

**Teaching Japanese Onomatopoeia:
Challenges and Possible Solutions**

A Research Proposal Presented to
The Foreign Languages Department

by

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Abstract

Japanese onomatopoeia relates not only to the imitation of a sound as in Indo-European languages but also to the description of appearances, feelings, atmosphere, conditions and natural processes. Onomatopoeic words compose an essential part of the Japanese lexicon and are utilised in written and spoken language, in formal and informal speech. Although native Japanese speakers use such expressions on a day-to-day basis, Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) learners struggle to understand and use them properly. Recently, representation of Japanese onomatopoeia in language education has been investigated by many scholars. Nevertheless, little is known about the impact native language and culture pose on Russian JFL learners. Therefore, this study aims to define main problems Russian JFL students face and add evidence to the research on the effective Japanese onomatopoeia teaching practices that consider cultural factors. The multi-method research design including content analysis and a small-scale survey will be employed to study useful Japanese onomatopoeia teaching methods. We will use the content analysis to recognise existing teaching practices and examine the extent to which onomatopoeia is represented in JFL textbooks. The survey will be conducted to depict the problems Russian JFL students have and assess their ability to understand and use onomatopoeic expressions accurately.

Keywords: Japanese language, onomatopoeia, JFL, teaching practices.

Introduction

This research relates to the area that focuses on the methods for teaching onomatopoeia to Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) students. The Japanese language has often been noted to be one of the languages rich in onomatopoeic expressions. Onomatopoeia is defined as “the fact of words containing sounds similar to the noises they describe, for example, hiss” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries). However, according to Hasada (1994), in the Japanese language onomatopoeic words are used not only to imitate sounds of objects or actions but also to define specific emotions, states of mind, conditions, atmosphere, natural processes, etc. Japanese onomatopoeia is recognised to be an indispensable part of the language due to its usage in all language registers from slang and dialects to written formal speech. Moreover, in some spheres, for example, natural science and healthcare onomatopoeic expressions are irreplaceable to transmit the right meaning. In addition, native Japanese speakers utilise such words on a day-to-day basis, which means that JFL learners need to understand and use onomatopoeia in order to communicate effectively in the language. Nevertheless, non-native speakers encounter difficulties learning and using these words properly. Japanese onomatopoeia and its seemingly limited representation in the language education have been addressed by many scholars in Japan and abroad.

A great deal of the research has been conducted to approach this topic by Japanese linguists. Nishimura and Takeuchi (2011) underline the importance of onomatopoeia usage in everyday speech and witness the problems JFL students face. Also, they highlight onomatopoeia’s inefficient representation in Japanese textbooks. Furthermore, Iesaka and Uchida (2014) offer new methods of teaching Japanese onomatopoeia, for instance, dividing expressions into groups according to the language level of learners and using visual aids and

mobile applications in the language education to imitate the way Japanese people learn onomatopoeic words naturally. Nonetheless, these studies overlook the connection between cultural factors and teaching practices. The need to investigate the impact native language and culture pose on JFL learners was recognised by Habib (2018) and Thuy (2017). However, they provide information only about Egyptian, Vietnamese and Chinese students. Thus far, in the Russian academic sphere research on Japanese onomatopoeia teaching practices is still in its infancy stage. Therefore, further exploration of this topic regarding Russian JFL learners seems a worthwhile pursuit.

To study useful methods of Japanese onomatopoeia teaching to Russian JFL students, we will employ the multi-method research design that consists of content analysis and a small-scale survey. With this design we aim to examine existing teaching methods and onomatopoeia coverage in textbooks used by JFL students in Higher School of Economics (HSE) and Moscow State Linguistic University (MSLU), define main problems Russian JFL learners encounter and offer specific exercises to address them. There is a good possibility that our study might be of practical use to JFL teachers and scholars exploring new methods of teaching Japanese onomatopoeia.

Literature Review

The Japanese language has often been described as one of the languages rich in onomatopoeic or sound-symbolic words. Although in the Russian and English languages onomatopoeia largely refers to the imitation of a sound, Japanese onomatopoeia is used to describe appearances, conditions, atmosphere, feelings or even silence (Hasada, 1994). In contrast to Indo-European languages, Japanese onomatopoeia forms an irreplaceable part of the lexicon and its usage is omnipresent: onomatopoeic words are utilized in formal and informal

speech, in written and spoken language. For instance, newspapers use these expressions to make the description of the scene more realistic, advertisements transmit to customers the feeling that the product can bring them through onomatopoeia and in natural science and medicine some onomatopoeic words have no alternative with the same meaning. While onomatopoeic expressions play a critical role in the Japanese language, non-native speakers experience difficulties learning and using these words properly. To communicate with native speakers efficiently, JFL learners need to understand onomatopoeia expressions and be able to differentiate them. Consequently, Japanese onomatopoeia and its seemingly inefficient representation in the language education has recently been addressed by many scholars in Japan and abroad.

A great number of studies have been found that focus on Japanese onomatopoeia (Inose, 2007; Hasada, 1994; Kirillov, 2016; Millington, 2012; Shiroshita, 2010). These studies generally examine different types of Japanese onomatopoeia, contexts in which onomatopoeia expressions are found, and translation challenges. Yet, they do not investigate Japanese onomatopoeia teaching practices. A study by Watanabe (1997) analyses 21 textbooks written in English and Japanese for JFL learners. His findings show that onomatopoeia is largely overlooked by textbook authors. However, his work seems to be outdated at the moment because most of JFL teaching materials have changed since 1997. At the same time, Pantcheva (2006) demonstrates a profound research on JFL teaching methods and suggests that phonosemantics or sound symbolism is important to consider when teaching Japanese. Specifically, she claims that the meaning of certain sounds in Japanese onomatopoeic words determines the message words transmit and the knowledge of these consistent correlations might be implemented in JFL teaching. Nonetheless, her study does not propose exact ways to apply the ideas to the language

education and was criticised by other scholars working in the field for this reason. On the other hand, Nishimura and Takeuchi (2011) focus on the importance of using onomatopoeia words in everyday speech and pay particular attention to the problems JFL students face. They divide these problems into two groups: linguistic and methodological, which makes a significant contribution to the academic literature in the field. Moreover, Mikami (2003) along with Iesaka and Uchida (2014) examine methods of teaching Japanese onomatopoeia and offer new strategies, for example, classification of onomatopoeic expressions according to the language level of learners and using audio-visual aids and mobile applications in the JFL teaching process, which reflects the way native speakers learn onomatopoeia words. In line with previous researchers, they indicate that Japanese textbook authors disregard onomatopoeia as a unique language formation requiring specific teaching approaches. Nevertheless, their studies neglect cultural factors and native languages of JFL students. The need to recognise the cultural context in teaching was noted by Habib (2018) and Thuy (2017), who highlight the role of cultural differences in teaching Japanese onomatopoeia to Egyptian, Vietnamese and Chinese students and provide specific teaching guidelines and exercises corresponding with learners' native language to help them overcome the problems they encounter. Their methods of JFL teaching are based on semantic and phonetic differences between Japanese and native languages of learners. Also, the researches refer to the non-native speakers' language picture of the world that determines their perception of Japanese language, culture and onomatopoeia in particular.

Thus far, little is known about the connection between cultural factors and Japanese onomatopoeia teaching strategies in the Russian academic sphere. Although the Japanese and Russian languages have unlike grammatical structures and phonetic systems and native Russian speakers' perception of onomatopoeia is clearly different, JFL teachers in Russia still use

textbooks that do not depict this distinction. As a result, Russian students could not distinguish Japanese onomatopoeic expressions and use them properly in speech and writing. Therefore, further exploration of this topic regarding Russian JFL learners seems a worthwhile pursuit.

This study seeks to contribute to filling this gap by investigating existing teaching practices of Japanese onomatopoeia and offering new methods of teaching onomatopoeia to Russian JFL learners that take into account their native language and culture. We will test whether Russian students with medium and high level of Japanese language proficiency can use and understand onomatopoeic expressions properly, define main problems students face and suggest possible solutions for each one of them. Our aim is to add evidence to the research on the effective Japanese onomatopoeia teaching, as there is still a lacuna in this field regarding Russian JFL learners.

Methodology

To investigate effective Japanese onomatopoeia teaching practices, we will employ a multi-method research design including content analysis and a small-scale survey. The content analysis will be used to study existing teaching methods of Japanese onomatopoeia and examine the extent to which onomatopoeia is represented in textbooks used by students learning Japanese as a foreign language (JFL). The survey will be used to assess Russian JFL learners' ability to understand and use onomatopoeic expressions accurately and identify the problems students may encounter. Our design is unique in that it includes in-depth analysis of Japanese onomatopoeia coverage in the most popular textbooks and evaluation of JFL learners' skills in two Russian universities.

We believe that the survey in the form of a test with both open-ended and closed-ended questions on students' use of Japanese onomatopoeia in line with opinion questions will enable

us to identify main difficulties JFL students face and suggest the appropriate form of exercises to address them. We aim to test about 80 Japanese language majors from Higher School of Economics (HSE) and Moscow State Linguistic University (MSLU). The scope of our study will be restricted to 4th year students because they generally have upper-intermediate level of Japanese language proficiency and provide an understanding of the efficiency of current teaching practices that exist in Russian universities. The survey will be conducted within approximately two weeks and students will be divided into small groups of up to 20 people.

To test our expectations and collect information about Japanese onomatopoeia representation in textbooks, we will rely on content analysis. This analysis will be conducted on a sample of 10 Japanese textbooks used in HSE and MSLU universities by students from 1st to 4th year. We will count each onomatopoetic expression in selected textbooks, analyse the given explanations and provide a thorough commentary on them. Our overall sample is limited to 10 textbooks due to the short timeframe for conducting the research and the choice of universities with the Japanese language programs.

Expected Outcomes

This research is pertinent to the field of study that focuses on the methods for teaching Japanese as a second language (JFL) to Russian students. As onomatopoeia forms a significant part of the Japanese language, we consider onomatopoeia teaching practices worth investigating. Moreover, we identify a previously ignored factor, cultural context, as an aspect that should determine onomatopoeia teaching practices to Russian JFL learners.

The perceived outcomes of this study are two-fold. Firstly, it is probable that our study will make several contributions to the academic literature on teaching onomatopoeia to JFL students. We will identify main problems Russian JFL learners face and classify them into

groups. In addition, little is known about the connection between cultural factors and Japanese onomatopoeia teaching strategies in the Russian academic sphere. We aim to explore how native language determines JFL learners' perception and understanding of onomatopoeia. As such, we believe that our study might add critical evidence to the theoretical research in this field.

Secondly, there is a good possibility that our study might be of practical use to JFL teachers and scholars exploring new methods of teaching Japanese onomatopoeia because we will offer a guideline with instructions on how to teach onomatopoetic expressions to Russian JFL learners. Also, we will propose specific exercises to help students overcome the difficulties they experience.

The research paper will be publicly presented during the oral thesis defence at HSE university in June 2020. Besides, open access to the study will be provided on the HSE website where everyone interested can familiarize yourself with our findings.

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