

# “JAPANESE LANGUAGE – DIFFICULT BUT POSSIBLE TO LEARN WELL IF PERSISTENT!”

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Mr. Bui Thanh during a Japanese lesson for HUBT students.

*Photo: Nguyen Huy Thuyet*

As Dean of the Chinese and Japanese Faculty, many a time have I signed to allow some students to stop learning Japanese as a second foreign language to move on to learn Chinese, English or Russian. Particularly, when students came to me and asked for my signature to change faculty, I would ask them about their reasons for learning another language since they had spent a semester learning Japanese. All of them replied: “Well, Japanese was too difficult, sir!” It is true that Japanese is difficult to learn, but it is not true that nobody can learn Japanese.

Many years ago, when I first learned

Japanese in a course, in my class there were a Japanese husband and wife teaching Japanese as language specialists for almost 6 years. When the course was finished, there were just five or six out of seventeen class members who were qualified as interpreters, the rest working as administrators or translators. In my Japanese class, my Japanese teachers would say that if we learners wanted to become good translators, we should master four thousand Japanese words. At the university, the students were taught just two thousand Japanese words, the remaining common words such as those

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denoting objects: face, nose, hair, ear, and other parts of human body we had to learn by ourselves with dictionaries. In addition, over a distance of six or seven kilometers on the road from our homes to the university, there were numerous signs and advertisements, etc; we jotted down the concrete words in them and consulted their meanings in the dictionary. In class, we were taught only abstract words which need semantic explanation such as passionate, radiant, resolute, good, bad, etc. That is why we only asked the teachers what we could not understand. That is the way we learned Japanese words. We could conclude that when learning a foreign language it is impossible to listen or speak well if learners do not know and remember words. In short, translation requires large quantities of vocabulary and if a learner wishes to be a good translator, he or she needs to master at least four thousand words. In order to satisfy this requirement, we strived by all means to build up a stock of four thousand Japanese words. However, it is often easier said than done. As usual, each day we learned five hours in class and ten hours at home.

In fact, Japanese, a polysyllabic language, is different from Vietnamese, a monosyllabic language. For example, the word “tôi” (I) in Vietnamese in speaking can be equivalent to the word in Japanese which contains four syllables: “oa-ta-cu-xi”, or for the word “ăn” (eat) in Vietnamese, its equivalent in Japanese consists of four syllables: “ta-bê-ma-xù”, etc. Japanese verbs are also different; they should be conjugated according to tense and style. For example, the equivalent word for “ăn” (eat) in Japanese in present tense is “Ta-bê-ru” (informal), “Ta-bê-ma-sù” (formal), “ không ăn” (not eat) “Ta-bê-nai (informal), and “Ta-bê-na-

sên” (formal). In short, Japanese verbs are generally conjugated according to tense: present, past or future, and styles: informal or formal in considerably complicated manners. What is more, the Japanese language uses a great number of particles to refer to subject or adverbial of purpose, etc. If they stand in different positions in the sentence, the meanings are different. For example, in the sentence “tôi ăn cơm” (I eat rice), the particle after the subject is pronounced as “oa”, but when indicating purpose the particle for the adverbial clause of purpose “tôi ăn cơm” (I eat rice) should be pronounced as “ ó wa-ta-xi-óa-gô-hãng-ô-ta-bê-ma-sù”. These are just a few of many particles in Japanese.

However, the biggest problem lies in Japanese grammar. In Vietnamese sentences, verbs usually stand after the subject, but in Japanese, verbs stand at the end of the sentence. In interpretation, when dealing with long sentences, in addition to acquiring a very good memory to remember the whole Vietnamese sentences, interpreters should listen to understand, select word order, and at the same time, conjugate the verbs. One example of this fact is that when translating the Vietnamese sentence “Nhân dân Việt Nam kiên quyết đánh Mỹ 10 năm, 20 năm, hoặc lâu hơn nữa” (The Vietnamese people will resolutely fight against the American invaders for ten years, twenty years or even longer), the interpreter could decide on the word order of the equivalent sentence in Japanese as follows: the phrases “ Nhân dân Việt Nam, 10 năm, 20 năm hoặc lâu hơn nữa” (The Vietnamese people for ten years, twenty years or even longer) could begin the sentence, then comes “kiên quyết” (resolutely) and finally is the verb “đánh Mỹ” (will fight against the American invaders). The

requirement for the interpreter at this time of translation is that when the speaker finishes saying something in Vietnamese, the interpreter should utter out its equivalent in Japanese. That is the reason why Japanese interpreters should develop good memory, good Japanese language competence, good skills in listening comprehension, selecting word order and conjugating verbs at the same time.

As has been said above, Japanese sounds very difficult for Vietnamese people to learn; however, it is quite possible for those who are persistent, hardworking to learn it well. Japanese acquisition requires learners to have strong energy, determination and persistence, work hard and practice using words in reality. In real life, it is obvious that everyone can do easy work but not everyone can do hard work well. I myself have found out that many students are very intelligent, energetic and well-trained, and five years after graduation they could become good translators.

By saying so, what I mean is that however difficult Japanese may be, if learners have strong determination and persistence they can do a good job in learning, translating and speaking the language.

For the present, our university has not yet opened the field of study, teaching Japanese for BA degree; Japanese is mainly taught as a second foreign language for those BA students who study English, Chinese and those who study in the Faculty of Tourism. From my observations, I have found that there are many students who work very hard, learn very well, have brilliant minds, and practice hard at home. As a result, these students, when graduated, have just passed 20 credits but could get qualified equivalent to level N; especially, some of them got N3 (According to the Japanese

government, there are five levels in evaluating the Japanese language competence: N1, N2 for BA Degree, N3 for Degree of Associate, and Intermediate Professional Education Diploma), and N4, N5 for Elementary level). Levels N4 and N5 take up five months to learn continuously, N3 taking nine months and N1, N2 taking four and a half years.

Factors that lead to the increasing needs to learn Japanese

For forty years since Vietnam and Japan established the diplomatic relations, the cooperative relationship between the two countries have been developing rigorously and upgraded increasingly in all aspects: politics, economy, investment, trade, science and technology, education and training, etc. It could be definitely confirmed that never before has the cooperative relationship between the two countries been developed so well as nowadays.

The waves of rigorous investment of Japanese companies after their confinement to the two unstable markets, China and Thailand, are now moving to Vietnam, resulting in a considerable increase in providing Japanese human resources in Vietnam. Japanese has nowadays become a language to be selected to meet the recruitment needs for Japanese investors in different job positions: translators, assistants, executive secretaries, office workers, general affairs staff, IT engineers who know Japanese. It has been noticed through recruitment that those Vietnamese people who know Japanese and can work are not many, not only few in numbers but also in specialized Japanese language competence. It could be said that Japanese companies in Vietnam are very “thirsty” for human resources with proper job qualification and Japanese language competence to meet the demands of the

Japanese investors. Nowadays, in line with this trend in our country many Japanese-teaching centers have been set up and many universities teach intensive Japanese.

Education and training: This is an effective cooperative and developmental field in different forms: state and private. In recent years, Japan has become one of those countries which has provided the greatest non-refunded aids for the educational sector in Vietnam. Specifically, Japan assists Vietnam, by the year of 2020, to train 1000 doctors, as well as to develop high quality universities. In addition, Vietnam has decided to invite Japanese specialists to teach in Vietnam. With the assistance from Japan, Vietnam has completed the phase of the experimental teaching of Japanese in a number of junior high schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In order to implement the second phase, the two sides have established a

team of specialists who study the extension of teaching Japanese in primary schools in the whole country.

It may happen that the rigorous development of the cooperative relationship between Vietnam and Japan in the years to come will cause a shortage in Japanese human resources. For this reason, together with the continued extension of teaching Japanese as a second foreign language, the Administration Board of the University has planned to request the Ministry of Education and Training to permit the university to open the disciplinary code of training Japanese for BA Degree to serve social needs in time.

In my view, in near future the labor markets which use the Japanese language will be highly competitive. Students should grasp this opportunity to select appropriate steps to take in their future lives.

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