The Role of Japanese Language Education in the Asian Century*

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Abstract
Foreign language education in Australia is going through an interesting time. The arrival of “the Asian Century” has posed the question “is Australia ready for it?”, and this has drawn much attention to education in Asian languages and cultural literacy. Although many university language programs still struggle under constant financial pressure, we are observing increased political and public interest in Asian language education. In this context, I believe that it is the time for us to stop and think about the future shape of Japanese language education. This paper examines the current environment around us and explores the potential role of Japanese language educators in Asian Century Australia.

Keywords
Japanese language, the Asian century, foreign language education

1. Introduction
Japanese language education in Australia has a long history, going back for a century (Shimazu, 2004). Japanese has a reputation as a difficult language to learn, and has no substantial community of speakers outside its home country - unlike, say, Chinese or French. Yet it has been enjoying great popularity for some decades. In 1998, Australia was the second greatest home for Japanese language learners in the world after Korea (The Japan Foundation, 1998). While now overtaken by China and Indonesia, Australia still holds the fourth greatest number of Japanese language learners in the world. Although the overall number of learners has declined somewhat over the last decade (de Kretser & Spence-Brown 2010), the preliminary results of a 2012 survey report that 296,672 Australians are formally studying Japanese, recovering by 7.6% from the great decline observed in 2009 (The Japan Foundation, 2003), (The Japan Foundation, 2009, 2013). About 64% of existing Japanese language teachers in Australia are not native speakers of Japanese (The Japan Foundation, 2009). While China, Korea, and Taiwan have higher ratios of non-native teachers than Australia (84%, 84% and 80% respectively), this is a considerably higher ratio compared to any other non-Asian countries such as United States (22.1%), United Kingdom (24%), Canada (24%), or France (22%). This strong representation of non-native

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teachers is the fruit of a long history of Japanese language education in Australia, and indicates how solidly established the sector is.

Today, Japanese language education in Australia is going through a significant change of context. With the rise of China, Japan has lost its former prominence in international business, but the importance of Asian languages and cultures is attracting more public attention than ever. There are signs of bi-partisan political will to engage more young people in Asian language studies.

It is perhaps the time for us to stop and think about what shape Japanese language education in the Asian Century should take. As teachers of a popular language, we have excellent access to young Australians, and can influence many young people through our teaching practice. We have a strong and established teacher base with a good mix of native and non-native Japanese language speakers, which enriches teaching practices. It is my view that we can take a leadership role amongst languages, and that university programs have important roles to play. This paper explores ways that Japanese language educators can lead the education of Australia in the Asian Century.

2. Languages in the Asian Century - Maybe useful but not so keen?

Our Asian neighbours are going through a social and economic transformation of unprecedented scale and pace. Although there are many views as to what this might mean for Australia, there is little doubt that the link with Asia is increasing in importance. Many believe that, as a nation and as individuals, we are poorly equipped to embrace Asia’s crucial roles in our present and future. Asian language education received significant attention from both sides of politics as an obvious area for building an Asia-ready Australia. The *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper launched in 2012 proposed ambitious goals such as:

- All students will have continuous access to a priority Asian language - Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese. (p.170)
- Our leaders will be more Asia literate, with one-third of board members of Australia's top 200 publicly listed companies and Commonwealth bodies having deep experience in and knowledge of Asia. (p.179)

  (Australia in the Asian Century Implementation Task Force, 2012)

Despite distancing themselves from the White Paper, the current Australian Government has equally ambitious visions: within a decade, they want 40% of Year 12 students to be studying a foreign language. They also announced the New Colombo plan, committing $100 million for the next five years to boost the number of young Australians undertaking university study and internship in Asian nations (The Coalition, 2013a, b).

These positive changes of climate around Asian language education, however, appear not to have reached the tertiary education system. Today most universities at least pay lip service to internationalisation, yet many of our colleagues in foreign language studies are undervalued and suffer from lack of institutional support. Many foreign language programs in Australian
universities are accorded low priority by university managers, and accused of attracting insufficient students for financial viability. Indeed, an alarming number of foreign language programs faced closure in recent years: The Japanese program at the Australian Catholic University was closed in 2011, and that at the University of Canberra faced closure in December 2011 for the first time. The Indonesian language programs at La Trobe University and University of New South Wales were under threat in 2012, and although they succeeded in winning a reprieve at that time, University of Western Sydney followed the trend and closed their Italian, Spanish and Arabic programs later in the year. Curtin University proposed the closure of their Asian Studies program, including Chinese and Japanese languages in 2013. About a month later, University of Canberra announced its intention to close not only Japanese (as proposed in 2011), but its entire language offerings (Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish). Asian studies at Curtin University won a reprieve, but University of Canberra ceased to offer foreign language education as of 2013, just a few months after the Japanese Program being awarded the University’s teaching excellence award for “Outstanding contribution to students learning”.

Some of the programs that faced closure appeared to be revenue neutral or possibly producing a surplus — though financial analysis of individual courses in some universities is notoriously unreliable or absent. For example, the reasons stated for closure of the Japanese program at University of Canberra were financial. However, accurate figures for costs were not produced, income was understated, and financial support offered by the Japan Foundation was ignored. Clearly, other factors were at work. All this suggests that universities do not value foreign languages as a core part of university education – not enough to maintain them even when they are individually profitable.

There is some good news for language studies, however. The urgency of fostering Asian language and culture competency has more recognition, both publically and with bi-partisan political support. University of Melbourne and University of Western Australia have made university-wide changes in their degree structure to increase flexibility, and this has led to a large increase in foreign languages enrolments (Lane, 2012). This demonstrates that university foreign language programs can flourish, when they receive institutional support. Asian cultural influences have become an ingrained part of our day-to-day life, albeit limited to banal cultural superficialities rather than deep understanding. National curriculums for foreign languages are being built for delivering coherent education throughout schools: The draft curriculums for individual languages are published for public consultation and planned to be implemented in 2014 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013).

Asian language education may be facing a great opportunity for growth. Japanese language educators, especially in university programs, should take leadership roles as the most established group in the Asian language education, and be the champion of Asian Century education.

3. Japanese as the champion of Asian Century education

I propose three areas for Japanese language educators to lead:

1) Extend student interest in Japan to an interest in wider Asia;
2) Develop systems to sustain student engagement in language learning, and
3) Foster personal qualities for the Asian Century, which go beyond language competency and cultural knowledge. The subsequent sections discuss each point in detail.
3.1 Hello Kitty as a Gateway to Asia

Japan has been one of the friendliest and most visible faces of Asia: Japanese animation, manga, games and sushi are probably the most familiar icons of Asian culture for many young Australians. A study on newly commencing students of Japanese Studies at University of New South Wales reports that many had significant exposure to Japanese culture before they started their studies, enabling them to name various cultural items and Japanese persons such as singers and actors (Thomson, 2010).

Also, some young Australians have opportunities to form a personal connection with Japanese people of their generation. It is not uncommon for Australian high schools to have school trips to Japan. Also, Australia is the most popular country destination for educational trips among Japanese senior high schools\(^1\). Combining school excursions and other types of trips such as English language camps and sports competitions, 30,418 Japanese senior high school students visited Australia in 2011. Australia and Japan have 109 sister city relationships as of November 2012\(^2\), which amounts to roughly one-fifth of Australia’s entire sister city agreements\(^3\). For young Australians, it is not unusual to have Japanese friends at some points in their lives.

I propose that we use this familiarity with Japanese culture to inspire student interest in the wider Asian region: a gateway to understanding Asia. Japanese culture, both modern and traditional, is a product of interactions with surrounding cultures. Our students experience this as soon as they start learning writing. Japanese imported Chinese characters to create their own writing system. We can introduce Hiragana, Katakana, and the multiple readings of kanji in their cultural and historical contexts. To talk about the development of Katakana, we can touch on Buddhism, which originated in India and came to Japan via China and Korea. Chinese poetry from the Tang dynasty is considered part of the foundation of the Japanese literary tradition included in the national curriculum. Even aspects of Japanese culture which developed or ossified during the Sakoku period were heavily influenced by outside forces; and Japan’s isolation during that period was far from absolute.

Influences from Asian countries are strong in modern day Japan. Popular food, such as karee, raamen and gyoza, are Japanese adaptations of other countries’ cuisines. The popular Sangokushi series of computer games are based on the history of Three Kingdoms in China.

Many – including Japanese themselves – think that Japanese are not mobile and prefer to stay in their country, but within recent history many Japanese people migrated to countries in the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. And Japan has many citizens and residences of Korean origin.

In teaching Japanese language and culture, we often focus on its uniqueness: it is this uniqueness that attracts many people to Japan. However, it is important to illuminate that Japanese culture was not born in isolation, but developed through interaction with the outside world. By placing more focus on how the cultural icons that young Australians love are connected with greater Asia, we can draw our students’ attention and stimulate imagination. Why not use the force of Hello Kitty for the bigger and better educational outcomes?

\(^1\) http://shugakuryoko.com/chosa/kaigai/2011-03-joukyou2.pdf
\(^2\) http://www.jnto.org.au/2013/sister-cities/
\(^3\) http://www.sistercitiesaustralia.com/About-Us.html
3.2 Towards Sustained Engagement

3.2.1 What’s happening at schools?

As described earlier, numbers of learners of Japanese in Australia decreased around mid-late 2000’s. In the ACT public school systems (kindergarten – year 12), however, the number is recovering steadily from its 2008 low point with approximately 2.5 times more students studying Japanese in 2013. Overtaking French, Japanese has been the most widely taught language in the ACT since 2009. The figures for 2013 are Japanese 36%, French 31%, Indonesian 16%, and Chinese less than 6%\(^4\). Approximately 62% of Asian language learners are studying Japanese. Figure 1 shows student numbers in eight foreign languages at public schools in the ACT from 2007 to 2013.

![Language learners in ACT public schools from 2007 to 2013](image)

Figure 1. Language learners in ACT public schools from 2007 to 2013

So, Japanese seems to be doing extremely well and increasing its presence. However, close examination reveals some issues. Figure 2 below presents a breakdown of 2013 student numbers in four Asian languages (Japanese, Indonesian, Chinese and Korean) and the second most popular language, French.

\(^4\) Data provided by ACT Department of Education and Training
Two things draw our attention. Firstly, Japanese is easily the most common language in early years, but French has much greater numbers by Year 7 and 8. The gap narrows in Year 10–12, but Japanese’s dominance at primary school level does not return. The pattern for 2012 data was similar. This primary-heavy student profile is not limited to the ACT. The Japan Foundation’s 2009 survey reports that 43% of Japanese language learners in Australia are in primary schools, 32% in secondary schools, 21% in ‘multi-level’ that includes schools which combine primary and secondary education, and only 3.1% are studying at the tertiary level (The Japan Foundation, 2009). A strong presence at primary school level is positive: the benefits of foreign language studies go well beyond skills in the target language, and learning a language and culture very different from theirs is a valuable experience for young children. However, we need to identify reasons for this weaker presence in secondary schools, and improve our practices.

Secondly, student numbers drop dramatically in all languages except Chinese after Year 8, when mandatory foreign language education ends. The Chinese exception might be due to newly arriving international students with Chinese language background: in 2013, ACT schools received 96 new international students from China, 1 from Hong Kong, 1 from Taiwan, 2 from Singapore (Australian Education International, 2013a).

To examine retention in detail, in Figure 3 we follow the ACT 2012 Year 8 cohort into 2013. The blue bars show the number of Year 8 students in 2012, and the red bars Year 9 in 2013. They should be similar if most students continue their language studies after the mandatory period. The green triangles indicate the retention rate.
Figure 3. Retention patterns between languages: Year 8 in 2012 and year 9 in 2013

All languages suffer from significant attrition. Many senior secondary students avoid non-heritage foreign language studies, for fear of being disadvantaged with the ATAR calculation: the decline in foreign languages in the NSW HSC is attributed to this in recent news (Harvey, 2013; Tovey & McNeilage, 2013). In the ACT, however, the concern for the ATAR calculation may not be the main problem. Many students quit Japanese at the end of mandatory language studies, but the drop at Year 11 and 12 when such concern starts to influence students’ choice of subjects is not great. For 2012–13 the retention between Year 8 and 9 (18%) is far less than between Year 11 and 12 (79%), and between Year 10 and 11 we have 125% — a net increase. While part of the student number in Year 11 and 12 maybe made up by newly arriving Chinese international students, it appears that the growth of Japanese studies in the ACT depends on student engagement at the high school level.

Cross-language comparison of the retention rates is not easy, as Year 8 numbers are very different across languages and this introduces other variables. Spanish, Italian and German appear to retain students better than other languages, but their small Year 8 numbers mean that those languages could be taught by a small number of well-qualified teachers and the curriculum coordination may be easier. For this reason, Japanese can probably be compared meaningfully only to French.

With high school students, French has better retention than Japanese, but why? The first possibility is the existence of the French-bilingual school. This is the only bilingual school in the ACT, and offers two streams for Year 7-10: one for students who studied under their bilingual program from kindergarten, and the other for those who join the school from Year 7, without

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5 There is no data for Korean as no school teaches it in years 8 and 9.
having a French speaking background\(^6\). It is unclear if the students in the bilingual stream are counted as French learners, but if so, student numbers for French in the ACT are boosted. Also, this school mandates foreign language studies until Year 10. It may be the case that the students who newly join the school at Year 7 are more inclined to study French for their foreign language requirement because of the environment. The 2013 enrolment to this school ranges 176-198 for Year 7-10 (ACT Government, 2013) and across all schools in the ACT French had 152 more Year 8 students than Japanese. Thus this school might account for the most of the differences between two languages.

Another possible reason would be the linguistic proximity between French and English. Students studying French can achieve higher functionality than those studying Japanese in the same amount of time. Reading authentic text in Japanese takes many years of study, whereas students in French would read and understand authentic French material much sooner. The difficulty of reading Japanese is simply not comparable to European languages, even though new technologies such as electronic dictionaries lighten the burden. Perhaps the joy of using the language that they study is more accessible to students studying French.

Such linguistic proximity also affects teachers’ linguistic skills. Teachers without sufficient linguistic ability cannot engage students easily, especially at higher levels. The lack of quality control of teachers and curriculum throughout schooling have been serious problems (de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010). Australian born teachers tend to play a more significant role in secondary schools than teachers with schooling overseas, for classroom control reasons. Perhaps the balance between linguistic competence and other skills as educators is harder to balance in Asian languages due to their cultural and linguistic distance. Students and their parents often express dissatisfaction, with the same basic materials being taught repeatedly throughout primary and high schools. Such experiences disengage students and parents and leads to a perception of foreign language studies being a waste of time. Maintaining and improving teachers’ language skills and curriculum coordination are essential for strengthening our future.

### 3.2.2 What can universities do?

To improve student engagement, university language programs have two important roles to fill other than training teachers:

1) Developing local educational strategies
2) Inspiring school language learners by providing them with role models.

The conditions around language education are different from state to state (de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010: 27). Firstly, the states and territories have strong control over school education, and the impact of state level policy changes far outweighs individual educators’ efforts. For instance, South Australia’s reduction in compulsory subjects negatively affected language enrolments (Anderson, 2013). Victoria’s bonus ATAR score for foreign languages resulted in increased enrolments in languages. The ACT mandating foreign language education from Year 3 to 8 significantly increased language learners in the ACT schools.

Also the demographic profiles, which are likely to influence attitudes towards foreign language studies and languages of choice, differ across the country. The 2011 census shows that two or more languages are spoken in 21% of households in the ACT, and the most common

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foreign language is Mandarin (1.9%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b). In Queensland too, Mandarin is the most common foreign language, but households with multiple languages are much less common, 11.9% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011e). In Tasmania, multi-lingual households are even less, only 5.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011f). In Victoria, 25% of households are multilingual, but the European languages -Italian (2.3%) and Greek (2.2%) – are more dominant (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011g). In NSW 24.5% of households are multilingual, and the most common foreign language is Arabic (2.7%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011c). In Northern Territory, 24.4% of households are multilingual and the most common non-English household language is Kriol (1.9%) followed by other indigenous languages, such as Djambarrpuynngu (1.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011d).

Numbers of international students affect the foreign language classroom and its educational strategies. This is particularly relevant to us, Japanese language educators, as China is by far the largest source of international students in Australia (Department of Immigration and Border protection, 2013b) and Japanese is a popular subject amongst them. Students with an Asian background can stimulate fellow students’ interest in Asia beyond Japan, but a disproportionately large representation can deter monolingual Australian students, as Chinese students are believed to have advantages in Japanese language studies. The distribution of international students is far from even across the nation; New South Wales and Victoria attract proportion: 37% and 30% respectively (Australian Education International, 2013a). Further, international students are concentrated in metropolitan areas.

Figure 4. International students enrolled to study in 2013 in each state and territory

Thus for effectively realising our vision, we need a locally tailored approach. The universities with research capacity and easy access to stakeholders in their areas have an
important role to play. For fostering a sustainable environment for foreign language education, universities can lead in building localised strategies and implementation plans based on a national vision.

Another important role for universities is providing role models for the students at schools. Interacting with senior students and hearing about their achievement is an inspiring experience for young students. At the University of Canberra, we observed that the student-run organisation, the Japan Club, facilitated such interaction. Seeing this, staff of the Japanese program at the University extended this peer mentoring opportunity beyond the barriers of the school systems, by sending students with exceptional language skills to a neighbouring high school as teaching assistants. This placement was incorporated in their individual projects within advanced level units, where students received credit points. This high school offers Japanese language for Year 7 to 10, but is short of suitably skilled teachers. We had three semesters of such placements and we received positive feedback from both teachers and the students. Exchange students from Japan can also be a part of this collaborative system: we were planning to send Japanese exchange students majoring in Education to the high school from 2014. Another outreach in the pipeline was ‘Japan Club Junior’. The idea was to invite college students (Year 11 and 12) a few times a year to events on campus hosted by the university’s Japan Club, and to maintain links with newsletters. This aimed to inspire the language students in Year 11 and 12 and give them some sense of the learning community; while also doubling as a student recruitment tool and attracting financial assistance from the university’s marketing budget. This idea could not be put in practice due to the program closure.

### 3.3 Fostering personal qualities for the Asian Century, beyond language skills

#### 3.3.1 Australia in the Asian Century: What does it mean to us?

It is widely acknowledged that Asia will continue its rapid economic growth. By 2030, Asia is predicted to have two-thirds of the global middle-class (Kharas & Gertz, 2010). There is little doubt that more Australian businesses will be operating in, or trading with, Asia in the future. We need the capacity to engage with business and political partners in Asia.

However, there is another important aspect: domestic social change. So far the public discussions have been focused around external engagement, and not much consideration has been given to internal effects. But Australia is getting ‘closer to Asia’ domestically too. Figure 5 presents the historical migration trends from the top four sources of migrants to Australia between 2011 and 2012: the UK, New Zealand, India and China. During 2009-10, migrants from China caught up with those from the UK for the first time, and overtook in the following year. Numbers from India also grew. In the latest data, the UK is now only at the fourth place (Department of Immigration and Border protection, 2013a).
Figure 5. Original nations of newly arriving migrants

The 2011 census data for country of birth shows that the proportions of people with Chinese and Indian heritage are still small in the Australian population (1.4% and 1.0%) but increased by 50% and 100% respectively compared to the 2006 census. UK is still the highest among all foreign countries (4.2%), but its proportion is not growing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011a). In 2013, 462,411 international students are studying in Australia, of which Chinese and Indian make up approximately 40% (Australian Education International, 2013b). In short, the domestic cultural landscape is shifting.

In his address to the Press Club in 2006, John Howard described Australia’s main “cultural pattern” as:

Judeo-Christian ethics, the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and the institutions and values of British political culture. Its democratic and egalitarian temper also bears the imprint of distinct Irish and non-conformist traditions. (Howard, 2006)

His claim may have been true at that point in time, and our fundamental legal and political systems are not expected to change dramatically, but the days where Judeo-Christian ethics must be automatically regarded as the dominant Australian cultural paradigm are nearing an end. And we are already seeing significant minorities who cleave to very different cultural patterns.

The Asian Century affects the internal dynamics of Australian society, as well as our relationship with our neighbours.
3.3.2 Fostering the Australian citizen of the Asian Century

So, we must ask ourselves in this context what university education should do. Some say “everyone in Asia speaks English, so why bother?”

In an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing society, I argue that what we need are people with attitudes of respect and curiosity towards unfamiliar values and practices; people who can empathise and effectively engage with people of differing cultural values; people who understand the existence and power of different worldviews; and people who can respond flexibly in unfamiliar cultural and communication situations.

We need the next generation to embrace and capitalise on the shifts in our external and internal relationships, rather than rejecting them. Success in international politics and business relationships, and in domestic social cohesion and sustainability — all depend on our cultural attitudes to one another.

I argue that foreign language education is an excellent vehicle for education to foster the necessary qualities. Although it is not often fully acknowledged, language studies foster far more than just skills in a specific language, or even awareness of a specific culture. Delivered well, the foreign language classroom inspires curiosity for unfamiliar cultures and gives glimpses of a life within a different cultural framework. The communication tasks make students put their cultural understandings into practice, giving them personalised and living experiences of a foreign cultural landscape. As languages are deeply enmeshed with cultural values, students can be challenged to think outside of their native value systems. And foreign language studies gives students the challenging experience of communicating with incomplete language skills: a first-hand experience of the difficulties, frustrations and even fears in speaking a language which is not their own. Such experiences can foster sensitivity invaluable both in the international and domestic contexts, as well as creativity in communication strategies.

These extra-linguistic benefits are not something that automatically comes with any language education; it is entirely possible to deliver language education with none of those benefits. Thus we must be conscious that the full benefits of language studies are unknown to those who did not receive quality language education. To change the environment around foreign language studies, we need to be proactive with communicating the rich educational benefits of it, and ensuring that language education is delivered with the broad benefits as key goals, not side-effects. Japanese language educators have the greatest access to young people amongst all languages – why not aspire to lead the change?

4. Conclusion

In Australia, foreign language education has long suffered from a lack of recognition for its full value. The arrival of the Asian Century, however, has brought us a great opportunity to turn things around. It is my belief that Japanese language education can take a significant leadership role for the necessary change. We have access to a great number of young Australians due to the effort of our predecessors and the popularity of Japanese culture; we have a long established educational scene with a good supporting mechanism. This paper discussed the three areas where Japanese language education can lead:

1) Using student interest in Japan to lead to greater understanding and interest in Asia as a whole;
2) Exploring new ways to sustain students’ engagement in language learning;
3) Communicating the role of foreign language education as an essential component in fostering young people for the Asian Century.

University language programs have a particularly important role to play in all of this. They have research capacity, educate the next generation of educators, and are better placed to understand local issues than central education bodies. Thus, I argue that it is critical for university programs to strengthen their collaboration with school systems, and lead or assist them.

Equally important is to clarify in our minds and teaching practice what we can do beyond instilling linguistic skills, and to communicate these outcomes proactively to the students, parents, and the wider community. Ultimately, we need to change the community’s perception of language learning – foreign language studies can give gifts much richer than the language skills which students may or may not use in future. One of the graduates of University of Canberra wrote in their support letter for the Japanese Program:

I believe that studying a second language greatly benefits not only the students but society as a whole. It promotes tolerance, understanding and greatly improves student’s understanding of their own language.

Australia’s position in this Asian Century and beyond will be shaped by the cultural attitudes of our young people. The basis of any international or regional relationship is the people behind it. Thus individual beliefs about cultural differences impact on Australia’s position in the region and also on domestic social sustainability. Foreign language education has a significant role to play in fostering essential attitudes of cultural openness, critical inquiry, and personal connection.

We Japanese language educators can contribute to this cause greatly, at much deeper and wider levels than producing graduates who can conduct a business negotiation in Japanese. Then why not aspire so?

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