

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Linguistics and (Language) Education

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Abstract

In this presentation, I will consider the effects of pandemic and post-pandemic (language) education from the perspective of Japanese language education and linguistics. First, I will provide an overview of the covid-19 pandemic situation in Japan and report that many international students who wish to study in Japan have not been able to enter the country. Under these circumstances, Okayama University has been conducting online events as part of its international exchange efforts. In particular, the university's OJEIC and the Faculty of Letters have taken the lead in organizing several events for exchange with Southeast Asian countries. I will report on this and show that the students' satisfaction was very high. Next, I will discuss the changes that occurred in the students in the online classes. First, we will look at the situation of first-year and second-year students, and then we will discuss the situation and changes of international students. In the final section, I will present the characteristics of the analysis of online conversations and talk about what we should be aware of in online communication, which will continue in the future.

Keywords: *communication, international exchange, student changes in the Corona disaster*

1. Pandemic and the situation in Japan

According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), as of October 24, the number of newly infected people is 285, the total number of infected people is 1,716,692, and the number of deaths is 18,183. Although the situation is gradually getting better, it is still unpredictable as we head into winter. (<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/covid-19/kokunainohasseijoukyou.html>)

1.1 Acceptance of foreign students

As a countermeasure against covid-19 in Japan, it is worth mentioning the acceptance of international students.

(<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20210918-OYT1T50092/>)

Privately-financed students are not allowed to enter Japan; only government-financed students are allowed to enter. A strange situation has been occurred due to this policy of the Japanese Government. Short-term exchange students such as Japanese Studies Students(Nikkensei) funded by the Japanese Government

can enter the country, but regular private students cannot. At Okayama University, a Korean student has completed his military service and returned to school only online.

Japan is the only country in the G7 that has taken such a measure. Because of the re-entry ban, private students, more than 95% of international students in Japan, are in a long line. Various organizations are demanding the Government improve the situation, but any decision has yet to be made.

(<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20210918-OYT1T50092/>)

2. Pandemic and International Exchange (Okayama University's Efforts)

In this situation, both students from around the world who are interested in Japan and Japanese students who are interested in the world are seeking opportunities for communication, and we have conducted several events online.

2.1. Exchange Results

The following are some of the online international exchange events

conducted by Okayama University.

1. OJEIC Events

Number of participants: 28 ASEAN students (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines), 15 Chiba University students (July 16, 2021)

2. Faculty of Letters, Okayama University and International Division of Kasetsart University

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) Project to Promote Cooperation among Overseas Study Centers in Japan (Southeast Asia) online student exchange meeting in Japanese, Kasetsart University and Okayama University (Zoom)

Wednesday, July 21, 2021 13:30-15:00 (Thailand) / 15:30-17:00 (Japan)

3. Two online events with students in Myanmar (September 24, 2020, September 29, 2020), one with students in Indonesia (September 25, 2021, HIROTOWER Language Education Center)

2.2. Student Response

In all events, more than 90% of the students responded to the questionnaire that they would like to participate again, indicating that students are hungry for interaction (with people from different cultures). Japanese students generally want to interact with English-speaking students, but not a few students participated in the exchange with Southeast Asian students mentioned above.

3. Pandemic and (language) education

Let us look at the changes that occurred during the pandemic, dividing them into native speaker education (Japanese students) and non-native speaker education (international students).

3.1 Education for new students

First and second-year University students have been taking online classes ever since they entered university, and they seem to lack the sense and awareness of being

university students. Face-to-face communication is crucial for the development of language skills as college students.

From what I have seen, the most striking difference between the past and the present students is the length of answers they give in exams. In general, university exams require students to write a certain amount of sentences. However, students who take classes only online (after this referred to as "online students") answer questions such as the following in one to several lines, and in some cases, in just a word.

Examples of questions in exams are;

1. Reproduce the content of the class on the difference between the Japanese particle "wa/ga".
2. Write your opinion about the change in the Japanese language spoken among the young.

In cases like the examples above, students are expected to answer in sentences of some length. Despite this, the new students often completed their answers in one or two short

sentences. What is the reason for this?

One of the fourth-year students of my laboratory told an interesting story that had happened when she took a university exam for the first time. She realized that she had to write longer sentences in the answer sheet by accidentally looking at other students' answer sheets around her. In other words, students get to know that they have to write more extended paragraphs in college by seeing the students around them writing of a certain length. Of course, they cannot see the content, and it is clear that they are not cheating, but it is a thought-provoking idea. We change our behavior by knowing what "our neighbors" are doing.

3.2 Education for international students

Let us now consider the changes that seem to have occurred among international students. As mentioned earlier, due to the decision of the Japanese Government, most of the international students have not been able to enter Japan, and each one of them has become skeptical about their level of Japanese. "I wonder if

my Japanese is up to the task or if I am not as good as others". These concerns can be resolved by being in the same classroom, encouraging each other, and communicating.

Another problem is that the time spent using Japanese is getting shorter in absolute terms. Currently, the only time they practice Japanese is when they are participating in online classes, and once the class is over, they are left to use the local language.

This sense of mental insecurity and absolute lack of time caused a series of cancellations, especially among students in higher-level classes. This tendency was remarkable among the students who started their study abroad online. They were anxious about the difference in level between them and the students who had participated in the class before, but they could not find enough time to practice Japanese to make up for their anxiety, so they gave up on the course.

4. Pandemic and linguistics

As in other fields, the pandemic had a variety of effects on linguistics. In fields such as dialectology,

contrastive linguistics, and applied linguistics, where it is essential to go to the field to conduct research, research has been delayed for more than two years. In particular, in the field of Japanese linguistics, just when methods for describing dialects in addition to the standard language and for comparing and contrasting dialects are becoming popular, researchers are looking forward to the end of the pandemic.

At the same time, we are exploring the possibilities of research that can be done in this situation. In my laboratory, we are researching online communication.

Online communication is a different environment from face-to-face communication in that there is no shared space, no eye contact, and a time lag. The following are some of the differences in communication that arise from this environment.

1. There is a decrease in the number of reactive tokens. The decrease seems to be a strategy to avoid overlapping with the next utterance due to the time lag.

Reactive tokens in Face-to-Face Communication

(1) A: Soredene, konaida, senseino tokoroni ittano.

B: Un

A: Soshitarare, sensei inakute.....

A: So, the other day, I went to see my teacher.

B: uh-huh

A: And then, you know, he wasn't there.

Reactive tokens in Online Communication

(2) A: Soredene, konaida, senseino tokoroni ittano.

B: (Un) →

A: Soshitarare, sensei inakute.....

B: →Un

"Un" by the speaker B sounds delayed to A due to the communication device.

In Japanese face-to-face conversation, reactive tokens are usually given without pause immediately after the conjunction "soredene(so)" as in (1). In Japanese,

it is known that reactive tokens are frequent, and there are many types of them (Clancy et al. 1996, among many others). However, as shown in (2), B's tokens sound out of time to A when a time lag occurs. It causes communication problems. Therefore, communication will be hindered. In order to avoid this, in online communication, B does not utter any reactive tokens in many cases.

2. Overlap increases.

When a speaker finishes speaking and gives up the right to speak, the rest of the participants are immediately allowed to gain the right to speak. Who gets the right is determined by eye contact, pointing, and other methods that work only in face-to-face situations.

Since they cannot be used in an online conversation, it becomes unclear to whom the right has been given. As a result, several people start talking simultaneously. Even in a conversation of two participants, a speaker A may cause an overlap with the next turn-taker B if A judges that B does not start to speak. In this case, A gets her/his right to continue her/his

turn, hence the overlap.

As far as I know, there is no technology or method to solve these problems at this stage. Considering that online communication will still be used after the pandemic, research should be done on online conversations.

5. For the future

What we have experienced in the pandemic is not all bad.

1. We seem to have found that some things are not necessarily done face-to-face. Instead, we have found that they can be done online only. Such things should be actively utilized.

2. The number of presentations and papers submitted to the societies in our field has skyrocketed during the pandemic. The lack of commuting time and shorter meetings online are some of the positive aspects of online, which we should continue to do.

We have been gradually returning to face-to-face classes since October. We believe that we will soon be able to research in the field. It will

take some time, but we hope that the world will gradually return to normal and we will be able to deepen our international exchange.

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