

Experience with Teaching the Japanese Language to Elementary School Children in Hungary

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Japanese is taught experimentally at a Hungarian primary school as part of a reform curriculum. In the past three years, nine- to twelve-year-old children learn to read, write, and communicate in Japanese through a whole system of projects and activities. Projects include *shiritori*, origami, card games, songs, children's plays, nursery rhymes, encounters with Japanese children, correspondence with pen pals in Japan, cooking simple Japanese dishes, and celebrating Japanese holidays. The idea is to provide a complex cultural message through the acquisition of a second language. The school is also involved in teaching judo, folk dances, chess, computing, ikebana, and a number of unusual "school subjects."

It is clear that three groups of students have picked up Japanese with unexpected ease due to the benefits of Zsolnai's method and the support of the Japanese community worldwide. The children are taught the grammatical terms and standards that are used for teaching Japanese at higher levels in two other locations in Hungary, making sure that the continuity of their studies will be secured.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of the Japanese language as a second language at a Hungarian primary school was first introduced at the Experimental Elementary School at Törökbálint in 1987. In this school a new educational approach known here as "Pedagogy in line with Practice" (PILWP) was developed by Dr. József Zsolnai and his associates.

The object of PILWP is a range of activities selected to transfer cultural values from one generation to another by intervening in an active and institutionalized way into the personality development of those taking part in the learning (educational) process. This approach regards pedagogy as a process for personality and ability development, and it looks at the accomplishments of social sciences and the humanities as the foundation of practical teaching. The findings borrowed from the various disciplines are conceived as devices to orient the students in problem definition and problem solving.

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These academic studies are meant to lay down the foundations of education, including social and cultural anthropology, linguistics, and economics.

The emphasis in PILWP is not on the dyadic teacher-student relation, but on the process of transferring cultural values as a social complex, learning and developing personality, and seeking or trying to retain the identity of the self or ego.

The primary and outstanding function of PILW pedagogy is to provide for the transfer of values and the acquisition of values. All aspects of the social and biological existence are aspects of values, and culture and society are mutually inclusive. The total transmission and acquisition of the whole system of culture from an early schooling are considered to be important and possible.

By educational means, the acquisition of a national identity and learning about the national character is possible, promoting awareness of the total system of culture. Our culture is European as well as Middle and East European, and whoever makes an attempt to bring up children with a realistic self-concept should not forget this fact or ignore that there are many peoples and nations outside the European culture that have set an example to Europe on how to study and appreciate other cultures while preserving their own national identity.

In PILWP the educational process is thought of as a sequence of activities and a series of changes in conditions. In pedagogy the process of learning and the process of cuing are well separated. The activity of a teacher is deemed to be equivalent to the practical organization and implementation of the educational processes. This is done with the help of an educational program or scenario. The program is designed to combine teaching materials, objectives, and requirements as a string of activities. By arranging the teaching materials taxonomically one can get a clear picture of the materials used, and it is easier to devise tools for teaching.

The taxonomical grouping of teaching materials in Zsolnai's system are as follows: (1) a group of school subjects (objectives), e.g., communication; (2) activity classes (activities), e.g., reading; (3) activity divisions (tasks), e.g., reading syllables; and (4) activity groups (operators), e.g., reading aloud. The teaching material and teaching tools should be mutually inclusive. They should specify what ways of learning and practicing are required to perform a particular activity category and to acquire relevant skills and qualities. This system is implemented through a collection of exercises, games, workbooks, and audiovisual materials. PILWP may result in a new approach for children to recognize that the universe of school-subject constructs is an artificial world and is just the first step toward the universe of real life. These are the basic assumptions that have helped this school—designed for personality and personal skills development—develop its own curriculum where, in addition to the usual subjects, folk dance, chess, judo, and Japanese-language study have been included.

Information about Our Japanese Language Project

The teaching of the Japanese language and culture can be closely fitted to the Zsolnai approach, which is designed to convey a total system of culture. The use of various

Table 1 Students Learning Japanese: Form and Years of Study

Year	Form (school grade)							No. of Years Learning Japanese				Total	
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4		
1987	3			12					15				15
1988		16				12			16	12			28
1989		18	15				9		18	15	9		42
1990			18	12				12		18	12	12	42

sign and code systems (concept signs, syllable signs, Chinese and Japanese readings of characters, vertical writing, horizontal writing), which are more complex and of more layers, renders the teaching of Japanese especially suitable to use Zsolnai's method.

The multiple layers of the Japanese culture illustrate how a culture can accommodate, acquire, and import elements without losing its own identity. The coexistence of lifestyles, both traditional and modern, are examples of choosing from values and conveying values.

Teaching began after two years of preparatory work with a group of schoolchildren of different ages. Most were seven to twelve years olds who had been selected for their good linguistic aptitude. The course was started by a Japanese native speaker on scholarship; he also spoke fairly good Hungarian. Later a Hungarian native-speaker teacher also joined. The minimum number of classes required to make progress was set at four classes a week. In the following year, taking the age specific characteristics of the students into consideration, it seemed reasonable to set up two groups. The majority of the schoolchildren, who were elder, were separated from the younger ones, and the latter group was filled in with children from their peer groups. Interest in the subject grew in the school, which made it possible for us to make selections. This is how a Form 4 (nine year olds) and a Form 7 (thirteen year olds) emerged. The classes were held simultaneously by the two teachers. In 1989 another group for nine year old children was formed; thus, our experience with teaching beginners covers three years (Table 1).

Japanese Language Through the Zsolnai Method

The Zsolnai system allows the language teacher to independently decide how to make the teaching material attractive for the children. My ambition has been to make the children feel that they have missed something if they have failed to take part in an activity group to acquire a particular skill. To that end, I have included a number of cultural elements in the curriculum. Teaching a second language required us to define a package according to above-mentioned activity classes. The skills taught were verbal understanding and text production (generation), reading, writing, and cultural knowledge (Table 2).

Table 2 Activity Tasks Versus Teaching Aids

	Verbal Understanding					Reading					Writing			Culture		
	Verbal activity	Understanding	Produce text	Grammar	Pronunciation	Sign recognition	Chinese characters	Speed of reading	Reading techniques	Practicing	Introducing signs	Practicing	Chinese characters	Discuss	Newspaper, TV	Manifestation
1. Nursery rhymes	○	○	○	○	○					○				○		
2. Songs	○	○	○	○	○							○		○	○	
3. Flashcards	○	○	○			○	○	○	○	○	○		○	○		
4. <i>Iroha karuta</i> proverbs	○	○			○	○		○	○	○	○					○
5. Games: cards, <i>Janken, shiritori</i>				○		○						○		○	○	○
6. Origami														○		○
7. Drawing by cuing		○	○	○										○	○	○
8. Video linguistic	○	○	○	○	○	○								○		
9. Video cultural	○	○	○	○	○	○								○	○	○
10. Audiocassettes		○		○	○							○		○		
11. Roleplaying	○	○	○	○	○									○		
12. Tongue twisters					○			○								○
13. Riddles		○	○	○								○				
14. Practice sheets						○	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	
15. Calendar	○		○										○	○	○	
16. Fairy tales			○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○		○
17. Cooking, dressing													○	○	○	
18. Nameplates (<i>nafuda</i>)											○	○	○			
19. Japanese events	○	○	○		○									○	○	○

Preparations for Understanding Verbal Texts and Verbal Production

We practiced linguistic and nonlinguistic activities using nursery rhymes, songs, and role playing. Diverse conversation styles in the Japanese language, independent of age, later were introduced for class use. Class instructions were given in hiragana: “です...ます...てください。”

This has proved to be very useful to introduce the [7] form of verbs. The purposeful [まじょう] form also was used.

Teaching started at the verbal stage, the purpose of which is to familiarize the schoolchildren with the sound system and intonation of the target language. The range of Hungarian and Japanese sounds is very close and often overlapping. For instance, consonant clusters in both languages are avoided. This facilitates learning how to pronounce Japanese words, but at the same time—strangely enough in the beginning—it

caused problems in memorizing words which resemble Hungarian words and follow similar pronunciation rules. Switches of syllables were relatively frequent; thus, familiar sounding but meaningless words, a kind of verbal mumbo jumbo, are more difficult to retain in Hungarian than in other European languages. But it also may be possible that words of Latin and German origin, which have been adopted into the Hungarian language, help one memorize when learning a European language, whereas they have a reverse impact when learning Japanese. Therefore, learning nursery rhymes and songs at the initial stage is of crucial importance. The benefit of using selected songs and rhymes is enhanced if they contain some typical structures and phrases which can be acted out, such as: (1) greetings [おちゃをのみに..., どんぐりコロコロ...]; (2) cuing—songs for drawing [よこ, よこ, たて, よこ]; (3) grammar, including counting [インディアンのおじさん] and adjectives [おおきなりの...]; (4) nursery rhymes and plays [じゃんけんぽん, しりとり]; (5) tongue twisters [なまむぎ]; and (6) proverbs [いろはカルタ].

Proverbs and sayings are started on introducing *いろはカルタ* when practicing to recognize the sign. About every week a new proverb is learned with a simple explanation. The keywords are memorized with the help of flashcards. If possible, a Hungarian proverb of similar meaning is taught. Proverbs are surprisingly efficient for enhancing reading and character recognition. To practice pronunciation also is very important, especially achieving the right pitch.

Hungarian words typically are stressed on the first syllable; therefore, it is important to choose a list of words for drills where the first syllable is stressed (such as words beginning with お).

It is also useful to practice the numbers and names of months at the beginning of a class. One proven efficient way to do this is to connect some gestures with words, such as the names of the days with the knuckles of the hand. During this initial period, the acquisition of gestures different from Hungarian gestures and the differentiation of nonverbal Japanese communication are important, such as pointing at oneself (at one's nose), greetings, bowing, counting to indicate numbers (the use of fingers), and waving to call somebody (just the opposite as the Hungarian gesture).

Understanding in verbal communication is taught by practice to understand texts and practice of the role of the second person (singular) receiver based on the linguistic patterns learned so far. Responses to greetings and forms of address in different situations are taught using role playing selected according to the particular conditions the child is in. Examples include an encounter with a teacher, a classmate, or an adult and at different places or different times of the day. By including elements of some fairy tales, the elements of communication can be practiced in a playful fashion.

Greetings:

おんどり: あさです...おはようございます。
 ひるです...こんにちは。
 よるです...こんばんは。
 ...おやすみなさい。

Meals:

たべましょう：いただきます...おいしいですか。
ごちそうさまでした。

Apologies: When bumping into someone, dropping something, being late:

ごめんなさい。
すみませんでした。

The children are very enthusiastic using these words outside classes too.

Practicing a response to a teacher's query for personal details can make use of nursery rhymes:

かえるのうた...なにがきこえますか。
どんぐり...なにをしましょうか...あそびましょう。

The words are explained, and the keywords are displayed in Hungarian:

ゆき...やま—のはら, はながさく。
いぬ—ねこ, まるくなる。

Role playing the songs may be done using words only, e.g., the class will be silent at places and only certain children will say the words required:

どんぐり...
どじょうがでてきて ...こんにちは
ぼっちゃん ...あそびましょう
どんぐり ...よろこんで

Role playing with gestures and mime; for example, the class sings out and the some children will imitate what is sung. Songs are a good opportunity for using gestures in conjunction with words.

Using songs and nursery rhymes, simple translation exercises can be started. E.g., first for gist and just words. Translation provides a good opportunity for introducing a family or friend. Another approach is to make a drawing based on the description of a person. (In accordance with the lexical knowledge, an ever-growing description helps introduce adjectives.):

かお が まるい。
め が くらい。
かみのけ が ちゃいろです。

Producing texts in the first-person singular: Greetings, address, and introductions.

Taking into consideration from the beginning the characteristics of the Hungarian language, the use of personal pronouns must be carefully monitored. As in Japanese, personal pronouns in Hungarian are very rarely used. When addressing people the difference between addressing an adult and a child must be highlighted.

Learning how to express will and requests is started at a very early stage, in parallel

with developing vocabulary starting with the ...をください form. This is connected with the introduction of numerals:

えんびつを にほん ください。
いぬを いっぴき かいてください。

At this stage, learning by doing becomes important again, for example, drawing pictures and selling at a shop. In addition to saying thanks, cultural characteristics, gestures are connected, such as a polite hesitation when requesting something or bowing as an expression of gratitude.

It is built into the learning process in harmony with the grammatical phrases of orientation, inquiry, and defining a location.

Role playing and the description of various pictures are a suitable means of developing skills to produce texts on one's own. Using the teacher's cuing, by changing characters, objects, and venues, the pupil is capable of expression according to individual skills. The multitude of expressions within the Japanese language is reduced at the beginning to generally acceptable polite conversation, but on addressing the patterns expected in an adult-child conversation, teacher-pupil relationships are definitely used; thus, first names and family names are not used as it is customary in Hungarian, but should be used as in Japanese. Conversation is easier if the children find themselves Japanese names. Attempts are made not to use coursebook sounding names. Questions and expressions that are impolite, inconvenient, or do not fit are not used for drills either.

Independent verbal production will be complemented by the reproduction of songs and dialogues learned in front of an audience.

Linguistic manipulations can be started by replacing one type of elements by the same type but having a different meaning; verb for verb, noun for noun, and then nouns replaced by pronouns.

あきらくん は 9さいです。...4ねんせいです。
あのこは...
ともだちは...

Sentences can be expanded or shortened to familiarize students with sentence patterns. Transformation exercises also can be used.

Teaching the right pronunciation involves development of comprehension of speech adjusted to Japanese pronunciation and speech articulation through imitation and reading, based on speech in the class by the teacher and recorded speech on tape.

Practicing the sounds different from those of the Hungarian language, with consideration for special lip movements (compared to Hungarian).

Practicing word stress and pitch is first done by teacher's cuing then recorded sequences of sound, such as pronunciation of unstressed syllables and devocalization for example, the syllable for the ん sound. Rhythm can be practiced with short and long sequences of syllables. Intonation is practiced with sentences of the same meaning in question and statement forms.

Pronunciation drills are coupled with breathing drills and speed exercises, making

sure that lip movements are appropriate. Rhythm exercises are started by reciting the lyrics to songs without tune. Later the schoolchildren are made aware of specific pronunciation by reading aloud and practicing short, long, and connected syllables.

Reading

In the first year only hiragana is taught systematically. The symbols are introduced during the first week, when some words—such as greetings and names of objects—are

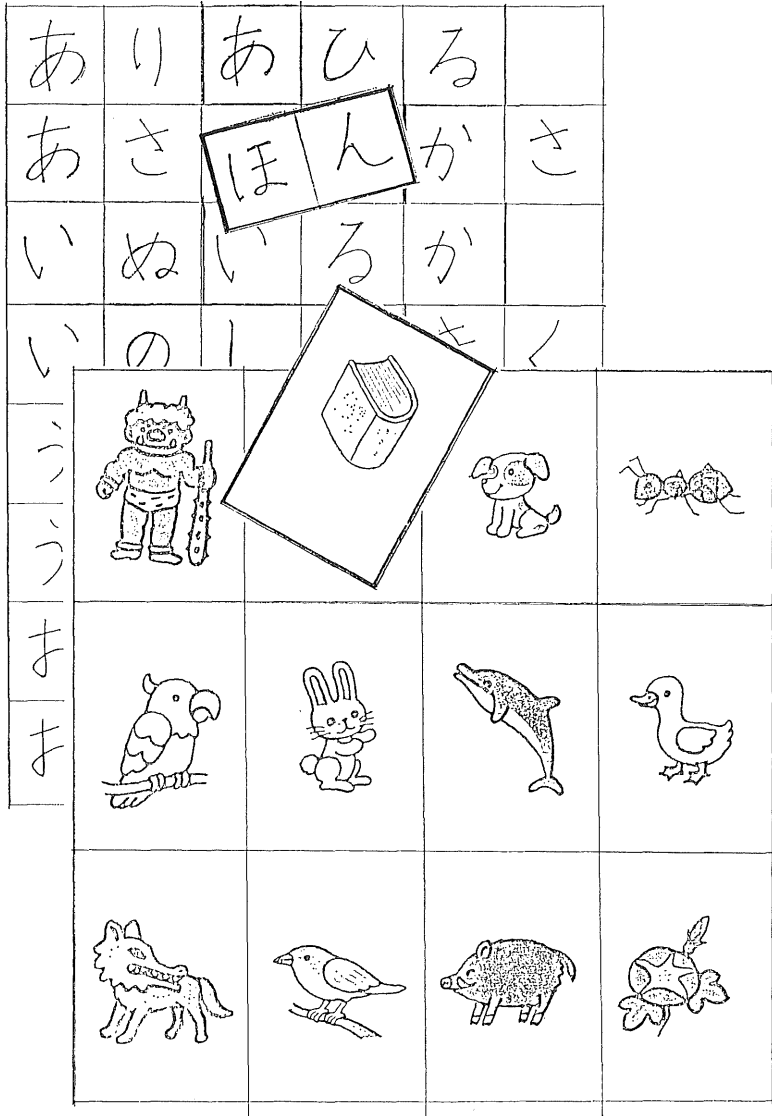


Fig. 1 Find Matching Pairs. The teacher has large size sets at the blackboard and each student has an individual set.

already known. Memorizing words is started by first showing pictures of objects. The picture of a written word is continuously matched with the picture of an object, then by removing the latter, the students are encouraged to "read" the picture of the word. A related exercise is finding a word picture from a set to match the picture of an object (Fig. 1).

The identification of signs is practiced independent of word pictures. After a large hiragana chart is presented, memorization of the symbols is started immediately. The methods used by the elementary schools in Japan also are used to say the symbols aloud.

Attempts are made to recognize at random hiragana by columns. Finally, taking the charts aside, flashcards are used to identify the symbols more quickly and precisely. The use of *iroha karuta* has been a great help in the course of instruction. First, the teacher reads a proverb, and the children compete to find the card showing the relevant symbol. At this stage it is not so much the sign as the picture on the card which helps students to memorize a sound pattern. Later this relationship is weaker, and the picture becomes an advantage for learning the proverb.

The introduction of modifying symbols begins with identifying sounds and acquisition of basic sounds. Children soon become aware of the separation of syllables and the relationship and the differences among strings of sounds. Making word strings (*shiritori*) and simple crossword puzzles are a very good way to do that. Good examples were adopted from Japanese elementary school textbooks, drills, and from correspondence course books (*tsūshingaku*). This helped to match the number of sounds with the number of hiragana symbols. It should be noted here that at an earlier stage Hungarian schools used to teach children to read by separating words into syllables, because the hyphenation rules in Hungarian follow the division of the syllables. This fact facilitates manipulation with the syllables for the students.

Preparation for the Introduction of Chinese Characters

After presenting the general features first, the kanji for numbers, years, months, and days are used to read the "spoken" symbols. This enables the pupils to write down their age and then birthday as well. The major criterion for selection of each kanji is its immediate usability and frequency. Japanese schoolbooks are very suitable for this purpose. The first year ends with a reading of the beetroot tale (*Ōkina Kabu*). By this time, the better students can read as fast as 180 to 200 kanji a minute. Two years of experience shows that nine to ten year old pupils can efficiently memorize kanji and achieve a relatively good recognition in a relatively short time.

To speed up the reading, pictures of words are still used, but they are shown for a decreasing period of time. Good results have been achieved for practicing reading with precision by listening to a recorded version of the text. It is a pity that only a few texts are available for which the recorded version is the same as the written text, word for word.

Recorded texts also can be used for correcting mistakes in reading. Errors are corrected by imitating the teacher's pronunciation. The most frequent mistakes are mismatching, omitting, and rereading the same lines in a passage.

Reading is practiced by using songs, nursery rhymes, and didactic sample sentences. Good results were achieved with grammatically more difficult and, as far as content is concerned, more interesting selections, such as textbooks and tales. In these cases, texts are translated without any detailed explanation of grammar. Recurrent and more significant structures are practiced by showing a few easily grasped examples, but they are introduced only when they come up in the text. These “unintroduced items” do not create a problem in systematically presenting the grammar; however, they become beneficial later when the structure to be explained sounds familiar. The same is true of the lyrics of some songs. For example, comparison of adjectives is in the curricula of second- and third-year classes, yet in teaching songs and fairy tales, the expressions such as *でた, だた...ぼん の ような つき...しろつめくさのようなくさがすきです*. sneak into the memory of the children. Practicing reading by role playing also helps to differentiate between locations and characters.

Writing

The teaching of writing begins in the third and fourth week, just as the teaching of Hungarian letters does. First, the symbols are practiced written “in the air” as large signs, then drawing and correctly forming the symbols are practiced; examples are written down in the exercise books a few times (Fig. 2).


へこく	たむな	らろそ
りいた	みせれ	はほまは
くり		
とてこ	こへく	つしう
ろらち	もはほま	きかせ
		
おあめ	はまほ	えのう
こにり	しつ	もきま
		

Fig. 2 Exercise and Test Page. Find the correct hiragana and copy them into the box

な	つ	い	ち	せ	み	り	よ	く	つ	せ	こ	あ
の	り	も	の	ん	ん	お	め	ら	く	い	ま	お
た	べ	も	の	せ	な	わ	た	し	え	と	け	い
か	ふ	み	る	い	お	り	る	じ	て	ん	し	や
い	え	し	よ	く	ど	う	し	し	り	ん	ご	と
こ	う	え	ん	ふ	る	も	く	よ	う	び	む	き
ど	こ	お	よ	ぐ	た	つ	ら	い	ね	ん	ま	ど
も	が	さ	む	い	い	た	い	が	っ	こ	う	き
た	ら	こ	ろ	く	る	ま	る	で	ん	し	ゃ	の
ち	し	お	ん	が	く	ち	か	て	つ	た	ぎ	ら

Fig. 3 Crossword Puzzle. Problem 1. Count identical hiragana.
Problem 2. Find words.

The practice sheets made for kindergartens and primary school pupils in Japan are used for teaching hiragana. Katakana used in the first year is only that necessary to write one's own name.

The foundation for the use of kanji begins by copying words and phrases and is followed by dictation exercises and purposeful writing. It has been an interesting experience that dictation is something children in all classes enjoy tremendously. Dictation exercises also are easy to revise and assess; they must be used to practice the characters and then word formation (Figs. 3 and 4).

Learning to write "difficult" hiragana—は, へ, and を—are introduced at an early stage, first in copying and then in dictation of short sentences where they occur. Because of the limited modification of hiragana, the consolidation of learning modified syllables and gluttural stops (assimilated sounds) is slower.

Kanji are introduced with hiragana in the second half of the first year and practiced as words and phrases. First only numerals are used, but these are practiced as soon as possible, using both systems of writing. Since a major objective of teaching a foreign language to children is to explore its relationship with culture, the examples for verbal communication as well as reading and writing examples are drawn from everyday Japanese life. The goal is to convey cultural values that are in harmony with those of Japanese children of the same age. Examples of the lyrics of how to approach the goal are through reciting (or singing) songs, reading fairy tales, and making *nafuda* (nameplates) to practice writing (Fig. 5).

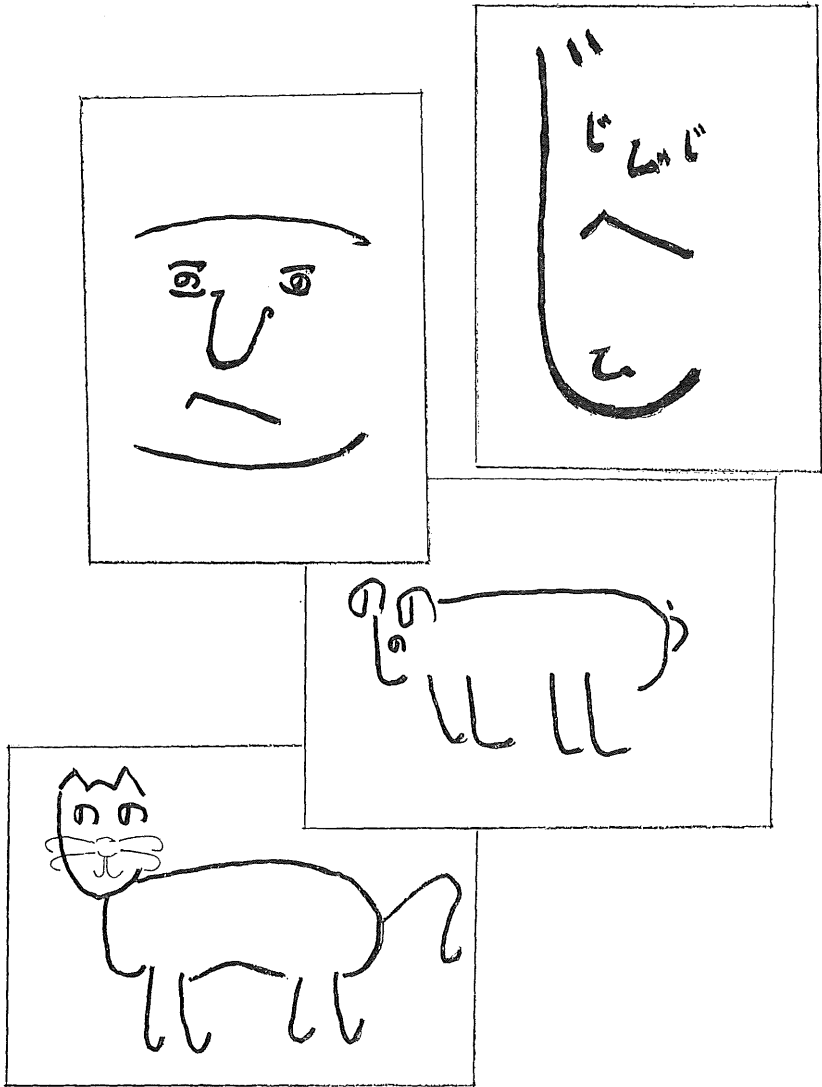


Fig. 4 Hiragana Pictures Drawn by Students

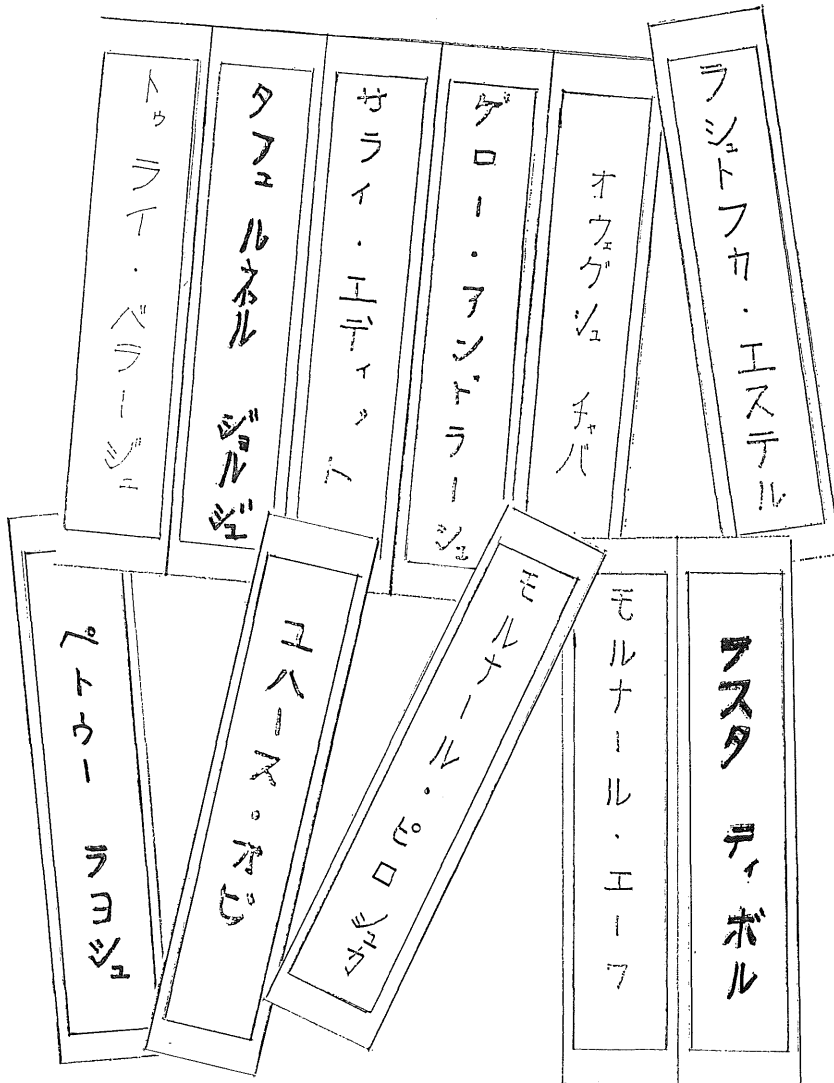


Fig. 5 Nafuda Plates Written by Students

Acquisition of Knowledge on Japan and Japanese Culture

Simple statements, short sentences, practicing short passages, pictures, and maps offer many opportunities for teaching about Japanese culture. The acquisition of cultural facts and knowledge is present in practically every moment of the teaching process. The holidays of Japan are regularly discussed when they occur during the calendar year. In addition to increasing knowledge, these discussions serve as an emotional experience in language learning. Using the “slide bank” pictures, the customs and beliefs related to the holiday are discussed in Hungarian, and based on the pictures, short and

simple sentences are heard and produced. The children can sing a song or play a game related to the holiday; origami can be used for nearly all holidays or events of importance. The children also can make drawings to show how an event is celebrated in the lives of Japanese children.

Newspaper articles also offer opportunities for expanding children's knowledge. For example, in connection with the new emperor and new imperial period, children learn about the Japanese calendar. Economic news brings in the subject of Japanese currency and industrial trends in Japan. The geography of Japan can be taught through many colorful posters and postcards as well as the map of the country. The growing popularity of Japanese sports provides a good opportunity for children here to see or practice them at an early stage. In this school, for example, they have been taking judo courses for some time.

It is also important for children to have everyday encounters with the manifestations of the Japanese way of life. The preparation of rice dumplings is a delight of the last class every year, and *otoshidama*, the New Years gift of money, is given out here as a token gift in the form of a five-yen coin. An encounter with anything genuinely Japanese, be it a person or an object, is very influential. The school has a library of Japanese books (mainly gifts of private individuals) so that the children can actually get hold of the books that their counterparts in Japan are likely to read.

CONCLUSION

Based on experience and results that the children have attained thus far, the Zsolnai approach and the freedom of designing and holding courses of teachers are efficient means for conveying linguistic and cultural values at primary schools.

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