

# Coming to Australia to Study Japanese: Australian Contribution to Global Japanese Language Education

Chihiro KINOSHITA THOMSON  
*University of New South Wales*

## Introduction

Australian tertiary institutions have been successfully internationalising their student population over recent years, by attracting a great number of overseas students, especially those from neighbouring Asian countries. “Aggressive foreign student recruiting” started with the Commonwealth government’s introduction of a full-cost fee policy in 1985 (Burn, 2000). One example of this trend is seen at the University of New South Wales (UNSW hereafter), where in 2003, 25 percent from the total student population are international students (UNSW Facts in brief).

Australia has also been successful in developing and implementing comprehensive language policies such as the National Language Policy (Lo Bianco 1987), Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Dawkins 1991) and National Asian Languages and Literacy Policy (1994). Such foresight is unique among English-dominant nations and these policies have resulted in a widely accepted notion that languages are a vital national resource, and have led to a vast increase in the study of languages (Lo Bianco 2002). Among the languages endorsed by these policies, Japanese has become prominent. In 2000, Japanese was the most studied foreign language among Year 12 students, having a 22% share, followed by French (17%) and Chinese (11%) (Australia-Japan Foundation 2000). Australia is now well-known to be committed to Japanese language education, ranked third in the world only after South Korea and China in terms of the number of Japanese language learners. One in 60 Australians is reported to be studying Japanese in Australia (The Japan Foundation, 2003). In this environment, Australian tertiary institutions have emerged as providers of quality instruction in Japanese language.

The above two trends combined produced a new breed of learners of Japanese language and culture. They are overseas students, mostly of Asian background, who study Japanese in Australian universities. This paper discusses this group of learners and the issues behind the developments in relation to globalisation of Japanese language education. It then argues that Australia should become a deliberate contributor of global Japanese language education.

## Student population

In discussing learners, UNSW serves as a good case study for the purpose of this

paper. According to the Directory of Japanese Studies in Australia and New Zealand (Japan Foundation 2004), UNSW held the largest number of students enrolled in Japanese and Japan related courses in Australia in 2003. The cumulative student number reached almost 2000, which comes to 13% of the total number of student enrolment in Japanese and Japan related courses in Australia.

We will examine the data from the UNSW Planning Office website (accessed on 25/10/2003). At UNSW, the ratio of overseas student EFTSU (Equivalent Full Time Student Units) in the total EFTSU has steadily increased from 18% in 1997 and reached 25% in 2003 (Table 1). The ratio of overseas student EFTSU for Japanese courses is higher than UNSW as a whole. The ratio grew from 27% in 1997 to 33% in 2003 (Table 2).

**Table 1 Trends in UNSW EFTSU**

	Overseas Student EFTSU	Total UNSW EFTSU	Ratio of Overseas Students in Total
1997	4532.1	25065.7	0.18080883
1998	4794.6	25134.6	0.19075696
1999	5393.8	26095.9	0.20669147
2000	6174.2	27152.7	0.22738807
2001	6915.1	28944	0.23891307
2002	7899.6	31146.3	0.25362884
2003	7702.5	30637.1	0.25141087

**Table 2 Trends in JAPN EFTSU**

	Overseas Student EFTSU	Total JAPN EFTSU	Ratio of Overseas Students in Total
1997	45.5	170.9	0.26623757
1998	33.9	128.2	0.26443058
1999	46.5	150.3	0.30938124
2000	53.9	164.2	0.32825822
2001	65.1	202.3	0.32179931
2002	72.3	230.2	0.31407472
2003	71.1	213.6	0.33286517

In 2003, one third of the students studying Japanese language and culture courses at UNSW were overseas students. Although the UNSW statistics do not provide data on the ethnic breakdown, from the collective experiences of Lecturers of Japanese including myself, it is safe to state that almost all overseas students studying Japanese at UNSW

come from Asian countries. This data is from UNSW alone, but judging from discussions with colleagues in Japanese studies in Australia, we should be able to assume that similar tendencies are also observed in other Australian universities to a varying degree. In the above mentioned Directory, Drysdale refers to the trend of having a large number of overseas students in Japanese programs in Australian universities, stating that some universities in large cities appear to have overseas students making up to 50–70% of the total student numbers (2004, p.11).

### **Why study Japanese in Australia?**

A question arises. Why do overseas students come to Australia and study Japanese?<sup>1</sup>

Overseas students have an option of going to Japan to study Japanese. Instead, they come to Australia and somehow end up in Japanese classes. Unlike prospective postgraduate students who often email us specifically asking about our Japanese Studies programs, we rarely receive enquiries from overseas students who aspire to join our undergraduate Japanese program. It is probably reliable to assume that many overseas undergraduate students are coming to “UNSW” or to “Australia,” but not to the Japanese program per se. Furthermore, UNSW and many other Australian universities’ degree structures encourage students to study at least two disciplinary streams, such as International Relations and Japanese Studies, Finance and Japanese Studies, and Computer Science and Japanese Studies. Thus Japanese studies are chosen as a supplementary discipline, rather than it being the primary focus of their studies.

In any case, their choice of Japanese had to have reasons. The most talked about reason would be the instrumental value of the Japanese language. These students are often already proficient in a number of languages. They would further brush up on their English proficiency in Australia. By adding Japanese to their list of languages, they will increase the potential marketability of themselves in their future. This argument was perceived to be more than reasonable during the era of the Japanese economic boom up to the late 1980s. In a weaker Japanese economy since then, it still holds some truth, but another argument is gaining strength, i.e., the appreciation of Japanese popular culture. Many overseas students from Asia had grown up watching Japanese animations such as *Doraemon*, and *Pokemon*, Japanese TV dramas such as *O-shin*, and more recently *Long Vacation*, and *Beautiful Life*. They had been surrounded by Hello Kitty stationery goods, songs by Hamasaki Ayumi and SMAP, and comic books such as *Slam Dunk*. Many of them routinely sing karaoke, eat sushi and use Shiseido cosmetics. Their interest in certain aspects of Japanese popular culture must have prompted their desire to learn more about Japan and its language. Students over the years have told me their reasons for learning Japanese: some wanted to read manga in the original Japanese, while others wanted to understand their favourite Japanese songs, and yet others wanted to meet a Japanese TV star. We can observe a parallel to the Japanese youth 30 years ago who studied English,

1 In this discussion, learning Japanese includes learning about the Japanese culture. I believe that Japanese language study cannot be complete without associated cultural study, while in the same token learning Japanese culture has to be accompanied by study of language (Thomson, 2003). At UNSW, all Japanese language courses are taught under the overall goals including development of cultural and sociocultural competencies.

at the same time keenly watched American movies and TV programs, listened to FEN and bought American LPs. It is perhaps realistic to think there are both pragmatic reasons and a “positive valuation” (Befu, 2003) of Japanese culture, popular culture in particular, behind their enrolment in Japanese language courses.

Japan presents at least four hurdles as a destination for studying abroad, which indirectly promote the student mobility towards Australia. The first is the language itself. The students would have to pass the Japanese Proficiency Test Level 1 in order to be admitted to a tertiary institution in Japan. We all know how time consuming it is and how much commitment it requires to reach this level, just to be admitted. In contrast, in many countries where these students come from, English is taught in schools and they already speak English, which is required in Australian universities. Furthermore, in Australian universities they can study Japanese language and culture from scratch while studying other subjects. The second is financial constraints. Japan is still one of the most expensive countries to live. Australia cannot be classified as inexpensive, but in comparison to Japan, Australia is more affordable for many overseas students. Third is the university infrastructure. Many Australian universities have designated International Offices, which assist overseas students in getting accustomed to Australian life and the university system. However in Japan, except for a select few private institutions, which are reputed to be “international”, support for overseas students is not very systematic, probably because the number of foreign students is still limited compared to that of Australia.

The fourth and perhaps the most difficult is prejudice and discrimination. The Japanese society is seemingly becoming more familiar with ‘foreigners’ living around them, evidenced by the facts that the number of registered foreign residents reached 1,778,462 in the 2001 (1.4% of the total population) and that one in twenty marriages in year 2000 was an international marriage (The Asahi Shimbun, 2003). Despite that, prejudice and discrimination against foreigners, especially against non-Caucasian foreigners still persists. Takano Fumio, Director of Tokyo Alien Eyes, an NPO, brings up “90%” as the key statistic in discussing foreign students in Japan. He states that 90% of foreign students in Japan come from Asian countries, and that the rate of refusal of foreign tenants in rental properties is also 90% (Takano, 2003). I would not say that Australia is prejudice-free and discrimination-free. However, Australian society has embraced multiculturalism for many years and people’s understanding of what is fair and legal is more sophisticated, as well as the level of tolerance is higher than that of Japan. Australian society provides more friendly environments for overseas students to live.

These four hurdles and perhaps many others prevent some overseas students from going to study in Japan. Of those, some of them head to Australia.

### **Local interests to global contribution**

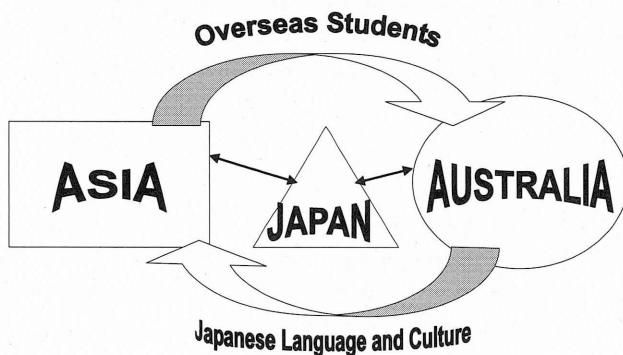
The surge of Japanese language education in Australia originated from local interests. Japanese was promoted as a part of the National Policy on Languages (1987), which set the scene for LOTE (Languages other than English) to be taught in schools in Australia on a much larger scale than before. This was followed by a phenomenal increase of Japanese learners in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, referred to as a “Tsunami” in

1989. The government showed further commitment by NALSAS (The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools) strategy in 1995, which specified Japanese as one of the four priority languages (White and Kakazu, 2001). Behind the national commitment were the strong Japanese economy and the conscious positioning of Australia as an Asian neighbour by the Labour Government. Japan was, and still is, the number 1 export destination for Australia. Japanese tourists came to Australia on group tours en masse, and Australia was once the top destination for Japanese honeymooners. Australia saw the practical value of the Japanese language.

In the last 20 years, Japanese programs in secondary schools and tertiary institutions have made significant progress (White and Kakazu, 2001). Australia is reputed to produce quality secondary materials, and the qualifications of secondary Japanese teachers have been upgraded by efforts such as the Japan Foundation's fellowship programs. Australian universities are known to have a Japanese language teaching approach based on sociolinguistics and to be innovative in terms of curriculum. Secondary and tertiary programs together have further worked out an efficient articulation system. Most students who study Japanese in secondary schools and wish to continue their study in universities can now be accommodated in upper levels. Despite that the current Liberal Government has withdrawn from the NALSAS program, and the days of the "Tsunami" are over, Australian universities are blessed with solid programs in Japanese language. During this time, the Australian Japanese language programs, perhaps accidentally, started to contribute globally as they accepted overseas students into their programs.

During my trip to Korea in 2003, I was most pleasantly surprised to see so many of my former students at a dinner hosted by the Korean branch of UNSW Alumni Association. Those students who studied Japanese with me at UNSW are back in Seoul and are using Japanese in their professions, some in trading, others in translation and interpretation, telecommunications, and manufacturing. I sometimes receive emails from my former students who went back to their home countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. They work in Japan-related professions and occasionally seek my advice, ask for letters of reference in search of a better position, or just to say hello. Between 1997 and 2003, at UNSW alone, roughly 3000 overseas students studied Japanese. Australia has become a global provider of Japanese language education, whether it intended to or not.

Figure 1



### Japanese language as a global commodity

In discussing Japan's contribution to globalisation, Harumi Befu (2003) describes two routes of the cultural globalisation process: the sojourner route, and the non-sojourner route. The first process involves Japanese nationals who leave Japan as sojourners, take their culture to their destination and spread it to the locals. The other process happens without native carriers, but some aspects of Japanese culture are taken up by locals. If we can call Japanese language one of the cultural exports of Japan, the global contribution of Australian Japanese language education requires another explanation, which might be categorised as a hybrid of "Indirect Japanization", in Befu's term (2003, p.11). The term describes the following process: Asian students study Japanese in Australia, they take Japanese language and culture from Australia to their home countries, and they use the skills locally and internationally.

In the reality of globalisation of Japan, or "Japanisation" of the world (Befu, 2003), alternatively in the "Japanese diaspora" (Tai, 2003), Japan no longer "owns" Japanese culture. Sushi, for instance, is no longer exclusively Japanese, as evident in a scene in Sydney where an Australian construction worker eats a "big Sushi roll" for lunch, which was made by a migrant from Korea at a Chinese-Australian owned Sushi shop. "Japanese culture" can only be described as an individual cultural phenomenon which takes place among multiple networks of people in various contexts in Japan and beyond (Tai, 2003).

In the same token, Japan no longer "owns" the Japanese language. Over 800,000 Japanese are living overseas (Asahi Shimbun, 2003), and this number excludes those who migrated and those who have not registered at their local diplomatic missions. Overseas Japanese and their descendants inevitably adapt their Japanese to suit their local use. Local variations are noted in overseas Japanese communities, such as in Los Angeles. "*Kiberi*" 帰米, for instance, used in the Los Angeles Japanese community, expressed in two kanji characters of "*kaeri*" or return home and "*kome*" or rice signifying the US, means American Japanese who had lived in Japan and returned home to the US. The term is not comprehensible to most Japanese living in Japan. Japanese language is also used by people without involving Japanese nationals. Japanese is the only tool of communication between a Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong scholar of Japanese literature and a Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese scholar (Nihongo Kyōiku Gakkai, et al. 2005). We have a neighbour, a French wife and Australian husband with two French-Australian children who were born in Japan. The two children attend the Saturday Japanese school with my daughter who has a Japanese mother and an American father and has been brought up in Australia.

### Language of power

The Japanese language as a global commodity is, however, clearly different from Sushi or Taiko due the historical and political baggage that it carries. We need to consider globalisation of the Japanese language in the context of the past assimilationist policy in Japanese colonies and wartime aggression of Japan. When I used to teach Japanese at the

National University of Singapore between 1989 and 1993, some Singaporean students revealed to me that their parents and grandparents did not want them to study Japanese because of the wartime memories associated with deaths of their kin. When my mother was visiting me in Singapore, an old Singaporean man approached her on the street and told her that he knew some Japanese. Then he shouted “*Migi muke migi, Tomare*” 右向け、右、止まれ; no doubt military commands that he was forced to follow during the Japanese occupation of Singapore.

Classrooms are often described in the context of power. There is a distinct power relationship between the teacher and the students. The teacher is the knower and the students are the learners. The teacher is usually older. The teacher is the decision maker with the power of assessing the students and giving them grades. In the case of foreign/second language classrooms, the teacher-student hierarchy becomes even more acute, especially when the teacher is a native speaker of the target language. The teacher can be seen as the absolute authority of the subject matter. If the teacher were not proficient in the students' language and or insisted in speaking in the target language, the students have to become mute due to their lack of proficiency in the target language. The eloquent teacher gains more power. When the teaching is done in the country of the target language, students are often minorities in the society they live, while the teacher belongs to the majority. Then the teacher becomes even more powerful.

Teaching of Japanese as a foreign language in Japan by Japanese teachers bears the danger that is reminiscent of assimilationist colonial classrooms. The teacher, an authentic Japanese person, who is the authority of the subject matter, teaches their native language to foreigners, who are minorities in the Japanese society. The linguistic demands of the Japanese language of acknowledging vertical relationships makes it even harder for the students to create any relationship with their teachers on an equal footing. Unless teachers are aware of the power they possess and conscientiously make efforts to “dis-empower” themselves (Tanaka, 2000), the students have no other choice than to conform. The Japanese society surrounding the classroom also reinforces the pressure of conformity.

### **A shift from accidental contribution to deliberate contribution**

So far, Australian contribution to Japanese language education of overseas students has been more accidental than deliberate. I would like to argue here that Australia is ready to make a more deliberate contribution to the global Japanese language education.

Tai states, “If classrooms are places for cultural exchanges, they should be places for equal exchanges. In contrast to one-sided exchanges characteristic of colonial contexts, equal exchanges require a transformation of Japanese language and culture themselves.” (2003, p.20). Even though I tend to agree with Tai's statement, I cannot overlook the difficulty of realising it in the context of the teaching of Japanese in Japan. However, in contrast, Australia can offer a relatively neutral ground for learning Japanese and exchanging ideas about Japan. On one hand, Australian teachers of Japanese can offer a third party view of the Japanese language and culture to the students. Native-Japanese teachers in Australia are more ready to place themselves in their students' shoes than their counterparts in Japan, as they themselves are minorities in the Australian society, and they

have faced language difficulties themselves in their day-to-day life in Australia. On the other hand, overseas students, and Asian students in particular, can engage in the learning of Japanese away from the stigma and pressure from their parents and grandparents. This should help them construct their own understanding of the Japanese language and culture. Moreover, the power difference between teachers and students in Australia is in general smaller than that of Japan.

Australian classrooms can become a venue for creative teaching of Japanese language. Although it is grossly outdated, the notion of Japan as a mono-cultural and mono-racial place with middle class Japanese who speak the “Standard Japanese” is stubbornly persistent in Japanese language textbooks. I believe that this persistence is a reflection of the way Japanese is taught in many classrooms. Australian classrooms, situated in a multicultural society can challenge these outdated notions perhaps more easily than their Japanese counterparts, as the teachers and the students live in a society in which cultural difference and pluralism are a daily experience (Lo Bianco, 2000). At the same time, the view of learning foreign languages in a dichotomy of native versus non-native, where the non-native tries to become native, has to be questioned. “The learner’s language of origin and the cultural mores and experience they value will interact with those of the target culture. The result cannot ever be wholly the original, nor wholly the target” (Lo Bianco, 2000, p. 13). Australian classrooms can aim to create a “third space” (Bhabha 1990, 1994), where a learner can enjoy their hybrid identity, neither a clone of a middle class Japanese, nor a clone of their parents, while speaking Japanese. This way, Australian classrooms can provide an ideal preparation ground for future global citizens who enjoy unique and dynamic global encounters with Australians, Japanese and others. This at the same time contributes to the globalisation of the Japanese language education.

There is one further contribution that Australia can make to the overseas students of Japanese. That is, in Australian universities, they also learn Academic English and associated research skills. If the students are seeking professional positions using the Japanese language in the future in the international arena, the Japanese language skills alone would be insufficient. Additional high level English would give them an edge. For those students who seek to be serious scholars of Japanese language and culture, it is crucial to be able to read academic literature not only in Japanese but also in English. Asian students who are familiar with both English speaking society and Asian society with Japan literacy (Neustupny 1989) would strive ahead of others who are not.

### **Concluding remarks**

Australia welcomes a large number of overseas students. Many of them study Japanese and take the Japanese skills back to their home countries. This accidental contribution of Australian Japanese language programs to the global market needs recognition. Furthermore, this contribution has the potential to be developed into a more deliberate and unique contribution. Australian classrooms as a neutral ground can challenge outdated views of language teaching and unnecessary over-assimilation, while fostering global citizens who are comfortable in their hybrid identity, resulting in globalisation of Japanese language education. Given the difficulties discussed above of



Japan as a study abroad destination, we might see more overseas students who specifically come to Australia to study Japanese in the future.

## REFERENCES

Asahi Shimbun 2003

Asahi Shimbun. *Japan Almanac 2003*. Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2003.

Australia-Japan Foundation 2000

Australia-Japan Foundation 豪日交流基金. *Australia hakken オーストラリア発見*. <http://www.discover.australia.or.jp/> accessed on 12/6/2006.

Befu 2003

Harumi Befu. "Globalization Theory from the Bottom Up: Japans Contribution." *Japanese Studies* 23:1 (2003), pp. 3–22.

Bhabha 1990

H. K. Bhabha. "The Third Space—Interview with Homi Bhabha." In J. Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

Bhabha 1994

———. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Burn 2000

Barbara Burn. "Australia and Foreign Student Recruitment." *International Higher Education*. Winter, 2000. [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News18/text6.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News18/text6.html), accessed on 13/6/2006.

COAG 1994

COAG, Council of Australian Governments. *National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy*. Brisbane: Government of Queensland Printer, 1994.

Dawkins 1991

J. S. D. Dawkins. *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991.

Drysdale 2004

Peter Drysdale. "Overview: Japanese Studies in Australian and New Zealand Universities." In *Directory of Japanese Studies in Australia and New Zealand*, The Japan Foundation, 2004.

Japan Foundation 2003

Japan Foundation. "Sekai no kunibetsu jōhō" 世界の国別情報. <http://www.jpjf.go.jp/j/urawa/world/kunibetsu/2004/australia.html>, accessed on 14/6/2004.

Japan Foundation 2004

———. *Directory of Japanese Studies in Australia and New Zealand*. Canberra, 2004.

## Lo Bianco 1987

Joseph Lo Bianco. *National Policy on Languages*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987.

## Lo Bianco 2000

———. “After the Tsunami, Some Dilemmas: Japanese Language Studies in Multicultural Australia.” *Australian Language Matters*. 8: 1. JAN/FEB/MAR 2000.

## Lo Bianco 2002

———. “Brief Outline of the Australian Language Policy Experience.” General background information to accompany panel discussion at the US Federal Interagency Language Roundtable. [http://www.govtilr.org/PapersArchive/ILR\\_papers01.htm](http://www.govtilr.org/PapersArchive/ILR_papers01.htm), accessed on 14/6/2006.

## Neustupny 1989

J. V. Neustupny. *Strategies for Asia and Japan Literacy*. Japanese Studies Centre, Melbourne, 1989.

## Nihongo Kyōiku Gakkai et al. 2005

Nihongo Kyōiku Gakkai et al. 日本語教育学会、他. *2004-nen Nihongo kyōiku kokusai kenkyū taikai 21-seiki no Nihongo kyōiku genba o kangaeru hōkokusho* 2004年日本語教育国際研究大会 21世紀の日本語教育現場を考える 報告書. 2005.

## Tai 2003

Erika Tai. “Rethinking Culture, National Culture and Japanese.” *Japanese Language and Literature* 37: 1 (2003), pp. 1–26.

## Takano 2003

Takano Fumio 高野文生. “Ryūgakusei ni yasashii Nihon e” 留学生に優しい日本へ. *Gaikō Forum* 外交フォーラム 179 (June 2003), pp. 60–61.

## Tanaka 2000

Tanaka Nozomi 田中望. *Nihongo kyōiku no kanata ni* 日本語教育のかなたに. Tokyo: Aruku アルク, 2000.

## Thomson 2003

Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson. “For the Symbiosis of ‘Language’ and ‘Studies of Japanese Studies in Australia.’” In *Language Teaching at Crossroads*, ed. Alina Skoutarides. Japanese Studies Centre Working Paper No. 13 (2003). pp. 3–7.

## UNSW 2004

UNSW Facts in Brief 2004. <http://www.unsw.edu.au/about/pad/aboutfacts.html>, accessed on 13/6/2006.

## UNSW 2003

UNSW Planning Office website, [www.planning.unsw.edu.au](http://www.planning.unsw.edu.au), accessed on 25/10/2003.

**White and Kakazu 2001**

Karen White and Katsumi Kakazu. "Language Policies in Australia." *Current Report on Japanese-Language Education around the Globe*, Vol. 6, pp. 115–130, 2001.

**Note:** The paper was originally presented in 2003 and revised in 2004. Since the last revision, Australia had a change of government to the Labour Government led by Mandarin speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the general emphasis on Asian languages has made a come-back. Japanese still remains to be the first foreign language of Australia and many overseas students study Japanese not only in the tertiary sector, but also in the secondary sector. My view on the Australia's contribution to global Japanese language education has not changed much, but perhaps more developed now at the end of 2009. For my more recent views, please refer to my edited volume *New pedagogies for learner agency: Japanese language education research and practice in Australia* (Thomson, Ed. 2009), Coco Publishing.