

Cultivating Ambassadors at Aichi Prefectural University

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“Why do Japanese people take their shoes off when they enter the house?” “Do you really eat whale?” “What are toilet slippers?” It is not unusual for Japanese students to freeze when confronted with such questions, uncertain how to respond. As part of Aichi Prefectural University’s participation in the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, the university this year began offering courses specifically designed to help students develop the skills necessary to talk openly and clearly about Japan. This paper will discuss the development and implementation of the J-Ambassador course.

The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development

The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development is a Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiative, aiming to address the current tendency of young Japanese to be “inward looking” (MEXT, 2012). MEXT holds that given today’s global economic climate, Japan needs to cultivate citizens who have high-level comprehensive language and communication skills and experience of foreign cultures, and are able to make positive contributions on a global scale to foster a stronger, more prosperous, cosmopolitan Japan.

Aichi Prefectural University initiated their own Global Human Resource Development Project in 2013. This project aims to see over 60% of students enrolled in the foreign languages department experience overseas study as part of their degrees. Recognising the importance of an integrated approach, the program is designed to provide students with the practical skills necessary for success at each stage of the study abroad process. Through the new multilingual learning centre (iCoToBa), students have the opportunity to participate in free, extra-curricular classes in English, Spanish, Chinese, French and German. In addition to the acquisition of superior language ability (in multiple foreign languages), these classes target international understanding, presentation skills, information literacy, communication skills, intercultural adaptability, problem-solving and management skills. The J-Ambassador course is one such class, designed to address all of the above goals. Similar courses are offered in all five of the iCoToBa languages. This paper limits itself to a discussion of the English language course.

Course Outline

The J-Ambassador course focuses not on the acquisition of a fixed set of language structures or vocabulary, but rather on challenging students to identify and be able to express who they are as representatives of Japan in a global environment. The goal of the J-Ambassador course is not to help students simply to assimilate to another culture. Rather, the course aims to enable students to recognise and understand similarities and differences between cultures, in order to achieve more effective communication.

The course was created to facilitate the achievement of three core objectives:

1. To reflect upon Japanese truths and stereotypes and identify possible foreign perspectives.
2. To acquire vocabulary necessary in talking about Japanese traditions and objects.
3. To be able to communicate information about Japan clearly.

The first objective seeks to prepare students for situations they may encounter overseas, by exposing them to a wide range of perspectives on Japan and helping them to consider how to respond to those. This requires students to consider their own knowledge and ideas regarding many aspects of Japan and Japanese culture. The second and third objectives hope to facilitate the communication of these ideas, by providing language tools (Objective 2) and introducing strategies for effective communication across cultural gaps (Objective 3).

Five J-Ambassador courses were implemented in the 2013 – 2014 academic year: two concurrent courses in each of the first and second semesters, and one intensive course during the summer vacation. Each course comprised twelve or thirteen ninety-minute lessons and followed the same core syllabus, with variation in specific topics and activities depending on the student group. (See Appendix 1 for the second semester syllabus.)

The opening class of each course focused on identifying student and teacher goals and getting to know each other, in order to establish a comfortable group dynamic. As the J-Ambassador course encourages students to express their own opinions and share and learn together, building good relationships is essential. Students shared ideas regarding the image Japan presents to the world, stereotypes about Japan, and aspects of Japanese culture that are difficult to explain in English. Ideas that arose in this time, together with suggestions by the teacher, decided the general topics to be incorporated into the syllabus. Such topics as food, religion, language, etiquette, geography, education and subculture thus became the focus of discussion in subsequent classes.

Each topic was allotted at least one class period. Discussion stimulus was provided via a range of media: foreign documentaries, Japanese government publications, newspaper articles, internet fact sheets, exchange student interviews, Japanese television programs, and YouTube videos. Students were encouraged to reflect and comment on the information provided, and to

answer related teacher and peer questions. In addition to extensive discussion activities, students enacted role plays, designed posters, played games, wrote summaries and gave oral presentations to consolidate their ability to effectively express in English the opinions formulated through discussion and reflection tasks.

Each J-Ambassador course culminated in a group project. Students were required to work together to introduce one element of Japanese culture in English. They were encouraged to use their own ideas and their own “real voices” to give an accurate portrayal of the actual situation in Japan today. The specific nature of the project changed over the year, with the first two groups presenting their introduction in written form on the internet, and summer and second semester course students delivering oral presentations.

Observations

The J-Ambassador course drew heavily on group discussion activities to encourage students to realise the validity of their own ideas, and discourage reliance on a teacher figure to provide answers for them. Students in iCoToBa classes come from a range of grades, ages and language abilities. It was not surprising then, to see some initial reluctance among students to speak out in front of each other. Continued emphasis on the validity of every opinion, and on the value of hearing other perspectives, together with regular group mixing and ice-breaking tasks, was effective in overcoming this hesitation. By the end of the course, students were able to actively interact to sustain thoughtful group discussions.

As the students grappled to identify their own responses and break down their opinions into manageable concepts they could express in English, many discovered gaps and conflict in their own understandings of Japanese culture. Group discussions revealed disparity between individual ideas that challenged simplistic generalisations and stereotypes, and encouraged students to appreciate the existence of other perspectives on Japanese culture even amongst themselves.

In seeking to express their ideas related to Japanese culture in English, many students initially showed a tendency to over-translate, relying on dictionaries to translate Japanese items and ideas into English words. This is an ineffective strategy, as it causes a breakdown in conversational flow, and often fails to achieve the desired understanding. Concepts or items that do not exist in the cultural context of the second language elude such simplistic attempts at translation. Consider, for example, the Japanese food *konnyaku*. Dictionaries suggest “devil’s tongue jelly” is an appropriate English rendering, but few English speakers outside of Japan would understand that translation. In an effort to tackle dictionary-dependence, the use of dictionaries during discussion-based tasks was discouraged. Some vocabulary was pre-taught, but often students were required to think creatively to find ways to convey meaning using the

tools they already possessed. In response to the question of how to explain what *konnyaku* is, student groups eventually came up with such descriptions as “a hard jelly made from a kind of potato” or “potato jelly that feels like rubber”. Both of these explanations are effective in conveying a clear image of what *konnyaku* actually is. As the courses progressed, students became more relaxed and increasingly able to explain concepts in real terms, shifting the focus away from precise translation and onto more functional communication.

As the first semester course drew to a close, the final project required each group to compose a paragraph on their chosen aspect of Japanese culture. These were then uploaded to an online class “J-Dictionary” visible to both internal and external readers. (The J-Dictionary can be accessed at <http://j-ambassador.blogspot.jp/>) Disappointingly, in spite of the improved ability of students to analyse and reflect deeply on Japanese culture apparent in class, many student groups reverted to comparably shallow topics in this final project. There was even a tendency in some compositions to perpetuate ideas that students had only recently identified as myths or at the least as overgeneralisations.

The shift to an oral presentation in the later courses was introduced in an attempt to counter this tendency, encouraging more extensive interaction between students to develop original and thoughtful ideas. Student pairs delivered ten minute presentations, followed by five minutes of question and answer time. Presentation requirements and guidelines were in line with those of the 7th Annual Japanese Culture Presentation Contest (Kansai University of Foreign Studies), in the hope that students would be encouraged to take their work one step further and actually enter the contest, thus giving the task a purpose beyond the confines of the classroom. Careful topic choice was emphasised, with students asked to select an area in which they felt that they really wanted to convey a message to the world about Japan, or felt that Japan was misunderstood. In the summer course, the presentations displayed evidence of more original thought and greater engagement than in the J-Dictionary task. No students chose to enter the contest though, and some presentations were still not quite in line with the goals of the course. The second semester presentations had yet to be completed at the time of writing.

Concluding Remarks

The J-Ambassador course saw a successful first year. Students were all able to contribute to meaningful discussions about Japanese culture and many showed definite improvement in their ability to critically consider their own culture and the attitudes towards it that others may have. Students also showed increased confidence in speaking without a dictionary; trying instead to consider the cultural context of the conversation and choose language and communication strategies accordingly.

A key challenge in future development of the J-Ambassador course lies in creating a more

effective final project. The purpose of this course is ultimately to facilitate genuine intercultural communication, especially on topics related to Japanese culture. It follows then, that a project allowing students to practice what they have learned in an authentic exchange situation would greatly enhance its utility value, which could be expected to induce higher student motivation and greater effort. This type of task demands absolute commitment from students. Such commitment has not been evident in the majority of iCoToBa courses to date. This is perhaps due to the extracurricular nature of the courses, with little formal testing and no course credit for iCoToBa classes. Furthermore, iCoToBa class times are necessarily decided after regular class schedules have been established. This often results in clashes with other extracurricular activities similarly arranged to fit around regular classes. In particular, student exchange events, university-wide TOEIC testing, library orientation sessions and school festival preparations resulted in frequent class absences this year.

J-Ambassador has seen an exciting first year. It now behooves us to consider how best to support graduates of this course as they continue their global journey. Linking this course effectively with current or new iCoToBa classes and projects should be considered, in order to further extend skills introduced and practiced in this course.

References

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Appendix 1: J-Ambassador Syllabus, Semester 2 2013

Course	J-Ambassador	Materials	teacher-generated	Teacher	Fern Edebohls fern@for.aichi-pu.ac.jp
Objectives	① To reflect upon Japanese truths and stereotypes, and identify possible foreign perspectives. ② To acquire vocabulary necessary in talking about Japanese traditions and objects. ③ To be able to communicate information about Japan clearly.				
Content	Each class will address a different element of the Japanese lifestyle that students are likely to be questioned about overseas. Students will consider reasons behind core Japanese practices and principles and practice explaining and discussing Japanese truths and stereotypes.				
Assessment	60% class participation 40% presentation * Attendance of at least 2/3 total classes offered is necessary for completion of this course.				
Lesson	Tasks & Themes	Objectives (Students will ~)			
1	Introduction - What is Japanese? What are the stereotypes?	Brainstorm typically "Japanese" concepts & things they think would be difficult to explain to foreigners. Look at Japan from an "outsider" perspective.			
2	Communication	Consider Japanese communication styles (verbal & non-verbal, including attention to respect). Learn related vocabulary.			
3	Food	Look at stereotypes of Japanese food. Consider how to correct/develop understanding about the Japanese diet. Learn related vocabulary.			
4	Geography	Discuss Japanese geography with attention to natural disasters. Learn relevant vocabulary and discuss how to talk about sensitive issues.			
5	Religion	Compare religion in Japan with other world religions. Simplify ideas and convey them in English.			
6	Etiquette	Identify unspoken rules that are important for foreigners visiting Japan. Learn necessary vocabulary and be able to explain an aspect of etiquette.			
7	School	Consider differences between Japanese education and that in other countries.			
8	Family	Examine the "typical" Japanese family - is there such a thing? Investigate opinions/stereotypes around the world.			
9	Subculture	Look at Japanese "otaku" culture as the world sees it - is this an accurate reflection? Discuss subculture groups present in Japan.			
10	Presentation Preparation	Work in groups to develop a presentation. Step 1 - forming pairs and deciding a theme.			
11	Presentation Preparation	Work in groups to develop a presentation. Step 2 - developing definitions and expanding upon them.			
12	Presentation Preparation	Work in groups to develop a presentation. Step 3 - preparing visuals and practicing delivery.			
13	Final presentations	All groups to present their presentations.			
Note to students					
This course will use teacher-generated materials. Please obtain a folder for your class handouts and bring it to every class. Please try to come to every class. If you must miss a class, it is important to advise your teacher via email a day in advance. Students who miss a class should copy handouts from classmates or email the teacher for a soft copy (email address provided above). We will do a lot of talking in this class; please come with an open mind, and a willingness to share, listen and be challenged!					