

Reconsidering the goals of Japanese language education

The world has changed dramatically in the last 10 years, and this requires a reconsideration of both the goals and the processes of Japanese language teaching and learning. This paper examines three areas of change, and their impact on our field.

1. Changes in the community and environment. The boom in Japanese studies of the 80s and early nineties was often attributed to economic motivations for the study of Japanese (although it has often been pointed out that this was an oversimplification). Both empirical studies and anecdotal evidence indicate a change away from economic motivations to an interest in popular culture. In addition, there has been a parallel shift in the rhetoric of educational authorities within Australia, and in the activities of government and semi-government institutions in Japan. The backgrounds of learners in Australia are also changing, with a rapid increase in the proportion of students from Asian backgrounds, both at tertiary level and to a lesser extent at secondary level, bringing new linguistic and cultural complexity to the language teaching environment.

2. The impact of information technology on the changing nature of literacy, literacy acquisition and communication in Japanese as second language in the age of the internet. Information and communication technologies, and the internet-based resources and cyber-communities which they have enabled, are changing the nature of literacy and communication in Japanese, and at the same time opening up new opportunities for language learning. The role of technology in changing the tools we use to teach and learn language is often canvassed, but the implications of the changing nature of literacy for the basic goals and content of our teaching has not been adequately understood or engaged with by the profession.

3. Changes in linguistic and educational theories. This section of the paper will explore some of the changes in linguistic and educational theories that are important to our field.

All of these changes open up new possibilities and challenges for language education, but they also require a reconsideration of the relationship between Japanese language and Japanese 'studies'. The paper will tease out the uneasy relationship that has existed between the fields over our recent history, and canvass some possibilities for the future.