

# **Designing a Conversation Course for Thai Teachers of the Japanese Language**

**Mamoru Ikuta\***

---

## **Introduction**

The Japan Foundation Bangkok Language Center, established for the purpose of giving information, extending financial support and developing teachers' training programmes for institutions and teachers engaging in Japanese language education, conducted a language course for Thai teachers of the Japanese language from August to September 1991.

First, a general description of the course such as aims and participants' background will be given. Secondly, teaching method and class activities will be introduced together with detailed syllabus and curriculum. Lastly, some pedagogical problems will be discussed using the questionnaire completed by the participants.

## **1. Surveying the course**

The course was designed for Thai teachers of the Japanese language, that is, non-native speakers of Japanese. The aim of the course was to advance the standard of teaching by brushing up their command of Japanese.

One of the problems which language teachers are facing is that they tend to be frustrated by the fact that they have to teach the language although they do not fully understand nor speak it fluently. This is a dilemma. They need to study it more before they will be able to teach it well. They always feel that their knowledge of Japanese may not attain the level required for teaching.

With this problem in mind, we provided the course for those teachers who have little time to study Japanese (because they are busy teaching it), or who cannot find an adequate school

---

\* Chief Language Officer, The Japan Foundation Bangkok Language Center.

which teaches at intermediate or advanced levels (because most schools conduct lessons at primary level).

## 1.1 The description of the course

### 1.1.1 The period

The course was conducted every Wednesday between August and September from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. (a total of 7 classes).

In setting the period, we had some limitations resulting from the availability of participants, who are teaching during daytime and/or living far away. Thus we gave only one class in the evening per week for two months (neither too long nor too short for busy people).

### 1.1.2 Dividing the class

The participants were divided into two levels, namely, intermediate (class A) and advanced (class B) level.

Class A was taught by a team of two teachers, that is, a Thai teacher and a Japanese teacher.<sup>1</sup> The former gave an explanation of the structure of sentences, various expressions and cultural background. After that, the latter did oral drill and various activities using the expressions and cultural knowledge given by the former.

As for class B, the participants were given explanation and drills in Japanese only.

## 1.2 The background of the participants

There were thirty participants from universities, teacher's colleges, colleges, secondary schools and other institutes which provide Japanese language. The percentages are given below.

*Fig. 1 Institutions*

University	6	(20%)
Teacher's College	3	(10%)
Secondary	9	(30%)
College	5	(17%)
Other Institutes	<u>7</u>	(23%)
Total	<u>30</u>	(100%)

### 1.2.1 Teaching experience

The length of teaching experience varied from none to sixteen years. Fifty percent of the participants had been teaching for three years or more, and the other fifty percent for less than three years. (See the figure 2.)

**Fig. 2 Length of teaching**

Less than 1 year	8	(26.7%)	}	50%	}	60%	}	73.3%	}	90%	}	100%								
1 year or more	2	( 6.6%)																		
2 years or more	5	(16.7%)	}																	
3 years or more	3	(10.0%)																		
4 years or more	4	(13.3%)	}																	
5 years or more	5	(16.7%)																		
10 years or more	3	(10.0%)	}																	

### 1.2.2 Proficiency in Japanese

Since we did not hold any kind of placement test, it was not easy to evaluate exactly the proficiency of participants. We divided them into two groups by considering whether or not they understood introductory lectures in Japanese only. Those who did not understand enough explanations and instructions in Japanese entered class A. and were given introductory lectures by the Thai teacher, followed by oral practice given by the Japanese teacher. In spite of that, the gaps between the participants (in the same class) were wide enough to cause some pedagogical problems.

## 2. Designing the course

In designing the course, syllabus (the content of study), curriculum (what kind of teaching method we applied and to what level we taught) and teaching materials were selected by considering participants' background such as teaching experience and their proficiency in Japanese

I will discuss how we designed the course in this order.

### 2.1 The syllabus

#### 2.1.1 What should be taught in the course : structure vs. function

As the title of this paper indicates, this was a conversation course. Needless to say the aim was to teach Japanese conversation. However, it is not unimportant to reflect on what a conversation is, what a language is and what we are actually teaching in the name of "conversation".

There are two sides of a language, that is, "structure" and "function". They are inter-related and may be compared to two sides of a coin. In teaching a language, we have to bear in mind which aspect of the language we are teaching. They are often confused.

We can say that the "structure" of the language is its "grammar". To teach "structure" means to teach morphology and syntax, in other words, how the verb conjugates and how words form a sentence.

The participants of this course had been taught mainly the structure of Japanese. All of them learnt the pattern of sentences in the primary level. What they needed to learn was how to use the language, how to convey their intention to another, how to express their feelings

and what expression they should choose at the right time and the right place, that is, the "function" of the language.

When you ask someone for a favour. for instance, when you want someone to open the window, you are not likely to say :

- (1) Watashi-wa anata-ni mado-o akete moraitai-desu.

I SUB you AGT window ACC open TE want AUX-POL  
I want you to open the window.

Though this sentence contains no errors, it is not acceptable in a real discourse. It is merely a description of your feeling. This type of sentences is rarely found in actual conversation.

- (2) Mado-o akete-kudasai.

window ACC open TE-IMP POL  
Open the window, please.

This sounds rather abrupt in spite of using the polite marker.

If you want a polite expression, you may say :

- (3) Sumimasen-ga, chotto, mado-o akete morae-nai deshoo-ka.

excuse me but a little window ACC open TE want-NEG PRV-QU  
Excuse me. Would you kindly open the window ?

However this expression is not appropriate when you talk to your peer or friend, since this sounds too formal for a close relationship. In this case, the right expression will be :

- (4) Chotto mado akete kun' nai.

a little window open give-NEG  
Open the window, won't you ?

or

- (5) Mado akete-yo.

window open-SOF  
Open the window.

Depending on the content of your request and the interlocutor, you need some preliminary remarks such as :

- (6) Oisogashii tokoro sumimasen-ga...

HON busy AUX excuse me but  
I'm sorry to bother you,...

and

- (7) Gomeiwaku de-nakattara,...

HON trouble COP-NEG-PST TARA  
If you don't mind,...

Or an appointment might be obligatory.

Those who have studied the structure of the language can produce sentences such as (1) and (2) without much difficulty. As for (3), we can find examples in some primary text books based on the communicative approach.<sup>2</sup> However, from the fact that these expressions are found in the latter part of the text away from the simple asking (-te kudasai), it seems that

the authors assume it is a structurally difficult sentence or, when the authors disregard this expression, that it should be delayed until the intermediate level.

Of course, this is not to be criticized at all because the text is designed for the primary level, which requires the introduction of sentence structures from simple to complicated.

We excluded type (4) and (5) from this course because there seems to be no need for the participants to talk with peers and friends in Japanese. They want to communicate with the Japanese in rather formal situations.

Expressions such as (6) and (7) are dealt in some intermediate level texts.<sup>3</sup> This kind of "strategical expressions" was also within the scope of this course.

To summarize this section: in this course various formal expressions were introduced with communicative procedures such as introductory remarks, discourse strategies and so on.

And we also touched on paralinguistic features or non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures, dress code, tone of the voice and prosodical features such as intonation and prominence as far as these features function significantly in a conversation.

In my definition, language is one aspect of communication. What should be taught in this course is how to communicate in Japanese. We have not only to teach how we convey our intention but how we communicate politely and smoothly using the Japanese language.

### 2.1.2 The content of the syllabus

The syllabus<sup>4</sup> consisted of 5 sections.

#### § 1 Greetings

- 1 Function of greetings
- 2 Daily greetings
- 3 Talking about the weather
- 4 Farewelling
- 5 Leaving a person
- 6 Greeting a person not seen a long time
- 7 Expressions of thanks
- 8 Greeting for the first time
- 9 New Year's greetings
- 10 Expressions of condolence
- 11 Other idiomatic expressions

#### § 2 Asking someone a favour

- 1 Expressions of requesting
- 2 Preliminary remarks for request
- 3 Politeness expressed by discourse
- 4 Politeness expressed by hesitation

- 5 Accepting a request
- 6 Refusal
- 7 How to request humbly

### **§ 3 Persuading**

- 1 Preliminary remarks for suggestions
- 2 Acceptance and hesitation
- 3 How to refuse politely
- 4 Inviting someone to a date

### **§ 4 Complaining**

- 1 Expressing a complaint
- 2 How to receive a complaint
- 3 Complaining between friendly speakers
- 4 How to soften a complaint
- 5 Getting out of trouble
- 6 Finding a point of compromise

### **§ 5 Expressing ideas**

- 1 Suggesting one's idea
- 2 Asking one's idea
- 3 Expressing one's points of view
- 4 Agreeing to someone's idea
- 5 Opposing someone's idea
- 6 Concession
- 7 Developing one's idea logically

## **2.2 The curriculum**

One section of the syllabus comprises one lesson. Each lesson consists of two parts, namely, "Explanation" and "Drills". The five lessons were allocated as following :

- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| Day 1 | Orientation--The aim of the course                           |
|       | Lesson 1 Explanation of expressions and cultural background. |
| Day 2 | Lesson 1 Explanation   |
|       | Lesson 1 Drills--Discourse drills (substitution)             |
| Day 3 | Lesson 2 Explanation   |
|       | Lesson 2 Drills--Discourse drills (substitution)             |
|       | Role-playing practice  |
| Day 4 | Lesson 3 Explanation   |
|       | Lesson 3 Drills--Discourse drills                            |



- Day 5 Lesson 3 Drills--Role-playing practice  
 Lesson 4 Explanation  
 Day 6 Lesson 4 Drills--Discourse drills  
 Lesson 4 Drills--Role-playing practice  
 Day 7 Lesson 5 Explanation  
 Lesson 5 Drills--Discourse drills

### 2.2.1 Teaching method

As stated in 1.1.2., the participants were divided into two classes according to their proficiency in Japanese.

In Class A, the first part of the lecture was given in Thai by the Thai teacher. Expressions, cultural background and other communicative rules were introduced in Thai so that every participant was ready for the drills.

#### 2.2.1.1 Discourse drill

The drills were given in the latter part of the lesson. There were two kinds of drills, discourse drill and role-playing practice.

In discourse drills, we considered the grammar beyond the sentence level. In Japanese, we make polite sentences by adding a prefix and suffix, auxiliary verbs etc. However, it is not enough in real communication to simply produce honorific sentences. We have to set the communicative goal first, for instance, requesting the visiting lecturer to correct the essay we wrote, and secondly, to consider what kind of expression is appropriate, how we arrange the sentences in order, and what kind of preliminary remarks we make. Thus we begin by saying:

- (8) Anoo, ima oisogashii deshoo-ka  
 INJ now POL busy AUX QU  
 Well... Are you busy now.

If we get the answer.

- (9) Iie. Nan' deshoo.  
 No What AUX  
 No. May I help you?

Then we would say,

- (10) Chotto onegai shitai koto-ga arun' desuga,...  
 a little favour want thing SUB have AUX but  
 Well, I have a favour to ask you.

The sentences (8)-(10) are called preliminary remarks, which make the communication smooth.

After that we would go into the essential part of the conversation.

- (11) Jitsuwa, ima nihongo-de essei-o kaite-irun' desu-ga, tadashii nihongo-ni natte iru-ka dooka jishin-ga nakute... Gomeiwaku-de nakereba, chotto mite itadake-nai

deshoo-ka.

In fact now Japanese<sup>INS</sup> essay<sup>GL</sup> write<sup>TE</sup> AUX but right Japanese<sup>GL</sup> become-  
TE whether confidence<sup>SUB</sup> lack<sup>TE</sup> If you do not mind a little look<sup>TE</sup> receive<sup>POL</sup>  
NEG AUX QU

Well, I'm writing an essay in Japanese now. But I'm afraid I have  
some mistakes. Would you mind correcting my work?

What is important in these drills is to learn how to build up the sentence to achieve the  
communicative goal using appropriate expressions and strategies.

#### 2.2.1.2 Role-playing practice

After learning various expressions and how to arrange them at the discourse level, the role-  
play<sup>s</sup> practices were given.

In these drills, our aim was that the participants would be able to apply the expressions  
and strategies to the situations that they are likely to encounter in daily life.

The participants in each class were divided into two groups. Each one of the group were  
given a card in which the role, situation and directions were written.

Here is an example :

(12)

1. The purpose of the lesson  
How to complain politely to the superior.  
How to persuade without forcing.
2. The scene--Lecturers' room at university
3. The players--Chief Instructor and Lecturer

(13)

#### Role Card A

Role : Lecturer

Situation : The timetable for the new term has been announced.

You have found that the number of your lectures is  
more than others'.

Besides, you have to teach "Business Japanese", which  
will be held for the first time.

Directions : Ask the reason why your assignment is greater than other  
teachers. If you are not satisfied with the reason, ask him/her  
to lessen your assignment.



(14)

**Materials : Timetable**

Subject	hrs.	Lecturer		Subject	hrs.	Lecturer
Nihongo 1	4	A (You)		Writing	2	Wanchai
Nihongo 2	3	Wanchai		Reading	2	B
Nihongo 3	3	Ishida		Business Japanese	3	A
Listening	2	Ishida		Japanese Affairs	2	B

(15)

**Role Card B****Role** : Chief Instructor

**Situation** : After the announcement of the new timetable,  
You have received a complaint from lecturer A about the  
assignment of the lectures.

**Direction** : Persuade lecturer A using materials given below.  
Point out that though the assignment of teaching is more  
than others', they have other work besides lectures.  
Also point out that lecturer A is the best person to teach  
"Business Japanese"

(16)

**Material 1** : (The same timetable as Card A)**Material 2** : Assignment of works

B	(Chief instructor)	---Management, Teaching
A	(Lecturer)	---Teaching
Ishida	(Lecturer)	---Teaching, Development of teaching material
Wanchai	(Lecturer)	---Teaching, Development of teaching material

Before the teacher hands out these cards, the scene, the situation, the role and the purpose of the lesson should be introduced clearly and precisely.

The learner should understand well beforehand the role he/she would play.

From the learner's standpoint, he/she reads the card first and decides what kind of expression is appropriate for the person he/she is talking to, and what kind of strategy is effective to achieve the goal of the communication.

To make it easier for the learner to comprehend the situation. A Thai version of the card was attached to the Japanese version. (The latter would provide the key words to the learner.)

The conversation generated through this practice is similar to an actual conversation in that it is pursued through communicative necessities, not through cramming sentences, and in that the result of the conversation depends on the interaction of the two speakers.

For instance, if player A is more assertive than B, B will accept the complaint and reconsider the planning. If player A is somewhat reserved, B will reject the complaint and A has to withdraw.

Irrespective of the result, the learner should play the role deliberately. A strongly assertive approach from player A might offend B's feelings, or a bossy approach from B might create distance between them.

#### 2.2.1.3 Teacher's role

The teacher, after the explanation of the card, separated the class into their two groups, A and B. Learners discussed the card within the group and decided on expressions and strategies. The teacher walked around the groups and gave advice to help the learner understand the practice and so on.

Then the learners from groups A and B made pairs. While they tried to make the conversation following the cards, the teacher walked around the pairs correcting the errors and prompting sentences.

Lastly, the teacher chose some pairs and let them play in front of the class.

In correcting errors, the teacher should concentrate on expressions rather than minor grammatical mistakes. When correcting pronunciation, intonation is crucial. The same sentence could have various meanings depending on the intonation.

(17) Soo desu-ka. (With falling intonation)

Ah-huh. (I agree with you.)

(18) Soo desu-ka. (With rising intonation)

Is that so?

(19) Soo desu-ka. (With exaggerated rising intonation)

I doubt it. (I don't agree with you.)

Since there are quite a few preliminary remarks and interjections in Japanese conversation and these kinds of expressions convey meaning through the intonation rather than the word itself, it is important to provide the right intonation.

#### 2.2.1.4 Example of conversation

An example of a conversation was given after the practice.

(20)

Fujiwara : Anoo, ima oisogashii deshoo-ka.

Yamamoto : Iie.

Fuji : Jitsu-wa shin' gakkai-no jikan' wari nan'desu-ga... Watashi-no tan' too jikan'-ga chotto hoka-no sen' see-yori ooin' ja naikato omoimashite...  
Ishida-san' -mo Wanchai-san' -mo 5-jikan-zutsu desuyonee. Dooshite watashi-dake 2-jikan' ooin' deshoo-ka.

Yama : Sore-wa desu-ne, gozon' ji kamoshiremasen' -ga, Ishida-san' -to Wanchai-san-wa jitsu-wa kon' gakkai, oshieru-hokani atarashii kyoozai-o kaihatsu shinakereba naranain' desu. Sorede, sonobun' kyoomu-no futan' -o karuku shita hoo-ga iin' ja naikato omoimashite...

Soreni, kon' gakkai-kara hajimaru "Bijinesu Nihongo" no koosu-wa Fujiwara sen' see-o oite hokaniwa kan' gaeraremasen' shi...

Fuji : Sono "Bijinesu Nihongo" no kurasu nan' desu-ga, hajimete-no koosu nanode jikan' -ga kakaru-to omoun' desu. Sen' gakkai-ga 5-jikan' -de, soreyori fueru-to naru-to chotto kurushii yoona ki-ga shimasu.

Yama : Sore-wa wakarimasu-ga, hoka-no sen' see-mo min' na onajikurai taihen' da to omoimasu-node nan' toka yatte kudasaranai deshoo-ka.

Fuji : Soo desu-ka. Wakarimashita, Nan' toka doryoku shite mimasu. Iroiro wagamama itte sumimasen' deshita.

Yama : Taihen' deshoo-keredo onegai shimasu.

(21) (Translation of (20))

Fujiwara : Well, you seem to be busy. Could I have a moment ?

Yamamoto : Sure.

Fuji : Well, it's about my assignment in the next term. I'm afraid my assignment of work is a little bit greater than other teachers...

Mr. Ishida and Mr. Wanchai, for instance, teach only 5 hours a week. Would you tell me why I have to teach 2 hours more than they ?

Yama : Well, as you might know, Mr. Ishida and Mr. Wanchai have a project of developing new teaching materials besides teaching in this term. So, considering this point, I thought their burden should be removed. And I believe that you are the only teacher who can teach "Business Japanese" which will be held from this term.

Fuji : Well, about this "Business Japanese", I think I need a lot of time to prepare for the course, as this is the first time. I'm afraid 2 hours extra besides this preparation is too much for me.

Yama : I understand that. But I think other teachers share the same burden as you. I would be happy if you agree with my plan.

Fuji : Well, I understand. I will try my best. I'm sorry to bother you in the middle of your work.

Yama : Not at all. Thank you for your cooperation.

#### 2.2.1.5 The content of the role-playing practice

The content of the drills is as following :

Lesson 1 Greeting a person after a long absence.

Lesson 2 Asking a professor to attend a symposium on Japanese language education.

Lesson 3 Inviting a section chief to a welcoming picnic for newcomers.

Lesson 4 Complaining to a chief instructor about an assignment of work.

Lesson 5 Expressing one's points of view.

### 3. Evaluation of the course

In this chapter, some pedagogical problems will be taken into account by reviewing the course and analyzing the questionnaire<sup>6</sup> from the participants.

#### 3.1 The teaching method

Some participants remarked that "team teaching" (a combination of Thai and Japanese teachers) made it easier for them to comprehend the lesson. They were given the explanation of expressions, culture, communicative rules etc. and the chance to ask questions, in Thai.

This also helped them to ease the tension when they spoke a foreign language.

This method, in my opinion, is more effective when applied to a class for intermediate or primary level learners. For advanced class where the learners understand the explanation easily, we do not have to deprive them of the chance to hear Japanese.

#### 3.2 The results

Most of the participants stated in the questionnaire that they improved their language performance, in other words, how to use the right expression at the right time and the right place.

They said it was a good chance for them to learn a lot of useful expressions such as preliminary remarks, idiomatic expressions and hesitation that they had never learned before.

Above all, we were very happy when some mentioned they obtained a confidence in Japanese conversation through the drills which enabled them to express what they wanted to say.

### 3.3 The problems

Some complained that they needed more time to practise. They also needed more varied examples of scenes and cases.

In contrast to the teacher's strategy of correcting errors mentioned in 2.2.1.3., some participants, irrespective of their level wanted to be corrected more. The fact that they felt uncertain without being corrected and might continue their mistakes should not be over looked. The method and purpose of correction should be reconsidered.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The course seems to have been a success in that the syllabus and the curriculum were fitted to the participants' needs and they improved their efficiency in Japanese to a certain degree.

We are planning to hold a similar course for Thai teachers twice a year together with teachers' training courses and consulting services. We hope that we can provide them a chance to brush up their Japanese and revitalize their motivation to teach Japanese.

We will try our best to improve the course taking into consideration the needs of Thai teachers.

#### List of Abbreviations

ACC (accusative)	INS (instrumental)
AGT (agent)	NEG (negative)
AUX (auxiliary)	POL (polite)
COP (copula)	PRV (provision)
GL (goal)	PST (past)
HON (honorific)	QU (question)
IMP (imperative)	SOF (softening word)
INJ (interjection)	SUB (subective)

#### Notes

1. Two lecturers were invited from Thammasat University. I would like to thank Mr. Artorn Fungtammasan, Associate Professor, and Ms. Shinko Fukazawa, lecturer at the Japanese Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts for their cooperation.

2. For example, "Bunka Shokyuu Nihongo" (Bunka Institute of Language), and Osamu & Nobuko Mizutani "An Introduction to Modern Japanese" (The Japan Times)

3. For example, S. Okazaki et al. "Roorupurei-de Manabu Kaiwa" (Bonjinsha), and Nagoya University ed. "A Course In Modern Japanese" (Nagoya Univ. Press)

4. Setting up the syllabus, the idea is borrowed from D.A. Wilkins (1976).

5. For role-playing practice, see S. Okazaki (ibid.), B. Tanaka et al. (1989), H. Takahashi

(1990), and K. Johnson et al, (1981).

6. The questionnaire was done at the end of the course and 21 participants answered. I analyze it here qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

### References

- S. Okazaki et al. (1987, 1988) "Roorupurei-de Manabu Kaiwa 1.2" (Bonjinsha)  
K. Johnson et al. (1981) "Communication in the classroom"  
H. Takahashi (1990) "Komyunikatibu-apuroochi-to roorupurei" (Tohoku Univ. Nihongo Kyooiku Ronshuu vol. 5)  
B. Tanaka et al. (1989) "Roorupurei-to Shumireeshon" (Bonjinsha)  
D. A. Wilkins (1976) "Notional Syllabus"