

MANGA DESIGN AND ROLE LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Takako Yasuta¹, Evgeny Pyshkin²

¹Fukushima Medical University (JAPAN)

²University of Aizu (JAPAN)

Abstract

We present the project contributing to a rich discourse on innovative approaches to language learning, which is an immanent part of cross-cultural communication. With respect to commonly recognized multimodality of language learning, we study the possibility of using the unique elements of Japanese Manga design for the benefits of creating an environment addressing both educational perspectives and local community development. We also address the aspects of multimodality of language learning, where novel practices (such as poetry creation, learning metaphors, and use of prosody structures with personalized audio-visual tools) should not be understood as competitors but rather enhancers of traditional CALL scenarios creating new technology-driven solutions. By adapting the idea of role language in EFL courses, the learning experience of unmotivated EFL learners can be improved. Role language also plays an important role in Manga localization, i.e., adapting an existing translation to fit the scope of conversation and to make sense in another language. This process helps students to understand the differences between language systems, thus to avoid straightforward (often inadequate) translation. From the societal perspective, students' bilingual Manga designs may be used as parts of real-life problem-based projects contributing to the development and promotion of the local community. Our primary experience demonstrates that our students enjoy making Manga while learning new English expressions and conversational patterns, along with elementary cross-cultural communication and business skills.

Keywords: Manga, L2 writing, role language, multimodality, project-based learning, college-level EFL.

1 INTRODUCTION

Manga, or a Japanese graphic novel, originates from a variety of graphic sources. These sources create a significant part of the Japanese culture and include the old storytelling scrolls, picture books of Edo period, and ukiyo-e sketches of everyday life [1]. Figure 1 illustrates examples of such ancient Manga prototypes.



Figure 1. Old scroll book; picture books exposed in the Museum of Edo-Tokyo; Japanese print "Pearl searchers".

Modern understanding of Manga concept refers to the traditions established in the end of the 19th century with the appearance of Manga magazines such as *Eshinbun Nipponchi* (1874), *Marumaru*

Chinbun (1875), and *Garakuta Chinpo* (1879). Manga dramatically developed in the years after World War II. Many authors argued that the possible reasons for such an explosive development could be found in the censorship policies of Allied occupation authorities prohibiting art and writing considered to be connected to the glorification of Japanese militarism, but accepting publication of other kinds of creative material, including Manga [2]. Figure 2 shows an example of modern Manga.



Figure 2. Modern love comedy Manga in Japanese: from “Love Hina”, K. Akamatsu.

Despite its specific visual styles, Manga does not address only younger generations: in Japan, people of all ages buy and read Manga books. While the beginning of contemporary Manga was significantly influenced by the Western comics traditions, last decades demonstrate that Japanese aesthetics considerably contributed to the global world of comics, where Manga became one of the highly exported Japanese inventions, along with technology and industrial products [3]. Many popular Manga stories are translated into different languages (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Japanese Manga translations into English and French (Photo taken by the authors in a Manga shop in Paris, France).

Using Manga and comics for educational purposes receives some attention of educators. While it seems quite natural that Manga and comics help to extend the learning scenarios in the Japanese language and cultural studies [4] and provide comprehensible learning materials for primary school-level students [5], [6], [7], other examples of using Manga in college and university courses such as math classes [8] or medical university education [9] are not so obvious. However, it has been reported that Manga-based activities can increase students’ willingness to learn and foster their creativity [10], [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16]. Language in bilingual Manga is often used for linguistic comparison for advanced learners or college students [13], [14], [15], [16], [17].

Attention to multimodality of language learning is one of the noticeable trends in today's academic discourse. Many novel approaches (creating poetry [18], learning metaphors [19], and teaching prosody structures with personalized audio-visual tools [20], [21]) are about introducing the practices explicitly responding to multimodal nature of language learning. Different practices should not be understood as competitor but rather enhancers of traditional learning scenarios, especially, in regards to the opportunities provided by present-day computer technology: the challenge is not in transferring traditional techniques of managing language-related data with the use of computers, but in creating totally new use cases, which would not be possible without digital technology" [22]. Manga is multimodal by its nature [23]; therefore, Manga design can provide an excellent environment to address the multimodality aspects of language education.

2 PROJECT SCOPE

2.1 Role Language in Manga

Manga uses a lot of emblematic and metaphor conventions. Role language, which is a set of linguistic stereotypes associated with certain Manga character types, is one of these conventions [24]. Thus, in Manga, boys talk like boys, while princesses talk like princesses. Figure 4 shows an example of the typical role language in English.

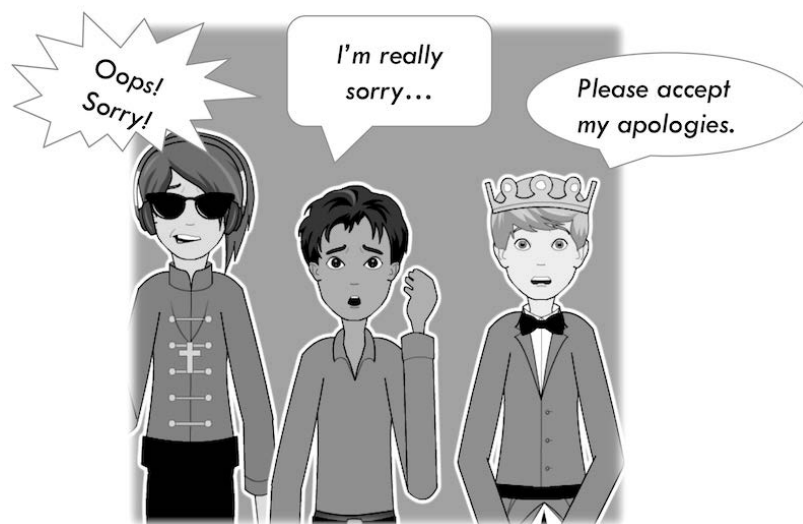


Figure 4. Role language in English.

By adapting the idea of role language in EFL courses, language instructors may be able to introduce an authentic learning experience to unmotivated EFL learners and provides a possibility to pursue a career in the pop culture industry.

Role language plays an important role in Manga localization. Localization is a process of adapting an existing translation and rewriting it to fit the scope of conversation and to make sense in another language. For example, the Japanese language has various linguistic features reflecting the gender, personality, and age of the speaker; therefore, an appropriate translation into English requires rich knowledge of the two languages and connected cultures and sub-cultures. It may include specific linguistic features (such as speech features of young girls), different degrees of politeness (which might not be easily expressible in the target language), etc. That is why the translation of game scenarios, anime, or Manga stories requires addressing both linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. These assumptions are in line with the notion of Godhe & Magnusson: "learning is social, situated and mediated": using a multimodal approach, the mediation can help extract meaningful modes of working with language material, for example, "reading, creating and discussing texts as 'design'" [18]. In turn, Perniss argued that studies of multimodal approaches are framed within the broader analysis of social interaction [25]. With the popularity and development of the Manga industry, acquiring skills for localization could be a new and innovative goal in foreign language education.

We consider a college-level EFL writing course as an assessment and application area for our approach. Here we describe a use case that we already implemented in the language class. Students

create bilingual Manga comics that introduce local restaurants to foreign visitors. Ishibashi found that prewriting activities in L1 promote L2 writing for novice learners [26]. Thus, in our study, low-intermediate level Japanese EFL learners create Manga in Japanese first, and then they design an English version. While writing stories, they have to establish a role language in Japanese and find a way to reflect it in its English version. The process of localization using role language helps students to understand the differences between two language systems, thus to avoid straightforward translation, but to express these differences adequately. From the societal perspective, students' bilingual Manga designs may be used as parts of real-life problem-based projects contributing to the development and promotion of the local community.

2.2 Problem-based Learning in Collaboration with Local Community

Project-based learning (PBL), especially when collaborated with computer-assisted language learning (CALL), can introduce motivating and productive activities in L2 classrooms. PBL is an ideal approach for language learning because it allows students to engage in authentic activities that are relevant and similar to the activities that adult professionals engage in [27]. PBL creates a student-centered learning environment especially with a project theme that interests students. Adapting CALL will maximize the positive effects of PBL, as online activities and multimodal applications fascinate students in the digital era. Digital tools can enhance the students' learning motivation, problem-solving competence, and learning achievement, and self-confidence in learning [28], [29].

The current study is a project aimed at improving students' writing skills in English by contributing to the revitalization of Fukushima Prefecture, the area struck by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. A group of university students in Aizu-Wakamatsu, a famous tourism destination in Fukushima, created Japanese-English bilingual Manga to advertise local restaurants to foreign visitors who look for good places to eat in the city.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Project Workflow

Forty-four computer-science juniors and seniors at a university in Fukushima participated in the project. They are low-intermediate level EFL learners who are required to develop advanced academic English skills in order to write an academic research paper as a requirement for graduation. They are unmotivated English learners; according to the pre-study survey, 22 (50%) of them hated English, and 18 (40%) of them had reluctantly taken English courses to earn required English credits for graduation. Additionally, 12 (27%) of them said that they hate group work activities.

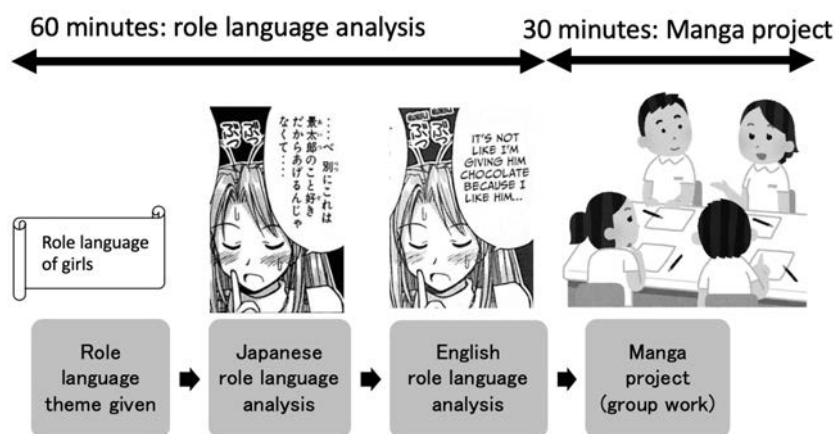


Figure 5. 90-minute class procedure.

The students were enrolled in an English elective course called "Language in Manga" that focuses on developing writing skills and fostering linguistic insight. The class met 15 times during the 3rd academic quarter in 2017, each time for 90 minutes. In each class, the instructor lectured on role language for 60 minutes using extracted pages from popular Manga in Japanese and English. After that, students worked on their group work Manga project for 30 minutes using the role language features they

learned in the lecture part, with an online comic creator. Figure 5 shows the procedure of the class activity. The group work project was designed to contribute to the disaster-hit local community: to provide information about local restaurants to foreign visitors. The course participants created bilingual Manga to advertise local restaurants. By using a local mascot as the main character, the participants worked on the role language of each Manga character. The Japanese Manga were created first as a preparation for their English versions. After carefully revising the Japanese Manga by the course instructors and their classmates, the participants created identical Manga in English. Each group turned in their Manga and a “role language report” that explained how and why certain linguistic features were chosen in their Manga. The author examined the Manga and the report to see how role language was interpreted and established by the participants. They also filled out course surveys regarding their learning attitudes and motivation.

4 RESULTS

This section describes the project organization, student feedback and expected outcome of project implementation. Our primary experience demonstrates that our students enjoy making Manga while learning new English expressions and conversational patterns, along with elementary cross-cultural communication and business skills. Figure 6 and 7 show extracted Manga panels from one of the Manga by students. Not only using preset pictures, the students voluntarily visited the restaurant and took photographs of the restaurant and food in order to complete their Manga.



Figure 6. Example of Manga in Japanese.



Figure 7. Example of Manga in English based on the Japanese version.

4.1 Positive Effects of Project Implementation

It was found that the Manga project in L2 writing brought about a number of positive effects. Choosing the linguistic features that reflect the personality of Manga characters allowed students to use a variety of expressions and sentence patterns. They understood the relationship between certain linguistic features and their impressions. Participants also learned sociolinguistic appropriateness, such as how and when to use polite or casual forms. It was also found that this project using Manga and a real-life objective motivated the participants and influenced their learning attitudes positively. Course surveys revealed that the participants were more positive about learning English and cooperating with other students. In the pre-course survey, 12/44 students answered they hate group work activities, but in the post-course survey, 43/44 students answered that their group work activities were successful. Also, 22/44 students said that they liked English more than before, or enjoyed the course (i.e., Manga making). There were many positive comments and feedback from the participants as well;

- “I could learn a lot of casual speech expressions in this class.”
- “I learned useful expressions for communication.”
- “I learned real English.”
- “Manga as a learning material was fun.”
- “I enjoyed working with other students and learned a lot from them.”
- “We could make the project a better one by working together.”
- “I could learn new sentence patterns and expressions.”
- “Role language analysis was interesting to me.”
- “This class changed the way I read Manga positively. Now I pay more attention to the language than before.”
- “The comic creator was fun!”

These comments indicate that the participants found the Manga project authentic and attractive, as one of them described the class as a “real English” experience. In any L2 classroom, it is necessary for students to feel their learning experience is not a fake but leads them to the real world where they can make a positive contribution through the language they are learning.

4.2 Summarizing Expected Outcome

Though the problem of motivating students to learn foreign languages is particularly challenging for mostly monolingual countries (like Japan), sharing innovative practices in language learning is important for teachers all around the world. On the one hand, such practices contribute to further improvements in learning process. On the other hand, they may favor improving soft skills and a better understanding of socio-cultural contexts; the latter problems seem to be common for many countries.

4.2.1 *Developing Language Skills*

Through making Manga, students learn more aspects of linguistic variation:

- to distinguish the narrative (written) language (e.g., English in our case) from the conversational language (speech),
- to use new expressions and sentence patterns (e.g., tag questions, exclamations), and
- to select and organize necessary information effectively.

4.2.2 *Developing Social and Business Skills*

Working in groups, students develop their soft skills. They learn:

- to be assertive,
- to interact and work with other students,
- to interact with local people (restaurant owners) through interviewing, and
- to make their projects better by helping each other.

There are also some essential business skills, introduced to the students in the process of designing a Manga book, namely:

- How to arrange information within a limited space effectively (presentation skills, ability to organize information);
- Copyright and plagiarism issues (how to use images and other exported materials properly);
- Effective use of camera angles while taking photos of the places and locations they describe in their Manga projects.

4.2.3 Contribution to Society

Since students know that their Manga designs are real-life projects contributing to the development of the local community and its promotion, they are better motivated to create a product, which would:

- provide helpful information to foreign visitors,
- provide useful information to international students looking for reasonable local restaurants, and
- help to promote the “hidden gems” (i.e., small but excellent restaurants that are not known widely yet).

5 CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, in this work, we made an effort to demonstrate how a project-based Manga making activity using a comic creator could help low-intermediate college students to improve basic writing skills in English. Our study was done by using L1 as preparation for L2 writing and establishing the matching role language for Manga characters in two languages. By using Manga and an online comic creator, we expect that the project would positively affect the learning attitude and motivation of computer-science majors who are generally believed to be Manga fans and enjoy online tools. It was also expected that working in groups would foster a sense of teamwork and produce Manga with better quality.

Our primary experience demonstrates that our students enjoy making Manga while learning new English expressions and conversational patterns, along with elementary cross-cultural communication and business skills. Besides, they can see an example, why learning a foreign language may be beneficial for attaining their career goals, for example, in the big industry of contemporary pop culture and gaming. Although our Manga approach is most effective in teaching extensive communicative skills in a foreign language classroom, it is potentially applicable to teaching higher-level academic skills. A further project goal is to apply this approach to instruct advanced L2 writing. Students who learned appropriate registers for different contexts through the Manga approach should be able to transfer their linguistic skills to more formal linguistic skills for academic/ business purposes.

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