

Investigating the Need for Learning Modules in Japanese Language Education among Learners at USIM

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Abstract

Effective spoken communication is crucial for language acquisition, yet research on cohesion in spoken Japanese among university students is limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating the necessity for cohesive learning modules in Japanese language education at USIM. Through surveys and qualitative analysis, specific areas where cohesive modules could enhance speaking proficiency are identified. Findings will inform tailored teaching strategies and curriculum enhancements to meet learners' linguistic needs. Additionally, this research contributes insights into effective language instruction methodologies. By highlighting the importance of cohesion in spoken communication, it aims to advance language acquisition understanding and refine instructional practices in Japanese language education at USIM and beyond.

Keywords: Cohesion, Speaking Proficiency

Introduction

In an increasingly interdependent world, knowledge of foreign language is seen not only as an added advantage which has become crucial in accessing foreign technology but also is systematically associated with one's meaningful and constructive engagement in global trade and education. To achieve this one must be adequately equipped with the ability, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to understand and communicate effectively. Additionally, knowledge of foreign languages is essential to be able to better understand a country's social and cultural peculiarities.

As a multi-racial country in an interdependent world, Malaysia is also affected by the global economic crisis. Employment situation in Malaysia necessitates the need for graduates to acquire employable skills including proficiency in a third language. According to the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2007), "Proficiency in the third language is vital for developing human capital that drives the k-

economy as well as gears the country towards competitive innovation in the international arena” (p.62)

In the case of teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), previous studies have confirmed that the connection between the interest in Japanese animation (anime) and interest in learning Japanese language (Abe, 2009). Furuhashi (2013) suggested that, “by using materials in which students are already interested, language teachers can expect students will enhance and improve their language competence” (p.73). According to Yen (2013) learners can improve their speaking and writing skills through the learning tools and role-playing activities. In his findings, it is demonstrated that learners could improve their speaking and writing skills via peer-to-peer and self – correction behaviour. However, foreign language learners in Malaysia, especially the learners Japanese, Arabic, and other L3/FL are normally unmotivated to use these foreign languages in communication due to the strong mastery of their first and second language, thus contributing to their weakness in their foreign language speaking skills.

Most students do not exert much effort to improve their Japanese speaking skills. According to Ishak (2013), this problem is pervasive, including even the advanced students, as they are extremely shy to speak in foreign language, anxious of being ridiculed and accused of being show-offs. He further found that most students never used additional materials besides the textbook, be they printed or electronic, such as magazines, newspaper, radio, television, or the internet, in the quest to improve their foreign language speaking skill. Mohd Zain (2014), on the contrary, reported that students in his study performed many activities to support their learning, like reading Japanese magazines and book, watching Japanese movies, memorizing Japanese vocabularies, answering questions in Japanese, speaking Japanese with friends, asking questions in Japanese, participating in Japanese language contest.

Based on the researcher’s experience in teaching Japanese language in University Science of Islam Malaysia (USIM), the most students that took Japanese beginner course are found to speak Japanese. This is caused by their untrained Japanese and their daily language affects. Therefore, students’s problems will be very complicated to be solved if the problems are still unclear and are not found out their causes. To know and understand the students’ problems above, the researcher would like to conduct the study.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the introduction of the researcher’s above, the researcher would like to state the problems in learning how to speak Japanese at Japanese study programme.

Objective of the Research

Based on the background and statement of the research above, the objective of this research is “To know and understand the students’ challenges in speaking Japanese” and “proposes several recommendations to address these challenges. In other word, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced in teaching Japanese speaking?
2. How can these challenges be recommended to improve the Japanese communication

Literature Review

Speaking is one of skills used to express ideas and to communicate with other people in the entire world with a variety of reason such as relationship, business, networking, overseas travelling etc. Speaking skills is a skill which means not only to be known or learnt, but also to be practiced. Speaking is not about what should be said only but what people should listen and to know and to understand each other. It determines how long it is listened, how well it is understood, and applied between two people or among people.

According to Haynes and Zacarian (2010), "Speaking is retold, summarize, discuss, share, tell, persuade, argue, report, recite, describe, comment, explain, sing, echo, repeat, read aloud, present talk, say, whisper, chant, announce, ask, and answer. They imply that the language is produced by sounds to express ideas and feeling to other people, to inform news, report, etc, and to do something relating to the sound.

Many people feel that speaking in a new language is harder than reading, writing, or listening for two reasons. First, unlike reading or writing, speaking happens in real time usually the person you are talking to is waiting for you to speak right then. Second, when you speak, you cannot edit and revise what you wish to say, as you can if you are writing (Nunan, 2003). It states that speaking is more difficult than writing or listening and reading where in writing, you may reconstruct it while making mistake.

According to Hoge (2012), "There is a huge problem out there. There are a lot of confused language learners. These students know a lot of foreign language. They know a lot of grammar rules. The problem is they cannot understand instantly and effortlessly. They cannot speak clearly, confidently, and effortlessly. They know about the language's linguistics, the academic study of linguistics, nouns and verbs and pronouns and phrases and clauses and different very tenses, all that stuff, but they cannot perform. That is a huge problem, all the adult students out there who just cannot actually speak foreign language well and understand it well, even though they know a lot. Most schools, most programs and, indeed, most students in those schools are focussed on grammar rules and on linguistics and on writing.

Methodology of Research

In conducting this research, the researcher applied "qualitative descriptive method". According to Fraenkel et al. (2023), "Qualitative descriptive method is to document and event, situation, or circumstance of interest." It is assumed that by using qualitative method in this research, the researcher wanted to know, to understand the students; problems, and to describe the result of students' problems.

Subject of the Research

In this research, the researcher took subject from the first semesters' students who enrolled Japanese Language as a foreign language in University Science of Islam Malaysia (USIM) in the academic year 2019. The subject would be taken by the researcher by using purposive sampling. As it is stated by Kumar (2011). "The primary consideration is purposive sampling is your judgment as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of your study." Therefore, the researcher chooses 25 of USIM students from the first semester in USIM.

Technique of Data Collection

The researcher conducted data collection by interviewing the students. Type of interviews used by the researcher was a face-to-face interview. It is stated by Creswell (2014) that a qualitative interview is when the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, interview participants by telephone, or engages in focus group interviews, with six to eight interviewees in each group.

Furthermore, the students were interviewed one to one (in person interview) to describe from general topic and details about students' problem in understanding and speaking the Japanese at campus. The individual interviews were video-recorded. The data collected were then transcribed verbatim into texts and coded. The researcher began the analysis of the data by using the transcriptions of the verbal information from the interviews recorded as the body material for content analysis.

Technique of Data Analysis

In this research, the researcher applied analysis data. According to Given (2008), data analysis is an integral part qualitative research and constitutes an essential stepping stone towards both gathering data and linking one's findings with higher order concepts. Based on the statement above, the researcher conducted data analysis into four phases. The four phases of analysis data were as follows:

1. Data collection, is qualitative research, the researcher conducted data analysis while and after collecting the data in certain period. It meant that those activities were done while and after collecting the data.
2. Data reduction, the research selected and only focused on important points to find the theme and pattern.
3. Data display, to notice at displays data helped to understand what was happening and to do something further analysis or caution on that understanding.
4. Conclusion, after the data had been collected, reduced, displayed, and analytic conclusions were conducted to emerge and to define the data more clearly.

Based on the statement above the researcher could conclude that after the data causal factors of the students' problems.

Research Finding and Discussion

The findings revealed 2 types of obstacles, namely internal and external obstacles. Internal obstacle refers to the limitation that comes from the learners' own selves, knowledge, and skills, while external obstacle refers to the constraint that comes from the outside such as the lack of a supportive environment and ample opportunity to speak Japanese.

In terms of knowledge, vocabulary was reported to be the biggest obstacle, as mentioned by 20 respondents, and followed by the limited command of Japanese grammar, as mentioned by 5 respondents. The least reported obstacle was the shortage of content in speaking, as mentioned by 5 respondents. The finding corroborates the finding of Tanveer (2007) found that in terms of linguistic difficulty, pronunciation was the first most important aspect that his participants were challenged with while attempting to speak a FL/L2 followed by grammar. Besides the inadequacy of vocabulary, the present research has identified another problem similar in nature, i.e., the problem of being too cautious to apply the technique during

speaking. This problem was normally found among students who is taking Japanese language as foreign language. According to the respondents it takes them a long time to figure out the correct grammatical usage. As a result, they hardly speak Japanese language. Hence, grammar must be impeccable before speaking the language. Similarly, Horwitz (1987), in her survey of 32 FL learners regarding their beliefs about language learning, found that a minority of learners who were shy and over-concerned with accent and correctness, would probably handicap their attempts to participate in communicative activities. Tanveer (2007) explained that learners who fear making mistakes always regard learning and speaking in FL in the classroom as a problem for them. The fear of making of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners' concern to save their positive image of impression in the mind of their teachers and peers (Tanveer, 2007). Tanveer (2007) observed, a learner's obstacle "may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one's peers".

The lack of vocabulary is closely related to the limited content of speaking. Sometimes learners might have ideas to share with partners but are unable to express them with suitable words. At other times, learners may have the right vocabulary but lack of ideas to apply them. Because of the lack of vocabulary; respondent struggled to express ideas. Due to this problem, there are respondents whom lost their native speaker friends. The native speaker friend started to lose interest in conversing due to slow in responding and tired of having constantly translate. A limited vocabulary and a good command of grammar are not sufficient to boost the learners' self-confidence and courage to speak in Japanese. The lack of self-confidence was a very serious issue among the respondent, as evidenced 12 of them, while courage was mentioned only 2 times. Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) described this situation as discontinuous interaction strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor. They further explained that this strategy is normally used in the communication breakdown for example when the speaker fails to get the message across to the interlocutor. The speaker keeps quiet for a while just to think of the way to convey the message appropriately. Tanveer (2007) offered another interpretation for the above problem by alluding that "many words do not come out when required to speak in hurry" as learners can process only a limited amount of information at a time. The silent duration is risky as speakers might lose their friends' interest to continue speaking with them.

Skill refers to additional elements that can embellish one's speech, for example, spontaneity, fluency, proficiency and native-like speaking. Of these, spontaneity and achieving native-like speaking skill, were considered most problematic, as reported by 3 respondents. Lack of fluency and proficiency were considered as next in difficulty as mentioned by 2 respondents. The Japanese language is totally different from the Malay or English language. Another 3 respondents expressed his disappointment with most Malay learners who tend to speak "Malayanized" Japanese. According to the respondents the Malay learners practice Japanese among themselves, and they are hesitant to approach the native speakers to learn how the natives speak their language.

As for external problem, 3 respondents mentioned that the Malaysian environment is not conducive to the development of Japanese speaking skills. The environmental lack leads to the shortage of opportunity to speak Japanese as mentioned by 1 respondent. This concurs the environment promoting the optimum use of the FL in Malaysia is conspicuous by its absence.

It is dominated mainly by Malay language, the English language, and other ethnic languages, for these are the most popular media of communication in Malaysian society. FL learners in Malaysia, especially the learners of Japanese, Arabic, and others languages, are normally least motivated to use the language in communication because they already have strong mastery of their first language, thus contributing to the weakness in the FL speaking skills.

The respondents also listed several factors that might contribute to the problems mentioned, such as the attitude of learners. Most learners seem to put no effort to create Japanese environment that could help them to develop the Japanese speaking skill. Perhaps they do not feel the necessity to use Japanese as a medium of communication because they are living among the Malay community.

In conclusion, the findings have shown that the participants were aware of their problems to develop their Japanese speaking skills. The problems mentioned were not new as they were revealed by previous studies as well. Like the findings on the pre-requisites, respondents expressed more internal problems than external problems.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to know and to understand the students' problem in order that the lecturers could solve their problem to use Japanese speaking area in university faculty. The researcher believes that language is main problem for the respondents because it is required to achieve the advanced level of Japanese speaking skill, as aspired to by most of them. Having a good command of the Japanese language, for example, sufficient acquisition of Japanese vocabulary, a good command of Japanese grammar, will surely enhance their language skills, thus enabling them to gain courage and confidence to speak. As such, learners will be willing to speak, make mistakes, be corrected, and improve their language competence. Self-confidence helps them to be calm and relaxed, eliminate or at least reduce their shyness, nervousness, and anxiety to face people. These positive attitudes will motivate them to use various strategies to utilize whether the facilities and opportunities available around them to create the environment and opportunity to speak Japanese. In other words, they become interested to practise what they have learnt orally. When they realize that they can speak, they will be excited with their new speaking ability, thus establishing more positive attitudes towards Japanese speaking, such as discipline, motivation, determination, diligence, creativity and so on. These attitudes were evidently shown by the respondents throughout their efforts to develop Japanese speaking skills. These attitudes will contribute to meaningful and effective strategies inside as well as outside the classroom.

As suggestions, students need not to be in a foreign country to learn the language. They can do it from the comfort of their home or local community. Therefore, wherever they are, they could make a group to practice spoken English even if we are in the countryside where there is a formal education or non-formal education. All efforts depend on motivation from the students themselves and the lecturers. Based on the students' problem in applying Japanese, thus the researcher would suggest students to not only learn the vocabulary, grammar rules and pronunciation but also to communicate Japanese especially for speaking Japanese. Students must think that speaking Japanese is neither speaking local language nor English language. Basically, speaking Japanese is not the same as speaking your own language. That is why students need to practice a lot so that they may not be afraid of making mistakes.

There are many FL learners have the similar problem, the most problem they go in speaking is the fear of making mistake and the people listening to them well not understand. The problems should make Japanese learners to be motivated to practice every day, to help each other to solve their problem in speaking Japanese and keeping speaking the language.

Repetition is really needed to train listening, imitation, and speaking. As an old Russian proverb states that repetition is the mother of all learning process. Therefore, do lots of repetition in listening, imitation, and speaking to master of practical spoken Japanese.

Fluency is the first goal. It means being able to communicate ideas without having to stop and think too much about what you are going to say. And accuracy is the second goal. It means that you speak without errors of grammar and vocabulary. Many people are very complicated to speak because of starting from accuracy not fluency. They have forgotten the way that they learned since they were babies. If they learned a language by studying grammar rules, they would not speak the language automatically and instantly. To achieve the fluency of speaking, stop thinking the grammar rules and after that Japanese may be continued with speaking accurately. Speaking accurately means you learn the grammar from step-by-step practice. In other words, practicing grammar rules is learning once and speaking thrice.

Another suggestion maybe becoming an active listener. Listening is one of receptive skills to acquire speaking skill. You may listen from basic listening advance listening. It should be done every time. Listening in this modern era is easy because there have been a lot of sophisticated technologies such as, hand phone, computer, and so on. Students can imitate the native Japanese speaker's pronunciation, and speak like them.

Reading lots of Japanese books, novels, newspaper, magazines, etc makes you to have lots of idea to speak, to have a lot of vocabulary, and the better Japanese sentence arrangement, even pronunciation practice you have when you read aloud.

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