Teaching language as culture: using the Japanese writing system as a target of cultural research

Abstract

Within the context of a Language Curriculum Reform at the University of Melbourne, an attempt was made to create a curriculum that allows students at lower-intermediate level to discover culture embedded in the use of Japanese language, with special focus on the Japanese writing system. Studying Japanese challenges non-native students in many ways; coping with the increasing number of kanji is one of them and needs to be addressed appropriately. The resulting curriculum systematically focuses directly and indirectly on various aspects of the Japanese writing system as a target of learning, in addition to other learning. Students not only develop a better understanding of Japanese language and the cultural practice of writing, but they also gain strategies for learning kanji, as well as developing their literacy skills to enable them to conduct research in and on Japanese.

1. Background

As a result of a Faculty of Arts initiative, known as the Language Curriculum Reform (LCR), a new curriculum was implemented across all levels of the Japanese program at the University of Melbourne in 2012. The scope of the LCR included a redevelopment of the existing language curriculum “that includes communication goals incorporating high levels of literacy development; cultural/intercultural inquiry, and meta-awareness—in the context of expanded social and cultural contexts of use and expanded content areas” (Scarino 2010). Following the lead by the Modern Language Association’s (2007: 4) call to teach “functional language abilities” in the form of “critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception” at all proficiency levels, it was agreed that all language programs should adopt the language-culture nexus at the core of the curriculum. The curriculum emphasised, amongst other things, the understanding of the semantic value of words which carry cultural and historical meaning in the target language. As a part of the Japanese teaching team, this author took responsibility for designing the curriculum for second year students in 2010.

The language-culture nexus approach necessitates seeing culture as the force influencing how language is constructed, i.e. the semantic values of words must be
made visible to students and elaborated upon, rather than relying on translation, to avoid the risk of students assigning their first-language connotation to the words. This allows students to critically evaluate the differences in meaning intended by the speaker of another language and to see beyond the surface language structure (Kramsch 2006). Whilst reading literature and texts from various genres is a suggested starting point for such a curriculum (Byrnes 2009), it was decided among the Japanese teaching team that the language proficiency of the second year students in the Japanese program may be too limited for them to understand the subtle differences in nuance which a slight change in, say, a verb conjugation form may make for more fluent speakers. It was agreed that at a lower proficiency level, the main focus of the curriculum should still be on students acquiring linguistic competence, although cultural content should be made prominent to allow students to develop a critical cultural awareness of the Japanese language.

Thus, a new approach to teaching culture, emerging from a focus on language forms at a lower proficiency level, was considered. As discussed above, the notion of culture in LCR is not in line with how ‘culture’ is usually treated in Japanese classes (which is usually limited to a superficial introduction, such as popular tourist destinations and customs when visiting a Japanese family). In order to move away from such a model of teaching culture and to highlight the link between language and culture, a shift of focus on teaching content was necessary. This enabled the new curriculum to align with the trend in modern higher education, i.e. a constructivist approach to learning. In such curriculums, students are encouraged to actively construct new knowledge through learning experiences provided by teachers and capitalising on students’ prior knowledge (Biggs and Tang 2007; Ramsden 2003). According to this approach, peer-to-peer interactions are encouraged in various ways, such as peer collaboration and peer assessments, in order to allow students to reflect on each other’s knowledge and to deepen their understanding of the new concept by encouraging critical thinking (Pearce, Mulder and Baik 2009). Whilst the normal practice in language classes of letting students practise speaking amongst themselves using the target grammar and vocabulary may seem to encourage interaction amongst peers, it may not contribute to the development of students’ critical thinking skills. By letting students critically research and analyse the link between culture and language forms, students may develop both cultural knowledge and critical thinking skills.

Considering the limited language proficiency of the target students, the cultural aspects most visible to them were the different scripts used in Japanese; the focus for students with greater proficiency would have been differently formulated (Crozet and Liddicoat 2000). The newly redesigned curriculum therefore revolves around the theme of Japanese scripts and their use for various purposes. The teaching and learning activities surrounding the project are designed to encourage students to think critically, to foster cultural awareness and to study at a deeper level. It allows students to explore for themselves why learning kanji and the culture behind the Japanese writing system is important in Japanese study and how they can learn
kanji with less stress. To attempt assessment tasks, cooperation amongst students is necessary to facilitate discussions on their experiences of using another language, not limited to Japanese. This contribution will outline the curriculum design concepts, assessment tasks and teaching and learning experiences provided to students, in order for them to acquire language as well as the culture behind the language, then reflect on its first year of implementation.

2. Designing the new curriculum

The following five principles form the basis of the new curriculum:

1. **Linking writing and culture**: The language-cultural nexus to be highlighted by learning about the use of various scripts used in Japanese and the historical and cultural backgrounds behind them.

2. **Learning culture through research**: Knowledge of culture to be deepened through actively researching aspects of the Japanese writing system that students are interested in.

3. **Developing critical thinking skills**: Critical thinking skills to be developed by incorporating peer assessment and group work as a core part of the curriculum.

4. **Discovering cultural differences**: Intercultural interaction to be fostered by engaging students in discussions with other students from different cultural backgrounds and making the results of those discussions assessable.

5. **Learning language through research**: Language learning to occur as students engage in research and present their findings in Japanese.

The approach that was taken was to incorporate a research project at the centre of the subject and to build teaching and learning activities around it. The following sections will address each of the principles in detail, including the rationale and a brief review of relevant literature, to match the constructive approach to learning that is the norm of a good teaching practice in current tertiary education settings (Biggs and Tang 2007).

2.1 Linking writing and culture

Dealing with Japanese scripts is one of the most challenging aspects for many learners of Japanese. The Japanese writing system involves the use of two sets of phonetic scripts, developed in Japan; a large number of idiothetic scripts called kanji, adopted from Chinese; and Arabic numerals and the Roman alphabet, where necessary. Being a script-based language, the extent to which a learner may advance in studying Japanese may well depend on how many kanji he/she can learn. The rules for using these scripts are linguistically as well as culturally based and may carry different intentions of the writer. Choosing appropriate scripts with which to communicate, however, is within the bounds of learning about culture reflected in
language use which can be mastered by students with limited proficiency (Scarino 2008).

A variety of topics relating to the Japanese writing system were chosen to be introduced each week. The topics chosen represent a cross-section of the Japanese writing system and are interrelated. Each topic is discussed not only from its historical perspective but also from social and cultural perspectives and from students’ perspectives as learners of Japanese. The topics and key concepts are listed below.

1. **Kanji** and their readings and meanings: the origin of kanji and the reason for multiple readings for each kanji.
3. **Kanji** learning methods: various methods used by Japanese people and foreigners living in Japan to memorise kanji, using Japanese primary schools and foreign Sumo wrestlers as examples.
4. Onomatopoeia as written expressions in comics: the choice of words, scripts and writing methods and its effect on creating different impressions on the readers of manga (Japanese comics).
5. Japanese scripts in computing: the process of converting phonetic input from keyboard to scripts on computer screens and the influence of computer-mediated communication on modern written Japanese.
6. **Kotodama** and **Mojidama** (word spirits): the influence of Shinto (the Japanese native religion) to explain the phonetic script system and the cultural value of handwriting in Japanese.

The key concepts of each topic are introduced to students in the form of weekly readings in Japanese, written in the format of an academic essay (see also Section 2.5). Students’ understanding of the readings are tested during the lecture each week, using a personal response system provided by the University.

The overarching theme, ‘Japanese writing system’, is introduced in the first lecture for the semester, by viewing the YouTube video of the annual ‘Kanji of the Year’ (今年の漢字) unveiling ceremony. In December each year, the ‘Kanji of the Year’, a kanji that reflects the year’s events, is selected by popular public vote. For example, in 2012, the kanji 金 (kin: gold, money, metal, a great achievement) was selected as it reflects a number of key events in Japan, such as gold medals received by Japanese athletes at the London Olympics, a Nobel prize received by a Japanese scientist and the increase of the consumption tax. In the video, a monk from a temple in Kyoto
writes an enlarged kanji in front of a crowd, using a brush and ink (see Figure 1). Through understanding the purpose of the ‘Kanji of the Year’ event and watching the video, students have a chance to form opinions about the event based on their prior knowledge of kanji. For example, they can confirm that a kanji is an ideogram that encompasses multiple meanings and readings; that the kanji written in calligraphy is not necessarily the same as how it is written in the printed media; and can evaluate the effectiveness of using handwriting, rather than a computer-generated image, as a method of unveiling the ‘Kanji of the Year’. Other questions are raised, such as how Japanese people memorise and distinguish the multiple meanings and readings of kanji, why kanji can be written in different forms in everyday writing but not in a kanji quiz and why emphasis is still placed on calligraphy, despite being in the computer-era. These questions lead to the formation of the nine topics given above.

Figure 1: Screen capture of a YouTube clip, unveiling of ‘Kanji of the Year’

2.2 Learning culture through research

The research project is adopted as a learning activity based on an enquiry-based learning method to encourage a deeper understanding of the chosen aspects of Japanese culture as represented by the Japanese writing system (Gonzalez 2013; Ramsden 2003). Rather than have students learning cultural information from textbooks, enquiry-based learning asks students to actively seek information and analyse the given cultural phenomenon to deepen their learning. After determining their topics, students are to research a chosen aspect of the Japanese writing system as a project assignment in groups of three (see also section 2.4). The research project is to be conducted in four phases: (1) deciding on a topic as a group through discussion; (2) creating an annotated bibliography; (3) drafting a research essay and
reviewing others’ essays; and (4) presenting the findings in an academic essay. Each stage of the project is assessable and carries marks. To record and present their findings from (1) and (2), each group is to create a wiki page. Students are given choices of topics as outlined in the previous section as a group and are required to find out: (1) general information on the chosen area; (2) its historical development; (3) contrasts with equivalent notions in other languages/cultures; and (4) the importance of the chosen area to the learners of Japanese. The weekly readings are given online at an early stage of the semester and include references that students can follow up. Students are required to conduct their research in Japanese, using resources available on the internet and the University libraries (see also section 2.5).

The term ‘deeper understanding’ is used here to contrast between a ‘surface approach’ and a ‘deep approach’ to learning (Ramsden 2003). A ‘surface approach’ can be defined as simple memorisation of facts, whilst a ‘deep approach’ refers to internalisation of new knowledge and subsequent application of that knowledge to problem-solving. In terms of learning culture in language courses, a typical textbook approach of presenting cultural facts can only facilitate a surface approach. On the other hand, researching the aspects of the Japanese writing system in which students are interested—and comparing those aspects with other languages and cultures—can actively facilitate a deep approach to learning. It also helps students connect with their past experiences of dealing with Japanese people.

Students’ academic skills, i.e. the ability to describe, report, analyse and contrast information, are also challenged here. The result of the research is to be presented as an academic essay and goes through a peer assessment activity, as explained in the next section.

2.3 Developing critical thinking skills

Students are required to engage in critical thinking at least twice during the project: first in discussing and deciding on the topic as a group; and second in a peer assessment activity in which students read and comment on two draft essays prepared by other students.

The results of the discussion to decide on a topic are reported on in the students’ wiki pages, and are assessed.

The peer assessment activity is organised through the software made available by the University’s Learning Management System and is conducted anonymously. Firstly, students are required to submit their draft essay online. Students are then required to read and comment on two essays written by other students in the cohort, using a set of guiding questions (see Appendix) which focus on both the use of the target language and the content of the essay. The papers are distributed randomly by the software, thus it is not possible to choose papers on a specific topic to review. In other words, students may be asked to review essays on topics different to their own, thus requiring a basic knowledge of each topic covered in the subject. Finally,
students receive feedback from their peers, which they can draw upon to improve their final draft of the essay.

Students’ critical thinking skills, as well as their language skills, are challenged in this activity. Literature shows that peer review or peer assessment has a number of positive effects on students’ learning. Firstly, asking students to write for their peers rather than for their lecturers tends to motivate them to produce something that reflects their true ability; the social nature of the activity motivates them (Pearce et al. 2009). Secondly, by reviewing peers’ work, students are exposed to a greater diversity of perspectives than those of the lecturer alone (Pearce et al. 2009). In this particular context, students are able to examine different conclusions drawn from the same evidence and understand the applicability of topics other than their own as they relate to their learning of Japanese. Thirdly, students are given an opportunity to engage with the assessment criteria and critically evaluate whether their peers’ written work satisfies those criteria. This, in turn, helps them improve their own writing (Lundstorm and Baker 2009). Fourthly, students are given an opportunity to receive feedback on their writing before submitting their work for final marking by the teaching team. In a subject with a large enrolment, peer review can supplement the feedback given by the teaching team to further improve students’ academic and language skills. Finally, students need to actively read the essays written in Japanese in order to give constructive comment, thus contributing to their own learning of the target language and the culture.

2.4 Discovering cultural differences

Common reasons for implementing group work assessment include the ability to tackle large projects which would be beyond the scope of a single student, and to encourage critical thinking (Burns and Sinfield 2008). In addition, one of the reasons for adopting a group work strategy for this research project was to facilitate intercultural interaction between students. When forming groups, students are instructed to include at least one member from a different cultural background, e.g. two Australian students and one Chinese student. This is because students from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have different perspectives on the same issue. As mentioned earlier, the first assessable task of this research project is to report the group’s decision-making process in agreeing on a research topic. The intention of this task is to have group members share their perspectives on a given topic. For example, even though both Australian students and the Chinese students in a group may claim to have difficulty learning kanji in Japanese, the types of difficulties faced by the students might be different. Whilst the Australian students may think that Chinese students have an advantage in learning kanji because of the similarity in scripts between the two languages, the Chinese student may be in fact challenged by the subtle differences between Japanese and Chinese characters. Sharing these perspectives may result in the Australian students feeling more at ease and less disadvantaged.
This kind of exchange in small groups of students from diverse cultural backgrounds can contribute to the sharing of perspectives and the facilitation of intercultural interaction (Baik 2013; Ohashi and Ohashi 2011). In addition to this initial task, a question which specifically encourages exchange of perspectives is included in the final essay: to contrast the chosen aspect of the Japanese writing system with that of other languages (see section 2.2). In order for students to apply the findings and compare them with another language, they must rely on group members from other cultural backgrounds to provide information on their native language. It also gives them the opportunity to critically evaluate their own languages and connect to their cultural roots.

2.5 Learning language through research

All of the research-related activities outlined above are to be conducted in Japanese, the students’ target language. This idea is based on the holistic approach underpinning the curriculum design. In the holistic approach, the target language is presented as a meaningful text, and grammar rules and vocabulary are to be learnt by students as necessary to understand the meaning conveyed by the text (Swaffer and Arens 2005). When researching, students are reading Japanese texts for information. Although produced specifically for the students in this subject, the pre-lecture weekly readings also present key issues in Japanese, incorporating the target grammar rules and expressions to show how they can be used to convey information. Furthermore, presenting the weekly readings in the format of an academic essay can familiarise the students with the genre that they need to use to present their findings. By engaging in these activities, students are exposed to realistic use of the target language.

Furthermore, the writing skills involved in the research project are augmented through the use of a peer assessment activity (see section 2.3). After receiving comments from peers, students have another opportunity to consider if their use of language is in line with the appropriate practice. In addition, reading and commenting on others’ writing in Japanese is a comprehension exercise in itself. The final submission is, of course, marked by the teaching team to assess the students’ learning for the semester.

3. Other teaching and learning activities

The current university timetable dictates that each Japanese subject will have four contact hours per week, in one 1-hour lecture and two 1.5-hour tutorials. While lecture time can be used to orient various aspects of the Japanese writing system within the language-culture nexus, teaching and learning activities are needed to consolidate students’ learning. Worksheets are prepared for use in tutorials to elicit students’ own experiences and lead to discussion. Tutorial groups of 22 students also include students from diverse cultural backgrounds, so reflections on topics introduced in the lectures can be made from different perspectives. For example,
in the week when the topic of Japanese Braille is introduced, students learn in the lecture that Braille does not include kanji in its system. In other words, a Japanese writing system without kanji, the world some students wish for, is realised. During the tutorials, students experience reading texts written in Braille in order to compare the readability of that text with text written in ordinary Japanese writing. Discussions among students then follow on a range of topics, from the implication of using Japanese Braille in reading a literary work to exploring how other languages and cultures modify their writing systems for the visually impaired.

4. Discussion

The new curriculum was first implemented in Semester 2, 2012. At the end of the semester, students were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the new curriculum. Comments from students were mostly positive and many expressed the view that the subject was enjoyable. Some commented that the range of topics on different aspects of the Japanese writing system had increased their interest in Japanese language study. For example, one student wrote: “the weekly lecture topics [were] very interesting, and applying them to relevant areas of study for projects etc. complemented them very well.” Another wrote: “focusing on the language itself proved to [be] very insightful and has helped further my understanding of the actual Japanese language.” Intercultural interactions on specific aspects of the writing system appear to have occurred in tutorials as intended. One student wrote: “I enjoyed the... tutorials because as well as focusing on Japanese cultural aspects, eventually discussions would arise which resulted in the input of how these aspects were in other cultures.” The contrasts between writing systems in many languages, not just between Japanese and English, seem to have piqued the students’ interest and broadened their perspectives.

However, it must be noted that not all students enjoyed all topics covered in the curriculum. For some students, understanding a large volume of information in Japanese proved to be too great a workload. One student wrote: “a few of the cultural aspects we learnt about I didn’t really find interesting. Also there is a high workload in this subject, and... I felt I fell behind and it was very difficult to catch up.”

Peer assessment was also received with mixed reactions. While one student commented “the peer review was helpful, as we got feedback on how we were going”; another commented “the peer review component of the cultural project was somewhat unreliable. [It] was VERY open to error, whether the receiver of the feedback was aware of it or not.” There is room for improvement on how to implement this particular activity in the future.

Although no concrete evidence of students’ improvement can be given here because no comparable data between different cohorts was gathered, the tutors who marked the academic essays unanimously agreed that the quality of essays produced by the cohort of students in 2012 was higher than in previous years, in both their language use and the depth of information and analysis provided. It can be deduced that many of the teaching and learning activities of the new curriculum, which are
designed to enhance students’ writing, were not available to previous cohorts of students. Although a direct comparison of students’ writing produced under such different conditions is difficult, a further study is being planned in the future. It can be concluded that students were able to see the link between language use and culture through this subject.

5. Conclusion

In this contribution, the new curriculum for the lower intermediate level Japanese subject, which arose as a result of the LCR at the University of Melbourne, was presented. The curriculum focused on various uses of the Japanese writing system in making meaning in Japanese culture. By researching the historical and cultural backgrounds of the various Japanese writing systems and their impact on modern Japanese culture, it was intended that students would gain insights into the use of various scripts, as well as strategies for how to learn them effectively. Feedback from students indicates that the topics motivated them to learn more about the language itself. The task also successfully facilitated intercultural interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds.

Although an analysis of academic outcomes for this cohort of students (i.e. to investigate whether the curriculum had increased the students’ proficiency and achievement level) is pending, student feedback would appear to indicate that their critical thinking and academic skills were suitably challenged through the group research project and peer assessment. Students were also made aware of cultural differences in writing systems, not only between Japanese and English, but also with those of other languages, thereby instilling broader perspectives in students. This also aligns with the University’s goal of producing graduates who possess global awareness and intercultural perspectives.

However, there is no denying that the new curriculum increased each student’s workload, and despite the curriculum design that encourages a deep learning approach, some students were overwhelmed by the amount of work involved in the subject. Further adjustment is needed to ensure the curriculum strikes the right balance for future cohorts of students.

Notes
1. See http://www.kanken.or.jp/project/edification/years_ka nji.html (Kotoshi no kanji [‘Kanji of the year’]) on the website of the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society.
2. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKYcRczihgY (Kotoshi no kanji ha ‘kin’ [‘This year’s kanji is ‘gold’’]) from Kyodo News, Tokyo.
3. The list of verbs are adopted from Biggs and Tang (2007) to represent different levels of academic understanding.
References


**Appendices**

**Guiding questions used in peer review activity**

1. At which point did you feel most interested by this piece? When least? Explain.

2. Do you feel this paper relies on evidence, or on opinion or intuition? If the latter, cite examples of where this paper relied on opinion and intuition and five suggestions as to how the writer can write more objectively.

3. Does this paper sustain a coherent point of view? Why or why not?

4. How smoothly does this paper integrate examples into its own argument? Does it clearly illustrate connections between the evidence it cites and the ideas they support, or does it merely assume them? Explain.

5. Can the conclusion of this paper be convincingly drawn from the thesis and the argument made in the body of the paper? Why or why not?

6. Overall comments, including any corrections to errors in Japanese.

7. How would you rate this essay on a scale of 1 to 5?