

Integrating the learning of language and culture across the primary curriculum

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Introduction

Through the medium of language and culture the Japanese program at Balgowlah Heights Public School aims to provide experiences that connect and integrate learning across the curriculum. This requires a flexible and collaborative approach, working closely with students, parents and classroom teachers to ensure the learning has purpose, is relevant, meaningful and fun.

In these formative years of schooling, as educators our goal is to develop the minds of our students and provide the necessary knowledge, life skills and experiences that will enable them to face the challenges ahead in a diverse, rapidly changing and increasingly complex global society.

An integrated Languages program that exposes students to different ways of being and provides many and varied experiences can achieve substantive outcomes by enhancing and complementing learning across the curriculum. There are obvious limitations to what can be achieved in terms of language acquisition given the lack of face-to-face time and dedicated teaching space. Despite this, I believe it is still possible to teach successfully by ensuring the facilitation of four key elements, *Communication*, *Connection*, *Purpose* and *Experience*, each to be explained in the course of this paper.

Background

Balgowlah Heights PS is located near Manly on the Northern Beaches of Sydney. The school has over 700 students in attendance. Japanese language has been taught at the school since the early 1990s, commencing at a time when Japan was at the height of its economic success and demand for Japanese language at its peak. I have been employed as the Japanese teacher since 2004. The student population then was just 450. Currently in 2014, I am responsible for teaching and assessing 640 students from Kindergarten to Year 5. I teach 25 lessons for approximately 25 minutes, in 25 different classrooms with 25 different teachers over a period of 3 days. Students have a lesson just once a week. In NSW public schools Languages education is not compulsory and my position in the school is supported and financed by the parent community.

Over the past 10 years the aim has been to develop a Japanese language and cultural program that fosters a collaborative, intercultural and integrative approach to teaching and learning. In providing the program I bring 30+ years of Japan-related anecdotal experience, having lived and worked in Japan for several years and as well as working for Japanese organisations in Australia prior to marriage and children.

It is important to emphasise these are my own views and based entirely on personal experience and not on any academic research.

The key elements

Communication

Communication is about building and maintaining positive relationships with all key players within the school – the executive, staff, parents and students.

An executive team, in particular a school principal who actively promotes and supports languages in the primary system, is essential. Their enthusiasm for language learning and encouragement validates the program and gives it ‘status’ within the school. Involving the executive team, keeping them informed of the program content, and providing opportunities where they can witness the Japanese program in action (for example, performances, festivals, competitions and visual displays) are all very important.

Likewise, engaging the classroom teachers by discussing and sharing the teaching programs and lesson plans, working collaboratively and providing feedback, all help to foster ongoing support. Involving the classroom teacher in the lessons and having them engage and learn alongside their students is motivating and fun for everyone.

Keeping parents informed is also essential, particularly in my case where my position in the school is dependent on their support. Ensuring they understand the aims and objectives of the Japanese program and don’t have unrealistic expectations of me or of their children is important. Many of our parents are themselves monolingual and therefore don’t necessarily understand that the fact that their child will not be a fluent speaker of Japanese language after six years of learning in primary school is not to say they won’t have engaged in valuable and important learning and experiences.

At the beginning of each year, time is made to speak to all Kindergarten parents to outline the aims and objectives of the program, giving them insight into the type of activities their children will be involved in and what we hope to achieve. All new families that join the school at a later date are also provided a letter of welcome, a program outline and information on the language content taught to date. They are reassured that their child will not be disadvantaged should they not have had previous exposure to the language and culture. Parents are also kept informed via the school newsletter, or directly, of upcoming extracurricular activities or events (for example, manga and art exhibitions, movies, festivals, performances and Japan-related competitions).

In addition, at the end of each reporting period letters are written and distributed to all parents providing a summary of activities, the content covered during the semester and what students are expected to know. Lastly, it is also important to take the time, either before or after school, at school events or when the opportunity arises, to be visible and communicate face to face with parents as this builds their trust and confidence. These are also opportunities for advocacy and receiving their feedback.

Building a positive relationship with the students and striving to ensure that their needs and interests are catered for is probably the most important recipe for achieving success in the Japanese classroom. If you can demonstrate that you care, value and respect them as people, are able to build a rapport and they like you, then you can teach them anything. They will want to learn and want to please you. It is necessary to be always

being upbeat, positive, smiling and making eye contact with every student to commence every lesson, even if it is the ninth class for the day. Stopping to chat to them at recess and lunchtime, arranging extra activities, having a joke, being involved, interested and respectful is essential to maintaining that relationship. It takes time and energy but the benefits are tangible. There are always students who are challenging and difficult, but even in circumstances when dealing with inappropriate behaviour, it important to take time to reach an understanding and a solution to any issues that have arisen.

Connection

Connecting existing knowledge and experience with language content is another essential element to achieving success in the classroom. Languages cannot be taught in isolation but must connect to all learning areas of the curriculum, whether it be maths, science, history, geography or even art. A foreign language and culture provides the perfect medium for consolidating knowledge, enabling connections to be made and meaningful learning to happen.

To have an awareness and knowledge of what is happening in the school and in classrooms is paramount to facilitating language integration. For example, I teach 'time' in Year 3 after or concurrently with the learning occurring in the maths class. By doing it in the target language you are also consolidating what has already been taught. I also introduce the months, the date and the seasons at the same time as that learning is occurring in the Year 1 classroom.

Knowing your students and what they are learning across the different year levels and in individual classrooms can ensure the effective integration of the languages program. This does, however, require time, flexibility and constant adaptation. It means regularly attending year-level meetings where student needs can be discussed, and I can work collaboratively with classroom teachers and be involved in the planning process.

A languages program that demonstrates cross-curriculum connections and reflects an intercultural and holistic approach combined with a sound knowledge and understanding of your students can greatly enhance, or 'value add', learning outcomes.

Purpose

To achieve success in the classroom, what is taught and how must have a purpose for it to have value and meaning. Students need to understand what they are learning and why as well as how they will learn and for what purpose. To cite an example, in Year 5 students are asked to research, discuss and compare food etiquette at home and in Japan. Students often find this interesting and very useful as many are not aware of what constitutes appropriate food etiquette and table manners in their own culture, and of course everyone's experience will differ depending on what social and cultural background they have come from. Many also do not know how to use chopsticks properly, nor do they have any concept of appropriate etiquette surrounding their use. Hence teaching food etiquette is practical and has purpose.

Teaching language and cultural concepts that are relevant, and connecting it to what they know already, helps I believe to develop an understanding of self, others and the greater community in which we live. It teaches students to value, respect and appreciate difference between cultures. I think it also helps develop an awareness and sensitivity that our attitudes and our actions can impact and affect others.

When determining what we teach and how, it is worthwhile, where possible, to engage the students in the decision process, thus empowering them to take responsibility for their own learning. This has become increasingly possible with the use of technology, the internet, Youtube and language learning applications. We as teachers no longer need to teach but can step back and act as facilitators in the education process. In Year 5 at Balgowlah Heights students have the opportunity to do a PIP (personal interest project) where they are encouraged to focus on an area of Japanese language and culture of interest to them and to make a presentation to the class. They are then peer assessed following set criteria. This has proven to be very motivating for students. I too learn from them and am often in awe of the effort, quality and standard of what I now refer to as 'teach the teacher' presentations. Examples have included detailed models and explanations of Japanese architecture, gardens and Mount Fuji, an origami zoo, manga drawing lessons, Japanese dance performances choreographed by the students themselves, karate and ninja demonstrations (complete with outfits and homemade ninja weapons), Japanese cooking and ikebana demonstrations, Harajuku fashion, robotics and homemade kimonos. There have even been students who had previously underachieved in many areas of their schooling but have excelled in their PIP presentations. In one presentation a normally very quiet and introverted young boy was able to impress and amaze us all with his incredible knowledge of the Pokemon phenomenon, simply because Pokemon was his passion. The reaction from his peers did wonders for his self-esteem and confidence, and his engagement in school life improved.

Experience

I have discussed communication, connection and purpose as essential for achieving success in the primary classroom. The last of the key elements is experience. For this there is no substitute. Experience enables deeper, richer and meaningful learning to happen. When evaluating the program at the end of the students' six-year 'Japanese journey' at Balgowlah Heights, I ask them to recall what they have learned, remembered and enjoyed. Not surprisingly, it is always the experiential learning that has had the greatest impact on student knowledge and language development.

To cite some examples from Kindergarten, it is the classroom full of helium balloons when learning colours and decorating the bamboo tree with their wishes for *Tanabata* (Star Festival) that the students remembered. It is dancing the *tankobushi* (folk dance) with their parents under the *kohaku* (red and white striped celebratory bunting), eating *yakisoba* (fried noodles) and competing with their class wearing their team *hachimaki* (symbolic headband) at the *undōkai* (sports festival) in Year 1 when learning about celebrations. It is not the token lantern they could have made or the Youtube clip they could have watched, it is the actual event they experienced that they remember. In Year 2, it is the making of the *kakejiku* (hanging scroll) and learning of Matsuo Bashō's journey around Japan writing haiku poetry they recall from lessons about the importance of the seasons and connecting with nature. In Year 3, it is the Japanese play and performing a traditional folk tale at the drama festival and in front of the school. It is the making and painting of our *kaminendo daruma* (paper clay figurine) when learning symbols of identity and goal setting or creating amazing patterns doing *shibori* (traditional dyeing technique). It is the meditative art of creating stylized pictures with ink and brushes doing *sumie* (ink painting) and introductory speeches in Year 4 as they pretended to be exchange students in Japan. It may be the making and selling of *washi* paper products for the spring fair or the trip to the Japanese restaurant on the local bus

at lunchtime to put our knowledge of Japanese etiquette into practice or the sumo competition in the sand pit that makes the learning of the language and the culture come to life.

The most worthwhile and valuable experience of all, however, is the study tour to Japan. Below I have extracted passages from a letter to the school principal from a parent whose son participated in the Japan Study Tour:

We would like to formally let you know how much our son John appreciated the Japan Study Tour... Perhaps the best indicator of his enjoyment of the trip was John expressing an interest in seeing more of Japan ... and not just Tokyo Disneyland. ... John returned from the tour raving about the things he had seen... We believe that the heightened sense of curiosity and enthusiasm for learning he is exuding this term can be traced directly to the stimuli the tour provided... In summary, the trip was a brilliant cultural learning experience. John has returned a more confident young man with an enhanced understanding of what the world has to offer...

In the words of Confucius, 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.' There is only so much we can learn from a textbook and in a formal classroom setting. Language and culture is real and therefore must be lived.

Conclusion

It is in the primary years or earlier that we should be placing more emphasis on actively promoting Languages teaching and learning. Young children acquire language naturally and without fear or prejudice. I see what can be achieved in less than 30 minutes once a week teaching Japanese and the enjoyment children get from learning language. It is encouraging also when made aware of how well our past students perform in their high school language programs because of the experience they had at Balgowlah Heights PS. I often lament to think what could be achieved if languages were more valued and more time allocated to the teaching and learning of Languages in the NSW primary curriculum. Hopefully this will change with the introduction of the new Australian Curriculum and as the need arises for us as Australians, individually and collectively, to compete on increasingly connected rapidly changing world stage where the educated majority can already communicate in more than one language.

To have the opportunity to teach in a primary school is extremely fulfilling and rewarding. The key to achieving success in a Language classroom is not just what is taught and how but also that it is perceived positively and valued in the wider community. It is important to communicate aims and objectives, to work collaboratively, to be actively involved in the school and to develop an integrative and experiential program that focuses on students' needs and supports and connects the learning across the whole curriculum.

Postscript

This paper was written four years ago. It details comments I expressed following a presentation given at the NSJLE in 2014 as a primary Japanese language teacher in NSW. Fast-forward four years, and despite having become more aware of important educational research such as Professor John Hattie's Visible Learning (2012) – which sees us now all versed in the rhetoric of 'Learning Intentions and Success Criteria' – I still believe that what is written in this paper is as pertinent today as it was in 2014.

None of it is new and much of it has been said before. Today, I/we may be more experienced and better informed as teachers. But the key to ultimate success for us all is to be able to adapt to the needs of society. We must strive to develop and maintain positive relationships, ensure important connections are made in context and provide relevant, purposeful and valuable experiences that give our students the best opportunities to succeed in the future.

It takes enormous courage and fortitude to be an educator/teacher today. Whilst we can easily get caught up in the vexatious and demanding daily expectations placed upon us, we must not lose sight of the value and importance of our work, but instead rejoice in the difference we can make and what we can do for others.

References

- Hattie, J. 2012. *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.