Creating learning pathways through Japanese Communities of Practice

Abstract

Japanese language education in Australia currently faces two major issues: (1) the steady rise in learner population appears to have peaked; and (2) the continuation rate of learners to upper-level proficiency courses is low. In the tertiary sector, we identified two specific problems in relation to continuation. Although the pathways to learn and continue with the study of Japanese are there, they may not be accessible due to degree and program restrictions, and access and subsequent pathways are not very visible to students. At the University of New South Wales (UNSW), we run the Japanese program as Communities of Practice (CoP), which offer opportunities to students in the program to go beyond the course boundaries to find out about their learning pathways, and advise students who are not in the program on the content and learning pathways of the program. We propose that a well-networked language program CoP may be one way to encourage learners to continue with the study of the language. The UNSW Japanese CoP is an attempt to promote both accessibility and visibility of the Japanese program.

1. Introduction

Japanese language education has played a central role in the Australian language education scene for many years. However in recent years, a number of issues have been identified, including the low rate of continuation of learners to advanced and professional levels of proficiency. In this paper we briefly review the current trends and issues of Australian Japanese language education. We then discuss Communities of Practice and propose a framework of practice at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) as a possible useful strategy to increase the continuation rate of the learners of Japanese at Australian universities.

2. Trends in Japanese language education in Australia

Australia is known to be one of the major players of Japanese language education in the world. According to the Japan Foundation Japanese-Language Education Survey Summary 2012\(^1\) its learner population is currently fourth in the world in terms of numbers of learners. As a proportion of the population, Australia is second only to Korea among these top five countries, which together hold 83% of the total learner population in the world (Table 1).
Table 1: Numbers of learners of Japanese by country, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,367 million</td>
<td>1,046,490</td>
<td>1/1306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>253 million</td>
<td>872,411</td>
<td>1/290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>50 million</td>
<td>840,187</td>
<td>1/59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24 million</td>
<td>296,672</td>
<td>1/81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>23 million</td>
<td>233,417</td>
<td>1/99</td>
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However the steady and dramatic increase in learner population of the 1990s appears to have peaked at around 2003. Figure 1 shows the trend as captured in the two Japan Foundation surveys in 2006 and 2009, and the steep decline from 2006 to 2009 at 25%, with an increase of only 7.5% in 2012.

Another trend is the concentration of learners in the primary and secondary schools sector. Table 2 shows the distribution of Australian learners by institutional levels. The great majority of learners are concentrated in the primary and secondary schools sector and only 3% are in the tertiary sector.

These learners in primary and secondary schools are most likely beginner level learners. For example, at UNSW, students who have learned Japanese at secondary schools for 5 years usually enter our Japanese program at the intermediate level.
Table 2: Numbers of Australian learners by institutional levels in 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional level</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Tertiary</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of learners</td>
<td>172,464</td>
<td>112,302</td>
<td>9,682</td>
<td>2,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>287,766 (96%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.3%)</td>
<td>(0.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Number of enrolments in core language courses at UNSW in 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internationally recognised levels (CEFR, JR)</th>
<th>Year and Semester</th>
<th>Core Language Courses (UNSW course names)</th>
<th>Enrolment (Continuation Rate)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory levels</td>
<td>1st year 1st semester</td>
<td>‘Introductory Japanese A’</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st year 2nd semester</td>
<td>‘Introductory Japanese B’</td>
<td>170 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd year 1st semester</td>
<td>‘Intermediate Japanese A’</td>
<td>146 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd year 2nd semester</td>
<td>‘Intermediate Japanese B’</td>
<td>119 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate levels</td>
<td>3rd year 1st semester</td>
<td>‘Advanced Japanese A’</td>
<td>104 (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd year 2nd semester</td>
<td>‘Advanced Japanese B’</td>
<td>92 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4th year 1st semester</td>
<td>‘Professional Japanese A’</td>
<td>61 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4th year 2nd semester</td>
<td>‘Professional Japanese B’</td>
<td>44 (72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced levels</td>
<td>5th year 1st semester</td>
<td>‘Advanced Professional Electives 1’</td>
<td>29 (96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5th year 2nd semester</td>
<td>‘Advanced Professional Electives 2’</td>
<td>25 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NB: (1) the enrolment numbers include those who were placed into the levels via placement procedures, with the largest intake at ‘Advanced Japanese A’ which explains the seemingly high continuation rate; and (2) the continuation rate for first semester numbers is a proportion of the students enrolled in the relevant feeder course of the previous year.

The tertiary sector is presently the only place in Australia that can educate intermediate and advanced level learners of Japanese, at least in New South Wales. However, the UNSW figures given in Table 3 (from 2011) show that the majority of learners are studying at beginner levels. Close to three quarters (951/1,306) of all learners are in...
introductory courses (at UNSW, ‘Introductory’ or ‘Intermediate’ courses), with just one quarter at higher levels. If we assume that that this distribution at UNSW is representative of most Australian universities, then we can estimate that less than 1% of Japanese learners in Australia would be placed at an intermediate or higher level (remembering that only 3% of all Japanese learners are studying Japanese at university). In addition, the continuation rate from the first to second semester in introductory Japanese in 2011 was 33% (and from 2009-2013, ranged from 33% to 49%), markedly lower than at all other levels. To our knowledge, the low rate of continuation after the initial beginner’s course and the subsequent low number of upper level students is not unique to UNSW. Japanese appears to suffer from more serious attrition at this point in first year than a number of other languages, according to an extensive Australian study of beginner learners of languages (Nettelbeck et al. 2007), which states that about one-third of those who begin a language do not go on to the second semester.

In summary, the two major observations in current Australian Japanese language education are: (1) the rise in learner population may have peaked; and (2) there is a lower-than-desired rate of learner continuation to upper level proficiency courses.

3. Learning pathways for university students

We now consider what we can do in our own universities to make learning pathways accessible and visible, so that more learners will take up and continue learning of Japanese. We leave discussions on the transition from primary to high school for another occasion, and focus on issues within tertiary institutions.

3.1 Accessibility and visibility

Universities that host Japanese language programs offer courses at various levels. UNSW, for example, offers courses from the beginners to advanced levels and all students at UNSW can take these courses either as core or elective courses. Since the Japanese program is located in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW students can naturally major in Japanese Studies within the Bachelor of Arts. However the BA is not the only degree that allows sustained learning of Japanese at UNSW. A brief search on the UNSW website found 92 such programs, for example, Bachelor of Science International and dual degrees such as the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Engineering. It is also true in many universities that those students who studied Japanese in secondary school can take a placement test and be assigned to appropriate upper-level courses to continue on with their study of Japanese.

However this availability does not necessarily translate into accessibility. These courses may be available, but timetable clashes, inflexible program structures and such, frequently make it impossible for students to take up and continue with the courses (Northwood and Thomson 2012). At UNSW, for instance, students in the Bachelor of Commerce are advised to take courses offered by the Business faculty in the first year. It takes a highly motivated and determined BCom student to find that it
is actually possible to take a language course in the first year; others have to wait at least until their second year to take up a language course. Further, this availability of language courses to all students does not appear to be well known to students at the time they enter university. Students often take up an introductory Japanese course as one of the electives or a general education substitution only towards the end of their university career. Although they may find the course to be useful and interesting, it is too late for them to continue on to upper level courses. Even for those students who take up lower-level Japanese courses at earlier stages of their university career, it is not easy to have a clear understanding of what follows in their learning pathways. They may know the course sequences, but the published course outlines alone do not provide sufficient information to motivate them to continue with their study of Japanese.

This brief discussion has highlighted two issues surrounding the teaching of Japanese in Australian tertiary institutions: (1) although the pathways to learn and continue with the study of Japanese are there, they may not be accessible due to degree and program restrictions; and (2) access and subsequent pathways are not very visible to students. Communities of Practice are presented here as one way of addressing this.

3.2 UNSW Japanese Communities of Practice

At UNSW, the Japanese program conceptualises itself and runs as a network of Communities of Practice, as seen in Figure 2. Communities of Practice (CoP) are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger 2006: 1). Lave and Wenger (1991) regard learning as participation in a CoP, and that learning is “situated”. They consider the process through which a newcomer becomes a full member in a CoP as the central process of situated learning. The process entails the learner participating in the practices of the community, and developing an identity, which offers a sense of belonging and commitment to the community. The CoP provides a context for the learner to be engaged in the process. According to Wenger (1998), participation is not just being there for an event, but more active engagement in certain activities with certain people, in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Identity construction in this framework is understanding who we are in the context of certain communities.

Communities of Practice are characterised as having three critical elements of: (1) Domain: A shared aim or concern; (2) Community: Platform(s) in which members engage in joint activities; and (3) Practice: Activities held in the community on a regular basis (Wenger 1998). At UNSW, the Japanese CoP encompass groups of learners, teachers, and other speakers of Japanese as its members. The Domain for the CoP is a shared concern and passion for learning Japanese and striving to learn how to do it better by interacting regularly. They are made of smaller Communities such as the teaching team community, course communities, the Nippon Student Association (NSA; a student organisation for those who share an interest in Japan,
which is officially recognised by the University), and others, in which the members take part in a variety of activities. Their main Practices are a range of language learning and related activities including exercises and role-plays in classrooms, chatting about anime during breaks, and going out to eat Japanese food after class.

Figure 2: UNSW Japanese Communities of Practice

While each CoP functions well on its own (e.g. Thomson and Chan 2013), one of the further strengths of the UNSW Japanese CoP comes from the web of network of the smaller Communities as illustrated in Figure 2. The teaching team community is at the core of the network, which provides students with various systems to interact with other students of different levels and courses. For example, select students in the ‘Advanced Japanese’ course community make regular visits to the ‘Introductory Japanese’ classrooms (Thomson 1998) as seen in Figure 3. They become a part of the ‘Introductory Japanese’ classroom community, as they interact with the ‘Introductory’ students, and become role models to the junior students as they speak to the classroom teacher in Japanese, and as they help out in classroom tasks. The ‘Introductory Japanese’ classroom community often hosts not only these senior students from the ‘Advanced Japanese’ course, but others ranging from native speaker helpers, postgraduate students, to practicum students (Kojima 2014). In this context, the junior students and senior students not only interact to perform classroom tasks, but also to exchange information about Japanese courses, Japanese
culture, exchange programs to Japan and so forth. Through these experiences, the junior students learn what lies ahead of them from their seniors and gauge how much progress they will make by the time they reach the ‘Advanced Japanese’ course, while the senior students gain real situations to use Japanese with classroom teachers, learn by teaching the junior students, and transform their identity from that of a Japanese ‘learner’ to a Japanese ‘user’. The UNSW CoP host many other connections than the above, and provide a variety of interaction opportunities. These interactions among senior and junior students, and other Japanese-speaking members within the UNSW CoP help make learning pathways more visible (Thomson and Mori 2014).

Figure 3: Introductory Japanese classroom Community of Practice

Features of the UNSW Japanese CoP also include the Overlapping Broad Interface (OBI) zone, which is defined as an area that overlaps the inside and outside of a CoP, where members and non-members can interact with each other (Shimasaki 2012). OBI facilitates the participation of potential members in relevant CoP and helps to keep the CoP active (Shimasaki 2013). Figure 2 shows that Nippon Student Association (NSA) acts as one of the OBI zones for the UNSW CoP.

The NSA community welcomes UNSW students and others who are interested in Japanese language and culture. Some of the NSA members are enrolled in Japanese courses at UNSW and others are not. Due to the interactions between NSA and other communities, NSA members gain access to Japanese courses and teachers. Through
these interactions, NSA members learn about the Japanese course communities, e.g. the course context, teachers, and fellow students, and some members decide to enrol in Japanese courses, while others remain outside of the Japanese course communities (cf. Shimasaki forthcoming). As noted by Shimasaki (2012), the benefit of OBI goes in both directions, both to the NSA members who gain access to information on the Japanese course communities, and to the Japanese course communities, which gain new members. It helps that NSA members include students of different course communities. We believe that OBI makes Japanese courses visible to those students who are interested in Japanese language courses, often coming from non-Arts faculties, such as engineering and commerce, but who do not know that they have access to them. NSA enhances visibility through, for example, holding a booth at Orientation Week to provide Japan-related information to all students; announcing NSA activities at lectures and via Moodle Internet course communities of core Japanese courses; and mentioning support from the Japanese teaching team at NSA events. The teaching team community is active in ensuring that the NSA community has close contact with the Japanese course communities, by inviting them to course events and having regular informal discussions. This relationship has proven to bring benefit beyond the coursework. One manifestation of the collaboration between the teaching team and the NSA members was seen at the recent highly successful Sydney International Conference on Japanese Language Education in which NSA members played pivotal roles in guest relations using Japanese.

Our close examination of the UNSW CoP has revealed that we might also consider the ‘Introductory Japanese A’ course community as an OBI zone. The course has a large enrolment (Table 3), attracting students from all sections of the university. Other than the small number of students who have made an early decision to major in Japanese studies, these students are not necessarily committed to the study of Japanese long-term. Such students include those who do not intend to continue, who cannot continue, who may continue, and who will continue studying Japanese after the first semester. In other words, the course community offers an overlap of insiders and outsiders of the UNSW Japanese CoP. After the students make their decisions to continue on to the second semester ‘Introductory Japanese B’ course, the continuation rate to upper-level courses becomes stable at over 70% (Table 3). This could be considered as evidence that the ‘Introductory Japanese A’ indeed functions as an OBI zone and that the ‘Introductory Japanese B’ course (upwards) are located inside the UNSW Japanese CoP.

To this OBI zone, the UNSW Japanese CoP offers information-sharing strategies, such as the senior students’ participation as described above (Thomson 1998), and a classroom social event in which students from ‘Professional Japanese’ share their learning tips with the ‘Introductory’ students (Thomson and Masumi-So 2009). Further, the teaching team of ‘Introductory Japanese A’ actively engages the students with learning strategies and study plans so that they can successfully complete the course and hopefully continue on to the second semester.
3.3 Expanding the Communities of Practice

The current practices of UNSW Japanese CoP assist students to find out about Japanese course communities, join them, and discover their learning pathways (Shimasaki forthcoming; Shimasaki 2013; Thomson and Mori 2014). It further provides the students with a sense of belonging to the community (Ohara, Shimasaki and Okawa 2013), which most likely motivates them to continue with their study of Japanese, as seen in the association of motivation with integration in the one group in Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model (1985). In this way, the CoP seeks to address one of the problems identified at the beginning of this paper, that is, the low visibility of access and learning pathways of Japanese courses. However it does not address the other, that is, restrictions posed by degrees and programs.

While proposals to the university executives, deans and student administrations of non-Arts faculties that they should re-structure degrees and programs, ensuring access to language courses, are considered, it is important to do what can be done at the program level to have a direct impact on current and future students through engaging in activities to expand the CoP and to strengthen the network of communities.

One direction that we can expand is to network with communities of secondary school teachers. Providing school teachers and their students with information on access and learning pathways of Japanese study would potentially increase the student intake to all levels of courses when they are still at the early stage of their university career. This addresses the low continuation rate between school learning and university learning of Japanese. We have participated in such activities as the Open Door to Asia program (sponsored by the Asia Education Foundation) in which secondary school students visited the UNSW campus and experienced Asia-related learning activities, and the New South Wales Japanese Teachers’ Conference at which a team of Japanese university academics made a presentation on learning and career pathways of graduates of Japanese.

Another direction is to network with a community of employers from the industries, which hire Japanese-speaking graduates. Connecting the learning pathways with career pathways would provide goals and motivation for the students to continue with the study of Japanese. In this direction, our Capstone course has hosted the annual student ‘mini conference’. Members of the Sydney Japanese-speaking community participate in the conference, making comments and ask questions during student presentations as well as networking with the students. The 2014 conference was held recently with strong participation by 70 community members, including the Consul General of Japan.

The network between NSA and Japanese course communities can be further strengthened, and UNSW can more actively engage in raising visibility and improving access and learning pathways (plus career pathways) for students. This could be done at the beginning of the university calendar year as an information session for NSA members. The network between the UNSW CoP and the Sydney Japanese-speaking
community could also be enhanced. By having a strong network, we can raise the visibility of the UNSW CoP and its students.

In summary, operating the Japanese program as a CoP at UNSW, consisting of closely-knit communities, increases the variety and quantity of interactions among the members of the CoP. Furthermore, the UNSW CoP utilise NSA as the OBI zone, and the ‘Introductory Japanese A’ course also functions as the OBI zone which welcomes diverse students and gives them a chance to consider serious study of Japanese. As a result, members and non-members share information on access to and pathways of Japanese language study. Strengthening the CoP and expanding its network further to neighbouring communities could be one way to raise the visibility of the CoP and increase the numbers of students continuing to learn Japanese.

5. Concluding remarks

The value of the CoP has been recognised both locally and nationally: in 2012, the Japanese Studies Team at UNSW won three local awards for their practices based on CoP in 2012 (UNSW Vice Chancellor’s Award for Teaching Excellence; UNSW, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Dean’s Learning and Teaching Award for Sessional Teachers; UNSW Excellence in Postgraduate Research Supervision Award), and one national citation (for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching).

Our proposal has been that creating, expanding and strengthening language programs as Communities of Practice may be one way to help make language courses accessible and visible, providing a sense of belonging for the students and increasing the uptake and continuation of Japanese language learning. Creating a strong network with outside communities such as the community speaking the language, as well as the school teachers’ community, could also be a way to further enhance the quality of the Communities of Practice. We are optimistic that the CoP approach, particularly through such activities as bringing early beginner students into direct contact with higher-level students, is useful in generating ongoing interest—on both sides—in learning Japanese. Evaluation of the longer-term effect of the CoP approach on attrition is of course essential.

Acknowledgement

I appreciate the support by the editorial team and the anonymous readers for the constructive comments, which considerably reshaped this paper.

Notes

1. The Japan Foundation Japanese-Language Education Survey Summary 2012


5. The course names are in quotation markers and perceived proficiency levels are not.


References


Shimasaki, K. 2012. Participating in a learning community outside the classroom through Overlapping Broad Interface (OBI) zone. Unpublished paper presented at the Faculty of Arts and Social Science Postgraduate Conference. The University of New South Wales, Sydney.


