

Three Case Studies of Japanese Language Education Using Interviews and Participant-Observation

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There are two main characteristics of research conducted by Japanese language teachers. One is that the starting point for the research is located in the 'educational relations'. The other is the attitude of making the students the centre and trying to grasp the issues with the aim of contributing Japanese language education. Qualitative research into Japanese language education conducted by Japanese language teachers with the above characteristics traces the following path.

First, the teacher develops a rough theme, and then conducts text-based research and practical research in the field. Usually, an interaction between these two types of inquiry develops. During the field research the teacher observes informants' (such as students, colleagues, or other people connected to the field) actions and words, as well as the field itself. Then, the data collected in the field are analysed and interpreted before being written up in an ethnography.

Qualitative research was originally a method developed in anthropology, but today is used in education and other fields. In participant-observation the researcher, while participating in local activities as a member of the group being studied, observes what is occurring. The interview method used in qualitative research is the non-directive interview. Using this method questions prepared in advance are not put to the interviewee; questions are developed while observing the informant's reactions up to that point.

The objective of this paper is to consider how qualitative research may be made best use of in researching Japanese language education. We report our findings based on three research examples.

Ex. 1 : 'Qualitative Research concerning the Japanese Language Education of Missionaries' (Imai)

In order to research foreign missionaries' use of Japanese and interpersonal communication I first conducted interviews, and then conducted field work at Sunday church services. I approached the hypothesis generation process through qualitative research of both of these. I conducted non-directive interviews with nine missionaries regarding issues I had felt in the educational context. Through analysis of the data the missionaries' beliefs regarding missionary work and the Japanese language became clear. Also, as I wished also to observe their actions in social context I planned field work at Sunday church services.

I attended Sunday services on a continuous basis for one year and ten months and my informants included missionary couples, Japanese ministers, and people attending the services. A hypothesis was generated through cyclical repetition of observation, data collection, analysis and interpretation. While it was comparatively easy to effect entry to the field and to build rapport under the conditions of Sunday services this became a restriction with regard to maintaining distance with informants and maintaining the viewpoint of an observer.

Ex. 2 : 'Field Work in Supplementary Japanese Language Education' (Yoshida)

The starting point for this research was the question asked by supplementary volunteers at a supplementary Japanese language school for primary and middle school pupils namely, 'How is it that these children have learnt Japanese and progressed so far?' From this I developed the rough question: 'Is there a connection between children's television viewing and their learning of Japanese?'

The special feature of this example is that the researcher is a Japanese language supplementary education volunteer and is a full participant in the field area. The method that I employed to avoid excessive burden on my pupil-informants was participant-observation in the school, informal interviews, informants' diaries, and non-directive interviews. The non-directive interviews were conducted with individual informants, more than one informant at a time, and in groups. In addition to combining the data from interviews and participant-observation, I conducted text-based research and refined my research theme.

An advantage in this research was that before commencing the research itself I enjoyed relations of trust with the informants. However, at the same time a restriction on my research was caused by the ethical issue of infringing on informants' privacy.

Ex. 3 : ‘Where the principal research area is overseas and the informants are diverse’
(Iwazaki)

My research indicates actual condition of the acceptance of cultural difference by Japanese language teachers sent overseas and elucidates the mechanism of that acceptance. Also, the starting point for my research is my own experience as a Japanese language teacher sent overseas and my experience participating in the management of Japanese language speech contests overseas. Initially, I conducted quantitative research. However, a speech contest is a social event and I came to realise that a qualitative approach was more useful in trying to grasp in their social context the interrelations of the diverse participants (informants: Japanese language teachers from Japan, from the country concerned, students, judges).

My main research was conducted when I returned to judge two Japanese language speech contests in the country to which I had previously been dispatched as a Japanese language teacher. As a competition judge I simultaneously participated and observed events around me. Also, in order to discover my informants’ perceptions I conducted non-directive interviews, most of which I recorded on mini-discs for future analysis.

After leaving an overseas field there is a physical distance between the researcher and the informants. This gave many informants the confidence to talk freely and through the non-directive interview method I was able to gather a rich body of data. However, on the other hand this raises the ethical issue of how to use information with the potential to affect interpersonal relations among the informants themselves. Also, the length of time that may be spent on overseas research is limited. On the one hand this limitation of the time that the researcher spends in the field means that his presence has a limited effect on the situation in the field. On the other hand it creates difficulties in assessing variation between what was observed and what was divulged in interviews.

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