Designing Online Language Courses: Lessons Learned from Teaching Vietnamese Language and Culture for Japanese Learners

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Abstract

This paper shows the lessons learned after several courses on "Basic Vietnamese language and culture" targeting Japanese university students and adult learners, which have been conducted in 2020. Influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the materials and methods prepared for conventional classroom have been adapted and modified to suit the online platform. Although intended for beginners, these courses have applied and integrated approach for teaching a language and its corresponding culture in line with principles of adult learning, active learning, and problem-based learning. The lessons were designed using a wide range of techniques such as videos, pictures, anecdotes, crosswords, open-ended question, quizzes using multiple choice answers followed by analysis of each choice, online test. For each lesson, the learners were introduced to new vocabulary and basic expressions related to a socio-cultural theme such as history, national character, medical system, sightseeing, business etc. Looking from the perspective of both learners and teachers by evaluations and reflections, these courses have shown some positive experiences and suggested points for improvement of online language classroom in the future.

Keywords: Language Course, Online, Vietnamese, Culture, Adult Learning, Covid-19

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Introduction

There is an increased socioeconomic relationship and cultural exchange between Japan and Vietnam since 2008, after two countries signed the Japan-Vietnam Economic Partnership Agreement (MOFA, 2021). More and more people and companies from Japan goes to Vietnam for expanding their business while providing local Vietnamese with more employment opportunities and a working medium of Japanese language (Froese & Kishi, 2013). Furthermore, tourism and cultural exchange activities are also booming in both directions (Hoi & Cooper, 2020).

In Japan, foreign technical trainees, technical workers, and other work-linked visa holders saw a sharp rise. Among whom, number of Vietnamese students and trainees is increased drastically (Tran & Matsuura, 2020). As of the end of October 2020, 443,998 Vietnamese accounting for 25.7% of the total number of foreign workers in Japan, surpassing China (MHLW, 2021). Most of young Vietnamese, especially who come to Japan for work on trainee visas cannot communicate in Japanese at a sufficient business level. On the other hand, very few Japanese could speak Vietnamese at a sufficient proficiency level that could effectively communicate with Vietnamese. This mis-communication phenomenon poses a language communication gap between local Japanese and foreign workers (Zhang et al., 2021).

In recent years, the number of Japanese who are interested in learning Vietnamese language is rapidly increasing. This could be mainly due to the increased number of Vietnamese come to Japan for work and study, and vice versa, creating the needs for higher level of communication for business and exchange as well and for intercultural understanding. Vietnamese language courses, either academic or non-academic are being offered in Japan. Several universities in Japan (including Osaka University, Tokyo Foreign Languages University, Kanda Foreign Language University) already have undergraduate degree programs with major in Vietnamese language. Vietnamese language courses and private lessons are also being offered by numerous language centers and private tutors in Japan. Regardless of the purpose of learning Vietnamese, either for professional use or just for a past time, the need for learning Vietnamese language among Japanese still seems to be increasing (Multilingirl, n.d.).

Vietnamese is a tonal language with six tones. According to Foreign Service Institute, it is classified as Category III languages or 1100 class hours for English speakers (USDS, n.d.). Vietnamese language is characterized with its Romanized alphabet, mostly short, 1-2 syllable words, containing no gender, no verb conjugation, and almost no tense, and no plural forms. Vietnamese grammar seems extremely simple (SVO). Based on its historical evolution, Vietnamese language consists of many Chinese-based words. The key to learning Vietnamese is to practice its "pronunciation". There are 11 single vowels (Japanese has only 5 vowels), 3 diphthongs, and 19 consonants. For Japanese learners, being able to differentiate the overwhelmed number of different syllables of Vietnamese by tone, vowel and consonant at the beginner level is very challenged. Although, Japanese learners have some advantage in learning Vietnamese, since both languages have a significant number of Chinese-origin words in common, slightly differ in meaning and pronunciation.

Practicing pronunciation is the most difficult and tedious part of learning Vietnamese (Ishizaka, 2020). Even in the degree courses at Hanoi University of Vietnam National University, undergraduate students who major in Vietnamese almost take their first year only

for acquisition of pronunciation and basic grammatical items (Hanoi University, n.d.).

Vietnamese classes are offered widely in Vietnam for foreigners come to work or study about the country. Although an impressive number of learners entering these beginner courses, a very few remain to study after 1-2 month of study and very few learners could reach the effective communication level (Cu, 2017). Many quitted the class before they can master 100-200 basic vocabulary and some basic conversation patterns. For the learners who attended conversation classes, the most common reason for quitting Vietnamese class at the early beginning is to be bored by extensive pronunciation exercises. Losing motivation is believed to be the main reason for high drop-out rate among beginner classes.

There are already many kinds of textbooks for studying Vietnamese language available on the market. Some of the textbooks focus mainly on daily conversation or sentence patterns, while the others focus on grammar and pronunciation practice. However, although very well-written and supplied with audio CD, the learners seem to have difficulty to use these resources for self-study without attending a class and a constant conversation partner. Unlike studying English or Japanese, which have many standard testing and assessment systems such as TOEIC, JLPT etc., lacking such for Vietnamese language learners also make it challenging for continuing study.

At Tokushima University (TU), several non-credit courses for Vietnamese language were being conducted since 2018. These courses targeted not only students but also a wide scope of adult learners who wants to improve their understanding about Vietnam's culture along with some basic Vietnamese conversation skills for actual exchange activities. Many of the learners of these courses have experience traveling and work in Vietnam or involving with social activities with foreigners in Japan. Furthermore, there were also Vietnamese courses designed for students who are interested in learning more languages, gaining multicultural experiences and short-term study abroad.

In 2020, after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, all courses had to shift into online platforms. The planned courses on Vietnamese language were also conducted online. By analyzing the results of courses on Vietnamese language and culture conducted at TU in 2020 comparing to the courses conducted in the previous year, this paper is aiming to explore: (1) effectiveness of application of teaching techniques in online classes such as videos, pictures, funny stories, crosswords, open-ended question, quizzes, online tests etc., (2) effectiveness of introducing socio-cultural elements related to history, national character, medical system, sightseeing, business, environment etc. in activating learners' motivation at the beginner level.

Method

This paper analyzes the results of the course "Basic Vietnamese language and culture" for students and general adult learners conducted online from August – September 2020. The course was designed and implemented as a non-credit course for beginner level of learners who have never learned the language before, or who already have some exposure to it. It was designed as a short course with a total about 22 class hours, divided into 11 lessons at the pace of 1-2 times per week, for a small group of less than ten participants.

The syllabus included topics of highly practical use with some flexibility, but generally arranged as following: (1) Time, month, day, year; (2) Seasons and weather; (3) Meals and

cooking; (4) Hobbies and arts; (5) House and family; (6) Body, hospital, and troubles; (7) History and modern issues; (8) National character and personality; (9) Shopping and goods; (10) City walk and sightseeing; (11) Review and final test. Each lesson was divided into the following parts: (1) Warm up and review; (2) New vocabulary with about 10 words; (3) Conversation patterns with about 1~2 patterns for practicing the new vocabulary; (4) Cultural knowledge (story, video, quiz, question etc.) which is mainly conducted in Japanese; (5) Test and review of test answers; (6) Wrap up and reflection; (7) Homework assignment including pre-recorded audio and pdf handout of the current lesson for self-review at home. The steps (2) ~ (4) was supposed to be repeated if there was time left.

This course including study materials and course syllabus were designed independently by the trainer while taking several beginners' textbooks as reference materials. No textbook was found to include socio-cultural elements as study tools. The materials and stories were chosen to fit the lessons' topic and objectives, then adapted by the trainer to a simplified text containing only basic vocabulary and grammar structure. Sources for socio-cultural elements are materials freely available from internet such as videos, pictures, news articles, research articles, icons etc. Major parts of the contents were developed and actually used for the offline course in 2019, then had been adapted again for online course in 2020.

This course was conducted online using Google Meet platform for lecturing and discussion, and Google forms for testing and evaluation. All lessons were prepared on PowerPoint for online screen sharing. Data for analysis was collected from entry questionnaire, observation of reactions of the learners during the course, contents of discussion, opinion exchange and reflection during classes, test results and final evaluation questionnaire and feedback from learners.

Results

Characteristics of Participants

Participants were requested to apply online through link on a poster or from the recruitment homepage. Eight participants were recruited, including 3 university students (~20-year-old) and 5 general adult learners (40-70 years old) who are involved in teaching Japanese, social volunteer activities, and private business. All participants were native Japanese, having some English proficiency and a little experience of learning Vietnamese. The participants stated their purposes of learning Vietnamese for international exchange activities, travel and making business. By attending this course, participants expected to achieve some daily conversation and practical skills in Vietnamese, learn more about Vietnam including culture, national character, customs etc., and to know the differences of Vietnam from Japan.

Application of Teaching Techniques in Online Class

For the beginners, practicing pronunciation, listening and differentiate syllables that does not have corresponding sounds in Japanese is the most challenging part. At this stage, it is needed to build a basic vocabulary for practicing pronunciation and conversation. The number of new vocabularies for each session was limited to about five words or less, and several times of practicing speaking and listening those new words were ensured before it could go to the next session. The following figures represent the slides used during the online class. For each lesson, the participants were introduced to new vocabulary and basic expressions related to a theme.
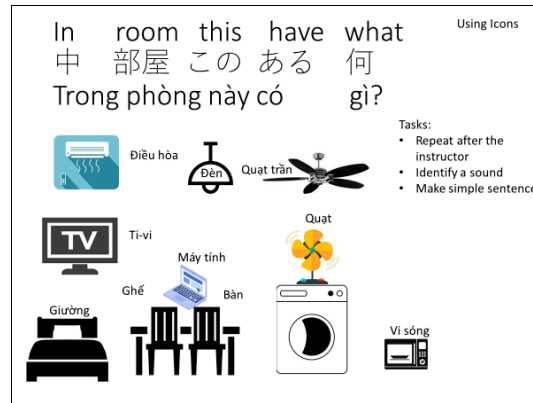
Figure 1: Introducing new vocabulary using visual icons.

Figure 1 shows a group of commonly available household commodities. The participants have tasks to repeat after the instructor every sound while look at the corresponding word in the slide. After doing this several times, participants were asked to identify the word corresponding to its sound pronounced by instructor. After that, participants were asked to read out the words and their pronunciation is corrected by the instructor. Finally, instructor introduced a sentence pattern and participants were asked to replace a word from the sample sentence using the vocabulary learned. Although looks simply, this exercise was very tedious for the beginners, taking time to focus on individual participants who lagged the process. For Japanese learners, it needs to focus on practicing the correct pronunciation of sounds such as "phở" (rice noodle) as all the vowels o, ô, ơ have the same sound "o" in Japanese. Another example, it takes a certain time to make a correct pronunciation of "bây giờ" (now) and "bảy giờ" (7 o'clock) since Japanese language can't make difference between tones such as "bây" and "bảy". Making difference between consonants such as "trứng" (egg) and "chợ" (market) was also sometimes difficult. During those exercises, younger students appeared to be more sound-sensitive since they could identify sounds and read out words faster and more proper than the older learners did.

Figure 2: Introducing new vocabulary using real-life photos.

Figure 2 shows a slide using a real-life photo instead of icons. At first, participants had a task to make comments about the picture, then all participants can discuss what they were seeing. In this case, because only half of the photo was being shown, they should discuss on what was the man in the photo doing. The discussion could be made in Japanese, or English. Then as the full photo were uncovered, the whole group realized that the new vocabulary in question is "cầu lông" (badminton) which is a popular street sport in Vietnam. Then participants worked on cognitive learning of the word and making sentences using the word,

as described previously. Through this kind of exercise, street life culture of Vietnam is subtly introduced to learners. In class, participants often gave very positive responses to this kind exercise in case the photo was the topic of their interest.


Figure 3: Introducing new vocabulary and cultural topic using quiz.

Figure 3 shows new vocabulary introduced in the form of quiz. Tasks were assigned to the participants to read out the question and the choices, then to identify the words by sound, then to answer the quiz and to discuss the topic in Japanese. Like the above, some participants could be activated by this kind of exercise in case the topic (boardgame) was attractive to their interest.

Figure 4: Introducing new vocabulary and cultural topic using videos.

Figure 4 shows new vocabulary introduced in the form of video. Tasks were assigned to the participants to watch the video while trying to notice as many times as possible the sound "vật" (wrestling). Then the participants were asked to discuss topic of the video in Japanese. Like the above, some participants could be activated by this kind of exercise in case the topic (traditional Vietnamese wrestling) attracted their interest.
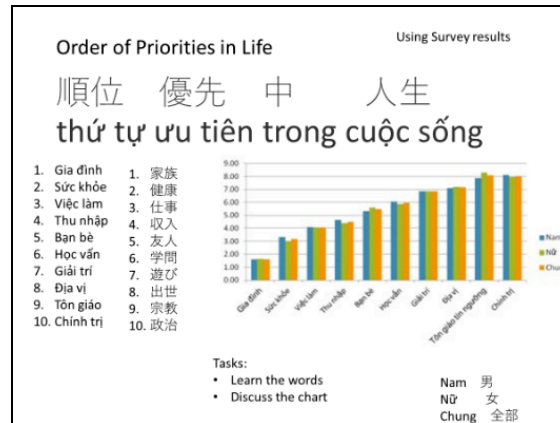
Figure 5: Introducing a social topic with vocabulary.

Figure 5 shows a new variant for introducing new vocabulary. Taken for example a recent survey about the priorities in life of young Vietnamese, which is freely available on internet, the content is simplified by instructor. The tasks given were like previous exercises, ask the participants need to spend sometimes to learn the new words. Then the participants were asked to discuss the survey results in Japanese, comparing with what young Japanese people may think about their priorities. Addressing a modern social topic, such an exercise was received very good feedback from participants, since it could help to understand the mentality and behavioral patterns of Vietnamese people.
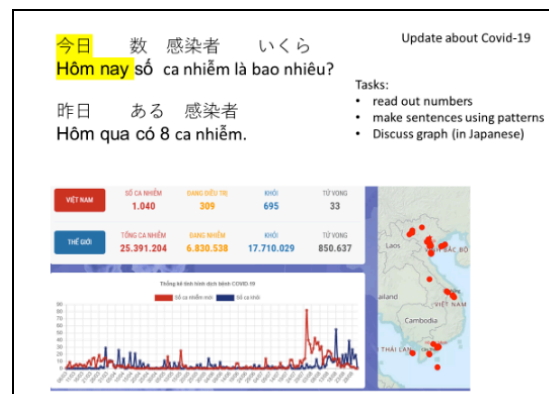

Figure 6: Exercise for reading numbers with a Covid-19 topic.

Mastering numbers was one of the learning goals that the learned were expected to achieve during this course. Figure 6 shows a new variant for practicing numbers. As Covid-19 was the topic of concerns for most of the people, the instructor cited the number of new infected or patients under treatment in Vietnam extracted from the news then showed it to participants on a slide. The participants had to read out the numbers, then make sentences using provided patterns. In the final discussion in Japanese, they were asked to make comment to the graphs, discuss about the situation of Covid-19 in Vietnam, and to compare that with the world and with Japan. This exercise was considered informative by the participants.
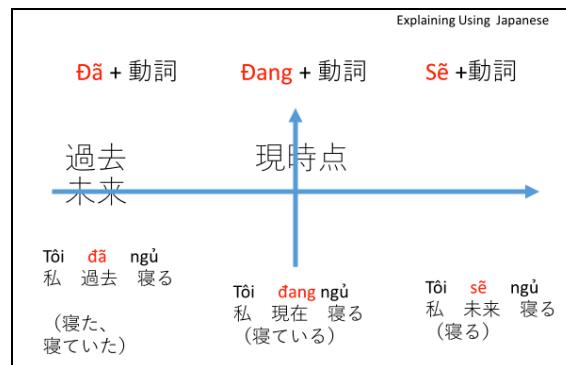
Figure 7: Explaining tenses in Japanese.

Japanese was used as language of instruction for conducting this course. Considering the beginner level of the participants, basic Vietnamese grammar was explained by the instructor in Japanese, to make the participants to understand in a fastest and thoroughly way. Figure 7 was used to explain about how to construct sentences with past, present, and future tenses. The participants' feedback had shown that basic Vietnamese grammar was well understood as it has some similarity with English, and most of participants had no problems of composing simple sentences following a grammar pattern.

Figure 8: Using English helped to better use of grammar patterns.

Although the instruction is provided in Japanese, some sentences patterns was made in English due to its structural similarity to Vietnamese and make the participants to understand it easier. In figure 8, examples of sentences in English were used for comparison with Vietnamese since English has the same order of SVO as Vietnamese. As feedbacked by some participants, using English example sentences made it easier to understand. Even, it might be no problem if the course had been explained fully in English as a language of instruction.

Applications of Socio-cultural Themes

In this course, socio-cultural elements were introduced on purpose with a goal to provide the knowledge on the socio-cultural context of the language formation and application from history to the modern social issues. It was also aimed to enhance the participants' motivation and active learning atmosphere during the course. Socio-cultural themes were introduced systematically in accordance with the lesson's content, including history, tradition, traditional arts, etymology, ethnicity, culinary, national character, medical system, sightseeing, business, social issues etc. These elements were adapted into simple Vietnamese for the participants to practice new vocabularies and grammar patterns. The order of themes was introduced selectively with minimal vocabulary and basic conversation pattern so that the participants

can memorize and practice within the context. Starting from history and tradition of Vietnam, the participants were introduced into the evolution process of the modern Vietnamese language and what does it have in common with Japanese language. Furthermore, the participants were introduced to the characteristics of Vietnam's culture which share many similarities with Japanese. Understanding the language evolution and comparative features between the two languages and culture was making mastering Vietnamese language easier for Japanese speakers.

Figure 9: Introducing mythology via reading exercises.

Mythology and fairy tales were powerful sources for conveying traditional values hidden behind the language. The instructor selected well-known and simple stories for adaptation. Figure 9 shows one of the most popular mythology – the story of kitchen gods. The participants were given tasks to read out the story when the instructor correct their pronunciation and intonation. After learning the vocabularies, the participants discussed the story and values from the perspective of Japanese culture. Interestingly, some of the participants had found similar stories from other oriental cultures. When comes to traditional culture, many people are interested in traditional music and musical performance, festivals, sports, architecture, and visual arts throughout the history. In this course, selected videos and pictures were chosen by the instructors to cover the most typical parts of these topics. For each session, participants listened to a short lecture in Japanese followed by a list of new vocabularies related to the theme. Then they watched a short video of 1-2 few minutes, then made discussion on the theme and pointing out some similarities with Japanese culture.

Figure 10: Open-ended question on a social issue.

Besides traditional culture, this course was also explored interest of participants about the modern social issues such as pollution, bullying in schools, corruption, bubble economy, superstition etc. Specific stories about these social emerging issues were selected from the news, books, media written in Vietnamese which attracted high attention of Vietnamese

society recently. The instructor adapted these stories for the language learning purpose. Figure 10 gives an example about garbage issues that attracted a lot of social attention in recent years. The participants were asked to comment about the pictures and discuss about the causes and solutions, as well as to find if there were similar issues in Japan. This kind of problem-based approach made the participants active and became more interested in learning about Vietnam, adding a motivation for continuing learning Vietnamese language.

Using anecdotes was one of the best strategies used during this course for teaching culture in both traditional and modern senses. Vietnam is known with its rich repertoire of anecdotes, a country where people enjoy telling anecdotes, as they often making fun of their own bad habits or behaviors, such as being too stingy, short-sighted, pragmatic, tricky etc. Anecdotes, both old and new, were considered by the participants as very interesting but useful tools to understand about Vietnamese national characteristics. Especially, when an anecdote was left open-ended and the participants were asked to guess the end of the story, in most of cases no participant could guess it. Furthermore, most were deeply surprised by the way Vietnamese people making joke.

The results of the final test applied at the end of the course showed that the participants practically had gained some progress in language skills. Besides being able to make basic greetings, they could retain about 50% (about 100 words) of the vocabularies introduced during the course, being able to make conversation based on several patterns, and being able to differentiate some syllables that does not exist in Japanese. Moreover, participants gained some intercultural knowledge and awareness, as well as multilingual mentality and reflex. Two third of the participants said that it is no problem if English is the language of instruction. Finally, they gained some self-study motivation and ability to self-study using the available resources.

Discussion

The course "Basic Vietnamese language and culture" is a preliminary attempt to pilot a short course on an ethnic language as L3 at university settings. For the participants to master new vocabularies, numerous repetitions of pronunciation and many short review sessions are necessary. This course has shown that the contents used offline techniques can be well applicable into online mode, including reading exercise, introducing traditional music via videos, vocabulary building using videos, pictures, anecdotes, crosswords, quizzes, multiple choice questions, open-ended question, online test for assessment and evaluation. Generally, these techniques were well perceived by the participants and contributed to improving their interest and motivation stay active during lessons. There was no significant difference when conducting the course online from offline classroom. Comparing to the offline version, participants of an online class may achieve equal results as offline class. However, inability of standard tests for Vietnamese language, especially for pronunciation part make it difficult to quantify the achievement. The final evaluation results show that most of the participants prefer online or hybrid classroom over offline.

Integrating teaching a foreign language with its corresponding culture is a common approach to target students as adult learners (Neff & Rucynski, 2013). In this course, incorporating socio-cultural elements to the language contents was shown to be a good strategy to enhance the participants' motivation and engagement. These exercises, alternating with the core language exercises, may activate the participants to brainstorm and orientate outside their habitat using their knowledge and experiences in order to find solutions for problems or to

guess the behavioral patterns in certain situations. Facilitating these sessions according to principles of adult learning and critical thinking seem to be effective for the participants to become more curious about the new socio-cultural settings that they may want to discover with their new language skills (Igarashi, 2018). Surprisingly, in this course, participants seem to interest more on modern socioeconomical themes and modern anecdotes than the traditional ones.

Covid-19 challenges the education to switch from face-to-face classroom to online platform. It may take a lot of time to prepare for an online session (Cavanaugh, 2005). Certain amount of time needs to be spent on making slides, pre-recorded videos, pdf handouts, composing quizzes, tests, crosswords etc. This course has demonstrated that although preparation process has been time-consuming, there have been no clear obstacles observed during the process of using the said teaching techniques in online mode. Provided the small number of participants (ten at the maximum), the teacher-learner interaction and learners' reactions can be well controlled. It is easier to observe and pay attention individually in the offline class. With the online mode, it may become difficult to assure the class quality with a greater number of participants. Moreover, it has been found to be difficult for instructor to have a good control of the class for techniques such as pair-work, small group discussion, role playing, because these exercises required to breakout the whole class into small breakout rooms. Good interaction among participants also seems difficult to achieve in the online mode. Lastly, it is difficult to conduct a writing practice session in online settings.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper analyzes and shows some lessons learned from the course "Basic Vietnamese language and culture" targeting university students and adult learners conducted at the TU. Through this course, a wide range of methods and materials has been applied, and the participants have been introduced to new vocabulary and basic expressions related to socio-cultural themes. The results show some experiences that could be served for improving language classroom quality in the future. It shows that integrating culture into language teaching at the beginner level could be an effective approach targeting university students and adult learners who already have some learning experience and reasons for learning. Moreover, this approach may be applied effectively in the online classroom by using various techniques alternatively for improving learners' engagement. Although there are some limitations of the online mode, it may stay firmly as an equal option to the traditional offline classroom in the future. Considering the increasing number of foreign workers coming to Japan, this experience with Vietnamese language implies that there is a need for learning certain ethnic languages in Japan for cultural exchange and business purposes. Languages such as Indonesian, Thai, Nepalese, Burmese, etc. may become the language in need. Promoting such ethnic courses could contribute to diversity, multiculturalism and internationalization and regional development of Japan.

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