On the Self-Expressive Component in Japanese Language Teaching and Its Syllabus Development

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1. Introduction

The aims of foreign language learning are threefold: the acquisition of effective communication skills, and the use of the language both to learn about the culture and society of native speakers of that language and to explain to them the culture and society of the learner's own country. Foreign language teaching must, therefore, place equal emphasis on these three. Most foreign language teaching, however, while helping learners find about the foreign culture, lags behind in training them how to explain their own. This paper focuses upon Japanese language teaching (JLT), examining the significance to learners of explaining the values and norms of their own countries and looking at methods of syllabus research and development for this purpose.

2. From "teaching Japanese culture" to "learning about other cultures"

Traditional Japanese language teaching program prepared on the Japanese side always saw Japanese language and Japanese culture as one and the same, and thus incorporated the transmission of Japanese culture. This was probably because one of the aims of JLT was to increase the number of foreign nationals with an interest in Japan and an understanding of things Japanese. Teaching Japanese language was considered a good way of getting foreigners to learn about Japan.

Of course, this aspect is important and demands greater attention in the future, but it is unwise to limit the aim of Japanese language teaching merely to "having students learn about Japan," or indeed to place too heavy a weight on

this. Doing so will end up narrowing the goals of Japanese language teaching and, as a result, reduce the scale of the Japanese language teaching endeavor.

Learners wish to tell Japanese people about their own countries. This same desire is seen in the foreign language teaching policies of other countries. Japanese language teaching in Korea, for example, aims to "foster the ability to understand the distinctive features of Japanese culture, to introduce Korean culture to Japan, and to promote mutual understanding between the peoples of Korea and Japan." This kind of two-way communication is what most learners are hoping for.

Furthermore, while it is desirable from a Japanese perspective to have others "learn about Japan," this can be seen as of a passive and low value. Equally important is the standpoint of "learning about the world" in Japanese. If more foreign nationals are capable in Japanese, Japanese nationals will be able to learn about the various different cultures of the world in their own language.

This argument is likely to assume an increasing importance in the future. At present, the strongest motivation for studying Japanese language among students is the desire to find employment in Japanese companies (or businesses somehow connected with Japan). There is a tendency to presume that if one can function in Japanese and has an understanding of Japanese customs, it will be possible to work in a Japanese company. However, few Japanese corporations make Japanese language ability a condition of employment for foreign nationals.

This discrepancy between the motivation for language learning and actual conditions of employment may well become an impediment to the actual promotion of Japanese language teaching both here and abroad. For Japanese firms, the ability of a foreign national to speak Japanese together with a good grasp of how things work in Japan is not, for various reasons, an adequate criterion for employment. If Japanese businesses are to be persuaded of the significance of Japanese language ability in foreign nationals, they need to be shown a new point of view.

This new point of view is the ability of foreign nationals to convey information in Japanese. If a Japanese company which has launched itself in Thailand employs Thai nationals who can speak Japanese, the Japanese employees can learn various things about how Thailand works through their Thai colleagues, in Japanese. Employing numerous Japanese-speaking Thais is extremely effective with regard to doing business in Thailand. The same can undoubtedly be said of any other country in the world.

For the ordinary citizen, too, nothing could be more useful than if foreign friends and acquaintances could talk about different aspects of their own countries in Japanese. If this view could be established, both companies and citizens would surely accept the importance of Japanese language teaching and support its further expansion. Of course, it is necessary for those individuals and

organizations involved in Japanese language teaching to publicize broadly how important this is.

No progress will be made without significant effort. It is only recently that this element has started to be emphasized even in the teaching of "English as an international language." In fact, English has become a language for multinational and multicultural understanding rather than the language to understand the American and British cultures. Therefore, unless Japanese people can talk about things Japanese and Indonesians about things Indonesian in English, English is useless as a language of information exchange.

Now, for foreign nationals to acquire the ability to speak skillfully in Japanese to Japanese people about the customs and systems of their own countries requires proper training. To deliver this effectively, Japanese language teaching curriculums need to contain solid programs that teach learners how to explain their own countries in Japanese.

Viewed from this perspective, it is clear that Japanese language teaching consists of three areas. These are "Japanese language acquisition," "learning about Japanese culture" and "explaining one's own culture." Japanese culture is reflected in exercises and texts at all levels of language acquisition, and is further presented under the subject "*Nihon jijo*" (the Japanese situation).

The same should apply to the learners' own cultures. This must not be dealt with as a minor subject, nor left done at random. It should be fully built into sentence-construction exercises, and off-campus opportunities organized for students to explain their own cultures. Cultural comparisons can certainly be a useful approach. At the same time, the development of "own country" content must also be a matter of urgency.

3. *Jikoku jijo* (Things about one's own country) training in Japan

This program seems to be in place in Japanese language teaching in Japan, albeit only in certain spheres and to a certain degree. It can be seen, for example, in cases such as "international understanding" program. Now that "general studies" hours have been introduced in elementary and middle schools, overseas students receive frequent invitations to talk about their countries and their experiences in Japan, from elementary and middle schools close to the universities they attend.

The overseas students quite enjoy their school visits. The schools that have them also highly evaluate their "international" encounters. In areas where there are generally few foreign nationals, in particular, universities receive a stream of requests from elementary and middle schools to send them an overseas student. Indeed, Japanese language learners are good at introducing and promoting themselves.

Japanese language teaching at most universities that take overseas students builds opportunities for the students to talk about themselves and their countries into the curriculum from the beginner level. In some cases these programs are achieving considerable success. At Hokkaido Bunkyo University, for example, students apparently become able to introduce their own countries in simple terms after just 60 hours of Japanese language learning.

Moreover, after 100 hours, they write comparative culture-based compositions and give speeches that express, for example, their thoughts, feelings or questions about daily life in Japan under such titles as “Things I have been surprised at in Japan” and “Oddities of the Japanese.” At this school, pronunciation is tested once every two weeks using these speeches. The same kind of thing is apparently seen at most Japanese language teaching organizations. Clearly, this type of theme seems to be very effective for practicing speaking and writing techniques.

Furthermore, communicative competence of this ilk, combining social mixing and information sharing skills, progress markedly as the level of proficiency rises. By the time the student reaches an intermediate or advanced level, he or she will have learnt how to adapt his or her way of speaking to the situation and will be able to pepper his or her speech with humor for a pleasing self-introduction (self-promotion). In any event, most overseas students are apparently doing self-introductions “until we’re sick and tired of them.”

This activity seems to be an essential learning activity for blending quickly into Japanese society and finding native Japanese friends and acquaintances who support their Japanese language learning. At Hokkaido Bunkyo University, willing overseas students who have reached at least an intermediate level in Japanese language (level 2 or higher of the Japanese Proficiency Exam) are sent out to elementary and middle schools for the schools’ “international understanding education” classes, at which time they are urged to perform as if they were ambassadors for their countries.

Thus, overseas students who have received Japanese language training in Japan would seem to have little difficulty in talking about their own countries. Some universities use these exchange opportunities for overseas students to train them in how to give effective presentations and performances. Hokkaido Bunkyo University has established a “research and report” course for overseas students of intermediate level and above.

This course has students write reports on aspects of their own countries that they have researched on the Internet or in publications and then present those reports in class. At first, like Japanese students studying abroad, the overseas students know little about their own countries and have no inclination to find out, but as their opportunities for interaction with Japanese people increase, they start to investigate in greater depth and breadth. Quite a few students have books and

other materials sent from their home countries, and some use multimedia devices when making their presentations.

Moreover, it seems that most overseas students have something they are good at and will demonstrate that skill when introducing their countries. Chinese students playing on the Chinese mandolin or Chinese fiddle, Indonesian students performing a Javanese dance (a goggle-eyed dance in time to Indonesian *gamelan* folk music), Australian students demonstrating animal mimicking (how kangaroos walk, jump, kick) and so forth meet with enthusiastic applause from Japanese schoolchildren.

Overseas students without a special skill talk about their native languages or intersperse their presentations with songs and/or games. If a Russian student, for example, writes the pupils' names in the Cyrillic alphabet, the class is thrilled. A talk about a foreign country that compares the Japanese way of *janken* (paper, scissors, stone) or a comparison of gestures used when greeting someone in Japan with those of a foreign country will equally excite the schoolchildren's interest.

Overseas students are sometimes discomfited by prejudices or stereotypes harbored by Japanese people. Those from developing economies are often asked, for example, if there are cellular phones in their country. While they may feel anger and sadness at this, as they interact more and more with their hosts, they acquire the attitude and the Japanese language ability to explain themselves and their countries patiently and properly.

Japanese schoolchildren are thus learning an enormous amount through interchange in Japanese with overseas students. This becomes increasingly important as the overseas students interact with ordinary citizens. The ability of Japanese language learners to explain about things in their own countries in Japanese is an extremely valuable asset not only for the learners themselves, but for the Japanese populace, too. The nation's information resources are enriched and taken advantage of.

As explained above, training in explaining about the learner's own country is provided in one form or another during Japanese language teaching in Japan. However, given its importance, it needs to be incorporated into the curriculum explicitly and systematically as a subject in the future. Furthermore, there should be integrated and systematic development of a syllabus laying out its goals and methodology.

4. *Jikoku jijo* overseas

Since there are few opportunities for learners of Japanese as a foreign language overseas to introduce their own countries, it is enormously important for them to study how to talk in Japanese about themselves and their countries. If there is no syllabus proposed worthy of the appellation, this is a field that

deserves considerable effort in research and development. However, there are some areas where teachers have, on their own initiative, come up with various techniques, and if organized, these could be useful references for the creation of future teaching plans.

If these autonomous activities are classified, they fall into the following three categories. The first involves having learners talk about themselves when doing drills that teach sentence structures. Next is the method of making the learners themselves or their countries the subject during composition and speech exercises. Finally, when the learners reach a higher level, it is possible to encourage such activities as the preparation of tourist guides and newspapers aimed at a hypothetical Japanese audience.

When practicing sentence structures, it is possible to guide learners to talk about themselves from the beginner level. Once the basic patterns "N *ga* A" (Noun is Adjective) and "N *ga dekiru"* ([I] can (do) N) have been drilled, learners are asked to talk about their hobbies, for example, using sentences like *"watashi wa tenisu ga suki desu"* (I like tennis) and *"watashi wa piano ga dekimasu"* (I can [play] the piano). In short, it is best if every time an expression or sentence structure is acquired, the learner is guided to use it to say something about himself or herself.

When numeral suffixes, "V*te iru*" (present continuous "-ing" form) and so forth have been drilled, it becomes possible to talk on the subject of, for example "My Family." *"Watashi no kazoku wa yonin desu. Chichi wa shougakkou no sensei o shite imasu. Haha wa kaishain de uchi no chikaku de hataraite imasu"* (There are four in my family. My father is an elementary school teacher. My mother works for a company close to where we live.). The important thing is that during oral practice learners are helped to synthesize items they have learned previously and items they are currently working on to talk about themselves, their families and friends, and the towns and countries from which they come. After 20-30 hours of Japanese language learning, compositions and speeches can be effectively encouraged. If "My Town," for example, is suggested as the topic, one gets something like the following: "My hometown is Jakarta. There are a lot of people and cars in Jakarta so it is very lively. April is the hottest month of the year. There is a lot of rain from October to March. Jakarta is a nice place. Please do come and visit me there."

Once an intermediate level is reached, it becomes possible to do various types of projects. Producing guides to scenic local places for Japanese tourists is one that often appears in Japanese language textbooks. With systematic planning, this can lead to the production of a weekly guide such as "This Week in Xian." Projects that have actually tried this type of enterprise have reportedly delighted Japanese tourists and residents in the locality.

However, it is not appropriate to push Japanese language learners to focus excessively on tourist guides or the like. It narrows the aims of Japanese

language learning and may well send the wrong message. Comparison of various social and cultural aspects of Japan and the learner's own country is probably the effective approach to take. When there is something in the text about Japan, the learner is asked to compare it to the situation in his or her own country. If the text reads "The capital of Japan is Tokyo," for example, a Thai student will produce "The capital of Thailand is Bangkok."

Provided the topics are tailored to the learners' level of proficiency, it is possible to carry out projects comparing Japan to the learners' own country from about the middle or end of the beginner level. Family, friends, teachers, transportation, education, television and famous people are just some of the topics for possible comparison. Group research and presentations give a wider input of ideas and make the presentations more varied, and, therefore, are an effective way of motivating learners.

Young students will probably show an interest in the youth cultures of Japan and their own country. In fact, the enthusiasm among young people overseas for learning the Japanese language derives from their affinity for Japanese youth culture. In Hong Kong, Japanese TV series about young adults are hugely popular, and it is said that students are increasingly taking up Japanese in order to understand these programs there.

The Japanese language stream in the English-language division at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University has a "Hong Kong youth culture" project that delineates in Japanese the lives and culture of Hong Kong's young people from a comparative cultural viewpoint. Packed with photographs and images downloaded from the website, it is a message to the youth of Japan about the youth of Hong Kong.

The list of topics is evidently youth-oriented: sport, fashion, music, food, shopping, comics, karaoke, dieting, character goods, computers, cellular telephones and love. Under "Where lovers go in Hong Kong," it reads (in Japanese), "On days off, …under the stars, we gaze at the beautiful view. Lovers… collect pebbles and make various shapes on the beach. The words 'I love you' are especially popular."

If one sifts carefully through activities like this, one gets a clear picture of just how strong the desire is among students of Japanese as a foreign language to learn about Japan and to tell the Japanese about themselves and their communities. This can lead to the building of mutually beneficial relationships in which Japanese people and those from other countries exchange information in Japanese, and can be said to be extremely significant for both parties.

In order to develop the sort of Japanese language teaching that involves not simply reception but also transmission of information, we need programs that not only bring learners into contact with Japanese culture, but also train them to explain their own. If information on Japan is dubbed *Nihon jijo*, then this can

perhaps be called *Jikoku jijo*. We would now like to point out several issues relating to the research and development of a syllabus for this.

5. *Jikoku jijo* syllabi

Training in self-expression in Japanese should always be given at the point when words and phrases or grammatical constructions are learned, right from the beginner level. Some organization is required to determine the items of self-expression that are appropriate to particular words or phrases and constructions. If instructors who have of their own accord come to teach in this way work together, it will doubtless be possible to put together a more comprehensive list of appropriate connections between words and topics.

At the same time, there is a need also for systematic Japanese language textbooks devoted to *Jikoku jijo*. Of course, just as it is possible to treat this as an independent subject, it is also possible to incorporate it into ordinary classes. If the latter is anticipated, then different texts for different levels of language proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced) may be considered. Depending upon the age of the learners, it may be desirable to introduce seemingly difficult topics from the beginner level. Even at the introductory stage, learners should be presented with conversational subjects appropriate to their age. Graded texts are needed for this purpose.

What is important with these texts is the kind of topic that is selected. In fact, it is very difficult to be specific about what a student should talk about if he or she is to explain his or her country. This area has always been handled rather arbitrarily in the past, no matter what the language being taught, but if Japanese language teaching tackles the problem properly, it could possibly provide a broadly applicable framework.

When bilingual education was widespread in America in the 1970s and school textbooks were being prepared in languages other than English, the “map of culture” at the end of E. T. Hall’s *The Silent Language* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959) was used as the yardstick for a number of things. This “map” laid out the criteria for resolving a “national culture” into one hundred constituent parts.

In the long term, criteria of this kind must be re-examined and appropriate, effective methods of analysis established. In the short term, however, to meet the clear and present needs of JLT classes, individual teachers should bring their own experiences and, through collaborative research sessions, draw up tentative plans. Funding organizations should also back such research and development. The following list (in no particular order) may suggest some useful topics.

(1) Family, friends, teachers (including their social roles)
(2) Food

(3) Tourist sites
(4) Festivals (annual events)
(5) Language (writing system)
(6) Proverbs
(7) National leaders/heroes
(8) Gestures (including questions such as why in Thailand one should not touch another's head)
(9) Folk tales
(10) Educational system
(11) Politics/systems of government
(12) Music/musical instruments
(13) The learner's hometown: natural environment, population, specialty products, etc.
(14) Commerce, economy, industry
(15) Fashion
(16) Youth trends
(17) Population policies (decreases in family size, the "graying" of society, etc.)
(18) Ethnic issues
(19) Communication styles
(20) Other things the learner would like non-nationals (Japanese people) to know

Putting together a textbook means writing model sentences in Japanese on these topics. It is essential that Japanese language teachers from the particular country concerned take part in deciding what goes into these sentences. This will both foster a cooperative relationship between Japanese teachers of Japanese and other nationals doing the same job, the direction that Japanese language teaching as a whole should take in the future.

These textbooks should also be used for studying for reports and presentations. For this reason, the textbooks themselves ought to be made highly audio/visual-based. It would also be necessary to create, for example, supplementary teaching materials using the Powerpoint device, thus paving the way to CD-ROM and DVD products.

6. Conclusion

Whereas foreign language teaching in Japan stresses learning about the customs of other countries, practice in explaining learners' own country in that language has always been neglected. Students learning English practice writing Christmas cards, but nowhere do they learn to write *nengajou* (Japanese New Year's postcards) in English. When this methodology is applied to Japanese

language teaching for non-native speakers, learners end up missing out on any practice in talking about themselves and their own countries in Japanese.

As the awareness grows here that English is a language of international communication, the aims of English learning and teaching are also shifting, toward a transmission model of self-expression and explanation of one's own culture. In Japanese language teaching, too, there is a need to develop programs that both reconfirm the importance of non-Japanese learners talking about their own countries in Japanese and also foster that ability. This is laid out in the language education policies of many countries, but actual measures have not been implemented. A guiding syllabus is urgently needed.

Note: This is a revised version of a paper by Nobuyuki Honna that appeared under the title "On the significance of explaining learners' own countries in Japanese and its syllabus development" (in Japanese), Sekai no nihogo kyouiku (Japanese Language Teaching of the World) No.7, 2003, International Center for Japanese, Japan Foundation.