

ICT in the Japanese Language Learning: Is That What Students Really Want?

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Abstract

In the last decade, one can witness the process when Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has been actively used in various fields of professional activity, including education. The COVID-19 pandemic set up new standards for educational system, where distance learning has become the reality that both teachers and students have to get used to. This research aims at assessing the effectiveness of online learning format in studying a foreign language, focused on studying the Japanese language at the University. Japanese requires a specific approach to developing learning and teaching methods. It is traditionally recommended to study the language in a form of various aspects. However, due to new realities, students often have nothing to do but to study some specialized aspects (the Japanese media, fiction, historical text etc.) by themselves, what seems to be almost impossible without getting practical recommendations from teachers. In this regard, a survey was conducted among the Japanese language learners, that was aimed at identifying the advantages and disadvantages of studying Japanese using ICT in comparison with traditional forms of in-class learning. The results show that despite the great number of online learning platforms providing typical options for learning basic grammar and character writing rules, there are practically no programs for training some specialized subjects in Japanese. Therefore, it seems extremely important to assess the students' views and needs in order to work out a new well-balanced methodology for teaching Japanese, based on the comprehensive use of both traditional learning and innovative one using ICT.

Keywords: ICT, Traditional Teaching Methods, Student Survey

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Introduction

The use of the Internet and Web-technologies has become an important aspect in teaching and learning over the past decade. It is true that such tendency encourages teachers to reconsider the existing traditional forms of education and find new approaches to teaching methods in accordance with the new requirements of educational system. Some educators note that ICT “have enabled the teaching community to redefine some of the strategies and concepts of teaching and learning. This has been done in terms of enriching classroom activities, reorganizing course structures, and providing learners with more autonomous as well as more learner-centered opportunities for learning” (Klimova, 2012).

This is equally true of the foreign languages and, in particular, oriental languages learning. However, in the latter case, it is rather hard to assume that ICT enabled learning might completely replace the traditional one, since the study of the Japanese language, in this case, requires a comprehensive approach, including the study of socio-cultural realities of the country.

Methodology and Findings

The problem of the methodology of teaching a foreign language considering the realities of "blended learning" is very important and actual. Traditionally the course on the Japanese language at the Department of Japanese studies at Saint Petersburg University is divided into several aspects such as: “Japanese writing”, “Japanese Grammar”, “Spoken language”, “The Japanese media”, “Translation of Japanese Fiction”, “Historical and Modern Historical Text” etc. They are developed to acquire translation and interpreting skills, as well as skills of writing a research paper or working with documents etc. (Lelenkova, 2019). Moreover, learning the language in the form of different aspects enables students to acquire the skills that can be applied in various fields of professional activity: research, education, diplomacy, translation, business, art and cultural activities etc. (Lelenkova, 2018).

However, with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning has become the preferable one, where ICT began to play a pivotal role in educational process. In the case of learning the Japanese language at the professional level it is rather hard for both teachers and students to take a comprehensive approach with a focus on studying the language in a form of aspects mentioned above.

Therefore, it is significant to take into account the opinions and needs of the students themselves, for it helps to develop and improve the existing teaching and learning methods as well as figure out the new ones according to current realities.

In this regard, a survey was conducted among the students of the 1-4th year of the Bachelor Program at the Department of Japanese Studies at Saint Petersburg University. The main purpose of the survey is to understand how students themselves assess advantages and disadvantages of studying Japanese in the e-Learning and in-class learning forms respectively.

Respondents were offered to answer the following 3 questions:

Q1. Have you ever used any online applications or programs for studying Japanese? If yes, then give some examples and explain the form of study they offer.

Q2. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of learning the Japanese language using ICT (online platforms, blogs etc.) in comparison with traditional forms of education?

Q3. What points are still relevant and useful in the traditional form of teaching the Japanese language? What points are survivals?

It is true, that the pandemic has given impetus to the development of online courses, which are now being created not just in a form of recording a lecture by a teacher, but represent vividly modern trends in relevant fields of education. In recent times, a number of specialized online platforms have been worked out which are aimed at effective learning of vocabulary and grammar rules.

Giving answers to the first question the respondents pointed out a number of online learning applications and sites which are especially popular among learners of Japanese. They are the following:

- Quizlet
- Duolingo
- Omoshiroi-nihongo.com
- Japanese-words.org.
- Jisho.org
- Bunpro.jp
- Memrise.com, etc.

In short, these online-programs allow to learn and memorize words and Japanese characters in the form of simple tasks using the Spaced Repetition system. Some of them also explain basic grammar rules and grammatical structures using specific examples. Learners are also offered to make a number of test tasks, such as filling the gaps with an appropriate word, character(s), phrase or grammatical structure, listening and comprehension test, making sentence translation from or into Japanese etc. Some of applications are aimed at the Japanese character learning and its writing practice only.

Moreover, such Japanese learning site as “Memrise.com” allows to submit one’s own learning courses, lessons, based on lexical and grammatical material that has been already studied. Thus, it helps not only to repeat the material, but also to check one’s own knowledge and correct mistakes if there are any.

There are also some online learning programs aimed at learning and training more specialized subjects in Japanese, such as the Japanese Media. Here such application as “NHK Easy Japanese News” is worth to be mentioned. It allows to read newspaper articles using a pre-compiled vocabulary list. It also has such an option like the use of an automatic built-in dictionary and some others. Learners have also an opportunity to share their own translations of the whole article or paragraphs with other users. There is also an option to make your own glossaries, lists of words and expressions to remember, etc. Such application enables to read a large amount of materials in a short time. However, it should be noted that having a regular opportunity to check the meaning of words or grammatical structures does not always result in memorizing and using them properly.

The results of the answers to the Question 2 (“What are the main advantages and disadvantages of learning the Japanese language using ICT in comparison with traditional forms of education?”) showed that **advantages** might be following:

- easy access to study materials;
- individual pace, time and place of studying (students are able to choose in what, when, where and how to study);
- opportunity of using websites or online platforms, where certain grammar rules and expressions are explained;
- opportunity of using various methods for memorizing (Spaced Repetition system, etc.);
- chance to check the correctness of answers;
- chance to submit new task options;
- training listening skills;
- more opportunities for communication with native speakers or people who learn the same language using social network, discussion tools etc.;
- opportunity for pronunciation training in one's own time;
- opportunity to read online various news and research articles in Japanese.

On the other hand, some **disadvantages** might contradict with the statements mentioned above:

- problems with technology;
- online learning programs contain test tasks that allow to practice basic skills, but do not provide the necessary cultural context and examples of their use in specific situations;
- a large number of online resources providing an incorrect information;
- a lack of useful textbooks;
- a lack of personal contact, group work and discussion;
- not having an opportunity to see the proper writing rules for Japanese characters as well as to practice its writing;
- loss of motivation to memorize vocabulary, etc. due to fast and easy access to online dictionaries;
- lower motivation to study;
- loss of communication and social skills;
- distance learning might lead to a loss of interest and involvement in the educational process.

As for the results of the Question 3 (“What points are still relevant and useful in the traditional form of teaching the Japanese language? What points are survivals?”) the answers can be classified as follows:

Relevance:

- academic environment and continuity of teaching traditions;
- dividing the Japanese language learning course into various aspects (grammar, writing, spoken language, the Japanese media, historical text, reading the Japanese fiction, etc.);
- in-class learning and personal contact with a teacher: live communication with a native speaker, working with audio / video materials and training translation skills with the teacher's assistance, etc.;
- group discussion of problems on different topics in Japanese;
- online applications do not provide options for studying more specialized aspects, such as, translation in different fields (fiction, official document, media, research papers, etc.);
- priority for the traditional methods of teaching the Japanese languages, since its study is closely related to the knowledge of history and ancient traditions, culture and mentality of the people.

Survivals:

- use of a lot of printed and sometimes outdated study materials;
- teachers' distrust of online dictionaries;
- new lexical material or grammatical structures are sometimes taught apart from context use in sentences;
- lack of listening and comprehension exercises with the use of already studied grammar and vocabulary.

Discussion

The results of the survey show that despite the great number of online learning platforms providing typical options for learning basic grammar structures and character writing rules, there are still very few programs for training some specialized subjects in Japanese that were mentioned above.

Moreover, it should be noted that the use of online applications and educational platforms is focused on individual learning. On the one hand, it is convenient, as students are able to repeat difficult topics as many times as they need. On the other hand, there might be a risk of "getting stuck" at the same level, as it is hard to estimate your own language learning progress in comparison with other students learning results. It is necessary to be extremely focused and self-disciplined so as not to get distracted while using online platforms.

Another problem is that the full versions of the most of online applications are fee-based. If one has not an opportunity to pay for it, the most part of useful options remains unavailable, what makes it difficult to study the language comprehensively. Thus, despite the undoubted advantages of using ICT in learning the Japanese, i.e. convenience and ease of use, fast access to the necessary information, etc., there are still a lot of disadvantages, such as it is not always possible to write characters or to discuss a topic, estimate objectively one's own language learning results, etc.

Therefore, taking into consideration the discussion above one should not ignore the significance of traditional and well-proven methods of in-class teaching and learning.

The case is that, for learners it is almost impossible to study specialized aspects of the Japanese language on their own, as there is a large number of specialized terminology, phrases or expressions, grammatical structures etc. that requires additional explanations and assistance in order to understand their meaning and use them correctly in translation. Here, it is the task of a teacher to work out the proper methods of language skill training for learners.

It is worth mentioning such forms of training as compiling thematic glossaries, identifying and memorizing specialized terminology focusing attention to the specific situations they are used, carrying out vocabulary tests (writing dictations, etc.), definition of grammatical structures and its context usage in sentences, etc. It is obvious that the ability to make a correct and high-quality translation has never lost its relevance.

In addition, learning just the language is not enough for building an intercultural dialogue between nations. It is also the task of lecturers to encourage learners to study geography, history, including the current political and economic situation, culture and ethnography, as well as customs and specifics of daily life of the people. Such form of studying seems to be of high

importance in order to get familiar with and understand the socio-cultural characteristics of the people of other countries, that is especially true for the Japanese people (Lelenkova, 2019).

Conclusion

It is obvious that nowadays Information and Communications Technologies have become an integral part of the educational process. However, despite their wide usage and popularity among both students and teachers, the tradition of in-class learning still remains the basis on which the academic education system was created. Although we are witnessing the formation of a new type of "blended learning", it is still difficult to give an objective assessment to its purposes and advantages. On the one hand, a lot of useful online applications and programs are being created with the use of effective methods of learning the Japanese language. On the other hand, one can notice a slowdown in the intellectual development in general, since learners mostly rely on online tool options rather than use their brains potential. It might lead to the loss of the ability to communicate, translate or interpreter from or into a foreign language, do some researches and so on. For example, working on translating from and into the Japanese language requires a comprehensive use of various skills and knowledge. Therefore, it is extremely important to assess the students' needs in order to preserve and improve the existing traditional methods of teaching, while not ignoring the innovative ones with the use of ICT.

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