

A Language and Culture Course for International Exchange Students

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Abstract

This is a practical report on the Language and Culture course that was taught to international exchange students who studied Japanese at the Center for Japanese Studies at Nanzan University in the 2021 Spring Semester. The Language and Culture course aims to improve cross-cultural understanding and develop cross-cultural competence among international students. By getting to know the specific features of interaction between language and culture, students gained a better appreciation of Japanese culture and language through viewing and examining the cultures and languages of their own countries. The paper reports on how the process of studying was organized, reflects on the class activities, and explores the issues and results by analyzing the students' work. By taking this course, students were able to acquire knowledge and skills to better adapt to their stay and study in Japan.

Keywords : language and culture, cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural understanding

Introduction

Scholars participating in Nanzan University's Visiting Faculty Program, which aims to strengthen collaboration among exchange partner schools, conduct their own research and teach one Japan Studies course in the Center for Japanese Studies (CJS). In my case, I decided to teach the Language and Culture course. Initially, I planned to be at Nanzan during the 2020 Fall Semester, but Japan Studies classes in that semester were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic, so my visit was moved to the following 2021 Spring Semester (January-May 2021).

I arrived in Japan in early January and quarantined for two weeks. The situation was complicated due to the fact that classes were moved to an online mode, so I needed to learn how to use the Canvas online learning management system (LMS). I was not familiar with this LMS as a different system was used at my home university. However, thanks to colleagues from the CJS, the invited instructors were given the opportunity to become acquainted with the

features of the Canvas system: how to organize material, distribute modules, design assignments and tests for students, attach text, audio and video materials, evaluate student papers, and provide feedback. The training course was organized by Dr. Croker, who was able to present the advantages of the Canvas system and supported instructors in the learning process. A friendly working atmosphere was created, where it was possible to study the Canvas system step by step, asking questions in problematic situations. Invaluable assistance was also provided by other CJS instructors, in particular Professors McGee, McMullen, Isoyama, Fujikake, and Kishi, who shared their experience in working with the program, and Kandori San in the CJS Office. I would like to express my gratitude to the instructors and staff of the CJS for their cooperation and support in adapting to life in Nagoya and working at Nanzan University during the difficult time of the coronavirus epidemic and distance learning.

Course Background

The course started on 18 January 2021 and ended on 19 May 2021. Classes were held once a week for 90 minutes in the early afternoon after lunch (13: 30–15: 00 JST). Classes were conducted in real time using the online meeting app Zoom. I taught classes from my office at Nanzan University, which allowed me to have stable Internet access and overcome difficulties that arose with using electronic learning tools. Students from various countries were enrolled in the course: Brazil, the Philippines, the USA, and Sweden. The student from Brazil was present in Nagoya at that time, and there was no time difference for the student from the Philippines. The student from the USA started classes in the evening (local time in his region). The most inconvenient time for the class was for the Polish student who studied at Stockholm University, as it was very early in the morning (5.00 a.m. local time). However, she took a responsible approach to classes, attended the classes on time, and was never late. Every student had stable Internet access, worked using their own computers, and had separate rooms for taking the classes. All of the students had an advanced level of English. The students spoke a certain level of Japanese and were familiar with Japanese culture, having studied or traveled in Japan. Only the student from Stockholm University had never been to Japan but planned to arrive under the exchange program. Thus, my challenge was to transform the course to work in a small group without the possibility of face-to-face communication.

Course Content

Initially, the Linguistics and Culture course was intended for a group of 10–15 students, involving real-time face-to-face communication and interaction, dialogic communication, and tasks, discussions, and other types of interactive activities. But due to the prevailing conditions — conducting the course online, a lack of direct communication, and a small group of only four students — I had to transform the course to adapt it to these conditions.

The Linguistics and Culture course is integrative and is designed to broaden the horizons of students, giving them a different perspective on learning a foreign language, in this case Japanese. The goal is for students to understand how closely language and culture are interconnected and how important it is to know the characteristics of a certain culture, in particular patterns of behavior, nonverbal language, stereotypes, and so on.

The course consists of a sequence of 13 modules (one module per week). Each module represents a specific topic, such as the main definitions used in cross-cultural studies; cultural values; cultural barriers; verbal vs. nonverbal communication; types of communication styles; stereotypes and prejudices; culture shock and culture bumps; and so on.

As a first step, students were given material to familiarize themselves with each topic. This material could be a text, an audio lecture or a video clip. The lesson began with a small discussion of the topic, where I discovered how much students knew about this topic and what questions they found interesting. Then I gave a lecture of not more than 15 minutes, providing the main outline of the topic. After the lecture, students were offered various tasks: definition of basic concepts on the topic, a quiz, a crossword, a small test or a role-playing game, and so on. For homework, students did a variety of activities: answering questions, writing essays, preparing presentations, and at the end of the course writing a final report. The evaluation criteria for each type of homework were provided.

The topics of classes were organized in such a way that students developed a theoretical basis for understanding the relationship between language and culture, which helped them to navigate the practical linguistic and cultural activities. The purpose of the course was to analyze and experience the challenges and benefits of intercultural communication by creating projects in collaboration with representatives of other cultures in the group; to experience how verbal and nonverbal behavior is shaped by cultures and interpreted through students' own cultural lenses; and to analyze and discuss examples of cross-cultural misunderstanding in various situations.

Practical tasks were designed in such a way that students could identify similarities and

differences between the culture of their language community and the culture of the Japanese language community. For example, when discussing cultural values, students prepared presentations on the topic taking into account their own cultural values, and then after viewing the other students' presentations they discussed the various issues, such as: What similarities in cultural values have you found between the national groups represented and your own culture? What are the differences? Is there any cultural value that really impressed you? Can you say that the information given in the presentations helped you better understand the significance of cultural values in human society?

Students were particularly interested in the topic of nonverbal communication, where nonverbal and paraverbal patterns were analyzed, compared and discussed, such as:

- the difference between a student's own culture and Japanese culture in non-verbal communication (body language - facial expression, eye contact, gestures, poses; the role of physical distance between people when communicating; touching - handshakes, kisses, etc.; the use of time - punctuality, doing several things simultaneously or one after another; the role of silence).
- the difference between a student's own culture and Japanese culture in verbal communication (pronunciation, grammatical structure, way of writing).
- the difference between a student's own culture and Japanese culture in paraverbal communication (tone, pitch, volume, intonation).

When discussing stereotypes, prejudices, culture shock, and so on, students shared their personal experiences of staying in Japan, what difficulties they encountered, and how they solved the challenges that arose in various situations. These were extremely lively discussions that did not leave anyone behind: Why don't Japanese people speak directly? Why don't Japanese people look at each other's eyes when they talk? Why do Japanese people often say *sumimasen*? Why do Japanese people bow instead of shaking hands? Why do Japanese people seem to be such reserved people?

The students compiled a table together during the class which indicated the main characteristics, similarities, and differences of the students' own cultures (American, Polish, Brazilian, Filipino) and Japanese culture.

Reflections

At the end of the course, students wrote a final report that summed up the course and helped understand how much the acquired knowledge could be useful in the real adaptation of students

to Japanese language and culture: What are the problems in communication between cultures? What factors influence intercultural communication? What is intercultural competence? What did you learn in the course Linguistics and Culture? Has it helped you improve your cross-cultural skills? Would you like to add any topic to study in this course? The students wrote in their reports that the course improved their knowledge about cross-cultural skills, prompted them to study much more about language and culture coincidences, learned to communicate better between different countries and cultures, and to be more open-minded. The students noted that they learned a lot about Japanese culture, such as cultural values, religion, superstitions, non-verbal behavior, and so on, but would like to add such issues as religious beliefs, cross-cultural conflict resolution, popular things in Japanese culture and so on. The greatest achievement of the course was neatly summed up by one student, who wrote, "Although we weren't able to meet face to face because of the pandemic, our Zoom classes still gave me an opportunity to practice my cross-cultural skills as I was able to talk with people from other cultures, become friends and listen to their opinions and point of view about their own culture, my culture and especially Japan."

Conclusion

I am planning to conduct a similar course in the spring semester of 2022 with students at the Pacific National University, Khabarovsk, Russia. Then the experimental material gathered from the students will be analyzed, and a final report on the research topic, "Theory and Practice in Cross-Cultural Communication in the Perspective of Global Development of the Pacific Rim Region," will be prepared. The results of this research will hopefully contribute to the research area provided by Pacific National University and Nanzan University as well as help develop relationships between neighboring countries, in particular Japan and Russia.

The following list of references contains readings that were used in the course, and that readers might find useful if they were to teach a similar course.

References

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外国人交換留学生のための言語と文化のコース

イリーナ・A・ポストエンコ

要 旨

本稿は、2021年春学期に南山大学外国人留学生別科で外国人交換留学生が学んだ言語と文化コースの実践報告である。この言語と文化のコースでは留学生の間で異文化理解を深め、異文化への適応能力を向上することを目指している。留学生は自国の文化や言語について調べ考察することを通し、言語と文化の相互の特徴を知ることにより、日本の文化や言語をよりよく理解することができた。本稿は、学習過程がどのように作られ、クラスの活動に反映したかについて、さらに留学生の活動を分析することによりその問題点と結果について考察する。このコースを受講することで、留学生は日本での生活や学習にうまく適応するための知識とスキルを身につけることができた。

キーワード：言語と文化、異文化コミュニケーション、異文化理解