Implementing an English-Medium Course on Japanese Language and Culture

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of a semester-long English-medium course on Japanese language and culture offered to exchange students studying at a women's university in Tokyo, Japan. The paper describes participating students' backgrounds, course content, methods of evaluation, and learner outcomes. In addition, feedback from students is included, as are instructors' ideas for future versions of the course.

Introduction

International students at Jissen Women's University are highly motivated to develop their Japanese skills and to learn about Japanese culture. However, sometimes they are not able to study these subjects at an advanced level because, until recently, these subjects were not available in English, which meant that students wishing to learn about Japanese language, history and culture at Jissen Women's University were limited by their proficiency in Japanese. In an effort to make these subjects accessible to English-speaking international students, we created the English Seminar on Japanese Language & Culture.

The advantage of this course is that faculty members in the Department of Japanese Literature deliver—in English—lectures in their areas of expertise, thereby opening subject matter that was previously unavailable to those international students whose Japanese proficiency was not sufficient for regular lectures in the Japanese language.

The course is an elective provided by the Center for Language Education and

International Programs（CLEIP）at Jissen Women's University. The first time this course was offered, three lecturers conducted classes on three different but related topics: contemporary Japanese, old Japanese and Japanese culture.

What follows are details about the course.

Participants

Because it is an English-medium course, students must have a good command of the language to fully participate. Furthermore, they should have an interest in Japanese language and culture, and because students who participate in the course have chosen to study in Japan, we assume this will be the case. Two students from the Netherlands took the course on which this report is based.

Schedule & Instructors

The three instructors taught classes in the following order:

Classes 1-5:   Contemporary Japanese（Hiroyuki Yamauchi）
Classes 6-10:   Old Japanese（Takenobu Fukushima）
Classes 11-15:   Japanese Culture（Jacob Schnickel）

All of the classes were held at the Shibuya campus. The schedule for the first semester of the 2014 academic year was as follows:

Classes 1-5 were conducted by Hiroyuki Yamauchi during second period（10:45-12:15）:
1. April 24   Vocabulary of contemporary Japanese（1）
2. May 1   Vocabulary of contemporary Japanese（2）
3. May 8   Grammar of contemporary Japanese（1）
4. May 15   Grammar of contemporary Japanese（2）
5. May 22   Sounds and phonemes of contemporary Japanese

Classes 6-10 were conducted by Takenobu Fukushima during first period（9:00-10:30）:
6. May 29   Periodization of Japanese history & brief review of Japanese

		literature
7.	June 5	Quiz 1, *Hentaigana* (an old variant of *hiragana*) 1 & Old Japanese grammar
8.	June 12	*Hentaigana* 2
9.	June 19	Quiz 2, *Hentaigana* 3
10.	June 26	Exam

Classes 11-15 were conducted by Jacob Schnickel during second period (10:45-12:15):

11.	July 3	Basics of culture & intercultural sensitivity
12.	July 10	Japanese culture: key concepts (1)
13.	July 17	Japanese culture: key concepts (2)
14.	July 24	Why do we misunderstand each other?
15.	July 31	Personal experiences & student course evaluation

Methods of evaluation

The methods of the evaluation by three instructors are as follows. The final grade was calculated by averaging the three scores.

- Yamauchi: Class participation (100%);
- Fukushima: Class participation (40%), Quizzes (20%), and Exam (40%);
- Schnickel: Class participation (30%), Weekly journals (40%), and Final assignment (30%).

Expected educational outcomes

It is hoped that students gained a solid understanding of the following areas:

Yamauchi:
A. Acquire knowledge about basic Japanese vocabulary, grammar and sounds;
B. Enhance their ability to think deeply about Japanese language;
C. Gain a sense that "Japanese is fun!" through taking quizzes on Japanese.

Fukushima:

    A. Distinguish each period of Japanese history;

    B. Explain famous Japanese literary works from each period;

    C. Read basic *hentaigana*;

    D. Explain basic classical Japanese grammar.

Schnickel:

    A. Compare and evaluate a variety of definitions of "culture";

    B. Become familiar with the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity;

    C. Discuss visible and invisible aspects of Japanese culture;

    D. Share personal experiences about living in Japan.

Sample teaching materials

Contemporary Japanese（Hiroyuki Yamauchi）

    Mainly three types of quizzes were given to the students. The first type of quiz required students to find the word that has different characteristics from the others. After doing so, students were asked to explain the reason for their choice. The following is an example of this type of quiz:

Which one is different from the others?
1. a. おはよう　b. こんにちは　c. こんばんは
2. a. うるさい　b. 明るい　　c. きれい　　d. おいしい
3. a. お姉さん　b. お兄さん　　c. おばあさん　d. お父さん　e. お子さん

    The second type of quiz required students to correct sentences that contained errors. After doing this, students were asked to explain why they thought the sentences were not natural. The following is an example of this type of quiz:

Correct the following sentences.
1. 昨日、焼き卵を食べました。
2. 先生、夏休みが近寄ってきましたね。
3. 大変です。もうすぐ来てください。

    The third type of quiz featured sentences with double meanings. After

identifying the two meanings for each sentence, students were required to state the reason it could be understood in two ways. The following is an example of this type of quiz:

> What are the two meanings?
>   1. エレベーターで遊ばないでください。
>   2. 絶対にジャイアンツに勝ってほしい。
>   3. トイレを探してください。

There were also other types of quizzes, especially about the sounds and phonemes of the Japanese language. The following are examples:

> Which is "rain"?
> ● a. あめ   b. あめ

> What is the meaning of this sentence?
> ● すもももももももも。

> Why is it hard to say?
>   1. 新人新春シャンソンショー（しんじんしんしゅんシャンソンショー）
>   2. 東京特許許可局（とうきょうとっきょきょかきょく）

About six to ten quizzes were given to the students in each 90-minute class.

Old Japanese（Takenobu Fukushima）

In my class, I used some old Japanese texts as teaching materials. In this report, I will show two samples of such texts.

The first material is Song-No 1658 in *Man' yōshū*（『万葉集』）, Japan's oldest anthology of poetry. I chose a copy called *Nishihonganji-bon*, because it was written with *katakana*, which is relatively easy for students to read.

You can see a script written next to the Chinese characters. It is *katakana*. Of course I explained to the students that we do not have the original *Man' yōshū* today, and that the original was not written in *hiragana* or *katakana*; it was written before *hiragana* and *katakana* were created.

Fig. 1 Song-No 1658 in the *Nishihonganji-bon Man'yōshū*

A significant grammatical point of this song is *mase-ba mashi*: counterfactual speculation, 反実仮想 (*hanjitsukasō*). After listening to my explanation of counterfactual speculation, the students were able to understand the meaning of the song. I also showed them the glossing information, a brief grammatical explanation, and the English translation of the song.

Furthermore, by studying this material, the students were able to learn not only what the song means but also what *Man'yō-gana* is: namely, Chinese characters used

to write Japanese phonographically（see, for example, Frellesvig, 2010）.

The next material is *Arigatakimono*（Rare things）in *Makura no sōshi*（『枕草子』）, one of the most famous essays in Japan, which was written some 1000 years ago. I chose a copy called *Nōin-bon*.
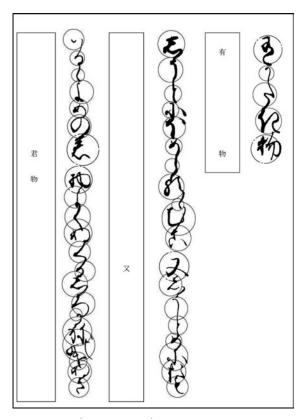

Fig. 2　*Arigatakimono*（Rare things）in the *Nōin-bon Makura no soshi*

All *hentaigana*（an old variant of *hiragana*）were individually circled so that students could read them easily.（As this paper is black and white, it is difficult to see the difference between the circles.）Red circles signify *hiragana*, and the blue circles indicate Chinese characters（*kanji*）. I circled all *hentaigana* in my teaching materials in this manner. On the last day of my class, the students took a fifteen-page *hentaigana* exam, and they both earned perfect scores. For this reason, I am sure that the circled teaching materials were effective.

Japanese Culture（Jacob Schnickel）

The purpose of the final five lessons of the series was to consider the topic of *culture* from the general to the specific following this basic progression: What is culture? What makes Japanese culture unique? Why do intercultural misunderstandings occur?

We began our series of classes by gathering, so to speak, the tool set we would need for our discussion of intercultural communication and Japanese culture. Students each shared their own ideas about what the word *culture* means. We then moved on to consider the iceberg metaphor of culture–the fact that there are both visible (e.g., art and clothing) and invisible (e.g., beliefs) elements of culture. We also discussed the importance of identifying universal, cultural and personal behaviors, meaning there are some behaviors that are common across cultures, some that are culturally specific, and others that are uniquely personal and do not reflect the culture. For our first session we also discussed a quotation from Hofstede: "The core of intercultural awareness is learning to separate observation from interpretation (p.17)." Together, these components comprised the basic tools we would need for our upcoming sessions.

In the second session we considered Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993), which identifies six stages of progressive sensitivity to cultural difference. We then moved on to Hofstede's (2002) cultural dimensions theory, which identifies and describes six dimensional categories of national cultures. We did not go deeply into either of these frameworks. Rather, we used them to establish the notion that there are means of assessing one's intercultural communication skills—as in the case of Bennett—and that tools exist for comparing cultures—as in the case of Hofstede.

In the last three sessions, we turned our attention to Japanese culture and our own experiences as visitors in Japan. Using readings from Davies & Ikeno (2002) and De Mente (2004), we attempted to identify some of the elements that make Japanese culture unique, considering, for example, concepts such as "*atarimae*," "*honne & tatemae*," and "*kuuki*." Readings from Elwood (2004) and Sakamoto (1999), provided humorous, anecdotal accounts of life as a foreign visitor to Japan, and we used them as a kind of testing ground for the general knowledge about intercultural communication and our specific knowledge about Japanese culture we had covered in previous sessions. Furthermore, these two authors served to spark recollection of some of our own cross-cultural experiences in Japan. These discussions and a review

of the five-session series made up the balance of our class time.

Assessment for my section was based on participation, weekly journal entries and a final assignment. Participation entailed reading assigned materials prior to class and contributing to discussions. The journal assignment required students to respond to the content of each lesson in the form of a short piece of reflective writing. For the final assignment, I asked students to write the introduction to the kind of book they might like to write about their experiences in Japan. This provided the opportunity to tie together the elements of the class: general knowledge about culture, specific knowledge about Japanese culture, and personal stories. Furthermore, I hoped writing an introduction to a book that does not actually exist might serve as an invitation to further their studies on Japanese language and culture.

Student feedback

Students completed course evaluations for each of the three sections. Referring to their feedback, we plan to implement some changes for the next time the course is offered.

Contemporary Japanese (Hiroyuki Yamauchi)

According to comments from the students, the level and the contents chosen by the lecturer were found to match them on the whole. Most of the comments were positive, but one referred to the lecturer's level of English. A lecturer conducting classes in English should have at least intermediate-mid level oral proficiency on the OPI scale. The proficiency level of the lecturer in charge, however, was estimated intermediate-low.

To provide interesting, effective classes about Japanese language and culture, it is essential that Japanese professors having a wide range of specialties give lectures to foreign students using English. In such cases, it is most important for lecturers is to have the willingness to give lectures in English as well as to demonstrate consistently at least an intermediate-mid level performance throughout their lectures.

Old Japanese (Takenobu Fukushima)

One of the most significant points raised in the feedback from students was

about my use of PowerPoint. The evaluation suggested that the slides were not especially engaging for students. This may be because my slides contained too much information, and they would prefer a more discussion-oriented task to hold their interest. However, they would not have been able to record all of the information covered in my lectures, and I am certain that when the students are asked about old Japanese in their country, my slides will help them. For these reasons, I will continue using the slides. Next time, however, I will explain to students more clearly why I use the slides and create more opportunities for group discussion so that they can remain interested in my class.

Japanese Culture（Jacob Schnickel）

Through the course evaluations, I learned that students valued the opportunity to study both with Japanese and non-Japanese instructors, feeling that this allowed them an insider's and an outsider's view. I took this as an indication that, on the whole, we are on the right track in providing a course that is practical as well as engaging for international students.

Conclusion

We were pleased to be able to offer, for the first time, an English-medium course on Japanese language and culture for two international students studying at Jissen Women's University. Though it was a first effort, we feel the three sections worked together effectively to create a unique learning experience. With the help of student feedback, we look forward to developing the course and continuing to offer it in the future.

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