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# **The Use of English in Beginner-Level Japanese Instruction —Learning Essential Japanese 1 through a Medium other than the L2—**

Nestor SERRANO

## **1. Introduction**

The direct method, introduced and established in England in 1900s as opposed to the Grammar-translation method, has obtained great success in language teaching. With the direct method, second-language teaching should be conducted without the intermediary of the maternal tongue.<sup>1</sup> It was first applied in French middle schools and achieved to build up students' communication skills. Scholars favoring the direct method believed that listening and speaking are the two main skills of learning a language, that grammar should be taught inductively, and that correct pronunciation is important enough that teachers should attach importance to phonology.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the success in middle schools, teachers and scholars are still drawing back from wholly embracing the direct method in language classes fearing a lack of thorough comprehension and precision of expression. Universities, especially, were faced many difficulties when applying the direct method, considering that the goals of language training in universities were to produce literacy and philological scholars. Nevertheless, the direct method had influenced a great many teachers and scholars and universities started to realize the importance of communicative skills in language learning. Nowadays, we can see many universities, though mainly holding on to the traditional method of teaching, include speaking classes in the syllabus. In some universities, taking Keio University as an example, language courses are divided into several sections according to the skill sets: the comprehensive class, the speaking class, the listening class, and the writing class.

There are many distinct advantages of solely using the target language (L2) in foreign language instruction, such as more direct exposure to the language in an authentic environment and a better perception of the grammar used in the target

language since grammar is learned inductively. As with any method, however, the direct method also has some drawbacks. A heavier reliance on oral skills may make it harder for some students who have not developed strong auditory skills, or who have stronger visual abilities. Additionally, some abstract concepts that may be familiar to those from one culture may not be as obvious for those of other cultures, making it harder to comprehend certain aspects of a language. Overall, it may still be considered an effective practice due to the immersive aspect that gives students a chance to really surround themselves with the Japanese language.

In contrast to this method, however, is a more indirect approach which uses an intermediary language to aid in the instruction of the L2. With this style of instruction, students are able to grasp concepts in a manner that is more familiar to them and can therefore digest the information more readily. Students can also gain access to more information since they can register all of the information faster in a language that they are more comfortable using. Students also have the added opportunity of expressing their own emotions and opinions better to both the teacher and the rest of the classroom since their communication would be limited due to their beginner-level proficiency in the L2. Using a language other than the L2 comes at a cost, however, because students will be given less exposure to the L2. They may also fall under the trap of translating in their minds from their mother tongue to Japanese, rather than think in Japanese itself. This method may be considered effective for those who are weak with languages or who are interested in fully dissecting the grammar patterns.

While this indirect method is not prevalent at this institution, it has been my method of choice when teaching the “Essential Japanese 1” courses here at Keio University. My reasons for doing so involve a variety of factors which I will explain as I outline what the classes entailed.

## **2. The Direct Method**

### **2-1. Keio University**

The direct method is one of several means of providing foreign language instruction and is presently the method of choice at Keio University. A possible reason for this decision is the demographics of the students. As all of the students are coming from countries all over the world, there are no commonalities between them that can unify them into one distinct group. The students are from various different cultures with many different backgrounds and can speak all types of lan-

guages. If an L1 other than Japanese was used, it would put some students at more of a disadvantage than others and the level of understanding may vary among students. It would thus be more appropriate to use Japanese in order to level the field for all of the students.

Another reason for adopting this method is to allow students to make the most out of their Japanese experience. The students have limited access to the most valuable resource that Japan has to offer: native Japanese speakers. A majority of students are only able to be in Japan for a semester or two, as they have other obligations such as the completion of their studies at their home institution or career advancement. Therefore, class time should also be spent using as much of the L2 as they possibly can, being that it is essential to have authentic experiences as often as possible. The direct method also gives students the opportunity to enforce the grammar that they already learned, as well as learn new phrases that can be used situationally. Additionally, students get the added benefit of witnessing Japanese culture first-hand.

The skill set of the teachers are also an important factor in the use of the direct method. The main strength of the professors here at the university are their vast knowledge of the Japanese language. It is quite a difficult task to understand the differences between foreign languages and Japanese, so incorporating another language into Japanese instruction can bring about additional confusion that would be less likely to occur among students with the direct method. It is also more efficient to train teachers using the direct method because it doesn't require that the teachers familiarize themselves with other languages in order to teach. The teachers can fine tune a skill that they already have a great deal of experience with, rather than one that takes more time to acquire.

Another advantage of using the direct method is preventing students from translating from their mother tongue to Japanese. Since Japanese grammar has very distinct characteristics including a unique sentence order and agglutinative conjugations, it is often difficult to switch from a certain language to Japanese. If students were to transfer language in this way, it can lead to more confusion as well as more mistakes. Having the students think solely in Japanese can help to remove a step in the language thinking process that leads to a smoother learning experience.

## 2-2. Effectiveness of the Direct Method

The ultimate question that stems from language education is whether the instruction achieved the desired effect of allowing students to communicate effectively in the target language. From my observations of Japanese language students who underwent the direct method at Keio University, I noticed several similarities.

The students form a habit of speaking and thinking solely in Japanese even when outside of classroom. A good product of the direct method, therefore, is that the students are frequently seen using Japanese with teachers in the halls and with others around campus. Getting accustomed to listening and responding in a certain language can be possibly be linked to confidence and using the language more frequently as can be seen with many of the students.

The direct method places less of a burden on the students as well, since it is a natural way to learn through repetition rather than by directly learning rules and conjugations.

A disadvantage may be that students can only ask questions in Japanese, thus limiting them in what they can ask, especially at the beginner level. There were students who would have specific questions about the content, but they would opt not to ask due to the complexity of the question or because they had difficulty wording it. At the end, they could not have their questions answered and they would have to proceed with a void in their understanding of the material. It may not have very lasting consequences in the overall picture, but it could make learning a bit more challenging.

The direct method may, unfortunately, not be friendly to learners who are weaker at languages. There was mention of some students being lost in the beginner level classes and never being able to fully recover and get back on track while at Keio University. When that occurs, it is not only more difficult to recover from that point, but it also may take a toll on motivation. At the earlier stages of language learning, it could be a sensitive time and losing control of the situation may not bode well for them when they don't have any tools to ask questions and regain a sense of understanding.

The issue also lies in the objectives of the students. Those who must use Japanese for a specific purpose that relates directly to their studies, must be able to understand Japanese as a native would. In these situations, the direct method can be a very effective means of forcing students to acclimate themselves to a Japanese environment in a shorter period of time. Their motivation is naturally high

since they need the knowledge at a relatively quick pace. On the other hand, students who study abroad in Japan short-term and don't necessarily require Japanese to proceed in their studies are probably learning Japanese for different purposes. In their cases, the goal is more about understanding Japanese in a more comparative way. Giving these students an opportunity to look at the language from their own lens and share their perspectives more comfortably can be a valuable experience for them so the indirect method may be more suitable to their needs.

### **2-3. Effectiveness of the Indirect Method**

The indirect method has benefits that can make up for the disadvantages in the direct method. The benefits can be seen more clearly in beginner level courses because of the limited ability that the students have in Japanese. One of the more influential benefits is that students can receive information in a way that they are accustomed to, so Japanese itself will be both less intimidating and more comprehensible. As a result, not only can it potentially boost student motivation, but students have more flexibility in asking questions as well. When they are unsure of something, they can ask more sophisticated questions since they are asking in a language they are more familiar with. The explicit knowledge of the language will also grow so there is more of an opportunity to make connections between grammar points and cultural differences.

In addition, those who are not as capable with languages can still follow without a feeling of being lost. If a student were to fall behind, it would not take as much effort to catch up with the rest of the class and to resume their studies.

While it is certainly true that the indirect method takes time away from speaking in the target language, quick and succinct explanations can allow students more time to practice what they have learned. Additionally, when they do practice in Japanese, they have a better understanding of how they are using the grammar and they can develop more confidence over time as they practice more and gain a deeper understanding.

The inherent interactions between teacher and student is information exchange. Teachers possess more information on the subject matter that they are teaching and it is thus essential that this information is transferred to the students accurately and smoothly. However, this communication between teacher and student often fails under the direct method. Moreover, students need more confirmation of the information and teachers cannot provide it with the limited abilities of

the students in the target language.

### **3. Essential Japanese 1**

#### **3-1. General Class Description**

“Essential Japanese 1” is a beginner level Japanese course offered by the Keio University Center of Japanese Studies and is intended for students with little to no Japanese language background. There are 15 classes in a semester and each class meets weekly for two consecutive class periods which last a total of 180 minutes. I was in charge of teaching two of these courses during both the Spring 2019 and Fall 2019 semesters.

#### **3-2. Class Objectives and Assessment**

The “Essential Japanese 1” course focuses on providing students with the ability to master elementary level Japanese grammar. The elementary grammar in the course is based on the textbook “Minna No Nihongo Shokyu I Second Edition” and covers the first half of the book (Lessons 1-13).

Although the prerequisite for the class is that the students must be able to read and write hiragana and katakana, it is covered briefly in the first few classes as a form of review.

Assessment is based on attendance, daily quizzes, homework, participation, and results on the midterm and final exams.

#### **3-3. Class Contents**

Each class in the semester covers the grammar patterns in one lesson of the “Minna No Nihongo” textbook. The general progression of the class is: a short quiz, grammar introduction using a pre-prepared worksheet, practice conversations, and overall situational practice.

The class always begins with a short quiz to help students review contents from the previous week, with the exception of the first class. In the first class, students are given a hiragana quiz to ensure that everyone fulfills the prerequisite since all writing will be in hiragana from the first class. Without a strong grasp of hiragana, it would be quite difficult to follow the contents of the course.

If many students showed trouble with a grammar point in the previous week, I would ask questions using the grammar point and write down the answers to point out the common mistakes and explain in English why it doesn't work. This

Chart 1 Grammar Points for “Essential Japanese 1”

Class	Lesson	Main Grammar Points
1	Academic Counseling	
2	Guidance, L1	「NはNです」「NはNではありません」
3	L2	「(これ/それ/あれ)は__です」 「Nは (person) の__です」「Nは (person) のです」
4	L3	「(ここ/そこ/あそこ)は__です」 「これは (place) の__です」「__はいくらですか」
5	L4	「いま__じです」「きょうは__ようびです」 「__じ(に) V ます」「__から__まで V ます」
6	L5	「__は__で__と__へ いきます」 「__へきます」「__へかえます」
7	L6	「__を(し) ます」「いっしょに～ませんか」「～ましょう」
8	Midterm, L7	「__は__で__を V ます」
9	L7, L8	「__は__に__を(あげ) ます」 「い - adj」「な - adj」「～い N」「～な N」
10	L9	「__は__がすきです」「__は__がじょうずです」 「__は__がわかります」「__は__があります」
11	L10	「__に__が(あります・います)」 「__は__に(あります・います)」
12	L11	「__に__が (counter) あります」「(time) かかります」
13	L12	「past adj」「__と__とどちらが adj ですか」「__のほうが adj です」 「__で__がいちばん adj ですか」「__がいちばん adj です」
14	L13	「__がほしいです」「__が(し) たいです」 「__は__にいきます」
15	Review, Final	

would be followed by a transition into the lesson of the day. New vocabulary would be introduced with a certain sentence structure in order to familiarize students with its potential uses. An important part of adding new vocabulary is to point out in English the potential misuses or cultural differences.

The next part constitutes the main part of each lesson, which are the grammar patterns. I would introduce a new sentence in Japanese with contextual cues that make the meaning understandable without knowing the specific words. I would

then proceed to write the sentences on the board and analyze the sentences using a mixture of English and Japanese to get the point across. Students are given a worksheet every class that has blanks and circles that students fill in as the class progresses. The blanks are filled in with nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, while the circles can be filled in with particles. The students fill these in with the sentences that I write on the board so that they can more easily see the construction of the sentence both visually as well as orally. Any questions that may arise are answered at this point until the students feel comfortable with the content.

I would then engage in teacher-student exercises to ensure that the students comprehend the material and to make any corrections when necessary. Lastly, I prepare activities that allow the students to talk amongst each other using the grammar of the day. I will go over some of the questions with them afterward and proceed with other grammar structures in a similar manner. At the conclusion, if time permits, there is an overall review of the day and a more situational conversation that allows students more flexibility with the language.

### **3-4. Student Demographics**

In each of my classes, there were students from all parts of the world including many from Asia and Europe, but also including a few from North and South America, Africa, and Australia. In many cases, it was their first time in Japan for purposes other than travel. Not only was the Japanese language new to them, but I presumed that the environment both inside and outside of the university was also new, so the early stages of the semester must have been quite stressful, as they had to orient themselves in completely new surroundings. Additionally, a majority of the students only spent one semester in Japan, returning to their home countries in order to continue their studies or to advance their careers. Thus, the amount of time that most students were exposed to a Japanese academic environment was limited.

It is certainly effective to begin classes in Japanese using the direct method, as students were a part of many different cultures and everyone in the class spoke a variety of languages having many different mother tongues. However, it is also important to note that the students were not only studying the Japanese language, but also general Japanese studies in various fields. These Japanese studies courses took place in English, thus making English the language that most of their other classes were taking place in. This shows that they were at least comfortable

enough in the language to take other content courses in them.

The students are also devoting a lot of time to other studies and are not solely focused on Japanese language instruction. Therefore, it can be considered more efficient to provide the information directly than to have them infer from the context in which they are given the information.

### 3-5. Implementing the Indirect Approach in the Classroom

One situation in which the direct approach would not be effective is when there is a concept that has subtle differences Japanese, while they are considered the same in languages like English. For example, lesson 8 of “Minna No Nihongo” introduces the vocabulary つめたい and さむい. From the perspective of English, they both mean ‘cold’ so simply providing examples would make it difficult to understand the concept that one is referring to objects, while the other is referring to the weather. Students in both my Spring 2019 and Fall 2019 classes asked questions regarding these topics at first, and occasionally made mistakes later in the semester when asked about the weather. Since this is not a familiar concept in some other languages, an explanation can help to make sense of the subtle differences where providing examples may make students aware that there is a difference, but not the instances in which each is used.

A more complex example that also confused students greatly both in the Spring of 2019 and the Fall 2019, was lesson 10 when describing the existence of objects in specific locations. 「とうきょうにとうきょうタワーがあります。」 and 「とうきょうタワーはとうきょうにあります。」 can be understood exactly in the same manner in English, but can have quite a different meaning in Japanese. The simple way to provide an answer is to point out that they are both answering different questions in Japanese. Whereas, 「とうきょうになにがありますか。」 should prompt students to answer with the similar grammatical format of 「とうきょうにとうきょうタワーがあります。」, another question 「とうきょうタワーはどこですか。」 should be responded to with 「とうきょうタワーはどこにありますか。」. While knowing that different situations call for different responses, students asked the reasoning behind this grammar structure in order to grasp why different situations called for different responses even though they had the exact same meaning in other languages. In providing an explanation about what information is known by both the speaker and listener in the sentence and what new information is given, students can begin to see what is deemed impor-

tant overall in the Japanese language. Admittedly, the students were still confused as to when they were to use each grammar point, but it can shed light on future issues when a similar situation arises, such as in other examples when は and が can be used interchangeably.

Another example of the benefit of the indirect method is that you can provide a cultural background of specific phrases. As part of an exercise, for instance, students from both semesters wanted to ask if I had time to meet them and they used the phrase 「ひまですか。」. While this makes perfect sense grammatically, they would not be aware of why this can culturally be considered inappropriate certain contexts in Japan. Rather than correct the statement by rewording it into 「じかんがありますか。」 I explained the meaning behind the word ひま and how it may sound inappropriate in Japanese due to the fact that it may assume that one has nothing to do. With this one explanation, I was able to implant the dangers of using the word in specific contexts and it made them wary when they used it. Although they still made mistakes, some were able to correct themselves when I repeated their question.

In the same lesson, students from both semesters also asked me why the negative structure 「～ませんか」 is used when making an invitation. This was the clearest example of when the indirect method was effective because the understanding after being given the explanation was immediate. As soon as I explained that the negative form gave the responder more of an opportunity to turn down the invitation, the correct usage was immediate. The idea stems from a theory proposed by Brown and Levinson known as the universal politeness theory. According to them, every member of a society has a *face*, or a public self-image. One type of face, known as the *negative face*, regards a person's claim to rights such as freedom of action and freedom of imposition. People use negative politeness, in order to satisfy the listener's desire to not be imposed upon, thus saving their *face*. This theory is relevant because it claims that these forms of negative politeness are used throughout all societies regardless of cultural background. Most of the students were, therefore, able to comprehend this concept of using the negative 「～ませんか」 without much difficulty. This was a case in which one explanation made it easier for students to further digest the successive information that followed. While the direct method would also be sufficient, each grammar structure would have to be interpreted individually rather than conceptualized as a whole, making it easier to comprehend.

This year in Spring 2019 when I was teaching Lesson 9 which was of the form 「～がわかります。」there was also a student who wanted to take the language further and to explore more specific statements using the same grammar structure. We learned, as part of the curriculum, the simple adverbs that could be used to express degrees such as よく, すこし, あまり, and ぜんぜん. However, a student asked how you can go even further and describe how he only knew a very tiny amount of kanji. It was a practical question that he could use in his everyday life so it was immediately applicable. While the correlation between Japanese and English in this example was more direct and didn't require further explanation, the students had the thought to ask. While the direct method gives people the grammar that they are supposed to be learning, it is harder to expand upon it by only using the target language of Japanese especially in the beginning level of instruction. The questions can become too complicated to convey without a language that they feel more comfortable speaking.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is important to note that while neither the direct or indirect methods are free of problems, it is better to make the option of indirect method available when teaching. There are many factors that contribute to selecting one method over the other, but it would not be effective to stick only with the direct method. The needs of the students are an especially important factor to consider in deciding upon a teaching method. When students have a clear purpose of being in Japan, such as writing or reading research specifically in Japanese, students may be better off with the direct approach since the objective is to become effective with the natural Japanese language. However, more and more students are coming here with other intentions and are studying in fields that don't specifically pertain to Japanese. These students don't intend to study Japanese for periods longer than a year and are more interested in being exposed to the Japanese language and culture and getting an idea of what the experience is like in comparison to their own experiences. As a teacher of Japanese, it is also important to look at your own abilities and the situation in the classroom to determine which style is more applicable in specific situations. In my specific case, I have had experience in using English as a medium to teach Japanese so it is more comfortable for me. I can also reflect on my experiences as a Japanese learner myself since I have looked into common pitfalls that English speakers and speakers of some other similar languages have,

allowing me to prevent some of them from happening. It is also advantageous for me to share some cultural experiences that I may not have been able to accurately convey if I were to speak solely in Japanese. The students also seem receptive to this information and often show curiosity and interest by asking more questions and providing their own input. That does not mean, however, that I have nothing to learn from the direct method among other methods. I acknowledge some parts of my lesson which can challenge the students and get them to rely more on their Japanese knowledge in the target language itself. There are also times when it can be clearer to show Japanese examples rather than explain it, due to the complexity of the grammar point. There are still opportunities to grow as a teacher and I intend to learn more about how I can incorporate other methods into my future lessons so that the students can get the most out of their experience here.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The main definition behind the direct method was introduced by Messieurs Firmery and Hovelaeque, the Inspectors General of Education in France in 1900.
- <sup>2</sup> The direct method was one of many approaches under the Reform Movement of the 1890s, which had the common aim of teaching the learner to communicate in the foreign language. Due to disagreements, there were distinct movements within the movement, but they all agreed upon the relative merits of reading, speaking, translation, and phonetics.

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