

Japanese language textbooks and the changing Japanese language student demographic

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This paper describes how Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) textbook development in the late 1980's was directed towards two types of students; the Western expatriate businessman and the American university language student. Over the last twenty years there has been a change in the learner demographic. The new generation of people learning Japanese as second language learners (JSL) is likely to be non-English speaking immigrants or technical students, mostly from Asia or South America. However, there are few textbooks that address their needs specifically. The paper gives several reasons why the former textbooks are inappropriate for these students. It then illustrates some recent trends that are advancing the development of materials for the JSL learner and concludes by highlighting recent government directives that are starting to produce positive, practical results for JSL learners and teachers alike.

この論文では、1980年代の後半に、Japanese as a foreign language (JFL)の教材が、欧米企業の日本駐在員、および、アメリカの大学にて日本語を習得する学生、という二つの対象を目的として開発された経緯について述べる。それから20年後、Japanese as a second language learners (JSL)として、アジアや南米から英語を話さない移民や専門学生といった日本語習得者が増え、日本語を学ぶ層が変化してきたにもかかわらず、彼らが必要とする日本語教材は開発されてこなかった。なぜこのような習得者に先に述べた教材が不適切なのか、いくつかの理由をあげる。そして、JSL習得者のための教材開発を促進する最近の傾向について説明するとともに、最近の日本政府の政策がJSL習得者、また教師にとって積極的、かつ実際の結果を生み出しはじめている状況について述べる。

Japanese as a foreign language education made a giant leap forward in the mid-nineteen eighties. Once purely the preserve of linguists and scholars of Japanese literature, Japanese suddenly became a language to be taught and learnt; all because there was a dollar, or a yen, to be made.

The economic forces that drove the Japanese bubble economy were the same forces that produced a wave of willing students and a number of Japanese textbooks in the beginning of the nineteen nineties. Western

companies clambered to get a foothold in the prosperous Japanese market. To do this, they needed to find employees with Japanese language ability – a rare commodity indeed. University business students saw their chance, and began studying Japanese language in tandem with their formal business courses. Companies competed to hire these graduates. Many western companies with a base in Japan also set up in-house Japanese language training courses. Some universities in America, Australia and Europe even began moving the Japanese department out of the linguistics faculty and into the business or economics faculty. In the decade between 1985 and 1995, as Miyagawa (1995) points out, Japanese language education went from having “a virtually monogamous relationship with the field of literature ...to teaching students in business in large numbers” (p4) A Modern Language Association survey showed that between 1986 and 1990, the enrollment in Japanese at the college level in America virtually doubled, to almost 45,000 students (Brod & Wells, 2000). This meant that publishing companies in the United States and Japan began publishing textbooks that catered to the market for this new burgeoning area of study.

But everyone knows how the story ends; the bubble soon burst, the funds budgeted for in-company Japanese language courses dried up, and the number of foreign companies offering jobs for people with Japanese ability declined. So too did the number of students studying Japanese language, and consequently, few new Japanese textbooks have been published since. This is not to say that Japanese language education stagnated in its development - on the contrary. While the popularity of studying Japanese in the West may

have waned, the number of students studying Japanese in Asia, particularly in China, has been rapidly increasing. The number of universities offering Japanese as a second language (JSL) teaching courses has also increased.

Now, as the Japanese economy moves out of its period of hibernation and the Chinese government continues to embrace policies of free market capitalism, the business and employment opportunities for Chinese people in Japan have begun to multiply. Between 1998 and 2003, the number of Chinese students studying Japanese increased by more than 50% - significantly more than any other country. (Japan Foundation, 2005) And of the overall population of Japanese language students in Japan, students from Asia make up 79.7%, while an almost insignificant proportion come from North America (4.7%) (Ministry of Culture, 2005)

The number and make up of people studying in Japan has also been changing. According to the Ministry of Justice, the number of registered foreign nationals in 2000 was 1 686 444 – almost double the number it was in 1985. Most of these immigrants are from Asia (especially China), South America (especially Brazil and Peru) and the Middle East: As the number of immigrants in Japan, both registered and non-registered, continues to rise, as it surely will in the ensuing decades, there will be a much greater urgency to supply language instruction for non-Japanese communities and to create more textbooks to suit their language learning requirements, which are quite different to the Western business man or American college exchange student.

There have been a lot of supplementary Japanese language books published in the last decade, such as dictionaries, grammar books and aids for learning kanji and vocabulary.

But again, in keeping with the trend from the eighties, most of these are focusing on English speaking students who are studying at Western universities or who are on foreign language exchange programs in Japan. The focus of Japanese language education for non-native speakers is still heavily biased towards teaching Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) to Western students, rather than teaching Japanese as a second language (JSL) to immigrants in Japan or to students from other Asian countries who are, or plan to live or study in Japan. Usuki (2001) warns that there needs to be more consideration for these students' different and diverse needs when designing materials and curricula.

This paper will focus on the changing demographic of Japanese language students and examine the suitability of some of the current textbooks on offer. The paper will also look at how this changing demographic relates to Japanese language education for non-native speakers as a whole.

Promotion of Japanese as a foreign language overseas

Economic forces may well have been a catalyst in stimulating the growth of Japanese language education abroad during the 1980's and 90's; however, political forces were also at play. With Japan reaching superpower status economically in the late 1980's, the government became keen to press its advantage into the political realm. One factor that was seen to be essential in increasing Japan's political influence overseas was increasing the worldwide population of Japanese speakers. The Japanese government thus began promoting Japanese as a foreign language. The Foreign Ministry set up the Japan foundation in 1972 as the

key organ for promoting Japanese culture overseas. This followed with the establishment of the Japan foundation Japanese Language Institute in 1989. A perusal of the Institute's website clearly illustrates its orientation towards promoting Japanese language education overseas rather than in country.

Foreign governments have been keen to take the economic advantages associated with having more of its citizens becoming literate in Japanese, while the Japanese government also has benefited from the public relations boost it has gleaned from the cultural exchanges that were part of the expanding JFL phenomenon. It is clear in 2005 that Japan's policy towards teaching its language to non-Japanese is "clearly tied to considerations of its status as a member of the international community" (Gottlieb, 2005, p74). The textbooks that have been created during the last two decades are indicative of the history and language policy of this period.

Focus on foreign university students and English speakers

The focus of JFL in the eighties was on Western business people and university students, mostly those studying at American universities. Consequently, many of the textbooks produced during this period are written in English - some completely in Roman alphabet without any kanji or even kana. Most books orientate their functional practice activities around tasks that take place in the office. One such text is *Japanese for Busy People*. The aim of *Japanese for Busy People* is to help learners acquire essential Japanese as quickly and as effectively as possible, so that they can

actually communicate with native speakers in their own language; all be it on a very basic level. The book has been very successful and popular. However, it is written in English and Japanese (the earlier editions using Romanized script for the Japanese), concentrates on functional scenarios in the office, and has little in the way of instruction or exercises for learning to read or write Japanese characters. Some of the functional themes for the chapters also clearly label *Japanese for Busy People* as a bubble era textbook for well-healed executives. ‘Ordering beer to be delivered’, ‘Invitation to a ski trip’, ‘Buying antiques’ to teach ‘wa’ and ‘ga’ and ‘Enjoying Kabuki’ to teach past tense adjectives just don’t have much relevance for the majority of Japanese language students in 2005.

Another example of the business-orientated genre is *Japanese for Everyone: a Functional Approach to Daily Communication*. This is an attractive text using Japanese script from the beginning. Each chapter contains several “functions” of language and grammar discussed in the context of the Japanese office environment. The text starts with the -masu form but later adds practice at other levels of politeness. This is because all the situational dialogues are based on one character, an American expatriate who has been transferred to Japan for business. This limits the book and precludes the use of informal and colloquial Japanese – the kind of speech that would have more functional value for a new immigrant.

The other main focus of the textbook market is on the Western (mainly American) university classroom. These books, while having exercises for students, are mostly designed to be teacher directed. They often have descriptions

of culture or daily life that are either redundant or not applicable to the student who lives in Japan. These books can also be quite expensive. *Learn Japanese: New College Text*, produced in 1984, is still commonly used in universities and recommended by the Association of Teachers of Japanese. This text places emphasis on sociolinguistic and discourse knowledge as well as functional competence. It is dense in its grammar and vocabulary content. Since it is designed for use in the classroom, presumably by a bilingual native Japanese teacher, it is lacking in grammar explanations but full of grammar drills. This often makes these kinds of textbooks of very limited use for those who have to study alone. Without the help of a teacher, grammar can’t be practiced. With only limited grammar explanation, the learner is also often left confused and frustrated.

Another popular university textbook found on many bookshelves in Japan is *GENKI 1 & 2: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese*. This is a reasonably recent introductory Japanese textbook series developed by faculty at Kansai Gaidai University in Japan. Lessons include conversations, dialogues, grammar explanations plus group and pair- based exercises and a large number of listening tasks. The book was designed for use in a large class by instructors teaching the Japanese language courses to exchange students. Most of the students are native English speakers from American universities. The book therefore has a substantial proportion of English text and suits the needs of teachers and students in the university setting. However, as with *Japanese for busy people*, the chapter themes and practice exercises are unlikely to present much relevance to students unless they are nineteen-year-old Americans.

Topics such as ‘Valentine’s day’, ‘Manga’, ‘Personal advice column’, etc have clearly been chosen to maintain the interest of young students rather than to teach functions for practical daily tasks. The amount of pair and group work also makes this book inappropriate as a self-study text. The book is also cost prohibitive for the individual if they want to practice the listening exercises, of which there are many. The CD’s for the first book alone costs 18 000 yen!

These kinds of Western university class and business-orientated materials still make up a large portion of the available textbooks. They have been very successful and catered well for their target audience. However, they do not support the new Japanese language learner who is likely to be a non-English speaking immigrant from Brazil, or a technical student from Vietnam, or an aged-care worker from the Philippines. Textbooks that are directed towards these students need to be produced in order to help them not only advance their language skills, but also adapt to living in Japan by teaching them how to perform functional tasks such as renting an apartment, applying for a job, or going to a doctor.

Issues

Lack of textbooks for private learners and self-study

As mentioned, most textbooks are made for formal learning situations, where a teacher directs a number of students in a classroom. There are very few texts that give adequate grammar explanations or a sufficient number of example sentences so that the student can fully understand the grammar point presented in a textbook without the

explanation from a teacher. Also, most of the drills in these books begin with a prompt from the teacher so that the student can practice the grammar task by responding. Very few books have written or audio material designed for the student studying alone that will enable learners to practice by themselves. And if they do, the CD’s or tapes for listening are usually very expensive. The number of students who can’t afford to attend language schools is likely to rise. As the number of students whose socio-economic circumstances are not as favourable as previous learners increases, there will be a need to make this kind of self-study textbook more available.

Large number of ‘dated’ textbooks

Most of the textbooks commonly used today by Japanese learners were first published between fifteen and twenty years ago. Between now and then, there have been major advances in language teaching in general (particularly through the spread of English as a global language, which has spawned the massive English as a second/foreign language learning industry), and significant developments specifically in the field of teaching JSL. While some of the Japanese textbooks available in 2005 have been edited since they were first published, many have not. Of the nine general adult textbooks suggested by the Association of Teachers of Japanese on their website, only two are published after 1990 and several that are recommended are from the early to mid 70’s. Even with new additions, most textbooks have changed little - the biggest change most commonly being a new cover. Although intended to modernize the look of the book, this often serves mostly to confuse buyers, since they

mistake the book with the new cover for being a completely new textbook.

Lack of support in languages other than English

With most textbooks being directed towards English speaking learners, there are few options for speakers of other languages if they are looking for a textbook that will also give them some instruction in their first language. Nearly all non-English speaking Japanese learners first turn to the books produced by AOTS (The Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship); a quasi-government body established by the former Ministry of International Trade and Industry to export technical expertise and training to developing countries in Asia. Realizing the need for their target market to speak Japanese, they developed their own textbook and translated it into 11 different languages. The AOTS books *Shin-Nihongo no Kiso*, *Minna no Nihongo* and *First Steps in Japanese* still remain the best options for non-English speaking JFL/JSJ learners, especially for speakers of minor languages such as Burmese. AJALT (Association for Japanese language teaching) has also recently published its *Atarashi Jissen Nihongo* in Chinese, Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese. Similar in format to *Japanese for Busy People*, it is aimed at the technical trainee from Asia and concentrates on teaching language “to prevent accidents and promote better communication in the workplace” [my translation]. (AJALT website, <http://www.ajalt.org/kyozai/kyozai1.html>) While these books have been a helpful resource for the many that have used them, they are basically the only textbook options for non-English speaking Japanese language learners. The range of supplementary Japanese

language books with translations or support in languages other than English is also limited.

Lack of intermediate and advanced textbooks

The number of Japanese language learners who progress beyond a pre-intermediate level and continue formal learning has, in the past, been small. Consequently, the number of textbook choices available for those learners is limited. Yet now that people who began arriving during bubble years have stayed in Japan, having either married a Japanese spouse or found long-term employment, the numbers of learners who have progressed beyond elementary level Japanese has swelled. However, good materials for these learners remain scarce. The intermediate and advanced textbooks that are available are poorly designed. All are basically the same format: a translated list of vocabulary with a passage to be read; some comprehension questions; and finally some grammatical drills - almost always without any grammar explanations. The main function of these books is to expose the learner to new vocabulary and grammar phrases. However, most of the readings are contrived, and most contain little in the way of supplementary notes.

Positive changes

Internet resources

The proliferation of the Internet has been a fillip for the production of JFL/JSJ learning materials. A number of organizations and individuals have set up Japanese language learning websites that contain a host of useful and innovative learning tools. Online kanji learning, dictionaries, grammar

exercises and vocabulary quizzes are just some of the many electronic aids available for the computer-literate learner. There is also a lot of information to help students choose the right Japanese language book for their particular study needs. A number of the textbook publishers provide companion sites for their textbooks. These sites offer extra listening and practice exercises to supplement the textbook material.

Some of the sites redress the deficiencies of textbooks that were mentioned above. For example, on the AJALT website, there is a ‘daily life Japanese’ page which has a huge number of topics helping immigrants to linguistically navigate their path through the myriad of tasks they need to perform as citizens in Japan. The page covers everything from visiting the real estate agent to look for an apartment, to applying for a mobile phone, to explaining how to get a driver’s license. While all the explanations are in Japanese, the Japanese used is simple, all the kanji used have furigana (phonetic reading of the character), and the contents pages showing where to find the information are translated into English, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese and five other Asian languages. (AJALT website)

One downside to website language learning aids is that their information is only available to those who are computer literate, and who also have a computer and Internet access. The learner must then be able to find the site that they need. Problems of accessibility and computer literacy are likely to become less prominent as computers and Internet access become cheaper and more available across Asia. Currently, these issues still must be considered an obstacle.

Grassroots action

Insignificant profit margins may be discouraging publishers from investing in producing new Japanese language textbooks. Yet necessity is forcing communities and schools at the local level to develop materials for learners themselves. One example is the staff at Dalian University of Technology, who due to the lack of appropriate materials written in Chinese translated the books “Genki 1&2” from English into Chinese to use in their Japanese language classes.

Another example is the local government and school teachers in Ota City, Gunma prefecture. The proportion of foreign residents living in Ota City is around 2.7 times greater than the national average. Of its 8,000 foreign residents, about half are Japanese-Brazilians. At the Asahi Elementary School in Ota, where 47 of the school’s 547 students are non-Japanese, the school employs three JSL teachers who create materials and develop the children’s Japanese language skills. The mayor of Ota City also established a ‘special educational zone for foreign children’. From April of 2005, the city has begun offering bilingual education in Portuguese and Japanese by hiring resident Brazilian instructors.

All around the country, there are groups of volunteers who are working together to provide language education for new immigrants to Japan. As there are few opportunities for paid employment for those who have trained as Japanese language teachers, many choose to volunteer as teachers in their local communities. Often supported by local government or NPOs, these groups provide what is usually the only language training option for many new immigrants

who cannot afford the money or the time to attend a full-time language school course. Although once well-meaning, yet poorly trained and skilled, many volunteer teachers now have teaching qualifications and the groups that support them are becoming better organized and coordinated.

Conclusions

Kubota (2002) asserts that promoting the teaching and learning of Japanese has traditionally been part of the discourse of *kokusaika* (internationalization), which he says was “part of Japan’s struggle to claim its power in the international community...and to affirm Japanese distinct identity”. From a brief survey of websites related to Japanese language education, it is still clear that this focus remains unchanged. In this paper, I have mainly argued that the majority of Japanese language textbooks available for adult learners ignore a large proportion of the learner population. Initially produced for the Western university student studying in their own country and the English-speaking learner working in a business environment in Japan, many of the current textbooks are out-dated and do not address the pragmatic needs of contemporary students in Japan; who are most likely to be non-English speaking, Asian or South American rather than Western, working in a factory rather than an office and studying by themselves or with a volunteer teacher rather than at university. The orientation of Japanese textbooks towards Western learners has followed the same direction set by JFL education as a whole.

It is time for Japanese language education to stop being part of the *kokusaika* advertising campaign and to begin providing better language learning materials and instruction

to those who have traditionally been outside JFL’s ‘target market’. An analysis of JSL in Japan by Ono Yumiko (1999) of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies concluded the state of JSL education to be “poor” in both quality and quantity. She noted that there were not enough trained teachers to support the number of JSL learners in Japan, especially children; that most schools had few learning materials (only 10% of elementary and secondary schools answered that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with what they had.); and that there was an urgent need for collaboration and exchange of information and resources between volunteers, professionals and governments. Various positive forces over the last few years have, however, begun to provide some forward momentum.

The National Language Council report in 1995 recognized that due to the increasing number of foreign workers living outside major cities, language education should be promoted at the regional level to assist the disparate bodies engaged in helping those residents meet their linguistic needs (Gottlieb, 2005). Since then, the government has begun to make policy statements relating to teaching Japanese to residents in Japan. These statements are just now beginning to result in concrete changes. The promise of “Preparation of Japanese language instruction materials for foreign children in Japan” that appears on the MEXT website under the title of ‘Promotion of Japanese Language Teaching for Foreigners’ has just started to be fulfilled in the form of a series of books published last month (October 2005) titled *Lesson preparation for Elementary school JSL classes*. The textbooks have been produced by Monbukagakusho’s curriculum research council. They offer instruction and

materials for teachers in designing lessons for students whose first language is not Japanese. This is a significant step forward in the recognition of the importance of Japanese as a second language for non-Japanese living in Japan. If these policy initiatives can continue to bring practical gains, it is reasonable to expect advances in JSL textbook and teaching material design in the near future.

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