)eligible to undertake during their senior schooling in New South Wales.

### **High school language curriculum in NSW: eligibility criteria, other hurdles and the heritage language course**

Students in NSW must complete 100 hours of language study before the end of Year 10. Students in Stage 4 (Years 7 and 8) start studying languages at the beginner level in most schools. Some schools use a part of the 100 mandatory hours for the students to study multiple languages. In Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10), languages are elective subjects. In Stage

6 (Years 11 and 12), languages are elective subjects for the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Of the Stage 6 HSC language courses, only four Asian languages—Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean—have differentiated courses for learners with heritage or background in those languages. Eligibility criteria are applied to all courses with the exception of the Background Speakers Course. The students’ (in)eligibility to enrol in a course is determined based on the eligibility criteria, irrespective of student preferences. Table 1 lists the various Japanese courses and their target students in detail.

Table 1: Stage 6 Japanese courses and their target candidature

Course	Description of target group
Japanese Beginners	“students with no prior knowledge or experience of the Japanese language, either spoken or written” (BoS NSW 2006; cited by Oguro and Moloney 2010, 26)
Japanese Continuers (+ Extension option)	“students who, typically, will have studied Japanese for 400–500 hours by completion of Stage 6” (BoS NSW 1999; cited by Oguro and Moloney 2010, 26)
Heritage Japanese	<p>Heritage Japanese language students are typically those who have been brought up in a home where the Japanese language is used and who have a connection to Japanese culture. They have some degree of understanding and knowledge of Japanese, although their oral proficiency is typically more highly developed than their proficiency in the written language. These students have received all or most of their formal education in schools where English (or another language different from Japanese) is the medium of instruction. They can therefore be considered to some extent bilingual, with English or the other language being the predominant language.</p> <p>At entry level to the course, students will have typically undertaken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some study of Japanese in a community, primary and/or secondary school in Australia, and/or</li> <li>• formal education in a school where Japanese was the medium of instruction up to the age of ten. (BoS NSW 2010, 5)</li> </ul>

Japanese Background Speakers	“students with a cultural and linguistic background in Japanese” (Board of Studies NSW 1999; cited by Oguro and Moloney 2010, 26)
------------------------------	---

The difference between the Heritage course and other courses is that it not only aims to improve language proficiency but also to strengthen the student’s connection to his or her Japanese heritage, and to develop a positive and mature bilingual and bicultural identity (BoS 2010). Students are expected to recognise and write approximately 500 kanji, including combinations. The number of kanji for the Continuers course is 200, while students who complete the Background Speakers course are expected to be able to write the 1006 kanji taught in Japanese primary schools and recognise kanji designated for daily use.

#### *Eligibility criteria and related issues*

Table 2 outlines the NSW Board of Studies’ (n.d.) eligibility criteria for Stage 6 language courses. For the purposes of determining eligibility, “formal education” is defined as “education provided in the system of schools ... that normally constitute(s) a continuous ‘ladder’ of full-time education for children and young people.” (UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education 1997; cited in BoS n.d.).

Table 2: Eligibility criteria for Stage 6 language courses

Course	Eligibility criteria
Beginners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have had no more than 100 hours study of the language at the secondary level (or the equivalent).</li> <li>• Students have little or no previous knowledge of the language. For exchange students, a significant in-country experience (involving experiences such as homestay and attendance at school) of more than three months renders a student ineligible.</li> </ul>
Continuers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have had no more than one year’s formal education from the first year of primary education (Year 1) in a school where the language is the medium of instruction.</li> <li>• Students have no more than three years residency in the past 10 years in a country where the language is the medium of communication.</li> <li>• Students do not use the language for sustained communication outside the classroom with someone with a background in using the language.</li> </ul>

Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students have had no formal education in a school where the language is the medium of instruction beyond the year in which the student turns ten years of age (typically Year 4 or 5 of primary education).</li> </ul>
Background Speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No criteria</li> </ul>

Decisions on eligibility are made by the principals of schools providing the courses. The issue with this arrangement is that there are not many principals whose area of expertise is in languages. In addition, some criteria are ambiguous, while all implicitly appear to equate potential exposure with proficiency. For example, the Continuers criteria that “[s]tudents do not use the language for sustained communication outside the classroom” may be interpreted differently depending on the principal.

For some students, the gap in proficiency levels between the Continuers and Background Speakers courses has been appropriately filled by the introduction of the Heritage course. There are students, though, who are deemed ineligible for the Continuers course but find the Heritage course too difficult. Furthermore, the current criteria suggest that students who go to Japan and study there after the year in which they turn ten may lose their eligibility to study the Heritage course. These issues and ambiguities mean students are unable to take courses best suited to their abilities.

### *Other hurdles*

There are access issues as well. The small number of teachers who have the ability to teach the Heritage course, combined with the small number of students wishing to study the course, means that the Saturday School of Community Languages in Chatswood and the Open High School (both operated by the Department of Education and Communities) are the only two schools offering the Heritage Japanese course. The eligibility criteria to attend the Saturday School—as well as restrictions at local schools, mostly related to resources, for enrolment in the Open High School—severely limit access to the Heritage course.

Another hurdle is that simply speaking Japanese at home is not sufficient to allow students to follow the Heritage course, which demands a high level of expression as well as reading and writing skills. Students need to acquire substantial ability for expression in Japanese, as well as reading and writing skills, to study the Heritage Japanese course but pathways which enable students to do this before they reach Stage 6 are extremely limited. There are no courses offered at mainstream schools or Saturday Schools

operated by the DEC. The only pathway currently available is the preliminary course for Years 9 and 10 provided by the Open High School.

An increase in the number of Japanese HLLs has been cited as one of the reasons for developing the Heritage course, but a comparison of the total number of students studying Japanese shows no increase from 2011 to 2012, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of students taking Japanese courses and other heritage language courses (BoS NSW 2012)

NSW HSC course	2011 total	2011 rank	2012 total	2012 rank
Japanese Background Speakers	31	35	22	43
Japanese Beginners	541	5	625	5
Japanese Continuers	802	3	692	4
Japanese Extension	270	9	192	12
Heritage Japanese	-	-	15	49
Heritage Indonesian	-	-	1	61
Heritage Chinese (Mandarin)	-	-	90	20
Heritage Korean	-	-	33	36

The only course for which there has been a growth in the number of students is the Japanese Beginners Course. The poor uptake for the Heritage course can be seen as a manifestation of the issues of access and eligibility criteria discussed above.

#### *Case study: Perspectives of a heritage language speaker*

Following is the perspective of Noriko Kojiro, whose experience highlights the diversity of experience, proficiency and dynamic needs of heritage learners.

Heritage language speakers should not be categorised or bundled together by arbitrary standards such as eligibility criteria as there are vast differences between individual heritage speakers. Even if one is able to speak both Japanese and English, the stronger language for the individual will vary depending on factors such as environment, time and topic. I lived in Japan until age ten, lived in Canada until age 17, then lived in Japan for eight years before migrating to Australia at age 25. English was my stronger language from my mid-teens to the early twenties but neither language is particularly stronger than the other

now, although it may be easier to speak in one language or the other for certain topics and situations.

The curriculum for the Heritage course in NSW includes identity and culture but individuals have different ways of dealing with these concepts. They are certainly matters that cannot be taught. I thought of myself as Canadian for many years. If I were asked what nationality I feel I am now, I wouldn't really know and wonder if it really matters. It is more important to me that I am who I am and that I am able to contribute to society in whatever way I can using my skills, particularly my language skills. There are of course people who feel a stronger connection to their first native language and the culture related to it. However, identity and language proficiency are personal and are not necessarily related to the parental language background, the number of years spent in the relevant countries or the language of instructions at school. Students may even reject the learning of their heritage language if identities are "taught" at school. We acquire and adapt to identity and culture through life's experiences. They cannot be learned in a classroom. Language education should just be that. It should not be an environment in which students are put into arbitrary categories based on eligibility criteria and taught identity in addition to language. The teenage years should be a time when people are able to freely explore and pursue language capability as well as cultural identity and literacy. The ideal would be to provide an enabling environment for students who have potential to become truly bilingual and bicultural.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding argument, supported by the case study presented above, provides evidence against the use of rigid, broad ranging and potentially ambiguous eligibility criteria, in favour of a more balanced approach reflecting the "extremely diverse language origins and competencies of the learner cohorts in Australian languages, and the complex task of providing fair, appropriate and comparable assessment" noted by Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009, 52). They further argue that "it is important to recognise that all learners have legitimate interests and rights, with distinctive needs and potential, rather than being seen as problems interfering with the efficient operation of examinations" (52). While we recognise the need for decisions to be made regarding the target cohort of any course, in recognition of the diversity of knowledge, skills and abilities reflected in that cohort, it is essential for any criteria related to inclusion or exclusion of individual students from a course to be unambiguous, fair and flexible.

## Bibliography

- Board of Studies NSW. 2010. "Eligibility for stage 6 languages courses." Accessed 27 May 2014. [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus\\_hsc/lang-eligibility-criteria.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/lang-eligibility-criteria.html)
- Board of Studies NSW. 2010. *Heritage Japanese stage 6 syllabus*. Retrieved from [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus\\_hsc/pdf\\_doc/heritage-japanese-st6-syl.pdf](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/pdf_doc/heritage-japanese-st6-syl.pdf)
- Board of Studies NSW. 2012. "2012 HSC media guide." Accessed 27 May 2014. <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/archives/news-media/media-guide-2012/>
- de Kretser, A. and Spence-Brown, R. 2010. *The current state of Japanese language education in Australian schools*. Carlton South, Victoria: Education Services Australia.
- Lo Bianco, J. and Slaughter, Y. 2009. *Second languages and Australian schooling* (Australian Education Review 54). Camberwell, Vic., Australian Council of Educational Research.
- Moloney, R. and Oguro, S. 2012. "Constructing a Japanese identity beyond the borders of Japan: an analysis of the role of heritage language development and use in identity formation." Paper presented at CLaSIC 2012: Culture in Foreign Language Learning: Framing and Reframing the Issue, Singapore, 6-8 December 2012.
- Oguro, S. and Moloney, R. 2010. "An alien from their own language: the case of Japanese in New South Wales." *Babel* 44(2): 22-31.
- Oguro, S. and Moloney, R. 2012. "Misplaced heritage language learners of Japanese in secondary schools." *Heritage Language Journal* 9(2): 70-84.
- Oriyama, K. 2010. "Heritage language maintenance and Japanese identity formation: what role can schooling and ethnic community contact play?" *Heritage Language Journal* 7(2): 76-110.