

Motivation and Challenges in Learning Japanese Language as a Foreign Language Among Malaysian Academia

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Due to the success of Look East Policy and Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025, learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia has become more common. Accordingly, there are more than 39,247 Japanese language learners in Malaysia and the number is increasing. Despite the steady growth of Japanese language learners, the language proficiency is not high wherein 52% of the respondents only possess basic command of Japanese language, 13% possesses medium command of Japanese language, and 2.5% possesses advanced command of Japanese language. Motivation and challenges are two key factors that determine the success of continuous learning among Malaysian learners. In this study, descriptive analysis and ordinal logistic regression were implemented. Integrative motivation (4.4508 ± 0.7444 , $p < 0.05$) has been identified as the main driver among Malaysian academia. The motivation has significantly contributed to the formulation of Japanese language learning interest. Meanwhile, personal commitment (3.8063 ± 1.1303 , $p < 0.05$) has been identified as the significant challenge that hinders effective learning. The survey findings are useful to develop future useful strategies for continuous Japanese language learning in Malaysia.

Keywords: Japanese Language, Challenge, Motivation, Malaysian Academia

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Introduction

Attributed to the internationalization effect, mastery of foreign language is viewed as a critical softskill to adapt into the global society. Good command of foreign language enables the learners to create value for themselves, their community and country. Nonetheless, learning new language is a time-consuming process that requires continuous practice and dedication. Therefore, attitude and motivation play paramount roles during the process. Among the foreign languages, Japanese language is one of the most frequently communicated language in this world, with more than 134 countries implementing Japanese language education across 18,661 institutes around the globe (Foundation, 2020).

As a multiracial mixing pot, Malaysia is a multilingual country. The local community is no stranger to speaking two or more types of languages in their daily lives. Furthermore, numerous Malaysian universities have been offering foreign language such as Japanese, French, Spanish language courses as one of the non-credit subject or credited electives in their curriculums. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education, learning foreign language has been highlighted as one of the key components in driving Malaysia's vision to become a fully developed country (Maktiar Singh et al., 2021).

Since the inception of "Look East" policy, Malaysia has built robust relationships with Japan. Preparatory education for study in Japan has been offered to students who have completed their secondary education. In fact, substantial numbers of Malaysian students would be sent to Japan to pursue their tertiary studies every year. As a result, Japanese language emerges as one of the most popular foreign languages practiced by Malaysian learners. Retrospectively, there are more than 39,247 Japanese language learners in Malaysia, in which 14,720 learners are coming from higher education institutions (Foundation, 2020).

In addition to formal education, Malaysian academia has been exposed to a variety of exchange programs to Japan. Among them, Sakura Science Exchange (SSE) offered by the Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST) is one of the well-known exchange programs within the academia. Through the exchange, technological transfer can be attained, and bilateral cultural understanding can be strengthened at international level. Even though the number of Japanese language learners has been increasing over the years, the prevalence of good Japanese language proficiency remains low. Most learners only demonstrate basic level of language command.

Literature Review

In Malaysia, survey on the learning of foreign language is an active study topic. Intuitively, majority of these studies have concentrated on the factors influencing the learning motivation among undergraduate students. However, most studies only focus on a higher education institution and/or involve small number of survey respondents. For example, Khong, Hassan and Ramli (2017) have conducted a survey on the relationship between university student's motivation and gender differences in learning Spanish as a foreign language. The study only conducted within a Malaysian university. While the study showed that students were greatly motivated in learning Spanish language, there was no significant difference between integrative and instrumental motivations and gender (Hou-Keat, Nurul Husna, & Norasrani, 2017).

Meanwhile, Teh, Sulaiman and Yusuf (2018) have investigated two different types of motivations i.e. instrumental and integrative motivations among Arabic language learners from a Malaysian university. Their study outcomes suggested that integrative motivation was more prominent among the diploma students with the justification that the students have strong desire to integrate with the Arabic culture, community and language materials (Teh, Sulaiman, & Yusoff, 2018). Chua and Azlan (2019) have carried out interviews on Mandarin learners to identify drivers that have motivated the non-Chinese students to continue learning Mandarin. Their study reported that the instrumental motivation was the main reason in encouraging the learning of foreign language. It was found out that learning Mandarin to achieve better grades and better future prospect were the significant factors (Wen & Azlan, 2019).

Nikitina, Furuoka and Kamaruddin (2020) have examined the relationship between language attitudes and learning Korean as a foreign language among Malaysian university students. The study results have indicated significant association between learners' instrumental orientations and attitudes towards the speakers of Korean language (Nikitina, Furuoka, & Kamaruddin, 2020). On the other hand, Othman and Latif (2021) have investigated the foreign language anxiety among 40 Japanese language learners in a Malaysian university. The findings reported that the foreign language anxiety was at moderate level. Besides, there were differences between the male and female Japanese learners in their level of foreign language anxiety for the factors of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety (Othman & Latif, 2021).

Methodology

Research Objectives

The study's objectives are:

1. To determine the level of motivation for learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia
2. To identify significant challenges of learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia

Research Questions

Several research questions have been formulated based on the research objectives:

1. What type of motivation for learning Japanese as a foreign language should be considered in this study?
2. What kind of learning challenges can be considered in this study?

Design of Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises of 4 sections i.e. (1) Demographics of Respondents, (2) Learning Motivation, (3) Challenges to Learn Japanese Language, and (4) Conclusion. Demographic information of respondents such as the education degree, field of study, name of exchange programs and gender were acquired in first section. The information would serve as guidance to the study's data analysis.

Types of motivation of learning Japanese as a foreign language. This section comprises of 9 questions. The learning motivation is categorized into integrative, instrumental (Gardner &

Lambert, 1972) and attitudinal (Liu, 2014) motivations. Specifically, integrative motivation aims to investigate the learners desire to socialize in the target language community, culture and become part of that society. Instrumental motivation is defined as the learning to accomplish a specific task/ goal such as passing an examination, while attitudinal motivation refers to the practice of motivating people by influencing their thoughts and behaviors.

Types of challenges in learning Japanese as a foreign language. This section comprises of 12 questions. Overall, the challenges have been categorized into four types i.e. foreign language anxiety, negative societal perception, burden from self-commitment/lifestyle and lack of learning resources (Quintos, 2021). Intuitively, foreign language anxiety is defined as a situation-specific anxiety arising from the uniqueness of the formal learning of foreign language, especially in low self-appraisal of communicative abilities in the foreign language. Negative societal perception refers to the rejection of a particular foreign language by a society. Burden from self-commitment/lifestyles refers to the lack of dedication by individual due to different commitment concerns. Lastly, the lack of learning resources refers to the limited accessibility to foreign language learning materials.

Details of Respondents

Survey questionnaires were distributed among Malaysian academia. A total of 105 researchers, postgraduates, and undergraduates from various institutions were recruited to the survey under the support of Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) and help from the Malaysian Alumni of Sakura Science Association (MASSA) coordinators. Selection of respondents was based on those who have joined exchange programs to Japan such as the JST Sakura Science Exchange, JSPS Ronpaku, and Japan Student Service Organization (JASSO). The respondents' age ranged from 24 until 51 years old, where 60% were females and 40% were males. PhD degree holders constitute of 46.7% of the total respondents, followed by Master degree holders (29.5%) and Bachelor degree holders (23.8%).

Study Methodology

Quantitative approach is adopted in this study. A survey questionnaire was distributed to the Malaysian academia via the voluntarily assistance from MASSA. The questionnaire adopted a 5-points Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Descriptive statistics used means and standard deviations to identify the degree of different Japanese language learning motivations among Malaysian academia. Then, ordinal logistic regression were implemented to investigate the relationship between motivation and challenge to the interest in learning Japanese language.

Results and Discussion

A previous study on Japan exchange program among Malaysian has indicated that continuous Japanese language learning is challenging and worth further investigation (Gan, 2021). Table 1 shows the descriptive analyses on the range of motivation level while Table 2 shows the statistical analyses on the significance of each type of motivation in relation to the interest to learn Japanese language.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations on overall, integrative, instrumental, and attitudinal motivation for learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia.

Type of Motivation	n	Means	SD
Integrative	315	4.4508	0.7444
Instrumental	315	3.7206	0.9991
Attitudinal	315	3.4476	1.0970
Overall	948	3.8769	1.0552

Malaysian academia has demonstrated a moderate level of overall motivation in learning Japanese as a foreign language (3.8769 ± 1.0552). Going deeper, the integrative motivation has been identified as the primary motivation to learn Japanese language (4.4508 ± 0.7444), followed by instrumental motivation (3.7206 ± 0.9991), and lastly attitudinal motivation (3.4476 ± 1.0970). The survey results were mainly in-line with previous studies on motivation of learning foreign languages (Maktiar Singh et al., 2021; Teh et al., 2018). Then, ordinal logistic regression was performed to investigate the relationship between each motivation type to the interest to learn Japanese language.

Table 2. Factors that contribute to the continuous learning of Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia

Variable	Wald	df	p-value	Odds' Ratio
Intercept 1	13.388	1	0.000	-
Intercept 2	13.740	1	0.000	-
Integrative	14.344	1	0.000	2.807
Instrumental	0.879	1	0.348	0.843
Attitudinal	7.694	1	0.006	1.820

The results suggested that both integrative (p -value: 0.000) and attitudinal motivation (p -value: 0.006) have significantly improved the model's predictive capability. The integrative motivation is regarded as the most significant factor that increases the odds of being highly interested in learning the Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia (Odds' ratio: 2.807). Meanwhile, attitudinal motivation also increases the odds of being highly interested in learning the Japanese language as a foreign language among Malaysian academia (Odds' ratio: 1.820).

Table 3 shows the descriptive analyses on different types of challenges in learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia. Then, Table 4 shows the results from ordinal logistic regression on the challenge of learning Japanese language in relation to the interest of learning Japanese language.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of different types of challenges for learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia, where the scale of challenge is defined as 1.00 – 1.79 (Very Low), 1.80 – 2.59 (Low), 2.60 – 3.39 (Neutral), 3.40 – 4.19 (High) and 4.20 – 5.00 (Very High).

Type of Challenge	n	Means	SD	Interpretation
Foreign language anxiety	315	2.7524	1.0169	Neutral
Negative social perception	315	3.0190	1.0999	Neutral
Burden from personal commitment	315	3.8063	1.1303	High
Lack of learning materials	315	3.8413	1.0528	High

The challenges in learning Japanese as a foreign language has been examined. For instance, the lack of learning materials (3.8413 ± 1.0528) and burden from personal commitment (3.8063 ± 1.1303) have been interpreted as the major challenges during the learning process. On the other hand, the roles of negative social perception (3.0190 ± 1.0999) and foreign language anxiety (2.7524 ± 1.0169) have been interpreted as neutral. Based on the results, it is perceived that personal dedication and availability of learning resources are important to promote continuous foreign language learning.

Table 4. Factors that contribute to the challenge in continuous learning of Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia

Variable	Wald	df	<i>p</i> -value	Odds' Ratio
Intercept 1	4.396	1	0.036	-
Intercept 2	4.007	1	0.045	-
Foreign language anxiety	0.008	1	0.092	1.010
Negative social perception	3.530	1	0.060	0.730
Burden from personal commitment	3.126	1	0.047	1.280
Lack of learning materials	0.734	1	0.392	0.880

Based on the results, it was found out that personal commitment (*p*-value: 0.047) was the significant challenge in learning Japanese as a foreign language in relation to interest of learning Japanese language. On the other hand, foreign language anxiety, negative society perception and lack of learning materials do not significantly contribute as the significant challenge in learning Japanese language (*p*-value > 0.05). Retrospectively, a study from Yamashita (2020) has indicated that demotivation occurred within the Indonesian learners due to boredom and low Japanese language proficiency. The study suggested that more interesting teaching content should be introduced to prevent continuous learners from demotivation (Yamashita, 2020).

Conclusions

In this study, the level of motivation in learning Japanese as a foreign language among Malaysian academia has been investigated. The respondents who had previously joined Japan exchange program, were recruited from numerous higher education institutions and private sectors across Malaysia. Besides, we studied different types of challenge related to learning Japanese language. Our findings shows that integrative and attitudinal motivation are significant factors that drive Malaysian academia in continuously learning Japanese language. We also identify the burden from personal commitment as the significant challenge to continuously learn Japanese language. The study findings serve as important insight for educators to formulate useful learning strategies in their language classes.

Acknowledgements

The author knowledges the financial support provided by the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) in supporting this project, and the voluntary help provided by the Malaysia Alumni of Sakura Science Association (MASSA) when conducting the survey.

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