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## What Makes Students Speak Japanese in Immersion Programs? State Policy, School Curriculum and Individual Learners in Australia



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### Abstract

Language immersion programs, which are a form of bilingual education, are shaped by multiple factors, including the specific characteristics of the region, the language, the community and the learners, as well as national and regional policies on language education. While the underdeveloped production skills of immersion students have been identified as the product of teacher-centred and controlled learning environments, it is not known what role background or heritage language students play in the Australian one-way immersion context, where their presence itself potentially enhances the speaking environment. This paper, based on a project on developing speaking strategies for a Japanese immersion program in Australia, argues that the speaking performance of students in immersion classes is also determined by other factors, such as peer interactions with background students, whose treatment in education systems in Australia remains ambiguous, reflecting the history of separation between foreign language education in schools and the maintenance of mother tongues in the community. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper analyses language policy and educational documents and discusses how the language performance of individual learners could be influenced not only by the curriculum but also by policy makers' improved understanding of individual learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds within schools.

**Keywords:** Japanese immersion; bilingual education; background speaker, heritage language; Australian curriculum; language policy

### Introduction

Language immersion programs, which are a form of bilingual education, are shaped by multiple factors, including the specific characteristics of the region, the language, the community and the learners, as

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well as national and regional policies on language education. Bilingual education, in contrast to, for example, “English-only policies” in English speaking countries, is often based on the linguistic rights of people who speak a minority language (Tollefson, 2012). There are different types of immersion programs, according to their delivery mode and focus. Typically, in one-way immersion programs students of a dominant language learn school subjects in a minority language. In two-way or dual immersion programs, students of the minority language and students of the dominant language learn school subjects together using both languages. Two-way or dual immersion benefits from the presence of native speakers of both languages, which provides students with opportunities to communicate with native speakers of the languages that are the focus of the programs (Potowski, 2007; Christian, 1995). In other words, two-way or dual immersion programs are intended to draw on the multilingual resources of students within the community (D. Johnson & E. Johnson, 2014).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has also gained support as a new approach to multilingualism. *f*CLIL differs from immersion programs in that it focuses on both language and content, whereas immersion programs primarily focus on learning content through the target language, and the use of the non-target language is therefore restricted. The term “bilingual education,” however, is still commonly used, even in relation to immersion programs or CLIL (Fortanet-Gómez, 2013).

In Australia, immersion programs have only been offered as one-way immersion programs within LOTE (Languages Other Than English) education. While the term LOTE has recently been replaced by “Languages in addition to English” or simply “Languages,” as discussed later in this paper, one of the characteristics of immersion programs is that they have gained “elitist” ground as part of the “value-added” marketisation of Australian public schools, while language education has been increasingly marginalised in English-speaking countries such as Australia (Smala, Paz & Lingard, 2012).

Many studies of immersion programs focus on the effectiveness of the programs, and one common finding is that they enhance comprehension skills rather than production skills (Fortanet-Gómez, 2013; Tedick, Christian & Fortune, 2011). De Courcy (2002) explains this tendency in terms of students’ minimal and restricted responses to teachers’ questions, which relates to the dominant role of the teacher in immersion programs, and argues that learners’ language experiences depend greatly on the second language context that the teacher maintains in the classroom. In terms of the negative aspects of immersion programs, Fortanet-Gómez (2013) lists the lack of use of the language outside the classroom and the lack of opportunities to use the language with native speakers. It is also reported in relation to students’ language use in the classroom that students’ use of English increases as they progress through the grade levels (Broner & Tedick, 2011; Potowski, 2007) particularly in peer interactions (Tarone & Swan, 1995) and that there is a tendency for code mixing in the upper grades (Ó Duibhir, 2011). These studies indicate that underdeveloped production skills are a result of the particular nature of immersion programs – namely, teacher-centred and controlled learning environments, limited opportunities for speaking with native speakers, and the use of English among peers. It is unknown, however, what kind of role background or heritage language learners<sup>1</sup> play in the Australian one-way immersion context, where their presence itself potentially enhances the speaking environment.

The passive attitude of students and their underdeveloped speaking skills were concerns of a Japanese immersion program offered at a public high school in Queensland, Australia. Initially, the project in which this paper is based on aimed to develop speaking strategies for both students and teachers in the program in order to enhance their engagement in the teacher-centred classroom atmosphere. The follow-up questionnaire and group interviews with the immersion students found, however, that the speaking performance of students in immersion classes is not necessarily determined by the teacher-

centred and controlled nature of the program but also by other factors such as peer interactions with students who are background or heritage language learners, whose treatment in education systems varies from state to state in Australia. In fact, the treatment of a small number of these students, who were enrolled in the program, was ambiguous. This seems to relate to a view that there are weaker links between community-based language learning and public school language education in Australia, although the nation relies principally on the language maintenance activities of its immigrant communities for the nation's bilingual capacity (Lo Bianco, 2009).

This paper argues that there is a link between students' performance, particularly in speaking, and the way immersion programs are set up within the school curriculum, which in Australia is regulated by the states. It further argues that although immersion programs have great potential to bring existing community-based language resources into public schools by allowing all types of learners to enrol, the current strategy of promoting immersion programs on elitist grounds, and making them available only to selected students, is a departure from this approach. This paper comprises three parts. It first examines the latest Australian language curriculum at both national and state levels in order to identify how immersion programs are situated within school language education. Second, it discusses how immersion programs in general are defined and promoted by public schools in Queensland, where the Japanese immersion program is offered. Third, it analyses the data from a survey that was conducted with the students in the Japanese immersion program, and discusses student perceptions of their language use in immersion classes and the factors that influence their language use.

### **Methodology**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is applied for analysis of language policy and educational documents in this study in order to reveal problems and contradictions surrounding the immersion programs and to discuss how the language performance of individual learners could be influenced not only by the curriculum but also by a better understanding of individual learners with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds by policy makers.

On the other hand, qualitative research methods are applied to collect and analyse the data from Japanese immersion classes at a Queensland high school, which is discussed later in this paper. It includes class observations, a survey and interviews to all the students in immersion classes. Qualitative research enables to collect and analyse individualistic data on deeper levels, and to "gain new insights into consumer thoughts, demographic behavioural patterns, and emotional reasoning processes (Haradhan, 2018, p. 19). It is therefore the appropriate method for analysis of the data collected from the observations, a survey and interviews in order to understand "the inside" of immersion classes and what influences students' language use in the classroom.

### **Immersion programs in Australia**

Before examining how immersion programs are defined and discussed by national and state educational authorities, we briefly consider a recent Japanese newspaper article on Australian immersion programs in order to introduce some of the political background to the programs.

#### **Asian languages for trade purposes**

On 17 August 2014 the Nikkei, a Japanese financial newspaper, published an online article about language immersion programs in Australia with the headline "Australia: Languages stimulate learning – General subjects are taught in foreign languages" (author's translation). The article begins by making the connection between the wide range of languages offered in immersion programs and Australia as

a trading country:

In Australian schools there has been a trend to learn general subjects such as Mathematics and History in foreign languages in “immersion education.” Chinese, Korean, Indonesian etc. As a trading nation, where one in five citizens are said to work in export and import business, there are a wide range of languages on offer. (Takahashi, 2014. Author’s translation)

The article concludes with the claim that the spread of immersion programs is a reflection of the Asia-focused policy of the Australian government:

In the background of the spread of immersion education, there are the policies of the Abbott Administration on free trade and investment and the fostering of international human resources. In particular, trade with Asian countries has been emphasised. The languages that are offered at each school reflect this position. It is essential, however, to train teachers with foreign language skills and specialist knowledge in order to offer well-developed immersion programs. The government promotes such education so that young people can use Asian languages, but also aims at increasing the overall academic achievement of children by boosting the intake of immigrants who are qualified in language education. (Takahashi, 2014. Author’s translation)

The article is apparently based on the Australia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement announced by then Australian Prime Minister Abbott and Japanese Prime Minister Abe in April 2014, but its suggestion that Australia attracts well-qualified language teachers by increasing its intake of qualified immigrants appears misguided<sup>ii</sup>, and indicates the writer’s limited understanding of Australian society. The article does, however, highlight the popular notion that language education is important to make Australia competitive in the international market. In Japan, English is the de facto foreign language that is taught in schools so that Japan remains competitive in the globalised world, and such a view seems to be projected onto the immersion programs of Asian languages in Australia. European languages are not mentioned at all in the article despite the fact that French and German immersion programs are also offered in Australia. This omission echoes the argument that the focus on Asian languages has undermined European languages and subsequently caused a decline in the value of language study itself in Australia (Slaughter, 2009). In the background there is also the commitment of the previous government to fund the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), which aimed to increase opportunities for school students to become familiar with the languages and cultures of Australia’s key regional neighbours – namely, China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea. It is understandable that a Japanese financial newspaper would be interested in the political and financial factors behind the popularity of immersion programs, but even so, it is curious that the article fails to acknowledge the linguistic diversity within Australian society. The term “foreign languages,” which is used in both the headline and the main text of the article, reflects an assumption that Asian languages are “foreign” to Australia. Japanese background or heritage language speakers who are studying in Australian schools are not mentioned at all in the article’s description of a Japanese immersion program offered at a high school. The view that languages other than the national language or dominant language are “foreign” languages is in fact common to Australia and Japan.

In Australia, the term “foreign language” remains dominant in discussions about Australian language policy because language policy is often based on the idea of teaching monolingual learners languages that are spoken in “foreign places,” even though virtually no languages taught in schools are not represented in the Australian community (Lo Bianco, 2009). This relates to the fact that economic competitiveness has been a major rationale for the national policy on languages in Australia. The utilitarian view of languages – Australians need foreign language skills for trade and business and therefore learning languages is good for future employment – is perhaps a way to keep ethnic politics

out of language education in Australia. This may derive from the complex history of multicultural affairs in Australia. Traditionally, in the past, language policy was defined as part of ethnic politics, and any attempt to mix ethnic and non-ethnic interests proved difficult (Ozolins, 1993). As discussed later in this paper, the emphasis on the distinction between language education at public schools and the maintenance of the mother tongues of immigrants is perhaps a reminder of this history. While the term “foreign language” remains a common expression in discussion of Australian language policy, the need for individual learners with diverse backgrounds and language skills has been gradually recognised and incorporated into the curriculum framework. The next section examines how background or heritage language learners are viewed in the language education curriculum at both national and state levels.

### **The Australian Curriculum: A language in addition to English**

In 2014, a “Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum” is being implemented in all Australian states and territories. Prior to this, in 2011, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) produced a document titled *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* in order to guide the development of the languages curriculum by ACARA. It was also anticipated that the document would be used to guide language curriculum development by other organisations (ACARA 2011). One of the significant points about the 2011 document is that it replaces the familiar term LOTE (Languages Other Than English) with the new expression “a language in addition to English,” which does not have an abbreviation. This change is important in many ways: By not grouping other languages against English, it draws attention to individual languages, and by not using an acronym it conveys a sense of normality, rather than of being exotic or foreign, about languages that are not English. ACARA took the change further and added a statement about the distinctiveness of each language to the 2014 F-10 Australia Curriculum, Languages:

#### **Preamble**

The Australian Curriculum: Languages is designed to enable all students to engage in learning a language in addition to English. The design of *The Australian Curriculum: Languages* recognises the features that languages share as well as the distinctiveness of specific languages. (ACARA, 2014)

The acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of each language leads to a statement on “Language specificity,” which was not included in *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*:

#### **Language specificity**

The curriculum content and achievement standards are different for each specific language because of inherent differences in the languages themselves. Each language has its own distinctive structure, systems, conventions for use, related culture(s), place in the Australian and international communities, as well as its own history in Australian education. (ACARA, 2014)

The view that each language is different and that therefore the curriculum content and achievement standard for each language should be different is also applied to learners. ACARA added the word “diversity” to the original heading of *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*:

#### **Diversity of language learners**

Understanding who learners are, as language learners and as young people, is the starting point for developing their language learning. An increasingly varied range of students now study languages in Australian classrooms. The changing pattern of migration to Australia is extending the range of languages students bring with them to school. Education systems seek to provide for this diversity of language background and for the fact that language classrooms include students with varying degrees of experience of and proficiency in the language being learnt, as well as their particular affiliations with additional languages. (ACARA, 2014)

The acknowledgement that students with diverse language backgrounds are currently studying languages in Australian classrooms and that they bring an extended range of languages to school is a leap from the reliance on ethnic schools for the mother tongue maintenance of migrants. In order to provide for such diversity within language classrooms, ACARA classifies learners of languages in Australia into three groups:

**Second language learners** are those who are introduced to learning the target language at school as an additional, new language. The first language used before they start school and/or the language they use at home is not the language being learnt.

**Background language learners** are those who may use the language at home, not necessarily exclusively, and have varying degrees of knowledge of and proficiency in the language being learnt. These learners have a base for literacy development in the language.

**First language learners** are users of the language being learnt who have undertaken at least primary schooling in the target language. They have had their primary socialisation as well as initial literary development in that language and use the target language at home. For Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages, first language learners are learners whose primary socialisation is in the language being learnt and who may or may not have yet developed initial literacy. (ACARA, 2014)

Reflecting the complexity of learners' backgrounds and language skills, the terms "native speaker" and "mother tongue" are not used in the classifications, and no connection is made between types of learners and their birth countries or parents. In relation to the second group, "background language learners," ACARA acknowledges that "the span of language experiences of background learners is particularly wide and learners in this group are likely to have quite diverse affiliations with the target language," but for "pragmatic reasons" it decides not to identify further groupings. This is probably the reason that heritage language learners are not included among the categories. Based on this classification, pathways for four languages (Chinese, French, Indonesian and Italian) have been developed to date. There are pathways for Chinese, to cater to all three groups, and one pathway for French, Indonesian and Italian, to cater to one group, second language learners. ACARA maintains that second language learners are the dominant group for those three languages in the Australian context.

The term "immersion programs," however, is only mentioned in relation to the diversity of learners of French: "French programs in Australian schools are offered to a range of learners, including some who are following immersion or partial immersion programs" (ACARA, 2014). This could be read as though it is a matter of personal preference to study in immersion mode. The term "immersion programs" does not appear in the glossary, but CLIL does, even though it is not used anywhere else on the website. In the glossary, CLIL is defined as "an approach to learning content through an additional language," but as mentioned earlier, this definition is more about immersion programs, rather than CLIL, which in general focuses on both content and language learning. In other words, ACARA does

not seem to differentiate between CLIL and immersion programs. It is also noticeable that ACARA does not address how bilingual education, CLIL or immersion programs should be incorporated into the school curriculum.

The next section examines how each state and territory has designed its language curriculum and responded to the 2014 F-10 Australia Curriculum, Languages.

### **State and territory language curricula**

Although ACARA claims that the Australian Curriculum “draws on current languages curricula in each state and territory and reflects best practices in language education nationally” (ACARA, 2013), the views of states and territories on language teaching vary considerably. The independent nature of each state and territory is reflected in the variety of names of the departments that are responsible for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum to government schools: “New South Wales Education Standards Authority” (New South Wales), “Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority” (Victoria), “Department for Education” (South Australia), “Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority” (Queensland), “ACT Education Directorate” (Australian Capital Territory), “The Northern Territory Board of Studies” (Northern Territory), “Department of Education” (Tasmania) and “Western Australia School Curriculum and Standards Authority” (Western Australia). Similarly, key terminologies are not consistently applied or defined. The term LOTE or “Languages Other Than English” is still used by most states and territories. Although the term has been gradually replaced by “languages”<sup>iii</sup>, no explanation about the change is given on the department websites. As for immersion programs, they are defined and implemented differently by each state, leaving ambiguity about their role in school education. In New South Wales (NSW), bilingual school programs appear to be immersion programs:

#### **Bilingual Schools Program:**

The NSW Bilingual Schools Program is an innovative strategy set to achieve a far greater levels of fluency in priority Asian languages among a cohort of students at four government primary schools. Students learn the targeted Asian language from an early age through language immersion for up to one and a half hours every school day. The program commenced in 2010 with Kindergarten and Year 1 classes and has expanded each year to include additional classes as the cohort progressed through the primary school pathway. (NSW Department of Education: Murray Farm Public School, 2019<sup>iv</sup>. Author Italicised)

The statement explains that the program teaches “the targeted Asian language from an early age through language immersion,” however, there is no clear definition of “immersion” currently provided by NSW Department of Education. The definition of “immersion” was found in the glossary page of NSW Department of Education and Communities in 2014 but has disappeared since. It states:

#### **Immersion education**

Immersion is a specific form of bilingual education that uses a second (minority) language to teach content other than language (subject matter) from the general curriculum to students of a dominant cultural background for at least one third of the available school week. (NSW Department of Education and Communities. Author Italicised).

As NSW bilingual school programs seem to target very young students, it might be necessary to have language teaching as the focus of such programs even if the delivery mode is immersion. The situation

is different for secondary immersion students, who need a certain level of language proficiency to learn general subjects in a second language. This suggests that the nature of bilingual or immersion programs differs significantly depending on the learners' age and proficiency in the target language.

NSW has also developed a different set of syllabus support materials for each language. It identifies five types of learners: Beginners, Continuers, Extension, Heritage and Background Speakers. Arabic, French, German, Greek, Italian and Spanish have three types – Beginners, Continuers and Extension – while all Asian languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean) have Background and/or Heritage Speakers as well as Beginners, Continuers and Extension. Combined with early bilingual education in these Asian languages, NSW seems to offer an extensive range of curricula to cater to both learners' proficiency and backgrounds, although explanations of the differences between Background and Heritage Speakers are not provided.

Victoria (VIC) is another state that addresses the importance of learners' heritage languages. This is reflected in the requirement for a languages policy at each school:

### **School languages policy**

Schools need to develop a policy statement which sets out the nature of the languages program to be provided. The actual preparation work will often be undertaken by a school languages committee, which may be a sub-committee of the council. A typical languages policy will include a rationale, information about the language(s) to be taught, objectives, provision and review arrangements.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the languages program need to be clearly stated. The objectives must include learning objectives and assessment practices consistent with the Victorian Curriculum F-10 Languages.

Other objectives may also include educational and community aims, such as:

- enabling students to experience continuity in languages learning from early childhood and/or primary school years into senior secondary schooling
- building stronger links with the school community or broader regional interests (for example, students could study the language of a country that the local community conducts business with on a regular basis, such as a rural and farming community which exports farm produce to Indonesia)
- *maintaining students' heritage languages* (VIC Department of Education and Training<sup>v</sup>. Author Italicised)

However, there is no indication of how the educational and community objective to “maintain students' heritage languages” could be achieved through school language programs. As in NSW, the Victorian government states that its bilingual programs are immersion programs:

### **Designated Bilingual programs**

The Designated bilingual program provides annual funding to support the delivery of 14 bilingual programs across 12 primary government schools to deliver:



- face-to-face teaching in and through, the target language for a minimum of 7.5 hours up to 12.5 hours per week to 100% of their students
- content-based teaching in the target language using teachers who have appropriate teaching qualifications
- content-based teaching in the target language across two or more of the Learning Areas within the Victorian Curriculum. (VIC Department of Education and Training<sup>vi</sup>.)

The designated bilingual programs are all partial immersion programs and it appears to entail greater use of English than full immersion programs. Again, similar to the situation in NSW, this kind of arrangement could be necessary at primary school level. For secondary schools, VIC promotes CLIL, which is markedly different from immersion programs because it has the advantage of addressing the “crowded curriculum<sup>vii</sup>” issue:

In a CLIL program, learners gain knowledge of the curricular subject (for example, Science) while simultaneously learning and using the target language (for example, Italian). CLIL has the advantage of addressing the “crowded curriculum” issue as it enables one or more curriculum areas to be taught in and through an additional language, and thereby extends the time on task for language learning. (VIC Department of Education and Training<sup>viii</sup>.)

The idea that CLIL is an economical option for teaching languages within the confines of the timetable is reflected in the additional requirement for schools to ensure that “students can also understand the key terms and concepts in content areas in English.” The Department also allows schools to “choose to teach CLIL units or modules rather than an entire CLIL program,” which again differs from the delivery mode of immersion programs.

The Queensland (QLD) government has a very different approach to language education from the NSW and VIC governments:

### **Language subjects**

The Queensland Languages senior syllabuses (Authority, Extension and External) are developed for *second language learners*. *Queensland legislation does not permit differentiation of syllabuses based on language proficiency, background or heritage*. The syllabuses equate to the national designation of Continuers syllabuses, i.e. syllabuses for students who commenced learning a language in the compulsory years of schooling. *Approved syllabuses are available for use by students who may be first or second language learners, or background or heritage speakers*. (QCAA<sup>ix</sup>. Author Italicised)

Even though the government acknowledges that students have different levels of proficiency and differing backgrounds, it does not allow schools to have different syllabuses for students who are not second language learners, and assumes that the same syllabus can be used for all types of learners. In fact, this is reminiscent of a previous policy relating to language choices. The document “Strategic Initiatives” was available as late as mid-2014:

### **Choice of languages – factors for schools to consider**

The six commonly taught languages within mainstream education settings in Education Queensland (EQ) are Japanese, German, French, Chinese (Mandarin), Indonesian and Italian.... Choice of the languages should **not** be guided by the desire to maintain mother-tongue languages in the community. Mother-tongue maintenance, which may serve small

constituencies within the school community, is not the driving aim of mainstream language programs in Queensland. The Government provides for these constituencies throughout the state via the After Hours Ethnic Schooling (AHES) program. (Teaching and Learning Branch Education Queensland 2010. Original emphasis)

Students who learn languages for mother-tongue maintenance might be “small constituencies,” but as observed in relation to Chinese Extension programs, their presence creates problems because of the unavailability of suitable programs for such cohorts within schools. In 2011, I. Crabb, E. Crabb and Peckman submitted the final report to the QLD Studies Authority on its “Evaluation of the Chinese (trial) senior syllabus 2010 in Queensland secondary schools.” Since the majority of the students were Chinese background speakers and the report identified significant disparities between the background and non-background speakers, it recommended a review of the syllabus to cater to non-background speakers:

## 9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 9.1 Students

Of the 27 students studying the trial Chinese Extension course, 19 were background speakers of Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin). Two of the four [participating schools] cohorts were international fee-paying students. Even though students had enjoyed studying the interesting and relevant topics and had been most successful with their studies in the senior Chinese course, a significant number of non-background speakers struggled with the expected listening and written complexities. The Language Consultant reported that there were disparities between the background and non-background speakers in terms of their pronunciation and spontaneity. The Manager of the Queensland LOTE Centre stated that the syllabus should cater for local non-background students.

#### Recommendation 1

**It is recommended that the syllabus demands for increasing language complexity be reviewed to cater for the needs of local non-background speakers.** (I. Crabb, E. Crabb & Peckman 2011, p. 27)

No recommendation was made to create a separate syllabus for background speakers. According to the report, the majority of students indicated that the main reason they chose Chinese Extension was to enable them to obtain a higher OP (Overall Position) score, which is the official Queensland Tertiary Admission Centre descriptor used for tertiary entry. The report also highlights the fact that there are full fee paying international students who are first language learners of the target language in the program, which was originally designed for second language learners. This reveals the complex nature of language programs in secondary schools, in terms of tertiary entry scores, the advantages and disadvantages of being a first or second language learner, and school marketing to attract students. The next section examines how QLD immersion programs address these issues.

### Immersion programs in QLD

In 2019, there were nine state high schools that offered language immersion programs (two French, two German, two Spanish, one Italian, one Chinese) in QLD, although the Department of Education, Training and Employment or QCAA does not specify or define exactly what constitutes a language immersion program, leaving this to individual schools. Each school promotes its language immersion

program as an “excellence,” “signature” or “specialist” program along with other special programs such as sports, dance, music and higher-level academic subjects. One school claims that “this gifted and talented [French immersion] program provides highly motivated students with the opportunity to extend themselves and to be challenged to do their best”<sup>x</sup>. All schools list various benefits from participation in the immersion program, emphasising that learners in immersion programs tend to perform better academically. In fact, one school provides its immersion students’ NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) scores in comparison with state and national averages. In terms of eligibility for application or profiles of students in the programs, no school mentions background or heritage speakers at all. Rather, schools emphasise that the immersion programs are designed for students with little or no previous learning experience in the language (French, German and Spanish). More than a decade ago de Courcy (2002) stated that the Chinese immersion program in San Francisco, in which a large number of Cantonese speaking students were enrolled for cultural and linguistic maintenance, would not be considered to be immersion in Australia. The situation does not seem to have changed, and more interestingly, the focus seems to have shifted from obtaining high level proficiency in the target language to attracting talented and well-behaved students. Most schools state that entry into their immersion program is by selection. In the selection criteria for one French immersion program, student interest in the target language is listed second last:

### SELECTION CRITERIA

- Strong linguistic aptitude-knowledge of English grammar
- Mathematical aptitude
- Personal organisation – time management – work habits
- Ability to adapt to new situations – perseverance
- Ability to work harmoniously with others & to follow instructions
- Extent of interest in the LOTE program
- Behaviour in class<sup>xi</sup>

In addition to classroom activities, most schools offer exchange programs or overseas trips as part of immersion programs, which provides additional value to the learning experience but at an added cost.

While entry to immersion programs in European languages requires no previous knowledge or experience of the target language, immersion programs for Asian languages (Chinese and Japanese) take a different approach. The first two years of the Chinese immersion program are in fact offered as pre-immersion, which provides intensive language study, and the application form for the Japanese immersion program includes a section on the Japanese language background of the applicant that needs to be completed by the applicant and their Japanese teacher. This indicates that character-based Asian languages are believed to require a longer period of study before being able to learn in an immersion environment than European languages. Given that previous study of Japanese language is a requirement for the Japanese immersion program, it could be expected that there would be more opportunities for background or heritage students to enrol in the program. The next section presents the data from a survey that was conducted with the students in the Japanese immersion program on their perceptions of language use in the classroom, and discusses the factors that affect the speaking behaviour of both students who are second language learners and background speakers.

### ***Japanese immersion program***

As stated earlier, the initial aim of this project was to assist a Japanese immersion program that is offered to Year 8 to 10 students by a state high school in Australia. The program started in 2008 without government funding, and built on the existing Japanese language program through the work of a

dedicated teaching team. The students' underdeveloped speaking skills were identified through our class observations, discussions with the teaching team and the audit report conducted the previous year. The audit report on the three immersion subjects (Mathematics, Science and Business) found that students' receptive language appeared to be much in advance of productive language in the largely teacher-oriented format, and that the students used English to ask questions and for student-to-student interactions. The report also pointed out that some lessons included a considerable amount of language practice that did not relate to the lesson content. Even though in some lessons all instructions were given in Japanese and the task sheet was completed in Japanese, much of the student talk was in English. The report concluded that the lack of a Japanese language subject – Japanese was not offered as a classroom subject until Year 10 – as well as the tolerance of a considerable amount of English in class might contribute to the gap between students' reception and production skills in Japanese. In terms of student views of the program, it reported that students felt that the immersion program was a high pressure environment but valued what they had achieved as a result of that pressure. There was no mention of background or heritage speakers in the report. In our class observations, we noticed that there were first language learners and background speakers in some classes. Most were very quiet during the classes. In relation to student recruitment, the report noted that the school currently had a rigorous recruitment process due to the significant dropout rate in the first year of the program when students self-nominated. The current selection criteria given in the school brochure are:

- A diligent and committed work ethic
- An ability to achieve good academic results, and
- An interest and aptitude in Japanese studies

This reflects the application form, which includes sections on Japanese language background (completed by the teacher and the applicant), academic history, personal characteristics (completed by the teacher) and personal statement and family support. There is no section that asks about the applicant's linguistic and cultural background. Although the school is located in an area in which all feeder primary schools teach Japanese, which indicates a strong community interest in and ties with Japan, the school's promotional materials make no mention of the surrounding community in relation to the program. This could be interpreted as a reflection of the government policy of separation between school language choices and local communities that was discussed earlier.

After producing support materials that included useful expressions for each Year level to be used in classroom by both teachers and students and ran workshops with the students using these materials, we conducted a follow-up survey with the students that involved a questionnaire and group interviews in order to determine student perceptions of their language use in the classroom. The questionnaire comprised ten multiple-choice questions. Forty students completed the questionnaire (response rate 82%), and nine of these students had a female parent/guardian with a Japanese name given on their consent form. These students were described as "students from blended families" by the school, rather than as background speakers or heritage students. According to the school there were no international students enrolled in the program. To the question about language use at home, seven students responded that they always spoke Japanese at home (four Year 8 students and three Year 9 students) and three Year 10 students responded that they spoke Japanese at home "very often."

To the question about language use at school, six of the ten background students responded that they spoke Japanese at school outside their Japanese classes. The language behaviour of these background students, however, varies significantly according to Year level. The three Year 10 background students stated that they rarely spoke Japanese at school outside Japanese classes. To the question about language use in the immersion classes, only three background students said they always or very often asked questions in Japanese. To the question about language use with other students, three students

said they always or very often talked to their classmates in Japanese in the immersion classes. Those students were not the same students who said they always or very often asked questions in Japanese. The three Year 10 background students answered that they never or rarely spoke to their classmates in Japanese. Four background students, including one of the Year 10 students, responded that they wanted to speak more Japanese in the immersion classes. It seems that language proficiency was not a major factor in their use of Japanese at school for the background students.

In terms of the presence of background speakers in the immersion program, the teaching team explained that while some other schools did not allow heritage students to enrol in their immersion programs (Chinese and French), they cautiously accepted students from blended families as long as the students satisfied the selection criteria and tried not to dominate the class. Similarly, they occasionally accepted international students, but only when those students had strong English competency. According to the teachers, background students tended to be shy about speaking Japanese compared to international students who occasionally sat in Science immersion classes. International students, who enjoy speaking Japanese with Australian students, seem to have a positive influence on background students, who are reluctant to speak Japanese in front of their peers. A form of self-censorship has been observed among immersion students regarding the use of Japanese in class, and this becomes stronger as they reach Year 10. The teaching team commented that some students wanted to talk to them in Japanese when nobody else was around. In order to obtain further information about students' response to the questionnaire, group interviews were organised.

Thirty-three students participated in the group interviews, which were conducted in four small groups. In relation to the question about language use at home, it was revealed that not all of the family members of the background students spoke Japanese, and the students chose the appropriate language to communicate with each family member. In relation to the question about language use at school, one Year 10 student explained that even if they wanted to talk in Japanese at lunch time they would not be able to do so because of the presence of other students who did not understand Japanese. This is consistent with the teachers' observation that peer pressure is very strong among Year 10 students. In response to the question about language use in the immersion classes, some students commented that they were not forced to ask questions in Japanese. They estimated that the ratio of Japanese to English used in the immersion classes was 50/50. In relation to the question about language use with other students in the immersion classes, some students stated that the main purpose of talking to their classmates was to help each other with the subject and therefore that using English was the easiest way to communicate. In relation to the question on whether they wanted to speak more Japanese in the immersion classes, to which 57% of the students responded Yes, some of the Year 8 and 9 students believed that they would speak more Japanese when their proficiency increased. However, one Year 9 student pointed out that they were teased by other students when they spoke up in Japanese in class. In the questionnaire, 80% of the Year 10 students responded that they wanted to speak more Japanese in class, but in the group interview one student pointed out that it created problems when background students answered questions in Japanese and other students did not understand the answers. This could be interpreted as meaning that academic understanding is a top priority for some students, but at the same time most of the Year 10 students think that they are likely to speak more Japanese if other students do so because they all try to fit in with the other students.

The Japanese immersion program is offered as an academic excellence program for selected students. The size of the immersion classes (around 15 students) is much smaller than that of the average class, and the immersion students perform better academically. Contrary to our expectation, the students did not consider they were particularly quiet in the immersion classes. Rather, they seemed to enjoy the intensive atmosphere of the small class. In terms of language use in the class, to our surprise, more English is used by both students and teachers than expected, which could relate to the assessment

policy: exam questions and answers often involve both Japanese and English. Since the ultimate goal of the immersion program is that students understand the subject material, students' spontaneous language behaviour is not the primary concern, although the teachers do encourage them to speak Japanese as much as possible. When we compare the different Year levels, Year 8 students seemed to enjoy speaking Japanese more than the other Year levels, probably because it was a new experience for them. At the same time, however, they were keenly aware that they needed to improve their Japanese knowledge in order to be able to speak more, an issue that the school tries to address by offering additional Japanese classes. Year 10 students, who have greater proficiency, seemed more self-conscious about spontaneously using Japanese in class, which their teachers put down to "emotional" issues.

Background students comprise 20-25% of the immersion students, and appeared to try to downplay their linguistic skills in the immersion classes. Even though the teaching team acknowledged this tendency, there was no obvious attempt to utilise the knowledge and experience of background students for the benefit of other students within the immersion program. Some of the background students seemed to make an effort to be mindful of other students' proficiency levels and not dominate the classes, but no consideration was voiced by the teachers for the background students who were not able to realise their potential within the immersion program. Clearly, speaking a language other than English at school is not seen as normal practice by students, even though the school promotes the language extensively. The different attitudes of the international students and the background students toward speaking Japanese at school is noteworthy, because it suggests that different types of learners require different approaches to learning the language.

### **Conclusion**

This project began with the aim of assisting students and teachers to increase their engagement in the immersion classes, which tend to follow a teacher-centred format, by developing language support materials suitable for each Year level that would promote classroom interaction. We discovered, however, that although students need to acquire the appropriate vocabulary and expressions to be able to ask questions and engage in discussions in Japanese, proficiency is not necessarily the key factor in determining students' language behaviour in the immersion classes. The particular nature of QLD immersion programs, which have been defined and promoted by state schools as elite programs for selected students in order to compete with private schools in terms of marketing, has also had an impact on the way students use Japanese in the immersion classes. By locating the Japanese immersion program within the state and national language-in-education policies, we also found that the state policy to develop curriculum frameworks exclusively for second language learners has been influential in shaping immersion programs.

Teaching Asian languages as foreign languages for economic purposes has been a major trend in Australia, reflecting Australia's ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis Asia (Johnson, Ahluwalia & McCarthy, 2010). Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) argue that Australia should not ignore potential resources within the ethnic communities that can provide the language and multicultural skills for Australia's external needs, but Kawasaki (2014) points out that the current situation in Western Australia surrounding second-generation Japanese speakers is not promising. Kawasaki argues that elite multilingualism and the monolingual ideology at both mainstream and community schools constitute one of the most significant factors mitigating against nurturing the language development of background speakers. According to Kawasaki, there is an expectation of native-like fluency among the second generation in community schools. Similarly, Hasegawa (2014) identifies the negative impact of not acknowledging the difference between native speakers and heritage learners – Japanese heritage students could be forced to abandon Japanese study at school altogether if they are considered to be

native speakers, who are not allowed to study the language as a LOTE at school. As discussed in this paper, in Australia's new Language Curriculum, language specificity and the diversity of language learners are now acknowledged, but the interpretation and application of the new initiatives vary considerably state by state. In most cases, the acknowledgment of diversity does not extend to the issue of the language rights of individual learners. While Lindholm-Leary (2011) suggests that two-way and one-way immersion programs could provide opportunities for students to further develop their heritage language because such students are in need of some form of heritage language instruction to be able to use the language in future, Australia's current one-way immersion programs that are designed for second language learners based on an elite bilingualism do not seem to embrace such opportunities. Smala, Paz and Lingard (2012) address the ethical and pedagogical implications of excluding bilingual and background students from immersion programs, and ask why being fluent in a language other than English as a result of migration or family background is not valued under the current education system. Immersion programs have the potential to create a space for utilising existing resources in the community to the benefit of mainstream schools. Both background students and second language learners should be able to benefit from such an arrangement: background students gain the opportunity to further develop their language skills, which can be of use to Australian society in the future, as well as sharing their knowledge and experience with their peers with confidence; and second language learners are able to receive authentic language input from their peers (rather than exclusively from their teachers) and thus deepen their understanding of the language and culture. Most importantly, this would help to create an atmosphere in which speaking a language other than English was seen as an everyday occurrence at school, and not as elite multiculturalism.

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<sup>i</sup> While the definitions of background language learners is clearly defined in the Australian Curriculum on languages, which will be explained and discussed later in the paper, there is no specific explanation of heritage language learners in the same document. The term “heritage language learners” is often used as a new way to call “background language learners” in wider Australian context. In this paper, we used the definition suggested by Oguro and Moloney (2012): “heritage to describe school children who are being educated primarily through English but who also have contact with other language(s) through their family or community. This group may include children born in Australia or those who have migrated to Australia, and may include children who have one or more parents or carers who use the heritage language with them” (p.71).

<sup>ii</sup> Language teacher is not on the current Skilled Occupations List: Retrieved November 21, 2019, from Department of Home Affairs website: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/skill-occupation-list/>

<sup>iii</sup> For example, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority states clearly “Languages” as “formerly LOTE” in Words & acronyms. Retrieved 21 November, 2019 from <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Footer/Pages/Words-acronyms.aspx/>

<sup>iv</sup> NSW Department of Education: Murray Farm Public School. Retrieved 22 November 2019 from <https://murrayfarm-p.schools.nsw.gov.au/bilingual-education.html/>

<sup>v</sup> VIC Department of Education and Training. “Create a language policy. Retrieved 22 November 2019 from <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/languages/manage/Pages/languagepolicy.aspx/>

<sup>vi</sup> VIC Department of Education and Training. “Approaches to teaching languages: Designated bilingual program.” Retrieved 22 November 2019 from <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/languages/manage/Pages/languageapproach.aspx/>

<sup>vii</sup> According to Clyne (2005), the crowded curriculum is caused because “too many schools are trying to integrate what should be considered extra-curricular activities into the core curriculum” (p.53).

<sup>viii</sup> VIC Department of Education and Training. “Approaches to teaching languages: Content and language integrated learning (CLIL).” Retrieved 22 November 2019 from <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/languages/manage/Pages/languageapproach.aspx/>

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