



Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools

St Andrews Lutheran College, Queensland

The school and its language programme

St Andrews Lutheran College is a P-12, independent, co-ed College located in the Tallebudgera Valley at the southern end of the Gold Coast. The College has an above-average ICSEA value. According to the ABS, the vast majority of residents (89 per cent) speak only English at home. Most residents are either Australia-born or migrants from English-speaking countries like England or New Zealand.

The College's Junior School (Prep-6) is an authorised International Baccalaureate (IB) World School. The College runs a mandatory Japanese language programme, and students study Japanese from Prep through to Year 6. After Year 6, they choose either to continue with Japanese or to begin learning German until the end of Year 9. In 2015, students in the Early Learning Centre have also begun learning Japanese once a week.

The College emphasises the intercultural and educational benefits of learning a second language, including improved brain functionality, greater appreciation of other cultures and better English literacy skills.

What works and how?

St Andrews seeks to work in partnership with the students' homes and emphasises the importance of collaborative effort by students, staff and parents to enable successful learning. The College references education research on parental engagement in explaining its approach to working with parents. Particular emphasis is placed on the junior years, where the learning of Japanese is mandatory for students. The Junior School handbook highlights how parents are the primary educators of children and that school-aged children thrive when parents are actively engaged in their learning.

Sharon Taki, the Junior School Japanese Coordinator, cited two activities aimed at enabling and encouraging parents to support their child's learning of Japanese. First, the school holds an annual Student-Led Conference (SLC), where all students share with their parents for 40 minutes the work from their Learning Portfolios. This sharing includes work completed as part of the Japanese programme. Students take their parents on classroom tours to discuss classroom displays and their key learnings. Sharon elaborates:

This is an opportunity for parents to visit the Japanese classroom and to see what learning is occurring. Students share with their parents their current Japanese unit and what knowledge they have gained. It provides the student with a sense of accomplishment and pride.

During the SLC, students are allowed to use their mother tongue to present their learnings to their parents. This approach not only facilitates parent-child communication about learning, but also responds to the cultural and linguistic diversity within the College.

Almost all parents (98 per cent) attend the SLCs each year. According to Sharon, gaining first-hand insights into their children's Japanese learning enables parents to develop positive views about learning a language. She describes, 'We see this as a cycle. Parents show interest in their child's learning, and the child is then even more eager to gain more knowledge.'

The College has conducted a small survey to learn more about parents' views on the value of the SLCs. Overall, parents were very positive about the SLCs, and see these as useful for:

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- developing insights into what their child is learning in Japanese, which encourages them to support language learning at home
- finding out how to better support their child's language learning
- gaining a better idea of how their child is traveling in learning Japanese.

The following statements from two parents further illustrate the success of the SLCs with respect to the Japanese language programme.

[The SLC] allowed me to see what was being learnt and provided additional information to [enable me to] further interact [with my children] and base discussions about what they were learning in Japanese.

I think supporting the learning of a language and being interested in their class work helps keep them motivated.

The second parental engagement initiative is linked to the school's Moodle (intranet) site. The School Performance Report for 2013 mentions that the use of Moodle has reinforced the school-home nexus. It also provides another way for parents to assist their child's language learning.

Each term the College sends a letter to parents—at each year level—outlining what students will learn in Japanese, including the unit of inquiry, sentence patterns and vocabulary. This material is made available, with corresponding voice recordings, on Moodle. This initiative enables parents to learn basic Japanese together with their children and monitor their learning.

Why it works

Endorsement and promotion by school leadership of the active role that parents can play in their children's learning is a key factor for successful parental engagement (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). Including such commitment into a school's official mission and profile is an important first step. This signals to teachers that parents' active engagement should be encouraged and appreciated, and it sends a message to parents that their active contribution to their child's learning is needed and wanted (Emerson et al., 2012).

The SLCs at St Andrews have been successful in fostering communication between teachers, parents and students. Parents subsequently have a better idea of their child's learning and can find more relevant ways to strengthen their child's motivation for learning and academic performance (Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002; Prescott & Orton, 2012).

Student-led events tend to attract many more parents to a school than open-door policies that might cause some groups of parents to refrain from visiting (Daniel, 2011). The fact that students have the option of presenting their learning portfolio in their native language shows how the SLCs at St Andrews seek to cater for a culturally and/or linguistically diverse parenthood (Kim, 2009).

With respect to the Japanese programme, the College's Moodle site has helped improve school-home communication. Parents are better equipped to support their children's language learning at home and monitor their progress. Such active engagement is beneficial to students' language learning success (Gardner, Masgoret & Trembaly, 1999).

About AEF

The Asia Education Foundation provides teachers, education leaders and school communities with innovative programmes, curriculum resources and networks to support the achievement of Asia literacy for every young Australian.

AEF is a joint activity of Asialink at The University of Melbourne and Education Services Australia. It receives core funding from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.

AEF leverages funding to support Asia literacy in Australian schools from a broad range of government, philanthropic and corporate partners in Australia and Asia.

What Works 8

>> This illustration was taken from *What Works 8: Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools*, which can be found on AEF's Web portal at: www.asiaeducation.edu.au/whatworks8
