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Teaching and Learning the Japanese Language

Over the years, language teaching has evolved, dependent largely on the needs and demands of the learners and influenced by the teaching situation, such as the curriculum design. There are several methods and approaches in teaching and learning a language, whether as a first or second language. With this is mind, this paper looks into the current teaching of the Japanese language. The main objective of this paper is to determine the common approach used in teaching the language. The analysis is based on an examination of three textbooks available online. Observations gleaned from the analysis is then validated using theories and studies on Japanese language teaching and learning.

The following table presents a comparison of textbooks on five aspects, namely: chapter format, number of vocabulary words, number of kanju characters, type of grammar exercises and the topics/situations used to illustrate the grammatical lessons.

Table 1: Comparison of Textbooks on the Teaching of Japanese Language

Textbook	Level	Chapter Format	Vocab	Kanji	Type of Grammar Exercises	Topics/Situation
Japanese for Everyone (JFE)	N4*	Dialogue, vocab list, Grammar functions with exercises, reading comprehension, listening comprehension	2500	450	Variety of exercises. Describe pictures, answer questions, partner dialogues, fill-in-the-blank, reading comp, listening comp.	Husband and wife go to Japan for business
Genki I & II	N4*	Dialogue, vocab list, grammar, exercises, culture note, useful expressions, kanji list	1700	317	Answer questions, describe pictures, translate, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, conversation with a partner.	School focus
Minna no Nihongo (Shokyuu I & II)	N4*	Textbook: Drills with sentence patterns, reading/listening comprehension, pairwork with partners. Workbook: fill-in-the-blank, answer questions about pictures, complete the sentence, etc	1980	518	Drills with sentence patterns, reading/listening comprehension, pairwork with partners. Fill-in-the-blank, answer questions about pictures, complete the sentence, etc	Various useful situations

Reference: *Comparison of Japanese Textbooks Table* . Accessed 29 September 2016 from http://rtkwiki.koohii.com/wiki/Comparison_of_Japanese_Textbooks_Table

*N4 Indicates that in **reading,** one is able to read and understand passages on familiar daily topics written in basic vocabulary and kanji. In **listening**, one is able to listen and comprehend conversations encountered in daily life and generally follow their contents, provided that they are spoken slowly.

As shown in Table 1, Japanese language textbooks have common components and features such as the vocabulary words and kanji characters. Grammatical lessons are emphasized through exercises and drills. The four macro-skills are also developed given that the exercises and activities include listening, speaking, writing, and reading components. The main contrast is found in the topics or language situation used. In these particular examples, the range of communication varied from the school, family (husband and wife dynamics), to a diverse range of topics.

The examples above indicate that the communicative language teaching (CLT) is commonly used in Japanese language classrooms. The popularity of CLT as a teaching approach is evidenced by the proliferation of western publications on Japanese language teaching as the one below.
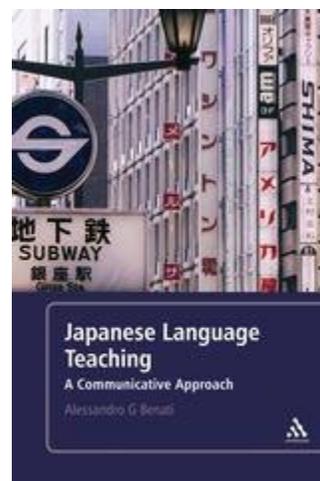
Several publications document the extent of the use of CLT in language teaching. What is communicative language teaching? Brandl (2008) reports that:

> Communicative language teaching (CLT) or task-based approach is generally regarded as an approach to language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001). As such, CLT reflects a certain model or research paradigm, or a theory (Celce Murcia 2001). It is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication. Its primary goal is for learners to develop communicative competence (Hymes 1971), or simply put, communicative ability. In other words, its goal is to make use of real-life situations that necessitate communication.

The Japanese textbooks showcased in this paper suggest the extensive use of the communicative approach of language teaching. There is marked evidence of the fundamentals for Japanese-language teaching such as promoting the spoken language through a separate frequency lists of vocabulary and grammatical structures for different target groups, exercise design for communication-orientated courses, etc. These features that are common in the textbooks analyzed in this paper strongly indicate the principles of CLT.

Although quite popular, the Communicative Language Teaching CLT or a task-based approach is, however, not a panacea to language teaching. There are numerous challenges to making communicative language teaching happen. These issues have to do with the choice of content, context, specific skill areas (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, etc.), and particular learning tasks that determine a curriculum. Table 1 shows that in the case of Japanese language teaching, different textbooks use a variety of topics and communicative situations, which may contribute largely to promoting language learning on one end or in limiting the scope and language experience of the learners, on the other. Because of this, research shows there is growing demand for other alternative approaches in teaching the Japanese language. One example is The Interactive Competence Approach advocated by J.V. Neustupny (1989) from Monash University in Australia. The author introduces the concept of "Japan literacy" as a broad framework for the discipline of Japanese-language teaching. Neustupny argued that there is a radical need to introduce more concern for sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence. The second major component of the approach requires that activities used in the process of teaching include a considerable number of "authentic use" (performance) situations along with "interpretations" (explanations) and "exercises".

References

Brandl, K. (2008). *Communicative Language Teaching in Action: Putting Principles to Work*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

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Hymes, D. (1971), ''On Communicative Competence'' in C.J. Brumfit & K. Johnson (eds*): The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (1981),* Oxford: OUP.

Richards, J. C. & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge University Press