Advocacy: In our Hands

It's the age old question—how do we better advocate the Japanese language in our school communities? Anne de Kretser, Director of the Monash Japanese Language Education Centre, shares some ideas we can all implement to increase the visibility and perceived value of Japanese to our stakeholders.

Japanese language has been taught in Australia for over one hundred years. It is taught at every level of education, early years, primary, secondary and tertiary and has been the most widely taught language at all education levels in Australia for a very long time. Many would say that Japanese language educators should have no concerns and Japanese as a main stream language is doing well. However, we know that the percentage of senior school students studying languages across Australia is decreasing, affecting all languages including Japanese. As frustrating as it may sometimes be, Advocacy is a wonderful avenue for us to emphasise the importance of what we do and celebrate the success of our students' learning. It is part of what we must do as Japanese language teachers, it is something we can control and how we can make a significant contribution.

There has never been a more pertinent time with the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, for languages to be seen as mainstream and a leader for aspects of the curriculum such as the general capabilities including, but not limited to, Intercultural Understanding. In fact, it could be said that languages and, in our case, Japanese is the only learning area that easily includes and addresses all general capabilities in the new curriculum.

However, despite this, the curriculum offering in schools is increasingly crowded and Japanese, like other subject areas, is competing for space in the curriculum. At a time when governments are acknowledging the importance of global connections and most school websites champion preparing students to become global citizens, it is still apparent that Advocacy for languages and in particular Japanese is essential. Advocacy must reach all members of the school community—students, parents and carers, school leadership and colleagues. How we advocate to these different groups needs to be carefully considered and targeted. As many teachers of Japanese demonstrate, the cultural values of Japan including 'not foregrounding oneself', advocating for Japanese language programs does not come naturally. But this is an instance where we need to bridge cultures and guarantee that the voice of Japanese is heard.

The best form of Advocacy is best practice combined with relevant, challenging curriculum. If students are engaged and progressing in skill and knowledge that is the best form of Advocacy we have. But to ensure that the school community understands how successful a Japanese language program is within the school we need to take measures to raise visibility of the Japanese program, the importance of learning Japanese and the general benefits to students gained through language learning in general. Teachers need to be informed and networked to take advantage of the resources, support and advice available to teachers of Japanese to make certain that they can provide their students with a best practice teaching and learning experience.

Visibility is our best means of advocating and that needs to be at every level of the school community.

- **Students**

Engagement is essential to students continuing their Japanese language studies. In this context, engagement should not be mistaken for fun. Students want to learn language that is relevant, they want to participate in activities that are relevant and they want to be challenged. Understanding why students are learning Japanese and what their expectations are, are key elements of engagement that can be addressed through thorough and considered programming. Through solid programming teachers can address students' interests and needs but also importantly ensure that students develop an understanding of their own learning and language learning strategies, which they can apply to other languages or other subject areas. Students want to use language and therefore ensuring that they are learning language they can use immediately with peers and in the classroom context is a motivational tool that leads to engagement. In addition, giving students the tools to be learners that are more independent will undoubtedly lead to deeper engagement.

- **School leadership**

Teachers should ensure that they speak with their school leadership about their programs, needs and aspirations. Wherever possible involve the leadership team in special activities or events and pursue a regular dialogue with them about the Japanese program. Be certain that the Japanese program is on their minds and the value of the program and what value it brings to the school is frequently highlighted. Often Japanese programs are not on the leadership's radar as it is running smoothly but involving the leadership in the program is an essential form of Advocacy at this level. It is imperative that the Japanese language program is seen as a school program not the teacher's. That ownership and responsibility for it is not solely that of the teacher but the school in general and therefore the effort to make the program successful cannot be the teacher's alone.

- **Parents and carers**

Parents and carers main priority is their children, to this end we need to target Advocacy to this group in several ways. Firstly, by emphasising the benefits of language learning in addition to the language itself: critical thinking, problem solving, independent learning, organisation, empathy, intercultural understanding and awareness that there are other ways of saying, thinking and doing. Secondly parents and carers understandably want their children to experience success, but with little knowledge or experience of language learning they may not know what that success looks like. It is imperative that parents have realistic expectations of language learning in the school setting and communicating what students will be able to do by the end of each semester or year is helpful in managing expectations and celebrating progress. Thirdly, by helping students understand their own learning and progress and conveying that to parents will help parents and carers to value the learning of Japanese. Reminders of the Japanese program through regular posts in the

school news, as to what is happening in the school program and a quiz item that students and their parents or carers can discuss together can bring Japanese into the home and keep it in the forefront of thinking. For secondary students about to choose subjects after the compulsory years of language studies, an email/letter home to parents about the benefits of continuing their Japanese language studies can generate discussion and lead to a greater uptake. Many parents/carers do not actively discourage their children from continuing their Japanese language studies, they just don't think about it!

- **Colleagues**

The Australian Curriculum encourages greater cross curriculum cooperation and with the strengthening of teaching approaches such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has provided opportunities for teachers of Japanese to work with their colleagues collaboratively in team teaching or cross curricula projects. This has led to greater engagement among students but importantly greater understanding and support for the Japanese language program among teaching colleagues. Support and value other subject areas and where possible work on complimentary topics and content. Building respectful relationships with colleagues can lead to greater support for the Japanese program.

In the time poor environment in which many teachers work there are many strategies to raise visibility that can be done efficiently and effectively.

- Label the school in Japanese
- Put a display in the school foyer and a photo book on the entrance table
- Ask for a Japanese room, as a specialist subject, this is a wonderful learning tool
- Prepare enough quiz questions for a weekly entry in the school newsletter, questions, information, website links, How to… hints
- Ask students to interview teachers in the school as to what language they speak, have learned or would like to learn, using a template have students make temporary badges for all teachers stating the answers to the questions, ask staff to wear them for a week. Students knowing that language learning or a desire to learn a language is widespread among staff can be inspiring
- Invite parents/carers and school leaders into the classroom
- For those with more time… Run a Japanese language short course for staff and parents (this can help with understanding and widespread interest)

Advocating for Japanese language education is the role of all stakeholders including teachers. It needs to become a significant and measured element of teaching, learning and communicating within the school community by the teacher. It needs consistent

determination and effort at the coalface of the school community by the teacher in addition to the efforts of the all stakeholders. Ultimately, it is in our hands.

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