

Understanding samurai dramas: An investigation into scaffolding students of Japanese through the cultural and linguistic entry barriers

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Abstract

To understand the storyline of samurai period dramas, *jidaigeki*, it is necessary to know the historical context, the social conventions, traditional Japanese culture and the lexico-grammatical patterns that the characters in the dramas adopt when playing the role of samurai. The primary research question was whether scaffolded discussions held in English could increase comprehension of or affinity towards *jidaigeki*. Tests, questionnaires and interviews were conducted on the control group (n=7) and experimental group (n=8) before and after a series of seminar discussions. The results suggest that scaffolding provided a valuable boost in increasing both comprehension of and affinity towards samurai dramas.

Key words: scaffolding, genre, L₁ usage in L₂ learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Definition

This research focuses on *jidaigeki* 「時代劇」, which translated literally means period dramas. However, given that the majority of *jidaigeki*, focus on the periods prior to the abolition of the samurai class, these dramas are frequently referred to in the Japanese press as *samurai* dramas despite the fact that the lead role may not in fact be a samurai. An alternative term is *Chanbara* 「チャンバラ」, which may be translated as swashbucklers or sword fighting dramas. *Chanbara* is one type of *jidaigeki* in which the climax of the drama is a sword fight, which is often the case in *samurai* dramas. To English speakers, swashbucklers and sword fighting invoke images of broadsword battles between knights in medieval Europe or three-musketeer style fencing in renaissance Europe. These terms do not give rise to images of a samurai drawing his sword and cutting his opponent in one smooth motion. This paper will, therefore, use the terms *jidaigeki* and samurai dramas.

Background

The impetus for this research arose from discussions between English-speaking students of Japanese participating in free language classes. Many were actively looking for employment but not managing to secure either part-time or full-time jobs. Discussions revealed that due to the economic downturn, a number of them were forced to co-habit with their in-laws in small flats. The householder invariably controlled the television remote control, and as such many hours were spent watching but not following the storylines of samurai dramas. Interest was expressed in learning more about *jidaigeki* in order to make more informed guesses about what was happening and be better able to follow the storyline. Seminar discussions on understanding samurai dramas were offered immediately after a series of workshops on job seeking skills for the long-term unemployed and underemployed.

Aim, approach and research questions

The primary aim was to enable a cohort of English-speaking learners of Japanese to understand the sociocultural factors and language necessary to follow the storyline in *jidaigeki*. The

researcher initially adopted a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in this case study. The cohort of subjects was felt to be a group worthwhile of study based on their homogeneity and rather special predicament. The focus of the research was not clear initially, but as approximately half of the learners were not able to attend the seminar discussions, the cohort divided itself into two groups. As a consequence, based on this self-selected separation of the learners into two groups, the research questions (RQs) that evolved were:

RQ 1. Can comprehension of *jidaigeki* be increased by scaffolded discussions in English?

RQ 2. Can attitude towards *jidaigeki* be improved by scaffolded discussions in English?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research builds upon two main bodies of knowledge related to this research, namely genre studies and scaffolding.

2.1 Genre of samurai dramas

There are a number of entry barriers to any particular genre of television programme. Watching a single episode of a serial drama for the first time provides a challenging task for the viewer as the number of characters in the cast can be rather large. There are multiple relationships and inferences to events that have happened in earlier episodes. Even the names and basic relationships between the characters are difficult to work out for many viewers. The genre of *jidaigeki* also adds the difficulty of understanding formulaic archaic Japanese, which learners of Japanese are only likely to hear in this genre.

From the outset, there appeared to be two key barriers to understanding *jidaigeki*, namely lack of knowledge of the language and the lack of familiarity with the culture.

Cultural entry barriers

According to Standish (2011), `jidaigeki are cultural texts that reaffirm and perpetuate basic cultural beliefs` (p.431). To understand *jidaigeki*, it is necessary to understand the historical context and social conventions. Even basic concepts such as the period, people and place are difficult to the uninitiated to follow. For example, anyone carrying *daishou* that is a *katana* (long sword) and a *wakizashi* (short sword) should be easily recognizable as a member of the *samurai* class, but a *samurai* is not always employed by a *daimyou* or feudal lord, particularly in the *Edo* era when there were numerous *ronin*, or masterless *samurai*. Should a *samurai* enter a house carrying *daishou*, the viewer should be able to interpret this as an act of aggression; or if a commoner insults a *samurai*, the viewer should be able to predict the *samurai*'s response. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how the concepts taken from *bushido*, such as loyalty and honour are inextricably intertwined into almost every aspect of a *samurai*'s life.

Linguistic entry barriers

The language used in *jidaigeki* is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as these are dramas designed for a native-speaker audience, there is a wide range of vocabulary, spoken at normal speed and using a vast array of structures. This differs greatly from the Japanese that many participants used on a daily basis, since their social networks were low density and uniplex, meaning that interactions in Japanese tended to be very domain specific. For the majority of participants, their interactions were limited to code-switching discussions with their spouse. Secondly, *jidaigeki* make extensive use of formulaic archaic language, such as '*de gozaru*' 「でござる」. This archaic language is, however, only used to give modern-day Japanese the sense of seeming as though it is from bygone eras, in rather the same way as interspersing modern English with *ye* and *thou* would create the image of old English, yet be comprehensible enough to watch and enjoy.

2.2 Scaffolding

Social construction, put simply, emphasizes the role of society in the creation of knowledge. Instructors adopting a social constructionist approach tend to adopt the role of facilitator rather than teacher to encourage collaboration between learners. Vygotsky's interpretation of how this happens emphasizes the psychological aspect.

Vygotsky (1978: 86, cited in Yasnitsky, 2011) defined the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as: the distance between the actual development level of the learner as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. A number of researchers have used the theoretical construct of ZPD to define the arena of learning. Bruner (1978) most famously coined the metaphor of scaffolding to describe the supported learning of children through their zones of proximal development by connecting new concepts to their existing schemata of knowledge. The scaffolding can be provided by a teacher, a peer and/or through instructional material.

Numerous researchers (e.g. Donato, 1994; Mariani, 1997; Forman, 2008; & Gibbons, 2009) have applied this construct to language learners. There are many studies that describe positive uses of the first language in second language learning (for example, see Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003; and Brooks-Lewis, 2009).

The extant literature, however, centers around the teacher's use of mother tongue in second language learning classrooms. Little attention has been paid to the scaffolding of second language learning by learners discussing cultural and linguistic factors in their first language. This study aims to fill that void by focusing on the use of discussion in the first language (English) to aid understanding of a second language (Japanese).

3. METHOD

Overview

Tests of the subjects' knowledge of the history, culture and language related to *jidaigeki* were given prior to and after a course of eight seminar discussions. Similarly, questionnaires and focus group interviews were also administered prior to and after the course. The final four seminar discussion sessions were video-recorded to provide a third-eye view of the interactions between subjects.

Subjects

The subjects were all English-speaking learners of Japanese living in Saitama city who registered for a free course in job seeking skills. The job seeking skills workshops focused on creating job application documents and practicing for interviews in both English and Japanese. The background data on each subject is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Background data on subjects

Group	Subject	Nationality	Gender	Reason for coming to Japan	In long term relationship with Japanese	JLPT* level	Number of years in Japan
Experimental group	1	American	Female	Anime	no	1	6
	2	American	Male	Martial arts	no	2	4
	3	British	Male	Marriage	yes	3	2
	4	American	Male	Work	no	5	1
	5	British	Male	Martial arts	no	2	4
	6	Filipino	Female	Work	yes	2	7
	7	American	Male	Martial arts	yes	3	6
	8	Filipino	Female	Work	yes	2	8
Control group	9	American	Male	Work	no	5	2
	10	British	Female	Language	no	3	1
	11	Filipino	Female	Work	yes	2	3
	12	Filipino	Female	Work	yes	2	2
	13	British	Male	Work	yes	5	2
	14	American	Male	Anime	yes	2	8
	15	Filipino	Female	Anime	yes	3	1

* JLPT - Japanese Language Proficiency Test (N1 = highest level, N5 = lowest level)

Five subjects were from the Philippines and ten were native English speakers from North America or the United Kingdom. Those from the Philippines were all female, while only two Western subjects were female. All the subjects had lived in Japan for between one year and eight years, with a mean length of residence of approximately 4 years. All were unemployed or underemployed and were actively seeking employment.

Seven of the subjects were unable to or chose not to attend the seminar discussion course, while the remaining eight were able to attend. The non-attending group was labeled as the control group (CG) while the participating group was named the experimental group (EG).

The mean values for each category are given in Table 2. There is a significant difference of two years in the length of time spent in Japan for the experimental group since the mean of the control group is approximately 2 years 9 months.

Table 2: Mean scores for groups

Group	Mean JLPT level	Mean number of years in Japan
Experimental group	2.5	4.7
Control group	3.1	2.7
Overall	2.8	3.8

Course of seminar discussions

The experimental group participated in the voluntary course of 8 sessions on samurai dramas held over a two-month period. Each session was held immediately after the job seeking skills session. This voluntary course consisted of discussions based around independent and group problem solving with a tutor giving assistance as appropriate. The researcher was the tutor for

the first four sessions and a bilingual Japanese businessman volunteered to be the tutor for the final four sessions.

Each one-hour session focused on one particular aspect of this genre, such as: the period, the place and the people. The starting focus on each session is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Focus of video clips used to start each discussion session

Session	Focus	Starting video clip	Title in Japanese
1	People	Various opening scenes	
2	Things	<i>Oedo so samo</i>	大江戸捜査網
3	Place	<i>Zatoichi</i> (various versions)	座頭市
4	Bushido	Twilight samurai (movie)	たそがれ清兵衛
5	Period	<i>Mito koumon</i>	水戸黄門
6	Culture	Seppuku scenes (various)	
7	Weapons	zenigataheiji	銭形平次
8	Language	zenigataheiji	銭形平次

Each session started with a video clip from which discussion ensued with the more knowledgeable helping the less. The tutor acted as a facilitator steering discussions in more fertile areas and asking probing questions. The tutor aimed at encouraging participants to learn from each other rather than acting as knowledge giver. At times, the tutor intervened to stem the transfer of misinformation. The discussions were lively with everyone participating, some more vocally than others.

After each session, the tutor looked up any necessary information and created a summary handout primarily aimed at the CG which was disseminated to all those registered for the course, namely the CG and EG.

Choice of instruments and process

Triangulation was used to reduce the risk of bias and enhance the reliability and validity. This research draws upon the results of tests of knowledge, questionnaires, focus group interviews and videos of seminar discussions. A visual representation of the relevant data collection is shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: A visual representation of the data collection points

Before the course	Seminar discussions	After the course
Pre-tests	Video recording of final 4 seminar discussions	Post-tests
Pre-questionnaires		Post-questionnaires
Pre-focus group interviews		Post-focus group interviews

Tests

In total each test consisted of 40 multiple-choice questions based on short video clips. Each multiple choice question was followed by four choices. Responses were recorded on an answer grid. There was one correct answer and three distractors. Some video clips were only suitable for one question, but where possible multiple questions were used for a single video clip. Video clips were displayed on one monitor and the questions were displayed simultaneously on a separate monitor. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of one test item. The pre-test and post-test were similar but not identical. In the post-test video clips from the pre-test were reused but with different questions; and, conversely, questions were reused with different video clips.



1. Who is a samurai?

- A. The man on the left
- B. The man on the right
- C. Neither of them
- D. Both of them

Figure 1: First question on pre-test

The test was subdivided into four parts: historical knowledge, cultural knowledge, grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. Each category contained ten items of equal weighting. It was administered within an hour. The test was trialled with native and non-native speakers of Japanese prior to the study.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires were extensive, but this study only makes use of the relevant sections which were regarding the subjects' attitude towards Japanese language and samurai dramas. A five-point Likert scale was used measuring affinity from high (1) to low (5). The same questionnaire was given before and after the job seeking and seminar discussion courses.

Interviews

Semi-structured focus group interviews were held to understand in greater depth the subjects' attitudes towards and comprehension of samurai dramas. The researcher held the focus group discussions in a small coffee shop with drinks and snacks provided for the subjects to encourage participation. The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured format, which is available in Appendix 1.

Limitations

This in-depth case study collected both qualitative and quantitative data, but given the relatively small sample size, there is difficulty in justifying the validity in extrapolating claims from this case study.

4. FINDINGS

The significant findings are those directly related to the two research questions aimed at ascertaining whether discussions in English can affect comprehension of or affinity towards *jidaigeki*.

Increase in comprehension

As illustrated in Table 5, there was an overall increase in test scores for both the control group (CG) and experimental groups (EG). The mean score for the control group increased by almost 50% from a pre-test score of approximately 36% to a post-test score of over 50%. The mean score for the experimental increased by nearly 90% from a pre-test score of just under 40% to a post-test score of slightly over 70%. One noteworthy result is that the test scores for each subject in both groups increased.

The logical conclusion is that there was an improvement in the subjects' comprehension of the factors tested. A notable statistical difference was that the EG test scores mean increase was close to double the increase of the CG. Given that the both groups received the same written information but only the EG attended the seminar discussions, it is possible to conclude that the improvement is due to participation in those scaffolded discussions.

Table 5: Overall pre and post test scores for experiment and control groups

Group	Subject identity number	Pre test score (%)	Post test score (%)	Score increase (%)
Experimental group (EG)	1	52.5	87.5	67
	2	37.5	75.0	100
	3	22.5	60.0	167
	4	20.0	42.5	113
	5	47.5	80.0	68
	6	37.5	75.0	100
	7	47.5	62.5	32
	8	47.5	80.0	68
EG mean		39.1	70.3	89
Control group (CG)	9	40.0	45.0	13
	10	32.5	50.0	54
	11	40.0	52.5	31
	12	27.5	50.0	82
	13	20.0	27.5	38
	14	40.0	70.0	75
	15	52.5	72.5	38
CG mean		36.1	52.5	47
Total mean		37.7	62.0	70

There are, however, a number of alternative explanations, which may have caused the additional increase in test scores for the EG, such as the Hawthorne effect or bias caused by the self-selected division of subjects into two groups. Put simply, the Hawthorne effect is when the behaviour of subjects is positively affected by their participation in a research programme. In terms of bias, it could be that the learners who came to the seminar discussions were intrinsically more motivated and so regardless of the seminars would have made more progress. An alternative bias could have been that as the mean initial affinity for Japanese language and *jidaigeki* was slightly higher in the EG than the CG, that could have played a role. The final explanation related to bias is that the subjects in the EG had on average resided in Japan for a significantly longer period of time, and as such, actually understood the dramas better, but simply had difficulty on the day with the format or other aspect of the pre-test.

When comparing the pre-test and post-test scores, it became apparent that the scores in the historical knowledge and vocabulary knowledge sections increased more than the cultural knowledge and grammatical knowledge sections. Figures 2a and 2b show the mean scores of pre- and post-tests by section. The largest improvements were in history with the overall mean increasing from just over 4 to 7 (out of 10) and vocabulary knowledge which showed an increase from an overall mean of approximately 2.5 to 6 (out of 10).

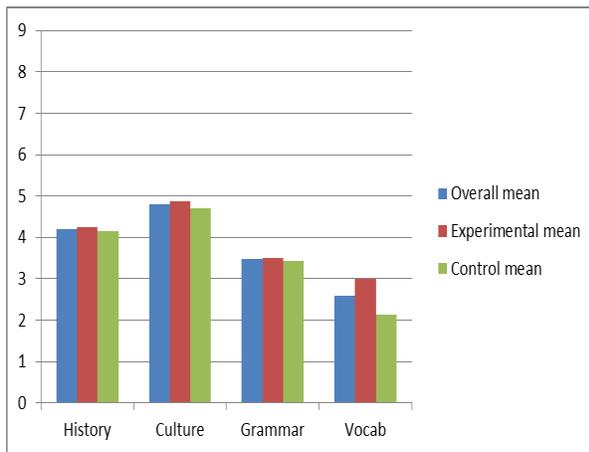


Figure 2a: Pre-test scores by section

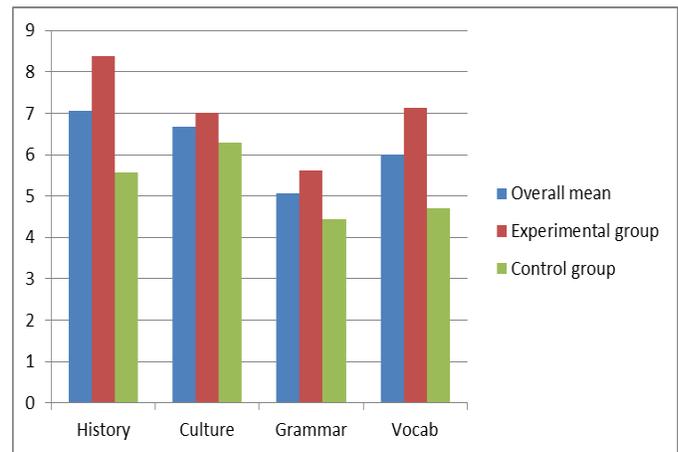


Figure 2b: Post-test scores by section

Subjects mentioned learning numerous concepts in both the final focus group interview and after each session to the researcher. To provide a flavor of the participants` views on the concepts covered, some of their comments are listed below:

Subject 2 I had no idea that Edo was actually Tokyo.

Subject 2 I had no idea what the dude in the white kimono was doing.

Subject 3 Some of us didn`t know there was a class structure. You know like India.

Subject 4 Well, at least you didn`t think that everyone brandishing a sword was a samurai. [who then looked to the one who thought so]

Increase in affinity

Affinity was measured using a Likert scale from 1 (low affinity) to 5 (high affinity). As can be seen in Figure 3, all participants showed higher degrees of affinity for Japanese people than for Japanese language with the lowest affinity being shown for samurai dramas.

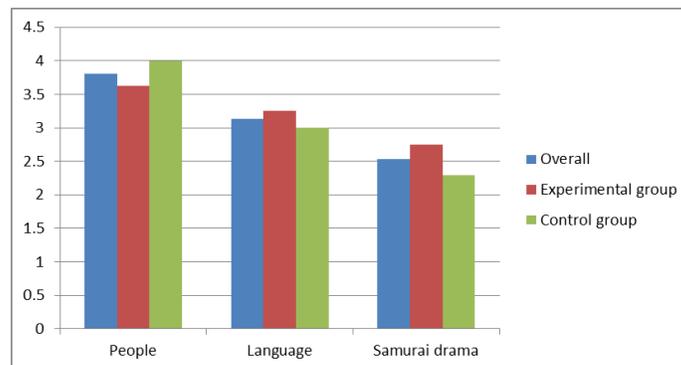


Figure 3: Initial affinity towards Japanese people, language and samurai dramas

There was no change in the affinity towards Japanese people or Japanese language in the post-questionnaires.

According to the questionnaire survey, there was an increase in affinity for *jidageki* across both the EG and the CG. The increase for the EG was greater than for the CG. There was a positive change in affinity for *jidaigeki* for both the control and experimental groups with the mean affinity increasing only slightly for the control group while the experimental group showed a significant rise as shown in Figure 4. Exactly 75% (6 out of 8) of experimental group had a slightly more or much more positive attitude towards *jidaigeki* in the post-questionnaire while only approximately a third (2 out of 7) had a slightly more positive attitude in the control group.

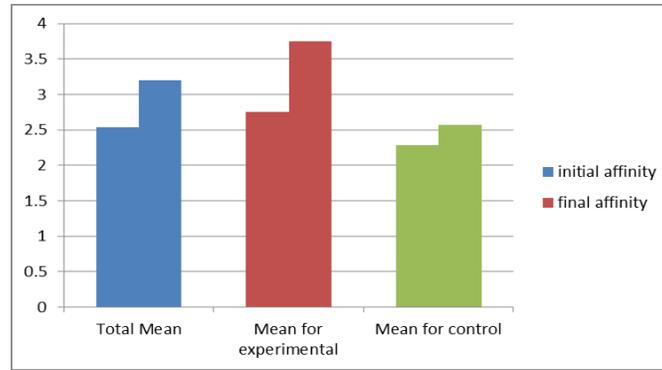


Figure 4: Changes in affinity towards samurai dramas

Since the primary difference between the two groups was that the experimental group participated in the seminar discussions, that would seem to be the probable cause of the increase in affinity. Skeptics might be inclined to propose other possible explanations. For example, the increase in comprehension of *jidaigeki* may have led to some positive reinforcement and created a virtuous circle. There could have been some bias caused in by the instrument design with subjects wavering between two options in the pre- and post-tests, but coincidentally selecting the option resulting in a higher affinity score in the post test.

Incidental findings

There were three incidental findings which arose from analysis of the data.

Likelihood of watching *jidaigeki*

According to the data from the pre- and post-questionnaires, those living with in-laws watched far more *jidaigeki* than those who did not. The mean number of hours spent watching *jidaigeki* per month by those residing with in-laws was just under 20 hours, which is three times higher than that spent by those not living with in-laws. Since none of the subjects were educated to degree level, the number of jobs open to them was rather limited. All subjects were either unemployed or underemployed. All of them were financially challenged, and many of their life decisions were decided by the lack of money; the television was viewed as a cheap form of

entertainment. In the focus group interviews, one reason given for watching samurai dramas was that the living room was the warmest room in the house in winter and the coolest room in summer. And they did not want to further financially burden their in-laws by going to another room and turning on the heater or air-conditioner.

Predictor of comprehension of *jidaigeki*

The r test score for basic linear correlation between the pre-test score and the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) score was -0.53, which implies there is an insignificant negative correlation between the scores. This, therefore, indicates that within this cohort of subjects the JLPT score was not a useful predictor of ability to comprehend *jidaigeki*. This may be explained by the focus on formal written language, particularly at the higher N1 and N2 levels in the JLPT.

The *anime* effect

Budo enthusiasts or martial artists who had been exposed to concepts from *bushido* within their training were expected to understand *jidaigeki* somewhat better than others. However, a surprising result was that there was a direct correlation between interest in *anime* and understanding *jidaigeki*. There were three *anime* enthusiasts with JLPT test scores of N1, N2 and N3, who all scored comparatively high on the pre- and post-tests.

It could be the case that since a number of *anime* incorporate aspects of *bushido* into their stories, they are more familiar with the genre of *jidaigeki*, or perhaps, it is that they have a more highly developed skill at guessing the storyline because of their experience of following *anime*. Subject number 15 had only lived in Japan for a year and usually watched *anime* in Japanese but with English subtitles, yet still outperformed seven other subjects who had passed the N2.

5. CONCLUSION

To summarize, both the control and experimental groups showed positive increases in their understanding of the language and the underlying social and cultural factors necessary to follow *jidaigeki*, with the increase for the experimental group being almost double that of the control group.

The post-course questionnaire surveys also showed an increase in affinity for *jidaigeki* for both groups. The increase for the experimental group was significantly higher than that of the control group.

Since the questionnaire survey result and test results of the experimental group differed significantly to the control group, there is a strong likelihood that participation in scaffolded discussions in English was able to improve both the participants' attitude towards *jidaigeki* and their comprehension of *jidaigeki*.

In addition, it was discovered that the foreigners who reside with elderly in-laws and could not afford alternative entertainment watched *jidaigeki* three times longer those who did not reside with in-laws.

Anime enthusiasts were better able to understand *jidaigeki* than those who had come to Japan for purposes other than martial arts.

Although this case study resulted in an increase in both affinity and comprehension of *jidaigeki*, the causality of that increase has not been clearly proven, and so this could be a fruitful area of research for anyone wishing to build on this study.

In this study the scaffolded discussions were held in English to break through the cultural and linguistic entry barriers to Japanese samurai dramas. An interesting follow-up could be to investigate scaffolded discussions held in Japanese to scaffold learners of English through the

cultural and linguistic entry barriers to a popular yet hard-to-follow American television series, such as the Simpsons.

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Appendix 1

Focus group and individual interview format (for final focus group interview)

Introduction - thanked, welcomed and chatted to enable participants to relax
- reassured participants of the confidentiality of their contributions
- highlighted the purpose

Main body **To discuss the course with emphasis on scaffolding**

Who did you learn from?

What facts or concepts did you learn? Who from?

What fact or concept will you never forget? Who did you learn it from?

To discuss the effect of the course on your ability to follow *jidaigeki*

Can you follow the storyline in *jidaigeki* now?

What difficulties do you still have?

Did the course help you?

What was the most important thing you learnt on the course?

To discuss the effect of the course on affinity

How do you feel about *jidaigeki* now?

Is your feeling the same as before the course?

Conclusion - thanked participants