
DIFFERENTIATION FOR GIFTED STUDENTS IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE CLASS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to share best practice of how to differentiate curriculum for gifted students in the Japanese language classroom. Acknowledging that language classes are diverse in not only ability but background culture, it is important that every student be taught to best support their learning. Knowing the theory is very different to being able to implement differentiated curriculum for gifted students in practice, so this paper aims to address both the theory and practical component using a unit on Family, aligned with the Australian Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The education of gifted students has long been a subject of keen interest and debate within the field of educational psychology and pedagogy. Known as a “quiet crisis,” countless gifted students attend school where their learning needs are not met (Renzulli and Park 2000). The consequence is lost academic growth, lost ambition, and a loss of their potential contribution to society. Australia’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) ratings are declining (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018), Australia is ranked 39 out of 41 middle income countries for equitable education (Noone and Varadharajan 2022), and underachievement in the gifted student population is skyrocketing (Jackson and Jung 2022). This is cause for alarm.

While the educational community has made significant strides in recognizing and addressing the distinctive learning needs of gifted students, there remains a paucity of research that specifically examines how these needs can be met through the differentiation of instruction in the context of high school Japanese language classes. Lo Bianco’s (2013) compelling research on Japanese language learning in Victoria is confronting, suggesting most dropouts of high ability students occur because many language programs lack rigour. To this end, teachers need support in providing gifted students inspiring, engaging lessons and in designing meaningful tasks that are relevant both to their students and to the world in which students live (Theisen 2002).

Gifted students, who often have advanced problem-solving skills and a deep thirst for learning, are a diverse group with unique learning needs. Furthermore, due to myriad language and cultural backgrounds, an abundance of varying interests, and diverse proficiency levels, the Japanese classroom poses a specific set of challenges when it comes to meeting the needs of gifted learners. To ensure that gifted students’ potential is nurtured into talent, educators must adapt their instructional methods to provide an intellectually stimulating and enriching learning environment. This educational context demands thoughtful consideration and innovation in pedagogical strategies.

This article provides explicit examples of differentiation as a means to cater to the academic needs of gifted students within the high school Japanese classroom. Furthermore, the article explores the complex interplay between gifted education and the Japanese language curriculum within high school settings. It aims to provide a structure where Tier 2 tasks and outcomes, which are suitable for the majority of learners, are modified for the gifted student, demonstrated in Tier 3. Some tasks also have Tier 1 options for students who need more support. Tier 1 and 2 tasks have been included in this paper as a comparison from which readers can understand the modification process to increase complexity for the gifted student in Tier 3.

BENEFITS OF DIFFERENTIATING CURRICULUM FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

Differentiation stems from the premise that every student should be taught with the intent to support the success of their learning (Tomlinson 2017). This links to Vygotsky’s key construct of “the zone of proximal development.” This is the space between what the student can do unaided and what they can do with assistance (Billings and Walqui 2017). This symbiotic relationship formed in a stimulating learning environment, helps the gifted student develop intrinsic motivation for learning (Kanevsky 2011). The teacher who differentiates well for gifted students learns to stimulate creative thinking and shifts from being the provider of knowledge, to the facilitator of maximized student learning (Sousa and Tomlinson 2018). Today’s gifted students have the potential to be our future leaders, scientists, artists and innovators and need their teachers’ support. In order to facilitate students’ abilities to transform into outstanding competencies, teachers not only need to have robust differentiated units, but they also need to ensure this intention is matched with students’ experience in the classroom. In the next section I will outline differentiation strategies that exemplify best practice in teaching Japanese to gifted students.

PROGRAM

To illustrate this, I introduce the unit on “Family” that was designed to use in a Year 7 class that had been learning beginner Japanese for six months at an independent coeducational school in outer Melbourne (see Table 1 below). To make Japanese meaningful to students, language needs to be linked to real life situations with enjoyable activities designed to reinforce vocabulary and concepts. Moreover, language learning also requires frequent repetition and recall as the effect of repetition reflects a neural learning mechanism essential for language acquisition (Christiansen 2016). Unnecessary repetition, however, should be eliminated (Johnsen et al. 2005).

A differentiation strategy illustrated in the program is curriculum compacting. Curriculum compacting allows teachers to adjust curriculum by replacing content students already know, with new content, enrichment, extension, and acceleration options. These adjustments allow for the discovery of relationships and concepts which is essential for gifted student growth and engagement in their learning (Rimm et al. 2018).

Maker’s model of differentiation (1982) has been implemented within this unit to stimulate critical and creative thinking with students’ interests and educational needs in mind. Maker’s model recommends modifying the content, process, product and learning environment to maximise learning for gifted students. Williams’ (1993) model provides a framework for developing activities and questions to stimulate thinking processes. Relevant elements of this model were also utilised to add depth and complexity for the gifted students. Furthermore, Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Processes (2001) has also been incorporated in the unit. There are six levels of cognitive learning, and each level is conceptually different. The six levels are remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. Focusing on student interest in anime the unit aims to be student centred and present content that expands beyond the curriculum. Variable pacing is provided, and group interaction is facilitated in many activities.

Table 1

UNIT ON “THE FAMILY”

Unit: Family	Stage: Year 7	Duration: 5 weeks
Concept Generalisations: All families are different.		
Unit Questions Are there any patterns to saying family members or counting them? How does language link to Japanese culture?		
Inquiry questions What do Japanese families look like? How might the modern Japanese family lifestyle compare with yours? What can be understood about Japanese culture from evaluating the language used for family members?		
General Unit Outcomes Know: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japanese family names and counters for people. • How to write about family in 2 different scripts. Understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interconnected relationship of language and culture. • How language and behaviour change according to participants, context and relationship, and how politeness and respect are expressed explicitly in Japanese through greetings, vocabulary, formulaic expressions, and actions. Do: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Count and describe family members in Japanese. • Adjust language to suit different contexts and situations. 		

PRE-ASSESSMENT

The purpose of pre-assessment is to help teachers understand their students' learning needs (Tomlinson and Moon 2013) and to determine their point of entry relative to the outcomes. This is so that instruction can be appropriately targeted to students' varied proficiencies across the content. Gauging students' baseline knowledge ensures value is connected to students' learning. Outcomes have been chosen to allow a high ceiling in this context. Due to the nature of learning a language as a beginner, Tomlinson and Moon (2013) argue that pre-assessment is best done after the first lesson of the unit. The pre-assessment aims to invite students to work with the teacher, to feel empowered to achieve higher level learning, and to feel confident about knowing the next step. To foster metacognition and self-regulation for gifted students, discussions focus on setting learning goals and extended outcomes. Further to this, assistance was given to identify strategies which would support students to achieve these goals and outcomes and to encourage the transformation of ability to talent. An example of pre-assessment is given in Table 2.

Table 2

EXAMPLE OF PRE-ASSESSMENT

After reiterating to students that pre-assessment is a low stakes planning tool to understand their needs, students were asked to:

- 1) Complete 2 family trees using the template. One is for their families and the other is a fictitious family. Use as many Japanese names as possible in either romaji, hiragana or kanji.
- 2) Complete a hiragana (script) quiz.
- 3) Consider why they think there are different terms depending on whose family is being referred to. Consider what this tells them about Japanese culture. Consider a greeting they would say differently to me as their teacher rather than a classmate. Explain.
- 4) Out of the following areas, tick all the ones that interest them, or add something that they would like to learn about from Japanese culture (anime/kendo-judo/sumo/manga/ food/kimono/baseball/ cosplay/city life/religion/music/other).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment was implemented over the unit in a variety of ways to provide guidance for students to keep moving towards their desired outcomes. Formative assessment occurred using both qualitative and quantitative processes of collecting data that reflect students' mode of learning to create a portfolio of evidence of learning over the unit. Many students enjoy verbally discussing their learning, so conversations with the teacher were recorded and added to students' portfolios as a qualitative measure of data collection. Quizzes, worksheets, and exit cards were utilized as a quantitative measure of data collection. Exit cards are a tool that require students to reflect on what they have learned during the lesson thus enabling teachers to quickly assess students' understanding of a concept. In the following section I will outline a unit of work that was designed specifically to cater for gifted students in a beginner Year 7 Japanese class.

ACTIVITY 1

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The pre-assessment analysis provided critical information specifically about vocabulary recall and script development. Differentiating via tiering was designed to reduce or amplify the complexity according to students' readiness (Tomlinson and Moon 2013), and the content, process and product was adjusted using Maker's Model (1982). Supporting the generalization that all families are different, various photos of Japanese families were presented according to the appeal and interest noted in the pre-assessment. To encourage creative thinking, the SCAMPER¹ model (Gladding and Henderson 2000; Pyryt and Bosetti 2006) was utilised in discussions with students. Students were encouraged to substitute basic scripts with complex scripts, combine ideas, eliminate superfluous information through editing and drafting, and adapt or rearrange how they presented their family tree.

1 SCAMPER is an acronym for Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify/Magnify, Purpose, Eliminate/Minimise and Rearrange/Reverse.

Table 3
SUMMARY OF CORE OUTCOMES FOR ACTIVITY 1

<p>Activity 1 Core Outcomes</p> <p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise and understand the relationship between the character-based scripts of hiragana, katakana and kanji (Content Description VCJAU139). • Know that kanji were brought from China, hiragana was formed by simplifying kanji, katakana was formed using a part of kanji. <p>Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding that each individual kanji represents meaning as well as sound, such as 日 ("sun," "day"), and that some kanji come from pictographs, for example, 山. <p>Do/Skill:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to write high-frequency kanji numbers, family members.
<p>Extended Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate the use of hiragana and kanji accurately while representing social conventions according to Japanese culture, (the difference between the words for their family compares to someone else's family) and describing members in full sentences. Analyse how families are represented through anime.
<p>Resources</p> <p>Photos, family tree template, printed family names, anime how to draw faces/print out anime faces.</p>
<p>Hook</p> <p>A variety of "shichi-go-san" family photos with Japanese children wearing traditional dress were shown to the students. This is a significant cultural celebration for families when their son/daughter turns 3, their son turns 5 or their daughter turns 7 years old. The Imperial Family and anime clips of young teenagers were shown.</p>
<p>Probing questions given to the students</p> <p>What do you notice about the different photos? (Is it culturally inappropriate to smile in formal photographs in Japan?) How do the photos reflect culture different to yours? Using William's (1993) visualisation skills, "Imagine you were one of the children who were 3, 5 or 7 in the traditional dress in the photo, how might you be feeling?" What might you be looking forward to in this celebration? Williams' (1993) "examples of habit" technique was used by asking students to research what traditions are associated with the shichi-go-san celebration.</p>
<p>Differentiation</p> <p><i>Gifted students were asked to complete the Tier 3 task.</i></p> <p>Tier 1—Design their family tree labelling each member in Japanese, and then create a fictional family tree, drawing anime faces/using cut outs.</p> <p>Tier 2—Design their family tree labelling each member in Japanese drawing anime faces/using cut outs. Write family names in Hiragana and kanji unaided. Research the Imperial Family and evaluate the general similarities and differences with teenagers in the Imperial Family compared to Australian teenagers. Present results of their research in a paragraph or dot points, and either hand-written or typed.</p> <p>Tier 3—After learning how to include pets, writes short sentences in Japanese for each member in her family tree including pets. Research how families are represented in the anime films she enjoys. Negotiate with the teacher on how they would like to present their findings.</p>

ACTIVITY 2

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Activity 2 was designed and differentiated to include 'attractive' options and encourage student choice (Kanevsky 2016). Using Maker's (1982) framework of thinking, it was student-centred, open, utilised a real audience and encouraged creative thinking. Many students enjoy producing work that allows them to showcase their creativity, so the "Incubation Model of Teaching"² of Torrance and Safter (Hines et al. 2018) was implemented as either the primary goal or a thinking process goal to complement conceptual content understandings. Scaffolding, a crucial aspect of the zone of proximal development, was provided to help students engage with the content through reflection, divergent thinking and problem finding. The draft process allowed sophistication in the development of content, and students were supported to include additional sources of information and connect their ideas with their personal experiences. Peer collaboration was offered which allowed the opportunity for peer evaluation and debriefing. Table 4 provides a summary of the core outcomes for Activity 2.

2 The model was originally developed by E. Paul Torrance and provides a framework for the development of lessons consisting of three stages: Heightening Anticipation, Deepening Expectations and Extending the Learning.

Table 4
SUMMARY OF CORE OUTCOMES FOR ACTIVITY 2

<p>Activity 2 Core Outcomes</p> <p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify language associated with gender, age, social status, or the purpose of interaction, for example, ぼく/わたし, はい/うん, こんにちは/！\口ー, さようなら/バイバイ. <p>Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise that Japanese language use varies according to the context and situation of the interaction and the relationship between participants (Content Description VCJAU016), therefore it is essential that students understand and use the variations in language use based on the age, relationship, and level of familiarity between participants. For example, 母はは/お母かあさん and ～先生/～さん avoiding あなた when showing politeness. Recognise the importance of using appropriate forms of address when interacting with different people, for example, using ～くん/～さん when communicating with close friends, family members or other young people, and using ～さん、～先生 for adults. <p>Do/Skill:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore connections between languages and cultures as exemplified in particular words, expressions, and communicative behaviours, noticing how meaning can be culture-specific and difficult to transfer between languages (Content Description VCJAC118).
<p>Extended Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Display understanding of how language and culture are connected. Design and create a profile using sophisticated and varied language, integrating media, language, and culture.
<p>Resources</p> <p>YouTube, Obento text.</p>
<p>Hook</p> <p>Sample student profiles were displayed.</p> <p>Students watched the pop star, Tomohisa and other young Japanese influencers on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pHJdxQPzDY and https://www.japanbuzz.info/the-top-japanese-influencers-for-2021/ which has a range of fun quirky Japanese influencers).</p>
<p>Differentiation</p> <p><i>Gifted students were asked to complete the Tier 3 task.</i></p> <p>Tier 2—Create a social media profile page in Japanese with their name, age, and family. Include photos of their family and area of interest in Japanese culture. Using speech bubbles, add appropriate language for who/what they are communicating.</p> <p>Scaffolding may include IT support, and language assistance.</p> <p>Tier 3—Create a social media profile page in Japanese including pictures their family and Japanese related interests. Include their name, age, nationality, telephone number, pets and further information about themselves and something related to Japanese culture. Demonstrate their understanding of how language varies according to the context in culturally specific expressions.</p>

ACTIVITY 3

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Drawing on Bloom's Taxonomy, the incorporation of cognitive processes and knowledge has been used to add depth to gifted students' learning (Davis et al. 2018). Content and processes were modified according to Maker's Model (1982) to use factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge across the cognitive processes. Successful completion of Activity 3 for the gifted student relied on students' ability to remember, understand, apply, analyse, and then create a differentiated product. Gifted students showcased their ability in writing Japanese with a high ceiling, open-ended task where they decided on the length, breadth of content, and range of scripts they wanted to incorporate. Table 5 provides a summary of the core outcomes for Activity 3.

Table 5
SUMMARY OF CORE OUTCOMES FOR ACTIVITY 3

<p>Activity 3 Core Outcomes</p> <p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family names <p>Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language conventions that reflect Japanese culture, for example、はじめまして、どうぞよろしく. (Content Description VCJAC008). <p>Do/Skill:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translate and interpret familiar texts in Japanese and interpret words and expressions encountered in simple Japanese that do not translate easily into English. • Locate key points of information in a range of texts and resources and use the information in new ways (Content Description VCJAC004).
<p>Extended Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate to translate and interpret short texts, noticing and explaining aspects that are similar or different in Japanese and English versions. • Plan, develop and create a self-introduction in Japanese using a variety of culturally appropriate language.
<p>Hook</p> <p>Brought in travel brochures, supermarket catalogues, newspaper, children's books, and readers to display a breadth of sources students could recognize language from.</p>
<p>Differentiation</p> <p><i>Gifted students were asked to complete the Tier 3 task.</i></p> <p>Tier 1—Read the entry about someone's family and follow the prompts to recognise the use of language in the article. Scaffolding: Students are given a glossary and the article is short.</p> <p>Tier 2—Read the entry about someone's family and answer the comprehension questions. Scaffolding: Students may use a hiragana script chart.</p> <p>Tier 3—Write a family introduction on genkoyoshi paper, including as many details as possible and noting culturally appropriate language. Scaffolding: Instruction is given on the conventions of using genkoyoshi paper.</p>

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The purpose of summative assessment is to assess student growth to determine if essential content has been mastered against the outcomes of instruction (Sousa and Tomlinson 2018). With student learning preferences considered, the assessment should mirror the learning goals, measure the most essential aspects for students to know, understand and do, and align with the cognitive level of learning goals (Tomlinson and Moon 2013). This assessment has been designed to give students a high ceiling opportunity to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do, and empower them as they recognise their growth against pre-assessment.

RATIONALE FOR THE SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The designed assessment is relevant to gifted students because it supports their learning needs for product adjustments to incorporate evaluating, analysing, creating, and connecting with authentic challenges. Passow (1981) argues that not all students should, could or would want to do the same task, so the Tier 3 activity was designed to specifically match gifted students' learning needs. To increase the complexity of the task, a cross-curricular element was implemented that involved analysing the English language. Metacognition is the process of intentionally thinking about how one thinks and learns and plays a key role in the processes of successful language learning and teaching for gifted students. Gifted students generally possess a high level of awareness of the intricacies of the target language they are trying to master, including how it compares to their mother tongue and other known languages, and the strategies that can be employed for this purpose (Li 2019). A sensitivity to multi-cultural backgrounds was also embedded to reflect the diverse background of many students. Furthermore, Williams' (1993) "examples of change" mode was used to develop creative thinking, encourage access to advanced content, and facilitate independent research skills. Table 6 provides a summary of the summative assessment core outcomes.

Table 6
SUMMARY OF SUMMATIVE CORE OUTCOMES

<p>Summative Assessment Core Outcomes</p> <p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise and use features of the Japanese sound system, including pitch, accent, rhythm, and intonation (Content Description VCJAU012). <p>Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on the experience of learning and using Japanese in different contexts, commenting on similarities to and differences from their own usual language use and behaviour (Content Description VCJAC010). <p>Do/Skill:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate Japanese ways of communicating that reflect cultural values and practices such as the expression of respect or familiarity, for example, 母, ママ and お母さん, ~さん and ~せんせい. • Describe and demonstrate differences in ways of showing consideration for others in Japanese, for example, using particular terms of address, register and body language in greetings, and noticing that a focus on "self" is avoided in Japanese by the minimal use of the pronoun 'I' in interactions.
<p>Extended Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse language and use metacognition to evaluate their own use of native language. • Explore relevant experiences and points of view regarding Japanese family structure and influence on society. • Evaluate the role of the Imperial family/Analyse the changing make up and role of the contemporary Japanese family.
<p>Differentiation for Summative Assessment <i>Gifted students were asked to complete the Tier 3 task.</i></p> <p>Tier 2 Part 1 Talk about their family tree they have previously created, or a photo/picture of their family, in Japanese. OR Make a powerpoint using their family tree and do a voice over describing them in Japanese.</p> <p>Tier 2 Part 2 Talk (in English) about the way family members are described which reflects Japanese culture?</p> <p>Tier 3 Part 1 Talk about their family tree they previously created, or a photo/picture of their family in Japanese. OR Make a powerpoint using their family tree and do a voice over describing them in Japanese. Then, in English, either written or orally, communicate about the way family members are described which reflects Japanese culture? What parts of the English language/ their native language that reflect their culture?</p> <p>Tier 3 Part 2 Describe how the family size and roles of family members are changing in Japanese society? Choose how they would like to present their findings. OR Analyse the role of the Imperial family and evaluate the influence on Japanese society today. Use their relative new understanding about the Imperial family, explain how far they think their influence and/or power extends? Choose how they would like to present their findings and thoughts.</p>

PITFALLS

Designing a unit of work reflecting the needs of a gifted learner requires substantial differentiation to enrich their learning experience and to produce high quality curriculum. This requires time, effort and understanding. Furthermore, time management and realistic planning can be an area of weakness for gifted students so providing scaffolding to support real deadlines is crucial for student success.

CONCLUSION

Units that are proactively planned according to student needs, differences, and similarities in mind, are student centred by nature and lead to increased engagement (Tomlinson 2017). With this as foundational, preassessment was designed to gauge proximity to essential knowledge, skills and understanding that determined how to plan and support students to meet their desired negotiated outcomes. The activities within the unit were tiered according to Bloom's taxonomy and Passow's test of differentiation (1981) and assessments were designed to allow students to demonstrate their learning throughout the unit, encouraging the creative and critical thinking processes through modification of content, process and product based on models by Maker (1982) and Williams (1993).

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