



Teaching Toki Pona in Japan

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Toki Pona is a minimalist constructed language consisting of only 14 phonemes and 137 words. Registered as ISO 639-3 code “tok” in 2022, it is used by thousands of language enthusiasts around the globe, especially through social networking platforms. After a brief overview of the Toki Pona language, this paper discusses the possible merits of learning Toki Pona to English learners in Japan. As an exploratory study, Toki Pona is taught to students at a Japanese university by way of an informal club. A teaching log, conversations with students, and a student questionnaire indicate that learning Toki Pona may positively impact awareness of part of speech and communication skills. In addition, several of the participating students were also training for their teaching licenses, and reported that the experience was beneficial to their growth as teachers. Considering the low burden required to acquire the language, it is concluded that Toki Pona warrants more formal investigation into its benefits for language learners.

トキポナは、わずか14音素と137単語からなるミニマリズムに則った人工言語である。2022年にISO 639-3コード“tok”として登録され、主にSNSを通じて、世界中の何千人もの言語愛好家に使用されている。本稿では、トキポナの概要を簡単に説明した後、トキポナを日本の英語学習者に教える利点を把握するために、日本の大学で非公式な学習サークルを通じて、学生にトキポナを紹介した経緯について述べる。教師の指導日誌や学生のアンケートから、トキポナを学ぶことで、品詞に対する意識の向上とコミュニケーション・スキルの促進が期待できることが示された。また、教員志望の参加者は、言語教育への異なるアプローチの仕方を体験できたことを高く評価している。言語習得の負担が少ないことを考慮すると、トキポナは言語学習者にとって有益であり、今後さらなる調査が必要であると結論づけられた。

Many start to learn a third or additional language in secondary or tertiary education. In addition to fulfilling curiosity or satisfying interest in the culture of that language, learning a third language can provide linguistic benefits. Huang, Loerts, and

Steinkrauss (2020) found that learning two foreign languages, as opposed to just one, had a positive effect on both language aptitude and working memory. However, the significant investment in time and effort necessary to learn a third language means that such benefits may not be realized for some time. Besides, the commitment may seem daunting to learners who do not have a particular interest in another language. One alternative is to learn a constructed language (conlang), or artificial language, of which over a thousand exist. In a paper introducing the international auxiliary language Esperanto and its benefits to language learners, Helen Eaton wrote in 1927:

There is a growing interest among progressive educators in the educational value of teaching an artificial language as a basis for all language study. The unique value seems to lie in the fact that a language artificially constructed puts into practice, through its absolutely regular grammar and word-formation, certain theories of structure which illustrate to the pupil the functions of grammar and word-formation – functions which are often lost sight of in the maze of irregularities and exceptions that have grown up in all natural languages. (p. 87)

While Esperanto learners are not burdened with the “maze of irregularities and exceptions” of a natural language that Eaton refers to, Esperanto does have over 16,000 words – making mastery of the language itself little different from other foreign languages in terms of commitment in time and energy.

This paper proposes the minimalist constructed language Toki Pona as a possible solution. This language has no inflectional morphology and only a total of 137 words. It is generally said to take only 30 hours to learn (Yuzbay, 2023). The paper presents the results of an exploratory study on teaching Toki Pona to a group of students at a university in Japan. Data derived from a teaching log, conversations with students, and results from a student questionnaire conducted at the end of the program indicate that students may benefit in several ways from the experience of learning Toki Pona.

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Toki Pona

Toki Pona was created by Canadian linguist and translator Sonja Lang in 2001. Working from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which proposes that the language we speak affects the way we think, she wanted to see if breaking the concepts of the world down to basic elements would promote positive thinking (Roberts, 2007). An online community of Toki Pona speakers sprung up, and in 2022 Toki Pona was recognized as a world language with the ISO 639-3 code “tok” (“Change request documentation: 2021-043,” n.d.).

Currently, there are thousands of Toki Pona speakers around the world. On social media, Toki Pona has a community with the second largest membership among constructed language communities on Reddit, at over 15,000. Esperanto has the largest, with over 27,000 members. Toki Pona takes first place within conlang servers on Discord, with over 10,000 members on its largest server (Lang, 2023). The 2022 Toki Pona Census (Jan Tamalu, 2023) had 1931 respondents. To the question, “Would you say you know Toki Pona?” 1432 responded yes. Ninety responded that they are fluent in the language. Respondents came mainly from North America and Europe, making up a total of over 80 percent of respondents, in addition to responses from regions all around the world. There are numerous online resources and shared creations available such as Toki Pona lessons and original music on YouTube, memes on social networking sites, a Wikipedia site in Toki Pona, a newspaper, translations, and original stories and poems. Toki Pona Day is held annually in August through the Discord server Ma Pona pi Toki Pona, with online events scheduled over a 24-hour period. Courses in Toki Pona have been taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Princeton University, and the University of Geneva (Roberts, 2007; “Where is Toki Pona used,” 2024).

Unlike Esperanto, Toki Pona was not made with the intention of becoming an international auxiliary language, that is, a planned language constructed for the purpose of international communication. Among conlangs, Toki Pona is considered an artlang, or artistic language. Peterson (2015) defines an artlang as “a conlang created for aesthetic, fictional, or otherwise artistic purposes” (p. 21). As Toki Pona creator Lang describes the language in her 2014 book, “Although it is very easy to meditate and communicate honest thoughts and everyday activities in Toki Pona, it is impossible to translate a chemical textbook or legal document in the language without significant losses.” Toki Pona is for those times when you want to share ideas and feelings with like-minded people, not for life in the “complex, modern civilization we live in” (Lang, 2014, p. 11).

Phonology

Toki Pona is a minimalist language phonetically, lexically, and semantically. There are 14 letters of the English alphabet used: a, e, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, s, t, u, and w. Vowels represent only one sound, and are similar to the vowel sounds of Spanish, Japanese, or Esperanto. The language is also designed so that there are few minimal pairs. People of varying backgrounds can therefore pronounce words differently without being misunderstood. Pronouncing the word *toki* as “dogi” would be acceptable (Lang, 2014).

Syllables are made up of one vowel or a consonant-vowel combination that can be followed by a nasal *n*. While vowels can stand on their own, they cannot follow one another; there are no diphthongs. Stress always falls on the first syllable of a word.

Vocabulary

The 137 words of Toki Pona are derived from languages around the world so that there are some words familiar to people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most represented languages are English, Tok Pisin, Esperanto, Acadian French, Finnish, Georgian, Serbo-Croatian, and Chinese (Moniz, 2019).

There are several ways in which many concepts can be expressed with only 137 words. First, single words encompass several concepts in a category. For example, the word *moku*, means both *eat* and *drink*. *Pona* means *good*, *simple*, and *friendly*. Second, most words can function as any part of speech, depending on their position in a sentence. *Moku* means *eat* or *drink* as a verb, but also means *food* or *meal* as a noun, and *related to food/eating* as an adjective (such as when functioning as a part of an expression for *kitchen* or *refrigerator*). In addition to *good*, *simple*, and *friendly*, *pona* means *peace* or *benefit* as a noun, *improve*, *fix* or *heal* as a verb, and *okay* or *thanks* as an exclamation (Lang, 2021). Third, while words are combined to express more specific concepts, those compounds are not fixed. Modifiers come after nouns in Toki Pona, so when you want to specifically talk about a lion instead of just using *soweli* (animal), you might want to say *soweli wawa*, or strong animal. Or, depending on what your listener is familiar with, you might want to say *soweli lawa*, or leader animal (such as king of the beasts). *Soweli alasa*, or hunter animal, is another option. Lang (2021) includes a “warning against lexicalization” in the preface of her *Toki Pona Dictionary*, writing, “the whole point of Toki Pona is to mediate about what things mean to you personally, paying attention to the unique context around them, and to construct your own phrases using the building blocks provided by Toki Pona” (p. 18). This fluidity of word combination assures us that learners do not end



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up memorizing lists of combinations – which would essentially be the same as learning a full natural language lexicon.

Syntax

Toki Pona sentences start with a subject followed by the particle *li*. *Li* is followed by an adjective, noun, or verb. So, “*soweli* (animal) *li suwi* (cute),” means “The animal is cute,” and is an example of a sentence without a verb. “*Soweli li moku* (eat),” would be “The animal eats.” To add a direct object, use the particle *e* after the verb, then a noun. “*Jan* (person) *li moku e soweli*,” would mean “The person is eating meat.” Prepositional phrases come after the direct object.

La is another particle, and is used to put a contextual phrase or fragment at the beginning of a sentence. Without tense markers, this is a common way of indicating time; “*tempo* (time) *pini* (end) *la jan li moku*,” would be “Speaking of finished time, the person eats,” or, “Speaking of the past, the person ate.” *La* is also used to connect two sentences to make conditional statements.

Negative statements can be made by adding the negative modifier *ala* to nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The interrogative word *seme* is used to make questions. Another construction is the pre-verb. A verb can be placed before the main verb of a sentence to make a compound meaning, such as “want to X” or “try to X.” Not present in Toki Pona are articles, tenses, plurals, and the passive voice. Any grammar more complicated than what is described here is dealt with by using multiple sentences, sometimes connected with a colon.

Literature Review

To date, few papers have been published about Toki Pona in relation to language learning. In the teaching context, Coluzzi (2022), an Italian language teacher in Malaysia, taught his students Toki Pona as a way of learning communication strategies. He had been finding that students would stop speaking altogether if they did not know a word in Italian that they wanted to use. He wanted to teach them the skill of circumlocution, or the describing of an unknown word using other expressions in the target language. In order to do so, he taught a group of students Toki Pona. In Toki Pona, any concept outside of the core 137 words is expressed by freely combining these words, which is a process very similar to circumlocution. Although the results of Coluzzi’s study were not conclusive, questionnaire results indicated that some students felt that they had gained the ability to utilize circumlocution when speaking in Italian through having learned Toki Pona.

Zorrilla (2018) investigated the cultural identities and world perspectives of three language communities of Esperanto, Volapuk (a conlang created in 1879 to 1880) and Toki Pona. She surveyed and interviewed Esperanto speakers and analyzed online forum content of all three language communities. This included close reading of randomly-selected forum posts as well as content analysis of six months of posts. She found that the languages “impact their speakers’ perceptions and worldviews through both their unique grammatical structures and the sense of community they foster among learners” (p. 30).

Methods

At a mid-level university in Japan, the author started an informal club for learning and using Toki Pona as part of the university’s faculty individual research program. After advertising the project through posters and flyers, an informational session was held in the spring of 2022 attended by seven students, one professor and three administrative staff members. All were native speakers of Japanese with intermediate to advanced English language ability. After a brief introduction to Toki Pona and an introductory lesson, the weekly club meeting time was announced, and attendees were instructed to sign up for the LMS (learning management system) class page for information about weekly club meetings. The seven students attended face-to-face lessons throughout the spring semester. They were second and third-year majors in international studies, and three were training to become English teachers. Two administrative staff members often joined through a Zoom broadcast of the classes, and one professor from another campus of the university viewed the recorded Zoom sessions weekly through the LMS page.

Spring and Fall Sessions

The club met once a week during lunchtime for 30 minutes. Most of that time was spent on short lessons. Each lesson started off with an introduction of five to seven new words in a flashcard type presentation manner, drilling them several times in random order along with previously learned words. One new grammar point was introduced and practiced, then students would work on translating five sentences that included the new words and grammar. The remaining time was used for practice in speaking in the language together, and memes and original Toki Pona music that featured words or grammar points from the lesson were sometimes introduced. Lessons were taught mainly in Japanese, but new Toki Pona word meanings were given in English, and translation activities were between English and Toki Pona. A teaching log was kept



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by the author, who taught the lessons. For each session, the following were recorded: lesson goals, lesson content, observations on student ability to use the language, and observations on student comments and atmosphere of the class.

While seven students could attend the spring sessions, due to scheduling difficulties only two students continued in the fall semester. Both were third year undergraduate students studying for their English teacher licenses. By the end of the academic year, all of the vocabulary and grammar of Toki Pona were learned, and both students expressed interest in taking on a teaching role with new club members in the next academic year. One was particularly interested in translation and started working on a translation of her favorite children's book on her own time.

Post Session Questionnaire

After the final meeting, the two members completed a questionnaire on their experience in the club (see Appendix). The questionnaire contained seven open-ended questions. Dörnyei (2010) gives the disadvantages of open-ended questions as the following: they are difficult to code, and they take time to answer. The latter can discourage respondents from completing the questionnaire. However, the author decided to use open-ended questions because the two respondents were both enthusiastic about the club, the language, and about language learning research. In the absence of quantitative data, the author hoped to draw a richness of answers and to “identify issues not previously anticipated” (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 36), both being benefits of open-ended questions. Permission was obtained from students to use their responses in this study, and all student responses are presented anonymously.

Findings

The following findings include only those pertaining to the student members, not professors or staff who participated.

Teaching Log Observations

Student Awareness of Parts of Speech

Over the course of the year in the Toki Pona club, the author witnessed the students developing a higher awareness of parts of speech. The meaning of Toki Pona sentences relies heavily on the parts of speech with which words are used. As any word can function as any part of speech and words are not inflected, one must be particularly aware of how

words are being used. When first starting to translate Toki Pona sentences, students would ask the meanings of words, or mistakenly use the meaning they had first learned for a word. They then were observed to gradually catch on to the idea that a word in, say, the direct object position was probably going to be a noun. They even began to use words such as *noun* and *verb* in Japanese when discussing among themselves about how to compose or translate a Toki Pona sentence. This had not been seen at the beginning of the program.

Communication Skills

Several aspects of the Toki Pona language challenged the students in various ways throughout the year. Most challenging was the lack of specificity that is characteristic of Toki Pona. During the first half of the program, students grappled with the lack of specificity when referring to concepts. When translating *strawberry* into Toki Pona in the second club meeting, the classroom broke into conversation in response to the idea that “small fruit” (*kili lili*) would be sufficient. Some expressed frustration that this translation did not distinguish strawberries from other small fruits. With verbs, students were perplexed by the fact that the word *esun* means both *buy* and *sell*. In the fifth lesson, a student asked how she can make it clear that she has bought a shirt instead of having sold one. She and other classmates expressed relief and understanding when the author explained that context was the key; if she is talking with her friend at school and she is not in the habit of selling clothing, the friend will probably assume that she has bought the item rather than sold it. By the second semester, students had become familiar with this aspect of Toki Pona, referring to their pets as just “my animal” (*soweli mi*) rather than specifying cat or dog.

A second area of communication skill growth was in word combination. As Lang (2021) specifies in her warning against lexicalization, concepts outside of the 137 Toki Pona core words are not expressed through set combinations; rather, speakers put words together in ways that will most likely be understood by their audience. The students caught on to the idea of freely combining words, as seen in an interchange in the sixth meeting. The author was presenting a lesson on negatives and expected “My mother doesn't eat animals,” (*mama mi li moku ala e soweli*) as a translation for “My mother is a vegetarian.” However, one student wrote, “My mother is a vegetable person,” (*mama mi li jan kili*) and the others agreed that this was much more understandable to them as meaning vegetarian. In this way they were making original combinations that made most sense to their community.



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Concerning other communication skills, in a conversation after the final session, the author told the participants about the Coluzzi (2018) study of Italian learners in Indonesia becoming able to use the skill of circumlocution through their experience with Toki Pona. The participants of the current study stated that in hearing about Coluzzi's results, they realized that circumlocution in English did in fact come much easier to them than before.

Benefits to Teacher Trainees

The two members who continued through the second semester of lessons were both studying to become English teachers, so in addition to Toki Pona itself the topic of teaching methods came up occasionally in our sessions. One difference they noted between the Toki Pona lessons and their practicum lesson plans was a lack of emphasis on conversational usage of the language. On the other hand, they stated that the drilling aspect of the vocabulary and grammar presentation allowed them to come away from each lesson feeling confident in using the new grammar. They could then use it themselves in conversation. Further, both year-long members expressed an interest in taking turns teaching new club members in the following year. However, no new members joined in the 2023 academic year.

Post Session Questionnaire Results

The appendix shows the complete student answers to the questionnaire. All answers were positive about Toki Pona, with expressions used including “enjoyable,” “great life-long hobby,” and “cool.” Concerning communication skills, Student A referred to Toki Pona's lack of specificity in answering question 3: “Did learning Toki Pona change your view of language or foreign languages?” She wrote:

Toki Pona doesn't require detailed explanation, which makes listeners guess what each sentence stands for. This is completely new concept for me, and somehow it reminds me that it is more important to be willing to communicate than to speak perfectly.

She continued on this topic in response to question 6: “Do you think learning Toki Pona is beneficial for students in Japan? If so, at what age or for what purpose (to become an English teacher, etc.?)” She wrote, “Learning Toki Pona makes your learning language journey easier mentally for the reason that I mentioned on Q3.” On word combination, Student B mentions it in her answer to question 5: “What are the merits of Toki Pona?”

She writes the following: “We make sentences by combining simple words. This progress is useful for improving other languages' communication skills.” On the benefits to students training to become teachers, there was a comment on this in question 7: “If you have any other comments about your experience learning Toki Pona in our club, please add them here.” Student A writes, “It also inspires you how to teach English in the classroom, so if you take a teacher training course, you can develop your idea of teaching language as well.”

Discussion

With Toki Pona, students can gain the benefits of learning an additional foreign language without the burden of having to learn thousands of new words, memorize conjugation charts, or navigate idiosyncrasies and rule exceptions. The results of this study suggest that Toki Pona has potential benefits of student awareness of part of speech, communication skills, and as a supplement to teacher trainee programs.

Student Awareness of Parts of Speech

The increased awareness of parts of speech observed has been shown to be lacking in English learners at the university level in Japan, as can be seen in studies such as Tokunaga (2014). She found identifying parts of speech as well as verb tense and voice to be problematic among low and intermediate English proficiency university students in Japan. Her study found a correlation between English proficiency test scores and metalinguistic knowledge, and she attributed this to the lowering of entrance standards of universities due to the population decline as well as to the change in focus of secondary education textbooks towards communication and away from grammar. The increased awareness of parts of speech found in the current study could be beneficial to learners if it transfers to their English studies. However, controlled studies are needed to determine both whether the study of Toki Pona does in fact result in an increase in awareness of parts of speech, and also whether that awareness transfers to their L2, English.

Communication Skills

In dealing with Toki Pona's lack of specificity, the students relied heavily on context and paying close attention to their conversational partners. This type of communication would be classified as high-context within Hall's high-low context framework. He describes a high-context communication as one which includes minimal information

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because most of the information is assumed to already be known by the listener. A low-context communication provides most information explicitly (Hall, 1989). Aside from benefits such as using context rather than relying primarily on the spoken word when communicating in a foreign language, this experience can serve as a lesson in communication styles. These students' L2 (English) is considered to come from a low-context culture, while Japan is a high-context culture (Hall & Hall, 1990). Learning a foreign language that utilizes high-context rather than low-context communication may help Japanese students to start to utilize their high-context communication skills from their L1 when speaking in other languages. A course in Toki Pona could even take advantage of this aspect, and include a forum for discussing high-context and low-context cultures and communication.

Teaching Methods

As a constructed language used mainly online, inherent differences between Toki Pona and natural languages may promote differences in teaching methods. Learning Toki Pona can be a chance for teacher trainees to experience and evaluate alternative methods. A second benefit for teacher trainees is that they can start teaching Toki Pona with minimal investment in time learning the language. Teaching peers a language that they do not already know brings added reality to language teaching training not found in mock lessons of the target L2, known by both those taking the role of student as well as the role of teacher.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the possible merits of teaching the minimalist constructed language Toki Pona to English language learners in Japan. After teaching Toki Pona to students at a Japanese university by way of an informal club, results from a teaching log, conversations with students, and a student questionnaire suggest that learning Toki Pona may positively impact awareness of parts of speech and communication skills, and may afford unique opportunities to teacher trainees. Limitations of the study include the limited time and scope of the lessons and the very small number of participants. Controlled experiments in each area discussed are recommended rather than replicating or expanding this study.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Toki Pona Club Post Program Participant Questionnaire

Number	Question	Student A Response	Student B Response
1	Why did you originally start attending the Toki Pona club?	To be honest, it is just because I like professor Kitano. And I thought it will be great opportunity to learn from her.	I'm interested in learning new language.
2	After a few lessons, why did you continue to attend the Toki Pona club?	I wasn't particularly keen on it at first, but through the process of learning grammar of Toki Pona, I became interested in how the language is created. I like the fact that Toki Pona is made up of a very simple combination of words, which makes my brain clear. So I just enjoy the moment of learning new words and grammar. I love learning grammar above all.	It is enjoyable for me to communicate with my friends and teacher. So I continue to learn it.

Number	Question	Student A Response	Student B Response
3	Did learning Toki Pona change your view of language or foreign languages?	Totally. Toki Pona doesn't require detailed explanation, which makes listeners guess what each sentence stands for. This is completely new concept for me, and somehow it reminds me that it is more important to be willing to communicate than to speak perfectly. This mindset is very important for learning new languages.	Yes, I think so.
4	Did learning Toki Pona affect your worldview?	I am not sure it affects my worldview since I've never thought about how I see world. But I remember that Ms. Kitano told me the background of the creation of Toki Pona, which is related to the treatment of depression (I apologize if it's not correct). Come to think of it, I think my way of thinking and personality changes when I speak Japanese and when I speak English. Which means language shape the way you think and how you see the world. Although I'm still beginner of Toki Pona language, I believe that one day speaking Toki Pona creates new style of me. I'm so curious.	Yes.



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Number	Question	Student A Response	Student B Response
5	What are the merits of Toki Pona?	It will be great life-long hobby to clear your brain, just like puzzle games. Also, Toki Pona is not common language, so you can write secret information in your diary. You won't get caught swearing in front of a boss you don't like. That is so cool, isn't it?	it is easy to learn. It has few words. We make sentences by combining simple words. This progress is useful for improving other languages's communication skills.
6	Do you think learning Toki Pona is beneficial for students in Japan? If so, at what age or for what purpose (to become an English teacher, etc.)?	Learning Toki Pona makes your learning language journey easier mentally for the reason that I mentioned on Q3. Don't afraid of making mistakes. Way more important to express your thought.	I think if the students who are interested in language, it is good for them. But I don't think everyone should learn it.
7	If you have any other comments about your experience learning Toki Pona in our club, please add them here.	The method of Ms. Kitano's lecture is memorable so you can memorize vocabularies quickly as long as you keep attending. (I wasn't reviewing after class, but for some reason I still remember them when I attend the next lesson) The vocabularies slides she created is magic. It also inspires you how to teach English in the classroom, so if you take teacher training course, you can develop your idea of teaching language as well.	