Chapter 7

Project-based business Japanese curricula corresponding to the globalization of Japan

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1 Introduction

More and more Japan related companies are approaching universities, particularly in ASEAN countries, to search for new graduates who can communicate in Japanese. The university in Singapore, where the author of this chapter has been coordinating and teaching the Business Japanese course, is no exception, and an increasing number of companies both from Japan and from Singapore are knocking on the university's door. Why is this so? While the fundamental reason is the increasing acceleration of the globalization of the Japanese corporate world, the requirements of Japanese companies in Japan and Singapore, where the present study was conducted, seem to be different.

This chapter will first discuss the background to the requirements for Japanese language speakers by Japanese companies both in Japan and Singapore, and define "Business Japanese Competences" expected by them, prior to reporting on the practical study.

1.1 The need for foreign employees speaking Japanese at Japanese companies in Japan

The Japanese government and the Japanese corporate world are accelerating their globalization efforts, and Japanese companies are opening up positions for an increasing number of foreign employees. In 2008, the number of foreign workers in Japan was 486 400 (Mackie, 2010), but by 2016 this had increased exceeded 1 million (Foreign workers in Japan hit the 1 million mark for the first time last autumn: Ministry, 2017), which means a rise of 740% over twenty years. According to Nikkei Business (Zunou motome "sekaisen" ni nozomu [Challenging world competitions to seek talents], 2013), the number of Japanese companies planning to employ foreign workers is increasing, and in 2014, almost half (48.4%) of Japanese companies in Japan reported the inten-

tion to employ foreigners. Recently many prominent and fast-growing companies in Japan wish to have Asia's top talents in their Japan headquarters. What they need are "future global leaders" and in order to get them, the employers are offering highly competitive remuneration. The major reasons for such changes are the declining working population caused by aging, the unwillingness of Japanese young people to work overseas (31.7%), and their poor English; 135th in the world and 27th in Asia in 2011 (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [METI], 2012). As a result, Japanese companies have to rely on foreign workers. With these considerations in mind, the Japanese government has been making efforts to increase the number of foreign students in Japanese universities, so that they can work for Japanese companies after graduation with a high level of Japanese language proficiency. For example, in 2006, the Ministry of Education launched the "300 000 Foreign Students Plan", but they have been struggling to achieve this objective. In fact, the number of foreign students has decreased since the Great Tohoku Earthquake in 2011 (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2013). As there are also tendencies for excellent Asian students to study in universities in Western countries rather than in Japan, admission to Japanese universities is getting easier. For these reasons, both negative and positive, Japanese companies are encouraged to search for excellent foreign graduates. They expect that non-Japanese employees will help improve Japanese employees' English ability as well as bring global views and cultivation of intercultural skills to their companies.

1.2 The need for foreign employees speaking Japanese at Japanese companies in Singapore

Although it is true both inside and outside Japan that graduates with Japanese proficiency are in high demand by Japanese companies, the reasons seem to be slightly different inside and outside of Japan. The major reason in the case of Singapore is that since gaining independence from Malaysia in 1965, the economy of Singapore has grown rapidly, and the country now has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Japan has greatly supported the economic growth in Singapore, and both countries still enjoy a strong economic partnership. Japan was Singapore's seventh largest trading partner in 2010, and Singapore was the largest Asian investor in Japan, with a focus on real estate. Japan is one of the top three investors in Singapore (Embassy of the Singapore Republic, Tokyo, 2015). Because Singapore offers access to fast-growing markets including China and India, an increasing number of Japanese companies have established key manufacturing plants in Singapore to bring their most advanced products to the global market. As a result, more and more Japanese companies have been established in Singapore. For example, large manufacturing and trading companies have established their regional headquarters in Singapore. Japanese companies have shown a growing interest in partnering with Singapore in new business areas and sectors. Consequently, a large number of Japanese nationals have been transferred from Japan, or have been locally employed. However, it has become more difficult to employ Japanese nationals in Singapore over the past few years because the Singapore government has tightened the eligibility requirements for foreign workers in order to give more job opportunities to Singaporeans. Because of this, Singaporeans with Japanese language proficiency are in high demand.

Overall, non-Japanese graduates with Japanese language proficiencies have become important for Japanese companies both in Japan and Singapore. This is obviously a good situation for Japanese language learners who want to use their language ability in their future careers. However, it has also created challenges for them as well as for Japanese language teachers. First of all, it is not easy to reach the proficiency level expected by companies in the current education system. The N2 level of the Japanese Proficiency Test is required by most companies, which can only be reached by far more class hours than those offered by universities in Singapore. Furthermore, not only high language proficiency, but also business related knowledge and skills are required in order to be able to work successfully for Japanese companies. Then, what kind of knowledge and skills should Japanese language learners acquire before graduation? How can university level Business Japanese education facilitate acquiring such knowledge and skills?

2 Business Japanese Competence

The earliest Japanese language education for business purposes, which is nowadays called Business Japanese Education, probably started with the establishment of the US Department of State Foreign Service Institute led by Eleanor Jorden in Japan in 1952 after World War II. Takamizawa (1987), who worked for the Institute, called the Japanese language programme for American diplomats, "Job-oriented Training", and reported that Business Japanese communication was a complex mixture of Japanese language, cultural knowledge, and skills of the Japanese way in both human relationships and of business. Since then, extensive research into Business Japanese has been conducted, including business communication by foreign business people, research on interactions between Japanese and foreign business people, reports on Business Japanese curricula and teaching practice, just to name a few.

Earlier papers were mainly reports on the Business Japanese program for American businesspersons at a business school in the US (Tamaru, 1994), or on preparatory programs for future American businesspersons (Sano, 2000, 2002). In the late 1990s, the focus of the research shifted to Asian countries. Miyazoe (1997) reported on the Japanese language programme for business purposes at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Shimada and Shibuya (1999) investigated the Japanese language needs of Japanese companies in five Asian cities: Seoul, Dalian, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Bangkok, and reported on gaps between the expectations of the Japanese companies and foreign employees working for these Japanese companies. Horii (2011) investigated the needs of the actual skills of their foreign employees in Hanoi, Vietnam by interviewing company executives and employees, and claims that in business communication, not only communication skills but also problem solving skills and intercultural competencies are necessary. However, these are not well addressed to in the current business Japanese education.

In addition to needs analysis, an increasing number of studies have been conducted about intercultural issues or communication conflicts between native Japanese business people (NBP) and non-native Japanese business people (NNBP). Sei (1998) studied 142 employees, both Japanese and non-Japanese workers, and examined the

causes behind the barriers in business communication. It was found that non-Japanese workers faced many barriers linguistically and psychologically. The linguistic barriers were due to lack of skills in assessing situations correctly, and assuming the appropriate speech register in Japanese. Kondo (1998) claims that the four major problems NBP find at work when dealing with non-Japanese workers are (a) unreasonable treatment; (b) inefficiency of work; (c) differences in business customs; and (d) cultural differences. Kondo (2007) further studied communication conflicts between NBP and NNBP, and concluded that the conflicts NNBP from Asian countries face are stronger than those from Western countries, and it becomes even more serious after five years of working. Son *et al.* (2009), who investigated Chinese businesspersons in China, claim that Chinese Business Persons (CBP) tend to have problems with the salary and decision making system of Japanese companies. Based on her interviews with both Hong Kong Business Persons (HBP) and NBP in Hong Kong, Aibara (2009) reported that there were four problem areas NBP had when communicating with HBP: (a) contact situations enlarge the psychological distances between HBP and NBP; (b) differences in the understanding of job responsibilities; (c) differences of communicative behaviour due to pragmatic differences; and (d) lack of communication ability. Tachikawa (2013) investigated how CBP employed by Japanese companies in Japan could overcome intercultural conflicts in the workplace. It was found that the use of avoidance and accommodation among some of the CBP suggested effectiveness in conflict management.

These studies provide useful resources for Business Japanese Education, but the teaching implications are scarce in the literature. Among them, Maruyama (1991) proposes a model (team teaching of a Japanese language teacher and a businessperson), where the roles of the language teacher are overall curriculum design, coordination, and teaching language, while the role of a businessperson is in providing information about business, teaching business technical terms, setting up business situations, etc. Sei (2006) emphasizes the importance of *Taigu* expressions or polite expressions for businesspersons, and suggests various approaches that invite learners' noticing on *Taigu* expressions. Utsumi (2006) introduces a learner centred approach, where learners get better understanding of business conversation through observation and analyses of business conversation.

However, most of these suggestions are for teaching working adults, and there are few for university students. Ousho, Masumiso and Tomson (1997) is a rare paper that reports on a university language course for undergraduate students. It presents a course design based on a needs analysis and delivery of "Hospitality Japanese" at a university in Australia, and reports that the course was successfully delivered using the local community resources, such as guest speakers and field trips. However, it needed improvement on the balance between the linguistic objectives and non-linguistic objectives, because learners were disappointed that their language ability did not improve as much as they had expected, due to an exceeding use of English over that of Japanese.

Recently, in response to the increasing needs of Japanese language speakers for business education, the Japanese government and related organizations have drawn up

guidelines for Japanese language educators and Japanese companies. Among them, the *Guidebook of Business Japanese Education for Foreign Students for Japanese Educational Institutions*, published by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) (2011), presents a comprehensive framework for both parties. The guidebook states that the competence foreign graduates must acquire before entering Japanese companies are as follows:

(1) Business Japanese proficiency required for working in Japan: Advanced communication skills for smooth communication and advanced discussion skills.

(2) Knowledge and understanding about Japanese corporate culture: How to work in Japan, Japanese business culture, knowledge about business fields, and professional development.

(3) Fundamental competencies for working people: cooperation, teamwork, and abilities to fit into Japanese organizations.

[*Translation from Japanese.*]

Figure 1 indicates three "Fundamental Competencies for Working Persons" explained by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). They are defined as the basic abilities required in working together with various people in the workplace and in the local community, and consist of three competencies with 12 competency factors.

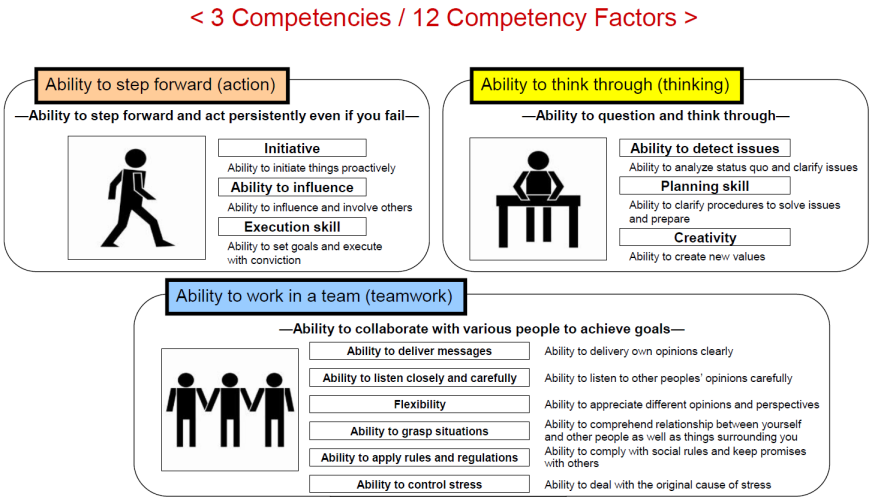


Figure 1: Fundamental competencies for working persons (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2006)

These guidelines suggest that not only an advanced level of Japanese language proficiency but also various other competencies are required. However, it is too difficult to achieve these goals in Japanese language courses at universities in Singapore. First of all, the proficiency level that students can reach before graduation is limited but

many companies expect N2 level of Japanese Language Proficiency Test that requires at least 600 class hours. However, the maximum class hours they can take before graduation is around 400 hours in one university, and far less in the other universities. Besides, most students taking Japanese language modules at universities in Singapore do not major in Japanese Studies or Japanese Business, and their general knowledge about Japan is also limited. Considering such limitations, as well as the fact that no matter how well students are equipped with business related knowledge and skills, if they cannot communicate well, they will be unable to work effectively as part of a team, which is emphasized as the main competence under the "Fundamental Competencies for Working Persons". Thus, it is reasonable to say that the primary focus of Business Japanese education should be placed on enhancing language proficiency, and then the particularly important parts for business communication of the other two areas: "knowledge and understanding about Japanese corporate culture" and "fundamental competencies for working people". These should be enhanced in a university language course in Singapore or anywhere else in a similar situation. To illustrate this, the red circle in Figure 2 indicates the major objectives of Business Japanese Education, and we regard these as the "Business Japanese Competence".

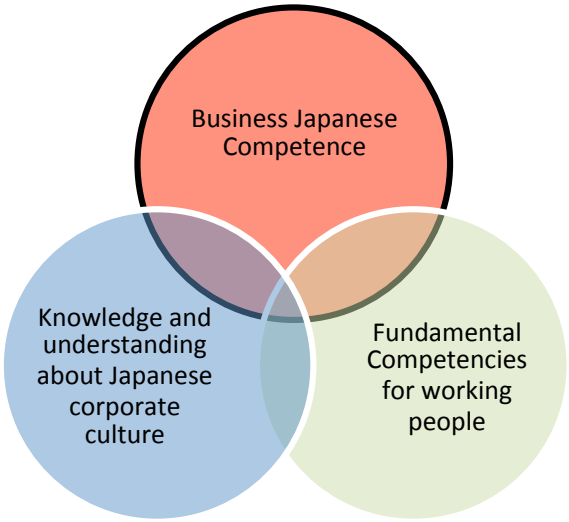


Figure 2: Business Japanese Competence

In order to achieve these objectives, a 'Company Visit Project' was incorporated into the Business Japanese module at the National University of Singapore throughout the semester, and this was done over the past 10 years. The project has been conducted several times, and according to the student feedback, it has always been perceived very positively by the learners. However, the overall success of the project varied for some reasons. What are the factors that bring success? How do the students perceive the benefits of the project? It is vital to get detailed answers in order to ensure the future success of the project, and to continually improve it.

3 The study

3.1 Educational activities

The present study was conducted in a Business Japanese module offered at the National University in Singapore. The objectives for the module are:

(1) To enhance communication skills so that students can handle business situations in Japanese.

(2) To enhance social skills such as leadership and team-making in work, and to create good relationships with others.

(3) To learn business manners and the mind-sets that are important for business success.

These objectives were carefully set to meet the requirements of companies, based on previous studies, and government guidelines. Students were informed about these objectives. Besides these aims, there was another significant goal, which was to raise students' interest in Japanese companies through the project work. Despite the increasing needs for Japanese speaking graduates by Japanese companies, there are few students who consider working for them after graduation, even if they take the Business Japanese module. In fact, research examining the expectations and preferences of professional positions of over 5 500 university students after graduation in Singapore discovered that there was no Japanese company among the top 100 most attractive companies in Singapore (Trendence, 2014). In order to achieve the above-mentioned three objectives, the Project-based Business Japanese Curriculum was planned and implemented with this fact in mind.

Project-based learning is said to date back over a hundred years, based on the educational philosophy according to which "students will develop personal investment in the material if they engage in real, meaningful tasks and real-world situations" (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 318). Since then, learning science research has found that "deep understanding occurs when a learner actively constructs meaning based on his or her experiences and interaction in the world, and that only superficial learning occurs when learners passively take in information transmitted from a teacher, a computer, or a book" (*ibid.*). Project-based learning is a form of *situated learning* where learning can be considered as a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The Project-based Business Japanese Curriculum shares the same educational philosophy, so it is extremely important to place learners in a business situation as close as possible to real life. It is also essential to foster competence that enable them to work well as a team. Based on this theoretical backbone, the Project-based Business Japanese Curriculum was implemented with the following four features.

First, the "Company Visit Project" was created as a pillar of the curriculum to provide students with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in real business settings and to gain first-hand knowledge about the Japanese business world by visiting a Japanese company, interviewing Japanese business people, corresponding with

them through e-mail, and giving a formal presentation about their findings. Furthermore, various sub-components are placed around the "Company Visit Project" to help implement the project successfully as well as to deepen students' understanding of the business culture, mind-set and behaviours of Japanese business people, and to enhance their linguistic knowledge and skills (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Curriculum for the Business Japanese module

Second, although visiting a company and interviewing business people is a very helpful learning experience, the meeting time can be only a few hours, and what they can learn within this time is very limited. Therefore, in order to maximize their learning, a number of tasks are set up for the learners based on the key concept of the "Three Phase Project Work" (Walker, 2009), which consists of (a) a preparation phase; (b) an interaction phase; and (c) a reflection phase (Fig. 4).

Third, most of the project tasks are carried out by a careful combination of group work and individual work. Group work can be beneficial in many ways but it is particularly important because the "ability to work in a team" is pointed out as one of the three major "Fundamental Competencies" by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) (2006). Through group work, it is hoped that students can learn how to successfully carry out tasks with others, how to be a good teammate, as well as how to take leadership. Besides, group work can reduce the individual workload if it is well planned and made collaborative by ensuring that there is only a single submission from each group. This is important, as carrying out all the tasks individually can be overloading not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, because some tasks are clearly beyond some students' proficiency levels. To address the possibility that only certain students work hard, a "Coordinator System" was established, whereby every single student has to take leadership of a specific task, such as corresponding with

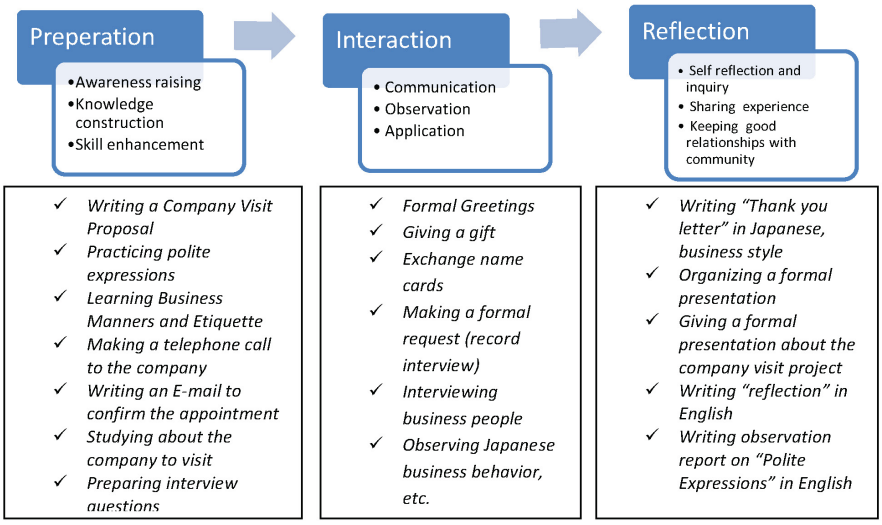


Figure 4: Project work tasks over three phases

businesspersons, preparation of interview questions, or presentation of the Company Visit Project.

Fourth, this project was designed so that different layers of collaborative work could be conducted. For *situated learning*, it would be best if students could actually be situated in the society they wish to join, which is the business world in the case of Business Japanese Education. However, it is impossible to situate them in such an environment throughout the semester. Thus, a learning environment was created so that all the participants —teachers, students, and business-related people— could collaborate with each other. Furthermore, in the project, which the present study examines, Japanese university students also participated and collaborated in two ways: (a) through e-mail correspondence and social media while they were in Japan; and (b) in person during a two-week visit to Singapore around the time of the company visit. Both groups of students helped each other prepare for the interviews, then visited the company together. After the visit, they summarized the findings from the interview, and prepared a presentation about their company visit. It was expected that such collaborative work would be mutually beneficial although their individual objectives were not the same. The main objectives of the students in the Business Japanese course was acquiring Business Japanese Competence, while that of the Japanese university students was acquiring intercultural communication skills and understanding the global world (Takagi & Walker, 2014). Overall, the primary objective of learning how to work with people from a different cultural background, and how to cope with communication difficulties was greatly assisted by the extensive collaboration described above.

The module consisted of seven class hours per week: a two-hour lecture, two two-hour tutorials, and a one-hour tutorial. A part of the lecture and one of the two-hour

tutorials were used for the project, mainly for giving guidance, instructions, reading references and sample materials to learn how to write a business email, a proposal, a report, and a thank you letter; how to conduct a formal interview and a formal presentation, and giving feedback. Most of the work was carried out outside of class hours, and students' self-regulated learning and good teamwork were encouraged.

3.2 Objectives

A practical study was conducted to help us understand how well students in the Business Japanese module performed in the "Company Visit Project" and what their perceptions were as to what made the activities successful or not. The major activities focused on during this study were (a) preparation of the company visit; (b) conducting the company visit; (c) preparation of the presentation; (d) conducting the group presentation; (e) collaborative work; and (f) the learning of *Keigo* (敬語) ["honorifics", or "respectful language"]. The study was also designed to discover how to improve the curriculum and its implementation. Therefore, the study set the following research questions:

(1) How well did students think they had performed each activity in the "Company Visit Project"?

(2) What made each activity successful?

(3) How did collaborative work contribute to learning Business Japanese?

3.3 Participants

All eleven undergraduate students enrolled in the Business Japanese module participated in the study. They had approximately 150–225 hours of formal instruction in Japanese language over a period of two to three years, and half of them had just completed the elementary level of Japanese. All of the students were asked at the beginning of the study to fill in background sheets describing their previous Japanese language learning experiences, their purpose for studying Japanese, and their motivation for taking the Business Japanese module. A few of them had studied in a Japanese university for up to six months as an exchange student, but the rest had never been to Japan, or had only stayed in Japan for up to three weeks. While one student had already accepted to take up a job in a non-local bank after his graduation, the rest were not sure what they wanted to do after graduation. In fact, it was interesting that most of them were not really interested in working for a Japanese company, but had the intention of enhancing their communication skills in Japanese.

3.4 Procedure

Data was collected through a written questionnaire with 23 Likert-type and open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire included five sections to solicit data about the students' learning (a) through preparation for the company visit; (b) on the day of company visit; (c) through collaborative work; (d) on the presentation; and (e) overall. These items asked students about their perceptions about the

outcomes and benefits of the project, their reflections on how to further improve their activities, and the difficulties they encountered with using *Keigo* or Japanese polite expressions. Most of the questions were answered in English. The responses to the Likert-type responses were subjected to frequency analysis, while the qualitative data collected through the open-ended questions were analysed by coding, and they were summarized.

4 Major findings and discussions

Students responded highly positively in the 7-point Likert-type item to the question, "How would you evaluate your performance on ____?", with all the respondents selecting five or above, except for the last question. They particularly highly evaluated the collaborative work with the Japanese university students, their own contribution to the work, and the overall benefit of the project for their learning. In comparison, their evaluation of their own work such as preparation for company visit, group performance during the interview and group presentation, was slightly lower. The last question was "Do you think *Keigo* is still difficult for you?" so the lower the score, the more positive the responses were. It was not surprising that the responses to the open-ended question about what and how they performed on each activity were also generally positive.

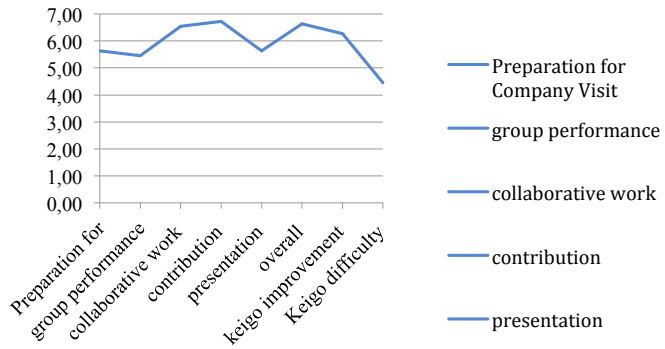


Figure 5: Students' performance in project work activities

The qualitative responses to each question were classified and the major findings were summarized together with sample comments.

4.1 If the visit went well, what do you think made it successful?

From the beginning of the course, students were quite concerned about their company visit because it was the first time that they entered a Japanese company, and they were worried whether they could communicate in Japanese in an appropriate way. They were also concerned about the appropriateness of their interview questions and whether they could understand the responses of the businesspersons interviewed. In spite of their worries before the visit, most of the students evaluated that the company visit went well. In their perception, the key factors behind their success were good

preparation, sufficient practice, and help from the Japanese university students and teachers. The preparation and practice included not only those for the visit itself, but also daily practice such as role-plays and practice on how to behave appropriately in tutorials, the learning of business manners and etiquette, and case studies about the Japanese way of business in lectures. They also perceived that the Japanese university students were very helpful because they supported the students mentally and physically, practicing together, going through interview questions carefully, and eventually accompanying them to the company visit. The most frequent responses to the question are summarized with some sample comments as follows:

Table 1: Students' comments on why the visit was successful

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Good preparation (6)	• "Prepare interview questions, investigate company background, practice interview manners, and rehearse flow of interview." • "I think it went well because we were well-prepared and did a number of simulations before the actual day of visit."
2	Sufficient practice (6)	• "[...] the weekly role-playing sessions prepared us mentally for the situations we are going to face during the visit." • "I think it is because of the business manners and *Keigo* learned in this module which made the visit went well."
3	Help by Japanese university students and teachers (5)	• "The interaction with our Japanese counterparts before the company visit." • "Help from the Japanese University students and the teachers who guided and mentally conditioned us for the interview helped significantly with confidence and content for the interview, which let the actual interview progress relatively smoothly."
4	Careful preparation (2)	• "We should have prepared to meet not just the interviewee we had contacted but also other representatives from the company." • "We should have taken extra care to ensure there were not answers [*sic*] to our questions available on their Website."

Note: () indicates the number of respondents. Some students commented on more than two categories.

4.2 Is there anything that could be improved for the company visit?

The responses to the areas that could be improved for the company visit were varied. The major areas for improvement were: (a) smoothness of conversation; (b) mock interview; (c) careful preparation; and (d) they also suggested that interview questions should not be sent in advance to the company in the future.

The comments given for this question will be very useful for the students in future projects. Particularly the comment about not sending the interview questions in advance is noteworthy. According to the students, they lost the chance to actually ask the questions by sending the company the questions in advance. Probably, the interview was turned into a one-way communication, or seminar style informative session by the businessperson. However, many companies requested the submission of the interview questions before their visit, probably because they wanted to prepare the answers or resources for the students. Because the students are not in a position to

Table 2: Students' comments on what could be improved (for the Company Visit)

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Smoothness of conversation (3)	• "It gets awkward sometimes when you do not know when to perfect timing [*sic*] of questions."
2	Interview questions not to be sent in advance (2)	• "We should not send the interview questions to the company, as they answered all our questions without us asking them."
3	Mock interview (2)	• "More role-playing sessions in actual formal situations should be acted out before the company visits. In this way, spontaneous interaction and communication will better prepare the students in attending the visit."
4	Careful preparation (2)	• "We should have prepared to meet not just the interviewee we had contacted but also other representatives from the company." • "We should have taken extra care to ensure there were not answers [*sic*] to our questions available on their Website."

refuse these requests, a possible way to solve this problem would be that the students submit just the theme and sub-themes, but not the individual questions. In this way, students should be able to carry out a proper interview.

The mock interview was one item the students regretted not having. Actually, the usefulness was well understood by the teachers, and it had been conducted in previous years. However, it was not possible in this particular semester, due to external circumstances, namely an e-learning week, which was scheduled by the university: students were not allowed to come to the campus, but had to study only through on-line learning during that week. While on-line materials were given to the students so that they could practice conversations by themselves, they were unable to have a face-to-face mock interview where not only the conversation but also non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, bowing and name card exchange, could be conducted with the teacher modelling and providing feedback. Because the practice of responding to impromptu questions will be really useful in real life, and can be done by the teacher if the lessons are conducted in a classroom rather than online, the students' comments on this point are truly understandable.

Careful preparation also provides very important points about how to prepare for the interview questions. As it would appear to be rude and thoughtless if the questions were for something easily found in the company information publicised by the companies' Websites or other material, this point should be noted, and students warned of this in future projects.

4.3 How did Japanese university students participate in the interview?

The collaborative work continued between the students and several Japanese students throughout the semester. At first through e-mail and social media, then the Japanese students came to Singapore one week before the company visit, and a few of them

accompanied the students to the company, and also helped with the presentation script after going back to Japan.

Under the supervision of this chapter's author, collaboration had not gone so well in the previous semester. This time it was left to the students how they collaborated with each other after the initial introductions by e-mail, and holding a welcome lunch, where they met for the first time. In the first meeting, some groups looked very happy to meet with each other, but some groups looked rather awkward, and did not communicate well with each other. Thus, it was good to find that all the students strongly perceived that working with the Japanese students was very helpful.

The major areas where Japanese students helped the most were in asking follow-up questions during the visit, particularly when a silence occurred in the flow of conversation, and help with difficult words and phrases.

Table 3: Students' comments on how Japanese students participated in the interview

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Follow-up questions (5)	• "Helped to ask additional questions to get a clearer answer."
2	Flow of conversation (3)	• "When it comes to awkward silence, they will ask questions to make the interview session continue smoothly." • "JS were with us to back us up to avoid awkward silence when we did not know how to respond."
3	Help with difficult words and phrases (2)	• "During the interview, they will help to explain some terms that we do not know." • "They were extremely helpful during the interview process by assisting us with difficult words and phrases."

It was a relief to see the responses to this question because there was concern that the Japanese university students might take over the roles of major interviewer because they were fluent in Japanese. To prevent this, the author and the teacher from Japan made the students understand that the main purpose of the company visit was for the Singaporean students to use Japanese in a business setting. This instruction seems to have been clearly understood by the Japanese students, and they helped the Singaporean students only when they faced problems during the interview, or when they needed assistance, such as clarifying responses from the businessperson. One student commented that the students also had a chance to learn how to be polite by observing the communication between Japanese students and businesspersons: "One of the things I learned from them that I think is very useful is the importance of 'cushion expressions', which help 'soften' one's expressions as well as to make ourselves sound more polite."

4.4 Is there anything you noticed about the language or behaviour of the Japanese students or business people?

The data indicates that students noticed important features of the Japanese language and behaviour through interaction with the Japanese university students and the businesspersons, although the actual time they spent with them was short. In fact, the features they noticed are commonly described in the literature as *polite language and behaviour*, *speech style shift according to social hierarchy*, and *collective action*. However, it was apparently quite striking for the students to actually witness these features in real life situations. They reported quite detailed descriptions about the incidents they encountered.

Table 4: Students' comments on what they noticed about Japanese students or business people

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Polite language and behaviour (7)	• "The language and behaviour of the Japanese students and business people were extremely polite." • "Japanese students tend to be rather 'indirect' when asking questions. . . . When they disagree or think something is bad, they would say it in a manner that will not hurt the feelings of the opposite party [. . .]. Very sensitive towards other people's feelings when they express their opinions." • "Bowing is a very big part of the Japanese culture. [. . .] Mr. U told us that sales increased by quite a few percentage points in Singapore and he bowed deeply and thanked us, his head almost touching the table [. . .]. When we said we preferred their product over others, he bowed deeply and thanked us again. He did not have to show so much gratitude in our Singaporean context so that we were overwhelmed."
2	Speech style shift due to social hierarchy (2)	• "We found that the general manager is a very casual person who likes to laugh (and crack jokes to make us laugh too). However, whenever the President came in to address us too, he became extremely solemn and spoke in a lower, softer and more formal tone which made him seem like a totally different person which also highlighted the distance between the levels of hierarchy in the company." • "Among (JS) students themselves, they usually talk to each other using plain style. However, when junior (JS) are asking their seniors something, they will switch to polite style, or when they are asking more personal questions for example their family, they will also use polite style."
3	Collective action (2)	• "[. . .] during the meeting, if someone wants to leave for a moment, for example to buy a drink or go the toilet, they will definitely inform all other group members and ensure that all of us heard her. This is something we usually don't take that seriously." • "I realized that Japanese people prefer to discuss issues face-to-face, and they often make an effort to look through each other's work, give feedback each time and comment on each other work thoroughly [. . .]. It's time consuming, but I think this is an important process."

It is remarkable that they learned so many things in a very short time. It is also a surprise that the students even noticed the Japanese group's behaviour, although they only worked with the Japanese students for a few hours. These features, such as seeking consensus from everyone, careful and thorough work, are often viewed

negatively by foreign businesspersons (Kondo, 2007), but the students in this study seemed to try to understand both the positive and negative sides.

4.5 If the presentation went well, what do you think made it successful?

At the end of the semester, a group presentation was given to an audience that consisted of the rest of the class, the businesspersons involved in the company visits, some junior students taking a Japanese course, and several Japanese language teachers. The presentations were conducted in a formal way just like a business presentation. The presentation was divided into parts, and individuals wrote their own part first, and after combining the parts, they prepared the slides for the presentation together. All were evaluated both individually and as a group, and teachers gave detailed feedback on both. The students took different roles, such as a moderator, presenter, and cameramen to take photos and videos, receptionist to distribute the programme as well as to escort the guests. It was also agreed internally that every student would ask at least one question in the question and answer session after the presentation. Finally, the presentations were evaluated by everybody in the audience, including peers, company people, and teachers. This whole process of presentation was conducted in a very formal manner, with students wearing business attire. They were quite nervous, according to the data, but they were able to perform well, and were satisfied with their work. The factors for the success were as follows:

Table 5: Students' comments on what they thought made it successful

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Good preparation and practice (6)	• "Our group discussed the content of the presentation together to ensure that there is a smooth flow in our content." "The collaborative work with my group mates." • "We wrote the script beforehand and edited it several times so that there were no grammatical errors."
2	Collaborative work with group mates (4)	• "I think it is due to the constant practicing we had as a group that made it successful."
3	Teacher feedback (2)	• "Consistent support from the teachers in correcting our scripts really helps in the success of the project." • "It is also thanks to our Sensei, who gave us a lot of feedback for use to improve on."

Good preparation and practice was the first factor that made the presentation successful, which is the same as for the company visit itself. It should be noted that there was one factor that was raised for the presentation but did not appear for the company visit, which is collaborative work with group mates. It is probably because by the time of the presentation, the 11^{th} week of the course, the group mates became far closer than at the time of the company visit, which was conducted on the fifth week, and they were working together much better. Another reason may be that they had known that without collaboration, the group presentation would not go well. The necessity of this can be pointed out by recalling two disastrous presentations from the

past. In one case, in spite of the students' higher level of Japanese, they completely failed because they competed with each other within the group too much. In the second case, more advanced students did not help the weaker one in the preparation, and could not rescue her during the presentation for lack of script and understanding of her part.

4.6 Is there anything that could be improved (for the presentation)?

The points to improve varied from student to student as indicated below. Even when they were in the same group, their reflections were not always the same. In fact, the students of the most successful group, who were evaluated the highest by the guests, were also the most critical about their own performance. In fact, the above "2-way communication" and "More cohesive among slides" came from the same student. Another student of the same group also commented in a similar way to "More cohesive among slides", saying that "We were able to start preparing our scripts long ago so we were familiar with our content, but we did not have enough time to prepare our slides", and "We should have planned ahead and started thinking about the script when we were done with the company visit". It is interesting that their slides looked well structured, and they completely memorized the scripts and presented so well, and still, they were more critical, and more specific about what to improve than other groups. They also reflected on not only their individual performance but also about their group work as a whole. In contrast to this, the comments by the weaker students gave more general comments such as "More work can be done on the content, and more preparation can be made in answering the questions posted by the guests". This implies that being able to evaluate one's own performance critically, and find ways to improve must be important for learning.

Table 6: Students' comments on what else can be improved (for the presentation)

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Better preparation (5)	• "There was insufficient time for me to fully memorize my script and I relied too much on cards." • "We did not have enough time to prepare our slides, so some of us were unfamiliar with when to click." • "We focused too much on the presentation itself that the preparation for Q&A was very last minute."
	More of our thoughts and feelings about the interview (2)	• "We could have done better by presenting more on our reflections of the project while presenting on the content to make it less dry."
	2-way communication (1)	• "One of the audience, Sensei (teacher) commented that my presentation was interesting because it sounds like a TV programme. After reading these, I thought that maybe I should have put in more effort in making my presentation sound more natural [. . .]. I mean a 2-way communication."
	More cohesive among slides (1)	• "I think our group could have made the slides more cohesive. If one looks at our power point slides, one will realize that different sections were being done by different people."

4.7 Overall, if you think there are benefits, what do you think they are?

The data indicated that the students perceived the overall project-based curriculum to be beneficial for their learning. Some students expressed their appreciation for the classroom activities and, some for the outside classes as follows:

Table 7: Students' comments on what benefits the curriculum brought them

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Learning how to behave appropriately (6)	• "It gives students opportunities to interact with Japanese people and learn about their business etiquettes and way of doing things in Business setting." • "I feel that the class was very beneficial over the usual Japanese classes because we learnt many skills and ways of dealing with different situations, which might be useful in work."
2	Better understanding about Japanese company and people (5)	• "It was truly an eye opener and also a very good opportunity to learn about different industries." • "Thanks to this project, I have had the chance to experience and be exposed to Japanese companies and have come to understand better... I feel like I am more prepared to enter a Japanese company now." • "It gives students exposure to how the business environment of a Japanese company is like."
3	Interacting with business people (3)	• "The project presented an opportunity to converse with Japanese on a corporate level; this is an experience which cannot be obtained through regular means."
4	How to work with people from different cultures (2)	• "Having the chance to group with the Japanese university students helps us to understand how to work with people of different cultures."

The data indicates that all the following objectives were achieved: (a) to enhance communication skills so that students can handle business situations in Japanese; (b) to enhance social skills such as leadership, team-making to work and to create good relationships with others; and (c) to learn business manners and the mind-set that is important in leading to business success.

However, the data also showed that what students felt to be beneficial differed from student to student. This must be because the needs and expectations of each student were different. For example, being able to visit and understand Japanese companies would be beneficial for those who were interested in working for a Japanese company, while learning how to behave appropriately were beneficial for students who wanted to improve their Japanese in general.

Finally, the survey questions asked about the learning of *Keigo* because that is one of the most important as well as the most difficult linguistic items for business Japanese as shown in previous studies (Sei 1998, Walker et.al 2014).

4.8 If you think your *Keigo* communication improved, what do you think was useful?

Despite claiming that *Keigo* communication is difficult, the students in this study perceived that their *Keigo* communication improved greatly. What they found useful for *Keigo* learning was as follows:

Table 8: Students' comments on what they found useful for *Keigo* learning

	Summary of comments	Sample comments
1	Role-play (7)	• "By keeping practicing and using *Keigo* during class tutorials, it is very useful for enhancing my *Keigo* communication." • "Role-playing is definitely the main and most efficient tool in driving the idea and usage of *Keigo* in different types of context."
2	All (5)	• "I think almost all the activities in class were useful to enhance our *Keigo* communication skills. The textbook helps to improve our verbal communication skills... other tasks such as business email writing were also useful... the Websites provided by the teacher for learning Business Manners were also very helpful." • "Everything in class was useful; there was no wasted effort across the entire semester."
3	Practice with immediate feedback (2)	• "Carrying out conversations in classes while receiving immediate feedback, in particular, was extremely useful. Outside of class there has been no practical usage window for application for *Keigo* so it was highly welcome."

It is interesting to find that most of the students appreciated classroom learning more than interacting with Japanese people outside class. The author had assumed that the learners thought that interacting with businesspersons was the most useful way to learn *Keigo*. The main reason might be that the time they were able to interact with businesspersons was limited. Furthermore, and more importantly, students assumed that in real life, they would not receive feedback from native speakers of Japanese. The lack of feedback would probably prevent them from noticing even if they fail to use *Keigo* appropriately because inappropriate use of *Keigo* is not as obvious as grammatical errors that can cause communication breakdown. Nevertheless, lack or inappropriate use of *Keigo* can be rude and can harm human relationships as many studies have affirmed. Therefore, although the students may not think this far, their responses provide valuable implications for teaching *Keigo*. It is also interesting to note that although most students felt that their *Keigo* was greatly improved, some of them still claim that *Keigo* is difficult. The details will be discussed in the next section.

4.9 What are the difficulties in learning *Keigo*?

The question where students' responses were most varied was: "Do you think *Keigo* is still difficult for you?" Some chose 2 and some chose 7 on the scale of 1 to 7. The difficulties they claimed are summarized as follows:

Table 9: Students' comments on the difficulties in learning *Keigo*

	Summary of comments	**Sample comments**
1	Use appropriately depending on context (4)	• "Context is definitely the most difficult aspect of *Keigo*." • "While learning the style and structure is easy, knowing when to apply them is difficult as we are required to judge based on the situation."
2	Politeness inherent in the language (3)	• "There is a wall erected when speaking with Japanese due to the levels of politeness inherent in the language something which is not present when dealing with native English language speakers." • "*Keigo* is difficult because Japanese is multi-tier and has many politeness levels."
3	Variety of forms (2)	• "The variety of *Keigo* words makes it quite difficult when I first hear the words."

The above results support many previous studies that emphasize that *Keigo* communication, which requires skills to judge the context correctly, to adjust speech styles according to the context, to choose the right forms both verbally and non-verbally, is one of the most difficult features for Japanese language learners. The research in Business Japanese also emphasizes this (Sei, 1998), but there are few studies that would go as far as giving advice or suggestions about how to teach *Keigo* for business purposes. Therefore, this would be one of the most important areas for further study.

5 Summary

This chapter presented a practical study on a "Company Visit Project" in a Business Japanese course at the National University in Singapore. The project involved preparation, interviews with Japanese businesspersons, and presentation of the findings from the company visit. Action research was carried out to investigate students' self-evaluation of their performance and perceptions of the benefits of the project for learning business Japanese, and to discover areas that should be improved in the future. The major findings of this study were as follows:

First, students were highly positive about the value of the project for their learning. They reported that they understood what Japanese companies were like, improved their *Keigo*, and that they acquired business manners and etiquette, just to name the major areas. They also perceived the project as being beneficial for learning how to work in a team that included people from different cultural backgrounds.

Second, they were highly positive about the collaborative work with the Japanese students, reporting that the Japanese students were very helpful during the preparation for the company visits and interviews, as well as for supporting the interviews with businesspersons in the company. They also learned various features of Japanese behaviour, such as polite language and behaviour, speech style shift due to social hierarchy, and collective action through interaction and face-to-face discussion with the Japanese students when they stayed in Singapore for two weeks.

Third, although less positive than the other items, they positively evaluated their own performances in the company visit and the presentation. These less positive results can most likely be attributed to the fact that there were certain things they only realized after the activities. For example, they should not have sent the company their interview questions in advance for reasons explained in section 4.2. They also found that they were not able to communicate smoothly, and that finding the best timing to speak was also difficult. These will be useful pointers for future projects.

Finally, they reported on a number of key factors that make the project a success. The most important factor was constant practice, especially role-play in the classroom, and good preparation with their group mates. Teachers' feedback on the role-plays and presentation scripts was another factor reported as useful.

6 Pedagogical implication and implication for further research

Firstly, the success of Business Japanese education can be attributed to the creation of a learning environment where situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is realized, while retaining knowledge and skill based learning as a daily practice. In the theory of situated learning, learning is no longer regarded as the acquisition of knowledge or skills, but the process of developing a harmonious relationship between the participants and society. In this project, different layers of collaborative work were planned and implemented: group work among the Japanese language learners, group work among Japanese language learners and Japanese university students, and finally between both sets of students and the Japanese companies. Collaboration between the teachers and the companies as well as between the teachers of both universities was also an important factor for successfully connecting the university and the society, or the business world, which, before the project, had been far away from the students' daily life.

Secondly, collaborative work can bring a number of benefits, which can never be provided through regular classes, no matter how excellent the teaching materials or the teachers are. These benefits can be realized all the more if all the participants share a common objective, which in this project was to successfully conduct the company visit. Because the project was challenging for both the Japanese language learners and the Japanese university students, they were encouraged to collaborate very intensively toward the goal. At the same time, through interacting with each other, they had opportunities to learn how to work with people from a different background. It was observed that they were quite cautious with each other when they met for the first time in the welcoming lunch, but they grew closer while working together, and some of the relationships are still maintained, a year after the project. Being able to create and maintain a good relationship with Japanese people and society can be an asset for Japanese language learners for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, establishing a coordinator system, where every student is to be in charge of a certain activity as a coordinator, will be useful because it can facilitate learning of both how to take leadership and how to be a good team maker. Being able to work in a team is one of

the three fundamental competencies needed for working for a Japanese company, as stated in the government guidelines, so it is prudent to include this in the curriculum.

Thirdly, classroom learning is also very important not only to bring success to the project but also to enhance communicative competence that enables students to communicate in a socio-culturally meaningful way. As there was quite a large gap between the proficiency level of the students and the tasks set for the project, the weaker students had to make great efforts and spend considerable time on their daily classes. Nevertheless, better students also had to do the same because they had to lead and help others in order to proceed with the project as a team. They had to learn business related vocabulary, memorize basic conversations that could be the base for role-plays in various situations, practice hard, so that they could interact appropriately, read authentic materials to get company information, and learn how to write business documents and letters, which require many formulaic expressions and formality. Without such endeavours, the project work would never have been successful.

Fourthly, reflection is helpful for their learning, and can highlight the critical aspects of performance and encourage learners to think about what makes for good performance and how they might improve in the future. Although the reflection report was used for research purposes in this study, it was mainly conducted in order to help the students to reflect on their own performance, and to find areas and methods to improve their Japanese. Interestingly enough, the students with higher proficiency levels were more critical about their own performance and proposed more concrete ways to improve their performance in the project as well as to further improve their Japanese.

Finally, the teacher's role is also vital in the successful implementation of the curriculum. This role starts way before the course begins. This includes contacting companies to seek cooperation, discussing with the teacher of the partner university about how to make the collaboration work effectively, and designing curriculum and course schedule while taking into consideration all the conditions given by the companies and the partner university. The number of companies also needs to be adjusted based on the students' enrolment, which can be only given after the semester starts. Once the semester starts, it is very important to give clear guidance on the project, to closely monitor the students' progress, and to provide useful advice when required. Giving the right feedback with the right timing is also important in order to keep students' initiative and ownership of their work.

Some limitations to the study must however be acknowledged. One of these limitations pertains to the methodology of the study. Only self-reported data was used as the instrument, but interviews with selected subjects would have allowed the researchers to collect richer data. Getting feedback from the businesspersons the students visited would have also given more balanced data. In fact, simple questionnaires were sent to the company but the responses were all simple and positive. Further requests were not made in order to avoid further work for the company. However, an additional approach to gain more information, such as critical feedback on the students' performance and suggestions on how to improve the project would be useful for the research as well as for the improvement of the project in the future. Another limitation was that students' performance was not recorded as data for analysis. How they really

conducted themselves in the company, how they interacted with the Japanese students and the businesspersons, and what kind of difficulties they faced during the interview, these would all provide useful resources for future projects. Furthermore, the students in the project work were not asked whether it raised their interest in working for a Japanese company. Few of them showed interest at the beginning of the module, and it seemed that this would not change so easily over the period of the module (13 weeks). However, one and a half years after the project work, at least six out of the eleven students are or will soon work for Japan related businesses; two are already working for major Japanese companies in Singapore, one was offered a job in the Tokyo headquarters of the world's largest Internet search engine company. Another one decided to work for a Japanese university, although at the time of the study s/he intended to work in the public sector in Singapore. It cannot be judged whether this is a direct result of the Project-based Curriculum because better job opportunities are now being offered by Japanese companies. Nevertheless, it could well be the case that the Project-based Curriculum motivated students to consider the possibility of working for Japan related companies. It is hoped that this study could be of some help for Business Japanese education in the world.

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Appendix 1 – Company Visit Project Report

Name: Date:

The objectives of this report are twofold. One is for you to reflect on your participation in the project. The other is for teachers to improve the project in the future. Your honest and critical views will be appreciated.

1. Preparation for Company Visit

1.1 Do you think you prepared for the company visit well?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very well

1.2 What did you do to prepare for the visit?

2. On the day of the Company Visit

2.1 How would you evaluate your group performance of your visit?

Very Poor 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Excellent

2.2 If the visit went well, what do you think made it successful?

2.3 Is there anything that could be improved?

2.4 How did Jissen Women’s University students participate in the interview?

2.5 Is there anything you noticed about the language or behaviour of the Japanese students or business people?

3. Collaborative work

3.1 Do you think your group work went well?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very well

3.2 How did you contribute to your group work?

3.3 Do you think you had any benefits from the collaborative work with Jissen Women’s University students?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very much

3.4 If you think there were benefits, what do you think they were?

3.5 If you think there were demerits of the collaborative work, what do you think they were?

4. Presentation

4.1 How would you evaluate your group presentation?

Very Poor 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Excellent

4.2 If the presentation went well, what do you think made it successful?

4.3 Is there anything that could be improved?

5. Overall

5.1 Do you think you received any benefits from this project?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very much

5.2 If you think there are benefits, what do you think they were?

5.3 Do you think your *Keigo* communication was improved through this module?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very much

5.4 If so, what do you think was useful for enhancing your *Keigo* communication (including class activities, textbooks, etc.)?

5.5 Do you think *Keigo* is still difficult for you?

Not at all 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 Very much

5.6 If so, what are the difficulties about *Keigo*?

5.7 What do you think would help you to further improve your *Keigo* communication?

5.8 Please write any comment or suggestions to improve the Company Visit Project.