

MULTILINGUALISM AND LOCAL-GLOBAL IDENTITIES: JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the value accruing to a regional area in Australia from the location of an undergraduate Japanese language education program in a university in that area. The focus is on the manner in which the inclusion of such a program enhances the sustainability of the area. Sustainability is here defined as the resilience demonstrated by social subjects in the absence of the full range of services available in more densely populated and resource advantaged areas. Such resilience implies an ongoing capacity on the part of subjects to contribute productively to social and economic networks in the area. The discussion includes two cases of graduates of the program under review. On the basis of these cases, the argument is advanced that local regional and rural area access to a tertiary sector second language program offers a unique and valuable strategic dimension to the personal and professional development of social agents in regional areas and to the sustainability of these areas generally.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on development in the regions acknowledges the *a priori* right of regional Australians, and indeed agents in regional areas throughout the globe, to have access to a similar fundamental level of service provision to that of the residents of more metropolitan topographies (see also Harreveld, Smyth & Down and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue). In this article, I argue that, given the shift in commodity flows and communication networks which has occurred with globalisation (see also Walker-Gibbs, this issue), there is a strong case to be made for second language literacy to be added to the basket of *a priori* basic rights accessible to those living outside main population centres. In the 21st century, it is no longer appropriate to dismiss access to second language learning opportunities in regional areas as something insignificant or arbitrary. On the contrary, such access should be mandatory. While Indigenous languages (see also Allison & Douglas and Smyth & Down, this issue) add a rich element of diversity to many areas of rural Australia, as yet there are limited contexts in which these languages can be deployed. There is little doubt that in the globalised community of today lack of access to the learning of languages used in that global context, and the opportunities that derive from the skills acquired, will contribute

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to the insularity and atrophy that follow the isolation of a society. In other words, the absence of second language learning opportunities can eventually have as damaging an impact on a regional community as absence of access to more traditionally recognised services.

The specific program referred to and advocated for in this article provides high levels of Japanese language and culture literacy to pre-service teachers in a regional education faculty in Australia. The program was commenced in 1993, with the initial support of funds from the Federal Government, and has continued to graduate Japanese language and culture literate teachers for the primary and secondary sectors until 2004, the time of writing this article. The first section of the argument provides some background to the general issues of second language teaching and the benefits of multilingualism – that is, the ability to use two or more languages. This will be followed by the presentation of two cases (see also Walker-Gibbs and Smyth & Down, this issue) of program graduates and a discussion of the contribution that these young people have made to the sustainability of their local region (see also Allison & Douglas and Harreveld, this issue).

BACKGROUND

Language learning policies in Australia have often been driven by pragmatic economic considerations. However, there is a range of benefits that accrue to a community when second language learning opportunities are made available. In his declaration of the ineradicable necessity of transcending monolingualism in 20th century Australia, Michael Garbutcheon Singh (2001) has noted the manner in which both pragmatic economic motivations and human development motivations should be taken into consideration by language policy makers (see also Walker-Gibbs and Harreveld this issue):

Languages provide the global economy with the rich cultural resources of the accumulated knowledges of humanity. In the global economy where linguistic diversity is the norm bilingualism has a competitive advantage. Further, languages also play an important part in the ongoing processes of remaking a nation's identity. The movement and mixture of peoples are integral to establishing egalitarian multilingualism as a representation and project of Australian identity formation and nation-building. (p. 123)

While Singh acknowledges the economic benefits and “competitive advantage” which are a consequence of linguistic diversity, his work eschews a primitive human

capital paradigm (see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) in favour of determinations based on human development theory (see Lo Bianco [2000a] for a detailed discussion of human development as opposed to human capital justifications of language policy and language learning). In other words, he advocates language diversity in recognition of “the rich cultural resources of the accumulated knowledges of humanity” which is accessed by knowledge of more than one language. There is a clear implication in Singh’s argument also that access to multilingualism is a human right, in the manner of access to first language literacy, health services or adequate legal representation.

Singh is not the only scholar to have presented an argument in favour of multilingualism as a critical element in the human development of the global environment. Jagdish Gundara (1999), for example, notes the importance of sound language policies, including those that relate to the teaching and learning of a second language, as an element in the development of integrated societies. He argues the role of language policy as “a democratic focus for the legitimation of national and international social order” (p, 57). As Gundara’s argument suggests, the global environment is a multilingual environment and those who have access to only one language are thereby deprived of the interaction and subsequent development opportunities that exist for subjects with bilingual or multilingual proficiencies. Lo Bianco (2000b) notes the manner in which insistence on the superior value of one language deprives social subjects restricted to that language of access to “insights into worlds fashioned outside” the language so valued (pp. 20-21). This is the case even when the specific language is English, the putative global *lingua franca*.

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed strong policy support by governments at all levels for second language programs in Australia. Recently, however, there has been a tendency for policy makers to regard the use of English as sufficient for global interaction and communication and, therefore, to judge second language programs as unnecessary. Such a position overlooks the fact that the English only speaker and thinker stands sorely impoverished beside those global subjects who speak and think in their own language, in addition to the acquired second language of English. In other words, bilingual subjects are able to understand the linguistic motivation of the English language speaker. By contrast, regardless of any eagerness to communicate, the monolingual English language speaker is disadvantaged by having no capacity to

understand, empathise with or discern the linguistic motivations of the bilinguals with whom they are engaging.

As is the case with any other field of knowledge, such as mathematics or first language proficiency, the most efficient and equitable method of disseminating second language skills is through programs in schools. Such school-based programs require staff with tertiary teaching qualifications and a high degree of cultural and language literacy. Hence the concomitant need for teacher education programs, such as the one being discussed here. However, the commercialisation of the tertiary sector has also seen programs with language components vulnerable to either downsizing or closure. The nature of language teaching demands class size limits which restrict the income generation possibilities of these courses. Hence, institutions facing increasing pressures to self fund have been loath to expand or even maintain language teaching offerings in recent years. Regional universities lack the population catchments of their metropolitan counterparts and are frequently without the capacity to generate other kinds of revenue, such as private endowment, of many of the more established tertiary institutions in Australia. They have thus been subject to a particularly pressing financial vulnerability in this respect. It is tempting for policy makers and similar authorities, operating in the current impoverished resource settings and with limited or no access to information regarding the benefits of second language learning, to judge second language programs as a luxury that cannot be sustained.

CONTESTING POLICY PRACTICE

My project in this article is vigorously to contest such tendencies in policy practice through the presentation of the cases of two young women, both of whom have lived in an Australian regional area since birth, undertaking Japanese language studies in the education faculty of the local university. Students were chosen for participation in the study on the grounds, firstly, that they had completed a tertiary program specialising in Japanese language proficiency study and Japanese language education and, secondly, that they would not have chosen to travel to a metropolitan centre to undertake their tertiary programs. In other words, I was particularly interested in understanding the experiences of local students who would have been unable to study Japanese had it not been offered at a regional site.

The work of theorists such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) strongly suggests that the location of such programs in regional areas can contribute strategically to the viability of a region and greatly enhance its sustainability. Appadurai has introduced the notion of “reliable local subjects” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 181) – that is, social agents who have intimate knowledge of local cultural practices. He argues that these subjects have a particular role to play in the dissemination of skills to others in a community. Unlike the subject who makes a decision to reside temporarily in a community, often merely for self-benefit, or who is ‘despatched’ to a region by an employing authority, the “reliable local subject” is one whose identity to some extent resides in the community. This agent, therefore, has an emotional and psychological commitment, in addition to a pragmatic attachment, to the community. This is in contrast to the temporary subject who will leave the area once the element of self-gain no longer exists.

In this discussion, “reliable local subjects” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 181) are local students enrolled in the program, particularly those students who would not elect to study the language outside the region and who remain in the region after graduation. The specialised local knowledge that they hold enables them to transmit successfully the skills that they acquire to other agents in the region and thereby to promote education in that region. I would argue that successful transmission of these skills to other regional agents is less likely to occur if knowledge is transmitted by non-local agents who locate themselves in the region temporarily merely to take up employment.

CONSIDERING THE CASES

Data informing the discussion were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with a view to developing cases. Case study method is helpful in this project, given that I am not seeking to identify ‘patterned’ behaviour that must be identifiable or replicable across all participating subjects. I am open to the possibility that there will be no common response from those participating in the program. In fact, such an assumption or expectation would severely limit the vitality of the notion of difference underlying my advocacy of second language learning. It might be noted that both participants, here named as Tess and Sophie, are young women. The putative gender imbalance is an effect of the relatively large number of girls and young women who elect to specialise in language study in Australia.

Tess

Tess had grown up in a relatively remote area of rural Australia, attending a primary school with only 12 students, three of whom were her siblings. She had travelled to a small rural town for her secondary schooling and then to a larger, coastal, regional city for a tertiary education. Like many domestic students currently undertaking regional tertiary education in Australia, Tess was the first member of her family to enter university. She had originally considered going to a metropolitan centre to study. However, her parents had expressed concern about such a move. She had, therefore, chosen to enter the program in question, thus giving herself the option of travelling home, if necessary, on weekends. Nevertheless, the notion of coming even to a large regional city was quite exciting and overwhelming, and she had, in fact, initially been concerned about getting lost. This contingency did not eventuate and she soon became familiar with her new environment. She commented as follows:

There are some people who think the place where the uni[versity] is is just a rural township. But when you come from somewhere that only has two main streets, it's got everything. I really enjoyed living there and I didn't think I was missing out on anything. The shops and everything were close by and I liked that. When I went to high school I had to travel 35 kilometers twice a day and that was really an effort.

Because Tess was able to make regular visits to her family during her program of study, she was rarely homesick, even though she had never been away from home prior to her beginning study. Her capacity to adapt was also assisted by the fact that she lived with cousins in her first year of university. However, the crucial factor in her success appeared to be the proximity of her own family. She felt that the likelihood of her completing the program would have been greatly diminished had she gone to a capital city to study. As she noted:

There were quite a few times, especially at the start, when it all got a bit too much for me. When that happened, I just packed everything up and went back home to Mum and Dad for a weekend or so until I felt okay.

Tess's comments in this respect reflect a common student coping strategy. The notion of being able to depend on family who are within reasonable travel distance by car ensures that students can confront difficulties secure in the knowledge that backup, if needed, is only a few hours away. It is a reassurance that would have been unavailable to Tess had she travelled to a capital city to study. In fact, the likelihood of

Tess's completing her tertiary education in a metropolitan centre in the absence of the support that she was able to access in the regional area is debatable. She would, therefore, not have acquired the capacity to 'value add' to the regional community in the manner suggested in this discussion.

Tess had always wanted to be a teacher. Her Japanese results at school were good and she felt that she would have some good future opportunities offered to her if she enrolled in a Japanese language course. I have noted that there has been a tendency in Australia to justify second language study with a spurious human capital argument. It is interesting, therefore, to note that neither student featured in this project was motivated to study purely to acquire a secure income. While both felt that there was some future financial security in the notion of teaching Japanese, they were attracted to the field principally because of an intrinsic interest in the Japanese language in its myriad forms and with its accompanying cultures.

Of particular interest to this discussion which seeks to articulate the relationship between the value of the program in which Tess was enrolled and the sustainability of a region was Tess's response when asked what she intended to do with her future. She indicated that, while uncertain about the details of her future, her base would always be the region. However, this desire was balanced by a recognition of the fact that she would also often leave the region, particularly to travel to Japan. I argue in the conclusion of this discussion that these comings and goings on the part of what might otherwise be referred to as stable subjects contribute significantly to the sustainability of the region. Furthermore, subjects such as Tess become important trailblazer role models in a region with a limited non-English speaking presence. Their long-term presence in the region, moderated by their occasional departure to sojourn in a place which can give them "insights into worlds fashioned outside" their own community, to recall the words of Lo Bianco (2000b, pp. 20-21), can be a crucial element in injecting much needed resilience (see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) and vitality into, and thereby strategically engaging, regions which by their very definition experience the dilemma of a natural tendency to isolation.

Sophie

Like Tess, Sophie had studied Japanese in the secondary sector before entering university. However, prior to enrolling in the program she had spent a year in Japan and her motivation for undertaking the program was a strong desire to continue her use of

Japanese on a day-to-day basis. Sophie's motive here raises an important matter concerning the issue of sustainability, and one that is suggested above in the closing comments on the experiences of Tess. Much literature on regional and rural sustainability involves strategies which might be used either to add value to or to develop resources that exist in the region. However, this material can be flawed by the fact that it fails to account for the need to sustain skills and resources that, while they originate from outside the region, are brought in by local agents who have been sojourners in another site.

The considerable level of Japanese language skill that Sophie acquired as a young exchange student sojourner in Japan is just such a resource. When she returned to the region, the presence of a tertiary Japanese language education program permitted her to maintain her skills. She was also able to develop these skills in a way that would facilitate her transmitting them, as a teacher, to others in the region.

It might be emphasised here that the sustainability of the region, its vitality and its resilience depend on the capacity of local agents not merely to stay in the community, but also to move backwards and forwards between the community and other areas. Such movement is essential to ensure that the community is constantly in a process of revitalising itself. Certainly, some revitalising can occur with foreign agents entering the community from outside and establishing networks through which a rejuvenating contribution can be distributed and acknowledged. However, there can be strong resistance (see also Allison & Douglas, this issue) to this input from the outside on the part of local agents, who, for various reasons not always defensible, can sometimes decline to accept as legitimate the revitalising activities in which visitors engage. This can be the case even if the duration of the visitors' time in the region extends into years or decades.

It follows, then, that the region needs to support programs and activities that enhance the development of skills enabling a local agent to move out of and back into the community. I am cognisant of the reservations expressed by theorists, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2001), to the effect that the term 'community' can refer to an unreflective space that heralds exclusion and ultimately disintegration. Nevertheless, I would argue that the maintenance of diversity in a community acts as a preventative against such a possibility. As argued at the outset, this diversity is greatly enhanced by the presence of second language speakers and of programs to develop those speakers.

I am particularly interested in examining the local regional community as a site for “imagining alternative possibilities for the future” (Dirlik, 1996, p. 22). I do not wish to romanticise this function of locality, but rather to investigate the local as a site of both “promise and predicament” (Dirlik, 1996, p. 22). With respect to the matter of predicament, there is no doubt that the implementation of programs in regional areas can be fraught with the difficulties that arise from dilemmas such as fragile economies of scale and limited capacities for broadening options. Nevertheless, we need also to acknowledge the tremendous strategic potential for innovation inherent in regional communities that are without the centrist, non-negotiable, regulatory tendencies of the metropolitan spheres. The region might be conceptualised as a terrain in which we are given the capacity to hear “previously inaudible voices” (Dirlik, 1996, p. 22), including voices that speak to us in a second language, and that have the capacity to engage and promote education in that terrain if they are recognised and accorded ‘speakers’ rights’.

When asked about the reasons that she chose to study in the local area, Sophie was adamant that the support of her family was the most significant reason. Having already spent a year in Japan, she was not disturbed by the thought of separation from her family *per se*. However, she was aware that undertaking tertiary study without this support would have presented considerably more difficulty than study close to her family home. The notion of studying in a familiar geographical location was also reassuring, in that she would not be required to spend considerable time and emotional energy orientating herself to complicated and unfamiliar surroundings. She was also cognisant of the value of having previously established her credentials in the area as a part-time employee. Thus, she had a strong sense of identity as a member of a regional community.

However, existing simultaneously with this sense of regional belonging was an equally strong sense as a proficient speaker of the Japanese language and as a Japanese literate Australian. Scholars such as Jane Williamson-Fien (1994) and Fazal Rizvi (1993) have written of the dangers of programs that are designed to develop Asian literacy among Australians and that rely on little more than discursive representations of a monolithic, unproblematic Asia. Sophie’s Japan literacy— that is, her knowledge and understanding of Japanese language and culture – and those aspects of her Australian identity that derived from this Japan literacy were not of that variety. She had lived in Japan for an extended length of time on a number of occasions, and had also developed friendship bonds with Japanese students studying at her university as exchange students

throughout the four years of her program. Her Japan literacy was, therefore, grounded in a range of lived experiences of considerable breadth and depth. In this respect she was an exemplar of what Garbutcheon Singh (2001) refers to above as a citizen "integral to establishing egalitarian multilingualism as a representation and project of Australian identity formation and nation-building" (p. 123). Thus, she could make a unique and highly valuable contribution to her regional community.

When asked what aspects of the program that she believed had been most beneficial to her, she was unequivocal that it was the opportunity to have contact with and to socialise with young students from Japan. These international students, some of who were also sessional teachers in the program, ensured the presence of a vigorous learning environment in which Sophie could maintain and expand her Japanese language proficiency. She commented on this as follows:

What I really loved was being able to speak Japanese when I wanted to. The tutors were fantastic: they really helped us and they spoke Japanese all the time so that meant we could too. The best part was student consultations where we got to see them outside class and you could really talk about what you wanted to with them. I really like that. You could be really relaxed. I think that's when you learn your best language.

Her comments are significant in that they reveal the manner in which the program gave Sophie, like Tess, the opportunity to engage in a productive activity of value to herself, but also with the capacity to add value to the local community. Through her participation in the program and her interaction with the Japanese staff, she was able to do something that would otherwise have been possible only in a site distant from a region. Performance of the skill in that distant site would certainly have contributed to Sophie's personal development. However, there would have been limited contribution to the sustainability of the region. In Sophie's case, being able to perform the skill in the local area was intimately connected with her desire to remain in regional areas as a Japanese teacher upon graduation. In this respect, her potential contribution was much greater than that of an outside agent with similar skills. The likelihood of outside metropolitan agents who enter the regions remaining for any length of time to undertake a sustained transfer of skills to local agents is relatively small. Outside agents tend to move in and out of the region in an itinerant manner (see also Harreveld and Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, this issue) and, while some do establish themselves as

reliable local presences, the probability of this occurring is significantly less than in the case of established local agents.

CONCLUSION

I have argued here that the provision of a second language program in an Australian regional university creates a site of ferment in which multiple possibilities arise for the region to sustain itself and to maintain the vitality necessary to provide practical and cultural services to its members. I have suggested that the notion of multilingualism among the citizens of 21st century nations is an imperative if nations are to participate fully in the global economic and cultural world. I have further contended that the right to access second language programs is one that is the province of all citizens, including those in regional areas. The dynamic generated by a regional second language program contributes positively to the life chances of individual students, the sustainability of the local area and, ultimately, the national cultural wealth. It is essential, therefore, that such programs be retained and expanded.

As highly skilled local agents, the young women studied in this project have the capacity to contribute to the general viability, sustainability and resilience of their region. Being local subjects, they have undergone local rites of passage, giving them the status of "subjects who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbours, friends, and enemies" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 179). Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (1996) have pointed out that "these spaces of the local, within the practice of everyday life[,]...can provide a spawning ground" for those various "surreptitious creativities" of "reuse, recoding and deterritorialization" (p. 4). As Bauman's (2001) thoughts on community demonstrate, such creative and strategic deterritorialisation is essential for communities, regional or otherwise, to remain active and alive.

This is not to romanticise or gloss over the problems that arise in these contexts, for, as Dirlík (1996) notes, any promise offered is also accompanied by predicament. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, second language study in a regional area can result in significant personal and social gain for local subjects involved, in addition to creating revitalising spaces of recuperation for the community generally. This is a significant means of promoting education in such an area and thereby of engaging its residents as learners.

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