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SARARII-MAN NEO:
INTEGRATING BUSINESS JAPANESE
INTO JAPANESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic transactions as well as interactions among people and corporations around the world are increasing in the age of globalization, conditions that require academic institutions to respond by sending students overseas through international internship programs. For instance, every year approximately thirty graduate and undergraduate students go to Japan through the MIT internship program to work alongside Japanese colleagues from leading companies and institutions. During their internship, which lasts from six weeks to one year, they are expected to enhance their Japanese language proficiency and their understanding of the Japanese culture and society. Those who wish to work as interns are required to take two years of Japanese language courses, as well as culture courses, seminars, and training, to familiarize themselves with the areas of politics, economics, technology, and logistics.¹

Such programs call for business language instruction. Hiroaki Kawamura and Mari Noda (2006) point out that it is important for learners to be coached to develop skills to negotiate their membership in their own “domain,” which can be defined as a group of individuals with a clear set of shared objectives, in this case, those of their host institution in Japan. Ideally learners should take courses geared specifically to advance their career globally, such as those offered at Georgia Institute of Technology (Kikuchi and Shinzato).

However, not all institutions may be able to offer such a course as a result of various challenges within each academic institution. Offering a Business Japanese course on a regular basis necessitates sufficient financial and physical resources as well as stable enrollment numbers and often collaboration with other departments. Then, the question remains whether it is feasible for the course to be offered in light of existing internship and/or study abroad programs. Keeping in mind the challenges academic institutions may have to face, this study explores ways of offering an optimal Japanese language learning experience, in case a Business Japanese course may not be offered before the learners’ departure for Japan.

¹ For more information on the internship program, please visit the website <http://mit.edu/mit-japan/programs/internship.html>.

In this article, we will first see the results of a survey conducted at MIT to illustrate the needs of intern candidates. Second, their needs are examined from the perspectives of communicative competence (Canale and Swain), learning strategies (Oxford) and flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi). Then, possible utilization of a Japanese TV program called *Sararii-man NEO* is introduced, with its pedagogical implications, as a means to integrate Business Japanese elements into existing curricula.

2. SURVEY

2.1. *Evaluation*

An initial survey conducted in 2005 shed light on the discrepancies between the current curriculum and the needs of learners who plan to intern (Kurasawa and Nagatomi). A second survey was administered so the learners' needs could be confirmed and examined, as the host institution in Japan may not necessarily be the same every year. In addition, because Hiroko Fudano ("Kaizen") addresses the importance of including perspectives of stakeholders other than language instructors to evaluate and improve a program as a whole, the second survey reflects the perspectives of a director of Intern Placement, as well as those of instructors of Japanese language courses. Thus, the second survey features three additional categories; expertise (major field of study), broad/international perspectives, and interpersonal skills/emotional maturity.²

2.2. *Results*

Based upon the program evaluation suggested by Fudano ("Kaizen") as well as Tatasuya Ono and Yukiko Tabuchi, results from fifteen of approximately thirty returning interns were examined. Regarding the four categories related to Japanese language skills and the three categories relevant to the perspectives from the director of Intern Placement, returning interns were asked to evaluate how important each category was for experiences as interns to be meaningful, on a scale from 0 to 4 (0 = 0%, not important at all; 4.0 = 100%, very important). Similarly, they rated how satisfied they were with each category. "*Sekisan-needs-do*," which refers to the intensity of needs, was calculated by using "*zyuuyoo-do*," which refers to the degree of importance, and "*manzoku-do*," which refers to the degree of satisfaction; thus, *sekisan-needs-do* = *zyuuyoo-do* x (4.0 - *manzoku-do*). The numerical results as well as learners' comments indicate that improvement of reading and listening skills

² See Appendix.

are particularly important for learners to utilize their experiences in Japan.³ Not every intern may have been expected to demonstrate high proficiency in Japanese, so much of their contribution to the host institutions was through their expertise in English. Some returning interns avoided using Japanese when it came to work-related issues, as they were afraid of miscommunication. However, most of them think they could have had more opportunities to utilize their expertise if they had possessed a higher level of proficiency in Japanese. Here are some excerpts of returning interns' comments:

I only completed certain assignments in Japanese because he [my supervisor] knew my level of Japanese—if it were insufficient, I would not have been assigned those tasks.

... had I had a higher level of Japanese, I probably would have been trusted with more difficult tasks.

I would be able to express my thoughts twice as clear and we would not need to have repetitive email rounds and sometimes several meetings in one day. I would be able to just go to their desk and ask them my questions directly instead of sitting down on [at] my desk and trying to put my words into a Japanese email, which took a long time to compose.

... if I were more proficient in Japanese then I would have been able to explain my decisions better.

Even when most of their communication in Japanese was limited to casual settings, such as during lunch breaks and after work, returning interns point out the importance of communicating in Japanese in order for them to establish rapport in their domain:

I could only become as close with other coworkers as my Japanese skill[s] allowed, especially with those who spoke no English.

Some of my friends who are less shy about using Japanese had an easier time communicating (and therefore an easier time learning, I think) because they were confident and spoke Japanese without thinking much.

³ *sekisan-needs-do*: Listening 4.08, Speaking 4.06, Reading 4.14, Writing 3.36, Expertise 3.08, Broad/international perspective 1.61, Interpersonal skills/emotional maturity 1.65. Higher numbers indicate greater need intensity.

Those who were discouraged by communication breakdowns tended to avoid communicating in Japanese, and by doing so, they might have missed opportunities to secure their membership in the domain, where they could have felt more comfortable using a trial and error approach in Japanese. Shoji Azuma examined the use of honorific polite forms in business settings and states that non-native speakers are more favorably viewed by native speakers of Japanese as their Japanese proficiency progresses and they use more correct forms. Moreover they should not be afraid of making mistakes, because native speakers are more tolerant of their errors compared to those made by native speakers.

In sum, it is necessary for interns to be provided ample opportunities that motivate them to develop communicative competence, in particular, for listening skills and recognition of *kanji* in reading.

3. LEARNERS' NEEDS

3.1. *Communicative Competence and Language-Learning Strategies*

Since most intern candidates take only two years of Japanese-language courses at MIT prior to their departure, it is unrealistic for learners to become capable of demonstrating their own expertise in Japanese. In light of the constituents of communicative competence explained by Canale and Swain, while the two-year-long Japanese-language courses may help learners build grammatical competence as a solid foundation, it remains difficult for learners to utilize their grammatical competence in context without sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is indispensable, in that it is necessary to interpret and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances, by using knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics and phonology (Canale and Swain). Sociolinguistic competence is also important for interpreting utterances appropriately for social meaning, especially in the case of Japanese, where contextual factors such as the roles of participants and the setting and norms of interaction play a crucial role. There may be a low level of transparency between the meaning of an utterance and the speaker's intention. In addition, strategic competence, which can be called into action as a "coping" strategy when breakdowns in communication occur, is to be utilized to compensate for grammatical competence and/ or sociolinguistic competence.

The results of the survey indicate that the learners who intern in Japan need to realize they may not be able to avoid breakdowns in communication.

In order to cope with such breakdowns, they should employ the learning strategies explained by Rebecca Oxford, specifically, compensation strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Compensation strategies help learners to continue using the language, which results in more opportunities for them to practice, letting go of the belief that they have to understand every single word for communication. Affective strategies are effective at lowering anxiety and enhancing motivation by developing tolerance for dealing with ambiguity, which is unavoidable in learning a new language. In their domain, that is, at their own workplace where they are expected to work with others, interns must utilize social strategies to cooperate with proficient users of Japanese, develop cultural understanding, and become aware of others' thoughts and feelings, for instance, by asking questions for clarification or verification.

3. 2. *Flow Experience*

According to the results of the survey, some returning interns' interest in communicating in Japanese declined after communication breakdowns in which they were overwhelmed by how little they knew. To experience the "flow" that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi investigates may be effective at diminishing such a negative tendency. Csikszentmihalyi argues that the main function of conversation is not to get things accomplished, but to improve the quality of experience. He describes such experience with optimal quality as a flow experience in which people are very involved in an activity, and the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at a great cost, for the sheer sake of enjoyment. Learners must be made aware that it is fine for them to not comprehend every word when they communicate. Rather, they should consider such challenging situations as good opportunities, and find enjoyment in continuing to learn. In order for a flow experience to occur, there should be a focused attention and tasks that challenge one's skills without causing frustration. If learners experience a flow through such tasks, it is possible for them to enter a "virtuous" cycle: finding enjoyment in communication by using strategies and developing communicative competence as it raises the bar to seek more enjoyment.

4. SARARII-MAN NEO AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

The needs clarified in the results of the survey account for the possible utilization of a Japanese TV program called *Sararii-man NEO* from the perspective of communicative competence, learning strategies, and flow experience.

This thirty-minute-long comedy series consists of short segments that can be utilized for various activities in class at various proficiency levels. First, because the program is not tailored specifically for learners, they realize that they can still enjoy it even if they find it challenging without subtitles. Second, as one can tell by the name of the program, it is filled with information on—and has plausible situations that employees (*sararii-man*) may face in—Japanese corporate culture. For instance, it introduces dining halls for employees and interviews with executives such as Carlos Ghosn (Renault-Nissan). Also, many segments depict funny interactions among employees such as colleagues, executives, and their subordinates during meetings and socialization after work. In order for learners to be able to laugh, they need to understand the culture and what makes particular situations humorous. At the same time, by sharing laughter with other learners, they are likely to lower their anxiety and experience a flow.

As Oxford states, laughter is also effective to reduce learners' anxiety from the perspective of the aforementioned affective strategies. Rica Ninomiya also points out the pedagogical implications of laughter. Her study identifies the effective factors and the functional roles of laughter in her students' project from the perspective of learners' motivation, having emphasized the claim made by Akira Shimizu et al. According to their claim, laughter expresses one's willingness to cooperate without adversity, and it is an important means for smoother communication to sustain good relationships. Ninomiya states that laughter is more than a passive reaction to a stimulus, in that learners must make themselves actively involved enough to understand the content to laugh. The effective roles of laughter in learning that she listed include an enhancement of learners' motivation, an active involvement in communication, a sense of achievement, and a rapport with others in their domain.

To develop better listening strategies, learners benefit from continuously viewing and listening to each short segment throughout the term. Besides improving their listening skills, they become more comfortable dealing with *kanji* and vocabulary that they have not learned but that are useful for reading skills. Before showing a certain segment, instructors may write the terms that frequently appear in the program (that is, also in the corporate world) in *kanji*, in order to allow learners to guess their meaning. Many segments show visual images of such terms as well.

Learners may demonstrate their understanding of the content not only by their laughter but also by restating the content in their own words. If the segment deals with a conflict in communication among employees, the

segment may be stopped when the conflict arises, and learners can come up with their own solution. Depending upon the proficiency level, instructors may modify some restating tasks, by cloze tasks (providing sentences with blanks) or steering toward eliciting appropriate target structural patterns, such as honorific-polite forms and causative forms.

5. CONCLUSION

Even when a Business Japanese course cannot be offered, current curricula cannot ignore the needs of those who learn Japanese with a global career in mind. Utilization of short segments in *Sararii-man NEO* throughout the semester is effective in that it can motivate learners to enhance communicative competence by developing appropriate strategies necessary for learners to be better prepared to function in their occupational domain.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRES ON INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

JAPAN2006

- Graduate / Undergraduate (year ____)
- Major field of Study _____
- Name of company/institution _____
- How long? (weeks months years)

- In which category does the company/institution above fall (please √):

Automobiles & components	Consumer electronics
Energy	Banks
Diversified financials	Insurance
Health-care equipment & services	Pharmaceuticals & Biotechnology
Commercial services & supplies	Transportation, Aerospace
Software & services	Semiconductors & semiconductor equipment
Technology hardware & equipment	Telecommunication services
Utilities, Heavy industries	Chemical industry
Others (Government funded research institute, University, etc. Please describe)	

- How important/indispensable do you think each of the following is for experiences as an intern to be meaningful (please √)?

	100% very necessary	75%	50%	25%	0% not at all
Listening skill in Japanese					
Speaking skill in Japanese					
Reading skill in Japanese					
Writing skill in Japanese					
Expertise (major field of study)					
Broad/international perspective					
Interpersonal skills, emotional maturity					

- After your internship in Japan, how much are you satisfied with your own . . . (please √)?

	100% very satisfied	75%	50%	25%	0% not at all
Listening skill in Japanese					
Speaking skill in Japanese					
Reading skill in Japanese					
Writing skill in Japanese					
Expertise (major field of study)					
Broad/international perspective					
Interpersonal skills, emotional maturity					

- In what context did you utilize your proficiency in Japanese (e.g., telephone, conference, e-mail, presentation, translation, interpretation, etc.)? Specific examples would be helpful.

- Do you think you could have had more opportunities to utilize your expertise if you had possessed a higher level of proficiency in Japanese? If so, what could you have done differently?

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