



SO YOUR SCHOOL IS LAUNCHING AN ASIAN-LANGUAGE PROGRAM?

FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS are becoming increasingly interested in Asian languages such as Japanese and Chinese, but these languages are distinctly different from more traditional language offerings. As such, they need to be introduced and developed in a slightly different way. To help shed some light on ways to build success into new Asian-language programs, Cheng & Tsui Company talked with Jessica Lee Haxhi, a veteran K-5 Japanese teacher based in Connecticut, and Charlotte Mason, the co-founder of one of the first junior high Chinese programs in the country. These are some of their suggestions:

- **Get Buy-In from Everybody.** Or if not everybody, then at least good representation and support from all the parties involved—students, parents, administration, teachers, even cultural and community groups—at the very beginning of your new Asian-language program.
- **Hire Trained, Enthusiastic Teachers.** Make every effort to rely on professional teachers, not parents or other untrained native speakers. Mason points out that some teachers may need additional professional development to help build pedagogical skills suited to teaching in a Western classroom. You will also want to look for teachers who have confidence in students' abilities to learn the language, and who can express that belief. "Too often, Chinese teachers do not really believe that their American students can learn Chinese," says Mason. "This idea is then unconsciously conveyed to the students."
- **Decide How Much They Need to Read.** The complexity of Japanese and Chinese written characters poses a challenge for those who would teach them to non-native speakers. "You can't just write what you say on the blackboard and expect students to understand it, if they don't know the characters," says Haxhi. The founder of any Asian-language program needs to decide on the basic philosophy and teaching strategies to deal with the challenge. Will you use romanization (*romaji* for Japanese, *pinyin* for Chinese)? How many characters do you want the students to have learned by the end of the term, the year, the program? Or do you want to focus on speaking and listening *before* reading and writing? Talk to education experts in the language and decide these questions early on.
- **Plan for Continuity.** For those just starting an Asian-language program, this may feel like the cart before the horse. But program proponents should be aware of what other learning opportunities and resources are available for future levels of language learning. Where will students go at the end of your program? What do they need to know to be able to move up? This can be a problem for many students going from high school to college-level study, says Haxhi, where requirements for written proficiency may be stricter than they are used to. With both the Chinese and Japanese languages now being tested at the AP level, the question of preparedness and planning takes on fresh urgency for the more advanced students in your program.

Teachers and program administrators can help by being prepared and knowing which other language programs your students may feed into. Work with parents and students to be ready, by helping to locate supplemental study materials, language tutors, and online resources. Remember to look at cultural immersion programs as additional language study opportunities.

• **Be Your Own Best Advocate.** You may have the most brilliant new language program in the state, but no one is going to know or care unless you put your program out in the public eye. That starts even before classes do. “Don’t just add the course to the school catalog and wait,” says Mason; instead, advertise the course among students, and work with administration and teachers to include Asian cultures and histories in other programs.

Be proud of the students and optimistic about the possibilities (without going overboard in your claims), and be prepared to work regularly at your promotions and advocacy. In an excellent article for the Japan Foundation’s *Breeze*, Haxhi points out that advocacy comes in two stages: start-up and ongoing. “Many of us thought that once our programs were established and the students were happy, we could focus purely on our teaching,” she writes. “But administrators change, parents and students are new every year, and budgets fluctuate with the economy. Challenges to language programs can come at any time; only consistent, long-term advocacy can help them to survive.”

Resources

Phone conversation, Charlotte Mason, co-director, China Exchange Initiative.

www.thechinaexchangeinitiative.org

Phone conversation, Jessica Lee Haxhi, Maloney Interdistrict Magnet School, Waterbury, CT.

“Keep the Airplane Flying! Japanese Language Program Advocacy,” by Jessica Lee Haxhi. The *Breeze*, 29, fall 2003. Japan Foundation, Los Angeles.

Asia Society, New York City. Teacher resources and curricula planning materials online.

www.internationaled.org/education www.internationaled.org/education

Japan Foundation, Los Angeles, Advocacy Kit. Order form downloadable at www.jflalc.org.

Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools. www.classK12.org

Chinese Language Teachers Association. clta.osu.edu

Cheng & Tsui Company. Asian-language textbooks and supplementary cultural materials.

www.cheng-tsui.com

This information circular is provided by Cheng & Tsui Company as a service to teachers and administrators who are thinking about starting an Asian-language program in their schools. We welcome feedback, and encourage you to send us questions and challenges that you are facing in your work, for possible inclusion in future circulars.

For more copies of *So Your School Is Launching an Asian-Language Program*, please send us your name, mailing address, and email address.

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