

Teaching of Japanese Language to Filipino Learners through Blended Learning

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Abstract

This study aimed to find out the effectiveness of blended learning as a mode of delivering Japanese language lessons to learners from selected degree programs in two Universities in the Philippines offering Japanese language course. After finishing the one-semester Japanese Language Course, under graduate learners from the experimental group and control group similarly demonstrated a very good skill in writing and speaking that their level of proficiency in the skill did not significantly differ. In the case of the learners from the graduate programs, those from the experimental group obtained a very good to excellent level of proficiency in writing while those from the control group posed a good to very good levels of proficiency in the same skill. However, statistical computation shows no significant difference as to writing skills between the groups. In speaking, it was found out that learners from the graduate program's experimental group showed a higher proficiency level in speaking compared to the control group as proven by statistical analysis. Learners from the experimental group further supported strongly the identified advantages of blended learning in teaching of Japanese language. Nevertheless, most of them suggested the integration of other techniques, like the utilization of songs and self-constructed conversation activities, in the teaching of foreign language whether or not blended learning is applied. It was concluded that a higher level of Japanese language proficiency in speaking can be attained through blended learning approach. Subsequently, the application of this mode as an alternative method in teaching foreign language is highly recommended.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Foreign Language, Proficiency Level

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Introduction

Foreign language pertains to a nonnative language which is being learned in schools and is not spoken in the community where the teaching occurs. Studying another language allows the individual language learner to communicate effectively and creatively with other people who come from different cultures. The individual can participate to real-life situations through the language of the authentic culture itself. Learning another language provides access into a perspective other than one's own, increases the ability to see connections across content areas, and promotes an interdisciplinary perspective while gaining intercultural understandings (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that recent scientific researches on the brain suggests that learning foreign languages makes students smarter overall. Among the many benefits, it increases students' mental focus, reading and writing abilities, and even improves mathematical skills (Kim, 2013). Strong evidence shows that time spent on foreign language study strongly reinforces the core subject areas of reading, language literacy, social studies and math. Foreign language learners consistently outperform control groups in core subject areas on standardized tests, often significantly (Saunders, 1998; Masciantonio, 1977; Rafferty, 1986; Andrade, 1989; as cited by NEA Research, 2007).

In today's increasingly global world, students need to be prepared with foreign language skills that will allow them to participate in international markets and conversations. In the Philippines, since the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) was established in 1994 through Republic Act No. 7722, foreign language is already of the curriculum for most Doctor's Degree Program Courses being offered various Colleges and Universities. In 2006, the Commission issued CMO No. 47, otherwise known as Policies and standards for Master's and Doctor's Degree Programs in Criminal Justice with Specialization in Criminology. Article IV-e of CMO No. 47 stipulates that the foreign language requirement of 6 units shall require completion of one foreign language which may be from Asian languages like Japanese, Korean, Chinese Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesia, and others.

As to the method of teaching foreign language, Article III-B of CMO No. 02 series 2017 specifies that Delivering Higher Education Institutions (DHEIS) may deliver foreign language program through three main modes such as, face-to-face or classroom based education, distance education, and blended learning or a combination of the face-to-face mode and distance education.

In the undergraduate level, at least during the conduct of this research, some of the degree courses that require the study of foreign languages are the Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management (BSTM), Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management (BSHM), and Bachelor of Science in Hotel and Restaurant Management (BSHRM). Unlike in the aforementioned graduate degrees, the method of teaching foreign language for the undergraduate degrees usually follows the face-to-face mode or classroom based instruction.

The application of blended learning in the teaching of foreign language particularly Niponggo is the focus of this research. Kiviniemi (2014) said that blended learning is an effective means of optimizing student learning and improving student performance in some disciplines particularly health science courses. It is nevertheless a big

question whether blended learning as a mode of teaching foreign language will work for learners in the undergraduate or graduate study courses. Undergraduate students are usually in their post teenager or young adult stage while those in the graduate level are expected to be adult learners. It is axiomatic that most adult learners have some difficulties when it comes to memorization which is an indispensable means of language acquisition. Unlike children whose super-flexible brains grow the connections necessary to learn an additional language, adults have sophisticated grown-up brains that they may not be able to pull off "implicit" learning (Baer, 2014). It may be necessary then for adult learners to be given more face-to-face learning opportunities in so far as foreign language is concern. As explained by Keen (2010), the tricks to maintain foreign language fluency is to practice the same regularly. Applying blended learning in teaching foreign language where regular classroom sessions are not necessary would be an interesting topic for a research.

Should blended learning be proven useful in teaching a foreign language, learning institutions may consider it as strategy in resolving issues on classroom congestions, teacher shortage, tardiness of students and the like. It was then the purpose of this research to find out the effectiveness of blended learning as a mode of delivering Japanese language lessons to learners from selected degree programs. Specifically, it was intended to determine the level of Japanese Language Proficiency of the learners after a one-semester language course; the difference of Japanese language proficiency level between the experimental groups and control groups; and advantages and disadvantages of blended learning. Further, it sought suggestions for improving further the delivery of foreign language lessons through blended learning.

The research was conducted in two Universities namely, the Benguet State University and the University of the Cordilleras which are both located in the Cordillera Administrative Region of the Philippines. The former has considered the teaching of foreign language to students under the Bachelor of Science in Hotel and Restaurant Management (BSHRM) and the Doctor of Philosophy in Language course while the latter offers foreign languages for students under the Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management (BSTM), Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management (BSHM), Doctor's degree course in Criminal Justice with specialization in Criminology (Ph.D. Crim.), and the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management (PhD. Educ.).

Japanese Language Proficiency, as applied in this research, refers only to the basic writing and speaking capabilities of Learners. Furthermore, basic writing skills pertain to the writing of Japanese sentences using the Roman alphabet and not the sets of Japanese characters such as katakana, hiragana, and kanji. The acquisition of a new language normally takes time that a one-semester foreign language course would be limited to the teaching of language rudimentary. It follows that the application of blended learning in this research was restricted to activities online, such as; verbal and written communications, language video file reviews, and written exercises. Classroom-based instruction and conversations were still utilized as part of the teaching-learning method albeit not done regularly. For the purpose of comparing the impact of blended learning against the usual method of teaching language, the former was implemented for classes assigned as experimental group while the latter was applied to the other classes considered as control group. The levels of language proficiency were determined through written and oral language assessments.

In order to describe the appropriate proficiency level of the learners, the established grading systems of the University of the Cordilleras and State Universities were adopted as follows:

Table 1. Grading system for undergraduate programs

Percentage Equivalent	Numerical Equivalent	Descriptive Equivalent
99-100	1.00	Excellent
96-98	1.25	Excellent
93-95	1.50	Very Good
90-92	1.75	Very Good
87-89	2.00	Good
84-86	2.25	Good
81-83	2.50	Fair
78-80	2.75	Fair
75-77	3.00	Passing

Table 2. Grading system for graduate programs

Percentage Equivalent	Numerical Equivalent	Descriptive Equivalent
97-100	1.00	Excellent
94-96	1.25	Very Good
91-93	1.50	Good
88-90	1.75	Satisfactory
85-87	2.00	Passed
75-84	3.00-2.25	Conditional

The perceptions of learners regarding the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning were obtained through questionnaires. The same questionnaires were also used to get suggestions from the learners on how blended learning be further improved.

Conclusions

Language Proficiency

After a one-semester basic Japanese language course, assessments showed that most learners whether belonging to the experimental group or to the control group of the undergraduate degree programs possessed a good proficiency level in Japanese language as to written skill. In the graduate programs, most learners from the experimental group had very good to excellent language proficiency levels while learners from the control group held a good to satisfactory level of proficiency in the same language skill.

Statistical analysis disclosed that there are no significant differences as to the level of Japanese language proficiency in writing between the experimental groups and the control groups. It can be inferred that integrating blended learning is a creative

strategy in teaching Japanese language. Nonetheless, it may not necessarily result in written outputs that are superior to learning outcomes where the usual method of language teaching is applied. As concluded by Oguri, Allen, and Kato (2016), while blended learning aims at letting the students increase their self-efficacy so that they will feel more positive toward carrying out self-regulated learning beyond classrooms, blending technology does not necessarily improve significantly the students' aptitude in learning. The non-significant differences of written outputs may however be partly attributed to the short duration of Blended Learning application during the conduct of the research. The length of time in using blended learning and the limitations of the program's interface are among those variables mentioned by Kobayashi (2011) that can negatively affect learners' perceptions of and satisfaction with blended learning.

In speaking, the majority of learners from both experimental group and the control group of the undergraduate programs obtained convincing skills. Statistical computations did not also show any significant difference of proficiency levels between the two groups. Apparently, blended learning is just as effective as other language teaching methods depending on teacher's way of utilizing it. It can be concluded that, just like other methods, blended learning may not at all times be very productive when affected by unfavorable circumstances. For instance, the students of Tosun (2015) did not achieve great learning outcomes by the end of 6-weeks blended instruction program. Some of the reasons cited were the short duration of the study, students preferred the traditional classroom based learning thus they lack motivation when blended learning was applied, and students did not have the self-discipline to make e-learning a powerful option which allows them to work independently at their own pace.

In the case of the learners from the graduate programs, many of those from the experimental group possessed a very good proficiency level in speaking while the greatest number of students from the control group had a good to very good proficiency level in the same skill. Interestingly, statistical computation revealed a significant difference of proficiency in speaking between the two groups of learners from the graduate programs. The way how blended learning was applied to the experimental group could have contributed to their higher level of proficiency in speaking as compared to the control group. Classroom-based learning sessions were scheduled only four times during weekends with in the one-semester course. The control group on the other hand followed the regular schedule of graduate classes which were done during weekdays after office hours. It can be assumed that the non-traditional way of scheduling Japanese Language classes for the experimental group made them more comfortable as adult language learners since they were more relaxed during weekdays and they have more time to practice at their own pace. The control group on the other hand had to attend to their regular schedule during week days after office hours. It is expected that most of them came from work and might have already been exhausted physically and mentally causing their lack of enough energy to study and practice the Language.

The significant difference of speaking proficiency between the said groups may corroborate the study of Hamad (2015) wherein significant differences of learning outcomes between two groups of students were noted. The group who were studying Basic foreign language course using the blended learning approach had a better

learning outcome compared to those who learnt the same language by traditional approach.

Advantages of Blended Learning

The perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning, and so with the suggestions to improve further the use of such approach, were acquired from the experimental group of learners of the graduate program. Since these were learners whom blended learning was fully implemented, it is expected that they were in a better position to give empirical ideas on how the teaching mode works. The following are the advantages of blended learning that were either expressed by the learners or adopted from other studies:

1. Increase cost effectiveness for employees who are permanently busy and hardly ever can afford to attend face-to-face full-time classes.
2. Saves time and effort of students from regularly traveling to and fro the University.
3. Online materials maybe read as is and not necessarily making hardcopies that will require additional expenses.
4. Learners can be more independent and autonomous.
5. Learners can combine classroom work and modern technologies in electronic distance learning environment.
6. Learners can explore supplemental knowledge and information related to the language being learned.
7. Learners have longer time to practice and master the language by themselves and at their own pace.
8. Increase student-student and student-teacher interactions.
9. Allows learners to give immediate and detailed feedback.
10. Encourages more involvement and participation.
11. Reduce or even eliminate communication anxiety.
12. Offers more opportunities for communication, in both classroom-based and on-line learning, using foreign language.

It came out that most learners strongly agreed with the aforementioned advantages. Items numbers 1 to 3 are apparently cost effective means of studying foreign language; numbers 4 to 7 demonstrate how learners can independently progress in their learning; numbers 8 to 12 reflect how learners became more engaged in learning the language. The strong agreement of the learners on the said advantages is somehow similar with the strong support for blended learning given by the respondents in the study of Kehrwald, Rawlins, and Simpson (2011). Said respondents confirmed that blended learning enriched their learning. Likewise, the research finding above substantiated the conclusion of Kaplanis' (2013) and Kudyshev (2013) that blended learning is beneficial because: the learner is more engaged using a variety of content types; learners with different learning styles can be taught through diversifying teaching methods; it greatly affects the way feedback is facilitated especially that it allows feedback to be prepared from home; it provides opportunity for students to learn in a group with a teacher and additionally at home at a convenient time; student himself sets the optimal speed and intensity of the learning process; and it helps student to discipline himself and learn to work independently.

Disadvantages of Blended Learning

The disadvantages of blended learning proposed in this research included difficulties in accessing internet connection; not being challenged to speak foreign language due to absence of pressure; forgetting concepts learned due to the long gaps of classroom-based learning; very tiring “all day long” foreign language class; and slim chances to have “common time” for online discussion. Although the learners concurred with these disadvantages, their level of agreement is not as strong as their agreement with the advantages of blended learning. It can be presumed that the learners believed that there are more advantages than disadvantages of using blended learning in teaching foreign language.

The identified disadvantages of blended learning may impose some challenges both to the teachers and the learners albeit not in a very serious degree since these could always be given remedies. Technological challenges such as difficulties in accessing internet connection and slim chances to have “common time” for online discussion are indeed true especially to schools which do not have a good internet connection. This is precisely why Movchan, et. al (2018) claimed that full blended learning is possible if there is strong internet connectivity as this has a meaningful impact in terms of overall learning environment and experience. Undoubtedly, incorporating blended learning in language teaching-learning process may partly relies on technological feasibility.

“Learners not being challenged to speak foreign language due to absence of pressure” as among the disadvantages of blended learning can be attributed to the reduced number of actual classroom instructions. Presumably, when language learning is more on virtual, students have the tendency to become lax since no one in person will pressure them. Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) even declared that the absence of learner interaction causes failure and eventual drop-out. These authors noted that the lack of learners’ connectedness was among the internal factors leading to drop-out in online courses. In some instances, learners may not continue in blended learning if they can hardly connect well with others through online, thereby, developing feelings of isolation.

Suggestions on the Use of Blended Learning

Valuable suggestions to improve further the use of blended learning in the teaching of Japanese language were offered by a substantial number of learners from the graduate program. Their suggestions included the following: Integration of songs in the teaching of the language; more opportunities for conversation compositions and role plays; implementation of breaks during actual classroom instructions especially if the session is long; and classroom-based learning should not be done straight for one day.

The integration of songs was the most suggested means of complementing blended learning in the teaching of Japanese language. The respondents most likely agreed with the proven concept that familiarizing language by singing is easier and more relaxing compared with merely memorizing the language. Diakou (2013) stated that songs offer a great opportunity to help students change their classroom routine. The repetition and most importantly the fun involved in rhymes in songs could increase motivation levels by providing ample opportunities to work with interesting tasks and

activities. Moreover, rhymes in songs could help teachers convert their natural energy and enthusiasm into meaningful learning experiences. Gray (2013) even wrote that research from the University of Edinburgh found that adults who sang words or short phrases from a foreign language while learning were twice as good at speaking it later. It is thought that by listening to words that are sung, and by singing them back, the technique takes advantage of the strong links between music and memory. Although not clearly understood, music is known to help students when studying and can help to trigger memory recall.

The suggestion that “there should be more opportunities for conversation compositions and role plays” supports the idea that scripted conversations helps learners understand actual application of grammatical rules in speaking. With enough knowledge and useful vocabulary, learners may even learn the language faster when they themselves prepare, construct, and perform through dramatization. As stated by Peter (2015), speaking a new language requires a lot of time and practice focusing on conveying the meaning of words through conversations. Writing conversations is also useful in strengthening further the acquisition of language skills. Smith (2018) concluded that writing is the ultimate way to learn new vocabulary and practice verb construction. Writing is important in preparing an argument or point of view because learners can think and practice first the language before using in an oral conversation.

The other suggestions given by the learners such as the implementation of breaks for extended classroom based learning is in order. In fact there are studies proving the advantages of employing breaks in doing any tasks. In studies cited by Patel (2014), researchers studied four groups of people. Each of the groups worked on a brain-intensive task for 50 minutes. The group that took more breaks had the highest mental stamina at the end of the 50 minutes. Patel (2014) explained that by using another part of the brain, the students were able to give their analytical processing skills a break, and then solve the problem with renewed energy. Taking a break is essential to higher productivity, energy, concentration, efficiency, creativity, and just about every other good thing that one needs to survive.

Over all, a one semester Basic Japanese language course may produce a very good proficiency level in writing whether or not blended learning is introduced. For speaking however, a higher level of proficiency maybe acquired should blended learning be utilized.

There is no doubt that there are more advantages than disadvantages in using blended learning in the teaching of foreign language. Nevertheless, the approach will work better if it will be if it will be used along with other teaching approaches or techniques.

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