

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Increasing language participation in secondary schools: Armidale High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how classroom practices and school factors are encouraging language participation at Armidale High School. This is one of a series of case studies looking at classroom practice and language participation in NSW government secondary schools.

Background

Armidale High School is a co-educational, partially selective secondary school located in Armidale in the Northern Tablelands of NSW. It has an enrolment of approximately 700 students. Seventeen per cent of students enrolled are Aboriginal and 9% are from a language background other than English (My School 2016). The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA²) value that is slightly below state average

Armidale High School, according to the principal, prides itself on having a school culture that embraces multiculturalism and a broad curriculum. The school offers a number of languages at varying levels. In Year 7, all students undertake 'taster' courses in Japanese, French, and German. They also complete an Aboriginal Studies unit. The mandatory 100 hours are completed in Year 8 in German or Japanese, and these two languages are available as electives in Year 9 and 10. Stage 6 Beginners courses are run in Japanese, French and German and Stage 6 Continuers courses are offered in German and Japanese.

Students in Year 8 at Armidale High School are more likely to cite languages as one of their favourite school subjects than students at other schools. They are also more likely than students at other schools to state that languages are one of the three subjects they think they learn the most in. Interestingly, Aboriginal students in Year 8 at Armidale High School are particularly likely (compared to Aboriginal students at other schools) to state that languages are one of their favourite subjects (NSW Department of Education [VALID] data 2016).

In 2014, Armidale High School won the HTB Harris Award³ for their work in languages. The award recognises a program or coordinated approach to an educational need that emphasises innovative thinking, planning and action. Two of the language teachers at Armidale High School were honoured in particular, for their innovative language teaching programs using technology, and organising cultural exchanges with sister schools.



1 Tammy Cameron is the Head Teacher HSIE, and is also one of the language teachers at Armidale High School.

2 ICSEA is a measure of school socio-educational advantage created by ACARA.

3 The ACE (Australian College of Educators) New England Harris Award is open to any public or independent school or any community educational organisation, at any level of education within the north west region of NSW.

Classroom practices

The classroom practices at Armidale High School that appear to be particularly relevant to engaging and retaining students in languages are an emphasis on making language learning engaging through a focus on cultural immersion and excursions, and the use of technology in the classroom.

Making language learning engaging through cultural immersion and excursions

Armidale High School has a strong commitment to make language learning 'fun' in order to engage students in their learning⁴. Two of the primary ways in which Armidale High School makes language fun are to immerse students in the culture, and to focus on excursions and cultural exchanges with schools overseas.

There are many immersion opportunities offered at Armidale High School to engage students with language study. The opportunity to be immersed in a different language and culture, according to teachers at the school, can be particularly important in a rural school where there is usually less multiculturalism than in the bigger cities and thus less exposure to different languages and cultures. Ways in which students are immersed in language learning at Armidale High School include a focus on cultural activities in the junior years – for example Japanese tea-making ceremonies or sushi-making lessons.

The language classrooms are also decorated with cultural objects and the teachers make a point of greeting the students in the target language at the start of each lesson. For example, the Japanese teacher greets her students in Japanese and uses appropriate cultural gestures such as bowing. These students are also exposed to other aspects of Japanese culture such as manga and anime.

Armidale High School also places importance on ensuring students have access to overseas study tours, as well as hosting cultural exchanges at the school. For example, every second year, Years 9 and 10 students are offered the opportunity to visit Japan. There are also excursions to New Caledonia for the French students and opportunities for German students to stay with host families in Germany and attend school locally. Students who had participated in these opportunities talked about how much they enjoyed these trips, how much it broadened their understanding of the language and culture, and the motivation it gave them to continue studying languages. The school also has a Japanese sister school whose students visit Armidale annually and are hosted by local families. These students are visited in Japan by Armidale High School students every second year. These visits promote understanding of Japanese culture among the broader school community and may contribute to a greater interest in studying languages at Armidale High School.

Use of technology in the classroom

Armidale High School has a commitment to 21st century learning. A 21st century curriculum is specifically highlighted as one of Armidale's three areas of focus in their school plan⁵. An integral component of a twenty-first century curriculum is the effective integration of technology into schools. This includes the ability of teachers to access technology, using technology in the classroom in practical ways, using technology to build effective practice and using technology to share practices and learning with colleagues in the virtual and real worlds.

Technology is viewed as a key factor in teaching languages at Armidale High School. Language teachers and students use iPads and Chromebooks, and much of the teaching and learning is completed through apps, online programs and online communication tools such as Skype. For example, one of the online programs used at Armidale High school is Language Perfect (provided through the Education Perfect platform)⁶. Language Perfect provides an opportunity to make language learning more engaging and interesting for students, especially for more 'boring' aspects of language learning such as grammar. Programs such as Language Perfect also provide instant feedback to both students and teachers about learning progress. iPads are also used at Armidale High School to teach the Japanese script as it provides a more 'fun' way for students to learn and stay engaged with their learning, and Skype is used so that students can chat in Japanese with their sister school in Japan. Students at Armidale High School said that they enjoy these Skype chats and that it is a fun and useful way to learn Japanese.



4 This is not to say that the challenge and rigor of language learning were removed, but that students were engaged in their learning through 'fun' activities.

5 The other two areas of focus in the school plan are: high quality educational practice, and school and community learning

6 Education Perfect is an online learning platform which aims to improve learning outcomes and increase student engagement.

School-based practices

While technology and making language learning fun are seen as important factors contributing to language participation at Armidale High School, some school-based practices also contribute to participation in languages. These school-based practices are flexible learning spaces and collaboration.

Flexible learning spaces

While technology can be seen as an important aspect of 21st century learning, so too are flexible learning spaces. They provide communal spaces that can be configured in different ways for specific learning experiences and provide opportunities for people to work together in new ways.

Armidale High School has embraced flexible learning spaces in languages. This is particularly evident in the Japanese classroom, but is also seen in other language classrooms. The Japanese teacher stated that the reasons she embraces a flexible learning space are twofold. It is partly to provide a sense of immersion in the culture, so that when students walk through the door they feel like they are in Japan and “when you are in Japan this is what you do – these are the courtesies, the cultural practices and this is how we learn”. The other reason she favours a flexible learning space is to remove some of the barriers to learning a foreign language. It can be confronting for students learning about a new and different culture⁷, so she feels that providing a different type of classroom structure makes the students more comfortable and gives them a better feel for learning about something different. On the other hand, the French classroom, which was used mainly by senior students, is arranged in a more ‘mature’, adult learning way as this is what the students prefer. This means that there is more structure with desks, but there are also lap tables if students do not want to sit at desks, as well as a reading space and a kitchenette so students can make tea and coffee. Students at Armidale High School stated that they enjoy learning in these spaces.

Collaboration

Collaboration, both within and outside the school, is another factor that appears to encourage language participation at Armidale High School.

Armidale is a ‘university town’ with the University of New England located there. The language teachers at Armidale High School stated that because Armidale is a university town, there is a greater recognition among the population of the importance of studying another language, and this filters through to the number of students studying languages at Armidale High School. The school has strong partnerships with the languages faculty at the University of New England, particularly with the French and German faculties. Armidale High School also offers language teacher placements for student teachers from the University of New England. It is one of the few schools in the area that

offers enough languages to be able to do this. Student language teachers at Armidale High School are encouraged to spend time with all the language teachers at the school.

Armidale also has a considerable number of public, independent and Catholic schools for a town of its size⁸ and the language teachers at Armidale High School often work across these schools to enhance their language offerings. For example, the language teachers at Armidale High School state that they often have professional conversations with languages teachers at other schools in Armidale (be they Catholic, independent or public). There used to be a localised languages network group in Armidale, which the teachers at Armidale High School are looking to revive. Armidale High School also gets together with other local schools in the town for languages days. These sort of activities show the value of languages and promote culture and language within the broader community, which can influence the number of students who choose to study a language at school.



7 Confronting in that students have to think about a way of expressing themselves or doing things that are different to the norm. This may force them to ‘confront’ their existing ideas or experiences.

8 There are 11 schools in total in Armidale. Armidale has a population of around 24,000.



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