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MODERN ANECDOTES: A POTENTIAL TOOL FOR TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

This paper presents the results and challenges of using modern anecdotes in language lessons for warming up the class and teaching cross-culturalism. In 2020, we conducted a Vietnamese language and culture course targeting university students and adult learners in Japan. The course was conducted online using a variety of teaching methods, and participants perceived modern anecdotes as an effective way to convey cross-cultural understanding and enhance their curiosity and motivation to study the language. The study materials were designed by the trainer, and the anecdotes used in the lessons were selected from various sources. The results demonstrate that using anecdotes was an effective strategy for teaching culture and promoting understanding. The paper also examines the responses, acceptance, and preferences of learners towards using anecdotes, providing evidence for effective use and the types of anecdotes that teachers and students find effective. The findings of this study suggest that using anecdotes could contribute to stimulating learners' motivation for better learning outcomes.

Keywords: *cross-cultural issues, Japan, anecdote, humor, language learning, Vietnamese*

Introduction

Until recently, the number of foreign residents in Japan has been increasing sharply, particularly among trainee workers who cannot speak Japanese proficiently. Conversely, very few Japanese people speak any foreign languages other than English. This creates a communication gap between local Japanese and foreign workers (Zhang et al., 2021). In the last decade, the bilateral relationship between Japan and Vietnam has intensified (MOFA, 2022), as business opportunities have expanded (Froese & Kishi, 2013) and cultural exchange and tourism activities have boomed in both directions (Hoi & Cooper, 2020). As a result, the number of Vietnamese students and trainees going to Japan has drastically increased (H. Tran & Matsuura, 2020). In this context, the number of Japanese interested in learning Vietnamese has increased, mainly due to the growing number of Vietnamese coming to Japan for work and study, creating the need for better communication for business and exchange, as well as intercultural understanding (Multilingirl, n.d.). Japanese learners have an advantage in learning Vietnamese because both languages have a significant number of Chinese-origin words in common, although they slightly dif-

fer in meaning and pronunciation. However, due to the difficult Vietnamese pronunciation (Ishizaka, 2020), many learners quit the class before mastering some basic vocabulary and conversation patterns, with loss of motivation being the main reason for the high drop-out rate among beginners (Cu, 2017).

Humor has long been used in language classrooms (Corbacho Sanchez et al., 2018) or even for subjects such as medical teaching (Ziegler, 2009). Humor is often used to relieve stress, improve social interactions, or to communicate complex ideas in an entertaining way. Studies on using humor in teaching have shown that humor could promote understanding, hold the attention of students, create a positive atmosphere, and reduce anxiety (Powell & Andresen, 2006). There is evidence that many teachers and students perceive using humor as a positive factor for language learning (Pham, 2014). Humor can take many different forms, including anecdotes, jokes, satire, parody, and irony. According to Merriam-Webster, anecdotes is a usually short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or biographical incident. Literature has shown that using anecdotes can stimulate learners' interest and thus create a meaningful learning context in the second language classroom, in other word, to increase motivation in language learning (Deniz, 2001). In the conceptualization in foreign language learning (Dornyei, 1990), motivation is a complex combination of cognitive, affective, and social factors that influence the level of effort, persistence, and willingness to communicate in a second language. Anecdotes can tap into these factors by creating an enjoyable and memorable learning experience that stimulates curiosity, creativity, and social interaction. By using humor and storytelling, learners can relate to the language in a more natural and authentic way, which can increase their motivation to use the language in real-life situations. Furthermore, the use of anecdotes can help learners develop their linguistic and cultural competence, as they require knowledge of idiomatic expressions, wordplay, and social norms. There must be a theoretical nexus between anecdotes usage and language learning motivation. However, little has been reported about effective evidence of using anecdotes, especially when the target language is not English.

This paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by presenting a case study of using anecdotes in a language classroom, examining the responses, acceptance, and preferences of learners towards using anecdotes, providing evidence for effective use and the types of anecdotes that teachers and students find effective, and demonstrating the implications of using anecdotes in stimulating learners' motivation for better cultural understanding.

Methodology

In this paper, we show the results related to the use of modern anecdotes during the course "Basic Vietnamese language and culture" for students and general adult learners conducted online from August to September 2020 (H. N. Tran, 2021). The course was designed and implemented as a non-credit course for beginners who have never learned the language before, or who have already learned a little before.

It was a short course with a total of about 22 class hours, divided into 11 lessons at the pace of 2 times per week. Eight participants were recruited, including 3 university students in their twenties and five adult learners up to 70-year-old, who were Japanese teachers, social volunteers, and private business owners. All participants were native Japanese, speaking intermediate English as L2, and a little experience in learning Vietnamese (Table 1). The participants stated their purposes for learning Vietnamese for exchange activities, traveling, and doing business. By attending this course, participants expected to achieve some daily conversation in Vietnamese, gain a cross-cultural understanding of Vietnam including culture, national character, customs, etc., and know the differences between Vietnam from Japan. This course was conducted online using the Google Meet platform. The results of using anecdotes are collected qualitatively from the interaction, reflection, and quantitatively from feedback and evaluation forms from the learners during classes and at the end of the course. Participants were asked to evaluate each anecdote in terms of understandability and enjoyability, as well as general evaluation at the end of the course by five-level Likert-style questions from 1 to 5, as 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree and 5 for strongly agree.

Table 1. *Participants' characteristics*

Variable	Value	Total	
		<i>n</i>	%
Age	M = 39.25, SD = 18.85 Median = 40.5	8	100
University Student	Yes	3	37.5
	No	5	62.5
Gender	Female	2	25.0
	Male	6	75.0
Beginner	Fully beginner	5	62.5
	Has some experience	3	37.5
Has visited Vietnam	Yes	4	50.0
	No	4	50.0

The study materials were designed by the trainer, as the anecdotes were chosen to fit the lessons' topic and objectives to illustrate the cultural characteristics of the target language, then adapted by the trainer into Japanese using simple vocabulary and sentence structure. The anecdotes used in the lessons were selected from various sources, such as a book, videos, pictures, news articles, research articles, etc. Five anecdotes were selected for application in the course, including traditional anecdotes which were classified as such in the bibliography (Nguyen & Phan, 2016) and three modern ones which were not classified in the anthology but available on internet.

Results

For beginners, practicing pronunciation and differentiating syllables that do not have corresponding sounds in Japanese is challenging and often seems to be tedious. Building vocabulary is to be conducted along with practicing pronunciation and conversation. For each lesson, the participants were introduced to new vocabulary and basic expressions related to a theme. We tried to include some cross-cultural tasks to mix with the language practice part to sensitize the learners' motivation. The learners perceived using anecdotes as one of the most effective ways to convey cross-cultural understanding and enhance curiosity and motivation for studying the language. Vietnam is known for its rich repertoire of anecdotes, a country where people enjoy telling anecdotes, as they often make fun of their bad habits or behaviors, such as being too stingy, short-sighted, pragmatic, tricky, etc. Anecdotes, both in traditional and modern styles, were considered by the participants as very interesting but useful tools to understand Vietnamese national characteristics. Especially, when an anecdote was left open-ended and the participants were asked to guess the end of the story, in most of the cases no participant could guess it.

Here we show several anecdotes used in the course and the reaction and feedback from the learners collected from the in-class discussion, class reflection, and end-class evaluation questionnaire. First, we show two well-known anecdotes from Vietnamese traditional literature.

Anecdote 1. Flattering (Nguyen & Phan, 2016)

In the village, there had been a man who liked to flatter the superiors. One day he came to a Mandarin's house and said: "Yesterday, I dreamed that you would live for a thousand years. I want to report to you immediately this good news." The Mandarin did not seem turned happy as the man expected. He said, "I read a book about dreams. In a dream, everything is opposite to reality, and living is death. I'm worried about such a dream!". The man was scared, so he hurriedly said: "I'm sorry, I'm wrong. I dreamed that you would die for a thousand years!"

This anecdote is a very well-known traditional anecdote in Vietnam. In Vietnam's rural areas centuries ago, many people frequently flatter their superiors, usually some feudal lords, for earning material or social benefits. People tell this anecdote to criticize the flattering behavior, which is considered a bad manner of a person with dignity.

The reaction of the participants to this story was inconclusive. Most of them reported that the story was clear and understandable but not perceived as funny. As the problem with translation was excluded, it seemed that the nuance of humor in the form of sarcasm in this story was not well perceived by Japanese participants. Some participants argued that the Japanese do not use sarcasm, although flattery to

their superiors might also exist in Japan. In general, the participants were not excited about the sarcasm in the story, although they fully understood its content.

Anecdote 2. *The stingy man* (Nguyen & Phan, 2016)

Once upon a time in a village, there was a stingy man who was reluctant to eat or buy clothes for saving his money. One day, a friend asked him to go to the market with him. At first, the man refused. But as his friend kept insisting, then the man reluctantly took three coins in his pocket, and they departed for the market.

At the market, the man wanted to buy many things, but he was afraid of spending his money, so he did not buy anything. It got too hot, and he was thirsty, but he was afraid that he might have to pay for his friend, so he dared not to ask his friend to enter a restaurant.

On the way return, they got on a boat to cross a river. When the boat was still in the middle of the river, he was so thirsty, so he bent down to drink river water but unfortunately fell into the river.

His friend on the boat called out:

– Please save that man for five coins of rewards!

In the middle of the river, the man tried to raise his head and said:

– Five coins are too expensive!

His friend corrected:

– For three coins then!

The stingy man miserably raised his head again!

– Still too expensive! I'd rather die!

Like Anecdote 1, Anecdote 2 is also a well-known traditional anecdote that has been circulated in Vietnam's rural areas for centuries. People tell this anecdote to criticize stingy people, who are considered a bad characteristic of a person with dignity.

The participants' reaction to this story was mostly positive, as they reported that the story was easy to understand but not perceived as funny. It appeared that the sarcasm in this story was not well-received by the participants. It was evident that the story was not real and was created with some exaggeration for the sake of humor. As argued by the participants, although there are stingy people in Japan, it is considered a personal matter and personal choice rather than a bad manner. For example, the stingy man may feel afraid of not treating his friend, but in Japan, not treating his friend is fully acceptable. Thus, we could observe a clear cross-cultural value difference, which resulted in the different ways people perceived the intended humor.

From the above two traditional anecdotes, we can see that both stories were not well-perceived as funny. Instead, the participants saw them as unreal and exaggerated stories that emphasized some sarcasm. To verify whether some modern

anecdotes could be better received by the participants, we selected the following anecdotes. These were modern anecdotes that we found on the internet with an unknown origin, although all of them were very famous among Vietnamese people for decades.

Anecdote 3. *Aviation conference* (Haivn, 2017)

During an aviation conference, an American guy proclaimed, “Give me a piece of iron, and I will make a Boeing 787!”. The audience gave him a big round of applause.

A Japanese guy then shouted, “Give me a little semiconductor, and I will equip your 787 with a communication system”. Again, the audience applauded loudly.

Finally, a Vietnamese guy stated his ability: “.....”

What do you think the Vietnamese said? Paused for brainstorming!...

In this story, we decided to give a pause for the participants to brainstorm. Since some of the participants had traveled to Vietnam and had acquaintances, they might use their experience to guess the behavior pattern of the Vietnamese man in the story. Also, giving time for brainstorming might make the participants more proactive and motivated to find the pattern. Although none of the participants could give out the expected answer, they seemed happy to guess and discuss the solution.

Vietnamese guy: “If you give me a flight attendant, I can create an unlimited number of crew and passengers to ride your 787.”

Finally, giving the answer, which seemed to be unreal and exaggerated to the participants made them surprised and laughed, as they perceived it to be humorous. In this story, we gave a remark to the participants about the characteristic of Vietnamese people often likely to exaggerate their abilities for making jokes, for showing their pride, or for getting out of a difficult situation.

Anecdote 4. *Hero* (Haivn, 2017)

An American, Chinese, and Vietnamese boarded the plane departing from Moscow. Suddenly, a hijacker took out a gun and threatened everyone.

The Chinese guy started Kungfu moves, but it got wrong as the hijacker shot him.

The Cowboy took out his gun, he was shot too.

Then, the Vietnamese approached the hijacker.

The hijacker fired all the bullets at the Vietnamese, but he remained unharmed.

The hijacker ran out of bullets, then was arrested by the passengers.

Then people asked the Vietnamese: “Why aren’t you killed by bullets?”

Why do you think the Vietnamese survived the bullets? Paused for brainstorming!...

In this story, we took the same strategy to give a pause for brainstorming. The participants might use their experience to guess the secret weapon of the Vietnamese man in the story. Here, the participants became interested in finding the answer. Again, none of the participants could give out the expected answer, but it burst into a discussion about cross-cultural values.

The Vietnamese guy slowly took off his jacket.

His whole body turned out to be all kinds of bicycle parts, pressure cookers, irons, and more!

Then we gave the final sentence of the story, and it was still very puzzling as no participant could figure out what it was about. It needed further explanation about the Cold War era when Vietnamese people were so poor that they made a living by bringing bicycle parts from the USSR for resale in Vietnam. At this moment, it became clear to the participants, but it was still difficult for them to find it humorous since there was some sarcasm in the story.

Anecdote 5. Gratitude (Haivn, 2017)

A new haircut shop is launching a free haircut campaign.

A Bulgarian has entered the haircut shop and got a cut for free.

The next morning, the shopkeeper received a bouquet of roses.

An Italian also got a cut for free. The next morning, the shop owner received a pizza.

The next day, a Vietnamese also had a free cut.

What happened the next morning? Paused for brainstorming!

The next morning, when the owner opened the shop, he saw 20 Vietnamese guys waiting for free haircuts.

The end of these anecdotes seemed clear and fun for the participants, with less nuance of sarcasm perceived by the story. Instead, the learners enjoyed the ending as they found Vietnamese people to be practical, realistic, and quick to respond to word of mouth.

Table 2. *Participants' evaluation about anecdotes.*

Domain	Anecdote	Evaluation	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Traditional anecdotes	A1	Understandable	3.88	4.00	4	.641
		Enjoyable	2.75	3.00	3	.707
	A2	Understandable	4.38	4.00	4	.518
		Enjoyable	2.50	2.50	2 ^a	.535
Modern anecdotes	A3	Understandable	4.75	5.00	5	.463
		Enjoyable	4.50	4.50	4 ^a	.535
	A4	Understandable	3.50	3.50	3 ^a	.535
		Enjoyable	3.25	3.00	3	.886
	A5	Understandable	4.63	5.00	5	.518
Enjoyable	4.50	4.50	4 ^a	.535		
Traditional anecdotes	A1,2	Understandable	4.13	4.00	4	.443
Enjoyable	2.63	2.75	2 ^a	.582		
Modern anecdotes	A3,4,5	Understandable	4.29	4.33	4 ^a	.415
Enjoyable	4.08	4.00	4	.584		

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 2 shows the evaluation of the participants regarding each of the five anecdotes presented. Both traditional anecdotes (A1, 2) and modern anecdotes (A3, 4, 5) showed good understandability (mode 4 and 4a, respectively). However, no significant difference was found between the traditional and modern groups regarding understandability (Paired Samples t-Test $M=-.167$; $SD=.463$; $t(df)=-1.018(7)$; $p>.05$). On the contrary, traditional anecdotes (A1, 2) showed a significant low enjoyability (mode 2a) compared to modern anecdotes (A3, 4, 5) (mode 4) (Paired Samples t-Test $M=-1.458$; $SD=.425$; $t(df)=-9.707(7)$; $p<.0001$)."

Table 3. *Participants' evaluation about anecdotes.*

	Evaluation	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Do you think the use of anecdotes helped you to better understand Vietnamese culture?		4.13	4.00	4 ^a	.835
Did you find the anecdotes to be interesting?		4.25	4.00	4	.707
Did the use of anecdotes help you to remember the language better?		3.38	3.00	3	.518
Would you like to have more anecdotes in your future classes?		4.38	4.00	4	.518

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

The results of the final evaluation form applied at the end of the course (Table 3) showed that the participants highly evaluated the anecdotes used, which practically contributed to their gaining progress in intercultural awareness and mentality (mode 4a), enjoyment and curiosity (mode 4), motivation and engagement (mode 4). The participants do not see a direct link for improvement of proficiency (mode 3).

Discussion

From the results above, it may appear to be relevant to the existing theoretical frameworks for the use of humor as a motivational tool in language learning from several areas. According to the self-determination theory (Chirkov et al., 2007), learners are motivated by three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Humor can fulfill these needs by promoting a sense of control over the learning process, enhancing learners' confidence in their abilities, and creating positive social interactions that foster a sense of belonging. In the current study, the learners reported gaining a sense of inclusion over the process by being able to input their own ending version to the anecdote, which brought a sense of confidence and autonomy. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2012) suggests that learners acquire new knowledge and skills by observing others and modeling their behaviors. In our study, humor can serve as a stereotype for learners, demonstrating effective communication strategies and cultural norms while also making the learning process more engaging and enjoyable. Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) proposes that learners' affective states, such as anxiety and stress, can act as a filter that inhibits language acquisition. Humor can reduce learners' stress and anxiety levels, thereby lowering their affective filter and making it easier for them to acquire new language skills. The current study's findings appear to support this hypothesis, as the participants enjoyed the anecdotes in general. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011) posits that learners have a limited number of cognitive resources available for processing information. The current study supports the fact that humor can reduce cognitive load by making learning more enjoyable and less effortful, allowing learners to allocate more cognitive resources to processing and retaining new information. By drawing on these and other theoretical frameworks, researchers and educators can develop more effective strategies for using humor to motivate language learners.

Studies have shown that choosing an appropriate anecdote to fit the class purpose and context should be a flexible but elaborate task (Deniz, 2001). In the current case, although most of the anecdotes introduced during this course seemed well perceived and understood by the participants, the trainers still faced some challenges in applying anecdotes in the language classroom. At first, it took time to select and consider which anecdote to pick for the lesson. Some criteria were applied, such as the anecdotes should not seem to be offensive, the story is simple, and does not contain complicated cultural elements. There should be a turning point in the story to be paused for making the participants brainstorm. The story could be better if it describes people representing a multicultural setting. Furthermore, there should be

no copyright issue involved with the story. Choosing the timing within the lesson to introduce anecdotes also needed to be considered. Anecdotes seem suitable for icebreaking and warm-up during the beginning or middle of a session. It also had a good impact on introducing an anecdote at the end of a lesson, leaving a pause for the participants to brainstorm at home and to be continued in the next lesson.

Integrating cultural elements with teaching a foreign language is a common approach to target adult learners (Neff & Rucynski, 2013). In this course, incorporating anecdotes into the language contents showed to be a good strategy to enhance the participants' motivation and engagement. These exercises, alternating with the core language exercises, may activate the participants to brainstorm and orientate outside their habitat using their knowledge and experiences to find solutions to problems or to guess the behavioral patterns in certain situations. Facilitating these sessions according to principles of adult learning and critical thinking seems to be effective for the participants to become more curious about the new socio-cultural settings that they may want to discover with their new language skills (Igarashi, 2018). Surprisingly, in this course, participants seem to be interested more in modern anecdotes than the traditional ones. Modern anecdotes tend to be perceived as humor better than traditional ones. Anecdotes that compare different nationals without sinister intentions seem effective to explain certain intercultural characteristics. Anecdotes seemed to be effective for warm-up, and for changing the mood when learners seem bored with pronunciation practice or grammar lectures.

While the results of this study provide some insight into the potential benefits of using anecdotes in language learning, there are several limitations to be considered. Firstly, the sample size of this study was small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The results are limited to the participants who are native Japanese speakers, which may not be representative of learners from other cultural backgrounds or language learning contexts. Furthermore, the study only focused on the use of modern anecdotes in the Vietnamese language classroom, and it is unclear whether the findings can be applied to other languages or types of anecdotes. The study only used anecdotes as a supplemental tool in language instruction, and it is unclear how effective anecdotes would be as the primary mode of instruction. Lastly, while the feedback from the learners was generally positive, it is possible that the use of anecdotes may not be suitable for all learners and may not be effective in all teaching contexts. It is important for future studies to consider these limitations and conduct further research to explore the potential benefits and drawbacks of using anecdotes in language learning.

Conclusion

This paper presents the lessons learned from using anecdotes in the 'Basic Vietnamese Language and Culture' course for university students and adult learners in Japan. The results show that integrating anecdotes into language teaching at the beginner level has the potential to enhance learners' engagement and motivation to

learn the language, as well as to partially contribute to a better understanding of the culture of the target language. There seems to be no obstacle to applying anecdotes effectively in an online platform. The results imply that anecdotes can be used to support language learning and intercultural understanding when there is a need for learning ethnic languages and promoting cultural exchange, especially for cultures with rich verbal use of jokes and metaphors. Moreover, there is a need for further research to explore the effectiveness of using anecdotes in language teaching for different proficiency levels, cultural contexts, and language structures. Future studies could also investigate optimal ways of selecting and adapting anecdotes, as well as best practices for integrating anecdotes into language teaching in both online and face-to-face settings.

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