

Addressing the challenge of languages education in Australian schools: using promotion and popular culture to make Japanese visible and valuable

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Introduction

The theme of the third National Symposium on Japanese Language Education held in Melbourne in November 2016 was making Japanese language teaching and learning visible and valuable in Australia. This contribution is based on my keynote lecture at the Symposium, and has the following aims:

- (a) to provide simple tools to frame the way we can think and talk about the challenges for languages education in Australia, and Japanese in particular; and
- (b) to suggest practical solutions to these challenges in order to significantly strengthen the place of Japanese language and culture inside and outside the classroom.

Japanese has many potential positives in its favour at all levels of education, despite the challenges it faces along with languages education more broadly in Australia. At the macro level, there is great depth of engagement with respect to Japanese within Australian education – both over time and scale of effort and uptake. At the micro level, the richness and appeal of Japanese language and culture mean that Japanese is well placed to be successful in our schools and to generate interest and support more broadly in school communities. In this context, it can also serve as a successful model for all languages.

Understanding the challenge for languages education in Australia

How do we make languages indispensable in the Australian education system and wider society? We have decades of experience showing us how difficult this aim is to achieve. In the case of Japanese in our schools, there are specific concerns about the long-term impact of the termination of national funding programs to support Asian language and literacies in schools, and the rise of Chinese and China in the context of the Asian Century (see e.g. Tohsaku, 2014). In this context, we need to think laterally, and engage in new (and old) ways, to make Japanese (and other languages) desirable and in turn valuable.

The task is a serious one, but I would argue it should also be engaging. Humour can be a useful tool to help get the message across. As I explained and I hope I also demonstrated during my keynote presentation, such an approach should not be seen as undermining the importance of what we do as language educators and what needs to be done to strengthen languages education in Australia. Instead, humour can be a valuable additional tool to make important points and to change people's minds when they might otherwise be resistant to change. It is difficult to translate the particular humorous approach into written form, so I do not aim to replicate it here, other than to say it sits within a broader positive approach to the promotion of languages education that much of this contribution is written in.

Why aren't languages thriving in our schools? A simple frame

It is often said that languages are not thriving in Australian schools.¹ This is certainly the case when we compare with other nations that are high achievers in education. In the case of Finland, which has become a fashionable model for Australian education policymakers to follow and visit, each student receives significant school time in three languages in addition to their mother tongue. Most children have Finnish (more rarely Swedish) as their first language, and Swedish (more rarely Finnish), English and one other language. The average Finnish student leaves school with reasonable to good fluency in at least two (usually Swedish and English) of the three additional languages (a fact confirmed by my own observation).

In order to address this challenge in Australia, where do we start? While there are many ways to talk about languages education and the challenges it faces, I suggest it may be useful to understand them first by framing them in a relatively simple and accessible way.

It is important to understand that the problem is greater than our classrooms, and does not begin in our classrooms. It is in fact a wider societal issue that then impacts on policy settings, resourcing and provision for languages in our education system. Australia is not alone on this front – it is a fundamental challenge for all English-speaking countries. The broader ‘language challenge’ can be usefully explained by the powerful interaction of two phenomena: (a) the monolingual mindset; and (b) the so-called Anglobubble, a term I have proposed on previous occasions. These simple concepts are very useful in helping us understand the language challenge in Australia and how we might respond to it.

The term ‘monolingual mindset’ was first introduced into English by Professor Michael Clyne, and he defines it in the following way:

The greatest impediment to recognizing, valuing and utilizing our language potential is a persistent monolingual mindset. Such a mindset sees everything in terms of monolingualism being the norm, even though there are more bi- and multilinguals in the world than monolinguals. (Clyne, 2005)

The monolingual mindset is not inherently linked or restricted to English, but it has been repeatedly identified as characteristic of present-day English-speaking societies such as Australia. This is in spite of the increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse nature of the populations of the major L1 English-speaking countries as a result of ongoing migration (see e.g. Hajek & Slaughter 2014 for examples of the operation and impact of the mindset).

The term ‘Anglobubble’ can be understood as follows:

This is that part of the world, with a concentration of monolingual English speakers, that operates in English, and thinks it only natural that:

- (a) everything should happen in English and should logically be experienced and understood in English; and that
- (b) everyone speaks or should speak English.

There is a clear connection between being English-speaking (particularly as first and only language) and a bounded but see-through separation from the multilingual diversity and reality of the world outside the bubble. It is intended to be slightly tongue in cheek, precisely to contrast with more serious terms such as ‘Anglosphere’ or ‘English-speaking world’. It is this aspect that makes it particularly useful in helping to frame the way we can talk about

languages education to engage with different audiences. It is especially useful when talking, for instance, to students about why learning other languages may be useful or beneficial. My own direct experience has shown that students understand the term and are able to play with it, quickly giving examples that show the Anglobubble (and monolingual mindset for that matter) in action in their own experience of the world.

Given the enormous social and economic capital of English around the globe, it is not surprising to see how easily the concepts of monolingual mindset and the Anglobubble can come together, nor why they are so difficult to dislodge once enmeshed. Steve Price, an Australian media personality with significant influence, makes no bones in an opinion piece in a major daily about his views on languages and languages education, as seen in this short quote:

The new national curriculum will, after establishing Italian and Chinese, also teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Why? Can't someone explain to the bureaucrats and educators that this is a massive waste of time and resources? English, as anyone who regularly travels will tell you, is the universal language of business, diplomacy and entertainment. (Price 2011)

The words 'anyone who regularly travels' (by implication, the author of the quote) highlights one important element of the Anglobubble: it is not fixed to any one location, but is easily portable, able to move with L1 English speakers wherever they might go. They are likely, for instance, when travelling to stay in hotels and seek services in some form of English (often at a significant premium). Steve Price has clearly not been to Japan (or many other places) where, based on my own experience, the ability to function in English as an outsider entering the country is extremely limited.

Responding to the challenge

Now that we have a simple way of framing the challenging context in which Australian schools and languages education operate, what can we do so that languages education thrives? More specifically, how can we ensure that native English speakers understand they need more than English to operate in the world, so that they want to participate in language learning? How can we do this in a way that is compelling and perhaps surprising?

In the first instance, we need to increase demand and desire for languages inside and outside classrooms. Without this, we are unable to address all the issues that we have long been aware of, such as inadequate policy, resources, and teacher quality and supply.²

To increase demand and desire, it is essential to have a strong strategy both at the local level (in our schools) and nationally (across society). The local level is one educators and teachers can address themselves, individually, but ideally working together with other teachers – and is the focus of this contribution. The national level needs significant institutional/political support, of a kind that is ideally consistent, long term and well funded. In both cases, promotion and advocacy are essential, supported by high-quality marketing and a range of ideas old and new to be implemented. Successful marketing requires good strategy and in particular, a great product – something that Japanese clearly is (see below).

As part of this pro-language approach, I am a strong proponent of using popular culture to our advantage, both for promotional purposes to generate interest inside and outside the classroom, and to support classroom learning. It is self-evident that target language and

culture are always essential elements in both these contexts, but, as I argue below, attention should also be given to using our students' own Anglo-oriented culture as an unexpectedly effective tool.

We should always be careful to extend our efforts well beyond the classroom within the school – to students not currently learning Japanese as well as to other teachers, principals and parents. Popular culture can be a very effective element of a 'whole of school' approach. What happens outside the classroom can have significant impact on what happens inside. This presents a challenge to language teachers who, given the local and national contexts that they operate in, are expected to be skilled in the promotion of and advocacy for language education in schools as a valuable learning area for students.

Where is Japanese in all this? A great product which could do with a hero-based strategy

While I have raised some concerns about the current place of Japanese in our education sector (see also Tohsaku 2014 and de Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010), the factors that weigh on Japanese language teaching are not specific to the language, but are the result of external pressures that impact on the entire languages education sector. It is important to understand that Japanese (understood as shorthand for Japanese language and culture together) is, from a marketing perspective, a marketer's dream. Japanese culture – both traditional and modern – offers amazing possibilities to engage with students, schools and the broader public. I don't need to list them all for you, other than to point to the very broad range – from traditional arts and cuisine to manga, anime, high tech and beyond. However, using elements of Japanese language and culture to motivate Japanese language learning, while essential and inevitable in the classroom, is in itself not sufficient. These elements need to be integrated within a broader framework that motivates and sustains interest in Japanese inside and outside the classroom. In the first instance, the framework requires, amongst other things, a human approach, i.e. an understanding that as social animals we are likely to respond to the interests and influence of other people. In the Australian context, this is easily exemplified by the popularity and impact of sporting heroes – their success on the field is used by marketers precisely to motivate and change the perceptions and behaviours of the target audience. This may be, for instance, through the use of sporting heroes to promote products, or sponsored visits by sporting heroes to schools to encourage participation in sport. The fact that advertisers spend large fortunes on sponsored deals with sporting heroes year after year confirms the impact these individuals have on people around them.

It is in this context that I suggest we need heroes to promote Japanese inside and outside our schools. The question then becomes: who are the Japanese-language heroes Australians can recognise and connect with? I suggest a two-pronged response here:

- (a) We need real people and stories that people can connect with; and more generally,
- (b) We also need to use star power, role models, Anglo culture – anything and everything at our disposal.

A hero-based approach is designed to get the language message across and to increase the value of and desire for languages in our schools. That's good marketing!

In the first instance, students need heroes to connect with the idea that it is perfectly 'normal' as an Australian to speak Japanese, or to want to do so. But where are the language heroes for Japanese? For a successful strategy we need both people 'just like us' and the big stars with influence. At the moment, developing a hero-based approach to Japanese remains a challenge,

since it is difficult – even after decades of Japanese language education in Australia – to find them, especially at national level. I am currently aware of only two such national heroes who are fluent in Japanese:

- (a) Adam Liaw, a well-known celebrity TV chef
- (b) Gotye, an internationally successful singer and musician.

Adam Liaw was originally a lawyer who was sent to Japan for work before winning the first edition of the Australian television reality show *Master Chef*. He lived in Japan for some years and now has a Japanese wife and speaks very good Japanese. He is a successful author and seen regularly on Australian television. He can be found on Youtube promoting Japanese language and culture, e.g. ‘Nine Useful Japanese Phrases with Adam Liaw’.³

Gotye, raised in Melbourne, is best known for his global smash hit ‘Somebody that I used to know’ which broke records around the world, including in the USA. The official video clip⁴ has had more than 890 million views and both the song and the clip are very well known to our students – something that should be borne in mind. Few know, however, that he is also a fluent speaker of Japanese – a language he studied at school and at university in Australia. He can also be found online speaking in Japanese on television, in interviews and in concerts in Japan.⁵ It is only a pity that we cannot find clips of Gotye with a digital quality that would maximise the impact of his speaking Japanese.

There is a third candidate, somewhat limited but useful nevertheless: Australian supermodel Miranda Kerr, who has headlined a series of major advertising campaigns on Japanese television.⁶ In many cases, especially for the laundry product, Fundry, she is seen speaking coached Japanese.⁷ Whilst Kerr is not fluent in any real sense, the element of surprise here is useful in generating interest.

The paucity of identifiable Japanese-speaking Australian national heroes is an indication of how difficult it is to change entrenched patterns favouring monolingualism in Australia. That said, the three heroes identified here provide teachers with practical opportunities. They can be used by teachers of Japanese with students but also, critically, with parents and others during language promotion events. The various clips available online, particularly the advertisements, also provide valuable teaching and learning material. Teachers might want, for instance, to (a) translate and recreate ‘Somebody that I used to know’ in Japanese; (b) have students contact language heroes directly to ask about their Japanese language experiences; and (c) analyse the language and cultural content of Miranda Kerr’s Fundry advertisements.

Additional practical suggestions for language promotion and teaching

With a clear and effective multi-faceted strategy that addresses the needs and interests of all sections of the school community – students, fellow teachers, principals and parents – it is entirely possible to foster a strong languages program supported by the entire school community. However, such an outcome also involves effort and visibility inside and outside the class.

While language promotion through distribution of information, e.g. flyers, bookmarks, gift bags, is undoubtedly essential, it is important to understand that practical activities are also

very powerful in drawing students' attention and motivating them to begin and to continue. There are many practical suggestions – some of which, often provided by Japanese language teachers, are outlined in the sections that follow.

Japanese language teachers in Australia share their ideas

There is no paucity of practical suggestions available to language teachers for language promotion and teaching. Many of these come from the direct experience of Japanese language teachers keen to share their knowledge and ideas at the National Symposium event. For instance, Lane (2016), drawing on his experience as a Japanese language teacher in Australia, provides a very useful comprehensive list of the kinds of whole-of-school activities that are useful in reaching out to students, parents and teachers. Howard (2014) discusses her experience of the Japanese language speech night – an activity where students engage outside the classroom with the school community. Lee, Asano and Koga (2016) use the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami to bring real world events into the school environment. Venning (2014) outlines her experiences of using wikis to generate interest amongst students and parents. She highlights in fairly simple fashion how a technologically oriented activity functions and can also be effective in generating interest and support amongst parents. Undoubtedly more exciting and more challenging is the staging of Japanese language flashmobs, as described in detail by Venning (2016), who explains the process as well as the benefits. The motivating impact of this inclusive activity on students is very evident in her account.

The cover song

I have long promoted the cover song as a secret weapon for pedagogical and promotional success for languages education. That is, well-known English-language songs that are translated into the target language, e.g. Japanese.

I use the term 'secret weapon' not because teachers haven't used the cover song for teaching purposes in the past, but because I don't think its potential utility and effect have been understood. While much of our work as language educators is to foster inter-cultural understanding and awareness of the other through exposure to what is different and unique in other languages and cultures, we should also be aware of the powerful motivating effect of seeing oneself in translation. Students (and others) connect emotionally with cover songs for very good reason – since they 'understand' them already. Pre-existing exposure within the context of one's own language and culture also facilitates learning, as well as generating genuine curiosity that we can tap into.

Teachers might consider Gotye's 'Somebody that I used to know' as a useful starting point, especially with older students. While linking with the language-hero back story, one might start with translation of the song's lyrics as a classroom-based task before moving to actual musical production and the possible creation of a video clip – in collaboration with music and art teachers respectively. Otherwise, a great place to start for all ages is the Cup Song – an old song revived in the teen movie *Pitch Perfect* (released in 2012). The song has since achieved global success and is well known to young people for its use of simple clapping and cups to create an audible beat and visual effect.⁸ There are thousands of imitations and lessons devised by individuals on line. There is also an appealing Japanese version with young female students⁹ as well as a short commercial that was broadcast on Japanese television.¹⁰ Both of these can be used as models for students to imitate. However, an excellent real-life example of how the Cup Song can be used as a 'whole of school' activity or event is found in Coláiste

Lurgan's Irish Gaelic version involving the participation of hundreds of L2 learners, which has had millions of views.¹¹

What the Cup Song highlights in any language, including English, is the positive multimodal aspects and impacts it provide. It is fun and practical, and is of equal interest to boys and girls. It supports all learning styles, and is experiential, given the integration of physical movement, song and language learning. It is also up to the moment, and clearly outcome-oriented in a way that students and those watching understand. One only has to watch the end of Coláiste Lurgan's version of the Cup Song to see the wildly positive effects of the approach.

Turn your principal into a local language hero

Everyone knows that principals play a critical role in supporting languages programs in our schools. Principals' responsibilities are great, as is their impact on every aspect of their school's operation. Where principals are very positive, they function as strong role models for teachers and parents and are more likely to provide adequate resourcing, appropriate timetabling and moral support. In this context, languages programs are undoubtedly more likely to thrive. Unfortunately, long experience has also told us that in many cases principals, for a long list of reasons not discussed here, are not positively inclined towards languages education. They often have negative attitudes towards languages (the monolingual mindset at work), making life more difficult for language teachers and their programs (see e.g. De Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010). In these cases, we need to think about how we can transform attitudes and turn the principals in question into supportive role models – in a context where resistance to change can be ingrained.

While there are many ways we can try to reach out to principals, undoubtedly the most effective way to change attitudes and to turn principals into positive role models is to send them to Japan. There are programs currently in place, and these are well thought out, with pre- and post-departure support in addition to time in Japan. While home-stay in Japan may not be effective for every principal, it is undoubtedly the case – based on frequent observation by Japanese language teachers – that immersion visits really do change most principals and in turn the environment for Japanese language teaching in the schools these principals manage.

Food – the not-so-secret weapon

It should not surprise an outsider that language teachers often rely on food for educational and promotional purposes; Italian *gelati* days must be very well known. Lane (2014) integrates food consumption into his whole-of-school approach to the promotion of Japanese. A food-based strategy, if well thought out, can be particularly effective in the Australian context. National surveys show that 95% of Australians identify food as the strongest and best evidence of successful multiculturalism in this country. In this context, Japanese is particularly well placed given the depth of its culinary history and practices. It is easy to organize activities and events around many different Japanese food elements. One can be sure that many teachers, for instance, regularly teach students how to prepare sushi. But there are many other elements to explore, especially ones that are less well-known to the broader population, e.g. *tempura* – both in terms of its history as an intercultural contact phenomenon between East and West, and the technique involved (the technique and its name were borrowed from the Portuguese centuries ago). There are other exciting possibilities, including the concept of *umami* – novel to most Australians and something that can be integrated into language teaching and promotion in many different ways. From a pedagogical perspective, *umami* can also be linked into science lessons – given its controversial nature and recent

scientific research in the west that seeks to understand what it is or isn't. An Umami Day event for the whole school is likely to intrigue not only students but also teachers and parents.

Conclusion

There are many things we can say about the difficulties and challenges that languages education in Australia faces; these have been well described and reported by many different observers. It is helpful, however, to think in relatively simple terms, using concepts such as the monolingual mindset and the Anglobubble, about the macro or big-picture issues that impact negatively on the learning and teaching of Japanese and other languages. It makes it easier for us to explain and discuss the issues to others – whether we are talking to students, to teachers, principals or parents. We need to think about strategies to improve and support language teaching. Promotion and marketing are critical. Japanese language and culture sell themselves very easily in this context. However, we also need to work more broadly through strategies such as finding Japanese-speaking heroes, adopting a whole-of-school approach, and establishing a program of practical activities and strategies that support, motivate and ideally transform. A number of suggestions have been made here, for example, drawing on existing cultural knowledge by using Japanese cover versions of English pop songs, sending principals to Japan on an immersion experience, and thinking of new ways of exploiting Japanese food culture – these and other suggestions are all intended to make Japanese valuable, visible and ultimately highly desirable and successful.

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NOTES

¹ See e.g. Nicholas, 2014; Slaughter, 2011; de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010, for an overview of many of the factors at play.

² See e.g. Slaughter, 2011 on the vagaries of national policy on Asian languages education

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuCDtrhI6k4>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UVNT4wvIGY>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62-1G0pv2IQ>

⁶ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2425001/Victorias-Secret-model-Miranda-Kerr-stars-Japanese-detergent-advert.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnlggqGKeXc>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeXh-yXwEXM>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOW0QnHKoHc>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DIOw9cZqjk>

¹⁰ The Youtube version of the commercial viewed for this paper is no longer available

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hz63M3v11nE>