

The study of foreign languages in Australia – some ideas to incorporate into English policy and pedagogy in Japan

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要旨 : The degree to which nations and their people are interacting today is unprecedented. It is true that English is generally the language that is used for much of this interaction. However it would be folly for any nation to believe that that language alone would be suffice. For nations to work together, mutual understanding and respect is an obvious essential. To ensure this eventuation, an emphasis on the study of foreign languages, and coessentially the cultures of said languages, is imperative. Australia's geo-political situation and its history of immigration lend themselves easily to fostering these attributes. Japan on the other hand, has an urgent need for them but, recently, has lacked the ability to incorporate the necessary pedagogy. This paper will look at some of Australia's policies as well as language pedagogy and compare them to Japan's. It will offer a number of ideas that could be incorporated into language policy and pedagogy in Japan.

キーワード : language pedagogy, foreign language learning, culture, geo-political situation, language policy

Policy

The *National Policy on Languages* by Lo Bianco (1987) was an important document in focusing Australian educational policy on the importance of language learning. The 1989 *National Goals for Schooling*, went on to identify Languages other than English as “one of eight key learning areas”. The 1999 version of *National Goals for Schooling* reaffirmed the position that foreign language study was ideal for providing a broader appreciation of Australia and its position in the global community. More recently the *National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in*

Australian Schools 2005–2008 provides that intercultural skills and understanding are integral to students' understanding of their roles as international citizens and the responsibilities being one entails. Australia is by no means the only nation taking up these issues. 2001 was the European Year of Languages, and the Council of Europe enshrined intercultural competence and the contribution of languages teaching and learning into education systems. They did this to promote responsible citizenship and the development of understanding and tolerance.

The wording of these documents is important. Readers, hence the objects of the text concerned, can see hidden agendas as well as overarching goals within said texts. The Australian *National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005–2008* has in its "Purpose and Nature of Languages Learning" that learning languages:

- “• enriches our learners intellectually, educationally and culturally.
- enables our learners to communicate across cultures.
- contributes to social cohesiveness through better communication and understanding.
- further develops the existing linguistic and cultural resources in our community.
- contributes to our strategic, economic and international development.
- enhances employment and career prospects for the individual.”

The document goes on to state that goals include developing in (students) the capabilities to:

- “• communicate, interact and negotiate within and across languages and cultures
- understand their own and others' languages, thus extending their range of literacy skills, including skills in English literacy
- understand themselves and others, and to understand and use diverse ways of knowing, being and doing
- further develop their cognitive skills through thinking critically and analytically, solving problems”

These are very student centered aims the federal government has set out. The individual can easily see merit in aspiring to them. However one must appreciate that in Australia, at the present moment, the responsibility for education does in fact come under state, not federal, control. The federal government does have strong influence, though, through budgeting.

If we compare these ideals to those outlined by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) a number of questions arise. Firstly let us look at the objectives of English language learning as espoused by MEXT:

“With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in

order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.

At present, though, the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population are inadequate, and this imposes restrictions on exchanges with foreigners and creates occasions when the ideas and opinions of Japanese people are not appropriately evaluated. However, it is not possible to state that Japanese people have sufficient ability to express their opinions based on a firm grasp of their own language.

Accordingly, we have formulated a strategy to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" in a concrete action plan with the aim of drastically improving the English education of Japanese people. In addition, we aim to make improvements to Japanese-language education.” (MEXT)

Admittedly this is in English (though it is the official translation of the original Japanese text) and in so being, may lose some of the feeling the original text encapsulates. Even so, the reader is left with the distinct impression that these objectives are not student centered. Indeed, that there could well be a “hidden agenda”. The reader of this text would probably not feel a sense that these objectives have at their core any noble intent for the objects of the education, namely the students. The overarching goal seems to be the betterment of the nation – not that there is anything inherently wrong with that. However education, in its real sense, should have as its goal the betterment of the *individuals* of a nation.

There are other points in these objectives that need to be addressed. If we were to substitute “English” with “Math” or “Science” in the above outline, it would still make as much sense. From this one can conclude that MEXT, perhaps, does not see language learning as being particularly different to any other subject. Try doing the same substitution of “language” in the Australian statement and the statement becomes quite senseless. Language learning is a field very different to other fields of learning. One cannot approach the teaching of language in the same way.

Another point one can clearly see in these objectives is that MEXT believes English learning is tied to the learning of the national language and that only through developing the national language will English be able to develop too. Research shows that language skills are transferable as literacy requires an understanding of how language works (metalinguistic awareness). Language learners build sets of representational symbols to use for learning and problem solving and can switch effectively between those systems. They separate form and content. (Leopold 1939–49; Ianco-Worrall 1972). They develop an analytic approach to language

earlier because they focus on avoiding interference between their languages and pay attention to cues and hints (Ben-Zeev 1977 a & b). They also tend to be more divergent thinkers, which supports problem solving.

These benefits can be acquired even in a limited second language program. Learning a language in kindergarten and Year 1 was found to be enough to advance reading readiness in the English in Australian research by Yelland, Pollard and Mercuri (1983). Further advantages of bilingualism identified by Makin et al. (1995:38) include ‘increased problem-solving abilities, cognitive flexibility, verbal creativity and greater metalinguistic awareness’. The languages of a bilingual are interdependent in the person’s processing of language (Cummins 1977, 1978) and each language can aid the other in language and cognitive development. Literacy skills acquired in one language can be transferred to the other. The skills and strategies needed to make meaning from text are common to all languages. This applies even to languages with different writing systems (Ovando & Collier). Recognition of the internal structure of a word is important for developing literacy skills (Koda 2002) and can be enhanced by the learning of additional languages. Research by Cummins and Swain (1989:82) into bilingual education has found a common underlying proficiency across all languages, where the literacy-related aspects in the first and second languages are common and interdependent. Ensuring that the national language is at a particular level, however, does not necessarily improve foreign language ability. It is understandable that countries are wary of English. No other language has been so instrumental in the decline in the number of languages alive on the planet today. Tying the study of one to another, however, will help neither. A clear policy aimed at the learning and fostering of the national language is essential. This should not be tied in any way to the study of foreign languages. Notice the “s” at the end of languages. This brings us to the next point.

Though there are obvious reasons for the emphasis on English, students, hence the nation need to be cognizant of and exposed to other languages. Japan’s geo-political situation has changed quite dramatically over the last two decades. It seems incomprehensible that the study of Mandarin Chinese is not of similar import to English. Other languages of obvious necessity would be Russian, Korean, Spanish, Portuguese and French or German. The following figures show a different story in Australia.

“In 2003, the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) undertook a Review of Languages Education in Australian Schools. The Review found that nationally:

- approximately 50% of students were learning a language in mainstream schools
- there were 146 languages being taught in both mainstream and non-mainstream school settings.

This included:

- 103 languages (including 68 Australian Indigenous Languages) taught in government, Catholic and independent schools
- 69 languages taught through after hour's ethnic/community languages schooling.
- six languages emerged as the most commonly taught. These were, in order of enrolment numbers: Japanese, Italian, Indonesian, French, German and Chinese. More than 90% of languages learners were learning one of these languages." (MCEETYA)

Again, the fact that Australia has many immigrants and a strong representation by its indigenous peoples lends itself to the above situation. However, that these figures are for elementary schools shows a little of the variety that is available. Even a small percentage of this diversity is not available in Japan yet Japan, like Australia, requires a diverse set of language understanding in its particular geo-political situation.

Pedagogy

The approaches to language teaching taken by Japan and Australia have similarities but on the whole seem very different. The reasons again lie in the different socio cultural make up of the respective countries. Australia has a broad range of cultural diversity to draw upon when teaching languages. Japan does not. Australia has embraced this diversity where as Japan has embraced its unique culture and continues to promote it within its educational system. This however has profound effects on language teaching, learning and assessment. These were touched on in the policy section of this paper. The paper will now look more closely at the pedagogical aspects of language education.

The curriculum framework that the Western Australian state government details has many of the points that are promoted on a federal level too. The following is an example of how one state approaches (the other states and territories' approaches are similar) language pedagogy within a framework.

The Curriculum Framework (1998:154) emphasizes the need for second-language learning to be a continuous and cumulative process. Quality outcomes-focused programs should ensure that:

- learning programs recognize and build on students' prior knowledge and learning styles;
- a language-rich environment is provided. This includes *the teacher's use of the target language as the principal source of target language input* (Italics the authors), together with the support of *an environment that is rich in the media and culture of the target language* (for example, realia, labels, tickets, maps, students' work, posters, charts and the like). Where possible, *the use of the*

LOTE should also move outside the classroom and into other areas of the school(Italics the authors);

- learning technologies are incorporated into the learning and teaching program;
- there are *real opportunities for students to use the language in learning situations*(Italics the authors) with peer tutors and/or speakers from the target language community;
- learning opportunities provide students with intellectual challenge;
- students are able to learn within a supportive environment in which risk taking is encouraged and valued, and in which *errors are seen as part of the learning process instead of being viewed as deficits* (Italics the authors);
- LOTE learning is understood as a way of enhancing student-learning outcomes across a variety of areas, and *LOTE becomes the medium and not the end in itself*(Italics the authors);
- the focus is on making meaning, with an acknowledgment that language learning is happening when students comprehend the LOTE, even though their ability to write and speak may be limited;
- learning experiences are physically and mentally active and relate to the real world beyond the classroom;
- a collaborative learning environment is created, in which students work with each other, the LOTE teacher collaborates with students and there is a cooperative and collaborative relationship among the LOTE teacher, classroom teachers and/or other learning area teachers;
- *students are provided with opportunities to negotiate the context, content, learning strategies and assessment processes associated with learning another language*(Italics the authors).

The areas in italics above are areas that are very different to what is happening in Japan's context. The teacher in Japan is often seen as an impediment to students attaining good pronunciation. That the teacher should be the principal source of language seems obvious. Japan needs to support its teachers in their efforts at becoming source material. In addition the possibilities of creating an environment that is rich in the media and culture of the target language are endless if multi media and online materials are incorporated into the language classroom. Doing this would also increase the number of real opportunities for students to use the language they are learning. English also needs to be seen throughout the school as an addition to each subject not an additional subject. Incorporating English into other subjects and into the school culture is an important move in developing a whole school approach to language learning.

Errors have long been the source of much embarrassment and confusion in all areas of Japan's education system. Changing the focus from "errors are bad" to "errors in language learning are a matter of course" is essential to ensure that language learning takes place in a positive environment. Until this happens language learning will never be able to be seen as a medium for

communication rather than as an end in itself. However once this happens students will be able to negotiate meaning, text and context with confidence. There is also an urgent need to promote the use of phonics in the elementary school curriculum in Japan to supplement the work that has started in elementary schools.

Conclusion

The manner in which Australia's education policy is fragmented due to state rather than federal management means one cannot generalize over the whole country yet looking at the different state policies and pedagogical practice the overview is that there is general consensus that Australia's approach to language learning through both policy and pedagogy design is very student focused with specific outcomes clearly stated.

Japan has been working toward this end too but is still caught up in the debate about whether the national language should be tied to that of second language study. This paper shows that Japan should move on from that position, as it is false. There is also an urgent need for Japan to embrace second language learning as part of its overarching educational policy. To a certain extent this was done by MEXT however the broad objectives are somewhat narrow in their scope and have not been supported by concrete actions throughout schools. A broader scope including a number of languages is important if Japan is to take its place in the geo-political landscape that is changing rapidly as the 21st century progresses. If it does not, there will be many adverse ramifications for its rapidly aging population.

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