



Supporting Japanese Language Teachers in Malaysia: Are We Doing Enough?

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language education has often been overlooked in terms of space and value and this has impacted the amount of support and professional development that its teachers receive. In Malaysia, Japanese language is among the foreign language offered in schools and universities. As of the year 2021, there are more than 38,129 students learning Japanese language and over 215 institutions offering courses for the language all over the country. Despite the encouraging progress, Malaysia is facing a shortage of Japanese language teachers. While the exact reason behind the attrition of teachers is yet to be identified, research indicates that the lack of support and professional development are among the key factors. While training programs are offered year-round by teacher associations and organisations such as The Japan Foundation and MAJLIS, these programs are largely voluntary and often limited in the number of seats available for participants. This paper is an examination of the current efforts in providing support and development for non-native Japanese language teachers in Malaysia and explores suggestions that can be considered to facilitate teacher development in the country.

Keywords: Japanese language education, Malaysia, teacher development and support.

INTRODUCTION

Providing support and professional development for teachers has always been vital in influencing student achievement and the quality of the education received (Sancar, Atal & Deryakulu, 2021). While this is equally significant for all teachers across the board, it is important to note that the case for foreign language teachers is unique considering that they are often disregarded and left out in educational research (Endicott, 2011). Foreign language teachers also face specific challenges such as lack of space and value attributed to their subject (Sulis et al, 2022) as compared to other subjects. According to Mason (2017), the lack of space regarding foreign language education refers to three things: "a lack of space for the discipline in the curriculum, a lack of physical space for teaching and learning, and a lack of emotional space for foreign language teachers" (p. 60). This is further accentuated for non-native foreign language teachers who are often regarded secondary when compared to the idealized native speaker (Selvi, 2011). Due to these issues, it is not surprising that attrition rates among foreign language teachers have been on the rise, notably in English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia (Mason, 2017).

Number of Schools, Enrolment, and Teachers (2022)							
	Schools	Enrolment			Teachers		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Preschool	6,244	103,439	102,907	206,346	1,026	8,251	9,277
Primary	7,776	1,421,037	1,347,446	2,768,483	68,936	167,429	236,365
Secondary	2,449	1,038,274	1,022,070	2,060,344	51,043	131,136	182,179
TOTAL	10,225	2,459,311	2,369,516	4,828,827	119,979	298,565	418,544

Note : Data as of 30th April 2022.
 : Data from educational institutions under the MOE only.
 : Total excludes preschool.
 Source : MOE (EPRD and School Management Division).

Source: *Malaysia Educational Statistics, Ministry of Education Malaysia (2022)*

Figure 1. Number of Schools, Enrolment, and Teachers in Malaysia (2022)

Research on this matter, however, is still few and far between for other countries such as Malaysia. On April 1st, 2023, Deputy Education Minister Lim Hui Ying revealed that there is currently a 4.49% (19,431 teachers) shortage of teachers in the country. Li and Zhao (2022) noted the downward trend of the number of teachers from the year 2017 to 2021, and data from the Ministry of Education reveals a further decrease in the number of teachers from the year 2022 (418,544 teachers) to the year 2023 (412,684 teachers).

While the data represents attrition rates of teachers nationwide, data on foreign language teachers remains scarce. However, we can assume that foreign language teachers are also in the same boat, if not worse off. This is also not inclusive of teachers and lecturers who are teaching foreign languages in tertiary education. As aforementioned, foreign language teachers are often overlooked and due to their small number with only one or two of them within their educational institution, it is easy for them to slip under the radar when it comes to these numbers.

Number of Schools, Enrolment, and Teachers (2023)							
Level	Schools	Enrolment			Teachers		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Preschool	6,294	107,196	106,847	214,043	998	8,278	9,276
Primary	7,779	1,425,982	1,351,384	2,777,366	67,717	165,891	233,608
Secondary	2,452	1,042,448	1,027,679	2,070,127	49,592	129,484	179,076
TOTAL*	10,231	2,468,430	2,379,063	4,847,493	117,309	295,375	412,684

Note : Data as of 30 April 2023.

: Data from educational institutions under the MOE only.

: *Exclude from Total is Preschool.

Source : MOE (EPRD and School Management Division)

Source: Malaysia Educational Statistics, Ministry of Education Malaysia (2023)

Figure 2. Number of Schools, Enrolment, and Teachers in Malaysia (2023)

BACKGROUND

Foreign language education in Malaysia has been a point of emphasis since its inclusion in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015 - 2025. This includes Japanese language which has seen immense growth since its introduction through the Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1980s. According to the Survey Report on Japanese Language Education Abroad¹, as of 2021 Malaysia has 38,129 learners and 215 institutions offering Japanese as a foreign language.

Despite the increasing number of learners and institutions in the country, Malaysia has seen a slow but gradual decrease of Japanese language teachers since the year 2012, which had a total of 556 teachers. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, in the year 2021 the number has dropped to only 484 teachers. The decline may be linked to the overall shortage of Japanese language teachers worldwide, including in Japan as well, where a majority of teachers are only part-timers with high turnover rates (Hirahata, 2018).

¹ Survey Report on Japanese Language Education Abroad 2021, Japan Foundation

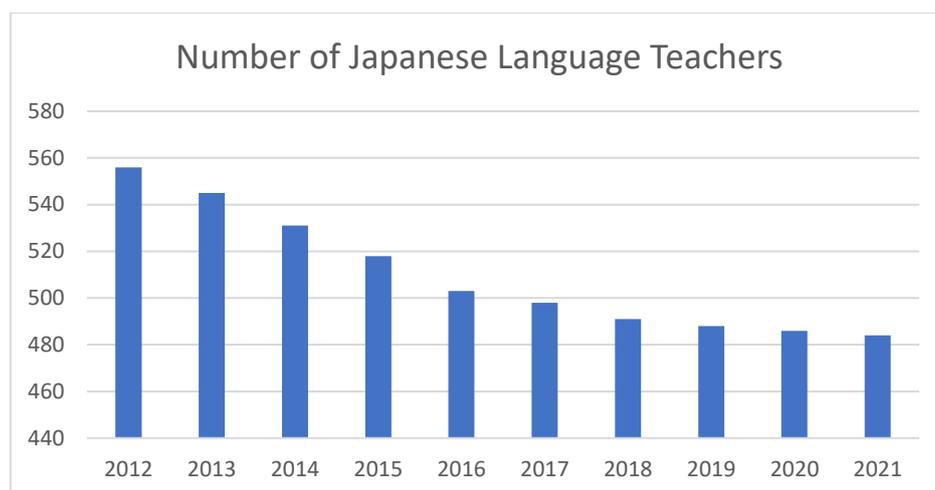


Figure 3. Number of Japanese Language Teachers in Malaysia

This has resulted in the rapid fluctuation of teacher supply from year to year (Hirahata, 2018; Kawada, 2019). Musaev (2023) stated that the limited number of Japanese language teachers in Malaysia is currently impeding on the quality of education provided. His posting to the *New Straits Times* on April 12, 2023, emphasized on the importance of addressing the teacher shortage and focusing on quality over quantity. He added that there is a lack of systematic support and professional development for current Japanese language teachers and that short-term internships can improve the qualifications of teachers, which can lead to quality education.

Furthermore, a closer look at the survey report reveals that the number of non-native Japanese teachers also heavily outweigh the number of native Japanese teachers, especially in the Southeast Asia region. Considering that these non-native Japanese teachers are the ones spear-heading the Japanese language courses in their respective countries, it is important to ensure that they are receiving the necessary support and professional development to maintain their careers. According to Sulis et al (2022), social factors such as mentorship from colleagues and support from school administrators are key factors in retaining teachers. To combat the issue of attrition of foreign language in the country, these are the factors that need to be taken into consideration.

Thus, it is the aim of this paper to examine the current efforts of support and development for non-native Japanese language teachers, specifically in Malaysia. In addition, it also explores suggestions on how to facilitate teacher development and provide support for teachers in the country.

METHODOLOGY

This paper describes a study that conducts a literature review on the subject to explore the issues related to the development and support for Japanese language teachers in Malaysia. The research questions that this study aims to answer are:

1. What are the existing support and development programs available in Malaysia for Japanese language teachers?
2. How can Japanese language teachers in Malaysia receive more support for their career development?

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Existing Support and Development Programs in Malaysia

Although it has been 40 years since the launch of the Look East Policy in Malaysia, the number of organizations that are dedicated to the expansion and development of Japanese language education in the country remains few and far in between. Most rely on the teachers working within their respective educational institutions to promote the language and culture, which as aforementioned can be difficult considering the value and space allocated.

In the beginning, most programs were organized and conducted by The Japan Foundation which carried the objective to promote Japanese language outside of Japan (Shimazu, 2008). The Japan Foundation identifies itself as local initiative which prioritizes the localization of Japanese language education based on the diverse needs and educational policies of each country (Shimazu, 2008).

The Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur (JFKL) has provided various programs in support of Japanese language teachers in Malaysia. This includes 1) a yearly seminar (Malaysia Japanese Language Education Seminar) for Japanese language teachers in the country, 2) Saturday half-day workshops for teachers which covers a range of different topics related to teaching Japanese as a foreign language, and 3) Japanese language teaching methods training programs to aid teachers with their teaching pedagogy.

Alongside the efforts of JFKL, the inception of Malaysia Japanese Language Instructors Society (MAJLIS) in 2016 provided a much-needed space where local Malaysian Japanese language teachers were able to discuss matters that are more specific to issues within the country. Working together, along with local universities, MAJLIS and JFKL were able to organize the International Conference of Japanese Language Education in Malaysia (ICJLEM) which provided the local Japanese teachers a chance to listen, meet and exchange ideas with each other.

These efforts, while helpful to an extent, are unfortunately not enough in aiding Japanese language teachers in Malaysia with the support and professional development that they require. According to Stewart (2014) merely engaging in passive and isolated practices (Table 1) are insufficient to influence a teacher's methods unless they are reinforced through continued exploration and hands-on experience. On the other hand, professional development and professional learning, requires teachers to actively learn and engage with the subject matter which results in lasting change and improve teaching practices (Stewart, 2014).

Table 1. Professional Development Activities and Relation to Depth of Learning

Professional Development Approach	Professional Development Activities	Objective	Core Features
Reading about a resource or method	Individual	Build awareness	Content focus
Training	A single workshop	Build knowledge	Content focus
Professional Development	Multiple session workshops	Change practice	Content focus, Active learning, Duration linked to teacher beliefs and standards
Professional Learning	On-the-job, In a community of practice	Change theories and assumptions	Learning in the workplace, using student data, learning through experience, learning through reflection

Source: Stewart (2014)

Considering the existing support and development programs for Japanese language teachers in Malaysia discussed, it is evident that there is more that can be done. If Japanese language teachers are to actively learn and engage to progress their professional development, then other bodies will also need to play their role, especially when it comes to educational institutions and existing colleagues or senior teachers as well.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

Role of Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play a crucial role in ensuring that their teachers are well trained in order to provide quality education for their students. For this to happen, it is important for education institutions to implement policies which can support their teachers and their professional development. As stated by Jaquith et al in their 2010 report:

“For the nearly 75% of the educators working in schools today beyond their novice years, professional development is the single most important strategy for extending and refining their knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices throughout their careers.” (p. ii)

According to research by Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995), in terms of professional development, educational institutions should consider policies that “1) reduce the isolation of teachers, 2) encourage teachers to assume the role of learner, 3) provide a rich menu of opportunities, 4) establish an environment of professional trust and encourage problem solving, 5) provide opportunities for everyone in the school to understand the new concepts and practices, 6) permit the restructuring of time, space and scale, and 7) focus on learner centered outcomes that address the how and why aspects of learning” (p. 4). In addition, policies that provide space and value to foreign language as a subject, such as allocation of a higher budget and more resources as well as organizing campaigns on the importance of language learning can greatly influence the retention of its teachers (Mason, 2017).

In the case of Malaysia and non-native Japanese language teachers, institutions can consider mandatory induction programs for early career teachers. Research by Podolsky et al (2016) reported that thoughtfully designed induction programs for novice teachers lead to higher teacher retention rates, expedited professional growth, and improved student learning. Mason and Poyatos Matas (2016) agrees and states that programs which are specific to the needs of foreign language teachers have been proven to be more effective thus should be thoroughly considered. Example of induction programs include orientation sessions, retreats, and seminars for early career teachers. This can help in creating lasting networking relationships and provide a sense of camaraderie between foreign language teachers who otherwise are usually left on their own within their educational institution. This is also in line with professional learning as teachers will be actively learning in the workplace and using their own experience to make changes and improve their teaching. Making the programs compulsory pushes the teachers outside of their comfort zone and to the least, ensures that they are attending courses that are helping to build their careers.

Role of Colleagues and Senior Teachers

Another important player in providing support are the current foreign language educators in service. Research by Bell (2020) suggests the following approaches in providing support: “(1) active mentoring early in the foreign major and throughout the first three years of teaching, (2) the communication of good teaching practices, and (3) the encouragement of involvement in professional development opportunities and professional organizations” (p.66).

As aforementioned, foreign language teachers are often isolated and there are usually not more than two, and in some cases three teachers stationed at an educational institution. Due to this, it is important for them to build strong networks with fellow foreign language teachers both within and outside of their educational institution. Research shows that strong relationships foster positive working environments which can lead to increased job satisfaction, and ultimately better student achievement (Podolsky et al, 2016). Teachers with strong social capital are also

more likely to stay within the profession compared to those who do not (Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2016).

According to Sulis et al (2022), practical guidance and encouragement provided by mentors had a positive influence on early career foreign language teachers. Due to this, a mentor-mentee relationship should be considered as it can provide support and guidance for both early career teachers as well as the foreign language teacher already in service. In addition, a mentor-mentee relationship can also provide an outlet where both parties will be able to reflect and discuss matters related to their subject on a regular basis, leading to improved teaching methods. A case study by Zaharuddin (2022) revealed that the lack of mentorship and guidance resulted in low self-esteem and self-efficacy among early career Japanese language teachers in Malaysia. In addition, early career teachers should also be given dedicated time to observe lessons conducted by teachers who are already in service. The observations, however, should be developmental and reflective in nature, opposed to mechanistic and evaluative (Mann & Tang, 2012).

Mason and Poyatos Matas (2016) highlighted that in their research, it was the teacher themselves that informally initiated the mentor-mentee relationships, without formal school policies. This can be a valuable step that either teacher can take in circumstances where the educational institutions are not able to provide the support that is needed. Given the benefits of productive working relationships as mentioned earlier, it is vital for teachers to remain active in engaging with one another.

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to shed light on the current condition of local Japanese foreign language teachers in Malaysia regarding the support they receive and their professional development. An overview of current initiatives and efforts reveal that there is space for improvement, especially when it comes to the role played by educational institutions, colleagues and senior teachers. This includes providing mandatory career development courses for their teachers, as well as mentor-mentee programs that can provide teachers with networking opportunities on a continuous basis. If anything, this paper is a preliminary study into the various issues faced by foreign language teachers in the country. Since research on this topic is scarce, it is important for future studies to further investigate the concerns faced by these teachers in order to combat the issue of teacher shortage discussed earlier.

Research has revealed that the amount and quality of support received is important in determining the outcome of a teacher (Podolsky et al, 2016). Even more so in the early years of their careers where they will more likely become competent and remain effective, should their support and professional development needs be met. In the past five years, there has been a marked increase in the number of individuals learning the Japanese language, and this trend is expected to continue. Thus, it is important to take note of the issues that affect not only the students, but the teachers as well. Thus, this research believes that providing sufficient support and

continuously encouraging teachers to work on their professional development should be seriously considered in order to sustain Japanese language education in the country for years to come.

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