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NSW high school students construction of democratic citizenship through language learning: a case study of Japanese language learning experience

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This study reports on the perceptions of five high school students in NSW who have been studying Japanese language since their primary schooling. The study examines how the students construct their self and others within their Japanese language classes and how the classes contribute to citizenship education. The discussion, based on data derived from in-depth and semi-structured interviews is focused on perceptions of language learning, interculturality and citizenship education. The results suggest that language learning contributes to the students’ construction of interculturality, which in turn provides a focus for meting the students’ needs for citizenship education.

Introduction

A new syllabus for Language Other Than English K-10 was published by the Board of Studies New South Wales in 2003. The syllabus shows an emphasis on intercultural competence as an objective. Introduction of the new objective has now developed to encourage schools to incorporate an intercultural language teaching approach with values education under the Asian Languages Professional Learning Project which was funded through the Australian Government’s Quality Teacher Programme and implemented during 2004/2005. The emphasis fits in well with the major trends in education, which give consideration to diversity. However, the

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shift from adoption of the “communicative competence” approach to foreign language teaching to this new Intercultural Language teaching approach demands a much broader emphasis on teaching language within its socio-cultural dimensions. The teachers need to realise the core concept of this theory as well as how to incorporate this theory to their classrooms. Moreover, how the language teaching can contribute to values education has to be understood clearly by teachers, as well as whole school community, if successful implementation is expected.

A new development is also seen in the area of citizenship education. In the past few years, there has been a clear realisation of citizenship education, which goes beyond traditional content such as voting, flags of the world and learning about the Westminster government system. The new approach aims to tackle issues of human values and multi ethnicity for use in Australian schools (Murry, 1996). The recognition of these needs is reinforced especially after observing the racial riots involving young Australians last December at Cronulla NSW. However, in spite of the active debates, indications of what and how to incorporate these themes into daily teaching, and research on how the learner acquires them, seem to be missing.

It is interesting to note that the two subject areas, Citizenship education and the Language Other Than English education, are included in the same subject, Human Society and Its Environment in primary schools in New South Wales. However, these two subjects were rarely discussed as interrelated, nor were they treated as key learning areas within primary school education in NSW. Quite a few Japanese language teachers whom I interviewed did not know that LOTE is covered in the HSIE syllabus in NSW.

Citizenship education

Questions of nationalism and civic responsibility are increasingly significant themes in discussions of education and cultural practice, although citizenship education is not yet an established component within the Australian school curriculum. New citizenship education in Australia considers how we as a pluralistic society characterized by difference and diversity are encouraged to draw strength from our differences rather than seeing our differences as divisive.

The image of ‘a good citizen’ is more often interpreted differently within a culturally and ethically pluralistic society. Donald defines (1996:174) who is a citizen:

…the citizen’ should be understood in the first instance not as a type of person (whether German nationalist or constitutional patriot) but as a position in the set of formal relations defined by democratic sovereignty. Just as ‘I’ denotes a position in a set of linguistic relations, an empty position which makes my unique utterances possible but which can equally be occupied by anyone, so ‘the citizen’ too denotes an empty place. It too can be occupied by anyone – occupied in the sense of being spoken from, not in the sense of being given a substantial identity.
Following on Donald’s argument, ‘A good citizen’, then, is a position also occupied by anyone. In this sense, educating young people to be ‘a good citizen’ is not to place them into a mould of a ready-made citizen. Rather, it is to provide the students as many opportunities as possible to reflect upon their place as a member of a society in relation to other members where they belong. The primary question for moral and civic education is not necessarily “what values should we cultivate in young people?” Moral agreement results from processes whereby citizens engage in questions of moral and civic virtue together, through discussion, debate and deliberation as Smith (2000) argues. Agreement on basic values, however, is not the only issue pertinent to moral and civic education. A crucial element in citizenship education is, therefore, to facilitate the students’ intercultural awareness and the role it plays in a pluralistic society where parties interpret norms differently, or where parties interpret appropriate action differently in light of specific shared norms.

The challenges are how to provide the teachers with practical applications of citizenship education. Kennedy (1997) emphasizes not only the importance of citizenship education for democratic thriving, but also the importance of understanding theoretical, political, and social contexts in order to shape educational programs. It is especially vital in the current trend in a school environment where the HSIE subject is seen as the least important within teachers’ daily practice as demands of other key learning areas such as Mathematics, Science and English are perceived as greater than those of HSIE within the primary school curriculum. Kennedy (1997:1) argues that “citizenship education is capable of being constructed in multiple ways and that it is important to be aware of how those constructions take place”. The challenge for civics and citizenship education is to somehow meld together civic knowledge, civic megatrends and civic realities in a way that will meet young people where they are (ibid. pp1-5).

**Interculturality and language education**

For foreign language education, the search for better ways of teaching has a long history. However, critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) currently seek to find ways of theorizing human agency within structures of power. The approach theorizes ways in which we may think act, and behave, that on the one hand acknowledge our locations within social, cultural, economic, ideological, discursive frameworks but on the other hand allow us at least some possibility of freedom of action and change. It suggests that we need to start thinking of what is produced in cultural encounters, not just homogeneity or heterogeneity or imperialism or resistance, but rather what third cultures or third spaces are constantly being created. As Byram (1999:98) argues, these are not included in the concept of communicative competence and the model of the native speaker which have underpinned language teaching for many decades. Kramsch (1993) also claims that traditional thought in foreign language education has limited the teaching of culture to the transmission of information about the people of the target country, and about their general attitudes and world views. However, understanding a foreign culture requires putting that culture in relation with one’s own. As we have seen for
social interactions as well as for the interaction with written texts, meaning is relational. Thus, for example, an intercultural approach to the teaching of culture is radically different from a transfer of information between cultures. It includes a reflection both on the target and on the native culture. Interculturality is a created sphere to understand another culture in relation to one’s own.

The LOTE syllabus in NSW (2003) reflects the notion of Interculturality as the ‘third space’, and introduces a new dimension ‘moving between cultures’ as one area of the objectives. Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco (1999:5) introduced the Intercultural Language Teaching approach as follow, which is also echoed by LOTE syllabus in NSW.

A new approach to language teaching is aimed at assisting language learners to develop the ability to create multiple ‘third places’ as they learn to interact with ‘otherness’. The ‘third place’ notion refers to a comfortable unbounded and dynamic space which intercultural communicators create as they interact with each other in their attempt to bridge the gap between cultural differences. The third place is therefore a point of interaction, hybridity and exploration.

However, it seems that the teachers of LOTE are still confusing the traditional notion of culture teaching in the language classes and the new dimension of culture teaching which aims to assist students to create these third places. It is important to articulate what is meant by the third places and how they develop.

**Interviews**

The overall purpose of this study is to examine how Japanese language learning experiences can serve citizenship education in Australian schools. Semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 high school students twice individually during their lunch hours. The description of the students are as shown in Table 1 below. The students are from the same school, which is a co-educational independent school based on a Christian philosophy. The family backgrounds of the students in this school are diverse, and they are of middle to upper middle social-economic group.

**Table 1: Student profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Gender/ age</th>
<th>Parents’ background</th>
<th>Japanese in-country experience</th>
<th>When started Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Male / 16</td>
<td>Australian x2</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Year2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Male / 16</td>
<td>Australian x2</td>
<td>2 weeks excursion</td>
<td>Year5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>Female / 17</td>
<td>Englishx2</td>
<td>2 weeks excursion</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>Female / 16</td>
<td>English / Scottish</td>
<td>2 weeks excursion</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>Female / 18</td>
<td>Italian x2</td>
<td>2 weeks excursion x2</td>
<td>Year2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data obtained from the interviews were analysed descriptively to identify response categories corresponding to the research questions on which the study was focused. The categories were Sense of Identity, Citizenship, Belonging, Other Cultures and Japanese Language Learning. These categories were chosen with the purpose of better examining the students’ identification of ‘self’ and ‘others’ and their connection to Japanese language learning experiences in order to identify the development of interculturality.

**How did they identify themselves?**

B1 and B2 are in Year10. B1 started his Japanese study when he was in Year 2 and B2 was in Year 5. They chose Japanese for one of the elective subjects. Their both parents are Anglo-Australian background, who were born in Australia. G1 and G2 are in Year 11 with Anglo-Australian backgrounds. G1’s parents and G2’s mother immigrated to Australia from England and G2’s father was from Scotland. The both of them started Japanese studies when they were in a kindergarten. G3 is in Year 12 and has an Italian background. She was born in Australia, but both her parents were immigrants from Italy. She started her Japanese studies when she was in Year 2. G1, G2 and G3 chose Japanese subject as one of their HSC examination subjects. All of the students had primary Japanese studies at the same school.

All the students including G3 identify themselves as Australian.

> I am part of the great southern land: the guy with the bush hat on... and it just separates me from other parts of the world like America and when I go on the Internet and I talk to people from America I’m mainly known as the Australian person and it’s definitely something that I hold and it’s something that I love because I love this country. (B1)

> I think I am Australian, but I am from Italian background. My first language was Italian until I was about 5. But sometimes I think more than others (that I am Australian). I think it’s more to do with whether you agree with things that government does, or that kind of things. Most of time I feel I am Australian. (G3)

The students’ identity seems determined within the comfort zone. The comfort zone, which looks firm, seems made up mainly with their secure social environment.

> Everybody loves us and you know it’s just being really lucky to be in a country like this where there isn’t great poverty and there’s social security and medical benefits and all that stuff. (B2)

The students expressed their opinion confidently, which reflected their own experience with other people, but it appears that the voice comes from the secure position of being within their comfort zone.
I think I know people who haven’t been overseas, and they don’t understand what we are like compared to the rest of the world. I think only by understanding other countries and other culture traditions and languages that you can understand your own well enough. (G3)

G2 compared herself with people who have not been to another country.

I think you can study history, and you can study economics, you can study about all kind of countries. But if haven’t been there, you are not intimate with that, you don’t really understand it. (G2)

Giddens, (1991, pp188) uses a term ‘the protective cocoon’, and discusses ‘trust’ as basic to this ‘protective cocoon’ which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality. He explains that avoidance of dissonance in our social life forms part of the protective cocoon which helps maintain ontological security. He discusses how available information is reduced via routinised attitudes which exclude, or reinterpret, potentially disturbing knowledge. From a negative point of view, such closure might be regarded as prejudice, the refusal seriously to entertain views and ideas divergent from those an individual already holds.

**How did they identify other cultures**

All of the students showed openness to other cultures, and they agreed with comments such as the following.

If someone wears a scarf over their head or just has a different way of speaking I don’t mind at all.(G2)

They have probably got other cultures that they wish to uphold and that’s their right. But that’s sort of part of what Australia is because it is a multicultural country. So Australia really can be defined by many different things and many different cultures. (B1)

These students’ attitudes towards immigrants do not correspond to those of many Australian Year 9 students. According to a survey conducted in 2002 by IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) a quarter of the young people of Australia are not prepared to tolerate this kind of difference. While 89 per cent ‘agreed’ to the proposition that ‘Immigrants’ children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have, only 73 per cent, agreed to the proposition that immigrants should have the opportunity to continue speaking their own language, or continue their own customs and lifestyles. These data provide an interesting perspective on the publicly espoused multi-cultural, non-assimilationist policies all Australian governments have followed for decades (Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood, 2002:92).

In the present study, the students’ opinions on the other cultures sounded derogatory. They showed tolerance toward other cultures, because they are in a secure and comfortable dominant group which part of their protective cocoon, but they did not use language that was ‘inclusive’ and spoke from the perspective of being in the dominant group rather than from an equal position. The comment by B1 above shows an example. He
acknowledges other cultures, but seeing the other culture from distance. He says ‘they have probably got other cultures’, and keeping their own culture as ‘their right’.

**Japanese language learning**

It seems that Japanese language learning assisted their self development. As shown above, the 5 students are all quite open to others, but they seem to close themselves within their comfort zone, and Japanese language learning is assisting them in coming out of their comfort zone, opening up themselves.

[Learning Japanese] presents a difficulty, they put you out of your comfort zone… just like hammering at your confidence. I mean you grow up with English, it’s just so easy. Whereas when you are sitting down and trying not to speak the way you’ve been taught to speak, to write differently, to sometimes even act differently, so it’s different, yeah and it puts you out of that comfort zone that you are always in, so, like it’s so easy just to stay in and say no I don’t want to do that, I don’t want to open myself up to that. (B1)

Learning language is a constant challenge. You’ve got to keep on going, keep on going. Learn new words and just build upon, everything (G3)

They were beginning to observe themselves objectively. When they are in the comfort zone, they do not notice things very clearly, because everything is settled and seems natural and nothing sticks out.

I feel rude when I find [I don't understand them/Japanese]. Sort of uncomfortable and rude at the same time. (G2)

Probably, initially I was pretty scared if I could do it or not. But then feeling very satisfied that I could do something very different. And I think that continues like up until now. It’s still a really good feeling that you can do something that’s really different to your own. Because when you learn French or language like that, it’s still very similar like based in Latin and that kind of thing. When you’ve got to learn language, completely different characters, completely different structures, and that kind of thing, then that’s definitely satisfying. (G3)

While mapping the students’ identification of their sense of self and other, their sense of belonging, and the influence of Japanese language learning experiences on the development of interculturality, it became obvious that the interrelation of these themes formed two circles, *self* and *other*. 
Japanese language learning experience as a gentle hammering effect from inside

They are within a hard shell of the comfort zone. They are open to other culture, but there is a gap between their self and other.

Japanese language learning worked as a hammering effect from inside the shell and provoked self-realisation by a weakening the hard comfort zone shell.

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**Figure 1: Mapping self and other.**

The hard shell has cracked, and made space for circulation between the self and others. Because this circulation is possible, they are ready to see themselves in relation to others, ready for exploration of self and other.

**Reflection on primary Japanese learning**

The students reflected upon their learning experiences during the primary school studies.

I liked doing it because people would say oh how can you read it or how can you write it like how do you know what it says but you’ve learnt it so you can say well I do know what it says. It gives you more confidence. (G1)
I liked it because I’ve always liked drawing so it wasn’t a real problem getting know Hiragana like my skill got really neat but it was just a picture. (G2)

Every character in Japanese is like Art. I liked it, it was so different. (G3)

The students’ feeling towards their Japanese learning experiences shifted from ‘fun’ to ‘challenging’ during the period of primary school to their high school experience.

**Table 2: The shift from primary to high school language learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary experiences</th>
<th>High school experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fun</strong> because:</td>
<td><strong>Challenging</strong> because:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The teacher made things fun</td>
<td>- Different to English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Different</td>
<td>- Languages present a difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Japanese characters are like Arts</td>
<td>- Feel I am rude when don’t understand the Japanese people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- More confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Japanese in-country experience**

Except B1, they all had Japanese in-country experience. They noticed the difference much more concrete way than the classroom learning when they were in Japan.

You just notice things more. (B2)

And it’s different if you go to somewhere like England like you don’t notice it as much but seeing it’s an Asian country it’s very different, even the food we eat is very different. (G2)

At first I was a bit sort of wondering like how it all worked and stuff but the other thing I had a problem with and in the end I didn’t, was communal bathing, that was the only thing. (G1)

Japanese people generally restricted expressing themselves. Like at school, all the girls were the same, how to wear make up, wear a short skirt, and things like that. They didn’t, no one ever said was what they thought. No one ever was different. They don’t like to be out of a group. It is too here to some extent, but not to the degree that it was. I guess that was hard to adapt. (G3)
When they were in Japan they noticed, compared, observed, negotiated and finally found solutions to deal with the Japanese culture.

Discussion

Language learning worked as a hammering effect on the comfort zone which surrounded their self, because of the activities undertaken in the classes:

- writing different letters – more like creative arts than writing
- speaking differently
- sometimes acting differently (bowing etc)
- hearing unfamiliar language spoken, or seeing unfamiliar writing,
- learning different ways of language construction and different language rules (spoken & unspoken)
- confidence diminished because of the things they could do in English, they could not do in Japanese. Eg, making a joke

They hadn’t realized how much they took for granted and what they understood as ‘normal’ in English culture and how it differed from what was considered ‘normal’ in Japanese culture. It is crucial to note that this realization was done within themselves, rather than being taught.

It seems that the safe environment was constructed while learning the language at primary school, and this foundation assisted them towards positive realization of differences, rather than negative.

This was reinforced when they were in Japan. They;

- **noticed**, because things were so different
- **compared** their own with the Japanese
- **observed** their own/how they feel
- **negotiated** within themselves, therefore their feeling/position **shifted**
- **found** what they wanted to do.

These students’ reflection on in-country experience echoed the pathway for developing intercultural competence that Liddicoat (2002) indicates. He indicates a non-linear process of acquisition of intercultural competence. It starts with Input, Noticing, Reflection, Output, Noticing, Reflection and Output. He argues that it is important to notice a difference in the input to reflect on the nature of the difference and to decide how to respond to that difference. It seems that the students went through a similar process to the pathway that Liddicoat demonstrates.

However, I cannot see that the students have created the third space. Rather they utilise the Japanese learning experience to prepare themselves for substantial interaction between their self and others. This real interaction is
possible, because their hard cocoon has cracked, and made space for circulation between the self and others. Because this circulation is possible, they are ready to see themselves in relation to others, ready for exploration of self and other. This process seems important to development of the students’ truly democratic attitude, as they still live within their comfort zone, the protective cocoon in Giddens’s terminology (1991), which support them to maintain their ontological security. As long as they are within the comfort zone, they are in a privileged position; belonging to the dominant group provided them with security. Unless they come out of that zone, the students cannot locate themselves on an equal position as the others. This is to say that the students tolerate the other culture, but they do it from a distanced higher position. A challenging experience of the language learning provided them the opportunities to find their own voice, and assisted the students to come out from their dominant norm.

**Conclusion**

As Smith’s discussion shows, building moral consensus in postmodern, pluralistic democracies is not agreement on a laundry list of absolute values that all citizens should subscribe to. Rather, moral agreement results from processes whereby citizens engage questions of moral and civic virtue together, through discussion, debate and deliberation. This discussion, debate and deliberation must be grounded with students’ intercultural development for successful citizenship and values education. Individual capacity to live and cooperate with others requires an understanding of otherness and the relationships between different cultural values systems. And this study indicates that students are developing interculturality as a hammering effect to crack their hard cocoon of the comfort zone while learning Japanese language. This experience will assist them to make more authentically equal interaction with others possible.

Liddicoat (2002) study indicates the acquisition of intercultural development is progressive, but not staged. This study sees the primary school Japanese language learning experience as the crucial foundation to the high school students to develop their interculturality. To hammer the comfort zone, the protective cocoon, means hammering the zone of trusted security. It is possible that without building a safe learning environment during their primary experience, the hammering effect may not work positively. The result of this study also suggests that language learning can be a useful tool to promote citizenship education. As unfamiliarity of practical implementation of citizenship education has been a concern for school education policy makers, it is time for the teachers as well as whole school community to re-think the reason why language learning is a part of the Human Society and Its Environment subject in NSW.

This study focused on five high school students, and indicated that they have developed a sense of interculturality while learning Japanese. However, this is not to say that all Japanese language learners could develop this quality, and further research is needed to examine how the students maintain and develop this
quality as well as how they might shift from this point of the state. This study of the 5 students forms part of a larger study involving primary, high school and university students, the results of which are under analysis.

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