

## **Gifted and Talented in Japanese – How to sustain their motivation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The latest survey shows the number of students studying Japanese decreased by 17 % in 2009 compared to 2004 figures (Burden, 2009). As teachers, it is our responsibility to cater for the special needs of gifted and talented students of Japanese so that they will sustain and increase their motivation and continue to study Japanese at senior levels. In this article I will explore the answers to the following questions, with reference to the literature review on Gifted and Talented (G &T) Education, Motivation and Second Language Acquisition Studies, specific issues in teaching and learning Japanese, and an interview with some of the successful Y12 and 13 Japanese students.

- \* Why is it important to focus on the G & T?
- \* How do we identify G & T students in the language classroom?
- \* What are their needs?
- \* How can we cater for their needs?
- \* What do G & T students say about their success?

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2005 the Ministry of Education made changes to National Assessment Guidelines (NAG) on the basis of good quality assessment information. Since then, schools have been required to identify gifted and talented students and “develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to address the needs of students and aspects of the curriculum” (Ministry of Education 2005). Over the last few years I have taught Japanese to a number of G & T students in a school in Masterton – a girls, years 7 to 13 secondary school, decile 10, with a roll of 317. This article presents some of the knowledge I gained through these workshops and professional readings, plus my observations and the

experiences I have encountered through teaching G & T students, and also the voices of the G & T students from a small survey of Y12 and 13 students.

### **Why focus on G & T?**

The learning of Japanese is considered to be more difficult than learning a European language for English speaking learners. Kandori (2009) cited in her research report that “It is often said that Japanese is one of the most difficult languages for English native speakers to learn (Chilamatsu, 2003), and its writing system is regarded as the most complex in the world (Sproat, 2000)”. Teaching Japanese to English speaking students requires different and more complex teaching methods and the students need to make more effort to succeed in NCEA exams. This may make students perceive that Japanese has fewer English speaking students choosing the subject or continuing to senior levels. Falling numbers means combined classes of Y12 and 13, or in some cases, three levels in one class.

Gardner (1983) claims that people with high verbal-linguistic intelligence display a facility with words and languages and those with verbal-linguistic intelligence learn foreign languages very easily as they have high verbal memory and recall, and an ability to understand and manipulate syntax and structure. As a language teacher, I believe we need to identify G & T students who possess this intelligence and cater for their needs, so that they succeed to their potential in learning Japanese. I also believe that focusing on Japanese G & T students will:

- give positive influence to other students
- help the students to succeed in NCEA exams
- allow them to become role models for other potential G & T students
- motivate the students to continue into senior levels

### **How do we identify G & T students?**

The general characteristics of giftedness and talent supplied by Meuli (2004) include some of the characteristics of G & T language learners. They are:

- Has advanced vocabulary, expresses self clearly and fluently
- Quick to master new concepts
- Willing to take risks, guess and hypothesise
- Keen to direct and plan own learning
- High output when enthused
- Passionate interests

### **What are their needs?**

According to Meuli (2004) G & T students have the following needs:

- Their ability understood, accepted and valued
- Their ability nurtured
- They are challenged at their own level
- They can interact with other G & T students

Most Japanese G & T students are found in mixed ability classrooms in Y9, 10 and 11. Kennedy (2003), in his discussion about optimum conditions for gifted students in regular classrooms, emphasises the importance of positive teacher attitudes toward gifted students and creating a gifted-friendly classroom.

“Common sense suggests that a gifted-friendly classroom environment can best be created by a teacher who genuinely likes gifted kids. And the blunt truth is that some teachers are not fond of gifted children. Most educators of the gifted can relate tales of teachers who ignore students, use them as status symbols, or even harass them ..... Bright kids placed with teachers who don't like them may wither both intellectually and emotionally. Placed with teachers who enjoy working with the gifted, they usually flourish.” (P232).

Kennedy also suggests the following to promote the well being of G & T students in regular classrooms:

- Explore ways to assign work.
- Offer materials that extend, not merely reinforce.
- De-emphasize grades and other extrinsic rewards.
- Encourage risk taking (P234)

### **How can we cater for their needs?**

As a starting point to consider how to cater for the needs of G & T students, it would be considerably helpful if we understood why our students study Japanese. According to McLauchlan's study (2006) shows that these are the four most frequently cited reasons for studying Japanese at Y11:

1. L2 is important (35.7%)
2. Interested in the country (19.1%)
3. For a job (17.7%)
4. For travel (11.2%)

Over a third of the students are willing second language students and surprisingly, future travel scores the lowest (MacLauchlan, 2006). In his study, McLauchlan also found out that the following were the most frequently cited difficulties in learning Japanese:

1. Vocabulary (42.9%)
2. Grammar (38.1%)
3. Kanji (11.5%)

To help improve the ability of students of Japanese to read kanji, Kirwan (2006) suggests the use of furigana. According to Kirwan, furigana is the answer because:

- Kanji are subliminally processed to some extent
- Students will gain more exposure to kanji, feeling more familiar with it
- Learners develop familiarity with certain kanji combinations to attain automaticity
- Use of furigana creates a positive feeling about kanji and
- Encourages students and teachers to go beyond prescribed kanji

For example, the reading materials for Y11 (NCEA Level 1) can include all the kanji which are prescribed for Y12 and 13 (NCEA Level 2 and 3) with furigana but only Level 1 kanji will be taught directly. I tried this with my own Y11 students in 2006 and the feedback from the students was very positive. It

resulted in some students, especially G & T students, learning a lot of Level 2 and 3 kanji.

Every student benefits from receiving effective feedback but the following are particularly beneficial to G & T students because they encourage noticing, problem solving and hypothesis testing:

- Prompt feedback
- Positive feedback
- Indirect feedback (Bitchener, 2006)  
E.g.: coding, underlining, commenting

It is important to de-emphasize grades and other extrinsic rewards and encourage learning for its own sake, because G & T students are generally motivated intrinsically (Kennedy, 2003). To help secondary students to increase intrinsic motivation classroom activities should:

- Be life relevant,
- Be teenager friendly,
- Have a variety to suit learning styles,
- Enable students to make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences.

Dweck (2008) claims that some messages we send enhance students' motivation, but other messages undermine it. According to Dweck, praising the student's ability and intelligence (fixed mindset messages) will not help G & T students because:

- many talented students lack confidence in themselves
- many gifted students simply stop working when school becomes more difficult
- setbacks indicate a lack of ability, and that lack of ability is permanent

Instead, to foster in our students a growth mindset with its motivation and resilience, we should praise the students (growth mindset messages) for their

effort, strategies, focus, persistence in the face of difficulty and willingness to take on challenges

These messages allow the students to remain motivated and effective in the face of setbacks. Dweck also claims that it is important that we, the educators, should hold a growth mindset, so that the students benefit from our efforts and these will help the students to seek learning, to love learning, and to learn effectively.

### **What are G & T students saying about their success?**

To find out what some of the successful Japanese G & T students are saying about their success, the following questions were asked informally:

1. Why are you studying Japanese?
2. What helped you to succeed in NCEA Level 1 and 2 in Japanese?
3. What is the most difficult thing about studying Japanese?
4. How do you manage the difficulty?
5. Do you think rewards from the teacher or parents help you to achieve highly?

Thirteen students (7 – Y12, 6 – Y13) who received NZALT Certificate of Excellence in the previous year in Japanese were chosen to be interviewed. To qualify for this certificate, the student must have gained 4 Excellences or more in NCEA Level 1 and 3 Excellences or more in NCEA Level 2/3. Two of the students received 6 Excellences in Y 11 and 12. The students (all female) in four different schools in the Wellington region were interviewed, either by their own teachers or asked to write their answers on the questionnaire. Oral interviews were recorded and transcribed later. Below is a brief summary of the students' voices which maybe helpful to the teachers who teach G & T students in understanding their thoughts and feelings. Although the number of students is small the most common answers have been placed from the top in the bullet points.

1. Why are you studying Japanese?

- Interested in the culture, language, people
- Learning languages is important
- Different from any other languages
- The Japanese class is fun
- Easier than French
- Have special connections

The student who answered 'Japanese is easier than French' said that learning French is harder because of the gender. Some of the G & T students study two languages

2. What helped you to achieve highly in NCEA Level 1 and 2?

- Self motivation
- Interesting and fun lessons
- Good teacher and good programme
- Hard work and keeping at it
- Learned and revised vocabulary and kanji hard

3. What is the most difficult thing about studying Japanese?

- Kanji
- The different form of language use (e.g.; plain/masu/te form, polite/casual form, men's/women's way of speaking)
- Learning vocabulary
- Word order
- Different forms of writing (hiragana, katakana, kanji)
- Pronunciation (silent ゃ)

4. How do you manage this difficulty?

- Practise vocabulary and kanji
- Revise in class and by myself
- Just keep at it
- Create own strategies to learn kanji/vocabulary, e.g.; songs, pictures, rhymes
- Ask help from the teacher/others

5. Do rewards help you to achieve highly?

- No. Mostly self-motivated
- Yes, to some extent
- Complement and encouragement rather than material rewards
- No. I want to please my parents and the teacher because they help me a lot
- I don't get any rewards

## **Conclusion**

It is believed that every student in a classroom has special needs. Since any teaching strategy works in different contexts for different students, (Ministry Of Education, 2007) effective teaching strategies for G & T students require that teachers inquire into the impact of their teaching on their students. Previously, our attention seemed to have been focussed on the underachieving students and G & T students had to find their own way to succeed in Japanese, which is more difficult to learn in comparison with European languages. As seen above, we have found out that not only the students' self motivated hard work, but also the teachers positive attitudes and effective teaching methods contribute to the G & T students' success in Japanese. To cater for their needs, we should understand their difficulties in learning Japanese and use a neuro-scientific research based approach in our teaching, to nurture their intelligence and ability, so that they can maximize their potential to achieve an outstanding performance.

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