

Conference Notes

September 30th 1993

I began my association with the Japanese language in 1970 at Governor Stirling Senior High School in Western Australia. I held a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1972 and 1973. Memories of learning Japanese were the shared native speaker teacher with Guildford Grammar and the new language laboratory, funded by Lang Hancock, which was very innovative for its time, but from the student perspective, interminably dull. There seemed to be endless rote learning alternated with an interesting script book that taught us the mysteries of Kanji and relieved the boredom of Alfonso, A Basic Course. We often had film crews from Japan and other faraway places come to see us, and all this made Japanese a more interesting subject than French (my other language study) or German. Alas, Hori Sensei had to return to Japan and his replacement relied on plodding through the textbook, page by page, substitution drills followed by more drills. Very little conversation. I left the study of Japanese just prior to the Leaving Examination (finding refuge in the Art Room) and didn't give it another thought for 10 years.

After travelling around Australia, New Zealand and a short trip to Europe, my interest in Japanese was renewed and I began studying Japanese at night – taught by Professor Neustupny's wife. I decided to pursue the formal study of Japanese and gained entry into the beginner's course at Monash University in 1984. I completed my Bachelor of Arts in 1986 with Japanese language and Asian History as my majors, completing a Diploma of Education in 1987 whilst pregnant with my first child.

As can be seen by this preface, I am a relative newcomer to the profession of teaching, having only started teaching in July 1990 at Nazareth College, where I taught Years 8 -12 in the 18 months that I was there.

In 1992, I started teaching at Firbank Anglican Grammar and have been given the opportunity to teach at Primary levels. In 1992, I taught Years 6 and 7. In the Primary school there is no set text and this meant that I could use my initiative and write my own course. I set out to make the language "useful", that is, to give the girls the opportunity to learn, with input from them, how to converse with Japanese people.

By mid-year, the Year 6 student were able to hold a short conversation with Japanese students on tour and by the end of the year were able to produce a Year Book, containing information about themselves and their likes and hobbies.

This year, (1993) I am teaching Years 3, 6. 7 and 8.

The Year 3 classes are beginning classes. The approach that I took this year, after attending a LOTE methodology course at Monash University during the summer holidays, was to speak only in the "target language" to the students. This was sustained for around four weeks, and

I have continued to use all classroom expressions in Japanese (with plenty of mime to make sure the students understand).

There are two reasons for not continuing with this approach. Firstly, I am not at native speaker fluency and felt unable to maintain correct speech at all times, (necessary for correct modelling) and secondly, the students were simply “switching off’ according to their class teachers. They were overwhelmed by the language and felt that they could not understand.

A summary of Year 3 activities.

Introductions

Numbers (ichi, ni, san..)

- 1 -10 using Kanji
- Counters for people,
- animals,
- machines,
- months,
- time,
- pens/pencils
- Japanese numbers. (hitotsu, futatsu...)

Activities centred on the numbers included songs such as 10 Little Indians, pictures, how many people in your family, how many animals you have. We practiced Kanji numbers and made a Big Book of numbers and learned how to count to 50 by tracing footprints and laying them on the floor and going around the classroom counting.

Numbers have traditionally been taught in in the Senior School at about Year 10 and I found that the students often had difficulty with the concept of counters for different objects, so my rationale was to introduce them with little or no explanation except “that it is just Japanese”. The students readily accepted the numbers and it tied in with their Maths curriculum, especially with telling the time.

The students have learned the first 20 Hiragana formally and each has her own Hiragana book where she writes stroke order and a limited number of words using those Hiragana.

Romanisation or Roomaji is not encouraged and is defined as being the “sound” that the Hiragana makes. Other Hiragana not formally learned are frequently used and the students are constantly exposed to flash cards with all the Hiragana characters on them. We regularly play bingo using the characters learned. (this is done at all year levels)

We have read some Japanese folk tales to familiarise the students with some of the culture and have observed festivals such as Doll's Day (Hina no Matsuri), Children's Day (Kodomo no Hi), Tanabata and made paper cranes for the anniversary of Hiroshima.

To further consolidate the Hiragana and the stroke order we have made Hiragana and Kanji characters in dough and baked and decorated them for classroom decorations.

The rest of this year will be spent on revision and consolidation of their characters learned and we have started a colouring competition, labelling the colours in Japanese correctly and producing a colour poster. We will then produce a Big Book on colours.

There is no set text and the course is resourced by original material made by myself, Hiragana books for children and some material produced by the Independent Schools Associations of Victoria and Queensland. Some material has been modified and adapted to suit from the National Curriculum material available.

A summary of Year 6

Year 6 students are currently starting their draft material for a Year Book that will be completed as they finish the year. A summary of the topics covered by Year 6 is being able to ask and give a variety of answers (approximately 15 sentences) about:

- Going to a place
- Food that they have eaten
- Things they have done
- Sports they have played
- Things they like to do

They are able, with this information, to write a letter, make a diary entry and to talk to a Japanese person.

Students are then able to talk about themselves, giving:

- Their name
- Age
- Year of study
- Address (suburb only)
- Telephone number
- Family makeup – how many people, identifying family members by Japanese familial terms - concluding with the production of the year book.

Each student contributes their details in script on a folded A4 sheet with a small school photo and I collate and print a copy for each student. In addition to this main activity, the students have discussed Japan as they perceive it, its relation to Australia and its location in Asia. They have also completed a major assignment (in English) on a cultural or historical aspect of Japan of their own choice.