Using Pre-Test for Assessing Familiarity With Japanese Culture of Foreign Students During Japanese Communication Class

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Abstract

After over two years into the pandemic, international student mobility is still not recovered in Japan and many of the exchange activities with students at foreign universities are still being conducted online. In 2022, we conducted an online summer school for foreign students from abroad to learn about up-to-date scientific research trends as well as to introduce basic knowledge about the history, culture, society, and lifestyle of Japan, as well as communication style with people in Japan. We designed a pretest covering various aspects of Japanese culture. The test was applied to a group of 60 participants, from whom 36 completed it during the set time. From the test results, the participants tended to show a good understanding of tangible items such as food, customs, weather, and modern appliances, while the more abstract items such as traditional sites, social values, and work culture seemed to be more difficult for them. The test also helped to get the participants to reveal their interests in Japanese culture. In short, applying such a pretest seems to be a good tool for the teacher to explore the level of knowledge and the need of students, and therefore to adjust the content in class accordingly.

Keywords: International Students, Japanese Communication, Japanese Culture, Pretest

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Introduction

International students receive the special attention of their respective host universities. Cultural values are considered an important part of the education to be provided to international students (Brion, 2019; D'Andrade, 2008; Meier, 2016; Storme & Demkhshani, 2002). As a result of internationalization, universities in Japan try to provide international students with preparatory courses, Japanese language courses, and Japanese cultural experience activities, local exchange activities… where they can experience Japanese and local culture (Hirota & Oka, 2001; Tanikawa, 2020).

In our previous papers, we have reported factors related to studying in Japan (Tran & Jin, 2021), experiences of international students with Japanese culture (Tran & Jin, 2020), pull factors provided by universities to international students (Tran et al., 2022), and challenges in attracting international students to Japan (Tran & Jin, 2022). These reports as well as similar reports from various sources in Japan have shown that there is an increasing interest in learning Japanese culture along with the Japanese language among international students in Japan. Understanding Japanese culture will not only facilitate international students' daily life and help to avoid academic stress but also support to adapt to the Japanese working environments and doing business with Japanese partners in the long run (Ogawa, 2013). Therefore, possessing sound Japanese cultural proficiency and the Japanese language will be an asset for international students.

Summer schools are the common activities aiming at attracting international students to host universities (Shimazaki, 2018). For a long time, Tokushima University (TU) organizes several summer schools each year for different types of participants from abroad, where foreign students could have a short-term experience of academic and cultural life in Japan. However, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted international students inbound to Japan (Bista et al., 2021; Murata, 2022). After over two years into the pandemic, international student mobility is still not recovered in Japan and many of the exchange activities with students at foreign universities are still being conducted online, including summer schools. Subsequently, there were attempts to conduct online summer schools as an alternative to traditional on-site events.

In 2022, one such event was conducted at TU for foreign students from abroad to learn about up-to-date scientific research trends as well as to introduce basic knowledge about the history, culture, society, and lifestyle of Japan, as well as communication style with people in Japan. About 60 students from seven countries in Asia, including Japan participated.

Aiming to assess the proficiency in Japanese culture of participants during the summer school in 2022, we conducted a short test covering various aspects of Japanese culture. By analyzing the results of the tests conducted in 2022, this presentation is aiming to show the preliminary results of applying a Japanese culture proficiency test in class, and the implications for further test development and application.

Method

We designed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) to make clear the goals and purpose of this attempt. Students who have interest and curiosity towards Japanese culture are attracted to participate in the school. Administrating the test at the beginning of the course assisted in the assessment of the participants' level of knowledge and therefore help the instructor to adjust

the content to suit the participants' need to plan for future courses. It also will help to refine and developing more test questions for the need.
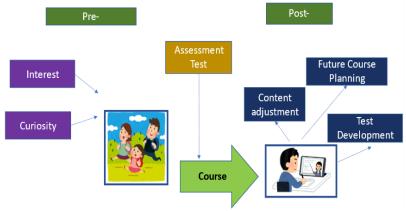

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

As the online summer school was conducted in English, and the English proficiency of the participants ranged from intermediate to advanced level, we tried to introduce a test in English that consisted of 10 multiple choice questions covering aspects such as lifestyle, sightseeing, food and drink, seasons, tradition, popular technology, business, and social practice… of Japanese culture. The questions are compiled from various sources (Chavez, 2005; Gilhooly, 2004) with some adaptations, or developed independently by the author. Figure 2 shows a sample of questions. The participants needed to choose a correct answer among four choices.

Most-visited castle in Japan

- Osaka
- Kumamoto
- Takamatsu
- Himeji

Figure 2: A question example

We conducted data collection in July 2022. Data collection was conducted via online Google Forms by 60 participants who were students at foreign universities who attended the online summer school at TU in 2022. The students were mainly from Asian countries. The survey was fully anonymous and no data to identify the person had been recorded. We made a qualitative analysis of the data obtained by using the KH Coder (*KH Coder*, n.d.). Word clouds were produced using a free online word cloud generator (*Word Cloud Generator*, n.d.). Quantitative data were analyzed by Excel/SPSS.

Results

The pretest covers various aspects of Japanese culture. The test was applied to a group of 60 participants, from whom 36 provided valid scores. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the total score. The mean score was 5.03/10 points, slightly above average for all participants.
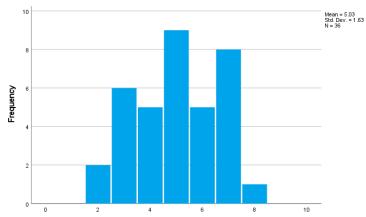
Figure 3. Histogram of the total score

Nevertheless, the mean score was differentiated by each item. Table 1 shows the mean score by item. The results show that higher scores at the pretest were achieved in questions about appliances, gardens, seasons, and drinks… while lower scores at the pretest were related to restaurants, castles, businesses, vending machines, and values... Quantitative questions such as "How many vending machines are there in Japan? The most-visited castle in Japan?" related to the number or frequency, and abstract questions such as "Which are not Japanese values? Which is true about Japan's work culture" are frequently missed.

Table 1. Mean score by item

	Question about	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Number of vending machines	0.39	0.494
2	Type of restaurants	0.50	0.507
3	Type of foods	0.50	0.507
4	Famous castles	0.25	0.439
5	Four seasons	0.69	0.467
6	Home appliances	0.78	0.422
7	Best drinks to gods	0.53	0.506
8	Japanese values	0.36	0.487
9	Japanese gardens	0.72	0.454
10	Business style	0.31	0.467

Regarding the need specified by the participants towards Japanese culture in an open-ended question, the answers of the participants were demonstrated as shown in Figure 4. There seems to be a tendency to pay more attention to visible parts of culture such as foods, clothes, technology… than the invisible parts of culture.

Figure 4. Interests in Japanese Culture

Conclusion

From the test results, the participants tended to show a good understanding of tangible items such as food, customs, weather, and modern appliances, while the more abstract items such as traditional sites, social values, and work culture seemed to be more difficult for them. The test also helped to get the participants to reveal their interests in Japanese culture, which mostly focused on the visible part of the culture.

In this preliminary attempt, as the number of participants was quite limited, we could not take into account the factors that could influence the results such as English proficiency, country, major, scholarship, age, part-time job, and income… In the future, we consider applying the test to compare longer periods such as between pre-arrival and, post-arrival, or pre-program and post-program. It also needs to design a pool of questions with more diversified content for such a purpose.

Acknowledgment

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