Paper Title: The role of Japanese language education in the Asian Century

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Abstract
We are in a period characterised by some as ‘the Asian Century’, where the scale and pace of Asia’s transformation and influence is unprecedented. There are many views as to what this might mean for Australia, but many believe that as a nation and as individuals, we are poorly equipped to embrace Asia’s crucial role in our present and future. Following the launch of The Australian Government’s Asian Century White Paper last year, Asian language education received significant attention from both sides of politics as an obvious area for building an Asia-ready Australia. In this context, it is perhaps time for us to stop and think about what shape Japanese language education in the Asian Century should take.

It is my view that Japanese language education can take a significant leadership role amongst languages. This is for two reasons: our access to young people, and young people’s familiarity and affinity to particular types of Japanese culture.

With the rise of China, Japan has lost its former presence in international business. Japanese is known not to be an easy language to learn, and is only spoken in Japan. Yet despite those discouraging factors, Japanese remains to be the most widely taught language in Australia. The overall number of learners has declined somewhat over last decade (de Kretser & Spence-Brown 2010), but in ACT schools, Japanese language enjoyed a steady increase of learners since 2008, doubling over four years (Data provided by the ACT Department of Education and Training). We are the language educators who have the greatest access to young Australians – in other words, we can influence a greater number of young people.

At the University of Canberra, among newly commencing students in Japanese courses, cultural interest is the most frequently given reason for taking up Japanese language study. Japan seems to offer an Asian culture which is accessible to young Australians. Many mention their exposure to Japanese culture through anime and gaming platforms. While K-Pop and Bollywood are also
gaining popularity, it seems that Japanese culture is the most familiar and popular Asian culture amongst Australian young people today.

Then, why not take this affinity to Japanese culture to foster our students’ interest in the greater Asia region? Can’t we use Japan and Japanese culture as a steppingstone, and cultivate interest in other Asian nations?

The Japanese Program at University Canberra has started implementing this by producing course materials and contents which explicitly draw links between Japan and its neighbouring countries and cultures wherever possible. While it is early days, students are responding positively.

Australia’s position in this Asian Century and beyond will be shaped by the cultural attitudes of young people. The basis of any country or regional relationship is the people behind it; so individual beliefs about cultural difference impact on Australia’s position in the region. Japanese language education has a significant role to play in fostering essential attitudes of cultural openness, critical inquiry, and personal connection.