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DOI: 10.24833/2410-2423-2022-1-30-122-124

LECTURES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GDANSK 2022

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Abstract. *This publication is a summary of the lectures given by the author to the students and faculty of the University of Gdansk in January 2022. Their topics included recent trends in polyglot studies (research on polyglottery), personal experience of exploring the Japanese language and culture, and input as a factor in language learning.*

Keywords: *polyglot, polyglottery, Japanese language, Japanese culture, language learning, input, language level, vocabulary size, psycholinguistics, University of Gdansk*

ЛЕКЦИИ В ГДАНЬСКОМ УНИВЕРСИТЕТЕ 2022 Г.

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Аннотация. *Настоящая публикация представляет собой краткий обзор лекций, прочитанных автором перед студентами и преподавателями Гданьского университета в январе 2022 г. Рассмотренные темы включают в себя современные тенденции в исследованиях полиглотии, личный опыт изучения японского языка и культуры, а также инпут как фактор овладения языком.*

Ключевые слова: *полиглот, полиглотия, японский язык, японская культура, овладение языком, инпут, уровень языка, объем словарного запаса, психолингвистика, Гданьский университет*

In late January 2022, in continuation of previous cooperation, the author of these lines was invited by the University of Gdansk to deliver a series of lectures on the topics of his research to the students and professors of its Faculty of Foreign Languages.

On January 25, he gave a talk “**Beyond the language limits: recent trends in polyglot studies**” to the students of the Institute of Applied Linguistics, in which he recounted the development of research on the phenomenon of polyglottery (consciously attained individual multilingualism) in the last decade. Systematic studies of this kind date back to 2013 and include annual Polyglot Conferences (since 2013) and Polyglot Gatherings (since 2014), academic conferences, symposia and seminars on polyglottery (2013, 2018, 2019 and 2021), the first

bachelor's graduation papers on this subject (since 2019), and the creation of the journal *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies* in its new format [4], [5].

Characterizing the trends and perspectives in this field, the speaker highlighted that polyglottery, paradoxically enough, is not so much about languages as it is about the principles of brainwork efficiency applied to language learning, and expressed the view that polyglottery can be regarded as an optimal model of language knowledge (bridging the gap between academic linguistics and practical language expertise), language education (learner-oriented and revealing scientific principles behind practical know-how) and language policy (recognizing the diversity of the language world and integrating global and local languages).

On January 26, in the lecture “**Modern Japan: studying the language and the culture**”, the presenter shared with the students of the Institute of Russian and Oriental Studies his observations on the Japanese language and culture made during his life and work in Japan. As for the study of the language, the speaker said that, at the initial stage, of much use to him were such textbooks as *Japanese for Beginners* [10], *Japanese with Ease* [3], and the Pimsleur Japanese listening course. Another big help were dictionaries with Romanization or Cyrillization of Japanese words, e.g. *Basic Japanese-English Dictionary* [1], *Romanized English-Japanese Dictionary* [9] and *Japanese-Russian Dictionary* [8].

The speaker pointed out that the main difficulty in learning Japanese is the writing system, which combines Chinese characters, two syllabaries and, occasionally, Roman letters. In languages with phonetic scripts, progress in the study of a language implies expanding one's vocabulary through reading, while reading, in its turn, is biologically dependent on a preliminary knowledge of the spoken language, i.e. on the ability to distinguish and pronounce words in their sound form [2, p. 100, 104].

In the case of Chinese characters as a logographic script (uniting words with whole graphic symbols that cannot be split into meaningful elements), there is a “vicious circle” for a learner as one cannot read because he does not know the words and cannot learn new words because of the inability to read. This problem can be solved by means of phonetic transcription (first developing a spoken knowledge of basic vocabulary and grammar patterns and later passing on to their graphic form) and parallel translation (bilingual texts), though memorizing hundreds of characters necessary for normal reading will still require substantial investments of time and practice.

The lecture also included some noteworthy facts about the Japanese language, such as the diversity of personal pronouns (私 *watashi*, 僕 *boku*, 俺 *ore* “me”, あなた *anata*, 君 *kimi*, お前 *omae* “you”, etc.) and avoidance of second person pronouns in communication; different styles of speech and choice of words depending on the degree of politeness in each individual situation; and use of hypothetical phrases and focus on decisions rather than desires as a result of the presupposition that one cannot know for sure other people's feelings.

Mentioned were some details of everyday life in contemporary Japan which may seem unusual for a European, for example: the use of black ink and personal seals instead of signatures in documents; washing oneself outside the bathtub; the phenomenon of convenience stores; excessive packaging (possibly, in connection with the gift wrapping tradition); vending machines that sell everything; tips not being expected in restaurants; mascots for all kinds of purposes including government institutions; and difference in salaries in the same position depending on sex, age and family status.

In terms of behaviour and communication strategies, the speaker highlighted the importance of expressing gratitude and apologizing extensively; demonstrating respect for the rules (and humbly asking for an exception rather than protesting in case of need); avoiding (even potentially) conflict situations; saving everybody's face; making decisions by collective discussion and agreement (or at least keeping the appearance of it); and observing official forms and procedures when trying to achieve something. The presenter concluded by saying that Japan left him with the feelings of it being culturally a different planet, and, at the same time, of universal brotherhood among people across the world.

On January 29, with the support of the editorial board of *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies*, a professional development seminar “**Input as a factor in language learning**” was held for lecturers of the University of Gdansk, University of Warsaw and University of Zielona Gora, as well as for teachers of Russian in Gdansk. The seminar was devoted to modern scientific data on the significance of input (perceived speech material) in the process of language acquisition.

The speaker first made the point that statistical processing of language input by the brain seems to lie at the core of language learning. The participants were then reminded of Stephen Krashen's comprehensible

input hypothesis stating that, to enhance one's command of a language, input (all oral and written texts the learner receives) must be understandable (from preliminary knowledge or from context), relevant to the learner's needs and interests, and provided in sufficient quantity, and must not meet psychological barriers on its way [7]. Addressing the question of how much input (countable in the number of words) is necessary in order to learn a language, the presenter introduced research data from developmental linguistics, corpus studies and polyglottery, arriving at the conclusion that the threshold level of foreign language competence (B in the European framework) requires the input of some 1,000,000 words [6].

In connection with this, the issue was raised of the size of vocabulary and the amount of input corresponding to different levels of language competence. Surprisingly enough, there is little research on such an important methodological question. An empirical study dealing with Cambridge exam participants, polyglot literature and language learners' online forums give very different figures (e.g. C2 is estimated at 4750 to 8,000 to 16,000 words). From a frequency based perspective, estimates which are in keeping with Zipf's law and indicate a more significant increase in lexical amount from level to level may be closer to the truth. Besides, the quality of vocabulary should also be considered (two individuals may know a comparable number of words but these can be different words). However, it is also possible that language competence levels as descriptive characteristics and vocabulary sizes as numerical values cannot be easily matched as inherently dissimilar categories.

By way of practical recommendations, the research data discussed emphasizes the need for: talking with children more (for their linguistic and general development); calculating input in language education programs; using more audio and video materials in language classes; stimulating extensive reading of literature at students' choice; exploring subjects of interest through the target language; and paying attention to learners' psychological factors.

Hopefully, interest in the topics of the said lectures not only demonstrates the relevance of a polyglot perspective on education and international communication and of a content-based approach to language learning, but also signifies shared aspirations and readiness for professional cooperation across borders.

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