



Investigating The Necessity of Learning Module For Japanese Language Acquisition Among Learners at USIM

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ABSTRACT

Spoken communication plays a vital role in language acquisition; however, research on cohesion in spoken Japanese among university students remains scarce. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the need for cohesive learning modules in Japanese language education at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). The research used surveys and in-depth analysis with 25 first-semester students to find key speaking problems, including a small vocabulary, low confidence, and not enough use of linking words like conjunctions and reference terms. These issues were found to significantly hinder fluency and clarity in spoken Japanese. The findings highlight the importance of integrating cohesion-focused instruction to improve learners' speaking proficiency. This study offers valuable insights for developing targeted teaching strategies and refining curriculum design to address learners' linguistic needs. Ultimately, it contributes to a broader discourse on effective language instruction methodologies by emphasising the pedagogical value of cohesion in spoken communication.

Keywords: Cohesion, speaking proficiency, Japanese language, fluency, language instruction.

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, proficiency in foreign languages is not merely an advantage; it has become essential for engaging meaningfully in global trade and education. Mastery of a foreign language equips individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitude to communicate effectively and comprehend the social and cultural nuances of different countries.

As a multicultural nation, Malaysia is significantly influenced by global economic challenges, prompting a demand for graduates to acquire skills that enhance employability, including proficiency in a third language. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2007) underscores the importance of third language proficiency for cultivating human capital that drives the k-economy and fosters competitive innovation on the international stage (p.62).

In the context of teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), past studies have established a link between interest in Japanese animation (anime) and the desire to learn the Japanese language (Abe, 2009). Furuhashi (2013) posits that language teachers can anticipate improved language competence by utilizing materials that resonate with students' interests (p.73). Yen (2013) highlights that learners can enhance their speaking and writing skills through engaging learning tools and role-playing activities. His findings suggest that peer-to-peer and self-corrective behaviors can facilitate improvements in these areas. However, many foreign language learners in Malaysia, particularly in Japanese and Arabic, often lack motivation to engage in communication due to their strong command of their first and second languages, which hampers their ability to speak foreign languages effectively.

Many students do not invest sufficient effort into improving their Japanese speaking skills. Ishak (2013) found this issue pervasive, even among advanced students, who often feel shy, anxious about being ridiculed, or fear being perceived as show-offs. Moreover, most students tend to rely solely on textbooks without exploring additional resources such as magazines, radio, television, or the internet to enhance their speaking abilities. Conversely, Mohd Zain (2014) reported that some students actively engage in supporting activities, including reading Japanese magazines, watching Japanese films, memorizing vocabulary, conversing in Japanese with peers, and participating in language contests.

From the researcher's experience in teaching Japanese at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), it has been observed that most students enrolled in beginner Japanese courses struggle with spoken proficiency due to a lack of training and the

influence of their daily language environments. Addressing these problems requires a clear understanding of the underlying causes, which is the motivation for this study.

BACKGROUND

Language acquisition is a fundamental aspect of communication and cultural integration, particularly in the context of foreign language learning. Proficiency in spoken communication is crucial in mastering a new language, yet many learners face significant challenges in acquiring speaking skills due to various linguistic and psychological barriers. Japanese, as a foreign language, presents unique difficulties for learners, especially those whose native language structures differ significantly from Japanese.

At Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Japanese language courses are offered to students as part of their foreign language curriculum. However, despite completing these courses, many students continue to struggle with spoken Japanese proficiency. The ability to speak fluently is often hindered by a lack of exposure to the language, limited opportunities for authentic communication, and the absence of targeted instructional strategies that emphasise cohesive discourse. This study investigates the necessity of developing a specialised learning module focused on coherence in spoken Japanese to address these challenges effectively.

Previous research has highlighted the impact of linguistic cohesion on language comprehension and production. Halliday and Hasan (1976) emphasise that cohesive devices, such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion, play a vital role in structuring discourse coherently. Without an understanding of these elements, learners may struggle to produce fluid and comprehensible speech. Furthermore, studies by Abe (2009) and Yen (2013) suggest that language instruction should align with learners' interests and incorporate interactive activities to enhance engagement and retention.

Despite these insights, limited research has been conducted on the role of cohesion in improving Japanese-speaking skills among Malaysian university students. Most existing studies focus on general language proficiency without addressing the specific challenges related to cohesive discourse. Moreover, traditional language teaching methods at USIM primarily rely on textbooks, which often fail to provide sufficient opportunities for oral practice and real-world language application.

Given these challenges, this research aims to explore the necessity of a learning module specifically designed to enhance cohesion in spoken Japanese. By incorporating elements of cohesion into language instruction, students may develop better fluency, coherence, and confidence in spoken communication. This study seeks

to bridge the gap in Japanese language pedagogy by providing insights into effective teaching strategies that facilitate meaningful and structured spoken interactions.

To address this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by Japanese language learners at USIM in developing spoken proficiency?
2. How do cohesive devices (e.g., reference, conjunctions, ellipsis) impact the learners' fluency and coherence in spoken Japanese?
3. What essential features should a cohesion-based learning module include to support and enhance students' speaking skills?

These questions are directly aligned with the study's objective: to evaluate the role of cohesion in spoken Japanese and to inform the development of a practical learning module that can improve students' communicative competence. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of a pedagogical framework that supports Japanese language learners at USIM, with potential implications for other institutions facing similar challenges. Ultimately, by addressing the need for a cohesion-focused learning module, this study aims to enhance the effectiveness of Japanese language education and improve students' speaking proficiency, preparing them for better academic and professional engagement in a multilingual and multicultural world.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the experiences and challenges faced by students learning Japanese at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). As noted by Fraenkel et al. (2023), this approach is particularly effective for providing detailed, accurate descriptions of specific situations and for capturing participant perspectives in real-world contexts.

The participants consisted of 25 first-semester students enrolled in the Japanese Language I course offered under USIM's foreign language elective program during the 2023 academic year. These students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Kumar, 2011). A clear justification for selecting first-semester students is that the majority of them began the course with zero prior knowledge of Japanese, making them ideal respondents for exploring challenges encountered at the foundational stage of learning. At the time of the study, students were receiving approximately four contact hours per week and were learning using the Marugoto A1 syllabus, which emphasizes basic communication in everyday contexts.

The selection of participants was not based on performance level but rather on their ability to articulate their experiences and willingness to participate in the interviews. All respondents were actively engaged in classroom activities and had demonstrated

the capacity to reflect on their learning process an important criterion for gathering meaningful qualitative data.

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both flexibility and depth. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in a private consultation room at the Faculty of Major Language Studies to ensure a quiet, focused environment. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore students' difficulties in speaking Japanese, their understanding of cohesive elements (such as conjunctions and reference words), and their perceptions of the current teaching approach. The interviews were conducted in Malay to ensure full comprehension and comfort, then video-recorded with participant consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for content analysis.

In terms of data analysis, the researcher followed the four-phase qualitative data analysis process outlined by Given (2008).

- Phase 1: Data Collection and Initial Coding – Transcriptions were reviewed while interviews were still ongoing, enabling early pattern recognition and iterative refinement of themes.
- Phase 2: Data Reduction – Relevant excerpts were extracted, categorized, and grouped based on recurring themes such as vocabulary challenges, cohesion usage, and communication anxiety.
- Phase 3: Data Display – Data were organized into thematic matrices to aid in visualization and comparison.
- Phase 4: Conclusion Drawing – The findings were synthesized to determine causal and contributory factors affecting students' spoken proficiency in Japanese.

This structured approach ensured methodological transparency and analytic rigor. By incorporating detailed contextual information about the learners' background, curriculum exposure, and interview procedures, the study provides a reliable basis for interpreting the factors influencing Japanese language acquisition and justifying the need for a cohesion-based learning module.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The findings of this study identified two primary categories of obstacles faced by learners in developing Japanese speaking skills: internal and external. Internal obstacles include linguistic limitations such as vocabulary and grammar, as well as psychological barriers such as anxiety and low confidence. External obstacles arise from environmental constraints, such as the lack of a supportive atmosphere, minimal exposure to authentic Japanese, and limited opportunities for oral practice.

Among internal challenges, vocabulary emerged as the most significant barrier, cited by 20 respondents, followed by difficulties in mastering Japanese grammar (5 respondents). A smaller number (5 respondents) also highlighted a lack of content as a speaking barrier. These findings align with Tanveer (2007), who noted that pronunciation and grammar are among the most difficult aspects of foreign language acquisition. In addition, many learners demonstrated hesitation and over-cautiousness when speaking, often delaying speech to construct grammatically perfect sentences ultimately hindering fluency. Similar patterns have been reported in prior studies (Horwitz, 1987; Tanveer, 2007), where anxiety about making mistakes prevented learners from participating in communicative tasks.

Notably, the interviews revealed that students struggled with producing coherent and connected speech, not only because of limited vocabulary but also due to a lack of awareness and use of cohesive devices such as conjunctions, reference words, and substitution. This gap in cohesion usage became apparent in their speech patterns, which often lacked logical flow and connectedness, even though it was not always explicitly mentioned by the students. Sentences were frequently isolated or repetitive, suggesting a need for instructional emphasis on cohesive discourse.

This absence of cohesion training contributes to the learners' overall fluency problems, as they are unable to structure their speech in ways that are both contextually and linguistically meaningful. Thus, cohesion while less visible than vocabulary or grammar is a crucial but under-addressed factor in the development of speaking proficiency.

Confidence was another recurring theme. Twelve respondents cited a lack of self-confidence, with only two specifically mentioning the need for courage to speak. Respondents also described experiences where their communication breakdowns caused by pauses, slow recall of vocabulary, or unclear expression led to disinterest from conversation partners, particularly native speakers. As Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) note, such "discontinuous interaction strategies" often discourage meaningful exchanges, resulting in a cycle of silence and withdrawal.

Additional challenges included spontaneity, fluency, native-like pronunciation, and overall oral proficiency. Structural differences between Japanese and Malay or English further complicated learners' ability to speak naturally. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the tendency to speak "Malayanized" Japanese, which they attributed to practicing primarily with peers rather than native speakers.

External challenges were also significant. Three respondents mentioned Malaysia's language environment as a barrier, with one specifically pointing out the scarcity of opportunities to speak Japanese. The dominance of Malay, English, and other local languages in daily interactions results in minimal exposure to Japanese. This environment, compounded by students' mastery of their first and second languages, often diminishes their motivation to use Japanese.

Crucially, while many of these issues are commonly cited in foreign language learning, this study underscores the critical role of cohesion in bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and communicative fluency. Learners are often unaware of how to link ideas, refer back to previous statements, or maintain topic continuity essential elements of spoken discourse. This lack of cohesive competence reinforces the need for a module that specifically targets the teaching and application of cohesive devices in speaking tasks.

In conclusion, although students are aware of the general challenges in developing spoken Japanese skills such as vocabulary deficits, anxiety, and limited practice the underlying issue of disconnected, incohesive speech emerged as a significant theme. Addressing this gap requires the integration of cohesion-focused instruction into Japanese language curricula. Such a module should build lexical and grammatical knowledge and emphasise the use of cohesive structures that enable learners to speak with clarity, fluidity, and confidence.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to investigate the necessity of a learning module specifically designed to enhance cohesion in spoken Japanese among first-semester students at USIM. The research identified several internal and external challenges that hinder students' development of speaking proficiency, including limited vocabulary, grammar knowledge, lack of confidence, and insufficient exposure to authentic speaking environments.

The findings showed that students had difficulty not just with language skills but also with speaking clearly and smoothly, often because they didn't use enough linking words like reference terms, conjunctions, and ellipsis. This lack of cohesion contributed significantly to fragmented speech, communication breakdowns, and lower confidence during verbal interactions.

The analysis underscores that, while general speaking strategies like vocabulary memorisation and pronunciation practice are helpful, they are insufficient on their own. A targeted instructional approach that integrates cohesion training is essential for enabling learners to structure their speech meaningfully and fluently. Learners need explicit guidance in using cohesive elements to logically connect ideas, sustain topic continuity, and enhance listener comprehension.

This study therefore recommends the development and implementation of a cohesion-focused learning module that incorporates structured speaking tasks, repetition, and interactive discourse practices. Such a module should complement existing curriculum components by scaffolding learners' ability to use cohesive structures in real-life communication.

By aligning instructional strategies with learners' needs at the foundational level, educators can foster greater fluency, coherence, and confidence in spoken Japanese. These improvements benefit students' academic language development and prepare them for more meaningful engagement in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Future research may further refine this module and assess its effectiveness in various instructional settings.

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