

Teaching Elementary Japanese to Foreign Businesspeople

Masako Nishikawa-Van Eester

Abstract

In this article, we explore how the Japanese language could be taught to the people who have an intention of expanding their business, targeting the Japanese and the Japanese companies. The practical target is a group of European businesspeople. From the perspective of teaching them, we consider the background of the target learners, the background of the target language (Japanese), and the contextually significant aspects in teaching/learning the Japanese language. As the result, we show several possible examples that are concrete and useful to apply to the target learners, which is potentially to be realized into a program “Learning Elementary Japanese” for those who intend to do business with Japanese corporations and entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Context and Its Background

In Europe, there is a group of people in the enterprises' world who would welcome any means of getting started to learn the basic Japanese language for better business possibilities in Japan. There are also several organizations founded with the intention of promoting European commercialism and industry towards the rest of the world, such as FIT, Flanders Investment & Trade¹⁾ and the Chambers of Commerce. FIT, for instance, is constantly seeking any promising events and programs as good occasions of their operations.

The goal of this article is to a) examine those people and their actual needs and b) discuss the possibilities of establishing a course which will optimize what is required and realizing them into an actual intensive seminar program conducted in either Europe or in Japan, as a project, for European companies where they have set Japan as a potentially promising market in mind.

The target students are the people who are heavily involved in international business operations and research programs who get regularly sent to Japan from European companies' headquarters for conventions, tradeshow, expositions, and business meetings with Japanese companies, cooperators and competitors. To be more specific in the scope, they are from Flanders and/or Brussels in Belgium, in the first place, and eventually from any other parts of Europe as far as the other conditions fit.

One of the typical examples is a Flemish researcher in the semiconductor industry working at a laboratory over there who flies to Japan several times a year mainly for sales talks and technical adjustments' sort of staff meetings with his Japanese counterparts. There is a chance that he might have to encounter his rivals at work then. He is a Dutch (what he calls 'Flemish')²⁾ native speaker. As a result of the educational policy on language by the Flemish government, he speaks French that is taught at the elementary school already as the other official language of Belgium (the official language of their counterpart, French speaking Walloon), then English and German.

Another example is a company president from Brussels. He is originally from the French-speaking district of Brussels, which is the officially bilingual capital of Belgium. He is a French native speaker and speaks English and Dutch as well, sending his children to the Dutch speaking school of the Dutch-speaking district of the capital. He also visits Tokyo and Osaka regularly in order to see his importers, local marketing staff for strategic meetings and major Japanese companies for a potential business partnership because he has been trying very hard to get in the Japanese confectionary market with his latest products.

The last example is a Dutch living in Brussels, who is married to a German, speaking Dutch as his mother tongue and English and German as foreign languages; he has been trying to enlarge his potential Asian market in high-speed data communication from the Japanese base. In all the cases, there is a robust need to understand the Japanese culture, and the language is clearly a part of it.

Pedagogical Considerations and Strategies

One of the most important factors that should be taken into considerations are the features and characteristics of the target learners. First of all, they are adults, skillful researchers and/or businesspeople of international experiences in their fields over many years. It is thus evident that they have already established a certain set of know-how programs and philosophies of their own when it comes to adopting themselves into new situations and moreover 'learning necessary languages' through interactions with others from different cultural backgrounds in actual business and socializing scenes, but limited background of Japanese. All those elements indicate one fact: they are all intelligent and sophisticated adults, highly probably representing the European business world. The classroom consists of, therefore, quite homogeneous members, which is a feature for the teaching side to keep in mind.

The other point is that what they set as a goal is something extremely specific, and possibly somewhat unusual in comparison with other ordinary language learning programs. What they want to acquire is very basic knowledge about the Japanese language including its cultural aspects and people's behavioral patterns to go along with them, and they want to add some strategies for better understanding and communication of the oral and simple written form of Japanese to them.

Brown made a presentation of a few immensely valuable arguments on 'teaching adults' as

what the teaching side has to be careful about in 'learner variables across age levels' such as that the learners are intelligent people with mature cognition and adult emotions although they cannot express complex thinking in the target language, and naturally, the teacher should never treat them like children by using 'caretaker talk' for instance (1995, p. 91). This is elementary when teaching mature persons. In some ways, it is much less complicated in terms of the classroom management since the chance of any discipline-related problem that is often observed in children's and teens' cases' occurring is close to zero during the lesson. It is imaginable enough, instead, that those students will try to be cooperative to the teacher aiming at the least time-consuming and distinctly systematic shortcut for learning.

Additionally, there is a high probability that the target students of this program are accustomed to applying their cognitive processing skills they have developed themselves in language learning experience to the new language-learning attempt. One fact serving as a supporting example here is that most of them have acquired and, as the result, are capable to handle the grammatical rules on 'cases' in German as a foreign language. The concept of 'nominative,' 'genitive,' 'accusative' and 'dative' has a functional relevancy with that of '*wa*' or '*ga*,' '*no*,' '*(w)o*' and '*ni*' respectively in Japanese³). Also in French, some pronouns clearly indicate their functions in sentences, such as '*lui*' just like '*ni*' in Japanese. Out of these facts, what can be distilled is that the teaching side should be sufficiently aware of the possibility of effectively utilizing those elements at teaching Japanese grammar, to be more specific, the functions and usage of '*(w)o*' and '*ni*' in Japanese. In that sense, teaching the class is very different from teaching monolingual people without any special linguistic background.

We can apply two methods: 'deductive' and 'inductive' approach when introducing new concepts and rules of the target language, taking an example of a familiar annual event such as '*o-shogatsu*' in Japan. In this case, the basic strategy applied during the lesson is automatically 'inductive' approach; it is appropriate because the learners are capable of conceptualizing and utilizing abstract thoughts as mentioned above, and also because of the reason of the time setting problem as discussed right below.

The learners are undoubtedly busy people; in other words, the course targeting them has to be carried out under a heavy time constraint, which at the same time requires high efficiency and reliable effective as quick-acting medicine since they will need what they acquired by following the course as soon as they leave the classroom and get back in the business context.

Japanese Business Culture

The target learners are basically highly sophisticated in their own business background in Europe, and eventually USA. They are highly motivated to learn the business background of Japan as well. Despite those aspects, however, there are still numerous elements that they should be fully aware of from the viewpoint of the business culture in Japan. As these aspects affect the use of language (both in one's native tongue and in one's use of a foreign language), it is good to investigate this relationship.

In his presentation, Ishikawa referred to the uniqueness of the Japanese market and

business culture, explaining “Some may say ‘the country where *atmosphere* rules,’” or “Japanese companies appreciate a long-term perspective (not a quarterly-level but that of several hundred years)” (2015)⁴.

Discussion

It is known, as a fact, how important it is for the student to realize and set his/her own goal to achieve in language-acquisition related process and activities. The detailed report of two case studies by Haneda is a vivid description of two learners of Japanese in contrast, which is full of suggestions and implications in its educational philosophy to support and reflect on actual maneuvers of teaching from the sociolinguistic point of view. It designates that the significance of regarding the target language as ‘investment’ (2005, pp. 273-274), recognizing the limitation and possibility in each individual’s case, the accurate estimation of each individual’s proficiency level, and mental readiness to work hard in order to reach the goal. In other words, you must know what is really necessary to achieve and how far you can get in reality by making what kind of efforts in the language activities. As introduced in Haneda’s article, the notion of ‘identity’ and ‘investment’ by Wenger and Norton has a strong relevancy with the participants of the program in the sense that, as a result of following the course, they will experience the business world from a completely different cultural background and through the whole process, they eventually acquire a new view on people’s interaction. Quite certainly, it will give an influence on their thinking, reasoning process and behavior patterns, which could be described as the process of their acquiring of totally new identities as Westerners who are under affluent exposure to the Japanese context.

The learners are frequent users of the latest communicative tools such as smart phones and computer software including e-mail, Internet. As discussed in the article by Chikamatsu on the computer use in L2 Japanese, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) particularly focusing on word processing is noteworthy. The article reports that, in Japan, writing with computers has become more common due to the growing use of computer-mediated communication and the Internet, and further mentions that for the native readers/writers of Japanese, it might give a serious negative effect in their writing proficiency in the future based on the survey about computer use and writing in L1 Japanese (2003, p. 116). However, it might be something very useful in the case of nonnative learners on the contrary. In the real business situation, it is almost inevitable that you receive e-mail correspondence including a certain percentage of Japanese sentences. One typical case is that Japanese native writers send e-mail in Japanese, which nonnative speakers of Japanese try to read it with the help of translation software tools and reply in English, and the Japanese read it and reply again in Japanese, or in some cases in English.

What Chikamatsu discusses in her study is focused on the mid-level Japanese learners who showed indeed a significant improvement in kanji and language skills (pp. 120-121); therefore, my argument might not be precisely on the same straight logical line in the case I deal with.

However, it is not so deviant either in the sense that the learner can make the best use of word processing skills of computers in their understanding of the Japanese writing system although it is limited and bound to the degree of their uses of the translation software program.

The reality in the present Japanese business world is that there are quite a few English and European-language based words particularly in the field of high technologies. For example, as observed in one of the official websites of the latest industrial products, the following style has been more and more adopted as the latest standard to appeal their client-companies in this industry:

(Japanese original)

アナログ・デバイスズの超低消費電力 (ULP) マイクロコントローラにより、最小限のシステム電力でエッジ・ノードがローカルなデータをインテリジェント処理できます。

(Japanese written with Latin characters – *romaji*)

Anarogu debaisezu no cho-tei-shohi denryoku (ULP) maikuro kontorora niyori saishogen no shisutemu denryoku de ejji nodo ga rokaru na deeta (w) o interijento shori dekimasu.

(English translation)

Analog Devices' ultra low power (ULP) microcontroller allows edge nodes to intelligently process localized data with the smallest amount of system power needed.⁵⁾

Apparently, it is a tremendous advantage, as a businessperson, to be able to read the text like above at international tradeshows and conferences in Tokyo: the key is *Katakana*' (most of the "simple" letters in the original Japanese above are *Katakana*, typically used in the Japanese phonetic representation of loan words.) Therefore, it should be emphasized, in the class, that the learners should get enough exercises to read *Katakana*.

Concerning teaching/learning the writing system of the target language, Hatasa's article gives us a wonderful opportunity to think about once again the significance of it, together with the statement by Harz and Noda⁶⁾ insisting that the students must not get any instruction on the writing system of Japanese until they get fully used to its spoken form. In my view, Harz and Noda seem to be a totally deviated case from the original and most important function of language teachers who should provide the students with what they need. Also, this sort of attitude towards language and language teaching limits the possibility of enhancing the students' ability unnecessarily with their random intention; it is called 'random' since they did not present any robust reason to support the insistence. At the same time, this issue starts having a critical argument on the motivation of the students' learning Japanese.

There are as many reasons as the number of students who want to learn a new language. Also, why do they want to learn the language? Those reasons are complicatedly and intimately related to the motivation, profound or superficial, of each individual. Moreover, we have already seen the case of the importance of setting a clear goal in each individual's language learning activity in the relation with his/her specific motivation in the report of Haneda on two learners

of Japanese from totally different sociocultural backgrounds. In the article, Haneda introduced the concept of ‘investment’⁷⁾ as well (p. 274), which is another point to be cleared for those who come to Japan for big industrial chances since they always need a strong identity to present themselves there automatically by visiting Japan as what they are to achieve what they are supposed to, and to know how they are supposed to do so.

Hatasa, on the contrary to Harz and Noda, presented an interesting result of a research program on the instructional meaning and timing of implementation of the writing system in teaching Japanese⁸⁾. The data analysis of this research result and conclusion distilled out of it showed evidently that at least it does not give any negative effect to the learners to implement the early introduction of Japanese ‘*Kana*’ and, eventually, the issue of delayed or early introduction is not a crucial argument with regard to ‘*Kana*’ (2002, p. 362). Then why not teaching them at once? Once the students manage to pick up some key-elements in contexts such as the text of a website examined in this article (like アナログ is ‘analog’: ア=a, ナ=na, ロ=ro(lo), グ=gu; デバイセス is ‘devices’: デ=de, バ=ba, イ=i, セ=se, ズ=zu; マイクロ is ‘micro’: マ=ma, イ=i, ク=ku, ロ=ro), the power they have acquired is enormous; it will be exercised at any business context they will have to adopt themselves in.

There comes another aspect of being able to read the Japanese writing; it is concerning on being able to read some ‘*Kanji*’ which makes a clear difference together with ‘*Kana*’ in the learners’ social and economic activities during their stay in Japan in enabling them to lead more comfortable life not only business wise but also at the level of daily routines. It would be much easier to figure out yourself while your Japanese colleague, secretary or interpreter is not around, which direction you are supposed to follow in the hall of a pavilion, for instance since amazingly there are still many places in Japan where all the indication is not covered multilingually but handled in the quite monolingual manner so that you might get lost all of sudden in the building without the basic knowledge of the Japanese writing system.

The ‘*Kanji*’ such as 出 (as used in “exit”), 入 (as used in “entrance”), 右 (“right”), 左 (“left”), 中央 (“central”), 最 (“most”), 小 (“small”) might help the non-Japanese user out in a dramatic way. In addition, the ‘*Kanji*’ like 超 (“ultra”), 低 (“low”), 力 (“power”), 電 (“electro/electric”) might be effectively of use as well together with some ‘*Katakana*’ mentioned already prior to the point of ‘*Kanji*.’ By that, the learner can at once see what it means when encountering a panel above an exhibition booth says, 超低消費電力 (“ultra” – “low” – ? – ? – “electric” – “power” → actual meaning: ultra low power) and 最小限 (“most” – “small” – ? → actual meaning: minimum). It is indeed extravagantly notable how much the learner can deduct from the provided information of ‘*Kana*’ and ‘*Kanji*.’ There are a number of people with keen linguistic sense who picked those up in the very early stage of their visit and they were enjoying their power. For those who highly motivated to learn, also with the teacher with appropriate training experiences discussed for instance by Dörnyei (2001, pp. 125 - 127) in order to increase learners’ satisfaction, it should just start going as an attractive cooperative work with the students and teacher.

Knowing Europeans, particularly Flemish, including another factor that they are very active

type of people in the international business world, the teacher should be well conscious in advance of the fact that he/she has to welcome quite aggressive and curious students when it comes to trying what they have just learned in the classroom; it means in reality that the students are so eager to try anything they have just heard from the teacher, for example, a fresh, novel expression or a strategy that they begin to try them for interaction on the street with whomever they first encounter, so to say, from the moment they are out of the classroom. For them any free occasion is to be tested because it does not cost them money, and most of them simply know from enough experiences or will simply learn quickly that the Japanese get basically friendly by a foreigner trying to say a few things in Japanese. This phenomenon is conspicuously noteworthy especially when we think about the general attitude of Japanese learners of English in Japan spending so much time, money, and energy on expensive language schools and teaching materials while timidly afraid of being spoken to suddenly in English on the street with a fear that they might not understand and respond it. It is in fact a strange contrast; however, the teacher should not let this wonderful feature go without teaching them a certain group of 'set phrases' such as daily greetings and simple expressions of gratitude like *'doomo arigato gozaimas(u).'*

Ohta made a clear statement that the interactional routines of the classroom have a profound impact upon the acquisition of the adult learner (1999, p. 1509). In socialization, it is essential for the learner to acquire the proper expressions and skills in the actual situation; therefore, this aspect should not be overlooked when considering teaching Japanese in such a course. We can also read an interesting report on the study of 'interacting with native speakers of Japanese' by Yorozu (2001). According to the result of this research project, the learners' interaction with the native speakers of Japanese outside the classroom gave a positive impact including communication apprehension and enhanced self-esteem and motivation (p. 211). The teacher should thus encourage this sort of activities.

The cultural aspect which the Europeans are not yet familiar with should be covered in the class too in the very early stage of the course since they are, again, mature, serious adults to comprehend another type of culture; it will probably take a form of lectures and discussions on them all conducted in English.

Conclusion

As seen in this article, the description of the learners has been carried out with several key points in teaching them the type of Japanese the target students require. As conclusion, the following are the goals of the program:

After following this special Japanese program for two weeks prior to their visit to Japan, the students will be able to:

- have some clear ideas of modern Japan together with their basic knowledge they have fostered by reading/seeing/hearing about Japan or through their own experiences of

being exposed to any form of Japanese culture.

- figure out what is written by reading or inferring 'Kana' and some selected 'Kanji' which makes their life in Japan much easier without any help, for instance, all the involved activities at the station.
- use a certain group of 'set phrases' in order to communicate with the local Japanese people without help of their Japanese colleagues and interpreters including simple greetings and strategies of response, and how to ask for help.
- with the help of some translation software,⁹⁾ infer what is the importance and the topic of a Japanese e-mail.
- think about the fact that they are, in some sense, experts of languages in practical use and know that they will also be successful in achieving the goal they set up in learning Japanese without hurting their feeling of self-esteem.
- carry out all those activities without feeling much stress by being in Japan, where some social scenes are totally unexpected to them in the beginning. (From the 'meishi' (business card) exchanging ceremony to the trouble caused by their trying to open the door of a taxi and jump in there, they should keep it in mind that it is simply a different culture, which has no relevancy at all with the superiority/inferiority of language and culture.)

What is examined and discussed in this article should take another form in the next stage into a realistic, specific learning program of two weeks for the target students sent from certain organizations and companies either in Flanders or in Tokyo.

References

- Booij, G. (1995). *The Phonology of Dutch*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Breen, J. (2018). Monash University. Retrieved on December 31, 2018 from: <http://nihongo.monash.edu/cgi-bin/wwwjdic>
- Brown, J. D. (1995). *Teaching by Principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Chikamatsu, N. (2003). The Effect of Computer Use on L2 Japanese Writing. *Foreign Language Annals* 36.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom.
- Flanders Investment & Trade. (2019). Retrieved on May 5, 2019 from <https://www.flandersinvestmentandtrade.com/en>
- Haneda, M. (2005). Investing in Foreign-Language Writing: A study of Two Multicultural Learners. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4.
- Hatasa, Y. A. (2002). The Effects of Differential Timing in the Introduction of Japanese Syllabaries on Early Second Language Development in Japanese. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86.
- Ishikawa, K. (2015). Doing Business in Japan. Retrieved on March 20, 2019 from: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/il/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/events/2015/koji_.pdf
- Kondo, Kobayashi, Niiikura, & Matsuo. (2003). *Dialog – Suteppu Appu Ban* [Dialog – Step-up Version]. Tokyo: Ikubundo.
- Ohta, A. S. (1999). Interactional Routines and the Socialization of Interactional style in Adult Learners of Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31.

Yorozu, M. (2001). Interaction with Native Speakers of Japanese: What Learners Say. *Japanese Studies*, 21.

End Notes

- 1) Flanders Investment & Trade, FIT, is an official Flemish organization which ‘provides confidential advice free of charge to businesses looking to set up or expand operations in the Flanders region of Belgium.’ <https://www.flandersinvestmentandtrade.com/en>
- 2) Booij explains in his book ‘The Phonology of Dutch’ that Southern Dutch is sometimes called Flemish, but it is actually ‘Dutch’ that is spoken in the province of Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium (p. 1). Or, according to Flanders Center (‘With the backing of the Government of Flanders along with help from many supporters, individuals, companies, public and private organizations, the Center has succeeded in broadening its scope of cultural activities.’), ‘Flanders is part of Belgium, a country where three official languages are spoken: Dutch, French and German.’ <http://www.flanders.jp/en/index.html>

The German speaking area is in the east edge of the French speaking part, Walloon, near the German border.

- 3) German definite articles and cases

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative (<i>ga, wa</i>)	der Vater	die Mutter	der Kind	die Kinder
Genitive (<i>no</i>)	des Vaters	der Mutter	des Kindes	der Kinder
Dative (<i>ni</i>)	dem Vater	der Mutter	dem Kind	den Kinders
Accusative (<i>wo</i>)	den Vater	die Mutter	das Kind	die Kinder

Dialog-Suteppu Appu Ban, Ikubundo.

- 4) Ishikawa’s Power Point presentation in 2015, Greenberg Traurig. <https://www.gtlaw.com/ja/locations/tokyo>
- 5) From: <https://www.analog.com/jp/products/processors-dsp/microcontrollers/ultra-low-power-microcontrollers.html>
- 6) ‘You must not attempt to read any of the Japanese material that follows until you first become familiar with Japanese sounds, and next learn the spelling code according to which familiar symbols represent those sounds in a completely regular and predictable fashion.’ From ‘Japanese: The Spoken Language’ (xviii How to Use This Book)
- 7) ‘The notion [of investment] presupposes that when language learning learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world.’
- 8) ‘The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a time lag in the introduction of Japanese syllabaries makes a difference in the early second language acquisition of Japanese.’ by Hatasa.
- 9) Jim Breen, Monash University. <http://nihongo.monash.edu/cgi-bin/wwwjdic?9T>