

Lessons Learnt as a High School Japanese Teacher in Australia

Kelly Harrison

Lifelong learning as a teacher of Japanese

Whilst studying Education at university in Australia, I was taught the importance of not only encouraging my future students to be lifelong learners, but to be a lifelong learner myself. As a non-native Japanese language teacher, I am acutely aware of the fact that I will, happily, always be a student of the language and culture I love so much. Additionally, as a teacher, I will continue to learn each year, each semester, each week about how to improve my practice as a foreign language teacher and how to encourage more students to continue studying Japanese. I believe there are a number of internal and external factors that have an impact on the success of Japanese programs in schools in Australia. There are factors which are in the teachers' control and others which are not.

Internal factors which influence the success of a Japanese program

Firstly, internal factors – ways in which a Japanese teacher can have a strong influence over his or her students. As a beginning teacher, I used to worry about making Japanese 'too hard' for students, concerned that if they had too much difficulty they would lose interest. Around the fifth year of my career, I became very interested in the bilingual teaching method of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). In this methodology, the explicit teaching of language and content enjoy an equal focus. Unlike immersion, where content is taught and language is basically picked up through exposure, in CLIL, language is still explicitly taught, just in time to access content. This method of teaching requires students to be exposed to and use a lot of the target language and I was initially concerned that it would be too overwhelming for students. In fact, I discovered the opposite. The higher I set my expectations, the better the students performed.

In 2016, I introduced a year-long CLIL program for the Year 10 Japanese students at my school. The course was 'Japanese Media Studies'. It was an opt-in program, capped at 20 students. We covered both the Year 10 Japanese curriculum and the Year 10 Media Arts curriculum, all within the allocated time for standard Japanese. We covered topics such as Japanese cooking shows, anime and Japanese advertisements and I aimed to only speak Japanese and to encourage students to do the same. Of course, I worried I was asking too much of the students, as they were required to complete conceptually and linguistically complex tasks. The course was however, very successful. Students reported higher levels of motivation and competency and the class had an extremely dynamic atmosphere. I learnt that if you raise the bar for your students, they will meet you there. Coming to realise this transformed my practice. Even if students are nervous to do so, they want to use the language and teachers need to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to do this.

Furthermore, I have learnt over the years not to underestimate how powerful a teacher's own passion and enthusiasm are in terms of motivating students. All of those interesting photos, videos and stories teachers share about Japan, all of the effort they put in to helping students try and understand an unfamiliar writing system and tricky particles – the kids do notice. Of course, not every student will respond with overwhelming enthusiasm, but the students who do respond may go on to make Japanese a big part of their own careers and lives.

Additionally, opportunities for Japanese teachers to network with their colleagues is incredibly important. This can occur through school-supported professional development but can also be

achieved by the teacher seeking out online connections. In Australia, we are lucky to have a Facebook page for Australian Japanese teachers, which in January 2018 had over 2400 members. Teachers from around the country share resources, ideas and are a source of moral support to one another. In November 2016, after presenting about my Japanese CLIL program at a conference in Melbourne, I started a Japanese CLIL Network Facebook page, which now has over 120 members. I find that many teachers are reluctant to experiment with CLIL, as they are unsure where to begin, so the page is designed to encourage and support more teachers to try out this method. I believe CLIL is steadily gaining momentum as an increasingly popular method of foreign language instruction in Australia

External factors which influence the success of a Japanese program

Of course, there are also factors outside of a Japanese teacher's control that influence the success of a program. To highlight this, I will offer some context about Japanese studies in Australia. Sadly, only around 10% of Australian students continue with foreign language study through to Year 12. Languages study is compulsory in Australia until the end of Year 8 (the second year of high school in most states), though this may not be enforced in every school. Different languages are taught in different schools across the country so unlike Japan where the common foreign language is English, the Australian context is plurilingual. Japanese is the most widely taught language in Australia. However, in many schools, there may only be one, sometimes two, Japanese teachers and in many, many schools, languages teachers often need to fight for their space on the timetable and often feel unappreciated by the school administration.

I was very fortunate in that for almost three years, I had a principal who was a former Japanese teacher. She was supportive of all pedagogical innovation but of course was a strong advocate for foreign languages. If I had an idea as to how to improve our Japanese program, she would encourage me and offer support. This was very motivating for me and is how my CLIL program started. For those few years, our Japanese program in Brisbane flourished. The students felt special that their subject was valued by the principal and therefore valued by the school. Sadly, very few schools in Australia have principals who are staunch supporters of foreign languages. I believe if more principals were true advocates for languages, Japanese and all other foreign languages would attract more Australian students.

The reason why Japanese teachers keep going

In closing, I have learnt that students continue with Japanese not because their parents have told them it can help them get a good job in the future, but because there is something about being in the Japanese classroom that makes them happy. Maybe they love the sense of accomplishment they experience when they say something and their teacher understands them, maybe they find kanji fascinating, perhaps they want to be able to watch anime without subtitles or live in Japan one day. The ultimate goal for a Japanese teacher is for our students to become lifelong learners of Japanese and I hope that this is a dream that can be realised for more and more teachers around Australia.

Biography:

Kelly Harrison is a high school Japanese and English teacher in Queensland, Australia. She completed a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Arts at the University of Queensland, including a one-year exchange at the Kitakyushu City University. Kelly has taught in government and Catholic schools in Brisbane for the past seven years and has a particular interest in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and curriculum development. She has received a number of grants for action research programs, mainly focussed on CLIL, and this has allowed her to present at a number of conferences around Australia. She is currently on maternity leave and involved in writing new Japanese resources for Year 11 and 12 students.