

# **Engineering Students' Learning Experiences in an Intensive Online Survival Japanese Class, Preparing for a Summer Internship in Japan**

## **Online Survival Japanese Class: Development and Students' Experience**

Satomi SUZUKI, Georgia Institute of Technology

**Abstract:** This presentation reports the course development of an intensive online survival Japanese class, specifically created for university-level engineering students, preparing for an internship in Japan, and their learning experience. The surveys taken from students inquiring the experience of the course showed the course provided them a positive learning experience via technology, allowing them to acquire linguistic skills and observe cultural differences enhanced by interactions with Japanese peers.

Key words: Japanese for a Specific Purpose, Synchronous online learning, Survival Japanese, virtual conference, telecollaboration

### **1. Introduction**

This presentation illustrates how technology facilitated the learning process of university students preparing for a 10-week internship opportunity at universities in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, Japan; despite the fact that the internships were canceled due to the COVID-19. First, it reports a successful development and undertaking of a 5-day intensive synchronous online survival Japanese class that was created specifically to serve six biomedical engineering (BME) students at Georgia Institute of Technology (GT) in the US. The class was complemented with a three-hour virtual conference, with the students interacting with their Japanese peers from the internship host institution in Japan. Secondly, it examines the students' learning experience from this course with the survey data taken from the students, which were collected at three different time periods. The results show the students' positive learning experience via technology.

### **2. The course development and content**

This course was created at the request of the BME professor at GT for his 6 engineering students preparing to participate in internships in Japan in summer 2020. This is part of a three-year project funded by the Nakatani Foundation. The class was offered on a non-credit basis to the students for 5 consecutive days in early May 2020, before the summer session/internship was supposed to begin. The author developed and taught the class with specific objectives in mind. The intention was that the students would gain basic linguistic knowledge and enhance their intercultural competence

in a way that would be applicable and useful from Day 1. It was also anticipated to ensure a smooth adjustment to their new environment and maximize their study abroad opportunity. Particularly, interacting with the host institution in Japan was intended to develop the relationship prior to their departure. Another intention was for the students to understand and appreciate their culture and that of others through this opportunity, which may offer them a life-long impact, by influencing their professional and personal growth.

Each lesson consisted of 2 hours of synchronous live instructions and peer activities using audio-visual based conference software called Adobe Connect. The students logged in from various locations in the US. The teaching materials were shown in the e-board as a focal point. For each class, a short lecture was given in the main room to present the learning point of the lesson, followed by students' practicing speaking Japanese in breakout rooms in pairs. Due to the intensive nature of the class with specific needs, the textbook, *Nihongo fun & easy: Survival Japanese conversation* (Ogata, et al., 2011), focusing on the very basic survival Japanese, was adopted, in which they can immediately put their knowledge into practice. *The Original point-and-speak phrase book: Japan* (Enomoto, 2001) was also used to illustrate a number of very frequently used daily conversational vocabulary listed with English translation and pictures. Each lesson focused on basic linguistic skill and cultural competence; however, grammatical explanations and character writing were minimized. For example, the lesson begins with a topic such as: self-introduction, hobbies, expressions of likes and dislikes, numbers, family and friends and their personality, asking how to get to places, how to shop and dine in, etc. It also assists students' raising their awareness of the pragmatic differences such as various speech styles, non-verbal communication (e.g., gestures, backchannelling), and dialectal differences, as some students were expected to have an internship outside Tokyo. Manners, customs, and the social system were also explained so that students will notice a difference in cultural expectations and avoid conflict. Various video clips about the Japanese cultures were introduced such as music videos popular in *karaoke*, *onsen* hot spring baths and *ryokan* Japanese style inns, festivals, Japanese street food, history and social issues, etc. There was one collaborative project on the final day to create a short video clip which summed up what they learned in the entire course. Written homework was optional, which was to complete worksheets including exercises and questions on grammar, listening, doing some research and reflecting on the Japanese culture comparing it with their own. Course materials other than the textbooks were posted in the shared asynchronous platform on Canvas provided by the school.

### **3. Video-conference**

Following the conclusion of the class, the author organized a three-hour video-conference collaboratively with a professor in the department of Applied Chemistry in the western region of

Japan, as one of the students was preparing to intern at his laboratory. With the author's request to organize a telecollaboration, the BME professor introduced her to the professor in Japan. It was agreed that such a virtual meeting would help them warm up to each other prior to the departure as the students' expressed their concern for living overseas for the first time where the primary language is not English. Due to the pandemic, it was timely to provide an opportunity for students to interact with their peers and learn from each other's life and culture without crossing a physical border. In August, this meeting finally took place, using the video conference software, Zoom despite a 13-hour time difference.

There were a total of 19 participants including graduate and undergraduate students, professors, and staff from both institutions. The event began with everyone's one-minute self-introduction in Japanese and in English. 9 students volunteered to prepare PowerPoint presentations to introduce various topics for 10 minutes in English (5 from Japanese university and 4 from GT). The topics were proposed by the organizers from each university in advance such as student life, the universities, research interest, the cities and their history and culture, the current situation with the COVID-19, etc. and each presenter chose the topic of their preference. The meeting was mediated by one of the student volunteers in Japan in English. A 10-minute breakout room session followed, having a direct student-student interaction.

#### **4. Survey data and results**

Three sets of survey data were collected on a voluntary basis at different points: at the beginning of the course in May (Survey 1), immediately after the course ended (Survey 2), and after the telecollaboration was held in August (Survey 3). The number of respondents varied between 3 and 5 per survey. The data were analyzed qualitatively, complemented by the author's observations as an instructor and developer of this class. Below is a brief summary of the results of each survey.

##### **4.1 Survey 1**

This survey asked questions to identify the students' experience with an additional language learning and intercultural communication. It also inquired about their expectations for the survival Japanese course and the internship. 5 students participated in the survey, showing they had some exposure to intercultural communication while their knowledge of Japanese language and culture was very limited. In a question asking their anticipated challenges during the internship in Japan, students expressed their concern of having little knowledge in the culture and the language to communicate. This included a very basic need such as ordering food. Another challenge that was identified is how to meet expectations as an intern and perform in a new environment. They expressed that the primary goal of this internship was gaining research skills in a university in Japan,

while having the opportunity to travel the country and experience something new.

#### **4.2 Survey 2**

The survey focused on the evaluation of the course and teaching. 5 students responded to the questions. They all strongly agreed or agreed that they learned a great deal in a short period of time. They also strongly agreed or agreed with the success of the instructor in creating an environment that was conducive to learning. Some comments included that good feedback was provided, participation was encouraged, the course helped them feel prepared, and the Adobe Connect worked well as a tool. They all strongly agreed that the course assisted them in understanding the basic language usage and some aspects of the culture including a deeper insight of the culture that they were not aware of before taking the class. For example, some commented on the aspects of the culture that interested them as they realized differences in the cultural norms, manners, and gestures. Students perceived that the strengths of the course were an active usage of breakout rooms where they were able to engage in dialogues with peers in a collaborative manner.

#### **4.3 Survey 3**

Three students from GT participated in this survey to assess students' experiences with the video-conference with the university in Japan. The results revealed that they all rated the event as positive or very positive. They found it as a unique educational opportunity to interact directly with students in Japan and learn from them, while one student mentioned that they wanted to have more "individual" time in the breakout room to get to know the peers from Japan. The perception towards the length of the presentation time varied; some thought it was too long and others thought it was too short. One student commented that what they learned would be helpful to prepare themselves when they will be in Japan. They all agreed that more events, collaborating with other universities would be welcomed in the future.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Overall, this synchronous online Japanese class was able to provide the students with a positive learning experience via technology. The course met the learners' expectations by teaching the basic language skills. Furthermore, they were able to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the often subtle cultural differences. The breakout room activities facilitated practicing their speaking with classmates. The video-conference provided a great opportunity for the students to gain a first-hand intercultural experience, interacting with their peers and professors in Japan without crossing the border in summer 2020. Even though the students were situated across the country, the technological tools mediated their interactions with classmates and facilitated their learning Japanese.

## 6. References

Enomoto, T. (2001). *The Original point-and-speak phrase book: Japan*. Joho Center Publishing.

Ogata, Y., Sumitani, K., Hidarai, Y., & Watanabe, Y. (2009). *Nihongo fun & easy: Survival Japanese conversation*. Ask Publishing Co., Ltd.