

Newspaper as a Pedagogical Tool in Japanese Language Learning

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Abstract

Newspapers are a great source for gaining information and knowledge about Japan. They are an authentic resource and an effective tool for learning the language. Newspapers play a significant role in developing the skills of Japanese language learners. Almost all the major Japanese newspapers have online presence through digital websites where news can be read online or downloaded. This ready accessibility of newspapers through the internet makes it easy to use newspapers in Japanese language classrooms as well. News pieces not only support the reading skills by enriching the vocabulary but can also be used in enhancing the spoken, writing, and listening skills. However, appropriate strategies may be required for effective handling of news articles for strengthening the reading comprehension of the learners. The present paper sheds light on the role of Japanese newspaper reading in intermediate and advanced language classrooms for enhancing the linguistic abilities of language learners.

Keywords: Newspaper, Japanese language learning, linguistic skills, comprehension skills

Introduction

Newspapers are a great source for gaining information and knowledge about domestic as well as international current affairs and events. Newspapers carry sections on important issues of society, economy, history, people, culture, literature and feature editorials, data reports, statistics apart from the day-to-day news. Youngsters are often encouraged to develop the habit of reading newspapers to know the

happenings across the globe and to become more aware and informed citizens of a country. Newspapers have now transformed from the printed paper version to digital formats, making them accessible beyond the constraints of space and time. Newspapers have crossed the physical borders as well as the language barriers. They are available on palmtops, just a click away, in the language preferred by the reader. Some two decades ago when people had to wait for days for the arrival of newspapers to the local libraries, it was unthinkable to be able to access the news of a foreign country in real time. This ready accessibility through the internet makes it easy to use newspaper in foreign language classrooms. The advent of the internet and its widespread availability have made it easier to access these resources online. They have made way into our classrooms, forcing teachers to rethink the teaching resources and methodologies, transforming the learning and teaching environment.

In language classrooms newspaper is considered a significant tool, as it exposes learners to the advanced vocabulary, terms and expressions which help them enhance their linguistic abilities. Scholars have emphasised using newspapers in language classrooms. As Ali and Devi note about the utility of news, 'The real-life events arouse students' curiosity, and they not only provide knowledge but give a practical way of indulging students in learning language.' (Ali & Devi, 2013), these 'real life events' and the 'curiosity' to learn more about them, in fact, motivate the language learning. Almost all the major Japanese newspapers have an online presence through digital websites where news can be read online or downloaded. With a sound internet connectivity, these websites can be accessed making it possible to use the latest news articles in the classroom. The present paper sheds light on the role of Japanese newspaper reading in intermediate and advanced language classrooms. The paper, while presenting a framework of Japanese newspaper class, claims that news pieces can be a source of bringing real and contemporary Japan closer to Indian Japanese language learners. The paper seeks to locate newspapers in Japanese language education in enhancing the linguistic abilities of the learners with special focus on the comprehension skills.

Newspaper and Japanese Language Education

Indian newspapers cover important news like dignitaries' visits and

trade and business relations with Japan. However, it is always considered beneficial to refer to Japanese news websites for the daily local news and updates. Newspapers in Japanese are considered an important resource as they bring 'the present and the popular in Japan' to the Japanese language learners (Watanabe, n.d.)¹. By adopting these news articles in the classroom, learners not only become aware of the news of the present-day Japan, but they also enhance their language acquisition/learning by reading them in Japanese.

The role of newspapers in education has long been emphasised upon. The movement 'Newspaper in Education' (NIE) began in the United States of America in the 1930s and was introduced in Japan in 1985². It began as a movement to encourage young Japanese readers to read newspapers, by introducing newspapers and incorporating news related activities in their language classrooms. However, as Miya observes, "to use newspaper pieces as a resource, is not just limited to the language education at schools in Japan (particularly Japanese language), but it is also possible to use them widely for foreigners and learners studying Japanese language, for learning sentence formation, expressions etc." (Miya, 2015). Lately the use of newspapers in Japanese language class meant for foreigners has also been widely gaining attention. There are a significant number of Advanced Japanese textbooks which have incorporated newspaper articles or editorials as part of their lessons. The significance of newspapers can also be corroborated with the number of resource books designed based on news pieces³. Only concern while relying on these resource books is that they might become outdated with time. With websites now refreshing their content almost on hourly basis, newspaper websites provide teachers and Japanese language learners with readily accessible updated content.

The primary reason for using newspapers in Japanese language class is its authenticity. There are various methods of learning Japanese as a second or third language. The common trend is to begin with textbooks designed keeping in mind the needs and level of the learners. While it is needless to say that such textbooks certainly support language acquisition, it is crucial to understand that gradual shift to authentic resources is essential for the language learning process. Authentic resources are the texts meant primarily for the consumption of the native speakers of the language, where language is natural and content genuine, embedded deep into the socio-cultural fabric of the society.

Texts like newspapers, short stories, essays, and magazine articles are a few examples of authentic resources. TV and radio programmes, films and documentaries are also considered as authentic materials.

From the perspective of Japanese language learning, one of the primary objectives of advanced Japanese learners is to be able to read newspapers (Tanabe, 2009, as cited in Chujo et al. (2010)). Newspapers are usually considered difficult with their extensive use of kanji compounds (Japanese writing system derived from Chinese ideographs), technical jargon and complex sentences. Newspapers in Japanese is often a goal that language learners strive for. However, recent studies (Tamura, 1994; Yamaguchi, 2005; Kato 2016) show that the ability to read newspapers should be considered as a tool for learning the language. In other words, newspaper is to be taken as a part of the process of Japanese language acquisition, which learners should be familiarised with rather than marking it as an end goal.

From the language acquisition perspective, there are features characteristic of Japanese newspapers. For instance, extensive usage of passive sentences, kanji words and kanji compounds can be seen. Newspaper language is quite distinct from spoken Japanese (Tamura, 1994). The countries which are usually referred to in Katakana, a Japanese syllabic writing used for foreign language words, in textbooks often appear in kanjis in news articles. Further, in the headlines, verbs often get omitted and end in grammatical particles or nouns, something peculiar to the newspaper language and not usually seen in Japanese language textbooks and other resources. News pieces are considered excellent resources for exposing language learners to sentence structures and new terminology, strengthening their language abilities. Along with the linguistic abilities, comprehension abilities can also be enhanced through news articles. A part of The Japan Foundation Teaching Methodology Series, *Teach Reading*, introduces 'reading' as 'not just gaining information from the passage in a passive manner', but rather 'an active act of comprehension by the reader while extracting the appropriate meaning using the reader's schema, and predicting the content of the passage'⁴. Hence, utilisation of newspapers can be more than just a 'passive act' of 'understanding by reading'. Deep analysis and discussion of the content for answering the related questions, while actively engaging with the news content, enhances comprehension skills as well as the critical thinking.

Newspaper in Japanese Language Classroom

Newspapers, though seem to be the most difficult genre for the Japanese language learners, can be incorporated during the intermediate and advanced language classes. It is imperative to note that newspaper reading in Japanese requires the knowledge of elementary grammar and adequate number of kanjis. There are various ways in which news can be taken up in language classrooms depending upon the factors like language level, interest or a particular skill the teacher would want learners to work on. There are stages while doing news pieces in the classroom and transition from one stage to another must be smooth. Each stage may be comprised of a few classes. Owing to the learners' habitual use of prescribed language text books, when they are exposed to unfamiliar news language and a variety of themes, teacher's support is of paramount importance during the initial stages of using this tool. Popular Japanese newspapers like *Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Sankei*, *Mainichi*, etc. are available in the digital format. One can also read news on the website of NHK, the public broadcaster of Japan. In the introductory class, newspapers and their websites should be shown. Learners may be encouraged to access the websites from their own mobile phones. Physical newspaper if available, should also be shown, as newspapers in Japan usually print vertically, whereas news websites read horizontally. Almost all the Japanese newspaper websites display the latest news and there are sections on society, politics, economics, international news, etc. Websites also have dedicated columns to the most read news as per the access ranking.

News pieces taken up during the initial stage can be from NHK Web Easy website, where news in concise form is available in basic and simple Japanese. The website, an initiative by NHK is especially designed for foreigners living in Japan and studying Japanese (Tanaka et al., NLP-TEA, 2015). However, it is also used as a language resource around the world. Though these are the simplified versions and not the original news pieces, they come across as a rather easy read for the uninitiated. The website offers multiple ways for reading news depending upon the comfort of the readers. Teachers have the liberty to use these functions as per the need of the class. For instance, it facilitates reading with or without furigana, which is reading of Kanji in Hiragana and is usually displayed above a kanji word or compound. Further, kanjis of people and place names are colour coded to distinguish them. These functions

not only aid the comprehension, but also help learners overcome the initial resistance felt towards news pieces. This gives learners time to become familiar with the news vocabulary and sentence structures. For the class, the article is printed and is to be supplemented with a vocabulary list containing difficult words along with their meanings. Gradually, no vocabulary list is supplemented and learners may be asked to come prepared for the class once the news link is shared with them. As the learners become familiar with the news pieces, shift to longer and complex regular news pieces takes place, to further stretch their linguistic skills. Here again, teachers' support is required until learners become familiar with reading the news. Supplementary texts related to the news piece can also be provided to augment the comprehension of the learners (Yamaguchi, 2005). In the next stage, learners look for a news piece of their choice and make a presentation in the class explaining the news followed by an interactive group discussion. The aim of each stage is to gradually lessen the dependency on teachers by fostering the learner's autonomy.

Each newspaper class can be divided into three stages of pre-reading, reading and post-reading. Pre-reading activity is primarily brainstorming, stimulating learners' interest in the news piece. It involves reading the headline and predicting its content, while discussing the background of the news. Learners are encouraged to share information they might be aware of. News videos can also be shown here. The images and visuals help learners visualise and understand the news better. During the 'reading', learners are asked to read the news and speak about the content. The teacher, while defining the sentence structure, kanjis, and grammatical patterns, explains the content of the news piece. Then learners read the news again while confirming their understanding. For post-reading activity learners are required to answer the questions based on the news piece and present the summary. At intermediate level, a bottom-up approach for reading is adopted, minutely verifying the difficult kanjis, vocabulary, sentence formation, etc. At the advanced level, the approach is more top down, where overall content of the news article is emphasised more than the grammatical nuances of the sentences.

For reading, Google chrome extensions like *Rikaikun* can be used for easier comprehension of the content in case learners are accessing newspaper articles on the computer or smartphone. The extension aids

in identification of kanjis and provides their readings and meaning. Anushree (2020) in her study enlisting the apps and websites most referred to by the Japanese language learners in an Indian university, discusses the trends and issues one may come across using these online platforms. For newspapers learners can be encouraged to use online dictionaries like *jisho*, *weblio*, etc. Mobile applications like *Todaii*, meant for language learners are convenient platforms while integrating newspapers in classes. *Todaii* not only specifies the corresponding JLPT level of the news piece, it provides grammar and vocabulary notes, along with some questions enabling readers to test their comprehension. Availability of these easily downloadable apps or websites makes the learning process interesting and integrating them into the classroom may enhance the autonomy of the language learners.

Newspaper and Japanese Language Learning Enhancement

Newspapers can be used to enhance the four linguistic skills of the learners, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening in Japanese. Long news passages when read aloud, in fact, act as a source of input, giving learners an opportunity to decipher the difficult kanjis and unfamiliar terms, exposing them to a range of vocabulary. Also, reading, paying attention to the accent, pronouncing aloud, with proper pauses, while understanding the passage raises confidence in oral expression of the learners. Writing answers or summarising the news pieces strengthens the writing skills, giving learners a chance to use kanjis and difficult words in their writing. Presenting them in the class in the form of presentations or debates, not only reduces the resistance towards accessing the websites in Japanese, it enhances the speaking skills of the learners and boosts their confidence. Some news websites also have audio of the news available which can be used for listening and shadowing purposes. News pieces with its diverse topics and themes, introduce learners to the new terms and expressions, expanding the vocabulary base and extensive reading increase their vocabulary acquisition. Long and complex sentences expose learners to the usages in grammar. It can be said that with newspapers, overall engagement with Japanese language at different levels is enhanced.

The cultivation of comprehension skills entails reading passages of different genres, length and getting used to reading. News pieces put language into a context, with real life events, scenarios, and incidents.

For enhancing the comprehension skill, since newspaper articles are not accompanied with questions, teachers can integrate customised questions based on the article. Questions related to kanjis are quite commonly used (Tamura, 1994), and so are the true-false statement questions or complete the sentence questions. Initially teachers can ask the direct questions orally which can later be changed to written format. At the intermediate level questions about evaluating the accurate understanding of the passage might be asked. For instance, questions based on what, why, where, how can help in gauging the comprehension of the learners. Answering the questions not only deepens the understanding of the news piece text, it also aids the ability of processing the available information. On the other hand, at the advanced level, the inference questions should be based more on studying the information, summarising, interpreting or comparison with one's own culture. In other words, it entails not just reading the text, but rather deciphering it and writing one's opinion about it. Suzuki emphasises the importance of articulating questions in comprehension class, that not only confirm the comprehension of the passage, but also check or develop the optimal application of the learnt vocabulary, grammar and expressions (Suzuki, 2011). Since the terminology of the news texts is technical in nature, answering the questions requires learners to work on the information and produce output. Learners tend to apply strategies into their reading in order to answer the questions, leading to the enhancement in their strategising skills. Comprehending the passage is certainly important, but more crucial is the critical reading skills. In other words, at the advanced level, it is also important to discuss Japanese society, its socio-cultural milieu and issues forming the background of a particular news article. Writing or presenting their opinion based on the well-argued points cultivates introspection and critical thinking of the learners. As Miya observes, newspapers enhance the 'think', 'transmit/convey', 'present', 'summarise' skills of learners (Miya, 2015). The 'thinking' skill entails a multi-perspective examination of the news. It could be examining and assessing the social-cultural background of Japan as well as comparing and contrasting with Indian society. The whole exercise enriches the experience, leading to holistic development of the learners.

Observations

It goes without saying that newspapers are a rich resource for Japanese language learning and promoting language proficiency. They also aid

logical and critical thinking. The fact that newspapers are meant for native speakers, language is not artificial but authentic Japanese, is certainly a motivating factor for the learners. Rich vocabulary of the genre not only enriches the input, but it also aids the output in terms of discussions, summaries, and question answering. Incorporating activities like presentations and debates makes classes interactive and creates a dynamic environment. Through newspaper learners are able to explore the various aspects of contemporary Japanese society and enhance the cross-cultural experience. They compare it with Indian society and draw similarities and differences. The exercise expands their horizon, developing a global perspective. It also enhances intercultural competence, which is now considered to be the fifth skill in foreign language learning, by exposing learners to different perspectives and ideas.

Newspaper reading in Japanese can be difficult and challenging, depending upon the choice, length and content of the articles. For some students, excessive unknown vocabulary and kanji usage might be discouraging. Sometimes, learners show resistance towards news of accidents, death, etc. So, careful selection of the article is very important, and it is advisable to begin with familiar, short, and basic news, which must be challenging yet not too taxing for the learners. Dealing with news related to economics and politics could be difficult at the initial stage. It is observed that learners usually find news related to weather, education, life and people in Japan and social issues engaging and feel motivated when pieces regarding India or international news is taken up, something they are already familiar with. It is important to select news complementing the learners' level, interest and background. Length, difficulty, content of the news should also be taken into consideration. A complicated news or text with no affinity may leave learners stressed and disengaged. However, some familiarity with the subject, with some unknown information is motivating, stimulating learners to look for the follow up news. Hence, it is very important that the articles selected while aligning with the learning aims and objectives, are relevant, relatable and challenging for the students. Teachers play a crucial role in overall planning and execution of the classes, facilitating a smooth transition to an independent learner. However, with all the advantages of using newspapers in Japanese language classroom, there are few challenges too. One is the ready availability of online software and

applications providing readings and meanings of difficult terms and kanji compounds. Though these applications come across as user-friendly and may assist reading at the initial stage, but longer reliance and exposure to such software may hinder the overall language acquisition of the learners. There are a few Japanese news websites where subscription is required for the full access to the articles, which is sometimes not payable from India. Another significant concern is the uninterrupted availability of internet connectivity, which can nevertheless be overcome by downloading the content.

It is important to underline that active engagement with the news pieces, group work and presentations in the class enhances communication and collaboration, bringing a sense of accomplishment to learners and lead them to become autonomous learners. It is also observed that after reading news pieces in class, learners begin showing interest in reading newspapers, or look for news related to Japan in Indian papers, or also start accessing Japanese news websites. With content available online, it promotes self-study, gives learners the liberty to access the websites and platforms outside the class.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the important role played by newspapers in Japanese language learning. It substantiates the vitality of news articles as a potential pedagogical tool developing linguistic abilities, comprehension skills and critical thinking of the learners. The plethora of themes embedded in the newspaper can attract the wide interest of learners and this can give teachers freedom for class planning and topics. Articles in newspapers, open doors to present-day Japan by bringing the country closer to the students by providing relevant and updated information. Newspaper texts offer the latest information about Japan in real time, triggering affinity towards the country and its people. Today's 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) are connected to their counterparts in other parts of the world including Japan, through SNS and other social media platforms. Hence, it is pertinent for the Japanese language learners to be consistently updated and newspaper in the classroom, while upskilling, keep the learners aware and informed. Newspaper is often referred to in Japanese as '生きた教材' (ikita kyozaï), which can roughly be translated as 'living language resource', something that can never become outdated, is a crucial tool and resource for enhancing Japanese language learning.

Notes

1. All translations from Japanese to English are by the author.
2. <https://nie.jp/about/>
3. https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/urawa/j_library/booklist/dl/BL03-2018.pdf
4. *Yomu Koto wo Oshieru: Kokusai Kōryū Kikin Nihongo Kyōjuhō Shirīzu7*, (Teach Reading: The Japan Foundation Teaching Methodology Series7), (2019). Hitsuji Shobō.

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