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***Teaching Spanish to Japanese students:
The students' profile, their needs and their learning style***

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TEACHING SPANISH TO JAPANESE STUDENTS: THE STUDENTS' PROFILE, THEIR NEEDS AND THEIR LEARNING STYLE

José Escobar

RESUMEN

Este documento se enfoca en el proceso de aprendizaje de los japoneses al estudiar español como segunda lengua. Como primer punto se abordan algunas características de los estudiantes japoneses, así como sus intereses al estudiar un idioma. Posteriormente se describe el sistema de enseñanza de idiomas en Japón; y se aborda el comportamiento de los estudiantes al momento de estudiar un idioma, así como el tipo de actividades que prefieren realizar durante la clase. Además, se mencionan diversos métodos de enseñanza que pueden ser aplicados de acuerdo con los intereses de los jóvenes japoneses y las diferencias culturales. Por último, el autor considera que enseñar español a estudiantes japoneses conlleva diversos retos que deben ser solucionados para obtener mejores resultados; de tal forma, los maestros deberán implementar diferentes métodos de aprendizaje basados en que las personas aprenden haciendo las cosas por sí mismos.

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the Japanese students' learning process when they study Spanish as a second language. First, it mentions some students' profile characteristic and their interests in learning a new language. Second, it describes the learning language system in Japan, the students' behavior in the language classes, and which activities they prefer to do in class. In addition, it describes different kinds of learning methods that could be applied depending on the students' interests and cultural differences. Finally, the author considers that teaching Spanish to Japanese students raises several issues that have to be attended in order to achieve success. Since learning a language implies hard work and effort, teachers must try different methods and approaches relying upon scientific evidence based on one fundamental assumption: people learn by doing things themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a language implies hard work and effort, something people know very well. This has led teachers to try many different methods which have been developed by English teachers and theoreticians who have proposed what they think are the best approaches (relying upon scientific evidences) and the best methods (derived from the corresponding strategies recommended as teaching). But according to experts like Scrivener (2005) one fundamental assumption that has always been present is that people learn by doing things themselves (p. 21) so they are asked to repeat, listen, read and write chunks of language that are prepared by teachers all around the world. This is why teachers make their students to work with others and to make role-play activities so as to simulate the different scenarios where they will have to use the language they learn in order to communicate.

On the other hand, Scrivener also emphasizes that learners use both several mental processes such as thinking, remembering, observing, etc., and their whole person since they bring a whole range of things to class: their needs, their wishes, their life experience, their home background, their memories, their dreams, their fears, etc., all of which is used to learn and understand new things. As an example, a simple greeting as the following one demonstrates this. A lecturer may start speaking by saying "Minna san, konnichi wa" which in turn means "Buenos días" in Spanish. It goes without saying that Spanish-speaking people will also go beyond that and say "Señoras y señores, muy buenos días" (Ladies and gentlemen, very good morning) or elaborate even more to say: "Señoras y señores, muy buenos días tengan todos ustedes" (Ladies and gentlemen, I wish all of you are having a very good day). Japanese students will not be able to understand why, i.e., Mexicans, use so many words or why this is considered ultra-educated.

Just to give an example, trying to explain all of the above to students is not a minor task as it also happens with the many hardships students will encounter in a simple greeting because they will be facing problems conveyed by:

- intercultural differences such as gestures, body expression, turn taking, etc.,
- grammatical differences in the syntax order, the number of words used, the intonation and the roles played by speakers in this interaction,

- avoiding interferences with another language they might know a greeting like “Good morning (ladies and gentlemen)” doesn’t match the Spanish expression, and
- translating and interpreting cultural contexts in a country as different and peculiar as Mexico.

As it is generally accepted, one way to learn words and to increase vocabulary is by means of the study and understanding of all the expressive possibilities of words and the word order of a language that Chomsky minimized by proposing that there is a universal grammar and that we have the human capacity to learn and assimilate linguistic and communicative structures as soon as we are born. The problem is that languages’ features do not always coincide in their structure or in the way they have and are still creating terms, concepts and vocabularies. This is obvious when comparing Spanish and Japanese. The form of words, their contents and their cultural references are kept apart by a world of differences not to mention what happens when considering Colloquial, literary, poetic and technical languages. All of them are the result of a gathering of experiences, attitudes, perceptions and prescriptions of what to say and how to interact in society.

STUDENTS’ PROFILE

Many Japanese people study some of the many languages taught in Japan, but English seems to be predominant. According to Martel Trujillo (2013) students’ motivations are diverse: they might have a desire to learn about other cultures, to travel, to study or work in a different country, etc. But the students’ profile is even more diverse since it varies according to their age, occupation, motivations and needs to learn, although there is a predominant presence of young university students at CEPE (Centro de Enseñanza para Extranjeros at UNAM) who have new common traits such as the use of new technologies, quite diverse preferences and cultural impressions as well as some English proficiency which is both advantageous and disadvantageous:

- On one hand, approaching Western culture by means of the English language they learn may be an advantage since this gives them an approach to a Western culture and language. However they still have to develop an intercultural competence or tolerance towards a Mexican culture which is also different from the American or European ones but whose influence is present in it and it is combined with the Mexican native culture inherited from pre-Hispanic cultures, together with historical events like the Independence and the Revolution wars, which have left their mark in many expressions that characterize the Mexican colloquial language.

- On the other hand, speaking English can also represent a big source of interference because when students use English to learn Spanish, they are usually confused by the different syntactic order which is also dissimilar to Japanese. And all those words that look alike in English and Spanish raise a problem too due to the lack of correspondence in meaning that may even have radically opposing meanings or usage.

THE JAPANESE OFFICIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The main features of Japanese education are: hard work, self-discipline, effort and persistence to integrate in society so that people can participate actively and accurately as its members and for its utmost benefit.

These are ideal features required to learn a language, and Japan has a long history of language teaching. As an example, according to Álvarez (2012) English has been taught in Japan since 1860. There has been some presence of the direct method but the yakudoku system has never been abandoned. The communicative approach has been tried as well as the emphasis on the importance of oral communication and interaction, the Government has implemented it in schools as the language of communication and cultural interchange but the traditional methodology (the yakudoku system) is still in use in Japanese classrooms (p. 43).

With the following illustration Hino (1988) exemplifies the way the system works in regards to language teaching:

[Target language sentence] ---- I saw her standing there.

Stage 1. [The reader mentally makes literal translation]

I saw her standing there

Watashi mita kanojo tatteiru soko

Stage 2. [Then reorders translation to match Japanese syntax]

Watashi mita kanojo tatteiru soko

1 5 2 4 3

Stage 3. [The reader arrives to the final Japanese form]

Watashi – wa kanojo-ga soko-ni tatteiru-noo mita

1 2 3 4 5

The system consists in practicing traditional-like (translation) exercises out of context based on memorization and structural repetition of grammatical formulas, together with long bilingual vocabulary lists. In the yakudoku system students read a text in the foreign language, they translate it literally into Japanese and they make a translation into their native language which results from the reordering of words so there is no room here for the comprehension based on contexts (46-52). But whatever Western teachers might think, this is also a tradition that has become a rule.

Another outstanding feature of the Japanese foreign language classroom appropriate to be pointed out is the difference between the elective courses of grammar-writing and conversation: all theory subjects are mostly taught by Japanese professors but conversation classes are taught by native foreign teachers, and it is with them where they experience Western methodologies and have interaction and oral production practice in innovative activities, both creative and ludic —simulations / roleplays—. It is with them that students find a more relaxed and close relationship with their teacher since teachers in Japan are not to be seen as equals. There have been Japanese researchers like Kawazumi (1975) who have criticized this traditional method and who think it should be avoided (Kawazumi in quoted by Hino, 1988).

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERISTICS IN CLASS

Generally speaking, Japanese students are usually considered to be passive, scarcely participative or introverted and with a certain lack of faith in their own skills. It is commonly thought that they are afraid of errors and also feel embarrassed when they make mistakes (which may be so because of personal and sociocultural reasons), although on the other hand it is commonly agreed that they have a solid grammar knowledge when it comes to foreign languages, but a lot of difficulty in their communicative competence. If we bear in mind that they are used to traditional (yakudoku) translation exercises, the characteristics Japanese students show in class explain why they depend so much on their dictionaries—which are now electronic—, why they prefer to work individually, in pairs or in very small groups, why they feel an enormous respect to their teachers, why they don't speak on their own initiative but only when teachers ask them to do so, and why they need enough time to elaborate their answers (which might also be due to their characteristic perfectionist perseverance).

A survey conducted by Saito (2006) at the University of Salamanca has determined that they are committed, motivated, constant and punctual students. They usually have a scarce participation at first but they are not really shy—their silence in class is rather due to social and cultural factors—. All they seemingly need is time so they get used to a new environment and methodology, since the problems they have with their spoken expression and their listening comprehension are due to their lack of opportunities to practice those skills in Japan. However, Japanese students who are recently coming to Mexico to study Spanish show a better performance-level and a bigger vocabulary and they report having had Spanish speaking teachers in Japan who have exposed them to spoken language and cultural integration.

TEACHING AND LEARNING STYLES' ADAPTATION

The literature contains many definitions of "learning style" but two of them can serve to the purpose of this paper: Hyland (1994) considers that this concept refers to a person's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of learning (p. 56) whereas Keefe, quoted by Hyland (1994), refers to it as the "cognitive characteristics, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment". So, according to these definitions it is obvious that there certain aspects must be considered in order to select the teaching methodology to be used.

In regards to Spanish it is important to know what its position is within the group of foreign languages Japanese students learn, or the time and place where they have learned them since this relates to their perception of its importance in Japan. This is certainly part of their motivation and learning needs: what they do need it for, what aspects they must improve, and what Spanish (regional) dialect they would like to learn or reinforce for the future. Universities may have a particular interest in Latin America by considering it as part of the Asia Pacific community across the Pacific Ocean which means that books and methods used in Spain may not be seen as helpful as those developed and used in countries like Mexico or Argentina regarding the new Japanese professional and commercial interests.

This leads to a deep consideration of the vision Japanese students have of both Hispanic cultures and the various Spanish-speaking countries they may visit. This also deserves a look into their preferred learning style, the way they like to learn and to be evaluated, the way they can correct their mistakes and the kind of strategies they can use to learn from their errors and mistakes, as well as the way to avoid them.

In turn, this needs a reminder of the way methodologies used in today's Western language teaching have emerged and have been tailored for some decades:

1. Theoretical assumptions emerged during the 20th century in relation to language teaching have resulted in the different application procedures that have shaped Western teaching-learning concepts.
2. This has been the basis on which courses' objectives, their content selection, their organization, the kind of teaching-learning activities, the teacher and the student's role, as well as the teaching materials have been established.
3. However, it has been found that considering the students' learning style is very important because a disparity between teaching and learning styles causes boredom and lack of attention. So it is necessary to adjust them in order to get the best results.

When considering the beliefs that have been derived from Western approaches it is said, for example, that:

- the student can learn a second language in the same way as he learned the first one (direct method),
- the structure is the basis of a language, so it is necessary to present it and to repeat it as many times as necessary until it becomes an expression habit (audio-lingual method),

- we must let the student to discover by himself the characteristics of the language he learns (silent way) or
- we must focus on the student and the acquisition process of the language (all of the communicative approaches).

This has been the teaching style in the Western world. However, Western beliefs produce negative effects because they do not consider the learning style of Japanese students but only describe what might be expected from the method according to its theory. As this leaves out any consideration of their learning style it might be disrupting the development of at least three competencies:

- discursive (the interpretation of the individual elements of the message in terms of its interconnection and its effect on speech);
- strategic (the ways to begin, close, keep, fix and redirect communication); as well as
- intercultural (the ability to understand, interact and understand people from other cultures).

Experts like Oxford (1990) have suggested that a lack of harmony between the student and the combination of instructional methodology and materials (pp. 2-3) may be the cause of boredom and lack of attention of Japanese students. And as Chinese culture is quite similar Lixin (2006) has also pointed out the need to understand that knowledge in Eastern Asia is something instructors must transmit rather than something to be discovered by students. In his opinion, students are conditioned by their learning style, which describes expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, etc., characteristic of their society that includes a great respect to teachers, who are expected to have thorough knowledge of the subjects they teach and thus have absolute authority in classrooms.

Furthermore, Dunn and Dunn (1979) have stated that when taught through methods that complement the learning characteristics of students at all levels, they become increasingly motivated and achieve better academically. Thus they pinpoint three different learning style elements, namely:

- a) environmental (sound, light, temperature and design)

- b) bemoational (motivation, persistence, responsibility, and the need for structure)
- c) sociological (working alone, with peers, with an adult, or some combination) (pp. 239-240)

The social interaction in class, the information processing (the ways they think and operate), as well as their personality (if they are introverted, rational, emotional, reflexive, etc.) are important factors to be considered as well.

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION

Teachers in general are quite aware of the different ways students: (a) start and finish a conversation; (b) take turns to speak; (c) dare to interrupt; (d) use silence as an additional communicative resource; and (e) know how to recognize the appropriate topics for a conversation. Young (2017), for example, states that teachers in general need to consider the best ways to teach students how to take turns when speaking and managing the floor in the target language because it is a central component of interactional competence (p. 1), something that seems to be overseen in many classrooms.

This lack of interactional competence —basically due to their learning style— together with the different nature of their language and the cultural aspects mentioned makes teachers to perceive their Japanese students as introverted. When discussing the matching of teaching styles with learning styles in East Asian contexts, Zhenhui (2001) brings to the attention of Western teachers a series of cultural features that according to the authors he quotes explain the behavior in classroom derive from their traditional learning style of Chinese, Japanese and Korean students:

1. According to Sue and Kirk (1972) teachers must consider their introverted style of learning, a style geared towards rigidity because many Asian students don't like ambiguity, uncertainty and lack of precision, all of which usually confuse them.
2. Oxford and Ehrman (1992) state that Japanese students do not like to take risks in a conversation, they prefer topic and speech accuracy since they have problems to infer/ deduce.
3. In addition, it is likely that if they refuse to talk about their own points of view and to make questions it is because they perceived that as disagreement (Song quoted by Zhenhui. 2001).

So, if their common way to study and learn is based on translation, focusing on the book, doing chorus repetition, analyzing structures, taking lots of notes and requiring a lot of explanation, it is convenient to address the kind of learning they prefer by means of visuals and noticing strategies.

VISUAL LEARNING

Reid (1987, quoted by Zhenhui, 2001) found that Japanese, Chinese and Korean students are quite visual: the lack of visual stimulus (blackboard) causes them confusion and anxiety. Controlled interaction and reading in group is preferred over individual reading, and according to Song, quoted by Zhenhui (2001) their favorite channels are visual (text and blackboard).

Therefore, the attention to be given to their learning style can include, for example:

- An extensive use of visual aids (photographs, drawings, etc.) in order to illustrate and reinforce word meaning
- The use of movies or video clips, and life role-play to illustrate the textbook lessons
- The addition of repetition and substitution exercises in order to practice basic vocabulary and grammar, and
- The wide use of the blackboard together with adequate intervals to let them think on what they are being told and taught.
- Providing explicitly syntactic and semantic information in order to facilitate learning and to develop the communicative and written interpretation skills.

These factors make teachers consider the use of a formal consciousness raising (Noticing) as their methodological strategy.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING / NOTICING STRATEGY

Since the nineties, applied linguistics research in second language teaching seems to have shown the need to integrate formal instruction within a communicative frame by means of an approach known as Consciousness Raising (CR) or Noticing which consists of a "conscience awakening" in the learner about certain linguistic forms in the second language input that are the goal of learning. The British Council (n.d.), in his Teaching English webpage, defines it very clearly: "Consciousness-raising, also known as awareness-raising, is part of the process a learner can go through with new language. They first become aware or conscious of the new language, then recognize and distinguish it, then produce it".

In regards to theory learning, Islam and Timmis (British Council, n.d.) refer to two authors who have worked around the concepts of noticing and language awareness. In regards to noticing, they refer to Batstone (1996) who describes noticing as a complex process that involves the intake of both meaning and form, and the time it takes for learners to progress from initial recognition to the point where they can internalize the underlying rule. Noticing can be guided by the teacher or by the students on those contents thought to be useful.

And in regards to language awareness they state that learning materials and teachers can best help learners achieve noticing if they also use a language awareness approach to describe language. So they refer to Tomlinson (2003) who sums up the principles, objectives and procedures of a language awareness approach as: "Paying deliberate attention to features of language in use in order to close the gap between their own performance and the performance of proficient users of the language". The main objective is to help learners to notice for themselves how language is typically used so that they will note the gaps and "achieve learning readiness" as well as independence from the teacher and teaching materials.

So, the idea is to combine Grammar and Communication, avoiding the overruns the more radical versions of the traditional and communicative approaches have experienced when they privileged only one of these two aspects. Teachers strive to "awaken the conscience" of students about problematic linguistic elements of the second language by means of activities that enable communicative interaction. Students are invited to discover by themselves the Grammar rules and models in these activities before they apply their conclusions in their linguistic production.

This is an inductive approach to second language learning, one that most published manuals related to ESL (SSL) seem to have favored less but it seems completely advisable since it seems to help the learners:

1. To develop knowledge about the feature and to become more aware of the feature in communicative input
2. To have an active awareness of the linguistic form under the assumption that the next step, resulting from this consciousness, will be the production of that grammatical feature
3. To bridge the gap between the explicit knowledge —generated by the formal instruction— and the implicit knowledge —or final acquisition of the linguistic form— which is a previous step for its production in communication
4. To follow a more conscious learning processes and
5. To become autonomous and more efficient learners who do not wait for their teacher to provide them with resources to resolve their problems because they have them.

According to Romero Castilla, quoted by Martínez Martínez (1998), activities based on consciousness-raising are usually done in groups or pairs, as a collaborative work which is well in tune with the strong collective Japanese frame of mind (p. 18) and matches the Confucian principle: "They told me and I forgot; I saw it and I understood; I did it and I learned".

A BASIC METHOD TO RAISE CONSCIOUSNESS

A basic method to do this is by teaching specific forms, by intentionally highlighting and pinpointing distinctions. And by interchanging information and interaction that leads to a negotiated communication, teachers can emphasize what is problematic (highlighting it in the input) in order to facilitate acquisition and the achievement of two operations:

- a) noticing, by which learners pay attention to problematic forms, and
- b) cognitive comparison, in order to compare what they have noticed in the input and what they produce (their own output).

Thus teaching Spanish to Japanese students must consider:

- The motivation produced by group work (the importance collaborative work has in their culture as a means to an end)
- The need to give them enough time previous to their active participation (there is no need to force them to participate when they are not ready since that blocks them both emotionally and psychologically)
- Their fear to make mistakes (owing primarily to a lack of enough time to resolve the activities or tasks assigned)
- Their surprise when they experience learning-by-discovery because they are not used to such dynamics (they usually receive passively the instruction given by their sensei).
- Their need for subsequent feedback (if students find out they need confirmation, they need to be "corrected" by their instructor).
- Their preference for inductive grammar (examples with the rule)
- The need to bring to light what they produce in order to make them conscious of what they do wrong, and that
- They appreciate every signaling of the differences between Spanish and Japanese.

CONCLUSION

Teaching Spanish to Japanese students raises several issues that have to be attended in order to achieve success. Since learning a language implies hard work and effort, teachers must try different methods and approaches relying upon scientific evidences based on one fundamental assumption: people learn by doing things themselves.

But having into account the particular features of Japanese students, such as their profile and their learning culture, asking them to repeat, listen, read and write a new language and to make them to work with others is not an easy task since learners use not only several mental processes such as thinking and remembering, but their whole person in regards to their own needs and wishes in order to better learn and understand new things. The cultural encounter is as important as the language to be learned so Japanese students will have to make a great effort in order to understand not only a new grammar and intonation but also

a new way of being and behaving the speakers of the target language use: gestures, body expression, turn taking, etc., features that do not coincide but they need to interact in the new society.

Teachers must pay attention to the student's profile and motivations to learn Spanish since they might have a desire to learn about other cultures, to travel, to study or work but they also have to pay attention to their profile according to their age, occupation, motivations and needs to learn and even be careful when they speak English already since this knowledge may interfere with the new language they are trying to learn. They also must show consideration to the features they bring with them that were rooted in an education system characterized by hard work, self-discipline, effort, persistence and the traditional language teaching method: the yakudoku system, a system that opposes the direct communicative method and emphasizes word-for-word translation, structural repetition of grammatical formulas and memorization of long bilingual vocabulary lists which has a negative impact on oral communication and interaction.

Spanish teachers need to be aware and understanding when it comes to their Japanese students' characteristics in class and they must try not to think of their students as passive, scarcely participative or introverted because they might act like that they're lacking of faith in their own skills, their fear of errors. They usually have solid grammar knowledge and only a lot of difficulty in their communicative competence because they are used to making traditional (yakudoku) translation exercises: Spanish teachers acknowledge that they are committed, motivated, constant and punctual students and that they usually have a scarce participation at first but they are not really shy and that their silence in class is rather due to social and cultural factors.

Thus it is important to adapt the teaching style and their learning style so that there is a better chance to help Japanese students succeed in the Spanish courses. A person's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of learning are important and helpful so selecting the best teaching method is a must. Although many different teaching methods and approaches have been developed in the Western world, the teaching-learning concepts, the courses' objectives, the content selection, the course organization, the teaching-learning activities, the teacher and the student's role, as well as the teaching materials, all of them require some adaptation towards what has been pointed out as the best suggested teaching methodology.

The approach can be based on: (a) an extensive use of visual aids (photographs, drawings, etc.) in order to illustrate and reinforce word meaning, (b) the use of movies or video clips, and life role-play to illustrate the textbook lessons, (c) the addition of repetition and substitution exercises in order to practice basic vocabulary and grammar, (d) the wide use of the blackboard, together with adequate intervals to let them think on what they are being told and taught, as well as (e) providing explicitly syntactic and semantic information in order to facilitate learning and to develop their communicative and written interpretation skills.

The approach can be based on the use of a formal consciousness raising (Noticing) as an essential methodological strategy consisting of a "conscience awakening" in the learner in regards to certain selected linguistic forms so as to start their learning process first by becoming aware or conscious of the new language, then recognizing and distinguishing it, and finally producing it. This inductive approach to second language learning is quite advisable in order to help the learners to develop knowledge about the language features, to have an active awareness of the linguistic forms they will need to be able to produce those grammatical features, to bridge the gap between explicit and implicit knowledge, to follow a more conscious learning processes and to become autonomous and efficient as learners.

Spanish teachers must consider that group work motivates Japanese students, that they must give them enough time to work and participate, and that they have to understand their fear to make mistakes and their surprise when they are exposed to new learning dynamics.

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