Chapter 9

Manga:
A Motivating Multimodal Medium for Learning English

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to illustrate the benefits of manga, or Japanese comics, as learning material in foreign language education for young adults, particularly in the Japanese college-level EFL context. The author has been conducting semester-long manga projects at universities in Japan, and this report is an accumulation of her major findings. This chapter introduces manga-based activities designed for college-level EFL courses in Japan. It describes how this approach assisted language learners in enhancing learning motivation, developing advanced linguistic knowledge focusing on writing skills, and sociolinguistic appropriateness in various registers. It also describes what language instructors should keep in mind when using manga in the classroom and tips for maximizing the effectiveness of manga-based lessons.

INTRODUCTION

Manga, an artform in comics that originated in Japan, is appreciated worldwide. It is not only entertainment but is often used for educational purposes. However, because of their entertaining nature, manga are usually utilized for ice-breaking activities or regarded as friendly learning material for emerging language learners. Manga are not commonly used as primary teaching material, especially in higher education. The EFL curriculum introduced in this chapter is unique and innovative as it aims at teaching college-level English, including academic writing using manga. The entire curriculum is manga-based, believed to be impossible or unrealistic, especially in a highly academic context. This chapter will show the manga-based approach that the author has used in the Japanese college-level EFL classrooms. The chapter introduces English education in Japan and its problems and explains how manga could be effectively used as EFL learning material in Japan. Then the author will introduce three manga-based

activities for college-level students and show some examples and outcomes of each activity. Lastly, the author presents some potential issues that language instructors should be aware of and tips that make manga-based activities most successful. Although the findings are derived from specific contexts (i.e., college-level EFL writing courses in Japan), they are applicable to other foreign language classrooms in similar contexts and offer an enjoyable learning experience, especially for a generation familiar with manga and anime.

BACKGROUND

English Education in Japan: What Are the Issues?

As this chapter introduces manga-based activities in Japan, English education in Japan will be introduced to give some background of the author's attempts.

English education in Japan has not been successful. English is a lingua franca, and the Japanese government has been attempting to reform English education to prepare for further globalization. However, the effort has not been paid off yet. Japanese students begin studying English in elementary school; however, few people are confident in their English skills. According to Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), more than 50% of high school students dislike English, and there is a negative correlation between low proficiency and low learner motivation. After learning English for at least six years, most high school seniors are at the CEFR A1 level, the lowest of the six levels (MEXT, 2017). In the annual report by EF Education First (2021), the English proficiency of Japan ranked 78th out of 112 countries and was in the bottom third group for the first time since the survey began in 2011. Why is the English education in Japan unsuccessful? The author introduces two major problems relevant to her research in the EFL classroom in Japan: 1. lack of learner motivation, and 2. lack of opportunities for using English for real-life purposes, including writing activities.

The level of learner motivation and English skills interact with each other; unmotivated students normally have poor English skills. Even though Japanese people know that having a good command of English promises them more business opportunities and widens their world, most Japanese English learners do not have long-term goals in learning. Few people are motivated to use English for communication because they rarely use it in real-life situations. Non-Japanese teaching assistants, ALTs, may occasionally present in English classrooms; however, in typical English classrooms in Japan, students communicate in English with their Japanese-speaking classmates and teachers. This creates an unnatural situation where all Japanese speakers speak in English, and teachers often find their students start talking to each other in Japanese when the conversation topic gets challenging during the conversation practice. Students do not seriously engage in English for communication because Japan is basically a monolingual country, and the number of people who use English daily is limited. The development of comparatively accurate translation apps might have accelerated people to believe that they no longer need English skills for communication. Thus, the status of English education in Japan has been unique.

Why do Japanese people study English for years? For most Japanese students, English is a prerequisite for entrance examinations. Passing the entrance exams for higher education is the ultimate goal of learning English. As Hirose (2003) argued, English education in Japan focuses on grammar drills and memorizing vocabulary necessary for the exams. In the writing classroom, few teachers teach paragraph writing. Nagakubo (2009) noted that few textbooks deal with paragraph writing; thus, it was rarely taught

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