

Using j-Dorama in EBL Language Study in Japanese

Jonathan Bunt, School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures

Abstract

The project was to develop and trial materials to foster a team EBL (two to three students) approach to grammatical and socio-cultural issues that must be addressed in understanding and 'translating' Japanese TV dramas. The aim was to assist learners in becoming confident and autonomous in both group and individual study. The development of higher level skills in using dictionaries, online, human and other resources was expected to emerge as part of the outcome of a group presentation project. The project was to work with existing students but to also work towards creating a new unit. The project failed to develop the EBL elements owing to inadequate timing and a number of other factors, but was sufficiently encouraging for the establishment of an EBL unit as a core course within the new BA Japanese Studies programme, which opened in September 2007.

Background

The project to a certain extent grew out of previous work on peer-to-peer learning partnerships through which it was discovered that a large part of the motivation and interest of learners in Japanese language classes was through their consumption of Japanese popular culture obtained via the internet.

Chief amongst the products and services cited were not just anime, which might perhaps have been expected, but rather Japanese television drama shows in a wide range of genres, many featuring well-known actresses and actors crossing over from music into acting. Japanese 'dorama' has a large and growing body of 'fans' outside of Japan. Some of these fans produce subtitles for the dramas that can either be downloaded or attached to video files captured from digital TV broadcasts or, in some cases, fans produce hard-subbed video files. The motivation of the producers is not

pecuniary and there is a fierce discipline within the sub-culture about 'spreading the love' and not producing pirate saleable materials.

Some recent learners of Japanese have, in fact, been participants in subbing groups, usually in a technical capacity. As a result, they have sought language skills to enable them to both contribute more and to understand and consume with connoisseurship. Others recent learners have become interested in Japanese because of their consumption of Japanese popular culture products. The technical expertise and tools to distribute and share enthusiasm/knowledge are now widely available and some of these fan groups exemplify the so-called Web 2.0 culture where structured communities of sophisticated users modify content to suit their own contexts.

There are sources of Japanese TV broadcasts in both raw and subtitled versions on the Internet. In addition to fan-networks, the recent rise of YouTube, Crunchyroll and other streaming video sites, along with the ability to order DVDs from overseas for use on region-free players, means that videos are widely available, shared and have international followings.

Most DVDs are produced without English subtitles as they are not marketed or distributed outside Japan, but an increasing proportion are destined for the wider East Asia market and may acquire English and Chinese subtitles; however, these versions are often of poor quality and display the classic errors of machine translation. A very small number have (extremely pedagogically useful!) Japanese subtitles for the hard of hearing.

For language learners and teachers there is both material and a culture of consumption that offers opportunities for innovative pedagogy. Some of these dramas can be used as 'texts' to look at the cultural context of language use. TV dramas, although acted from scripts, are often very much in 'natural' language; and for learners and teachers they have an advantage over real speech in that they have little redundancy (hesitations, fillers, repeats etc.). The material can be replayed, and it is invariable in content. Because the intended audience for the original shows are native Japanese speakers, the shows can prove to be challenging to understand for even more advanced students; however, the shows are a treasure-trove of 'moments' for showing language in use and have visual clues and engaging story-lines which stimulate a need to know what is happening and why. Enter the teacher!

Grammar teaching at intermediate level

Language teachers often have difficulty with intermediate learners and feel them to be the least 'rewarding' learners in that their development is less clearly visible than that of beginners. Intermediate learners often have an 'in-between-ness' in formal understanding that hinders the production of 'good' language and prevents the accurate understanding of 'real' language in use. There is also a tendency for intermediate learners to feel that grammar is less important than communication—a false yet widespread belief. The teachers' pragmatic need to maintain the numbers of students in their classroom and reliance on an interesting and communicative approach sometimes inadvertently supports this idea. When intermediate students are presented with grammatical material, they often complain that they have already 'done' it all before.

Japanese Grammar

One area where Japanese differs from many of the more commonly taught languages is in its grammar. Japanese grammar does not have issues such as noun-gender, adjective endings, articles, preposition and case agreement, plurals, and irregular verbs. But for all this, Japanese is a complex language capable of great subtlety and able to convey information with extreme precision. Producing 'grammatically correct' Japanese has a great deal to do with understanding the context of language use—much of the 'grammar' operates at discourse level rather than at sentence level. The attitude and intention of the speakers and the social relationship between them are 'grammatically' expressed. To understand Japanese grammar patterns it is, therefore, very helpful to have context; and it is here that TV drama can play a major role.

Japanese lower-intermediate students tend to have not fully mastered the basic sentence patterns and concepts; therefore, they are often weak analysts who are unable on occasion to find out what they need to look up! This can lead to reluctance to engage with 'real' Japanese and result in the learner being tied to the textbook and classroom context. Moving learners from this stage towards independent learning is a challenge for teachers and course designers. Even for advanced students the problem of the writing system can hamper the ability to use grammar references and dictionaries (of which there are some excellent ones) and these skills have to be explicitly taught.

In order to encourage intermediate students to look at 'real' Japanese and to make them analyse and look up grammar points, it seemed to me that an EBL model using drama texts would be ideal, as it would encourage collaborative discussion and analysis, as well as use of reference sources and informants.

The Project

The initial stage was to gather material, view it and select the resources. The resources and the corresponding EBL activities were to be tested on a group of intermediate Japanese learners. The nearest group available in terms of intermediate-level learners was a cohort of students on a 20-credit, three hour-a-week Japanese unit. The course selected was a third-level Japanese course on the optional languages (LEAP) programme. These tasks were also given to two students who had intermediate-level Japanese after one year in Japan as exchange students¹ and who were studying language. The materials were short sections of TV dramas ranging from as little as 35 seconds to up to 4 minutes and; as they were shorter than 'scenes', I will refer to them as clips. The idea was to start with a teacher-centred approach where the clips would serve as materials for the usual kinds of activities in the language classroom (focused listening exercises etc.). The plan was to move away from teacher-centred activity to having small groups (two or three) of students doing their own work on designated clips and presenting their outcomes to the rest of the class. It was assumed that after three to four weeks of working with similar material the students would gradually be able to work collaboratively using the teacher as a facilitator and as a reference source.

Activities

The video clips were used by the teacher and students in the following ways:

- A clip would be shown and, on second viewing, students were provided with a transcript containing all the material and asked to explain what happens;
- A pre-watching question sheet would be provided to focus attention on particular moments, e.g. 'Why did A cry? What was said to her by B? Was she insulted?'

¹ The question of what constitutes 'intermediate' is discussed below.

- A clip would be shown and students given a partial transcript with blanks to be filled in, focusing on grammatical items. Some follow-up questions about the grammar patterns were given;
- Subtitled (English) clips were provided and students asked to comment (Japanese language transcript provided). The 'English' subtitles were on a Malay product that probably machine-translated the Chinese subtitles into English; and it showed!
- A transcript was given as a reading/translating exercise and the clip was then shown encouraging students to revise their understanding/translation in the light of the context they now had been shown;
- A clip was shown and then a Japanese-subtitled version shown to confirm understanding/hearing.

The questions were: what happens in the clip?; what linguistic structures express this?; what is the communicative function of the—structure here?; and how can you confirm your understanding? The students were encouraged to discuss with and respond to the teacher, who served as a facilitator and informant, but also to use provided grammar references and native speaker informants. A volunteer native speaker attended the class each week and was available to be contacted. The teacher's stated intention was to avoid giving answers and to assist the learners in using the references.

A Word on Transcripts

A major hurdle for learners of Japanese lies in the writing system. A transcription of oral material will have to be different depending on the audience and to what extent they can read the standard characters. Learners acquire these skills slowly; and mastering the basic 2,000 characters that are used takes several years of intensive study. Chinese-literate students may be familiar with the semantic elements of many characters, but they cannot pronounce them and often misapply Chinese knowledge. The large number of homophones in Japanese means that a transcription that is purely phonetic makes it difficult for a non-proficient speaker to know which of the possible words is meant in some instances. The net outcome is that for several years there is difficulty in looking up words in a dictionary, as it is very time intensive! Transcripts need to be carefully tailored to the intended consumer so that they do not, in themselves, become the problem!

Problems

A major problem was that the students were slower to engage with this new mode of learning than had been originally anticipated. Although the initial idea had been to have groups meeting outside of class time for discussion sessions, it soon became clear that this was unlikely to succeed. The group was, in any case, smaller than expected and shrank from the initial seven to five and was composed entirely of non-native English speakers, all from South East Asia. All of the students were in their final year and Japanese was low on their list of priorities. The students complained about limited time, which resulted in poor attendance. The one hour of class time available, even when 'stretched' considerably, was not adequate for the type of activities originally envisaged. The syllabus allowed only a limited amount of reward to be given (within a portfolio mark) for this strand of activity and this may have been a contributing factor to several absences which hampered the 'group'. There was no opportunity to have the originally envisaged 'groups' working on separate material and presenting to each other. The tutor as informant role was overused by students; furthermore, the stated aim of encouraging students to 'look up' references was abandoned during class time as it took too long. After the first three classes, the tutor took the view that, until the students were really at a strong intermediate level, they would not be capable of analysing the sentence structures and could not make use of the grammar references and dictionary as had been planned. There was not enough time available to formally teach all the necessary material. The level of the group was in fact too low, not for the material itself perhaps, but for the task types. 'Intermediate' in terms of this project meant A level or higher; and the tasks envisaged required a certain formal knowledge of Japanese grammar, e.g. parts of speech, which the students did not yet possess. The attempts at discussion in class did not go well and when work was assigned to pairs it became clear that the pairs would rather do it separately – they claimed that they could not find time to meet up and had 'done it' themselves. The expectations of the students based on their prior learning styles (and perhaps influenced by their presumed familiarity with the teacher-centred approach still dominant in many South East Asian education systems) may have contributed to a degree of discomfort with the idea of class and group discussion.

Preparing material for the project required a significant amount of time dedicated to watching the TV dramas in order to find useful segments, as well as producing the corresponding transcripts. Unless someone is watching for their own pleasure while keeping an eye out for the pedagogic content, the process is not likely to be worthwhile in terms of the ratio of material watched to useful clips identified. The nature of the Japanese writing system means that transcripts of the audio needed to be carefully re-edited to make them comprehensible to students who have not yet learned all the characters. As discussed above, the transcripts will need to differ considerably according to the level of the intended audience.

Technical problems with the materials were also encountered. DVDs from Japan are region 2 (as in the UK) but some US and SE Asian sourced material was region 3 and so a region-free player was required to watch them. A further issue arose in selecting a method for indexing the clips chosen and creating a database. It was difficult to create a searchable list of grammatical and cultural 'items' without reference to transcripts and to additional 'teacher comments'. Transcription was most effectively done by a native-speaker; but in one or two instances errors were found in the native speakers' transcriptions so there was a need for quality control.

The physical environment for watching, discussing and plenary work was clearly an issue. The classroom we had was unsuitable and perhaps contributed to the difficulty. It was clear that a minimum 2-hour session was needed and that reference sources (human, electronic or paper) needed to be available in a physically convenient and appropriate setting. The planning of the pilot had not allowed for this.

Successes

The response from the students to the material itself and to the clarification brought by exploring grammar in this way was extremely positive. The material was felt to be interesting and, although challenging, to be less difficult than at first feared. Students also started to realise that 'grammar' does not mean 'exercises' but is rather about communication and that grammatical forms have function and context. Tutors also realised that the independent, EBL-style tasks originally envisaged were not fully suited to the level of the students and made modifications, so that the material itself could still be used but in the teacher-focused way that had initially been intended for an

introductory three- to four- week period only. The database of useful clips remains and can be expanded gradually and in collaboration with other colleagues. The transcripts in their various forms (full and partial, in different orthography, etc.) are also a valuable resource as a database to be searched for particular items and patterns and as exercises for students. One good exercise was searching a group of the transcripts of the clips that had been watched on the course (pasted into a single document) for patterns of verb use. The students were surprised to discover a high volume of a particular set of constructions that had been studied but had not been the focus of specific investigation. This was done as a 'what patterns have we learned this semester?' exercise. Students were asked to search for examples of a list of patterns that they generated themselves.

The material was good, the concept was good but the plan for the pilot was unrealistic given the circumstances with the group of students available. A new intake of students at a more truly intermediate level will alter many of the factors that prevented the original plan from working and allow a rerun that incorporates the positive factors and the material output (clips, transcripts) from the first attempt.

Development

The next stage is to develop the material and tasks into a 20-credit unit on the new (2007 entry) BA Japanese Studies programme. The start of Japanese Studies in September 2007 and the intermediate level of language proficiency of one stream of entrants should allow the idea to be repeated but with more time available; stronger motivation among students; higher order skills in Japanese; stronger linguistic skills in English such that discussion and presentation is a less demanding task; and other advantages. As I write this a core module called *Cultural Contexts of Language Use: reading the TV* has been approved and will be delivered in semester 2 of the 2007-2008 academic year. This will be taken by all intermediate learners on the BA Japanese Studies and will be challenging me to work on the (less successful) EBL aspects of this pilot. I look forward to this challenge and to discussing the questions that this will raise. Most of the negative factors listed at such length above will be ameliorated by having an appropriate physical space; resources; a higher level of Japanese and English; and dedicated time (two hours a week and two timetabled hours for discussion time for groups) through the semester. An additional and highly motivating and exciting element

is that each group will have two to three native-speaker informants who will be working with them on the presentation projects. These partners have been provided through collaboration with colleagues at Keio University in Japan – a partner institution for our student exchange. For some years, I have been working on online partnerships for language learning using 3D environments with text and latterly video chat, Skype and other video-conferencing tools. The new module has enabled me to combine this work with the EBL grammar through video idea. I hope that this new attempt will bear sweeter fruit.