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How to make 2FLs last: Learner Oriented German Materials

Marius Albers

(Researcher at Ehime University, Faculty of Law and Letters, Dept. of Humanities)

Abstract

One main characteristic of effective textbooks is that they concern the learners and their needs and interests. Although every year a considerable amount of new textbooks are published for the ever shrinking German as 2FL market in Japan, few take this requirement into account. This contribution presents an approach which starts from the beginning learners and aims at producing 2FL German teaching materials optimally oriented along the learners' interests in all their parts .

In particular, part one will explain the background and realm of the project, part two demonstrates attempts at finding out the learners' needs and interests, part three presents early results and applications, and part four outlines future tasks.

Introduction

Since April 2014 I have been a researcher at Ehime University, Matsuyama, Japan, and my topic is:

“Learner Oriented German Materials”.

- What expectations do Japanese learners have towards German teaching materials? – The quest is: With which contents and how do Japanese learners want to learn German? Presently, I am in the middle of my research and in this report I present a pre-study with a poll in one class. There are nine answers already, but only for testing purposes. My goal is to get at least 200 answers in this web-based survey. The survey proper will be conducted in June 2014. First I will give a brief overview of my research and motivation, before I refer to the educational background and socialization system as well as the learning culture, especially in Japan. Finally, I will present the survey questions, my expectations, and initial results.

My research targets Japanese learners, who are in the process of learning or have learned German at some stage in their life. Basically, I'm going to make a survey about teaching materials to be used in class. It also includes all aspects of learning a language (for example not only grammar or communications skills). Furthermore, I also want to find out whether the learning materials for Japanese learners should be different from those for e.g. Western learners. What I'm going to do is not to compare learners from different countries or different cultural backgrounds, but I focus on the needs, interests and expectations of Japanese learners of German, as far as their German teaching materials are concerned.

Why am I doing this research? I want to find out whether Japanese learners, who are living in Japan, are learning differently from learners in other settings, and what and how they basically want to learn. Therefore my goal is to be able to make recommendations for what German teaching materials for use in Japan should include, which didactical tools are to be used and where the focus should be.

As one result of this study I want to be able to distinguish between the expectations from the view of different groups, ages and aims. (For example, it could be the case that young learners are willing to play boardgames during lessons while older learner may not make sense of them. At that, advanced learners may have different expectations and wishes than beginners).

Theoretical background

According to several writers, Japan's educational system is until today influenced by Confucian philosophy. There, people belonged to groups and did not define themselves as individuals (Mohry et al., 2007: 70; Tomoda, 2000: 138). In present day Japan, we can still notice a high level of harmony and loyalty. The idea of Christianity and the western world on the other hand sees problems as individual personal matters. Everybody is responsible for himself.

A further proof of the differences between Japanese and Western socialization can be seen in the upbringing process. While a Japanese baby watches and tries to imitate his mother, the idea of Western parents is to give their babies space to try things out. They should be confronted with challenges (Tomoda, Shunzô 2000: 135f). In Germany, for example, school ends at noon and during the afternoon children are free to play, except for the albeit copious homework. In Japan, the whole day is organized by the school. This means that we can basically assume that Japanese learners have a different learning-culture which we should take into account when producing teaching material.

Method

Which method will I use for my survey? My study employs an internet-based survey, because this is cheap and the chance to reach a considerable amount of participants is high. I decided to use mainly closed instead of open questions. One main advantage is that closed questions are faster and easier to score and analyze. Of course there are many disadvantages, too. For example, the respondent may not identify himself with the given answers (Schumann, 2006:52ff). Therefore, in a few questions it is possible to add an answer. For example „What kind of learner type are you?“. There could be other learner types than those mentioned. In a few questions I also used an evaluation or assessment table. For example, for the question:”Which teaching method do you like?”, the respondent can choose in every part between „yoi to omou” “yes I like” and „yokunai to omou” “no I don't like”. The survey will be conducted only in Japanese.

Questions, Expectations and Results

My survey starts with a few basic questions about age and gender, followed by “where do you learn German?” Choices include: At university, private school, in self study, at the Goethe Institute, or other public institution. Next is “why do you learn German?” offering choices such as “For work, traveling, hobby, for university” and, “I want to use it later for work” or “for university because I had to choose a second foreign language (but later I

didn't care). These two questions allow choosing more than one answer and entering other reasons. The final question in this part is: Which level are you? Beginner, somewhat advanced, advanced, or higher level (beginⁿ, shoky^u, ch^uky^u and jouky^u). After these basic questions I go into more detail.

What kind of learner type are you? As I want to find out how Japanese learners learn. I give the respondents choices between „musical-rhythm“, „visual-spatial“, „physical and movement-related“, „intrapersonal“ and „interpersonal“ learner types (Arnold 2007: 14f). With even the garbage explanation and the dentist flyer full of visual explanations, the Japanese society is not only influenced, but inundated by manga and anime. My expectation would be that due to this manga- and anime-inundated character of the society, it could be the case that many respondents choose „visual-spatial learner type“. Also the intrapersonal learner type, which is somebody who is rather working alone, thinks a lot and intensively, might fit to plenty of Japanese respondents. (The opposite is the „interpersonal learner type“: A person who is talkative, likes to learn in groups and is skillful in convincing others). As my test survey shows my expectations were fulfilled. Both „visual-spatial (3 clicks)“ and „intrapersonal learner type (5 clicks)“ were chosen most. At this question, more than one answer was possible. The results may could be quite different when in the survey proper a few hundred persons will take part.

Which teaching method do you like?

The respondent had to choose between „yes I like“ and „no, I don't like“ (evaluation or assessment table-question). „Teacher centered teaching“, „working alone during lesson“, „group work“ or „partner work“? Unexpectedly, with five „yoi to omoimasu“ , „group work“ was the most desired teaching method. „Teacher centered teaching“ still seems to be welcome. Especially at this question it is difficult to tell a tendency because of only 9 participants. Nobody chose „no I don't like“ in any of the categories.

Which contents in teaching materials is most important?

„Grammar“, „Vocabulary“, „Communication“, „Reading“, „Writing“ or „Listening“? (only one answer is possible).

Basically, my expectation is that „Grammar“ is the most favorable choice. The reason is that Japanese learners don't want to make mistakes and therefore they learn grammar first very intensively. At least that is what I have been told by many Japanese. On the other hand I thought, If asked specifically, many Japanese might say that they want to learn

„Communication“. Also, in this question, the age difference and the difference between the aim why Japanese learn German, might influence the answer. Another interesting point is that there seem to be some Japanese, who only learn a language because they want to be able to read a book. In that case the answer „Reading“ should be the priority

In summary, I think we can see a kind of tendency in the results. Although, or, for that matter, because, in English high-school classes „Communication“ is not much in use, the respondents want „Communication“ tasks (67%) in teaching materials and likewise in the German class. „Grammar“ (11%) and „Vocabulary“ (22%) were also among the answers.

How high a percentage of grammar tasks and grammar explanations do you think is necessary in teaching material?

„Less than 20“, between „20 and 40“, „40-60“, „60-80“ or „over 80“ percent. When I compared the teaching materials produced in Germany and those produced in Japan I found an unequal higher percentage of grammar in the Japanese ones. Since there are not many answers yet, it is difficult to say something about the result. But at least 50 percent of the respondents said that half of the material should be grammar („40-60“). That is an impressive amount. None of the participants think that over 60 percent grammar are necessary.

Do you think group work is necessary?

Seven people said „Yes“, two said „No“. The respondents who said „Yes“ were lead to the next question.

How often would you like to do group work? „Every week“, „Every month“ or only „Sometimes“. I expected not much approval for group work. However, we can see among the persons who said yes that over half of them are willing to do group work regularly every week (57%). This result is surprising indeed.

Since board games are very common when teaching foreign languages, I further ask "Do you think games should be included in learning materials?" I also give some examples like *shiritori*. Surprisingly, everybody said „Yes“. In case of „No“. they would have been asked why not. The answers to choose from are: „With games it is not possible to learn“, „Games are no fun“ or the respondent can write something else. The next question was: How often do you want to play? „Only once or twice in one semester“ or „Regularly“ were the given answers to this attached question. I expect that not many

students want to play regularly. But at least a few do (33%). Most of the respondents did choose „Only once or twice in one semester“.

Intermediate Conclusion

My first recommendation for producing German teaching material is: Take into consideration that Japanese students are often visual-spatial and intrapersonal learner types. That means they usually have a distinctive spatial sense and they might learn with symbols and pictures more effectively than only with written vocabularies. My recommendation for German teaching material to be used in Japan is therefore to use symbols, charts, advertising, maps or even cartoons. To tell a story supported by pictures is also a good way to go. In the case of the intrapersonal learner type this might be difficult because as we found out group work and communication is also appreciated very much.

Since Japanese young students are not used to criticize and to challenge something, It might be wise not to shock them in the first chapter of a book for beginners. The socialization and the learning-culture is different from Western approaches, especially on the high school level. This means that group work, games or communication tasks where students are forced to use a considerable amount of creativity might be difficult and not reasonable.

It is also advisable to avoid underestimating grammar, since at the question about grammar tasks and grammar explanations half of the respondents said 40 to 60 percent of the class content should be grammar. Last but not least games might be more welcome than one might think. Also mind that all the respondents in this test run were between 19 and 22 years of age. Older learners may refuse.

At this point it might be too early to claim a relationship between young/old, male/female, university students/students at private schools and so on and their different wishes, needs and expectations concerning German teaching materials. For example, respondents who learn German for traveling or hobby might choose communication rather than grammar. Another example is that older learners might not be willing to play boardgames. In the study proper, which should yield a few hundred answers, I will try to establish relationships between age, sex and aim with the questions above.

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