

Expressing Jamaican Culture in the foreign language classroom

Tazuko Iijima-Kelly, The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

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Abstract

The Japanese course at The University of the West Indies Mona campus started in 1996. In 2014, the students are able to declare Japanese as their minor by completing all six Japanese language courses which are offered by The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and a history course which is offered by the Department of History and Archaeology. In this paper, I will introduce how we incorporate Jamaican culture in the Japanese language classes and discuss how it affects the students' language proficiency.

Keywords: Course design, Culture, Japanese for specific purposes, Japanese language education in Caribbean countries

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Introduction

The Japanese programme at the Mona campus of The University of the West Indies (UWI) now has about 120 students per semester. This programme is composed of six Japanese language courses within the three-year degree programme of the university delivered annually across two semesters. At present there are three instructors: two native speakers, one of whom is a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) volunteer, the other of whom is the author of this article, and one non-native speaker. During each semester, three writing examinations, two oral examinations and one listening examination are held. The students must pass each course to continue to the following course.

After attending American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Conference 2007, I realized how important it is to use culture in the language classroom. Before that, the content of our classroom delivery was based upon textbook contents only.

At that time, language proficiency levels for students were set as follows. Upon completion of all six courses (468 hours):

- Writing / Reading : Novice-High to Intermediate-Low
- Speaking/Listening: Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-High

These levels are consistent with those laid out in the *ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES 2012*.

In Jamaica, most students start learning Japanese language at university as there are no secondary schools that offer Japanese language courses as part of their normal curriculum. This places a natural limit on the time available for Jamaican students to achieve higher-level reading and writing skills. However, Jamaican students have excellent speaking and listening skills. This is possibly connected to the use of Jamaican Creole, called Patois, which is used in various unofficial situation, despite the fact that the official language of Jamaica is (standard) English. For instance, students speak standard English in the class room, but switch to Patois as they chat with their friends upon leaving the classroom. Indeed many of the sounds of Jamaican Patois are similar to sounds in the Japanese language. As a result, speaking and listening targets may be set higher than writing and reading targets.

In Jamaica, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is not available, and students must travel abroad to take it, typically to the USA. The coursework is designed to cover the necessary content for JLPT, however because of the cost of travel it is difficult for the students to take the examination. As there are very few Japanese companies here, it is not realistic for the students to get a job which provides an opportunity to use Japanese language. However, tourism is a large industry in Jamaica, and this opens up potential opportunities for graduates to use their acquired skills. After completing Japanese language courses at UWI, more and more students go to Japan as assistant language teacher (ATL) through the Japan and Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) or other private English teacher companies. In fact, for

many students, their motivation for studying the Japanese language is to go to Japan to teach English through JET.

Under these circumstances, how we should set goals for the UWI Japanese students? After teaching in Jamaica for long time it is clear that students have a wide ranging passion for and knowledge of Japanese culture, particularly such aspects as anime, manga, music, fashion, history and martial arts. In fact, in the view of the author often students have a greater explicit interest in Japanese culture than in Jamaican culture. This is not specific to either Jamaica or to Japan. It can be argued that local people, regardless of their country of origin, tend to take a less explicit interest in, for example, local tourist attractions than visitors. Moreover, Japanese people often have a fascination for Jamaican culture and Jamaican people in Japan have a lot of opportunity to talk about their home country.

Therefore we set the goals of the Japanese language courses at UWI as follows. *When a student goes to Japan, or sees Japanese people in Jamaica, they will be able to talk about Jamaica in Japanese.* This “CAN-DO” approach was motivated by the JF Standard for Japanese language education by the Japan Foundation.

Course outlines have been rewritten appropriately, to incorporate class activities and tasks focused on Jamaican culture. We now consider several examples.

Second year students

● *Activity: explain the meaning of a Patois word in Japanese*

Students are asked to choose one word in Patois that is an adjective, and which may not have a direct equivalent in standard English. In the oral exam, they explain the meaning of the word, and construct a short dialogue illustrating how the word is used. Our experience has been that, although the same word is often selected by several students, the oral presentations vary considerably, and very different dialogues result. The native Japanese instructors have learned from the Jamaican instructor that the same word can have different meanings in different parts of Jamaica, and must account for this in the examination. We have found that students select their word carefully and make a special effort to entertain the instructors during the dialogue section.

● *Activity: introduce Jamaican Parishes in Japanese*

This activity provides students with the opportunity to use the “potential form”. To provide an audience several JICA volunteers, recently arrived in Jamaica, are invited to attend the lesson, where students make a presentation on their assigned parish. Subsequently, in the writing task and oral examination, students must answer the question “If your Japanese friend visits Jamaica, where will you take them?”. The students must consider the destination according to the preference of their Japanese friend.

Third year students

● *Activity: introduce Jamaican superstitions in Japanese*

The students use the “To conditional form” to introduce Jamaican superstitions in Japanese. For example, it was traditionally believed in Jamaica that if you wash your face in the water used for washing rice you will see a ghost (“duppy” in Patois). Before the courses were revised, students were required to give directions in order to

demonstrate the use of the “To conditional form “. However this is less practical in recent times with the wide availability of GPS smartphones, which allow students to search for directions online. Therefore the task is considered out-dated and has been replaced with this activity.

● *Activity: presentation about selected objects in Jamaica and Japan*

For the final semester of the third year project, the students pick one object they like and research it. They have to research about their selected object both in Jamaica and Japan and make a final oral presentation. The presentation is limited to 15 minutes, though in practice its length depends on the speaker’s proficiency, fast speakers may finish in as little as 7 minutes and slow speakers may require the full 15 minutes to complete the presentation. Students may use visual aids. Presentations are followed by a question and answer session, where students answer questions from two instructors.

To develop their presentation, students choose their object in consultation with the instructor, research its history and its present situation both in Jamaica and in Japan, compare and provide a conclusion. Preparation takes place in parallel with the full semester over 13 weeks as normal classes are proceeding. Selected objects tend to be broad categories initially, for example, food or music. The instructor encourages the students to narrow the theme from there.

The following are examples of selections from the past several years.

Beer; Banana; Bus system; Defence forces; Education system; Funeral; National flag; River; Tea; Wedding; Anansi/ Kappa; Blue mountains/ Mt. Fuji; Cricket / Sumo; Dub / Haiku; Gal fashion / Ganguro fashion; Gangsters / Yakuza; *Jamaican Chinese New Year / Japanese New Year; Pantomime / Kabuki; Reggae / Enka; Rastafarianism / Shinto; Scotch bonnet pepper / Wasabi; Jamaican Chinese New Year was selected by a Jamaican student of Chinese descent.
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If an object exists only in one country but not the other, students are asked to compare two similar objects. For example, Scotch bonnet pepper and Wasabi.

Area for possible future development

In the first semester of the third year, students carry out a project to plan a tour of Japanese city. They pick a Japanese city and plan a three day (two nights) trip which must then be presented to a client. To achieve this, they must research the climate of the city and select the best season for Jamaican tourists, and advice on what to wear. They also must identify famous tourist attractions in the city, and famous local dishes. They research actual transportation fees, accommodation costs, and set the tour price. After the presentation, the students have learned new aspects of Japan, but will have connected those aspects to the needs of the Jamaican client.

In future this project way be adapted so that it is applied to Jamaica, where the students plan a tour of Jamaica for a Japanese client.

The author teaches primarily second and third year students. The cultural tools described in this article are limited to those groups. However there is possibility to spread these activities to first year students.

Finally, those activities are not limited to Japanese language courses, and can be adapted to other foreign languages.

Conclusion

For the past 10 years approximately, Jamaican culture has been used as a pedagogical tool in Japanese language classes targeting second and third year UWI students. Through various projects and activities outlined in this article, the students' oral proficiency is developed. The experience of the instructor is that students enjoy this aspect of the courses. Although this aspect of each course was designed specifically to improve the students' oral and listening skills, it has been our experience that the development of reading and writing proficiency can also benefit through the inclusion of writing tasks that ask the student to summarise the oral presentations, and the need for students to read the Japanese language in order to research their topics.

These activities have had the additional benefit of ensuring that students develop an improved understanding of and perspective on, their own culture. The author has received informal feedback from graduates who went to Japan as ALT indicating that these experiences were very useful to them in that context. We have presented several possible ways that these techniques could be developed further.

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