

JAPAN'S 3.11 TRIPLE DISASTERS AS THEMATIC UNIT FOR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

批判的思考力育成のためのセマティック・ユニット「東日本大震災」：
日本語初級クラスでの試み

Noriko Mori, State University of New York at Binghamton
毛利経子, ニューヨーク州立大学ビンガムトン校

1. INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, the role of foreign language education is expected to change because of internationalization, also known as globalization. In order to prepare students to be global citizens, Japanese language educators need to train students for the global job market. Japanese language educators should target beginning-level students to equip learners with communication skills that will be effective in the global community (Nazikian, 2013; Tohsaku, 2013). According to International Cultural Forum (2012), the goal of language education in the 21st century is “to promote personal growth of learners and to grow the power to live in the 21st century through the study of language and culture,” and the principle of language education is “discovery of others, discovery of self, and realization of connection”.

In order to achieve this, 21st century skills (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009) become especially important. Critical thinking skills are one of several 21st century skills. As a way to extend the ability to think critically students need training to see things from a different point of view or perspective, to recognize strengths and weaknesses of their own thinking, and to recast thinking in an improved form.

Content-based instruction (CBI) has been used widely at an advanced Japanese language level (e.g. Chikamatsu, 2009; Ushida, 2007) for a long time. In recent years, CBI at an elementary Japanese language level has been carried out as seen in the report of Hoogenboom (2011) and Sato, Nazikian, and Hamada (2010). However, there are not enough reports to prove its effectiveness at an elementary Japanese language level.

The Great East Japan Earthquake (3.11) is filled with potential as a teaching tool to encourage thinking critically. Japan is the only country in the world to suffer from atomic bombing. This experience affects how Japan deals with the problem of exposure to radiation after the 3.11, as well as future energy problems. It is believed that there are advantages to learning about 3.11 disasters (Tohsaku, 2013). For this reason, some teaching resources have been developed to teach about the 3.11. For instance, Hatasa (2013) developed a documentary film “Resilience: Protecting Today” and suggested diversified ways to use the film to teach Japanese language, culture, and current events in Japanese language courses and Japanese studies courses.

Thematic unit (a theme-based model) is one type of CBI, along with a sheltered model and an adjunct model (Davies, 2003). According to Tohsaku (2011), using a thematic unit is an effective approach to meeting the needs of a variety of learners, and is also useful in heightening a learner’s higher level thinking skills, cultural literacy, and technology literacy.

It has been more than two years since the Great East Japan Earthquake, but there are still many problems and issues in Japan such as exposure to radiation and tsunami debris disposal. I would like for students to know the current problems Japan is facing.

Knowledge of 3.11 will improve students' cultural literacy and help them communicate with Japanese people. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how I have incorporated the 3.11 triple disasters into the curriculum of an elementary Japanese language course as a thematic unit. The later section will describe lesson plans and classroom activities.

2. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This study was conducted during regular class time at a large public university in North East America. The course is an elementary Japanese; the second-semester Japanese course, which covers from chapters 7 to 12 of "Genki Vol.1" (Banno, Ikeda, Ohno, Shinagawa, & Tokashiki 2011). The goal of the course is to advance communication skills of students in Japanese by improving their four skills of language (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and by gaining cultural knowledge. The class meets four days per week, and instructional time is twice a week of 60 minutes and twice a week of 85 minutes. There are three sections of the Japanese course and a total of 52 students. Their language level is novice high based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012). This is a typical beginning-level Japanese language course.

Starting 2013 spring semester, general education learning outcomes are required to be included in all syllabi at the university. Critical thinking is one of the educational goals of the university. The thematic unit project will satisfy the requirement.

3. CLASS PRACTICAL REPORT

The thematic unit is an eight-week-long culture lesson. It was conducted during 85 minute class time, once or twice per week. The time spent on cultural lesson was 25-50 minute per week. The final assignment of the thematic unit (YouTube video) was an extra credit opportunity, not a course requirement. The Great East Japan Earthquake unit was preparation for the extra credit activity.

3.1 Plan and Objectives/Outcome

The goal of the thematic unit is that students will be able to state their own opinions about whether or not nuclear power generation is really necessary for Japan and their home countries.

3.1.1 Content objectives

There are six content objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to explain the damages caused by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis.
- 2) Students will be able to state the various effects of the disaster on other parts of the world.
- 3) Students will be able to state at least one source of alternative energy.
- 4) Students will be able to research both proponent and opponent of nuclear power generation, and state their rationales.
- 5) Students will be able to state their own stand and opinions about nuclear power and alternative energy.
- 6) Students will be able to state peer students' pro and con rationale through class discussion and debate.

3.1.2 Language objectives

Japanese language pedagogical goal is that students will be able to share their opinions in Japanese with their limited language abilities through in-class or online discussions. As a final product, the students will make a YouTube video, in which they will not only speak Japanese, but will also add caption in Japanese. Other language objectives include that students will be able to verbally summarize in Japanese the content knowledge gained in English, and that students will be able to email in Japanese.

3.1.3 Assessments

Both formative and summative assessments are used in this project. Formative assessments includes a written test (vocabulary quiz), and summative assessments are discussion, stating summary, debate, writing comments on web, emailing in Japanese, and making YouTube video. Among these assessments, the written test, discussion, summary, debate, comments on web, and YouTube video are used to assess students' content ability. The written test, summary, comments on web, YouTube video and email are used to assess students' language ability. Rubrics are made to grade debate and YouTube video.

3.2 Activities

This section describes weekly lesson plans and classroom activities.

3.2.1 Week 1

As opening, students watch a video of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis. The video clip is in English. Then, they learn where the disaster happened on a map of Japan. Then, they learn related vocabulary.

3.2.2 Week 2

The students read a comic strip describing the damage caused by the disaster. The comic strip is in Japanese.

3.2.3 Week 3

The students read articles about the effects of the disasters, such as tsunami debris and fish contaminated by radiation. These articles are either in English or in Japanese with English translation. Then, the students learn about the shortage of electricity in Japan.

3.2.4 Week 4

The class briefly goes over various methods of electricity generation and learns which methods are used in Japan. Then, the students get in a group by nationality, such as Chinese group, Indian group, and American group. In their first language, they research the situation of electricity generation of their home countries, using their own smart phones, iPad, or laptop computers. The students also further research advantages and disadvantages of nuclear power generation and alternative energies, such as wind and solar power. Next, students research the perspectives and attitudes towards nuclear power generation and towards alternative energies in their home countries, and then compare the perspectives and attitudes with the ones of the USA and Japan.

3.2.5 Week 5

Students watch a video of proponents and opponents of nuclear power generation. These videos are either in Japanese only, in English with Japanese caption, or in Japanese with English caption. Then, the students share their own opinions in English.

3.2.6 Week 6

The students get in a group of proponents or opponents of nuclear power generation. They discuss within groups of proponents and opponents to summarize their opinions as

a group opinion. And then, the students debate between each position. Both discussion and debate are conducted in English.

3.2.7 Week 7

Students read group opinions of proponents and opponents of other sections of the same Japanese language class on the website, then share their own opinions by commenting in Japanese on the website.

The class goes over an email format in Japanese.

3.2.8 Week 8

The students create YouTube video and tell their opinions in Japanese. They also write captions of their videos in Japanese.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the reflection and achievement of the attempt, this section will discuss the implementation of effective learning activities using the thematic unit for beginning-level foreign language class.

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester to collect feedback from the students. Of the 52 students enrolling in the course, 47 students completed a questionnaire, as five students were absent on the day.

Open-ended questions asked about the students' personal attitude toward the culture lesson about 3.11 triple disasters. Overall, the students in three different sections reported that the lesson was informative and interesting, so that they enjoyed learning about it.

The comments written on the questionnaire further clarified their impressions and perceptions of the lesson. Following are some representative quotations from overall students' comments: "It was a nice break from grammar lessons," "The discussion and arguments were interesting," "It applied our knowledge of the language to a real life event that affected many people," "It opened my eyes to things I did not know about Japan; Made me realize I need to understand the society as well as the language," and "I wish to learn more deeply."

The next question asked how the students liked learning about the Great East Japan Earthquake. Their comments include: "It was good to discuss an event and issues relevant to the present day," "I learned a varying perspective that may be applicable to the way I view societies on a global scale," and "I learned about traditions." Five out of 47 students mentioned that the 3.11 topic is challenging: "I enjoyed it but was a little difficult to understand in Japanese," "I think the topic is too tough for us," "It was interesting but lots of vocabulary." On the other hand, another five out of 47 students indicated that it was not challenging enough: "I had been already well versed in the subject," "We should've read Haruki Murakami's speech about it."

The students' comments on the use of online tools (YouTube, Wikis) had mixed opinions. Thirty-eight out of 47 (81%) students wrote positive comments, such as "It was a really creative idea and good for practice" and "It was a nice use of modern media." On the other hand, nine students wrote negative comments, including "I did not really like it because it was a very difficult and time consuming; YouTube was confusing" and "I find writing assignments more doable, as I don't own a microphone." However, among the negative comments, "I do not have time for this extra-credit assignment" is seen more than "I do not like using online tools," since YouTube video assignment was not a

requirement, but an extra credit activity. I think that communication and information transmission in the digital world has become routine for young adults, and teaching styles utilizing the digital world is easily accepted.

Another question asked if students like to learn another culture topic through thematic unit. Thirty-one out of 47 (66%) students wrote “Yes,” five students wrote “No,” one student wrote “Not sure,” and 10 students did not answer. Following are some representative quotations from the students’ comments on using a form of thematic unit: “I liked it since it spaced the topic, so we weren’t doing one thing for too long,” “By learning through sequential activities over several weeks, I could research on my own and learn in depth about it,” “Instead of being bombarded with a large amount of information, I gradually learned more.” There was only one comment from the students who answered “No” or “Not sure”: “The activities were short-lived.”

The next question asked what culture topics students would like to learn about in the future. Everyday life of Japanese people (food, clothes, holidays, customs, etc.), Japanese business culture, arts and pop culture (manga, TV shows, music, etc.), Japanese traditional culture (kabuki, tea ceremony, martial arts, etc.), Japanese religions, and Japanese ancient history are listed. There are many “cool” (globally appreciated Japanese popular culture such as anime and J-pop) topics in their answers, as well. Since the students reported that they enjoyed learning about the 3.11, adopting the 3.11 as a topic might help transition from “cool” to academic interest.

Since the 3.11 topic is serious and tough for the students, and there is lots of difficult vocabulary, I gave the option to use English in the activities made for improving critical thinking skills of learners. Also, I scheduled activities and tasks over 8 weeks, which gave the students enough time to digest the content and research work on their own.

What I was most careful about was not giving students an emotional mental block to Japanese language. I did not want to discourage students from continuing Japanese language study. In order for students not to be disappointed by their insufficient Japanese language ability, the use of English was a right choice by the educator.

The objective of the culture lesson was to give the students an opportunity to cultivate the ability to think about things from various perspectives and to re-examine their ways of thinking, by listening to the views of others with different cultural backgrounds and exchanging opinions with classmates. Based on the findings of the questionnaire, the activities in the thematic unit appeared to be quite effective for critical thinking.

5. CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated how I incorporated the 3.11 triple disasters into the curriculum of a university-level elementary Japanese language course as a thematic unit. Instead of mainly looking at accuracy and grammar skills, activities incorporating content is possible in the elementary level, and its effectiveness has begun to be proven. From the attempt of this project, I realized that it is possible to incorporate content of an unfamiliar serious topic as teaching material at an elementary level. Since it was my first attempt, and since the instructor chose the topic and activities, not by students, I made the final assignment as an extra credit activity. Next time I think that it would work fine as a course requirement. In that case, incorporating a student-led task or activity would be

ideal/necessary. For example, let students make a rubric for assessment to evaluate peers' and their own work, in order to promote learners' own reflection, autonomy, and responsibility. Lastly, I hope that this report will become an opportunity for, or stimulus to the efforts and activities of other educators in the future.

REFERENCES

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (2012). ACTFL proficiency guidelines 2012. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL.
- Banno, Eri, Ikeda, Yoko, Ohno, Yutaka, Shinagawa, Chikako, & Tokashiki, Kyoko. (2011). *Genki: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese, Vol. 2* (2nd ed.). Tokyo: Japan Times.
- 近松暢子 (2009) 「米国におけるコンテンツ・コミュニティーベース授業の試み -米国シカゴ日系人史」 『世界の日本語教育』 19, 141-156.
- Davies, Stephen. (2003). Content based instruction in EFL contexts. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 9 (2).
- Hatasa, Kazumi. (2013). Using the documentary film “Resilience: protecting today” as a teaching resource. Paper presented at the American Association of Teachers of Japanese, San Diego, California.
- Hoogenboom, Tomoko. (2011). Culture/content-based instruction at the beginning level. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of Association of Teachers of Japanese, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- 国際文化フォーラム (2012) 『外国語学習の目安 2012-高等学校の中国語と韓国語教育からの提言』 東京：国際文化フォーラム
- Nazikian, Fumiko. (2013). The role of foreign language teaching in the context of globalization: Report on a poster session project. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of American Association of Teachers of Japanese, San Diego, California.
- The Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2009). “P21 framework definitions.” 2012 from - www.21stcenturyskills.org.
- Sato, Shinji, Nazikian, Fumiko, & Hamada, Hideki. (2010). Possibility of content-based instruction for beginning-level foreign language class: community project.” Paper presented at the Association of Teachers of Japanese Culture Special Interest Group Meeting, Philadelphia.
- Tohsaku, Yasu-Hiko. (2011). Professional development for creating Japanese thematic units. Panel presented at the Annual Conference of Association of Teachers of Japanese, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- 當作靖彦 (2013) 「グローバル時代の日本語教育：その方向性と可能性」 『韓日語文論集』 17, 105-114 釜山外国語大学校日本研究所：韓日語日文学会
- 牛田英子 (2007) 「ナショナル・スタンダードの日本語教育への対応」 『世界の日本語教育』 17, 187-205.