Teaching Beginning Chinese Pronunciation at Komatsu Citizen's University

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On September 13 and 20, 2018 I had the opportunity to teach the first two lessons of Beginning Chinese, a course offered through Komatsu Citizen's University and whose teaching responsibilities were divided between me, Professor Ray Iwata and Professor Naihua Liu. These first two lessons covered basic Chinese pronunciation and Romanization. This is a report on the composition and motivations of the students enrolled in this course, as well as a description of the design and delivery of the classroom instruction over those first two lessons.

1. Student Composition and Motivations

A total of thirty students living in Komatsu City were enrolled. Nine were male and twenty-one were female. Three were in their twenties, four in their thirties, four in their forties, twelve in their fifties, three in their sixties, three in their seventies and one in his eighties. The youngest age was 21 and the oldest was 82. This age and gender distribution is shown in Table 1 below.
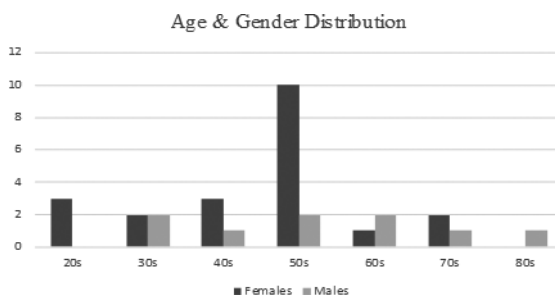

Table 1: Age and Gender Distribution

Of these thirty students, four reported having studied Chinese previously, but the reminder did not indicate any previous study. Their motivations for enrolling in this course can be classified into two major categories: interest and need, with exactly half choosing to enroll primarily because of general

interest and exactly half enrolling primarily because of concrete needs. As for needs, ten reported a need in their job, either because of needing to communicate with Chinese customers or needing to communicate with Chinese trainees. Three reported that they were studying Chinese in preparation for travel to China and two reported that they needed Chinese to help them to better communicate in their volunteer work in Komatsu City. These motivations are shown in Table 2 below.
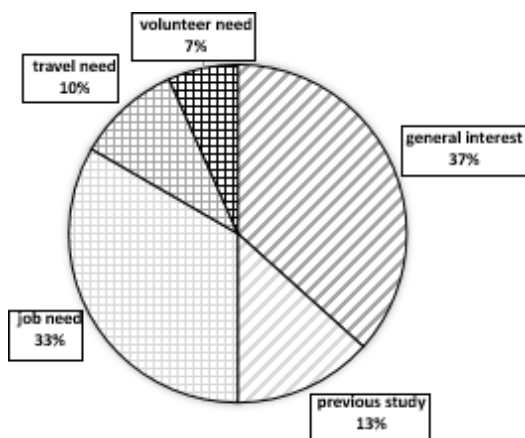

Table 2: Student Reported Motivation for Studying Chinese

2. Lesson Delivery and Classroom Observations

A set of printed materials was distributed to each student prior to the first day of class. These printed materials were written in Japanese and explained the articulatory principles of different Chinese sounds, as well as the pronunciation of different spellings used by the standard Chinese Romanization called Hanyu Pinyin. As such, these printed materials served as the textbook for these two lessons. For both lessons I brought in a laptop computer connected to the internet and projected onto the screen a detailed online table displaying every possible Hanyu Pinyin spelling. Over the course of the two lessons, as I introduced the four tones of Mandarin Chinese and the different classes of sounds, I was able to click the corresponding Hanyu Pinyin spellings and allow students to immediately hear the standard pronunciation of that spelling in each of its four tones.

The instruction over these two lessons followed a regular pattern. First, a particular set of phonologically similar syllables were written on the white board using Hanyu Pinyin. Whenever pronunciations known to be challenging to native Japanese learners were encountered, they were explained through a combination of simple Japanese articulatory explanations presented on PowerPoint slides, together with midsagittal sections drawn on the whiteboard to illustrate the particular articulation being taught. Then I

had students alternate between listening to the online model pronunciation and viewing my exaggerated physical articulation of each of these difficult pronunciations. I then had the entire class repeat together, before pointing to individual students to try pronouncing that sound individually. If the student pronounced that target spelling correctly I praised the pronunciation and then had the entire class repeat before asking the next individual student to try the same pronunciation. Students were provided with the URL for the online Hanyu Pinyin table with sound files and were encouraged to listen and practice pronunciation at home between classes.

Overall, most students actively engaged in class, made a serious effort to achieve target pronunciations and were willing to perform individually in front of their classmates. However, over the course of just two lessons it was not possible to provide enough practice and teacher feedback to train most students to overcome all of the common pronunciation challenges facing native Japanese-speaking learners, including tones one and four, distinguishing the retroflex set *zhi*, *chi*, *shi* from the palatal set *ji*, *qi*, *xi*, distinguishing *ri* from *li*, articulating a clear *f-* and distinguishing it from *hu-* and articulating a clear syllable-final nasal consonant of any sort, thus preventing them from distinguishing *–n* from *–ng*.

本稿は 2018 年 9 月 13 日と 9 月 20 日までに行われた公開講座「はじめての中国語講座」における講演を、講演者の手によりまとめたものである。