Using television dramas to teach Japanese language and culture

Abstract

The technological revolution that has taken place in the last thirty years has greatly enhanced global communication. For those involved in the teaching of foreign languages this means they now have greater access to authentic materials from the country where their target language is spoken than in the past. This material is a tremendous resource that can be used to enhance the learning experience of students. The use of authentic material in the classroom, however, is not without problems. This paper examines the potential use of television dramas in the teaching of Japanese language and culture. Seasonal dramas are an extremely popular form of entertainment in Japan. They are both a product of and a reflection on the consumer culture of that society. In this sense dramas offer insights into contemporary Japanese society that cannot be gained from other sources. Dramas are also designed to be entertaining and to draw the audience into the imaginary world they depict. One important issue to be considered in using dramas in the classroom is the extent to which the image they portray of Japan is real and to what extent it is distorted for dramatic purposes. Here discussion focuses on the 2010 production ‘Nihonjin no shiranai nihongo’ (Japanese that Japanese People Don’t Know). This is a comedy about a young woman who inadvertently becomes a Japanese teacher at a language school in Tokyo. The running joke throughout the series is that, although she is the teacher, she does not understand many things about Japanese language and culture so she learns things along with the students. This series offers a potentially interesting entry point for students wishing to study about Japan because it includes references to such popular topics as the tea ceremony, yakuza and ninja.

Thanks to recent advances in technology and the new wave of globalisation this has brought, there are now a wide variety of Japanese television programs, many with English sub-titles, available outside Japan. Subject to appropriate copyright approval, these can potentially provide a valuable resource for teaching language and culture. One of the problems in teaching Japanese in Australia is that both the linguistic and cultural gap separating the two countries is very great. The use of television programs in teaching can provide one means of helping to bridge that gap. By watching a TV drama, students who have never been to Japan can gain an immediate insight into what life is like there.
1. Television and Japan’s consumer society

Before turning to discuss the specific use of dramas in teaching it might be useful to provide some background information on television in Japan in general. Japan has a population of 126 million people and about one quarter of this number live in the greater Tokyo area. Other major centres of the population include Nagoya and the Osaka-Kobe area. Not only is Japan a highly urbanised society, it is also immensely wealthy. Despite the fact that the Japanese economy has been in recession since the early 1990s, the standard of living in Japan is still very high. The combination of high levels of urbanisation and a high standard of living make Japan one of the most consumer-oriented societies in the world. The media, especially television, plays an important role in this consumer culture. Consumerism is not only reflected in the constant commercials that appear on television but also in the programs themselves. Although foreign programs are shown in Japan, the overwhelming majority of content is Japanese. Japan, of course, is the only country in the world where Japanese is spoken and the domestic market is large enough to sustain large-scale production of television shows. This includes not only news and current affairs but also sports and other forms of light entertainment. Of particular interest in teaching language and culture are dramas, one of the most popular forms of entertainment on Japanese television. Given the importance of dramas on television in Japan, very little research has been published in this area in English. An exception is the recent book by Lukacs (2010) from which I have drawn heavily in the following section.

Unlike Australia where dramas such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* run interminably, Japanese dramas usually run for about twelve weeks and they coincide with the seasons. It is common for these seasonal dramas to be used as a form of advertising. Because they are made in the same season they are shown, the stars wear the latest fashions and they often go on excursions to famous tourist spots such as ski resorts and hot springs. Romance is the most common theme but dramas set in schools and the workplace are also popular. Dramas also often feature popular entertainment figures known as ‘talent’ in Japan. The appearance of a famous ‘talent’ can greatly increase a show’s popularity while ‘talent’ can add to their own fame by appearing in highly-rated dramas. As the various TV stations compete with each other and many new dramas are made each year, there is a constant drive for popularity. In short, television dramas are an integral part of Japan’s consumer society and watching these dramas provides a unique opportunity to observe aspects of contemporary Japanese society.

Despite all the effort put in to making dramas, Japanese production companies have made little effort to export their product to foreign countries. The reason for this is not clear but perhaps there is an assumption that because the dramas are so closely linked to life in Japan, there would be little interest abroad. However, Japanese dramas are quite popular in other parts of Asia like Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan. In these places some Japanese dramas are shown on regular television but there is also great demand for illegally-copied versions. Before the advent of the Internet these illegal copies were mostly distributed on pirated DVDs but now programs...
can be easily copied directly from the broadcast and spread over the internet. The availability of this technology has also facilitated the subtitling of Japanese dramas in various foreign languages. In the case of English, over the last few years there have appeared various fan-based groups that add subtitles and distribute the programs for free. This is a copyright violation but few companies have taken legal action to stop it happening. One reason for this may be that in many cases the fan-subtitled dramas are not actually competing against officially-produced product. Whatever the reason, the appearance of these Japanese dramas with English subtitles has created a relatively large fan-base for Japanese television dramas outside of Japan. In addition to illegally-copied dramas there are now also many commercially available ones that can potentially be used in teaching.

2. Television dramas in the classroom

Of course, the purpose of using dramas in teaching is not to entertain students. For Australian students of Japanese one of the main points of interest in these shows is the opportunity to see Japanese used in context. Often the Japanese is of an advanced nature so it can difficult for students to understand it fully. In this regard the availability of subtitles is a great help. If students do not have advanced Japanese, they can watch an entire show with subtitles so they understand the story and then focus on specific scenes where particular forms of Japanese are used in context. Dramas are particularly good for providing examples of the cultural aspects of communication and they can offer an insight in to aspects of Japanese language and society that cannot be found elsewhere. Unlike audio-visuals made for use in conjunction with language textbooks, the content of dramas is ‘real’. Not in the sense that what happens in the program is true, but in the sense that they are intended for consumption by a native-speaker audience. However, the meaning of these shows is very different for native and non-native viewers. When native speakers watch these dramas they do so simply for entertainment and are not seeking to find any deep meaning in the stories. Native speakers also have a good understanding of Japanese society so they can easily differentiate between aspects of the story that are realistic and those that are not. One of the interesting issues is to what extent the content reflects an accurate portrayal of Japanese society. Some dramas are extremely realistic while others are obviously fanciful. One of the tasks of the teacher is to help students differentiate between what is realistic and what is not. In this regard, using dramas in the classroom requires the teacher to have a very detailed understanding of the subject matter. One of the good things about dramas is that there are a great many already available and new ones are constantly being made so there is an ever-widening choice.

As an example of the potential use of drama in teaching I will discuss the series *Nihonjin no shiranai nihongo* (Japanese Language that Japanese People Don’t Know) first broadcast by Yomiuri Television in 2010. This show was based on a manga about a young woman who accidentally became a Japanese language teacher to a group of foreigners living in Tokyo. The theme of the series is that the teacher herself does
not have a good understanding of Japanese but she learns a great deal when she has to teach her foreign students.

The first episode begins with a young woman standing on a crowded bus. Sitting in front of her is an African listening to loud music through headphones. She complains that the music is too loud and that he should also stand up and allow an older woman to sit down. He answers in English saying he is tired and other people should stand up. She then berates him in Japanese saying that while in Japan he should follow Japanese rules: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” He finally stands up and everyone on the bus applauds. This scene immediately shows the strengths and weaknesses of using television dramas in teaching. While the setting is very realistic and shows students instantly what a Japanese bus looks like, the portrayal of the confrontation is not at all true to life. In reality it is very rare for people to speak up in such a way or in such a circumstance. The incident is supposed to be humorous but it does facilitate a discussion about how one should behave when visiting a foreign country. Should you follow the rules of the host country or should you follow your own rules? There is no simple answer to this kind of question but it is an important issue to which students of a foreign language must give considerable thought. Discussion of this topic can also provide students who have been to Japan with an opportunity to reflect on their own experience and to share that experience with other students in the class.

After the young woman gets off the bus, she is shown holding a name card and searching for an address. For the original Japanese audience this is simply a dramatic device used to show that she is a newcomer and not familiar with the area. In the classroom, however, this can be used as an opportunity to explain about the complex system of Japanese addresses and the use of name cards in human relations. As she finds the address she is looking for, she sees the African man from the bus running towards her. She assumes he is going to attack her so she runs inside the building. It turns out, however, that he is a student at a Japanese language school and is late for class. The young women (Haruko) has gone to the school to work as a substitute teacher. She thought it was a preparatory school and is shocked to find out it is a Japanese language school for foreigners. Once the head teacher finds out she has no experience teaching Japanese, he tells her she can go home but she insists on continuing saying that teaching basic Japanese is easy.

She goes to class and introduces herself in very simplistic and patronizing way without realising that the students can already understand basic Japanese. One interesting aspect of this series is the use of Japanese-speaking foreign actors. In Japan when foreigners are needed for minor roles in movies and TV shows, there is a tendency to use anyone available because Japanese-speaking foreign actors are not all that common. Although their acting ability seems fairly minimal, the actors in this drama clearly have different levels of fluency. Also, the way the actors speak Japanese reflects their own real ethnicity. For example, the Chinese actors speak Japanese with Chinese accents and the European actors with European accents. This raises the interesting question of what level and what style of Japanese language
learners should aspire to. Of course, students always say they want to become ‘fluent’ in the target language but few seem to give much thought to what this actually means. Native speakers are born in a particular place, they are born in to a certain social class, they achieve a certain level of education and all these things influences the kind of language they speak. Non-native speakers do not have this inherent language identity and, although they lack the fluency of native-speakers, to a certain extent they have the freedom to create their own new identity. As students progress with their language study, they need to give some thought to what style of Japanese they want to use. This is, of course, closely related to their purpose in studying the language.

In addition to the cultural aspect of the series, there are also many useful examples of language use from which students can benefit. For example, in the first episode there is the following joke:

Teacher: Tatteitte.
Student: Ta.
Teacher: Tatteitte.
Student: Ta.
Teacher: Tachiagate itte kudasai.

The humour comes from the fact that tatteitte has two possible meanings depending on how you divide up the words:

Tatte itte: tatte is the gerund of tatsu ‘to stand’ and itte is the gerund of iu ‘to say’. Combined in this way they make the informal request: ‘Stand and say it’.

Ta tte itte: In this case, the tte indicates the abbreviated form of the quotation particle ‘to’. This combined with the gerund of ‘to say’ means ‘Say ta’.

The teacher intends the first meaning but the student understands the second so in the final line the teacher says more explicitly ‘Stand up and say it’. This example shows how grammar that students study in class is actually used in real situations.

Since the drama is actually about language teaching, there are many language-related themes running through the series. In one episode an Italian student, Luke, falls in love with a girl who works in a ‘maid café’ in Akihabara. He is frustrated because he believes the girl does not reciprocate his affection because he is unable to express himself well in Japanese. Haruko offers to help him in exchange for being able to help in his business of writing manga—he writes and publishes manga but all the readings of the kanji are incorrect. Haruko prepares a speech for him to recite to the girl but this turns out to be a failure and he is once again rejected. In the end, however, it turns out that the girl is reluctant to talk because she has a very strong regional dialect of which she is ashamed. In another episode the sixteen-year old daughter of the head teacher visits the school. He is divorced from her mother and has not seen his daughter for many years. Haruko teases him because he is unable to communicate with his own daughter even though he is a language teacher. His
daughter uses a very colloquial style of Japanese popular among teenage girls known as ‘gal talk’. The students start talking to her and are very interested in the various expressions she uses. The head teacher makes an effort to re-establish a relationship with his daughter but in the end it turns out that she is only visiting briefly before going to live in the United States with her mother and new American stepfather.

One of the running jokes in the series is Haruko’s inability to speak correct or appropriate Japanese. In Japanese there is a formal style of speech used where there is social distance between speakers and an informal style used when the speakers are close. Haruko often uses the informal style to the head teacher and he continually corrects her. In Japanese there is also honorific language that consists of respectful style when the subject of the sentence is a social superior and humble style used when one’s actions impact on a social superior. A whole episode is devoted to this topic. One of the students has a part time job working in a family restaurant but the style of honorific language they use is not grammatically correct. It is a modified style that is respectful but intended to make customers feel more comfortable. The student ends up getting fired from her job and Haruko comes to realise how difficult it is for foreigners living in Japan not only in terms of language but also in terms of social customs and Japanese attitudes towards foreigners.

This is also an important theme in another episode. Jack, an American student with strong Japanese, needs to negotiate a contract with a sake manufacturer on behalf of his company. Unbeknownst to the other staff and students, the sake manufacturer is actually owned by the grandmother of Katori, one of the teachers. Another of the running jokes in the series is that Katori is in love with another teacher, Shibuya. At the beginning of the episode, Haruko tells Jack that this style of speech is too formal and that if he wants to make good relations with people he should use a more relaxed style of speech. When Jack goes to negotiate with Katori’s grandmother, he uses a very formal style of speech appropriate for a business setting. She rebuffs him, however, saying no matter how good his Japanese is, he is still a foreigner. Bearing in mind what Haruko has told him, Jack decides to change his approach and drops in to an extremely colloquial and familiar style of speech. Needless to say, the old lady is highly offended and refuses to have any more dealing with him or his company. This is problematic as it means Jack may have to return to the United States. Haruko tries to intervene to patch things up. It is at this point that they become aware that the old woman is Katori’s grandmother. Haruko tells the old lady that Jack knows more about Japanese history than she does and she is just prejudiced against him because he is a foreigner. The old lady agrees to resume negotiations if Jack and Haruko can perform a tea ceremony to her satisfaction. They agree to the challenge but secretly Katori is forced to agree to quit her English-teaching job and enter an arranged marriage if they fail. They fail miserably but the old lady agrees to pass them if Katori will quit her job as a Japanese teacher. At this point Jack and Haruko find out about the secret agreement and Haruko becomes angry and reprimands the old lady because of her prejudice. The old lady relents and agrees to talk to Jack and also encourages Katori to invite Shibuya to their house. Although this sudden change of heart is not
very realistic, the series does touch on some of the negative aspects of life in Japan and this makes it much more realistic than the way Japan is portrayed in language textbooks.

Almost invariably in language textbooks Japan is portrayed in a positive and simplistic way. Usually there are dialogues in which someone visits from abroad and many kind people show them around and introduce them to aspects of Japanese culture. Things like the tea ceremony are often discussed with an almost religious-like solemnity but as this drama makes clear, many young people have no interest in or understanding of such things. Moreover, there is rarely any discussion of things like racism or sexism but these issues do appear in dramas. One episode in this series is about a female student from Europe who talks a lot about her interest in ninja. Even though Haruko tells her there are no ninja in modern Japan she goes off looking for one. She goes to an area of woodland near the Imperial Palace and is attacked by a serial rapist. The portrayal of the attack is cartoonish and not at all realistic, but it does hint at the dark side of Japan. In another episode one of the students expresses an interest in gambling and becomes involved with some yakuza (gangsters). Haruko and Shibuya think she is in real danger but it turns out she has paid the gangsters so that she can play out the kind of scenes one sees in movies. The darkest episode comes towards the end of the series and revolves around a female Chinese student who has come to Japan because she wants to become an entertainer. After her arrival, however, she discovered that there were many other girls who are prettier and more talented than she is. She gets a Japanese boyfriend and they make a plan to open a restaurant together. She stops coming to class because she is working to save money. She does not realise it but her boyfriend is just tricking her and is trying to get her to work in the sex industry. The teacher discovers this and rescues her but the police take them all into custody. Officials from the Department of Immigration visit the school and there is the danger that the school will have to close unless Haruko agrees to leave. In the final episode this problem is resolved and all the students end up returning to the school because they have failed to pass the exams.

One of the main potential problems in using television dramas as teaching material is that they are not intended for that purpose. Language textbooks are designed for those with a limited understanding of the target language and are clearly structured so that new vocabulary and grammar is introduced in a controlled fashion. Dramas do none of these things so the teacher must have some clear plan as to how they wish to use the material. For advanced classes it may be possible to simply show a drama and analyse the linguistic and cultural content. In this case, the plot of the drama itself will provide cohesion for the course but the teacher will need to have a very detailed understanding of the content so they can explain it to the students. With advanced classes it would also be possible to have the students read the manga on which the series was based (Tomita 2009). With introductory or intermediate level classes it would be necessary to integrate the use of the drama with other aspects of the course. This could be problematic because it is important that there is some commonality between the drama and the other things students
are studying. If this is missing, the drama will seem irrelevant. One option is to have
the student watch the drama with English subtitles so they can understand the
story and then focus in on those parts of the dialogue that students can understand
or learn from. Fortunately there are many dramas available so it is a question of
individual teachers finding a drama that suits their purpose. Either way, using dramas
in teaching is not an ‘easy option’, it is not simply a question of pushing a button and
assuming the drama will teach itself.

As can be seen from this brief account, dramas like *Nihonjin no shiranai nihongo*
are overflowing with things that should be of interest to students of Japanese—
yakuza, maid cafés, ninja, the tea ceremony and so on. Although much of the material
is presented in a superficial and comical way, the series is modern and engaging and
a good way of introducing students to the serious study of contemporary society.
Watching dramas allows students to see language being used in ‘real’ situations.
Unlike language textbooks that typically present Japanese society in very simplistic
ways, dramas capture some of the complexity of real life. They have to be reasonably
realistic in order to attract an audience amongst native speakers. Only a few examples
have been given here from one series but every year new dramas are being produced
on a wide variety of topics and these potentially offer language teachers a large and
constantly expanding resource for teaching students about Japanese language and
culture.

**References**

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