

Secondary School Student Responses to Learning the Japanese Language at a Distance in New Zealand

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THE Japanese language has an important place in the New Zealand secondary school curriculum for many students and an important source of instruction in this subject is the New Zealand Correspondence School. Students in secondary schools throughout New Zealand are able to obtain instruction in the Japanese language through the Correspondence School if their own school is unable to provide them with a teacher in this subject.

A recent study by a native speaker of Japanese based on interviews with selected students (N=14) of this language in four Wellington secondary schools who were studying the language from the New Zealand Correspondence School (Otsuka, 1996) found a range of positive as well as negative issues affecting learners.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF LEARNING students reported that they had few distractions when learning Japanese from the New Zealand Correspondence School during the school day. Many noted that learning Japanese through the Correspondence School provided them with some flexibility, if required, as to when and where they could learn this subject although study time for Japanese was scheduled by each of their schools as part of their daily timetables. The experience of learning from the

Correspondence School provides students with an introduction to learning at a distance and, accordingly, to flexible and independent learning. It was noted by the students during interviews that flexible and independent learning was valuable experience in preparing for tertiary education at a later date.

Students reported that their tutor from the Correspondence School was particularly attentive and provided them with detailed comments on their work. There was widespread agreement that a close relationship between individual learners in schools in Wellington region and the teacher of Japanese at the correspondence School had developed, although this was very much a relationship at a distance. It was widely assumed by students that because the teacher at the Correspondence School did not have any classroom teaching he or she was able to devote a considerable amount of time to distance students in various schools.

Many students believed that there was more 'objectivity' in the teaching of an academic subject at a distance because the Correspondence School teacher did not know them 'face to face'. The teacher-student relationship was therefore based on the quality of student's completed assignment work in the Japanese language. Many of the students who were studying the Japanese language at a

distance therefore believed that they were taught by a very 'professional' person who was able to provide objective attention to their progress with the language.

There was widespread acknowledgement by the Wellington students that as well as being able to learn Japanese to some extent at their own pace, the requirement to submit assignments to the Correspondence School at regular intervals was a constant motivation.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF LEARNING the Japanese Language at a Distance The students reported a number of negative aspects in learning the Japanese language at a distance while attending a secondary school each day. Many noted that it is particularly difficult to understand the spoken Japanese language without actually seeing the speaker's facial expression or body language. Much time was reported to be spent listening to the Japanese language on audiotapes and this produced another problem – the speed with which the language on tape was usually spoken by native speakers.

A further problem in learning the Japanese language at a distance that was noted by students was the lack of peer interaction. Students learning the Japanese language in their various schools were handed the lessons from the New Zealand Correspondence School by one of their regular teachers (of another subject) and placed in a room in which to work on the assignments. Because students proceeded at their own pace with each lesson and therefore largely worked independently of one another, a distinct lack of peer interaction ensued. This led to many secondary school students who were learning the Japanese language from the Correspondence School under supervised conditions developing feelings of isolation and a longing for peer contact and support. Some students reported feeling lonely as well as isolated and wished that they had a teacher at hand in their own school to whom they could direct questions as they arose with assignments.

Most students reported experiencing some difficulty with Japanese and pointed out its complexity and difference from the English language in pronunciation, word order, lack of definite and indefinite articles, lack of plurals, a different verb system, the use of characters and in many other ways. Some students noted during interviews that there were many possible answers to a particular question in the textbook that was used which led to considerable confusion and frustration. Many of the students who were interviewed believed that they did not have enough opportunity to speak the Japanese language to feel as though they were gaining mastery of it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL Students learning the Japanese Language at a distance First, Students should, if possible, have frequent face to face contact with their teacher when learning a subject, particularly a foreign language, at a distance. Some of the students who participated in this study had never actually spoken with their tutor at the Correspondence School even though all students lived in the Wellington area. Almost all students said that they needed a lot of assistance to do well in this subject which was generally acknowledged to be difficult. To offset the widespread feeling of discouragement reported by many students in this study, regular telephone conversations with their Correspondence School teacher of language were recommended. This would in future ensure that confusion with points of grammar which arise from time to time are not able to prevent students making progress with the subject.

Second, many written explanations of Japanese grammar were found to be difficult to understand. It is recommended that the visual aspect of written materials be further developed with the inclusion of more drawings and pictures. This would make the textual material more attractive and perhaps assist in motivating students.

Third, a major problem facing New Zealand students of the Japanese language is adjusting their ears to the speed of the language as it is spoken. Students recommend the development of Japanese language tapes that could be listened to at various speeds to assist students learn how to pronounce words and expressions.

TELELEARNING AND THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE There are a number of ways in which languages are now taught including the use of audiographic technologies and the use of videos. The New Zealand Correspondence School in 1996 (after this study was completed) is experiencing with interactive television and this has the potential to provide new ways of teaching and learning foreign languages at a distance. Many of the issues raised by distance students of the Japanese language in this study may be addressed by this new interactive technology.

The Correspondence School has recently installed an upgraded telephone system and students now have more opportunities to contact their teacher to discuss problems as they arise. Increased use of the telephone to link students of Japanese from various locations with their teacher is in future likely to reduce feelings of isolation. This will also encourage the Japanese language to be spoken for at least part of a teacher-pupil exchange.

Telephone contact between teacher and distance students on a regular basis can in future be expected to have positive outcomes for both teaching and learning.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS The teaching of the Japanese language to secondary school students in New Zealand present particular difficulties when delivered by traditional correspondence methods. However, students in a range of Wellington secondary schools reported a variety of advantages as well as problems in learning this way. Many of the problems that were encountered in studying this language at a distance are likely to be alleviated through the introduction of an interactive television programme. This may give distance students and their teacher the feeling that they are actually participating in a class when learning Japanese in future. The feelings of isolation and loneliness that some students reported in this study can be expected to be overcome through the application of new technology to provide more direct and immediate communication between teacher and learner.

REFERENCE

OTSUKA, S 1996: *Japanese Language Learning in Distance Education*, Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington. (unpublished research paper).