
TRIAL PRACTICE OF DIALOGIC LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN BILINGUAL SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

In Australian primary schools offering English-Japanese bilingual education, Japanese language is taught using the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, which partially teaches the content of subjects in Japanese. However, the approach to measure students' Japanese language proficiency itself has not been established yet.

This research examines whether "Dialogic Language Assessment (DLA) for Japanese as a Second Language" can be adopted to assess Japanese language ability at the end of the 6 years of bilingual education. The implementation of DLA directly contributed to the teacher's understanding of students' Japanese language skills, which guided their adoption of improved teaching practices. This adoption of DLA suggested that "DLA Speaking" can be a particularly effective tool to assess learners' proficiency not only at bilingual primary schools but potentially also at secondary schools and "Hoshuko" (Saturday schools) in Australia and other locations outside Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual and immersion education in English and other languages is provided in some Australian primary and secondary schools. According to the Japan Foundation (2020), five primary schools offer Japanese-English bilingual programs in Australia. In these schools, Japanese language is taught using the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, which partially teaches the content of some school subjects in Japanese. However, specific teaching methods and assessments to measure Japanese language proficiency have not yet been established.

In this study, the authors attempted to measure students' Japanese language proficiency by administering the Dialogic Language Assessment (DLA) for Japanese as a Second Language at two Japanese-English bilingual primary schools in Australia. DLA, which was developed by the Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), is widely used in schools in Japan to assess students' Japanese language proficiency. This paper reports on the implementation of DLA at one of the two Japanese-English bilingual primary schools, where DLA was administered.¹ As a result of conducting DLA and understanding students' abilities, the Japanese classroom teacher (co-author) was able to reflect on her own lessons and improve her teaching method.

BACKGROUND

JAPANESE LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN JAPANESE-ENGLISH BILINGUAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In the past, one of the authors (Kadowaki) visited four out of the five Japanese-English bilingual schools in Australia and observed classes. Some schools have one to three classes at each grade level, while others have one or two composite classes with two grades, such as Years 1 and 2, together. In most of the schools visited, the teaching subjects for the bilingual class are divided equally into those taught in Japanese and those taught in English. The bilingual program at each school varies in its specific curriculum and content. Depending on the curriculum and subject topics, Japanese language teachers need to decide on the Japanese vocabulary and grammatical items to be taught. As there are not many ready-made, easy-to-use teaching materials available that cater for teaching such specific items in the Japanese language, teachers are obliged to create their own teaching materials. It was observed that they spend a considerable time each day preparing for classes.

The students' understanding of subjects offered as part of the Australian Curriculum as well as their Japanese proficiency associated with such subjects are assessed in academic performance within an individual school. However, an effective methodology to measure students' Japanese proficiency itself had not yet been established in any of the four schools visited. Therefore, the authors considered applying existing research findings on Japanese language education for children with foreign roots in Japan to the teaching of Japanese language in bilingual primary schools in Australia.

1 This experimental work is a part of a research project to support Japanese language education outside Japan. A detailed analysis of the assessment of students' Japanese language proficiency will be reported separately in another paper.

Japanese language for children with foreign roots in Japan is referred to as “Japanese as a Second Language (JSL).” In JSL teaching, school subjects are taught in Japanese, which is similar to the situation in Australian’s bilingual primary schools, where some subjects are taught in Japanese using the direct method.

As there is no standardised method of assessment of students’ level of Japanese, the authors decided to use DLA—an instrument that is widely adopted in schools in Japan—in bilingual Australian schools on an experimental basis. DLA as practised in Japan was accordingly implemented in two Australian bilingual Japanese-English schools in two different states with Year 6 students. This paper focuses on the practice in Caulfield Primary School in Victoria, one of the two bilingual primary schools to have implemented DLA.

The following section presents an overview of DLA, based on its accompanying teacher’s manual (MEXT 2014).

IMPLEMENTATION

WHAT IS “DLA”?

DLA was designed to assess the Japanese language skills of children, what kind of learning support is necessary, and how to support their learning of school subjects. DLA has Speaking, Reading, Writing and Listening sections, and a teacher’s manual explaining specific procedures for each section is available online.² The teacher’s manual contains detailed instructions on how to administer the tests and how to ask questions in Japanese. It is therefore easy for any educator to carry out DLA, and no special training for conducting interviews is required.

DLA takes into account the cognitive abilities of growing children in measuring Japanese language proficiency. The Speaking section usually takes about twenty minutes to administer and the Reading section about twenty five minutes. The amount of time the assessment process takes varies according to a student’s Japanese proficiency level. It is not necessary to do all four sections at once, and it is sufficient to measure speaking skills first and then implement the other sections in stages as the child’s Japanese language skills develop (MEXT 2014: 179).

Due to space limitations, this paper focuses on the Speaking and Reading sections, which were conducted face-to-face, one-to-one between teacher and student at one of the two schools in which DLA was administered. All interviews were recorded for later review and to assess each student’s Japanese language ability on the six-stage proficiency rating in the respective Evaluation Reference Frames for DLA Speaking and Reading. Each stage indicates the level a student in the school year is in. In any year level, stages 5 and 6 are considered to be the levels where students can keep up with their study in a school in Japan with some learning support when necessary.

The interviews were conducted in a private room. The interviewer sat alongside the student to create a relaxing atmosphere, instead of sitting opposite each other.

(1) DLA Speaking

DLA Speaking is divided into three parts. The first part is “Introductory Conversation.” The interviewer (teacher) starts with greetings and explains the procedure of the interview in Japanese. Then the interviewer asks the student some questions about himself/herself. After the “Introductory Conversation” is a “Vocabulary Check.” In this part, the interviewer shows the student some picture cards and asks him or her to name them in Japanese. All picture cards can be downloaded from the internet.³

Part 3 consists of three tasks—the “Basic Task,” the “Dialogue Task” and the “Cognitive Task.” These tasks involve looking at pictures first, then answering questions about the pictures, followed by role-playing conversations with the teacher. The

2 These materials can be downloaded free of charge from the MEXT website. Only the speaking part of the teacher’s manual is translated into English (<https://www.dla-kaken.jp/20220212wsdocuments>).

3 These words were selected from a list of fifty-five words across thirteen areas, including body parts, food, animals, school behaviour and emotions (MEXT 2014, 180).

Basic Task measures the retention of basic sentence patterns at an elementary level, while The Dialogue Task measures a student's ability to speak in a situation without any assistance. The Cognitive Task measures the child's ability to talk coherently about content related to school subjects. For the Cognitive Task, three or four cards are chosen from a stack of seven cards, according to child's age and development. Two or three cards are suitable for younger children.

After the interview is finished, the teacher listens to the recording and checks the student's Japanese proficiency based on the relevant checklist in the teacher's manual. The check sheets are used to determine at which level of the six stages⁴ of The Evaluation Reference Frame the child is positioned.

(2) DLA Reading

DLA Reading takes place after the DLA Speaking Cognitive task has been completed. Its purpose is to find out "how well the child understands the text", "how the child reads", and "how familiar the child is with reading books". There are seven different levels of books for Reading.⁵ A student's reading comprehension is measured through a dialogue rather than written tests in order for teachers to draw out the potential of each child (MEXT 2014: 178).

The DLA Reading process is as follows. First, before starting reading, the teacher shows the student the illustrations and key words in the book to help him or her understand the meaning. The student is then asked to predict the content of the book, and the teacher reads aloud a part of the book while the student listens to the story. Finally, the student reads the book aloud. When the student has finished reading, the teacher asks the student to summarise the story in Japanese and asks questions in Japanese to check the student's understanding of the content. At the end, the student is asked to share his/her impressions of the book. The teacher asks the student questions about his/her reading habit such as "What kind of books do you usually read?" and, "In which languages and how often do you read books?"

(3) DLA Writing

For Writing, eight themes are set according to the different age groups, and students write compositions in Japanese on these themes. The themes are "favorite animal" for Year 1 students and "school" for Years 5 and 6 students. The themes may be selected by the teacher according to the children's Japanese level. Students in Years 1-3 are required to write for 10-20 minutes, while students in Years 4-6 write for 20-30 minutes.

(4) DLA Listening

In order to measure the listening skills necessary for learning a subject, students watch 3-5-minute videos on eight different themes according to their age. As examples, Year 1 students watch "Field Trip Information" and Years 5-6 watch a video on "Energy." After watching the videos, each student is asked to talk about the content.

The above is an overview of DLA. The next section presents how authors implemented DLA at Caulfield Primary school in Victoria.

JAPANESE-ENGLISH BILINGUAL PROGRAMS AT CAULFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL

Caulfield Primary School (CPS) is a government school, and one of the two Japanese-English bilingual schools in Victoria. Incidentally, there are 11 bilingual primary schools in total in Victoria, two of which are Japanese-English bilingual schools (Bilingual Schools Network 2020). Students learn Japanese language for a total of seven years from Prep to Year 6.⁶ Students learn Japanese in a "partial immersion environment" (Baker 1993), with 50% of class time evenly divided between Japanese and English. Most of the students learn Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), but recently a few students who are learning Japanese as a Heritage Language (JHL) have joined the class.

4 Stage 2 students are able to perform the Basic Task. Stage 3 students can respond in single sentences. Stage 4 students are able to perform the Dialogue Task, which means they can use daily vocabulary, show fluency, and answer questions asked of them. Stage 6 students can perform the Cognitive Task related to age-appropriate subject content, and speak coherently with grammatical accuracy and fluency.

5 The books are distributed free of charge by MEXT. Book A is for pre-school children, B and C1 are at Year 1, C2 is at Year 2, D is at Year 3 and 4, E is at Year 5 and 6 and F is at the end of primary school to early middle school level.

6 Primary schools in Victoria consist of Prep (preparation level) and Years 1 to 6.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DLA

DLA Speaking, Reading and Writing sections were administered to Year 6 students at CPS. All students (a total of thirty-five) were given the task of introducing their school in the Writing section.⁷ For DLA Speaking, the students' Japanese language ability in class was divided into four levels based on their performance in class. Then seventeen students, several from each level, were selected and were interviewed individually. In addition, DLA Reading was conducted with seven of these students. This DLA was conducted together with the Year 6 classroom teachers.

The Basic Tasks and the Dialogue Tasks in DLA Speaking are designed to measure basic speaking ability in Japanese for children and are not limited to the context in Japan. In the Cognitive Tasks, students are asked questions about global warming and earthquakes, and Year 6 students at CPS had learnt the content. Therefore, we believe that DLA Speaking can be used even by primary school students who do not reside in Japan.

TEACHER'S PERCEPTION FROM DLA RESULTS

The Japanese classroom teacher (co-author) at CPS implemented DLA for the first time during Term 4, 2021. After the implementation, the teacher reflected on the process and provided some insights.

The Japanese literacy assessments at the school are aligned to the Victorian curriculum to indicate where the students' Japanese language skills lay within the school and how well they understood what they had learnt in class in Japanese. The implementation of standardised tests such as DLA has shown that it is possible to objectively assess students' Japanese language skills.

Overall, the results of the DLA Speaking study indicated that the students were not as fluent in Japanese as had been expected. During the DLA Speaking interviews, it was observed that students could not remember vocabulary that they had learnt previously and could not answer the "Vocabulary Check." The students were also frustrated because they could not express freely what they wanted to say in Japanese in response to the interviewer's questions. During DLA Reading, the teacher realised that she had not incorporated "telling a synopsis after reading a book" into class, which is a requirement of this assessment activity. Therefore, based on the results of the DLA, the classroom teacher considered how to teach students to speak more fluently in Japanese and implemented a change in teaching method in classes from 2022. Some of the teacher's reflections are addressed in the next section.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROVED TEACHING PRACTICES

Based on the experience reported here, we claim that DLA Speaking could potentially be used as an assessment tool to measure children's Japanese speaking ability, as there is no standardised Japanese speaking test for the students at Japanese-English bilingual primary schools in Australia.

It was clear from the results of the DLA trial that students were not able to speak in Japanese as well as they had been expected. Thus, the teacher changed her teaching style to provide more opportunities for students to speak in Japanese. Previously, when students were asked to talk about something in Japanese classes, they would first write a draft of the theme or topic and then practice speaking the script. However, the teacher realised that this was not enough for the students to say what they wanted to say in Japanese, as they were reading the script. Therefore, she changed the sequence so that students first did sufficient speaking activities in Japanese and then wrote about the content.

For example, the following lesson practice was carried out for Year 1 students on the topic of the "Geography of Japan." For the speaking activity, the students practiced simple conversation using brochures from a travel agency. Then they role-played an interview session with Japanese speaking staff, verbally asking about their hometown in Japan. This was followed by preparing posters on some Japanese cities. At the end, each student in turn gave a presentation on the city in the poster in front of the rest of the students, without looking at a script.

7 Due to space limitations, the results of the analysis of the students' essays are not covered in this paper.

The same method was applied in the Year 2 class on the theme of "Japanese Folktales." First, students were asked to individually prepare a poster about their favorite Japanese folktale, with a picture and key words in Japanese that summarised the story. Then students in turn told the story of their choice to the other students in the classroom without using a script.

In both cases, speaking practice and an oral presentation preceded writing practice. Consequently, students in both classes were able to speak well in Japanese on themes and topics without looking at drafts during their presentations. Furthermore, students wrote essays about what they had talked about after speaking practice and oral presentations, which seemed to ease the burden of writing.

After implementing DLA, the teacher adopted the concepts inherent in DLA in her classes more actively and confidently. In DLA, the interviewer does not correct the student's Japanese mistakes, but praises and encourages the students so that they can produce Japanese. She tried to "let students speak freely without being corrected each time they speak incorrectly" and to "do her best to praise and encourage them."

CONCLUSION

In this study the trial implementation of DLA provided an objective indication of students' Japanese language skills, as well as leading the classroom teacher to reflect on her own teaching and ways to improve her own teaching. DLA would be beneficial for students, parents, and teachers to objectively show what sixth graders in bilingual schools can do with the Japanese they have learnt over the past seven years and at what stage of Japanese language proficiency they are. At the end of the DLA interview session we conducted, most students commented in their final remarks that it was difficult but enjoyable. Though DLA is an assessment tool, it suggests that going through the DLA procedures can be enjoyable learning activities for students using Japanese language. It is important to encourage students to become aware of the Japanese language and their own learning through DLA. This requires teachers to bring out and measure students' strengths, to recognise and develop them. The advantages of DLA are that it is an assessment designed for children. The detailed teacher's manual and its clear assessment criteria can be used by teachers to effectively administer interviews.

Japanese-English bilingual primary schools in Australia have students from diverse backgrounds, including JFL and JHL students. JHL students are also enrolled in Japanese *Hoshuko* (Saturday Schools). DLA could be an appropriate tool for measuring the Japanese language skills of these students in Australia as well as in other locations outside Japan. DLA's implementation policy, basic concepts and specific methods can be used not only in bilingual schools but also in primary and secondary schools outside Japan.

Although this research could not empirically demonstrate the validity of the implementation of DLA through a detailed analysis of students' Japanese language proficiency, the trial was ground-breaking in the way that a standardised test like DLA was carried out as a Japanese speaking assessment in a Japanese language program in Australia.

In future, it is desirable to have more Japanese language teachers in Japanese-English bilingual schools conduct DLA to measure students' Japanese language proficiency by grade level. The authors also hope to conduct further research on how DLA can be incorporated into Japanese language education in Australia more broadly.

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