

Parental engagement in Japanese language learning at SCECGS Redlands

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Introduction

Parents influence their children's language learning. Research indicates that parents impact on their children's attitudes to language learning (e.g., Bartram 2006; Curnow, Liddicoat and Scarino 2007) and their competency in the target language (e.g., Bleakley and Chin 2008; Guven and Islam 2013). Even when parents are not able to speak the target language, they can still encourage their children's language learning by showing positive attitudes towards the target language and culture (e.g., Gardner, Masgoret and Tremblay 1999; Prescott and Orton 2012). However, how do we actually engage parents in their children's Japanese language learning? As an experimental project funded by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW, Takuya Kojima (a PhD candidate at UNSW Sydney) and I designed and implemented a Japanese language course for parents whose children were studying Japanese at Redlands so that parents could study the language collaboratively with their children.

Course overview

This eight-week beginners Japanese language course was held every week between 18:30 and 20:30 during Term Three 2017. We advertised the course via emails to parents. There was keen interest from our school community, and, in total, 28 parents attended the first lesson. Though six parents stopped coming mid-way through the course, 22 parents completed the course.

When planning the course, we referred to the Japanese K-10 Syllabus (NSW Education Standards Authority 2003). This guided our course design decisions to allow parents and their children to share their learning experiences. The topics were selected based on this educational philosophy, i.e., fostering the shared learning experience between parents and their children. Similarly, we employed a range of class activities that their children often do in their Japanese classes at Redlands.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

Week	Topic	Activities	Cooking lessons	Homework
1	Getting to know each other (Self-introductions)	Role-play (at a fancy party)	Welcome sweets	Introduce yourself to your family members in Japanese!
2	Counting in Japanese (age, year grade)	Bingo in Japanese!	Onigiri rice ball	Play Bingo with your family!!
3	Introducing your family members (description)	Ask me about my family		Interview your child using Japanese! (e.g. Personality)
4	Revision Week		Temakizushi	Make onigiri rice balls with your child!
5	Talking about your hobbies, what you like to do, what you are good at	Find your best friends!		Ask your child about what they are proud of about themselves!
6	Talking about your favourite Japanese foods	Let's use Interactive Whiteboard!		Family time at your favourite Japanese restaurant
7	Expressions and sentences you want to know		Okonomiyaki Yakisoba	Edit your video clips for your presentation with your child
8	Presentation: My Family Video Album		Party!!	

Specific course features – ‘Children teach their parents’ –

In this course, we introduced two important ‘devices’ that directly aimed to encourage parents and their children to be collaboratively engaged in Japanese language learning. One is weekly ‘homework’ and the other is an end-of-course project titled ‘My Family Video Album’. The homework activities were designed in various ways so parents needed to interact with their children by using the expressions and sentence patterns (e.g., playing bingo with their family members in Japanese, interviewing their children about what they are proud of about themselves). Our intention here is not only to encourage parents and children to be engaged in Japanese learning, but also designing situations in which children can ‘teach’ their parents and ‘assist’ their parents’ learning. We believed that through this approach we can foster children’s/students’ sense of confidence, initiative, and responsibility in their Japanese language learning. The end-of-course project ‘My Family Movie Album’ was also intended to encourage their collaborative learning (interacting with their children in Japanese) and asking their children to assist their learning and to help them edit their movies (as we know, children are good, often better, at using technology than adults!!).

Reflection – Involving and enhancing

Reflecting upon our participation observations and post-course surveys completed by the participating parents, this beginners’ Japanese language course successfully functioned as an educational opportunity, which provided the parents the opportunity to be engaged in their children’s Japanese language learning. A number of participating parents expressed that, by learning Japanese with their children, they understood ‘how’ their children learn Japanese at Redlands. However, it should be noted that the parents are not only referring to the process, but their comments also include their ‘respect’ for their children who are making a consistent effort in Japanese, and their children’s passion and enthusiasm for developing their Japanese language skills and knowledge. One of the parents wrote in his/her survey that “now, I fully understand it requires lots of time and effort to learn Japanese, and I will provide my best support for her”. We believe that this kind of “support” from parents is one of the most important elements that can be used to advocate languages at our school community.

The participating parents also talked about this course to other parents. One comment noted that “I’ve mentioned to other parents that I’m doing this course, and I think there would be a lot of interest from parents to do a Chinese, Latin, French, Spanish course too”. This kind of positive word of mouth spread by parents can contribute to raising the presence and reputation of the language programs within the school community.

Furthermore, this course also functioned to strengthen the teacher-parent relationships for students'/children's learning. Many parents highly valued studying Japanese with their children's classroom teacher (Yuji). What I, as a high school teacher, want to emphasise here is that this course allowed me to demonstrate directly to parents what I am doing for their children every day at school. I achieved it by collaboratively working with parents, sharing our passion for Japanese language learning and discussing our vision for Japanese language education.

Conclusion

Parents are very important stakeholders. Therefore, we, as language teachers, we need to consider the following questions. Are parents given enough opportunities to participate in what teachers and their students are doing at school? Are they actually invited to support their children's Japanese language learning? Do parents exist in our teaching programmes? Providing a language course for parents might be one potential answer. We believe that, by inviting parents to participate in our Japanese language education program, we (parents and teachers) are able to support our students'/their children's learning more collaboratively, and to design a clearer vision for Japanese language education at school and beyond.

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