

Keigo to use and to be used: Reevaluation of keigo learning in Japanese language classes

Yasutaka Maruki

Department of World Languages and Literatures, Pacific University,
United States

Author email: marukiy@pacificu.edu

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Abstract

For Japanese language speakers, including native speakers, the formal expression of polite, honorific, and humble forms, called keigo, has been a great challenge to master as it contains complex rules with various functions. Due to its primary purpose to show one's respect for another, the communicative aspects of keigo have been generally emphasized in teaching. Contrarily, the novelty of this study is to understand keigo as a form of self-expressions rather than reactive or objective expressions. By doing so, the students will be able to familiarize themselves with linguistic and grammatical rules of keigo without any social pressure to use keigo correctly. This research will first summarize the challenges discussed by the previous researchers and then will introduce three pedagogical methods of learning and practicing keigo: a conversation with one's future self, the first encounter conversation, and a spiritual or sacred conversation. Different from methods introduced in previous researches, these methods focus on the use of keigo as a way of expressing one's true thoughts and emotions.

Keywords: *keigo; politeness; honorific and humble expressions; intercultural communication*

INTRODUCTION

The practical use of language skills has been always valued in foreign language education. After the NCSSFL (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages) and ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) created Can-Do Statements in 2017, they became popular learning posts not only for each language course, but also for overall curriculum goals of language majors and minors. However, it is often the case that knowledge and abilities do not correspond with actual communication skills. For example, you might be studying a language whose country requires different communication styles depending on with whom you are talking and about

whom you are talking. These additional considerations and rules are obstacles for many students of Japanese, as they must master polite, honorific, and humble forms called *keigo*: for example, according to Astami, more than 80% of Japanese language learners find *keigo* to be difficult (2009). Even though *keigo* is usually introduced as a new set of grammatical rules and expressions in language textbooks, many scholars have pointed out that textbooks often lack explanations for the comprehensive cultural and social functions of *keigo*. At the same time, *keigo* is inevitably a part of linguistic skills and requires repetitive exercises to master its usage. This study will summarize the challenges of mastering *keigo* pointed out in previous researches and address how learning *keigo* demands more personalized or organic learning experiences than simply practicing different *keigo* expressions for various social situations.

The first challenge of *keigo* is due to the rules requiring that different words be used to describe the same action depending on the person who is the topic of the conversation, the person with whom you are speaking, or the situation in which the conversation is taking place. The most common mistakes are to mix up honorific and humble expressions, and if *keigo* is used in the question, 60% of the students are not able to answer properly (Astami, 2009). Although there is no doubt that much practice is needed to master unfamiliar and often lengthy expressions of *keigo*, Kawaguchi (1987) points out that many language textbooks problematically jam all the rules of *keigo* into one or two chapters. One of the most popular Japanese language textbooks in the US, Genki II (2011) introduces, a group of *sonkeigo* (honorific expressions) as new grammatical expressions in Lesson 19, and the group of *kenjōgo* and *teichōgo* (humble/modest expressions) are introduced in Lesson 20. In each section, the students learn eight new *keigo* verbs along with rules that apply for different verbs. This approach of practicing new expressions of *keigo* all at the same time appears to be rather systematic and forcible, but this is the reality that many learners of Japanese face. Tokuma

(2010), who conducted surveys to find out how Japanese language learners feel about learning keigo, states that there is often a gap between one's true emotion or thought and keigo expressions.

The second challenge of learning keigo is to learn its various functions, since keigo alone does not always reflect the statuses of the communicators. Even though keigo implies a hierarchical relationship, Obana (2018) explains that keigo can be used even among close friends: for example, colleagues and close friends normally communicate casually, but in a business meeting, they immediately follow an unspoken rule and communicate formally with keigo. Even in the situation, where a hierarchical relationship exists, Usami (2002) assures us, light-hearted, casual or informal expressions do not necessarily imply disrespect. Meanwhile, Kikuchi (2010) explains that keigo can be used also to show unfriendliness or disrespect, such as when one attempts to keep one's distance from another person. Obana and Haugh (2021) even point out that keigo can be used impolitely for the purpose of highlighting irony. Since keigo alone does not justify the meaning, how it varies the meaning based on the situation, Ultimately, keigo cannot be mastered by objectively imagining a respectful target, but from actually experiencing how it is used for different purposes.

The necessity of keigo's experiential learning can be explained by what is happening in Japan. Minayoshi (2014) explains that according to the statistics conducted by the Agency of Cultural Affairs to 2107 people, who are 16 years old and above, in 2005, 92.5% of people have expressed their desires to master keigo, but 67.6% of them were experiencing great difficulties. Usually, keigo learning starts in elementary school, the 5th or the 6th grade, and continues up to college in Japan: in addition to regular tests in the classroom, keigo also appears in entrance exams of not only colleges, but also private high schools and even private junior high schools. However, generally speaking, this long span of education is not always effective. When many college students begin their working lives through part-time jobs, they

often fail to use the correct keigo expressions, and instead use improper expressions of keigo, called *baito keigo*: *baito* is a shortened form of the word *arubaito* (*arbeit*), meaning a part-time job such as in a restaurant or convenience store. Moreover, many young workers simply try to memorize set phrases of keigo called *manyuaru* (manual) keigo. Understandably, these mechanical or robotic expressions of superficial keigo are considered to be problematic, as Minayoshi (2014) comments that it is the results of using or trying to use keigo without any intention to show respect or humbleness.

On the other hand, Inoue (2008) explains that each person's expectation and ability of keigo are meant to change gradually as the person grows older, so that it is actually normal for young workers to rely on *manyuaru keigo*, as they have not yet fully worked and lived in the society. Wetzel (2014) states that "manipulation of keigo" is actually "fundamental to smooth communication among members of any social organization." In other words, whether the expressions are traditionally accurate or inaccurate or whether thoughtful or unthoughtful, keigo plays a vital role for communication to take place in various social settings. Carroll (2005) writes:

For students to feel empowered in their language learning and to become open to learning and using politeness in a broad sense in Japanese, it is important for them to be aware that keigo is not something exotic, an add-on, but an integral part of Japanese sociolinguistic behavior.

Because it is ingrained deeply in communication, keigo is crucial for the holistic understanding of the Japanese language and culture. However, it is dangerous to superficially acknowledge what keigo embodies. For example, the lack of confidence or hesitation in using keigo or speaking Japanese in general often ends up making students become more quiet and reserved in what they consider to be formal or "real-life" situations. To make matters worse, their unwillingness to express their thoughts and ideas with keigo can be justified based on the false premise or stereotype that Japanese people are generally more quiet. The usages of keigo should neither disable their

language ability nor affect the personalities of the students, and it is important for them to take ownership of their keigo expressions. That is to say, they should be given opportunities to proactively express their thoughts and emotions using keigo words rather than to passively practice “appropriate” keigo expressions for various imaginative social situations.

As one of the most prominent pedagogical methods, Kawaguchi (2012) aims at the environment of the classroom, which he calls *kyōshitsu no bun'myaku* (the classroom context), where the students are able to practice keigo expressions without imagining hypothetical situations. One example is called “the champion’s speech”: a chosen student is interviewed after, for instance, receiving the highest score on a quiz. The content of the student’s accomplishment is not important, but the setting of the interview forces the student to make a public speech using *kenjōgo/teichōgo*, and the interviewer is expected to use *sonkeigo* in questions. This method is effective because the students can authentically experience the functions of keigo expressions in the classroom by adjusting their speech styles appropriate to the situation. Similarly, the following methods are designed for the students to reflect upon themselves and articulate their ideas and thoughts with keigo.

METHOD

Journal entries to a future self

This method is appropriate for the students at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second year, as they need to be at least familiar with simple sentence structures with basic verbs that are frequently used in everyday life. First, I ask the students to imagine themselves fifty years in the future and write a letter describing their current lives and asking questions to their future selves.

毎日何をしていますか。どこに住んでいますか。よくラーメンを食べますか。最近、どんな映画を見ましたか。

Every day, what are you doing? Where do you live? Do you often eat ramen? Recently, what kind of movies did you watch?

Next, I introduce the special verbs of sonkeigo and the rules of changing other verbs, then the students will rewrite their questions using sonkeigo.

毎日を何をなさっていますか。どこに住んでいらっしゃいますか。よくラーメンを召し上がりますか。最近、どんな映画をご覧になりましたか。

Once the students have written several questions to their future selves, they will then write about their current lives.

今、大学で日本語と科学を勉強しています。毎日、カフェテリアでごはんを食べます。夜、ルームメイトとビデオゲームをします。週末、叔父の家によく行きます。

I study Japanese and Science at college. Every day I eat at the school cafeteria. At night I play videogames with my roommate. I often go to my uncle's house on weekends.

The students will then change the verbs into kenjōgo to express their humbleness. This time, since the target of the person that the students are showing their humbleness is clear, they use kenjōgo instead of teichōgo.

今、大学で日本語と科学を勉強しております。毎日、カフェテリアでごはんをいただきます。夜、ルームメイトとビデオゲームをいたします。週末、叔父の家によく伺います。

The students can freely choose what they would like to ask and inform to their future selves. This is a weekly assignment, and they need to submit new questions to their future selves and explanations about their current live each week. As they gradually increase the number of both sonkeigo and kenjōgo, they have to keep a track of keigo that they have used.

First encounter conversation

This is appropriate for students who have completed at least two years of studying Japanese, since they have to be able to converse comfortably about familiar topics and daily activities. One of the most popular and basic usages of keigo is when the strangers meet for the first time, for example, at a business conference, a religious ceremony, or even at the train station. In this case, usually there is no power dichotomy between them, and keigo is used purely as an expression of one's politeness and courteousness to the person whom they have just met rather than that of obligation. This method is commonly used in Japanese language textbooks. Genki II, for example, introduces an exercise of imagining being at a formal reception and have a small talk with a stranger. In the workbook of An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese (2015), a conversation between two teachers, and the students have to practice sonkeigo for the questions and kenjōgo for the answers. What I would like to stress is, contrary to imagining possible "real-life" situations, the focus is to understand the role of keigo as a mutual consideration of one another at the beginning of a conversation. I normally have fifteen to twenty students and divide them in half, and they sit facing each other and converse for five minutes at a time. This is the format of popular language method of speed dating, by which the students communicate and get to know one another asking questions to one another. The students will start from greeting with each other by saying, "はじめまして." Next, using sonkeigo, they can proceed to the questions about where they are from, and hobbies or weekend activities; どちらからいらっしゃったんですか; 趣味は何でしょうか; 週末はどんなことをなさるんですか. In response, they will use kenjōgo/teichōgo or teineigo. わたくし、オレゴンから参りました; 週末はよくルームメイトと映画を見に行ったり、ビデオゲームで遊んだりいたしません. The students are not supposed to memorize keigo expressions and look at their notes. Admittedly, the conversation is very slow and unnatural in the

beginning. Thus, I encourage the students to actively add fillers, back-channeling, and sentence ending particles.

Spiritual or sacred experiences

The third pedagogical method is to write about spiritual or sacred experiences using keigo, and this is also appropriate for students who have completed two years of studying Japanese. This method is to understand the very origin of keigo, as Obana (2018) explains, keigo was originally created in order to communicate with deities and divine figures. Often in the context of foreign language studies, we tend to focus on the utilitarian aspect of language with secular perspectives, yet in this exercise, the students practice using keigo as they express their faiths, beliefs, desires and appreciations to God, a spiritual being, or a higher existence like mother earth or nature. As for expressing one's appreciations, this practice is similar to the exercise of writing a thank you letter using keigo introduced by Fukuoka (2019). Here, I introduce an important characteristic of keigo that is common to translations of many religious texts, that is, the use of *reru* れる and *rareru* られる, which is also the form of passive voice or spontaneity. For example, we all learn that *irassharu* いらっしゃる and *meshiagaru* 召し上がる are *sonkeigo* of *iku* 行く and *taberu* 食べる, but it is also acceptable to say *ikareru* 行かれる and *taberareru* 食べられる as keigo expressions. Generally, these *reru* and *rareru* are used when the speaker is expressing a certain politeness to the listener but not in an apparent manner, and it can be said that this is a personalized and down-to-earth keigo expression. Although it is unknown why passive voice or spontaneity is used as keigo, both honorific expressions and the passive voice or spontaneity represent the impact and effect on the very person who is witnessing the action, and I encourage the students to use this style of keigo to widen their vocabularies and improve their communication skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the assignment of writing to a future self, admittedly, many students find that imagining oneself in a distant future is difficult, as they are usually accustomed to think about their careers or academic paths after graduations. However, the purpose, once again, is to realize how their words of keigo truly signify their thoughts and emotions, that is, to learn keigo expressions in the process of discovering about themselves. Wakslak, Liberman, and Trope (2008) explain, "(T)he distant-future self is represented in a more structured, schematic manner than is the near-future self and that distant-future behavior is expected to more fully match up with general self-characteristics." Therefore, continuation is more important than the overall message or content, since the main goal is to develop a personal connection with their future selves. Among fourteen students, after four weeks, all students were able to change the verbs correctly into sonkeigo and kenjōgo. Although the content of this exercise may be mundane and simple, by imagining themselves in the distant future, the students can reflect upon what exactly is important for them and further understand their basic characteristics.

For the second method of the first encounter conversation, the students look at the notes of keigo expressions and slowly communicate in the beginning. I set each conversation to be five minutes long. Eventually, after a minute or so, almost all pairs have started to ask more specific questions about their partners, for example, favorite videogames, movies, and sports teams. What I have noticed is that even though the answers are often expected, finding commonalities with one another greatly excites the students, probably due to the fact that they are all sympathetic listeners.

I have also noticed that several students have used the fillers exaggeratedly to express their excitement. Previously, when I conducted oral tests of communicating with keigo in a formal setting, they often made

mistakes mixing up sonkeigo and kenjōgo/teichōgo just as Astami points out (2009). Clearly, their primary purpose was accuracy, and they were simply trying to verbalize what they have memorized rather than communicating with each other. However, this time, the students are not necessarily memorizing keigo expressions but learning that keigo represents the starting point of what can potentially develop into a bond between two people.

For the third pedagogical method, the students describe a special and ritualistic event in the past and reflect their experience by depicting the process of the events and expressing their sincere thoughts, including hope and gratitude. If the students are not familiar with religious references, they can talk about their family members, including ancestors, or even community members that have affected them spiritually in the past. If more options are needed, I ask the students to talk about a historical figure or a famous person and write how the person has achieved a certain goal and is inspirational to others. For this exercise, the students write a short essay between two and four pages. It is necessary to note that some students can easily describe memorable events associated with a religious context or spiritually empowering activities such as exploring nature through hiking or attending a religious ceremony or visiting a historical site. However, some students find this exercise very difficult. Although the quality of the essays differ significantly, the value of this exercise is to provide an opportunity for the students to express their thoughts and feelings genuinely with keigo and without an exception, among fifteen students, all students found reru and rareru expressions of keigo to be more familiar and useful than conventional keigo expressions.

CONCLUSION

The difficulty of keigo learning reveals the necessity of a more contextual understanding of the language, that is, to explore how a foreign or unfamiliar linguistic expression helps to disclosing thoughts and ideas along

with one's own personality and cultural background. For this reason, I have introduced these three methods to learn keigo expressions through the process of understanding themselves and learning how they communicate with one another. The first method, communicating with the future self, allows the students to discover their fundamental characteristics. The second method allows the students to experience a basic form of communication that can potentially develop into interpersonal relationships. The last method allows the students to understand their spiritual or cultural backgrounds through expressing their beliefs, values or moral principles using keigo. Admittedly, these methods may not enforce the practicality of keigo in a social setting, but they are designed for the students to experience keigo usage as a part of their authentic linguistic expressions.

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