

A Note on the Performance Test in a Conversational Japanese Course Taught to Visually Impaired Students

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Introduction

This is a report of a three-month conversational Japanese language course taught to class XI blind school students as an extra-curricular activity. At the end of the course, the students took a performance test that was in paired interview format. I was the instructor of the course; I did not have any prior knowledge or training in teaching visually impaired (VI) students. While teaching VI students was challenging, I found that being a language teaching expert helped me in teaching them.

Generally speaking, there are two primary methods of testing: paper-and-pencil based language test and a performance test. Paper-and-pencil based language tests are used to assess a learner's knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, etc., or to assess listening and reading comprehension. On the other hand, performance tests are used for assessing a person's speaking and writing ability (McNamara, 2004). It is probably most pertinent to assess the students of a conversational language course using performance tests. However, performance tests are more complex in terms of implementation and assessment, as compared to paper-and-pencil-based language tests. Hence, a language teacher who is well trained in language testing and teaching may be able to contribute immensely towards designing the core curriculum of the course and tests of language proficiency. In this article, I will attempt to explain the course syllabus, teaching methods

and evaluation method that I used for teaching Japanese as a foreign language to the aforementioned group of blind students.

Methods: The School and the Participants in the Japanese Course

The school in question is a government-aided school which is located in Delhi and is affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education. It is a residential school for boys and around 200 students, from preschool to class XII, study here. This was the first time that the school was teaching a Japanese language course. All students of class XI—17 in total—took the course and 12 of them completed it. The executive secretary, the principal, two teachers of the blind school and two Japanese volunteer teachers observed and supported the classes. The Japanese course was conducted from January to April, 2012. The school wanted to hold classes as frequently as possible since the students needed to remember the contents by listening. However, classes were held twice a week in the beginning and later reduced to once a week. Each class was about an hour long, and 16 lessons were covered in total, including the performance test.

Course Syllabus

Based on the discussions with the executive secretary and the principal of the school, I understood that blind students learn better when they “experience” the lesson and therefore it is

important to give them examples of appropriate situations when teaching languages. Therefore, I used a situational and topic-based syllabus. We decided to teach them how to communicate in Japanese along with some notes on Japanese culture and manners. Since the focus of this

course was on improving conversational skills in Japanese, we did not focus on Japanese script and grammar and announced the same to the students at the orientation. The content of the course is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Contents of Japanese Course Taught to Blind School Students

Lesson 1	Orientation (basic information about Japan, basic grammar rules, pronunciation and greetings)
Lesson 2	Classroom expressions
Lesson 3	Self-introduction 1 (name and greeting), how to read Romaji, numbers
Lesson 4	Self-introduction 2 (class and languages spoken), my favourite food and drink
Lesson 5	Touching to learn the names of vegetables, offering a drink
Lesson 6	Tasting (sugar, lemon, coffee, chocolate, etc.) and learning taste, my breakfast
Lesson 7	Singing Japanese pop song: 'Ookina furudokei' (Grandfather's clock) sung by Ken Hirai
Lesson 8	Time (learning to tell time in Japanese)
Lesson 9	Schedule of the day 1 (reporting in present tense, learning to identify minutes of the hour, learning to use verbs associated with daily activities)
Lesson 10	Time and schedule of the day (learning to say complete phrases from Lessons 8 and 9; such as "I wake up at 6.30 and I have breakfast at 7.45").
Lesson 11	Review
Lesson 12	Schedule of the day 1-2 (learning to report the schedule of the week or the previous days)
Lesson 13	Names of the months, my family, watching a DVD of Japanese high school students
Lesson 14	Taking Japanese guests on a tour of the school
Lesson 15	Review with Japanese guests
Lesson 16	Paired interview test

Teaching Materials and Method

It was difficult to choose teaching materials for the course because there is no Japanese textbook for VI students. In fact, there aren't many suitable conversational textbooks even for sighted schoolchildren. Hence, I decided to use audio materials as the primary teaching material. I chose *Marugoto: Japanese Language and Culture Starter A1*¹—a situational and topic-based syllabus text book. The audio materials are well structured, and include natural conversations that have been enriched with natural ambience sounds. Hence, it is easy for VI students to understand the situation by listening to the audio recordings. The situations include: introducing oneself at an international party, offering tea or coffee to friends and describing the schedule of the week.

Students learned collaboratively in the class. They practiced in pairs or in small groups and helped each other. This ensured that they got more opportunities to speak in a limited time and in a relaxed environment, as compared to speaking in front of all the students in the class. Teaching was also done collaboratively. Since I am not fluent in Hindi, the school teachers translated my instructions in Hindi when needed, and the Japanese volunteer teachers helped to observe and facilitate the pair work of the students.

I provided Braille handouts to fully blind students and handouts with enlarged fonts for those who were partially blind. In addition to this, I gave a recording of the class proceedings in mp3 format to the blind students after every lesson so that they could review them. Braille was written using the English alphabet, as the students already knew how to read English Braille. Contents of the handouts mainly consisted of new vocabulary that the students had learned in class. I prepared the handouts as a document file and the blind school teachers converted it to Braille using a special Braille printer.

The handouts were proofread by blind school teachers before being handed out to the students. At the end of the class, an oral task was given as homework. Since the students stayed in the hostel, they could talk to each other in Japanese even after the classes were over. They reported that they talked to each other about their everyday life, greeted each other and talked about food items or their daily routine with their classmates in Japanese.

Criteria and Task for the Paired Interview Test

I announced on the first day of the class that there would be an interview test at the end of the course. Two weeks before the end of the course, I explained the criteria and the evaluation method for the paired interview test and this was interpreted in Hindi by a blind school teacher. The criteria for the paired interview test were in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)² A1 Conversation and the JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education³ A1. The purpose of this paired interview test was to let the students know about their progress and to understand how they could do better. It was an absolute evaluation and each criterion was further divided into three categories—fair, good, and excellent. The test criteria and the evaluation categories are explained in Table 2.

Table 2

Criteria of Evaluation

	Fair	Good	Excellent
Performance	Could not answer well.	Answered the basic questions related to food, daily routine, etc.	Understood the situation well and spoke in a natural and relaxed manner.
Accuracy	Many mistakes were there in grammar and vocabulary.	Grammar and vocabulary were almost correct.	Grammar and vocabulary were perfect.
Pronunciation	Difficulty in understanding.	Able to understand with little difficulty.	Pronunciation was clear to some extent.
Conversation Ability	Failed to confirm to important points using phrases such as <i>Moo ichido ittekudasai</i> ("Please say it again.") etc.	Able to confirm important points using phrases such as <i>Moo ichido ittekudasai</i> ("Please say it again.") etc./repetition was not required.	

There are several possibilities for paired interview tests. In one, the teacher is the interviewer and the student, the interviewee. In another test, students take the role of an interviewer and interview each other. Since this was the first time the students were taking a performance test, I played the role of an interviewer, as it was easier for the students. Students were given one of three situations. The situations were read in Hindi by a school teacher. After making sure that the students understood the testing procedure, 5 questions were asked from each pair of students. I asked student A the first question and then I asked student B the same question. For the second question, I first asked student B and then student A, to counter-balance. The test lasted about 5 minutes for each pair. Students of similar levels were paired together, even though it has been found that a level difference between the students in a paired test does not have a significant influence on their scores (Brooks, 2009). Considering the case of Japanese students learning English, Nakatsuhara (2006) reported that performance was not too asymmetrical between students even if their level of spoken English was different. However, I paired students of similar levels so that the students felt that the testing was fair. A sample of a paired interview test is given as follows:

Examples

[Situation]

There are some students here from DPS school which is close to your school, who are also studying Japanese. Let's talk to them in Japanese.

Role A: You

Role B: A student from DPS

Questions

- 1) *konnichiwa, onamae wa?* (Greetings and what is your name?)
- 2) *nihongo ga dekimasu ka? / nihongo ga sukidesu ka?* (Do you speak Japanese? / Do you like Japanese?)
- 3) *doko ni sundeimasu ka?* (Where do you stay?)

- 4) *gakkoo ni shokudoo ga arimasu ka? Shokudoo no gohan wa oishiidesu ka? / nani ga ichiban oishii desu ka?*

(Does your school have a canteen? Is the food tasty? / What foods do you like the best?)

- 5) *Hiru gohan wa itsumo nanji kara nanji made desu ka?* (What are your lunch timings?)

Evaluation

The distribution of scores of 12 students who took the paired interview test is given in Table 3. As seen from the table, the students' pronunciation was fairly good considering that they were basic learners. They had also learned communication strategies well, which was evaluated as conversational ability in this test. Out of 12 students, 3 received full marks.

Table 3

Performance of 12 Students in Various Evaluation Criteria

	Fair	Good	Excellent	Total
Performance	3	5	4	12
Accuracy	4	5	3	12
Pronunciation	0	6	6	12
Conversational ability	2	10		12

The result and teacher's feedback for each student was read to the students in Hindi. Provisions were made for the students to take printed results with them in the summer vacation when they went home.

3. Conclusion

This report summarizes the teaching methods used for teaching Japanese conversation to class XI blind school students, and evaluated the students' speaking ability. During the course, students learned Japanese communication in pairs or in groups and were assessed by paired

interview tests. I made sure that learning, teaching and assessment were well correlated in the course. However, we did not do an analysis of the students' answers in the interview tests and this could have given us an insight into the correlation between what the students learnt in class and how they performed.

Vision is the primary and most effective means for acquiring knowledge for sighted students. Visually-impaired students however, need to learn the same content as sighted students, but without any visual cues. Therefore, it is very important that teachers for VI students be skilled enough to select relevant core content from the curriculum and teach it effectively (Aoyagi and Toriyama, 2012). Well-trained language teachers may be helpful in selecting the core content of the target language. As per my experience, teaching a language to blind students by a language teacher who does not have special training is difficult. At the same time, considering the complexities of teaching blind students, it is difficult to be a special needs educator, and teach a language without the knowledge of curriculum design, teaching methodologies, etc.⁴ A language teacher or a special educator by herself may not be able to effectively handle a language classroom for the VI students. An effective language classroom for the VI students needs experience and skills of both language teachers and special educators.

References

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Endnotes

¹ *Marugoto: Japanese Language and Culture A1* starter is part of a series of Japanese language textbooks for adult learners who are located overseas. It is developed based on the JF Standard for Japanese Language Education. A1 is the first level based on JF Standard and it is for the very basic Japanese learner.

² Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching (CEFR) is a set of guidelines developed for language teaching, syllabus design and curriculum development. The guidelines can be accessed at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

³ The Japan Foundation Standard for Japanese Language education is a set of guidelines proposed in 2010 for teaching, learning and assessment in Japanese language teaching. These guidelines are based on the CEFR. The guidelines can be accessed at https://jfstandard.jp/pdf/jfs2010_all_en.pdf

⁴ A report by Topor and Rosenblum (2013), on teaching blind students includes similar experiences of teachers with data collected from 66 teachers. They reported an overlap of strategies used in teaching blind students and teaching sighted students by trained language teachers.

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