

Distance Education in Japanese

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Introduction

Technology-enhanced education is becoming an increasingly important part of higher education. Some computer-mediated communication technologies allow for the access of remote databases through electronic networks, and information extracted from the databases can be downloaded into the learner's or teacher's own computer. With the use of such technologies, obstacles of distance, time, and limitations in foreign language learning opportunities are overcome.

The purpose of this study is to examine the possibilities of the use of WebCT (a web-based course tool) for teaching Japanese to foreign students before the students' arrival in Japan. Internationalization in the Japanese context has remained poorly defined with respect to language education. One of the reasons for this is that Japan has been slow to adopt advanced educational technology for instruction. With the use of a Japanese version of WebCT, which has recently been developed by Dr. Kajita, this paper will examine the possibilities for the use of WebCT in Japanese language instruction. We discuss the following:

- The reasons for teaching Japanese at a distance
- The development of Survival Japanese
- The use of WebCT for Survival Japanese
- Some feedback on the use of WebCT for Survival Japanese

The Reasons for Teaching Japanese at a Distance

Before explaining the reasons for teaching Japanese at a distance, we would like to describe briefly the unique situation of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) students and some features of APU's educational system in relation to Japanese language instruction. We will then explain the reasons for wanting to teach Japanese at a distance.

A global student body and Japanese instruction

International students at APU come from over sixty countries around the world. They constitute half of the student body. Annually, 400 international students are accepted by the University. They can be admitted based on either their English or Japanese ability.

About 85 percent of the new international students are admitted based on their English ability, and the remaining 15 percent are admitted based on Japanese language ability. Thus, about 340 of these students will receive Japanese language instruction each year.

Education in Japanese under the bilingual English-Japanese education system

Most lecture subjects are offered in both Japanese and English in the first and second years. Thus, students can be admitted with little or no knowledge of Japanese if their proficiency level in English is high enough for them to understand lectures.

In the third and fourth years, however, classes are offered in only one of the two languages. Therefore, students admitted to APU based on their English language ability, for example, will receive intensive Japanese language instruction for two years to increase their competence in Japanese. Since these are undergraduates, they have to take other courses taught in English while studying Japanese.

Japanese instruction and its goal

The Japanese program at APU is designed to train learners of Japanese starting at any level. At the present, a total of about 600 international students are taking a Japanese course.

There are six levels of courses, ranging from introductory to advanced academic courses. However, whether the students are beginners or advanced, the goal that they are expected to attain is the same, that is, to reach an advanced level where they can understand a lecture taught in Japanese and participate rigorously in class activities such as discussing topics related to the lecture, presenting their ideas and thoughts, and writing papers, all in Japanese. Thus, all APU students have a time limit in terms of acquiring Japanese. For those who start at the beginner's level, the maximum time for learning is two years.

Compared with students who can study Japanese at a language center, the time and energy that APU students can put into their Japanese studies is more limited for the reasons noted above. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and course designers to increase the total amount of time and the effectiveness of the time students can spend studying voluntarily before and after their arrival at APU. Survival Japanese is one of the ways to increase the amount of time and the effectiveness of self-study before arrival in Japan. Since they are not on campus yet, distance education will be needed.

The Development of Survival Japanese

In order to help learners of Japanese achieve their goal, especially those who have little or no knowledge of Japanese, we have developed materials to teach them the basics before they start their actual studies in Japan. The purposes of the development of the text that we created in April, 2000 and its contents are shown below.

The purposes of the development of the text

(1) Survival Japanese aims to help students learn the minimum Japanese necessary for daily life in Japan, before arrival.

(2) It also aims at helping students to prepare for the transition to university life at APU as soon as possible.

The contents of Survival Japanese

The program consists of two parts: Part I and Part II.

(1) Part I: Simple Japanese

Part I introduces *hiragana*, numbers, time expressions, Japanese money, calendar and useful simple expressions for those who are studying Japanese for the first time.

(2) Part II: Dialogues for Specific Situations

Part II consists of short dialogues. The dialogs are presented in twelve lessons according to particular themes. Thus, the subject matter has been chosen keeping in mind the various preparations which international students need to make for university life. Each lesson is divided into several units. Each unit is comprised of four parts, as explained below.

Phrases and Expressions: This introduces the words and phrases used in the dialog.

Conversation: This provides a model dialog based on the Japanese needed in various situations. Illustrations and copies of real forms are provided to make the situation easy to understand. Although in real-life situations the dialog will not be exactly the same, students can try to communicate using similar strategies. Students can practice the dialogs, clicking on one sentence after another and listening to it.

Grammar: Grammatical items are numbered in the dialogs. For their explanations, students can refer to the glossary.

Mini-Information: This introduces languages useful for understanding features of Japanese society and culture.

Limitations of the First Version of Survival Japanese

The first version of Survival Japanese that we created in April 2000 included a printed textbook and an audio-tape. These were sent to all the international students by mail. However, we found some problems with the printed text as well as with postal delivery.

- It takes a long time to develop high quality printed material. Once produced, it is difficult to change.
- In print, we could not show how to make the strokes necessary to write Japanese.
- It takes a long time, say 2-3 weeks, for the material to be delivered from Japan to other countries. There were cases in which the material got lost on the way. In other cases, it could not be sent to some recipients at all.

- Even if the materials were delivered, there was limited interaction between prospective APU students and APU teachers of Japanese or other APU students.

The Use of WebCT for Survival Japanese

Computers as a communication tool

There has been a growing use of computer-mediated communication. According to Bates (1995: 202), there are two important educational features that distinguish computer-mediated communication from pre-programmed computer-based learning. The first is that the learner can be in contact with teachers and other learners. The second is that remote databases can be accessed through electronic networks, and information can be extracted from a database and downloaded into the learner's or teacher's own computer, and stored for later use.

Although it is still open for debate whether this technology will result in truly new paradigms or not, a number of educators are trying to develop new approaches to teaching and learning based on computer-mediated communication.

The use of WebCT for Survival Japanese

WebCT, an abbreviation of "Web-based Course Tool," is a computer-mediated communication tool developed in Canada. Recently, it has been increasingly used in Canada and the U.S. After carrying out research on the possibilities of the use of WebCT at APU, as shown in Unetani *et al.* (2000), we have found it very useful as an educational tool for on-campus use as well as for distance education.

There are several types of WebCT tools, including content, quizzes, tools, calendar and glossaries. Among these, the most frequently used are contents, quizzes, glossaries, e-mail, and discussion forums.

Contents

Survival Japanese on the Web consists of two parts, with the same contents as described above. Students can listen to the sounds of *hiragana* characters, words, expressions, and dialogues, while watching the text on the screen. All the material is stored in the content part of the program accessible over the Internet.

On-line quizzes

Both Part I and II have on-line quizzes. After studying each part, students are given review quizzes to see how well they have understood the text. All questions are multiple choices. Students are requested to send their answers to instructors online.

E-mail/Forum

Students can send questions to a tutor or a teacher through e-mail. They can also exchange information with other students by e-mail.

Survival Japanese as a communication tool

There are several access modes to a designated WebCT server: (1) the designer (teacher) mode, (2) the tutor mode, and (3) the student mode. Interactions between students and other students as well as teachers or tutors can be made through e-mail and the forum very easily. The same is true for interactions between students and other students.

Some feedback on the use of WebCT for Survival Japanese

Here, we will show what we have discovered about our way of developing text on the Web and comments from our colleagues who have helped us review it.

Advantages

- The Web-based text sparks great enthusiasm among many students.
- The text on the Web is less costly than the printed one. Last year, we mailed 400 international students a copy of Survival Japanese with an audio cassette tape. It cost us 750,000 yen to print copies and make tapes. The Web-based text is not entirely free, but it is still less expensive.
- The Web-based text is ecologically friendly since it needs no paper.
- Students can listen to the sounds while watching the text or an online video. Matching text with sounds not only helps students understand the content, but also enhances their motivation to learn Japanese.
- A system for many-to-many communication such as the WebCT forum allows students to interact not only with the teacher or tutor, but also with other students. This also leads to an enhancement of students' interest in Japanese.

Disadvantages

- Access to the Internet is hardly universal. Many APU students live in areas where only print and the postal system are available.
- Even though some students can access the Internet, there are also some access problems. An Indonesian colleague who tried to open the Web in Indonesia told us that it took a longer time to upload the program there than in Japan. Another colleague who reviewed it in Australia told us that she could not access it with her old computer, but she could with her husband's newer machine. Thus, a student's machine needs to be rather powerful to receive the contents with the audio.

Here, we have discussed the case of the use of WebCT for Survival Japanese at APU. This is the first version of the Web-based Survival Japanese, and we hope to improve its content further. At the moment, it is also hard for many prospective students of APU to access computers before arriving in Japan. However, students' access to the Internet in the Asia Pacific region, especially in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan and Korea is rapidly increasing. Therefore, its strength as a teaching medium will grow considerably as access to the Internet in this region improves.

References

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