Three Australian Innovations in Language Education for Business Purposes

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Abstract

Amongst the strategic 'pillars' of Australia's Swinburne University of Technology is a desire to embrace internationalisation. Three years ago a restructure of Swinburne’s Faculty structure was undertaken to encourage this focus. The restructure placed language teaching within the School of Business, in an attempt to enhance the international focus of the business courses and to provide a fresh and unique focus for language teaching. The result is a highly distinctive blend of Asian and European focussed language programs with practical business teaching. This paper outlines innovative teaching developments that have taken place in response to this challenge. It exposes a set of ‘language and culture’ curriculum innovations, overseas work experience opportunities that may be incorporated within student courses, and web-based reading and listening interactive lessons for Japanese language acquisition which have all contributed to enhancing the position of the Languages department and blending the Languages curriculum with the International Business program.

Introduction

Swinburne University of Technology is a relatively small public university offering pre-university (Technical and Further Education), graduate and postgraduate courses. It acquired the status of university in 1992 and has strong business, arts, engineering, and IT departments, as well as the postgraduate Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship. Language teaching was shifted from the Faculty of Arts some seven years ago. Prior to a restructure by the university of its Faculty structure in support of strategic directions including, inter alia, entrepreneurship and a global focus, the Languages unit proposed that a linguistic/commercial approach would provide a stronger market niche for the attraction of future students. This strategy fitted well with the general direction of the university as a whole, particularly in view of the university’s push to internationalise its academic activities. In addition it appeared to be the only example of its kind in Australia – language teaching fully integrated within a School of Business. This special program has proven to be successful and is achieving positive results both from the students’ perspective and from the interaction between Languages and Business staff.
The Clients

The students come from a range of quite disparate sources. A double degree (Business/Arts with specialization in a language and culture) allows the combination of a Business and an Arts degree (in Italian language/European Studies or Japanese) over a four-year period. This is one year longer than a normal Business degree and gives the students not only exposure to another language and culture but to an internationalisation which they would otherwise not have had. The university agrees to provide a fixed but constant quota of students and encourages students from other faculties, coming from completely different source degrees, to take on these courses as minors or electives. Some 70 percent of the students currently involved in the language streams would be double degree students.

The students include a mix of some with no Italian/Japanese background or studies and those with pre-university language entry requirements completed. Students with a background of the language enter an Advanced stream, while those with little or no language background enter an Introductory stream.

Because of the centrality of the two language/countries undertaken, it was feasible to build around Italy and Italian language studies a European perspective and curriculum, and on the Japanese language side, to build an Asian studies perspective and curriculum. This paper offers three aspects of innovative teaching practice within this context: the Bachelor of Business/Arts (Italian or Japanese) double degree; an overseas work experience opportunity ('Work Experience in Japan' and 'Work Experience in Europe' - hereafter 'WEIJ' and 'WEIE'), and web-based reading and listening interactive lessons for Japanese language acquisition.

The Bachelor of Business/Bachelor of Arts (Italian or Japanese)

Double Degree

Students at Swinburne University may complete a double degree in Business and Arts (with specialization in a language area). This is viewed by the University and students alike as being superior to a single degree (in business, for example) as a preparation for work in international business.

Content

Generally, the content of the language and culture courses must be contemporary, with teaching of the language and culture that also has a practical commercial relevance. Curriculum must have a contemporary focus, emphasizing applicability, and with a strong linkage to business language and practices. Specifically, such content should:

1. provide linguistic proficiency in Italian or Japanese, including knowledge of the business language and culture;
2. impart competence in the social and economic environments of Italy and Japan;
3. seek to analyse the policies and regulations governing the European Union and Asia and their business environments;
4. develop the interdisciplinary links between Italian and European studies or between Japanese and Asian studies so as to extend the students' horizons.

**Figure 1.1**
Swinburne University of Technology School of Business Integration of Business and Languages: a Model

The above model illustrates how the integration of business with languages and culture at Swinburne has necessitated the adoption of a cross disciplinary approach. The resultant courses provide access for students to European and Asian cultures and languages for the business disciplines and vice-versa.

Over the past few years, the language and culture majors in Italian and Japanese Studies have been completely reshaped and their content reassessed in order to ensure that a clear business perspective was introduced which also complemented the international business subjects taught by the Business staff. The language and culture-based curriculum is also internally integrated. For example, the European Union program interacts closely with the Italian Studies program, each supporting the other. Italy is viewed as the gateway to getting to know and appreciate Europe and European business and Swinburne has developed strong contacts particularly...
with Italian authorities and industry links both in Australia and in Italy. In addition, the double degree provides links between the European Union and the Italian business environments, viewed from an Australian perspective. It ensures a complete integration of the EU, Italy and Australia, from the perspective of their economic and cultural systems, into the academic curriculum. The double degree aims to improve students' skills and increase their own resources by providing a competent knowledge of the European Union and its market which aims to develop a new relationships between Australia and Europe.

In a study conducted in USA by Turley and Shannon (1999), students of international marketing considered it important to be able to write and speak in a language other than English. An overwhelming percentage stated that it was desirable to be able to speak and write in a language other than English. The four top languages preferred by the students were Spanish, French, German and Italian.

Students wishing to combine Business and Italian or Japanese are required to understand the business culture, the business jargon and etiquette of Italy or Japan, and be able to read Italian/Japanese newspaper in order to appreciate the political, economical and social arena in which s/he may be required to work. In addition, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how European/Asian matters may affect the local market. Swinburne double degree graduates attempt to build these skills. They will eventually be culturally fluent, business competent and well prepared to bring their skills into a company ready to face the European or Asian market. The program is constantly being refined and updated in order to provide students with competent and unique skills which will give them the edge over their counterparts.

Implementation: Teaching and Learning Strategies

The repositioning of an innovative Languages curriculum and its implementation proved challenging, particularly as Languages staff are normally trained in the literary, linguistic (applied or pure linguistics) and sometimes other Arts-related areas such as politics or history, but generally have no training in the business area. Finding appropriately qualified staff, with expertise in European and Italian business or with an interest in Japanese business, willing and committed to join the staff of a Languages section became one of the most challenging obstacles. Slowly, as word spread about the unusual type of course being developed at Swinburne, it began to attract the appropriate people with varied expertise and experience in doing business in Europe and Italy. Their unique and differing skills and knowledge were highly valued, even more than high academic qualifications. These staff members have proven very successful in their teaching roles as well as in their interaction with staff of the rest of the School of Business.

Overall the languages staff have made a substantial contribution in the areas of international research, cross teaching, the development of the international business curriculum, both at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels, and in the general internationalization of the Business program. An on-going marketing campaign of the double degree programs ensures that within the university, students are educated about the potential long-range benefits that business studies combined with language and culture studies may have on their future career. Over the last few years, this campaign has been extended to secondary schools, drawing attention to the importance of internationalising students' horizons and offering
them the opportunity of continuing the study of a language, Italian or Japanese, in conjunction with their tertiary studies.

Over the last couple of years a concerted marketing exercise was carried out in conjunction with the University’s Divisional Marketing Office, targeting career advisors in schools. This has been a successful promotional strategy, which identified those students who are not only attracted to language study, but who are also able to see a definite connection between competence in a second language and their future international business career.

Web-based Reading and Listening Interactive Lessons for Japanese Language Acquisition

The Students

In semesters one and two, 2002, a class of 26 second year students of Japanese from the Beginner’s Stream (Japanese 2A) (six male and 20 female) and 20 first year post-Victorian Certificate in Education (VCE) students (Advanced Japanese 1A) (two male and 18 female) were combined for the reading section of the Japanese subjects in which they were enrolled.

Identical reading passages were developed for the two groups, as the level of Kanji (Chinese character) acquisition is identical for both groups of students, in an experiment aimed at increasing flexibility of the learning experience, increasing exposure time to written and spoken Japanese and improving subject delivery. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) courseware was developed to enable student’s flexibility of time, place and pace of learning vocabulary, expressions and Kanji. Students are all undergraduates and range in age from 17 to 24 years of age.

The majority of students were enrolled in a combined Bachelor of Business/Bachelor of Arts (Japanese) degree (67 percent; 31 students) with 15 percent (seven students) enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts degree. 11 percent (five students) of the combined group of students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Business degree; seven percent (three students) were students from other institutions that do not offer Japanese. 85 percent (39 students) of the total number of students were majoring in Japanese language, while the remaining 15 percent (7 students) were minoring in the language.

Similar courseware was designed for the Semester 2 Beginner’s Stream of first year Japanese (Japanese 1B). Of the 28 students enrolled in Japanese 1B, eight (three percent) are male, 20 (71 percent) female. 46 percent (13 students) of the class are students of the Bachelor of Business/Bachelor of Arts (Japanese) course; 29 percent (eight students) are from Bachelor of Business; 18 percent (five students) are enrolled in Bachelor of Arts degrees; one student each is from the Bachelor of Engineering course and the Bachelor of Applied Science (Computer Science and Software Engineering).

Rationale

Research into SLA (Second Language Acquisition) shows that Japanese, as a character-based language, requires an average of 2600 contact hours to reach basic
proficiency as opposed to 960 hours for the major Western languages. However, prior to the current innovation, there were only 400-500 contact hours over three years for most Japanese language programs at university level (Ingleson 1989). In order to overcome this short-coming and to increase exposure to the target language, it was felt that CALL courseware centred on the reading passages could provide interesting and stimulating activities for SLA learners of Japanese and could enhance the learning experience. In addition to improving learning opportunities and engaging them for a longer time, the development of CALL courseware for the reading passages has the potential to provide teaching and learning materials to cater for the diverse backgrounds and ability levels present in our classes, and to increase overall flexibility for learners.

Delivery

The Japanese section, together with technical assistance from Learning and Teaching Support (LTS) at Swinburne developed reading and listening passages in Japanese for interactive web-based delivery, and continue to do so. A multimedia web-authoring package, ‘Macromedia Flash’, is being used to create an environment that allows illustrative text and graphics to be superimposed on screen, along with digitized sound. In this way, learners are able to control access to a glossary or explanatory note by clicking on a highlighted word or phrase (‘hotword’) when the need arises. Learners are also able to control a digitized reading of the passage, sentence-by-sentence or of the entire passage by selecting an appropriate icon. With this program, learners are able to exert complete control over whether to use the annotations or sound, while not being distracted by unnecessary information.

The web-based reading and listening interactive passages were developed as a teaching and learning ‘tool’ rather than as a ‘tutor’. The use of the computer as a ‘tutor’ would entail temporary or permanent replacement of the teacher, whereas the computer as ‘tool’ requires the teacher and learner to work together. The benefits of using the computer as a ‘tool’ are that it can be used to engage, empower and emancipate both the learner and teacher.

Discussion

According to research into SLA, in comparison to traditional paper-based reading material, embedding information into a reading passage in this way is similar to the natural and communicative approach to language learning (Krashen 1981, Young 1983). As students have complete control over when, where and how long to study, as well as whether to use the embedded sound, glossary or explanatory notes, the learning process is truly learner-centred and interactive (Sims 1999). SLA researchers such as Benson (1997), Pennycook (1997) and Wenden (2002) advocate a learner-centred approach but this is difficult to achieve in a traditional classroom setting. The web-based interactive reading and listening Japanese passages cater for the diversity of capabilities, motivation, learning styles and different background of experiences that learners bring with them, further adding to the learner centred aspects of this approach.

The interactive reading and listening passages allow students to choose the depth of mastery they wish to achieve in reading and listening comprehension with
the added option of improving pronunciation. The interactive passages provide for a variety of learning styles with contextual feedback. As compared with traditional classroom teaching, learners are provided with flexibility of choosing the place, time and pace that learning occurs.

Evaluation

Focus groups and online surveys were conducted in semester one, 2002. Subsequent studies on different groups of students are currently being carried out to further support the efficacy of the interactive reading and listening passages. Future enhancements to the reading and listening interactive passages will be based on the outcomes of the focus groups and surveys.

The first study was carried out to find out how students experienced using the online interactive exercises. It consisted of a focus group of five student volunteers from the combined class of first year advanced Japanese and second year beginner's stream. A small group situation was used to ensure that high quality data would be obtained (Madriz, 1995:842). The focus group was selected as an appropriate method to explore student views on learning through using technology within a real-life context (students' personal experience) (Yin 1989:13). An online survey was also used to collect data from the students enrolled in the combined class of first year advanced Japanese and second year beginner's stream. Eighteen students responded.

A range of questions about student experiences using the online interactive exercises in relation to their learning process, and their ideas on how the program could be improved provided valuable feedback to both academic and technical development staff. Students indicated that their engagement with the learning resource technology was a very positive experience. The technical interface was reported to be easy to use and navigate. They reported that they were using the online exercises to enhance and consolidate their traditional study methods of using exercises from the textbook.

Students highlighted the fact that effective use of the sound files required orientation and coaching beforehand in order to make appropriate use of the sound. They found that the inclusion of sound enabled them to learn the correct pronunciation of the Japanese words and expressions, as well as enabling them to read and follow the reading of each sentence, including individual Kanji. They commented that this increased their confidence. Students commented that they gained confidence by being able to move on without wondering 'Do I understand this or not'. Learners received positive reinforcement for things they mastered and were able to correct errors and know with confidence that they now had it right. Examples of stroke formation for Kanji were regarded as being highly valuable. Students requested that more of these exercises be included in future interactive lessons.

The results of the studies into the efficacy of our web-based reading and listening interactive lessons indicate that they are an effective learning 'tool' (Levy, 1997:178-214) rather than a program designed to 'tutor'. In order to continue improving the learning material, a collaborative effort between the teachers and learners is indicated. The findings also indicate that CALL as a tool offers great potential for effective language learning tasks that otherwise might be tedious (Gunn, 1997; Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999). Students reported that they
were better able to work independently and control the way they learned, for a greater degree of learner autonomy (Blin, 1999:136-143). In order to use CALL to its full potential, the findings indicate that students need to be shown how to apply learning strategies (Vance, 1999:15; Wenden, 2002:47).

The evaluation studies indicate that CALL has potential to provide student-centred learning that is engaging and empowering for learners. However, a collaborative approach between teaching staff and students is needed to maximize the teaching/learning material.

Work Experience in Japan (WEIJ) and Work Experience in Europe (WEIE)

Introduction

The Work Experience in Japan (WEIJ) and Work Experience in Europe (WEIE) programs act as capstone subjects for students wishing to consolidate their academic studies on Japan/Europe with an in-country work ‘experience’. It is a way for students to apply their theoretical understanding of Japan/Europe with a practical and involving one. Almost ten years ago, Swinburne University came to the realization that living and working experiences can be as rewarding and more effective than lecture-structure learning scenarios.

Students who undertake the Swinburne School of Business Japanese and Italian majors study a sequence of eight subjects. This combines the study of business and Japanese/Italian language and culture, often within a double degree structure. Students undertaking these majors are offered the opportunity to apply for a subject known as Work Experience in Japan (WEIJ), alternatively for the Work Experience in Europe (WEIE) subject. Such students must have been enrolled in the major for at least two years, and must have a good level of language proficiency.

The Work Experience in Japan (WEIJ) or in Europe (WEIE) programs involve employment in a firm for a period of three to six months, providing exposure to facets of life and work that cannot be gained from classroom lectures. In addition to providing immersion in a Japanese-European language environment, a language learning strategy known to be very successful (Hornby, P. A. 1980, McDonald, S. C. 1991 Rolin-Janziti, J.; Brownlie, S. 2002), the experience is designed to provide an opportunity for students to apply their business learning within an offshore business environment. In this way students are assisted in the development of a confident approach to working in another country, and to exploration of the potential for future careers in Australian companies engaged in business with Japan or Europe.

WEIJ/WEIE Objectives

Work experience abroad is an exciting and effective path for students to gain immediate experience in an international setting. Learning to live, work and understand a different international reality is a major lifelong enrichment experience, which will remain for years to come. WEIJ and WEIE not only provide a concrete international experience, but also assist the process of bridging the gap
between academic 'textbook' explanations and the 'street' reality in an unfolding world of major complexity. Undertaking this work experience abroad puts international business into a new perspective for students.

Content and Delivery

WEIJ/WEIE is undertaken under supervision with a mentor from Swinburne. Prior to their departure, students negotiate with their subject convenor and their Japanese/European employer an area of particular interest to explore whilst employed in Japan/Europe. Suggested business topics include:

- Product marketing;
- Management practices;
- In-company education/training;
- Decision-making;
- Role of the union;
- Interpersonal relations within the company hierarchy and how these are reflected in language;
- Position of women in the Japanese/European company;
- Training of personnel for overseas posting, etc.

The practicum consists of six months' work experience in a Japanese company and three months in a European company either selected by the subject convenor from a number of firms with whom Swinburne has developed a strong relationship, or with a company known to the student and agreed to by the University.

The ideal placement is within an organization which will further the understanding of Japan or a nation within Europe and how it goes about its normal business. Having a good command of the language of the country, the student ought to be prepared to take a greater interest in the direction and the mission of the organization in which they work and its relevance to international business. In the case of Europe it becomes important that during their placement, students become aware of issues dealing with the European economic integration. This may be in the area of European integration, trade between European States, competition policy, doing business within the EU and outside of the EU.

Students move into positions equivalent to Japanese junior office personnel. The University may assist with finding either suitable independent accommodation or a home stay arrangement. Students may be provided with access to company recreation and other employee facilities.

The WEIJ and WEIE are highly regarded programs, both for students undertaking the Japanese/Italian majors and their future employers. The placement comes towards the end of their studies when students have gained good language and business competence. At this stage in their course, most students have also gained a level of maturity and independence that enables them to handle the situation and to exploit the opportunity. The School of Business offers students a rare opportunity to take up this experience and to be academically accredited for it.

WEIJ/WEIE students undergo assessment. In keeping with principles of action research, students are required to maintain a 'work diary' during the period of employment in which they describe aspects of their work experience shortly after they take place. It is both a reflective and a descriptive learning record, highlighting issues relating to management, reporting problems confronted and the like. The work diary is submitted within 3 weeks of the completion of the work.
experience. In addition, the WEIJE/EIE subjects are graded on the completion of a project, essay or assignment report based on an agreed business topic or theme of relevance to each specific work experience placement. It is anticipated that with appropriate ethics protocols, analysis of student diaries, reports and other forms of debriefing will allow worthwhile evaluation of the WEIJE/EIE programs against their stated objectives.

Conclusion

This paper has reported three instances of creative teaching responses to the challenge of a thorough integration of business and language learning. Each aspect contributes to a complete program of language and culture which interrelates very closely with courses focusing on the business environments of Europe and Japan. The International Business program together with its language and culture components is constantly evaluated, reviewed and regularly updated in order to maintain its relevance in an ever changing International Business environment. Through developments such as these, both the Italian/European and Japanese staff have been able to contribute to the development and the teaching of an innovative and highly successful international business program. These innovations may well be of interest to other universities wishing to integrate language and culture studies into their business programs.

While technological developments have been important in the development of one of these cases (the web based Japanese learning case), a willingness to think laterally and to experiment has been a necessity for each innovation reported. Underlying these changes is also an enormous level of enthusiasm displayed by both staff and students to create new, innovative and successful programs more ideally suited to the needs and interests of students who may be keen to integrate language studies with a business focus.

The case raises issues requiring further research. One such issue of which requires attention is that of longer-term course evaluation. Each innovation reported is subject to evaluation by both students and staff, combining the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data from each cohort of students. Such data has value. However, longitudinal study which follows graduates into their working lives would add considerably to the evaluation of these innovations. Such research would contribute answers to key questions concerning the medium and long-term benefits of the innovations experienced by students. Such longitudinal research would need to carefully address the issue of the extent to which subsequent work experience of graduates can be attributed to the innovations discussed, rather than to other factors. This would not be easy. A large scale empirical study using careful control of confounding variables such as overall student ability and on the job training as a graduate would be useful to this end, although doubtless difficult to design and execute. Ethnographic or other detailed qualitative study could also provide valuable insight on the subsequent work experiences of graduates and any perceived impact of student experiences such as have been discussed here on graduate's subsequent working life.
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Bionote

Dr Railton Hill has worked in small business, broadcasting, and account management, in addition to his academic career. He has worked in TAFE, and in
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**Bruno Mascitelli** is a lecturer in Italian and European Union Business Studies within the School of Business at Swinburne University. Bruno graduated from Melbourne University in 1975 (B.Arts) and completed a Master in International Business at Swinburne University (2001). Bruno previously worked for the Australian Trade Commission for 17 years in Milan, Italy and for the U.S. Commercial Service in Melbourne for 2 years. His major responsibilities over these two decades was in conducting market research, business development and liaising with industry and government.

**Tokuya Mizuno** has worked in Japan as a training officer in the transport industry. In his current position as lecturer in Japanese language, he has developed a new subject called Japanese for Business and Industry which focuses on Japanese business culture, including training for students who go to Japan to participate in the “Work Experience in Japan” program.

**Theresa Savage** has worked in education and training for many years, including 2 years experience in Japan. She has taught at all levels in the field of education, from kindergarten to postgraduate. She is currently lecturing in Japanese Linguistics and International Business at Swinburne University and undertaking research at both Swinburne and LaTrobe universities.