

## *Socio-cultural Aspects in the Japanese Language Teaching Methodologies*

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### **Abstract**

In the age of globalization learning a foreign language can be used as an important mean of cross-cultural understanding. Nowadays, there have been a lot of changes in the social life of people in different countries. Therefore, the language teaching and learning requires a comprehensive approach. That is especially true for the Japanese language, because, being a native language of one of the most closed nations in the world, its proficiency may be useful not only for communication, but also for better understanding the culture and mentality of the Japanese people. In the case of Japanese the teaching process can be divided into several subjects, such as grammar, writing, spoken language, the Japanese media, translation of Japanese fiction, historical text etc. Each of these subjects has its own specifics of learning and aims at developing translation or interpreting skills, as well as skills of writing a research paper or working with documents etc. However, learning just the language is not enough for building an intercultural dialogue. It is the task of lecturers to encourage learners to study geography, history, including the current political and economic situation, culture and ethnography, as well as customs and specifics of daily life of the Japanese people. The proper knowledge of the Japanese realities helps to make an adequate translation, what is especially important for state-to-state relations issue. Consequently, working out the appropriate Japanese teaching methodologies, taking into account socio-cultural factors, is finally aimed at building up the constructive dialogue with the Japanese nation.

Keywords: the Japanese language, teaching methodologies, comprehensive learning, socio-cultural realities, translation skills

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## **Introduction**

In the age of globalization learning a foreign language can be used as an important mean of cross-cultural understanding. Taking into account the importance of the international collaboration for further development of political, economic, cultural relations between different countries, one should pay more attention to the problem of working out the appropriate methodology of teaching a foreign language at University. Historically, the foreign language skills have been used not only as a mean of making a conversation, but also as a “key” for better understanding the way of thinking and the specifics of mentality of other people.

Nowadays, there have been a lot of changes in the social life of people in different countries. Therefore, the language teaching and learning requires a comprehensive approach. That is especially true for the Japanese language, because, being a native language of one of the most closed nations in the world, its proficiency may be useful not only for communication, but also for better understanding the culture and mentality of the Japanese people.

This paper aims to point out some features of the teaching methodologies of Japanese taking into account the necessity of learning the language alongside with the studying the historical and modern realities of Japan.

## **Methodology and Findings**

Traditionally the course on the Japanese language at the Department of Japanese studies at Saint Petersburg University is divided into several aspects such as: “Japanese writing”, “Japanese Grammar”, “Spoken language”, “The Japanese media”, “Translation of Japanese Fiction”, “Historical and Modern Historical Text” etc. Each of these subjects has its own specifics of learning and aims at developing translation or interpreting skills, as well as skills of writing a research paper or working with documents etc. However, learning just the language is not enough for building an intercultural dialogue. It is the task of lecturers to encourage learners to study geography, history, including the current political and economic situation, culture and ethnography, as well as customs and specifics of daily life of the Japanese people. Learning the language in the form of different aspects is finally aimed for the students can acquire the skills that can be applied in various fields of professional activity: research, education, diplomacy, translation, business, art and cultural activities etc. (Lelenkova, 2016).

Firstly, it’s worth focusing on two subjects, the main purpose of which is to study the texts on the socio-political and economic issues, that is "the Japanese media" and "Modern historical text". When studying these subjects, it is almost impossible to rely on certain teaching materials completely, since they quickly become out-of-date. In this regard, one should teach students how to work properly with texts of electronic and printed media and original historical research, while using auxiliary sources, including the Internet resources, to analyze information and work with lexical and phraseological material both in Japanese and in their own language.

The printed media is one of the most important means of information dissemination, and consequently, the formation of reality in the mind of common people. The media

has a difficult task of prioritizing certain words or events. Thus, the press can be considered as a kind of mirror of political, economic, cultural, scientific and technical life of the society (Ibrahim, 2016).

In Japan there has been a long tradition of determination of the character of the year and making the lists of the most frequently used popular words (jp. 流行語 *ryu:ko:go*) and neologisms or “newly created words” (jp. 新造語 *shinzo:go*). It is the media, where such words can be used for the first time and then widely spread in using among the people in ordinary life. The study of the popular or new words lists makes it possible to figure out the changes in the social, economic, political and cultural life of Japan over a period of time. In order to provide a better explanation of what exactly the tradition of neologism creation has been meant for the Japanese society in different historical periods, it's worth providing the following examples:

1940s – タケノコ生活 (jp. *takenoko seikatsu*). The word *takenoko* means “bamboo shoot”. This expression reflects the postwar realities in Japan and means “to exchange clothes for food”. In the postwar time people sometimes had nothing but to take off and give their clothes in order to get some food, as if one needs to peel a bamboo shoot before cooking.

1950s – 一億総白痴 (jp. *ichioku so:hakuchi*) means the process of dullness of the population caused by the mass use of TV and media.

1970s – オイルショック (jp. *oirushokku*) - “the oil shock”.

1980s – フリーター (jp. *furi:ta:*) – an abbreviation of the German *frei arbiter*, “free worker”, which means taking on work for a short duration. Such word had been practically used for young gradulators, who couldn't find a proper job and had to be held while waiting for other possibilities to open up. However, this term reflects not only the realities of social life in 1980s, but is also topical up to nowadays. Moreover, its meaning has also transformed a little in terms of emerging a new attitudes toward work among the younger generation in 1990s and 2000s.

1990s – リストラ (jp. *risutora*) means “restructuring”. The emerging of this term was caused by the realities of the prolonged economic recession in Japan since the late of 1980s, when some workers were forced to retire and left unemployed. It's also worth mentioning, that the word 首切り (jp. *kubikiri*), used previously, has gradually become out of use.

2000s – 妊活 (妊娠生活) (jp. *ninkatsu* or *ninshinseikatsu*) means literally “the pregnant life”. This word is used to express the way of life of a pregnant woman. The problem of child birth became one of the main problems of the Japanese society when such social problems as “fewer children and more careers” or “graying of the population” occurred in the beginning of 2000s. (Ibrahim, 2018).

The study of such phenomena as "popular words" and neologisms in Japanese plays a significant role in the work on translating texts of various subjects, as well as in acquiring the skills of verbal communication with native speakers.

Such subject as the “Modern Historical Text” provides reading and working with the texts on historical issues written in modern Japanese. The content of the research texts covers, mainly, a wide range of problems in the history of Japan, and world history, as well.

When learning the language in the form of reading and translating thematically specific texts, as those mentioned above, the problem of making inaccuracies in translating definite terms and concepts may arise. To that reason it is very important to develop the skills of conceptual translation. However, this aim cannot be achieved without further study of historical realities and the modern society situation. This is the goal of comparative study and analysis of materials in both native and foreign languages (Borisova, Lelenkova, 2017).

However, for the development of a more complete understanding of the language, having just lectures and practical exercises is not enough. In addition one can use the news reports, documentaries or movies, etc. This type of training develops not only listening and comprehensive skills, but also contributes much in getting familiar with the realities of the Japanese people’s life.

Reading and translating a fiction is another aspect, which is worth to be mentioned. It takes an important place not only in the teaching of a foreign language, but also in daily life as one of the means of getting to know other cultures. It is quite natural, when the plot of the fiction is put in the context of the everyday life realities that is customs, people’s behavior in various situations, the use of specific words and expressions. One of the problems of teaching the translation of fiction is that the bare knowledge of a foreign language is not enough for an adequate translation. It’s also necessary to understand the cultural, historical and other contexts (Lelenkova, 2018).

Working on a translation of fiction text means philological comprehension of the text, understanding of stylistic factors of linguistic expression etc. It is almost impossible to translate correctly the idea of a foreign author without knowing the linguistic features (phraseological units, fixed expressions, idioms, speech styles (official, courtesy, familiarity, vulgarism), special features of male and female way of speaking, proper and geographical names etc.).

### **Examples:**

1. 頂きます (jp. *itadakimasu*). This is the honorific form of the verbs “eat”, “drink” and “get”. So the literal (word-for-word) translation may be as “I get this food or drink with a pleasure”. However for some Europeans languages the expression like “bon appétit” is more common.
2. The place name written in characters 十八女 in a word-for-word translation means “eighteen women” (jp. *ju:hachi onna*), but in fact the place name sounds as “*Sakari*”.

As for the translation of phraseological units, a problem of “non-identifying” an idiom may arise:

3. 朝飯前 (*jp. asameshimae*), which may literally mean as “before the breakfast”. In fact, it has the same meaning as “a piece of cake” in English, in other words it means “it is very simple to do something”.
4. 体を張る (*jp. karada wo haru*) literally means “stretch the body”. In fact it means “to sacrifice one's health for; to risk one's life”.
5. 自腹を切る (*jp. jibara wo kiru*) means in a literal translation “to cut one's stomach”, while in fact it means “to pay for something out of one's own pocket; to pay more than it needs”.

A problem can also arise in the translation of words or expressions that denote the realities of daily routine or social life – the so called “a problem of untranslatability”. In this case one should find the ways to translate words or phrases that denote specific realities.

### **Example:**

天下り (*jp. amakudari*) . This idiom is very hard to express in other foreign languages, as it refers to a very common practice, existing in Japan only, when bureaucrats are often able to find high-ranking jobs in private firms after retirement. Moreover it is so common that it has its own idiomatic name. As this reality reflects the unique feature of the Japanese social life, one should translate it descriptively, making some comments.

Thus, while working on the translation of a fiction text one can obtain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural phenomena of other nations, based not only on the description of the phenomenon itself, but also on the daily life context. In consequence, the so-called “couleur locale” will not be lost during the translation and the features of the original related to the historical period of its creation will be kept.

It is assumed that a professional translator should not only be proficient in a foreign language, but also be sufficiently erudite in the field of history, ethnography, culture, geography, as well as in specifics of daily routine or social life of the Japanese people etc. In case a translator has a lack of knowledge in any field, it is easy to make a slip when translating.

For example, when the Izumo province is mentioned in a Japanese text, one can often find a mention of clouds at the same time. Someone who is not familiar with the history of the Japanese culture and literature might think that this is due to the specifics of the weather in this region. Thus one may miss an important reference to the myth of the *Kojiki*, in which the god named Susano, exiled to the earth, after entering the province of Izumo, admired the heap of clouds and composed the following poem:

|                        |   |        |        |
|------------------------|---|--------|--------|
| <i>Yakumo tatsu</i>    | Many  | clouds | arise, |
| <i>Izumo yaegaki</i>   | The clouds which come forth (are) a manifold fence. |        |        |
| <i>tsuma-gomi ni</i>   | For the husband and wife to retire within           |        |        |
| <i>yaegaki tsukuru</i> | They have formed a manifold fence:                  |        |        |
| <i>sono yaegaki o</i>  | Oh! that manifold fence!                            |        |        |

There is also quite a common practice when one can make a slip, translating some everyday life realities.

### **Examples:**

1. まごの手 (*jp. mago no te*), what literally means “the hand of grandson”. In fact it means “a back scratcher”.
2. 親知らず (*jp. oya shirazu*), which word-for-word translation is “not knowing one’s parents”. However in fact it is a “wisdom tooth”.

It is the task of a teacher to explain the meaning of such words and encourage the students to study also some of the cultural and historical features of the relevant country. As a result, students can obtain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural phenomena of other nations, based not only on bare description, but also on the daily life context.

Thus, working with texts in Japanese on various issues can be used not only as a mean of learning the language, but also as an important tool for understanding the culture and mentality of other peoples.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in the current realities of globalization and building up multilateral relations, studying the foreign language is of high importance in order to get familiar with and understand the socio-cultural characteristics of the people of other countries. It’s also true for the studying of the Japanese language. Working out the appropriate Japanese teaching methodologies, taking into account socio-cultural, political and economic factors, is finally aimed at building up the constructive dialogue with the Japanese nation.

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