

Chapter 13

Online Materials for Teaching Japanese

Kai Masumi
University of Guam, Guam

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how to adapt online learning to teach Japanese language courses. The author overviews the current language education situation in Japan, introducing the existing online Japanese courses and examine their content. Online learning is convenient because learners can learn at any time or place. However, learning Japanese online has a problem, namely a complicated typing system. The author details how typing in Japanese can be an obstruction to learning online. She also discusses the merits of typing exercises. Their previous research shows that learning Japanese characters at an early stage of learning can improve the students' listening ability. The author introduces hiragana and katakana software which can enhance the learning of characters. Finally, she describes a system to monitor the students' progress and involvement and how to incorporate online learning with face-to-face instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, based on the development and convenience of internet technology, numerous Japanese learning sites (see Appendix A) have sprung up. Online shopping, messages writing, and trading are very convenient because action can be performed at any time and there is no waiting. By extension, is it a convenient way to learn a language for the

same reasons? Would people think to access the internet to learn a language at home as they do now for shopping? How many would take a language course at school and also study on the internet at home? How many would try to learn a language exclusively from an online source?

There is a finding that suggests the acquisition of a language requires interactive communication. The Japan Pediatric Society, for instance, conducted research with 1,900 one and half-year-old children in 2004 to discern the influence of TV on their de-

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velopment. The result showed that children who watch longer hours of TV have an impediment in the immergence of content words, especially ones who do not have verbal interaction with parents while they are watching TV. Fukusako (1975) also states that children whose caretakers rarely talked with them during the language acquisition period show a delay in language development. As these findings point out, the learning of a language requires human interaction. These are the findings in language acquisition by children, but the same principle also applies to adult language learners. There is no research documenting language learning success without any human interaction. Then, what is the merit of using internet technology?

In this chapter, I examine existing online Japanese courses and discuss the problem of learning Japanese language online. I introduce a hiragana software program which I have developed and a katakana software program which is now being created for Japanese language learners at the beginner level. I discuss how to incorporate it along side face-to-face instruction and propose a blended course of online and traditional face-to-face learning for a Japanese language class.

BACKGROUND

Merits and Demerits of Online Learning

There are two types of online learning. One is distance learning. The instructor and the learners are at different locations. The learners participate in the class through the internet. This type of education existed even before the prevalence of the internet by using satellites. The other type has learners accessing a Web site and self-study materials. In this chapter, I discuss the self-study type of online learning. The term online learning refers to this type.

There are several advantages to online learning. First, learners can manage their own time and can

study any time and at any place they want. They can also study at their own pace. Second, learners do not have to wait for the teacher to correct their answers. Usually exercises on online learning sites give results instantly. Third, the learners get colorful visual information. Most Japanese textbooks contain few pictures. If there are pictures, they are usually in black and white. The textbooks for beginners mainly focus on grammar. Because of the learner's lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, the beginner's textbook does not include much reading materials. Learners, however, can read and learn about Japan in their native language through the internet.

Although online learning has many merits, there are also demerits. As all of us have experienced, one has to click around to find the page we are looking for. It takes time to get used to the site and to know where the information is that we want to see. If internet access speed is slow, it is frustrating and time consuming. If the learner has a question in the middle of practice, there is no one to ask. Currently, online exercises only use multiple choice or right-or-wrong type questions. The computer cannot correct or grade composition or speech. When the learner makes mistakes, the computer gives only the correct answer or model answer; it does not explain why it was a mistake or how to improve the mistake. The most crucial demerit of online learning is the fact that the learner interacts with a machine. It is not like actual interaction with other people as in a normal situation where language is used.

Language Education and Academic Research on Online Learning in Japan

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction) are attractive to foreign language teachers at universities in Japan. In foreign language courses, there are usually 30 to 100 students in one classroom. The teachers are mainly Japanese. The student

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