

Opening the Borders of the Japanese Language: Discovering and Answering the Needs of Students of Japanese in Serbia

MARKOVIĆ, Ljiljana, TRIČKOVIĆ, Divna
University of Belgrade

Abstract

Most languages, regardless of how much they are taught globally, are restricted to the relationship between local L2 speakers and native speakers. However, L2 speakers have their own linguistic identity and needs they seek to manifest in the language, not exclusively through association with native speakers. This fact remains unrecognized if L2 speakers are observed solely from the perspective of native speakers and not as a group of speakers with their own linguistic needs. English is nowadays used more in non-native speaker communication than with native speakers. How might Japanese similarly open itself up? If facilitation of communication between L2 speakers were achieved the borders of Japanese would open to new areas of use. This can be accomplished only by acting locally, i.e. providing the circumstances which will facilitate communication between L2 Japanese speakers. In this way, the language would stop being the exclusive property of its native speakers and would venture beyond its borders into a wider sphere. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the needs of L2 speakers, distinct from speakers who live in Japan. We offer a method for the examination of these needs and present an application of the results of our research.

Keywords: L2 speakers' needs, local application, Japanese language, Serbian language, borders and limitations

【キーワード】 L2 話者ニーズ、外国語の局所適用、日本語、セルビア語、境界と制限

1 Introduction

The limitation of the majority of foreign languages is that their use remains restricted to the relation native speaker – non-native speaker. The problem of this type of communication is that its primary aim remains the accommodation of the non-native speaker to the native speaker. The L2 user must go through a fairly unidirectional form of assimilation and acceptance of the norms of the given foreign language and culture. To be sure, this is the natural and expected scenario: the student is the one who should adapt. In this process there is, however, a very important factor that should not be taken out of the equation, as doing so results in the loss of motivation to learn a foreign language and a decrease in the ability to master it. The element in question is the universal and generally accepted view that one's primary desire is to express himself and communicate personal information in the foreign language, and that personal information or particular point of view often has to do with one's mother tongue. Regardless of the knowledge of the foreign culture, if the person is unable to express herself in a satisfactory manner, one cannot say that the foreign language has been acquired. In this paper we will attempt, therefore, to examine the elements that make this possible, firstly, by looking

at the theoretical foundations and then by providing concrete examples (case study 1 and 2) of the methods that might be employed to counteract this problem.

2 Theoretical framework and background of the research

According to the CEFR, the learning of a foreign language is, among other things, defined as follows:

*The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes **plurilingual** and develops **interculturality**. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences. Learners are also enabled to mediate, through interpretation and translation, between speakers of the two languages concerned who cannot communicate directly.*

(Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, p. 43)

We would like to place special emphasis on the fact that the conditions of *plurilinguality* and *interculturality* can be attained by adding the foreign element to the pre-existing native matrix. The moment a foreign language student masters the basic models of communication in an additional language, that language becomes part of his personality, which is enriched. Therefore, X (mother tongue, L1) + Y (foreign language, L2) are not = Y, but rather = XY. The linguistic identity of the person learning language Y (L2) cannot be merely adjusted to fit the cultural and linguistic mold of the language. The student departs from language X (L1) and through it, by observing differences and similarities, acquires language Y (L2). The connection between these two languages is a permanent feature. The level of mastery of a foreign language could consequently be measured by the degree to which the student has distanced himself from language X (L1) while using language Y (L2). At the beginner level, the connection is the strongest, while at the level that corresponds to level C of the CEFR, this connection is generally the weakest.

In the case of the Japanese language, we would like to note that language learning material for the beginner and advanced levels is quite well developed. However, we are under the impression that at the intermediate level, the techniques that could appropriately meet the needs of the students have not been given the same attention. We believe that this is the case because the methods used to produce textbooks for the intermediate levels still utilize models similar to those used at the beginner level (『みんなの日本語』, 『新日本語の基礎』, even 『まると』 etc.). Another reason is the fact that the postulates of contrastive analysis are not implemented consistently. In other words, the position and the identity of the student are not considered enough. Why do we think this is important? Precisely because it is at the intermediate level that the student, e.g. a Serbian student of Japanese, as an independent user (a feature of the B level) has the greatest desire to express himself from his own perspective, as someone who already speaks a language and who from that differing life perspective wishes to express his viewpoint in Japanese. He knows what he wants to say but he does not know how to say it in the Japanese language.¹

Why is this important? At this level students still rely on the material from their textbooks, and much less on raw language material. Also worth mentioning is the fact that it is unlikely that a Serbian has travelled to Japan nor has plans to do so in the future, therefore, Japanese is needed at the local level. However, not one beginner or intermediate textbook we had the opportunity to use contained words and phrases that might be useful in Serbia, such as “the confluence of two rivers” or “to air the room”, not to mention expressions concerning European history, Greek mythology and other topics familiar to a Serbian speaker. Consequently, the Serbian student knows how many types of trains exist in Japan but is ignorant of the words needed to communicate things which are important to him or which he might wish to share with Japanese visitors. In this way, Japanese remains applicable only within the context of Japan itself.

3 Case study 1

In order to overcome this barrier, we wrote the textbook *Step by Step (Korak po korak)* (Markovic & Trickovic 2015), which approaches Japanese language learning in this way from the very beginning and is adapted to the needs of the local population. Our idea is to develop this project and complete books for a level 2 beginners’ course and the intermediate level.

The features of this textbook are as follows: the course contains the central textbook, a book with a dictionary and grammatical explanations, a workbook, a poster and a set of kana flashcards. In the 10 units contained in the course, the student covers hiragana and katakana, the basics of sentence formation and a comprehensive vocabulary. All the lessons are constructed to encourage speaking from the very beginning and are suited to the environment in which they are used. The book is richly illustrated and follows the CEFR and JF standards, placing special emphasis on building student self-awareness in the learning process and the early formation of personal language learning goals. The textbook is accredited as suitable for use in high schools in Serbia and is used at the Faculty of Philology by students of Japanese language as an elective.

One of the defining characteristics of the textbook is that the lessons first present katakana, but not in the usual order. The first letters introduced are those which can be used to write the greatest number of Serbian names (e.g. the katakana letter *n* is given in the very first lesson and not at the end as most Serbian male names end in *n*). The goal of this method is to enable the students to write their names and those of their dearest. Additionally, as katakana is used to write foreign words that they are for the most part familiar with, the gulf between what is not known in Japanese is bridged and some of pressure is removed from the process of learning a new script. The third reason for this is that students would forget katakana quickly and would be discouraged by the fact that several weeks into learning it they would still be unable to write their name in Japanese. (In high school and elective subject courses, the basic letters are taught for an average of two months. All attempts at speeding up the process have been unsuccessful and have resulted in a significant decrease in the number of students in the course.) Therefore, with this textbook we wished to bridge the period needed to learn the kana script by offering selection of appropriate speaking exercises.

In February 2017, we conducted a survey of the textbook’s users to examine the results of the task we set before ourselves². The course received very high marks, and important

comments and suggestions were made. The average mark was 9 (8.8 out of 10) and most of the students praised the methodology used and the concise explanations provided. The students who had used other textbooks felt a certain unease about learning the letters in a different order, but the end result was that all the users knew the letters as well as their correct order³ (Hiragana is taught in the correct order, after katakana).

In the survey, we also asked questions about the reasons for learning Japanese and what students expect from the process, something we have been doing for years. The results of this year's survey confirmed the results from last year (Markovic & Trickovic (2016)) that the majority of students want to learn Japanese for certain aesthetic or personal pleasure and in order to be able to communicate in the language. Material gains were often not even the secondary motive. Unlike last year, this year's subjects demonstrated greater initiative regarding travel to Japan. Even though none of them had yet visited Japan or had any definite plans, they expressed their desires to do so and were quite specific regarding the amount of time they would like to spend in the country.

This year we added the question on whether they would like to communicate with non-Japanese speakers in Japanese and if yes, why. The majority of subjects (20 out of 26) stated that they would like to use Japanese with non-native speakers, saying that it would improve and speed up the process of learning the language.⁴ Like last year, the survey further showed that students have very little contact with Japanese people, which is not surprising given the fact that there are only about 150 Japanese nationals of all ages living in Serbia, including diplomats and their families.⁵

In conclusion, students of Japanese in Serbia recognize that communication in the language would benefit them, but they do not know how to make this happen. Regarding this matter, we have realized that it is necessary to organize Japanese language courses in such a way to enable students to communicate amongst each other and with other students of Japanese. Apart from this and keeping in mind that it is still difficult to travel to Japan from Serbia, there is a greater possibility that they will use Japanese in Serbia, even when speaking to native speakers than in Japan and that they should be taught to talk about Serbia in Japanese. We believe that this is a common occurrence with the majority of students of Japanese as a foreign language in the world.

4 Case study 2

In order to enable L2 speakers of Japanese to communicate with each other in Japanese, it is necessary for them to learn how to express their primary linguistic needs and not only to be able to understand what Japanese people are saying. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct thorough contrastive research which would provide data that would help in the building of learning material. On this occasion, we will mention an experiment we conducted in 2015 with students taking the subject Contrastive Analysis of the Japanese and Serbian Language, which began to be taught at the Faculty of Philology, the University of Belgrade in 2013. The results and method are described in detail in paper 'On the selection and manner of utilizing appropriate lexis in teaching Japanese as a foreign language at the B1 level in Serbia' (Markovic, Trickovic & Belusevic (2015)). We will briefly present those results here, as they are important to our case.

During the experiment, we noticed that students do not detect the differences in the meaning of learnt vocabulary and words whose meaning partially corresponds to a word in their mother tongue. At the beginning of the semester, students were presented with several words (命、人生、生活、生きる、寿命、生命) in Japanese. After consulting their dictionaries, the students concluded that these words in Serbian all correspond, more or less, to the words ‘life, to live’. Following this, students were given the task to quickly write (2 to 5 minutes) five sentences in their mother tongue which would contain the words ‘life, to live’ (‘život, živeti’ in Serbian). For homework, the students were told to translate these sentences into Japanese. Out of the 25 students that were taking the course that year, 14 completed their homework and we were able to collect 75 sentences. The aim of the exercise was to help the students realize that the meaning of words should not be taken at face value and that the semantic range of a word must always be considered, especially in the case of words for that can be assumed to have the same range of meaning in the two languages.

Here is a sample of the correction⁶ of the students’ homework:

2.

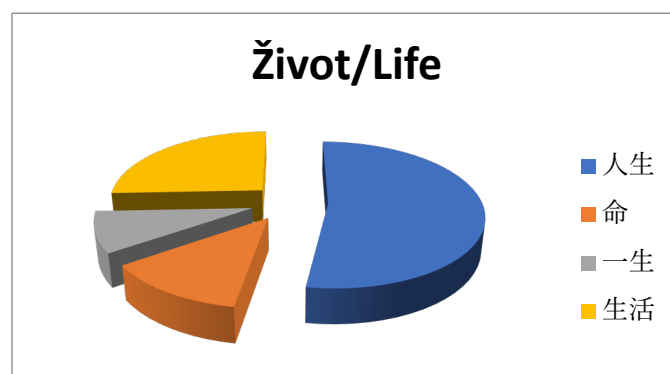
1. 生活のことじんせい私は私をびっくりさせました。 život me je iznenadio.
2. 彼女は苦しい生命がありましたじんせいを送りました。 Ona je imala mučan život.
3. この彼女は自分の子どもたちの人生のために生きています。 Ona živi za život svoje dece.
4. 生活じんせいたくさんいい人を/と合出会いました。 Upoznao sam dosta dobrih ljudi u životu.
5. 命人生はやくすごしました。 Brzo prođe život.

Comment [CE3]: 人生は早く過ぎます。

The statistical data (presented in greater detail in the mentioned paper) showed us that the Serbian word ‘life, to live’ most often corresponds to the Japanese word 人生 *jinsei*. Other words that came close were 生活 *seikatsu* and 生きる *ikiru*.

1. Semantic domain of the Serbian and English words *život/life* relative to Japanese

—セルビア語および英単語に対する日本語の意味領域—



It was also evident that Serbian students tended to use the word 生活 *seikatsu* in their translations and that they avoided the word 人生 *jinsei* as there were 14 sentences that required

the use of the word 人生 *jinsei*, which the students did not recognize. The sentences also showed that the word 命 *inochi* was used wrongly in 6 out of the 10 times it occurred. From this it is possible to conclude that students do not know how to use the given words.

Next, we tried to determine the reasons why these mistakes occur. We established that Japanese textbooks used in teaching introduce the word 生活 *seikatsu* early on but give examples of the use of the word 人生 *jinsei* only at the intermediate level. In the glossaries that accompany these textbooks, the words are translated into English as ‘life’, without any explanation of the limitations of their use and meaning⁷. Nevertheless, the Oxford Beginner’s Japanese Dictionary gives the following explanation of the word *life*: 生活 *life* (style); 人生 (person’s) life;

life noun: (human life in general) = じんせい・人生; (state of being alive) = いのち・命; (lifespan) = いっしょう・一生; (life expectancy) = じゅみょう・寿命; (everyday life) = せいかつ・生活.

The example of the Beginner’s Dictionary shows that in the case of English, care was taken to distinguish the differences in meaning of the word in the two languages. Unfortunately, this is often not the case in other languages.

As we later established, the reason the word 生活 *seikatsu* appears more frequently in Japanese language textbooks is the fact that the word occurs more often in Japanese (almost three times more than the word 人生 *jinsei*, according to the data from NINJAL-LWP for BCCWJ (NLB) (<http://nlb.ninjal.ac.jp/>). However, the consequence of the inadequate explanation (and in the case of English, we saw that it was enough to merely add one more word for the range of meaning to become more evident) was that students of Japanese whose native tongue is Serbian on learning the word 生活 *seikatsu* erroneously conclude that they now know how to translate the Serbian word ‘život’ (‘life’), which is one of the words they need at the beginner level onwards.

5 Final remarks

The languages that have crossed the borders of their native countries and are used internationally between non-native speakers are English, to a lesser extent French, Russian, German, Spanish and possibly others. The majority of the L2 speakers of these languages are at B1 or B2 levels. In these foreign languages, these speakers mainly express their own needs and not the needs of the native speakers with whom they rarely enter into communication (On a personal level, one of the authors can testify to using English with native speakers very rarely; we believe that is the case with other people too).

Therefore, what makes English a world language is first and foremost the fact that it enables communication between members of different linguistic communities and not necessarily with its native speakers. This is made possible, among other things, because of the clear contrastive differentiation between English and other languages, the result of the fact that the writers of English textbooks are frequently local non-native speakers of the language. In this way, they have contributed to our knowledge of the English language in general.⁸

The conditions required for writing a textbook to be used locally are difficult to meet and the mainstream of Japanese language teaching is based on contrasting the language almost exclusively with English. However, if we do not write Japanese language textbooks to be used by smaller groups of speakers, Japanese will never leave its borders and will not become a world language in the true meaning of the word. On our part, we will continue to try to counteract these tendencies by further developing the contrastive analysis of Serbian and Japanese. We believe that this could be a model to be followed on a universal level.

¹ We have addressed this question in several previous papers Markovic & Trickovic (2014, 2016, 2017). (Ref. also to Little 2007).

² We had 26 subjects, who had used the textbook as part of a course from October 2016 to December 2016. The anonymous survey was conducted at the start of the new semester on 20th February 2017.

³ The students were presented with the question which script they would teach their child if they lived abroad, the Latin alphabet, used in the country of residence, or Cyrillic (Serbian being written in both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabet). Most of the students (14 out of 26) answered that in those circumstances they would first teach the Latin alphabet, although in Serbia, the Cyrillic script is taught first and is considered nationally more important. Nevertheless, 10 students chose Cyrillic, precisely because it would be more difficult to learn and because of its cultural value. Two students stated that they would attempt to teach their child both scripts simultaneously.

⁴ Those who answered 'no' explained that it would be 'too complicated' or that it would be 'unnatural'.

⁵ Only a few students had had contact with Japanese people and in those cases with a very limited number (one or two people they communicated via the Internet).

⁶ The task of correcting the homework was given to Una Belušević, one of the best translators in Serbia.

⁷ Textbooks and dictionaries used in Case Study 2: 田中よね et al. (2001) 『みんなの日本語初級 1 – 初級I 本冊』, 『みんなの日本語初級 2 – 初級II 本冊』, 『みんなの日本語初級 1 – 初級I 翻訳・文法解説、英語版』, 『みんなの日本語初級 2 – 初級II 翻訳・文法解説、英語版』 スリーエーネットワーク; 東京外国語大学 留学生日本語教育センター (2010) 『初級日本語 上・下』, (1994) 『初級日本語 単語帳 (英語版)』, (1999) 『中級日本語』, 『中級日本語 語彙・句型例文集』 凡人者; 名古屋大学日本語教育研究グループ(編) (2002) 『A Course in Modern Japanese』 名古屋大学出版会; *Oxford Beginner's Japanese Dictionary*. (2010) Oxford University Press; NINJAL-LWP for BCCWJ (NLB) (<http://nlb.ninjal.ac.jp/>).

⁸ On this occasion, we did not conduct statistical research into what percentage of English language textbooks were written locally, but we can confidently state that for decades this was the norm in Serbia, as well as that it is generally thought that a large part of the population can communicate in English. We would also venture to say that only specialized language schools used textbooks written in English speaking countries. Nowadays the situation is a little different as schools are given the freedom to choose which textbooks they will use so a large percentage of these are by British publishers. However, we have reason to believe that foreign experts also took part in writing these textbooks, a matter we cannot address in depth at present. On the other hand, all Japanese textbooks that we have had the opportunity to come into contact with were almost exclusively written by Japanese nationals.

References

- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg. Cambridge University Press (www.uk.cambridge.org/elt)
- Little, D. (2007) Language Learners Autonomy: Some Fundamental Considerations Revisited. *Innovation in language learning and teaching* 1 (1): 14-28.
- Markovic, Lj. & Trickovic, D. (2014) Collection of Student Articles as a Case-study for the Acquisition of Discourse: Competence and Written Production in the Field of Japanese Language and Culture. *The Proceedings of the 18th Japanese Language Symposium in Europe Aug. 28-30, 2014*. Japanese Language

-
- Education in Europe (<http://www.eaje.eu/symposium/24;>
[http://www.eaje.eu/media/0/myfiles/28%20Oral21%20Markovic Trickovic.pdf](http://www.eaje.eu/media/0/myfiles/28%20Oral21%20Markovic%20Trickovic.pdf)): 203-208.
- Markovic, Lj. & Trickovic, D. (2015) *Udžbenički komplet za japanski jezik Korak po korak (Japanese language textbook set Step by step)* (2nd expanded and revised edition [First edition 2014]), Faculty of Philology University of Belgrade, Kokoro
- Markovic Lj., Trickovic D. and Belusevic U. (2015) = マルコヴィッチ・リリヤナ、トリチコヴィッチ・ディヴナ、ベルシェヴィッチ・ウナ (2015) On the selection and manner of utilizing the appropriate lexic for B1-level Japanese-language teaching as a foreign language in Serbia. 「セルビアの L2 日本語教育における B1 に適した単語の選択と使用方法について」『第 28 回日本語教育連絡会議発表論文集』2015 年 8 月 24-25 日、ザグレブ (available at: <http://renrakukaigi.kenkenpa.net/index.html>;
<http://renrakukaigi.kenkenpa.net/ronbun28.html>; <http://renrakukaigi.kenkenpa.net/ronbun/2015015.pdf>): 83-91.
- Markovic, Lj. & Trickovic, D. (2016) Students for Students – The development of a new pedagogy exemplified in kanji acquisition. *Japanese Language Education in Europe 21. The Proceedings of The 20th Japanese Language Symposium in Europe, 2016*, AJE & AIDLG ([http://www.eaje.eu/symposium/31](http://www.eaje.eu/symposium/31;);
<http://eaje.eu/pdfdownload/pdfdownload.php?index=189-194&filename=koto-markovic-trickovic.pdf&p=venezia>): 172-178.
- Markovic, Lj. & Trickovic, D. (2017) = マルコヴィッチ・トリチコヴィッチ (2017) 「セルビアにおける漢字学習に関して」『日本語教育連絡会議 (2016) 論文集 Vol.29』 Faculty of Philology, Kokoro, Andrić Institute: 169-175 – print version. (available at: <http://renrakukaigi.kenkenpa.net/ronbun29.html>;
<http://renrakukaigi.kenkenpa.net/ronbun/2016024.pdf>) - online version.