

Learning Japanese Online for Hawaii Retail Sales

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Abstract: Over 25% of the customers of a particular Hawaii-based clothing retail company are from Japan. Surprisingly, only a handful of staff can speak conversational Japanese. The participants of this study were retail store staff members that interact with Japanese customers on a daily basis. Meeting synchronously face-to-face for a language class is very difficult because these participants have sporadic business schedules. Therefore, a website was created incorporating definitions, audio files, recording tools, screencasts, flash games, and quizzes to help reinforce learning and cater to various learning styles. Surveys indicated that the majority of participants gave high scores to the content and found it to be interesting, engaging, and motivational. However, some participants claimed to experience technical difficulties with audio and web forms. Despite the challenges, the majority showed an increase in scores progressing from pre-test to post-test. The purpose of this instructional design project was to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of a web-based module teaching Japanese phrases to Hawaii retail sales associates and managers who interact with Japanese customers.

Introduction

Asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) enables language learners to actively engage in interactions with a wider range of individuals who take part in a conversation because the interactions are both place-independent and time-independent. Also, the unique interactional features of ACMC are considered to facilitate second language (L2) learning (Kitade, 2008). This clothing retail company had a need for some form of ACMC resource for learning Japanese. In the stores of this company, it was observed first-hand the minimal interaction that transpires between native Japanese customers and store staff. When speaking with the employees, many stated that the company offered a Japanese language class that met synchronously face-to-face sometime in the late 80's. However, due to very busy schedules and the inconvenience of having to meet together for a specific period of time, employees lost interest and participation diminished. There is a desire to learn Japanese, but the hassle of having to meet synchronously face-to-face and time inconvenience are the challenges to overcome. Therefore, an online asynchronous learning resource was created. This instructional design project focuses on the development and evaluation of a web-based module that teaches Japanese phrases to the staff of a clothing retail company in Hawaii.

Background

The frequency that learners use online supplementary materials has an effect on their positive perception of the educational value of the tools. This frequency is determined by requirements, learners' attitudes, their ability to use online tools, and their access to computers (Moore, 2010). With these concepts in mind, it is important when designing a form of ACMC to incorporate learning tools that stimulate as many of the cognitive senses as possible while ensuring that there is access to simpler user-friendly tools that the majority of learners will be familiar with. Learning styles include tactile, textual, verbal, audio, and visual types.

Network-Based Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been implemented since the early 1990's. Researchers reported that participation in CALL led to improved discourse management skills as the learners took responsibility for their own learning (Yoshitomi, 2006). Speaking and listening are at the heart of most people's foreign language learning. An open source course management system (CMS) or Learning Management System (LMS) used for language learning called *Moodle* makes it easy to practice speaking by allowing students to identify sounds that they need to use. Many institutions use *Moodle* to conduct online courses (Stanford, 2009).

On the website www.japanese-lesson.com, there is a basic conversation course that is full of audio recordings of native speakers. Embedded quizzes allow learners to review content by clicking on the audio of a Japanese phrase and then choosing the correct text translation in English (2008).

The instructional design module incorporated similar tools and techniques from these sources in order to create content that teaches Japanese phrases that are most specific to the merchandise, environment, and protocol of this specific clothing retail company.

Methods

In Figure 1, you can see a list of Gagne's Nine Events (Kilpatrick, 2001) that were used to evaluate what method and tools would be used to create the instructional module.

Figure 1. Gagne's Nine Events

- 1) Gain Attention – Interactive tools & imagery
- 2) Inform Learners of Objectives – Objectives listed at beginning of the 3 sections
- 3) Stimulate recall of prior learning – Flash game reviews previous information
- 4) Present the content – Weebly & Google Forms – Weebly formats for mobile devices
- 5) Provide learning guidance – Screencasts describe grammar / Audio links for listening
- 6) Elicit performance (practice) – Online recording tool Vocaroo
- 7) Provide Feedback – Flash games provide feedback for non-examples and examples
- 8) Assess Performance – Google Forms for gathering results / Answer key provided
- 9) Enhance retention and transfer to the job – All Interactive tools are utilized

The participants in this study consisted of store staff members (i.e., sales associates, supervisors, managers, and area managers) of a Hawaii-based clothing retail company. The learners have limited to no knowledge of Japanese language. The learners were adults 18 years and older and over. They were capable of operating a computer, viewing graphics, reading, understanding English, and hearing audio files. The learners enjoyed conversing with people, interacting with tourists from various countries, and encountering many Japanese visitors. They were hesitant to talk to Japanese visitors and/or wanted to interact with Japanese visitors in hopes that sales will increase and job security will be stabilized. Convenience of learning is very important to the learners. Since the learners needed to focus on making sales at work, a website was created using an online web tool called *Weebly* to allow learners to study during breaks and after work hours.

The module's lessons were divided into three sections on useful Japanese phrases to use when conversing with Japanese customers: 1) Creating Comfort, 2) Describing Merchandise, and 3) Handling Numbers. Other tools that were used to create elements of the module: *Google Docs*' forms to create surveys and tests, *Garageband* to create audio links. *Vocaroo* to record a user's voice, *Screenr* to create screencasts (video tutorials), and *Adobe Flash* to create interactive games that chunk content and review examples and non-examples. In Figure 2 below, we see a sample of some of the content in the activities. The blue links denote audio links that can be clicked to hear the pronunciation of words. The blue texts are all in Japanese. Next to those links are the English translations.

Figure 2. Activity Content

Click the blue links below for audio pronunciation

Activity #4 - Describing Types of Clothes

Different types of clothes:

[Dansei no fuku](#) - Men's clothes
[Josei no fuku](#) - Women's clothes
[Kodomo no fuku](#) - Children's clothes
[Nagasode](#) - Long-sleeves
[Hansode](#) - Short-sleeves
[Shatsu](#) - Shirts
[Mizugi](#) - Swim wear
[Boshi / Kyappu](#) - Hats / Caps
[Jaketto](#) - Jackets
[Zubon / Pantu](#) - Pants
[Shoto Pantu](#) - Shorts
[Sukaato](#) - Skirts
[Doresu](#) - Dresses



Other useful phrases:

[Doozo kite kudasai](#) - Go ahead. Please put it on (your body). (Used when customer is putting on shirts, jackets, and garments for the torso)
[Doozo kabutte kudasai](#) - Go ahead. Please put it on (your head). (Used when customer is putting on hats, caps, or other head gear)
[Doozo haite kudasai](#) - Go ahead. Please put it on (your lower body). (Used when customer is putting on pants, shorts, and more)
[Sore wa pittari desu](#) - That looks perfect on you.
[Maa maa desu ne](#) - It kind of looks ok. Could be better. (Only use with friends)
[Kore wa doo desu ka?](#) - How about this one?

Through mass emails sent to 23 retail stores located in Hawaii, the subjects received links to access the web-module. There are approximately 90 staff members at the retail stores

of this clothing company. Although not all members were able to participate, the goal was to get at least 20 subjects to participate. The Vice President of Merchandising and Sales was a change agent that has approved this project. This was the catalyst to motivate the staff in stores to go through the module. The pre-test, embedded tests, and post-test were used to measure the effectiveness of the module. The module was designed so subjects can complete all lessons and questions in 7 to 20 hours. The entire module had 16 sections with 10 activities that included embedded quizzes for participants to complete and 2 activities that are Flash Games that review the content learned but were not required to complete. Table 1 shows the different sections of this module.

Table 1. 16 sections for Japanese Online Learning Module

16 Sections	
1. Demographic Survey	9. Activity #6 - Colors
2. Pre-Test	10. Activity #7 - Beneficial Features
CHUNK #1 - Creating Comfort	CHUNK #3 - Handling Numbers
3. Activity #1 - Welcoming Guests	11. Activity #8 - Counting 0 - 10000
4. Activity #2 - Showing Gratitude	12. Activity #9 - Money Exchange
5. Activity #3 - Giving Directions	13. Activity #10 - Sales and Store Hours
CHUNK #2 - Describing Merchandise	14. Flash Game Review (Activities #6-10)
6. Activity #4 - Types of Clothing	15. Post-Test
7. Activity #5 - Sizes	16. Attitudinal Survey
8. Flash Game Review (Activities #1-5)	Thank you for participating

There was a demographic survey at the beginning of the module and an attitudinal survey at the very end of the module that helped to gather demographic information, anecdotal data, comments on the experience, and suggestions on how to improve the module. Although the ID web-module was designed for asynchronous learning and did not record and test the learners' ability to speak, the learners' ability to retain, listen, and recognize Japanese phrases was tested. This is important when engaging in conversation with foreign customers. Participants were given a total of 5 weeks to complete the entire module. They were asked to submit their own code names so their identity was confidential yet their progress was traceable. Because they were not supervised, they completed all quizzes and tests without cheating based on their honor. Pre-Test and Post Test contained 40 questions each with 4 questions covering each of the 10 activities listed in Table 1. Ten embedded quizzes reviewed all of the 40 questions from the Pre-Test and were divided amongst the 10 activities. Post-Test questions were different from Pre-Test. The instructional module is online at <http://japaneseforcrazyshirts.weebly.com>.

Results

Twenty-four volunteers signed up. Eighteen started the module. Eleven completed the module entirely. One volunteered did not follow instructions and claimed that technical issues were to blame. This left 10 participants that completed the module from beginning

to end. In Table 2 there are participants' percentage point scores from Pre-Test to Post-Test. Participants were allowed to take the module at their own convenience within the 5-week period. Therefore the "Time Span" denoted not the total amount of time spent taking the module, but how much time passed from starting the module to completing the module.

According to the "Score Difference" in Table 2 which measures the percentage difference going from Pre-Test to Post-Test, out of 10 students 6 showed improvement, 2 students stayed the same, and 2 students performed a little worse. The average score of the pre-test was 66%. That average score increased to 77% in the post-test. This would indicate some sort of progress while going through the module. There was no connection between time span (elapsed time to complete the test) and score values. For example, in Table 2 participants Volunteer 4, Volunteer 8, and Volunteer 10 all had a 336-hour time span. But their Score Differences varied greatly progressing from Pre-Test to Post-Test. (Volunteer 4 had +12%, Volunteer 8 had +33%, and Volunteer 10 had -5%). Several participants had great improvements: Volunteer 1 had +28%, Volunteer 7 had +25%, and Volunteer 8 had +33%. Although Volunteer 10 score dropped 5%, she scored a 90% in the Pre-Test and an 85% in the Post-Test. This probably means that she already had good knowledge of Japanese basic language, but was not necessarily familiar with the new material taught in the module. In a face-to-face conversation with Volunteer 10, she indicated that she did study Japanese language for the company when they first had the language program. However, this online module covered topics that she never learned before. She appreciated that.

Table 2. Test Scores and Time Relapsed (Quantitative Data – Progress from Pre to Post)

Code Name	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Score Difference	Time Span
Volunteer 1	70%	98%	+28%	5 hours
Volunteer 2	68%	65%	-3%	72 hours
Volunteer 3	65%	73%	+8%	2 hours
Volunteer 4	58%	70%	+12%	336 hours
Volunteer 5	75%	88%	+13%	72 hours
Volunteer 6	75%	75%	0%	5 hours
Volunteer 7	50%	75%	+25%	3 hours
Volunteer 8	40%	73%	+33%	336 hours
Volunteer 9	70%	70%	0%	72 hours
Volunteer 10	90%	85%	-5%	336 hours
	average=66%	average=77%	average= +11%	

Note. Values represent percentage of points scored (correct answers / total questions)

Table 3 below shows qualitative data. The 10 participants were asked to make comments on what were their most favorite components of the module, their least favorite component, and suggestions for improvement. Only 7 of the 10 participants completed the attitudinal survey and submitted comments. According to Table 3 below, games

appears 3 times in the column of most favorite components. The least favorite components and suggestions for improvements were all different amongst the individual participants.

Table 3 Attitudinal Survey Comments (Qualitative Data - Positive vs. Negative)

Code Name	Most Favorite	Least Favorite	Suggestions
Volunteer 1	Audio/Recording	Nothing	Ability to submit questions
Volunteer 2	Games	Nothing	Need to do this activity regularly
Volunteer 3	Informative	Codename on every page	Inputting codename was a hassle
Volunteer 4	X	X	X
Volunteer 5	X	X	X
Volunteer 6	Casual	No immediate test results	Instant results of tests/quizzes needed
Volunteer 7	Games/Quizzes	Audio unclear	Need toned spelling of words as well
Volunteer 8	Colorful/Games	Time limits stressful	Few typos
Volunteer 9	Self-paced	Too much content	Need to break up content more
Volunteer 10	X	X	X

Note. “X” means that no comments were made

Although the games were given a lot of positive comments in the attitudinal survey, the Likert scale for ranking the effectiveness of tools (screencasts, games, audio tools, tests/quizzes) showed that games accumulated the lowest total score while the screencasts scored the highest total score as indicated in Table 4 below. The Likert Scale allowed users to assign tools a ranking of 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The “Total Points” column indicates the total amount of points accumulated from rankings selected by participants.

Table 4. Effective Web Module Tools (Total Likert Scale Scores)

Tool	Description	Total Points
	<p>Screencast made via Screenr.com allowed an individual to record a 5-minute video by recording the user’s voice and actions taking place on the desktop simultaneously. The participants used screencasts as instructional videos.</p>	<p>28</p>

 <p>Powered by Vocaroo</p>	<p>Audio links allowed participants to listen for proper pronunciation. The Vocaroo voice-recording tool can record a user's voice and play it back. This tool allowed a user to practice pronunciation of Japanese phrases and make sure they were saying words correctly.</p>	<p>27</p>
<p>Quiz #1 Embedded Quiz #1 - Welcoming Guests Choose the most accurate answers to these multiple choice questions: * Required What is your CODE NAME? * (**You must use the SAME CODE NAME for ALL quizzes and tests) <input type="text"/> 1) What is the English translation for "irashaimase"? * <input type="radio"/> Please come again <input type="radio"/> Good bye <input type="radio"/> See you later <input type="radio"/> Welcome 2) What is the Japanese translation for "Please take your time"? * <input type="radio"/> O-geruki desu ka <input type="radio"/> Okagesama de <input type="radio"/> Doozo go-yukkuri <input type="radio"/> Doozo-goran ni natte kudasai 3) What is the Japanese translation for "I am good"? * <input type="radio"/> Watashi wa genki desu yo <input type="radio"/> Okagesama de <input type="radio"/> Yokoso... Kochira e <input type="radio"/> Doozo goran ni natte kudasai</p>	<p>Quizzes and Tests were designed in Google Docs. The embed html codes were copied and pasted into the Weebly Site. These tests and quizzes tested the participants' ability to recognize Japanese phrases and their English translations through multiple-choice questions. The results were recorded in a form that can be viewed by the user.</p>	<p>26</p>
	<p>2 flash games created to test learners' ability to recognize content from activities 1-5 and then 6-10. The goal of the first game was to diffuse a bomb by answering the questions correctly. In the second game, the participants were required to open a trap door by picking the proper translations. Examples and Non-Examples were reviewed.</p>	<p>25</p>

Challenges and Implications for Discussion

Communication with participants was a challenge because it was all done on email. No face-to-face interaction took place between the tester and subjects. Participants were worked in the retail stores and did not necessarily check their emails everyday. The workplace was very dynamic and fast-paced. Emails may have gotten lost in the foray of information that gets passed from senders to receivers. Also, participants work schedules were unknown so exactly when they would receive information about the instructional module was also unknown.

Another challenge was motivation and incentive. Additional extrinsic incentives (i.e., recognition, rewards, grades, etc.) were not provided to motivate the participants. There

was only the intrinsic value of learning Japanese to communicate with Japanese customers in an effort to increase sales and increase job stability.

There were originally 24 volunteers that agreed to participate. But only 18 participants started the module with the demographic survey at the very beginning. From those 18 participants, 11 continued the module to the very end. These 11 participants consisted of 8 store managers, 1 assistant manager, 1 area manager, and 1 supervisor. These employees' job security is based on the amount of sales that they generate in the store. Therefore they would be motivated to perform better by learning how to communicate with Japanese customers. It is unknown exactly why the other 13 volunteers did not follow through. Factors could be that their positions are not directly affected by generated store sales. Also, communication through email may not have been the most effective method.

A possible major factor for the decrease in participants would be the timing of the module testing. Participants were given 5 weeks to complete the module from December to January. Holiday season was assumed to be a time when volunteers would have more free time to complete the module. However, the majority of the volunteers that initially signed up were managers and supervisors. These people are not allowed to take the holidays off because it is the busiest time of the year for retail. Volunteer 8 made this comment in the attitudinal survey: "Time limit to complete was a bit stressful. Starting during holidays was not a good idea." Therefore, based on this data, the timing as to when participants are more readily available should have been researched in more detail and taken into greater consideration.

Only 1 participant actually did not follow directions and did not complete all quizzes and tests. Some participants claimed that Google forms were not working properly and did not send the information submitted. When used by other participants, the Google forms worked fine. Further investigation was done and it is speculated that the participants' computer model in the store was very archaic and did not have good audio to listen to the audio links in the instructional module.

According to the surveys, the overall grade submitted by participants was a B for the instructional module with a total of 2 A's, 3 B's, and 2 C's submitted by the 7 participants that completed the attitudinal survey. Content was viewed as being very informative and effective.

When analyzing the demographics of participants and their results, there were no relevant connections between characteristics or skill level and performance. Results varied among all 10 participants that completed the module.

Conclusion

Ten participants completed the module entirely. There was an 11% average increase in scores going from Pre-Test to Post-Test. The Pre-Test average score was 66% and the Post-Test average score was 77%. This would indicate that the instructional module was

able to teach relevant Japanese phrases and increase participants' knowledge and retention to a small degree. Among all 10 participants, Brady12 obtained the highest post-test score 98%. Brady12 said that the favorite content of the module was the audio and recording tools. The designers of *Moodle* incorporate sound identification for their users in order for more effective language practice (Stanford, 2009).

Although the convenience of having an asynchronous, non-face-to-face web module is highly valued by the participants, conclusions about its effectiveness cannot be drawn by the results of this instructional module. Further research should be conducted by adding some synchronous and face-to-face elements in the instructional module to see if participants actually perform better. Also, adding more extrinsic incentives such as bonuses or recognition by superior executives for participation may increase participation and performance results.

Asynchronous online interactions lack the exchanges of offline peer dialogues that are needed to create and maintain prompt comprehensible responses and learning through repetition (Kitade, 2008). This could be the reason why many volunteers dropped out from using the module because of the lack of human interaction.

The timing of when to test the module seemed to be a significant factor in this study. Testers should do more in-depth research with their volunteers and find a time that is most convenient for testing.

Future instructors and instructional designers that are creating a language course can use these results. Ideally, a language course would be more effective with a hybrid curriculum of face-to-face and online learning. But when confronted with the challenge of learners unable to meet synchronously as in this study, an instructional designer must consider additional methods of motivating the learners with incentives because of the lack of human interaction to promote learning through immediate feedback from an instructor and immediate responses from fellow learners.

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