

Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language for Interaction

This textbook is compiled based on the concept of “Teaching Japanese as a foreign language (TJFL) for interaction” advocated by J. V. Neustupný.

As the Japanese translation of the term interaction “*soogo sayoo*” (lit. inter-action) suggests, the fundamental characteristic of interaction is that it is realized through dealings with others. In the case of human interaction, participants usually work towards a goal and, without damaging the personal relationship, attempt to achieve that goal by actively getting others involved through language and other channels. While this textbook is grounded on this basic understanding regarding to the notion of interaction, its focus is further placed on “Japanese interaction in contact situations”, which has been indicated to be difficult for Japanese learners.

In mid-80s, the change of paradigm in the area of foreign language teaching as evident in the emergence of communicative approach and learner-centred teaching has brought into the increase of conversation and communication based Japanese teaching materials. The interactional approach of TJFL surfaced along this trend and gradually started to attract attention in the beginning of the 90s when the boom of Japanese learning hit its peak.

Let me introduce here a few basic ideas of this approach.

Q1: What is TJFL for interaction?

The educational goal of TJFL with an emphasis on interaction is set beyond the use of Japanese (e.g. four skills). More specifically, with the focus placed on the use of Japanese for the purpose of interaction, its ultimate goal is to raise individual learner’s consciousness to participate in contact situations with Japanese people and to get them motivated to use Japanese in their everyday life.

Q2: Isn’t it the case when one’s Japanese level is getting higher, one will naturally have more opportunities to interact in Japanese?

From the standpoint of a foreigner, quite unexpectedly, interaction with Japanese people is not necessarily held in Japanese even if he or she is good at the language. In an increasingly globalized world today, it is obvious that the Japanese language is not the only means for foreigners to interact with Japanese. At the same time, there are some Japanese who find it very difficult to communicate with foreigners, for instance, those who have a strong stereotypical image of foreigners being someone who don’t speak Japanese, and those who see a great distance between themselves and foreigners. For these reasons, it may be correct to say that the first hurdle outside the classroom for many foreigners who are studying Japanese is to find out how to make their Japanese friends and acquaintances get along with them in Japanese.

As explained so far, it is clear that living in Japan does not necessarily guarantee a foreigner a Japanese speaking environment. If one is eager to meet new people and to expand personal network, one will need to take part in such encounters initiatively. Otherwise, one might end up with leaving the country getting little contact with local Japanese other than university staff or volunteers after half-a-year or even a year’s stay in Japan.

It should be added that even if a Japanese speaking situation between Japanese and foreigners somehow comes into existence, since the situation usually becomes a contact situation, the interaction there is by far challenging and discouraging. Therefore, special training such as “TJFL for interaction” as targeted in this textbook becomes necessary in order to bridge up the classroom and the reality.

Q3: What makes it difficult for interaction in contact situations?

We should be reminded that the most salient feature of contact situations is the existence of what is referred to as “foreign factors” or “foreignness” in such situations. Foreign factors are often derived from the language used by foreigners (so-called “interlanguage”) but some of them are related to other aspects such as their physical appearances, non-verbal behaviour, or life style.

The more the awareness of foreign factors is raised, the more awkwardness one would feel towards other participants in the contact situation (i.e. contactedness). As a result, unlike the interaction between fellow Japanese native speakers, interaction in contact situations may change dramatically. The interaction between Japanese and learners in the elementary and intermediate levels can be regarded as a typical contact situation of strong contactedness as the learners gradually become competent to use the language.

In this kind of contact situations, language problems due to the learners’ insufficient Japanese ability particularly attract people’s attention. May be because of this, some people may think that as long as such errors are removed, interaction there will get close to that in situations between Japanese native speakers (internal situations). However, it may sound paradoxical, but findings in previous studies about contact situations so far have revealed that it is possible to build up certain kind of Japanese speaking situations even if there are significant Japanese language problems. On the other hand, interaction with less Japanese language problems does not necessarily get close to that between native speakers (cf. internal situations).

Let me here give some examples regarding to these two points. The first one is the one that contact situations can be built up in spite of rather significant language problems. Without this assumption, instructors in Japanese programmes will have to make their students wait until they are promoted to the advanced level in order to interact with Japanese people in Japanese. The main rea-

son of why a situation can be built up even though there are language problems is that foreign factors do not always become an obstacle for interaction, they sometimes become a bond for interaction. It is obvious that particularly in contact situation with a high degree of contactedness, Japanese native speakers tend to correct mistakes more thoughtfully, or they just let it go and continue. As for the learners, it is not uncommon that many of them are prepared to muster up the courage and take up the challenges while knowing that they may make mistakes. In such cases, if the learners have acquired how to skilfully ask for confirmation and clarification, it is quite possible to develop some kind of interaction with their Japanese conversation partners.

One more point is that interaction with less Japanese language problems does not necessarily get close to that between native speakers. This is due to the existence of interaction peculiar to contact situations. In the case of foreigners, many aspects of their foreignness remain obvious even if they have achieved a higher level of competence in the target language. As far as the Japanese society is concerned, stereotyped foreignness based on a foreigner’s appearance (e.g. a white person, a person of mixed racial background), personal name (e.g. written in *katakana* or nonstandard *kanji*, uncommon pronunciation), nationality (e.g. a foreign passport holder, a Japanese Korean, a foreigner of Japanese ancestry) may trigger such peculiar interaction in the contact situation.

Some typical features of interaction in contact situations which involve Japanese learners in the elementary and intermediate levels like the targets of this book may include the followings.

(1) Linguistic host (Japanese native speakers)

For example, conscious or unconscious use of foreigner talk triggered by their expectation and understanding of the foreigners (e.g. simplification of expressions, frequent use of questions, avoidance or dominance of topics, over-evaluation of the foreigner’s Japanese ability)

(2) Linguistic guest (Japanese learners)

For example, conscious or unconscious use of communication strategies triggered by expectation and understanding of the Japanese (e.g. over-polite, word coinage, borrowing), transfer of native norms, emotional reactions due to fatigue or shyness (e.g. avoidance)

(3) Both parties

For example, over-reaction, or on the contrary, lack of reaction, misunderstanding due to insufficient or incorrect understanding of the other party (bias), make exceptions when dealing with foreigners

(4) Others

For example, different interpretation derived from diverse norms, lengthy negotiation (e.g. different way of understanding regarding to the pronunciation and meaning of an English expression that is known to both parties), relinquishment of negotiation

It is not difficult to image that when learners and Japanese hosts who have little experience of contact situations confront a contact situation, they may not be able to respond immediately as there are far too many things happening out of their expectation. If they are willing to develop further interaction in contact situations, they will need to, instead of stepping back, take up the challenge of finding out how to understand and to overcome such interaction. Unlike in classroom conversation drills and role plays where learners can draw to an end when they reach their limits, in real life interaction that is impossible. TJFL for interaction aims for sustainable contact situations.

Q4: What would be important when teaching interaction?

It is important to be aware of the fact that interaction does not begin with the use of a language but rather begin with the recognition of a speech situation. As for TJFL

with the focus on conversation or communication, since the educational goal is to teach conversation and communication itself, it does not matter if the situation concerned is predetermined or even if it is not mentioned at all. For instance, in the lesson of self-introduction, which is dealt with in most textbooks, learners are instructed to learn how to do self-introduction in a given situation with given expressions such as “*Hajimemashite XXX desu. Doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*”.

Needless to say, learners do not introduce themselves to every Japanese people they meet in real life. Under the concept of TJFL for interaction, the situation to do self-introduction is not set in advance. Instead, more stress is placed on drawing the learners’ attention to what the important factors are when meeting Japanese people. This is because there are various kinds of interpretation regarding to the social significance of the language behaviour known as self-introduction. Should the situation be fixed in the textbook, some of the learners may wonder why they need to introduce themselves so often in Japan, and why everyone makes the same kind of speech in turn.

It has been pointed out that in recognition of the situation concerned, a speaker will need to have linguistic competence, as well as sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence in order to achieve the goal of interaction by actively dealing with others. These three types of competence can be explained in the following way.

(1) Linguistic competence

The competence to understand and manipulate formal features of the language (e.g. meaning, pronunciation system, writing system, grammar) as well as to comprehend incoming speech based on such formal features.

(2) Sociolinguistic competence

The competence to manipulate the language appropriately according to the purpose of interaction (e.g. when, where, with whom, about what and how).

(3) Sociocultural competence

The competence to participate in a given situation and react with understanding of how the language used there is interpreted by the society.

The above-mentioned types of competence for interaction are essentially conceptual. Therefore, it would be difficult to have them extracted or categorized in actual situations. For instance, in some interactional situations, the type(s) of competence required can be uneven. Again, in some other cases, a particular type of competence may have no part to play at all. Yet, there is no doubt that these concepts are useful in order to identify embedded problems in interaction.

Let me introduce here an episode that I heard from a Hong Kong family when they were traveling in Japan. They happened to see a signboard written with the character 湯 and they thought that it must be a restaurant where they can have soup. Upon entering the building, somehow men and women were directed to different rooms. While they were still working out what was happening, they dashed out of the place in surprise when they saw Japanese people inside walking around naked.

When I told this story to Japanese, I got responses such as “they misunderstood the character 湯”, “they should have asked the staff”. However, when I asked that family, they explained to me in a different way, saying, “it is unthinkable in the first place that people will take off their clothes and take a bath in the middle of the nowhere up in the mountain during such daytime period”. This shows that what caused the communication breakdown was not necessarily the lack of linguistic competence (cf. knowing the meaning of the character in Japanese), or sociolinguistic competence (cf. knowing how to ask people), but rather sociocultural competence (cf. knowing the culture of hot spring).

Let me also mention here that Japanese society is well-known for its high context culture. This means through conventional tacit understandings or “*aun no kokyuu*” (rhythmic breathing) in Japanese, people can

actually participate in different situations without using the language. If we put it in another way, this also implies that no matter how much Japanese language we teach, it would still be difficult for our students to play the role as a participant unless we ensure them a thorough understanding of the situation concerned. This may sound discouraging for experts in the areas of TJFL and linguistics but it is exactly what should be kept in mind if interaction is taken into consideration.

Q5: The culture of “*sassuru*” (to read between the lines) is often said to be difficult. How do learners find it from their point of view?

Sassuru culture is difficult not only for westerners but also for most learners from Asia. This is because from their point of view, other than the surface meaning of words, the art of using Japanese such as to dare to say something explicitly or to leave something unsaid is hard to understand.

The types of interaction that Japanese learners particularly find difficult are those using incomplete sentences and indirect expressions. In the case when a Japanese native speaker wants to convey the message of “*moo sorosoro kaeranai to densha ni norenakunatte shimaimasu*” (I will miss the train if I don’t leave now), it is common that he or she will omit the information starting from the end of the sentence. Therefore, the host will have no problem to understand even though one just says “*moo sorosoro...*” (well, I have to be...) or simply “*moo...*” (well...). In a similar situation, one might just say “*kyoo wa kuruma dewa nai node...*” (I didn’t come by car today...). Again, Japanese native speakers will understand what that person really wants to say. In order to interact skilfully, it is thus important to read beyond the surface meaning of words and to develop an ability to detect the important points that are omitted and hidden.

Nevertheless, Japanese interaction based on *sassuru* culture sometimes works favourably for the learners. The most thankful thing is that when Japanese people take up the role as the listener, they are willing to guess what the

learners are trying to say. This means that with the help of the listener's consideration, learners in the elementary and intermediate levels should be able to enjoy interaction in Japanese even if they cannot express everything in full.

As a matter of course, TJFL for interaction cannot guarantee learners a wider personal network. However, by motivating them to interact with Japanese people through the Japanese language, we can expect that there are more and more foreigners who want to deal with Japanese people and that would be a good thing for the Japanese society. I sincerely hope that this book can play a part in promoting it.

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