

Difficulties in Learning Japanese as a Foreign Language: The Case of Filipino Learners

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Abstract

This quantitative research study discusses the specific challenges in learning Nihongo as a foreign language, which was drawn from a sample of 481 randomly selected Filipino college students from 18 Nihongo classes offered at a state university. This study utilized a modified questionnaire. Data were statistically analyzed using mean, frequency, and percentage distribution. Findings revealed that limited Nihongo vocabulary and lack of cultural context of presented materials cause minimal retention and understanding of the topics that students are listening to. Poor listening comprehension thus leads them to have difficulties in responding and expressing themselves in class through speaking the language. Their challenges in pronunciation related to un-Nihongo syllable, stress, and intonation usage stem from the high deviation of Japanese from their native linguistic influence. It consequently affects their reading and writing skills; unfamiliar foreign characters cause them to have limited text knowledge and linguistic proficiency. Therefore, it is needed to rationalize the teaching and learning of Nihongo among students. While these data are informative for strengthening the instructional material for learning Nihongo, it also highlights the need for the university to consult with Nihongo experts on how to best teach and learn it, such as using the latest and cutting-edge technologies and innovations.

Keywords: *Filipino student, listening and comprehension, Nihongo, reading, speaking, writing*

Introduction

Globalization has caused the demand for high-level foreign language talent to increase significantly. Workplaces are internationalizing; thus, cultures and languages continue to diversify (Lonsmann & Kraft, 2018). Higher education bodies, as the primary advocates of language education, are committed to assisting with this. For example, here in the Philippines, the offering of foreign languages in curricular programs of higher education was institutionalized through CHED Memorandum Order No. 23, Series 2010. This is in the hopes of producing globally competitive local graduates for employment.

Meanwhile, Japan has established itself as one of the two largest non-European language-speaking nations of global economic importance, particularly in the image of the younger generation (Rose & Carson, 2014). Its economic rise to prominence paved the way to exposing its cultural aspects and interest in learning the language and culture. The number of students taking the language

proficiency test each year demonstrates the ongoing demand for Japanese language learning. In the statistics reported by the Statista Research Department (2020), from over 594,000 takers in 2014, it reached a record-breaking high of 1,168,000 takers in 2019 – a double in just five years. Furthermore, according to the Japan Foundation's Survey on Japanese Language Education Abroad, the number of student learners in various institutions implementing Japanese-language education in language studies abroad increased from 2,980,000 in 2006 to 3,850,000 in 2018.

Despite this surge in language education, introducing Japanese as a foreign language constitutes difficulties in teaching and learning, as highlighted in a few studies. In a recent review of language training needed by State Department employees, Everson (2011) claims that languages such as Japanese and Chinese take at least four times longer to learn and master than European languages. Racoma (2018) stated several possible factors that may dictate the ease of learning, such as unfamiliar accents, morphology, and a huge deviation of the writing system from the Roman alphabet in some native

languages. Additionally, cultural nuances bring additional challenges (Benton, 2020). This is particularly true when translating to Japanese since sentences must be broken down into smaller fragments for cultural differences to be expressed naturally. In a broader context, foreign language learning is influenced by the learners' natural language, and the extent of this cross-linguistic influence is highly dependent on the structural interaction between the two languages (Benson, 2002).

Given that the foreign language proficiency of students varies with their interlanguage, this study presents the contributing factors in the difficulties in learning Japanese, a foreign language, in the case of Filipino learners. This will hopefully be utilized as a basis for the preparation of instructional materials and the enhancement of the present strategies and framework of the instructors in Bataan Peninsula State University.

The goal of this research was to explore the learning difficulties of Nihongo as a foreign language, specifically in listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading and writing. The student's motivation for studying Japanese was also taken into account.

Materials and Methods

This research used a quantitative approach. Specifically, it used the descriptive method of research in investigating the learners' challenges in listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and writing Nihongo as a foreign language, and their motivational orientations in taking the course.

Four hundred eighty (481) students were selected as the sample of the study. This is 75% of the total students taking up Japanese subject in the Main and Balanga Campuses of Bataan Peninsula State University during the course of the research. The respondents were enrolled in bachelor's courses, namely: Information Technology, Tourism, Business Administration, Accountancy, Nursing, and Midwifery.

Stratified random sampling was used in the study. The respondents were chosen at random from the 18 Nihongo classes in the university. Since the researcher is also a Foreign Language teacher, she requested the participation of the Language Cluster faculty members in the distribution of the questionnaire. All respondents voluntarily participated in the study and did not receive any additional credits to the course grade. Data gathered were protected by the confidentiality agreement between

the researcher and respondents.

The instrument utilized was a modified survey from the study of Yanagi and Baker (2016), and consisted of 50-item statements on the difficulties in listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and writing. Items under listening, speaking, and pronunciation were adopted from the original; questions on reading and writing were added by the researcher. Additionally, a question regarding students' motivational orientation in learning the Japanese language was also included. Hence, the modified questionnaire was piloted to thirty (30) Engineering students to test the validity of the questions. The result from the pilot study indicates that most questions were understood and answered correctly by the students. The results of the pilot test were not included in the sample of the study. Items were scaled on a 5-point Likert ranging from "strongly agree (5)" to "strongly disagree (1)." The distribution and retrieval of questionnaires took nearly one month.

The data gathered were statistically analyzed using the statistical software IBM-SPSS Statistics version 21. Mean, frequency, and percentage distribution were used in identifying the difficulties of the learners in Nihongo as a foreign language.

Results and Discussion

Difficulties in Listening. The respondents strongly agreed having difficulty with understanding unfamiliar topics (4.86), understanding without repetition (4.78), understanding in class discussions (4.69), understanding in group discussions (4.56) and understanding Japanese video clips in the class (4.53) (Table 1).

Also, the respondents agreed having difficulty in understanding teacher's speaking speed (3.90), in recognizing if a sentence is a question or not (3.60), in understanding teacher's accent (3.58) and note-taking (4.45).

Results imply that students find it the most difficult to understand unfamiliar topics due to the fact that the new knowledge has very much deviated from their native language. Perhaps, listening comprehension is a struggle, because they do not have any background idea or cultural context of the materials, such as video clips, being presented to them. The audio quality of the resources may likewise be a contributing factor. There also seems to be a problem in the retention of terms and phrases, since they only accumulate a very thin vocabulary from their

Table 1. Students’ Learning Difficulties in Japanese in terms of Listening

Learning Difficulties in Listening	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1. I have a hard time understanding what my classmates are doing in class discussions.	4.69	Strongly Agree
2. I have difficulty recalling what my classmates were saying in group discussions.	4.56	Strongly Agree
3. I have difficulty in understanding my teacher because I am unfamiliar with the topics.	4.86	Strongly Agree
4. I have difficulty in taking down notes because I can't finish writing down sentences or key words before my teacher moves on to the next point.	4.45	Agree
5. I have difficulty in following my teacher because of his speaking speed.	3.90	Agree
6. I have difficulty understanding Japanese video clips in the classroom.	4.53	Strongly Agree
7. I have difficulty understanding what my instructor wants to say without repetition.	4.78	Strongly Agree
8. I have problems in identifying whether or not a sentence is a question.	3.60	Agree
9. I have difficulty understanding my instructor because of his accent.	3.58	Agree
10. I don't take notes because it prevents me from listening to a lecture.	3.07	Moderately Agree
Composite	4.20	Agree

class hours, and the language is not practiced or even encountered anywhere beyond classrooms. Similarly, difficulties involving the speaker’s speaking rate and accent also stem from the minimal exposure to language communication and usage.

Relatively, it is the responsibility of the instructors to provide relevant and sufficient background knowledge before the conduct of listening activities; critical issues in their comprehension would most probably arise otherwise (Ma & Ma, 1996). Aside from cultural differences, the familiarity of the vocabulary significantly affects their willingness to listen. Knowing the meaning of words most likely piques the students’ interest and drives them to be more curious about the topic since there is a sense of appreciation of the lesson. This agrees with Sabouri and Gilakjani (2016), who further discussed that unfamiliar vocabulary is a barrier to the effective listening comprehension process. One of the suggestions they highlighted is to present a variation of lecture inputs, such as radio news, interviews, daily dialogues, and films, according to their level of complexities.

Difficulties in Speaking. Results shown in table 2 show that most of the students agreed that they had difficulty on the following speaking activities: responding to other people immediately in group discussions (3.96), speaking in class discussions.(3.88), maintaining speaking (3.77), leading group discussions (3.69), limited Japanese expressions (3.69), giving presentation in front of the whole class without detailed notes or entire scripts (3.66), repetition in what had said (3.57), in speaking accurately than fluently (3.55) and speaking fluently than accurately (3.53).

The data shows that students have difficulty expressing themselves in group discussions. It is precisely because they could not apply through speaking what they have learned in class discussions since they do not completely grasp the topics they have listened to. Leong and Amahdi (2017) highlighted in their study that learners cannot improve their speaking ability unless they develop listening ability. They must first develop the ability to comprehend what is uttered to them to be able to give an effective response. Moreover, it may also suggest that students, since they do not take a significant amount of time in practicing foreign oral skills in a native environment, feel hesitant to speak the language out of fear of embarrassment.

Accordingly, Hosni (2014) stated that oral language, also used by the teacher, scarcely ever serves as a way for students to acquire information and discuss concepts in the acquisition of a second language. Consequently, the findings of Messadh (2017) pointed out that fear of not being able to speak was a common cause of anxiety among students in the classroom, as they are worried over the teacher’s negative reactions. Peer judgment perhaps gives a similar impact.

Table 2. Students' Learning Difficulties in Speaking Japanese

Learning Difficulties in Speaking	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1. I have problems in leading group discussions.	3.69	Agree
2. I have problems speaking in class discussions.	3.88	Agree
3. I have trouble responding to other people immediately in group discussions because it takes me time to interpret what people say and then decide what to say.	3.96	Agree
4. I have trouble speaking because my Japanese expressions are limited.	3.69	Agree
5. I have difficulty in maintaining speaking.	3.77	Agree
6. I have trouble expressing and I would feel embarrassed if I made a mistake.	3.45	Moderately Agree
7. I have trouble making presentations in front of the whole class without detailed notes or entire scripts.	3.66	Agree
8. I have more trouble speaking fluently than accurately.	3.53	Agree
9. I have more trouble speaking accurately than fluently.	3.55	Agree
10. I have trouble telling my instructor to repeat what he said because I'm embarrassed.	3.57	Agree
Composite	3.68	Agree

Difficulties with Pronunciation. As presented in table 3, respondents agreed having difficulty with the correct stressed syllable in a word (3.90), sounds in words (3.82), intonation when people talk (3.77), intonations in the sentence (3.63) and sounds in words(3.55).

When listening, respondents moderately agreed that they rely on intonation (3.34), stressed syllables (3.17), specific sounds (3.15), correctness of individual sounds (3.11) and Japanese intonation (2.51).

The data collected are similar to the observation study by Ohata (2004), which notes that pronunciation difficulties for Japanese learners may occur when they hear sounds in English that are not part of the Japanese sound inventory, when the rules for merging sounds into Japanese words vary from those in English and when the usual patterns of stress and intonation in English, which decide the overall rhythm or melody of the phrase, are different from those in Japanese. Piske and colleagues (2001) added that native language loyalty is one of the factors of having difficulty in acquiring correct pronunciation in the second language acquisition. The proficiency and frequency of L1 are inversely

Table 3. Students' Learning Difficulties in Japanese Pronunciation

Learning Difficulties in Pronunciation	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1. I have difficulty in pronouncing specific sounds.	3.15	Moderately Agree
2. When I speak, I pay most attention to sounds in words.	3.82	Agree
3. I pay most attention to intonation while I listen to other people talk.	3.77	Agree
4. I pay attention to the "correctness" of individual sounds in words rather than to the rhythm of my Japanese.	3.11	Moderately Agree
5. I pay attention to intonations in a sentence when I listen to other people talk.	3.63	Agree
6. I pay most attention to sounds in words as I listen to other people speak.	3.55	Agree
7. I pay attention to the stressed syllables when listening to other people speak.	3.17	Moderately Agree
8. I have trouble communicating in a word with the proper stressed syllable.	3.90	Agree
9. When I speak, I pay most attention to generating Japanese intonation.	3.34	Moderately Agree
10. When I use Japanese intonation, I feel embarrassed.	2.51	Moderately Agree
Composite	3.40	Agree

proportional to the degree of L2 foreign accent.

Pourhosein (2012), on the other hand, reported that good pronunciation contributes to learning, while poor pronunciation leads to significant difficulties in language learning. Furthermore, Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) stressed the importance of pronunciation in oral communication. It is also an important component of communicative competence. While pronunciation plays an important role in language learning, most students do not pay enough attention to this important ability.

Difficulties in Reading. As presented in table 4, the respondents strongly agreed that the most difficult reading activity was scanning a short document like e-mail, memo, and understanding its meaning (4.91). Also, reading of combined Hiragana and Katakana characters (4.89) and reading Katakana characters (4.66) also caused significant difficulties for the respondents.

The respondents also agreed to experience difficulties with reading contracted sounds (4.34), reading Japanese sentences (4.22), reading and following written instruction (4.02), reading simple Japanese words and phrases (3.76), understanding basic information (3.73) and reading Hiragana characters (3.43).

The data imply that most of the students struggle in enhancing reading skills in Japanese, therefore, fail in answering comprehensive questions. Difficulties arise from minimal text knowledge, and since Filipino and English both utilize the Roman alphabet, Japanese characters are strange to them and take ample time to grasp completely. This is parallel to the results found by Shehu (2015) that vocabulary, working memory, text processing are the most challenging difficulties for students in reading comprehension, brought by lack of familiarity with foreign characters.

Perhaps, it would be beneficial to engage them in readings with pictographic representations and illustrations, such as cartoons and manga, for example, to give visual connections and stimulate their interest. In the same way, they can promote observational, analytical, and higher-order thinking skills necessary for language learning development.

No matter how persuasive and fascinating the lecture is, learners would feel exhausted with the same method of teaching that involves frequent use of the left side of the brain—analytical, word interpretation, calculations, etc.—after a short time. Cartoons, on the other hand, are a form of visual data processed by the right side of the brain, which is holistic, imaginative, and artistic. Cartoons

Table 4. Students’ Learning Difficulties in Reading Japanese

Learning Difficulties in Reading	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1. I have difficulty in reading Hiragana characters.	3.43	Agree
2. I have difficulty in reading Katakana characters.	4.66	Strongly Agree
3. I have difficulty in reading contracted sounds.	4.34	Agree
4. I have difficulty in reading combined Hiragana and Katakana characters.	4.89	Strongly Agree
5. I have difficulty in reading simple Japanese words and phrases.	3.76	Agree
6. I have difficulty in reading and following written instruction.	4.02	Agree
7. I have difficulty in reading Japanese sentences.	4.22	Agree
8. I have difficulty understanding basic information.	3.73	Agree
9. I have difficulty reading familiar names and words.	3.33	Moderately Agree
10. I have difficulty in scanning a short document like e-mail, memo and understanding its meaning.	4.91	Strongly Agree
Composite	4.13	Agree

should be used as a medium for imagination and diversity to make students more participative (Bahrani & Soltani, 2011).

Difficulties in Writing. As shown in table 5, the students strongly agreed that they had difficulty in using Japanese particles and arranging words to form sentences with a mean of 4.67 and 4.59, respectively.

On the other hand, the respondents agreed that they had difficulty on the following: writing Katakana characters, writing simple Japanese words and phrases, writing complete Japanese sentences, making notes when someone is talking, understanding Japanese handwriting and writing the correct characters.

Further, the students moderately agreed that writing Hiragana characters and translation of English words in Japanese are difficult. In general, a composite mean of 3.98 infers that the students agreed that there were learning difficulties in writing.

The results presented reveal that students encounter confusion in writing foreign characters. Also, different technicalities, such as sentence structures and rules in writing, are completely diverge from the native language, Filipino, and English. Similarly, according to a study conducted by Fareed and colleagues (2016), insufficient linguistic proficiency, writing anxiety, lack of ideas, and weak structure organization were the difficulties encountered by the learners. Since writing tasks tend to be overwhelming, there is a strong need to make less threatening activities, so they could feel a sense of accomplishment to fuel them for the succeeding materials.

Essentially, Fabrice (2020) claimed that writing helps recall information. Writing words and phrases in logical sentences are more likely to stay in long-term memory capacity. It helps to remember grammar and syntax rules. By writing things down, the mind gets focused and ready to memorize. He also mentioned that by writing, an individual can give more time to focus on the process. He has enough time to be mindful of grammar, words, style, and every other aspect of expression. He also stressed that foreign students frequently have a limited vocabulary, making it difficult for them to create logical sentences.

Difficulties with Communication Skills in General. In relation to five communication skills (table 6), the respondents' responses indicated that the most difficult area was listening (4.20), followed by reading (4.13), writing (3.98), speaking (3.68) and then pronunciation (3.40).

Listening was found to be the most challenging, yet the most significant skill for students, since it precedes all other skills in learning foreign languages, including Japanese. According to Kondrateva and colleagues (2016), listening is a distinct type of speech activity that is more difficult than speaking, reading, and writing. It aids in the accomplishment of instructional objectives by allowing students to comprehend the sentence in a foreign language. Also, LeLoup and Pontero (2003) stated that listening is arguably the most valuable ability for receiving comprehensible input in one's first language and all subsequent languages. It is a widespread communicative event. In other words, we listen more than we read, write, or talk.

Table 5. Students' Learning Difficulties in Writing Japanese

Learning Difficulties in Writing	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1. I have difficulty in writing Hiragana characters.	3.16	Moderately Agree
2. I have difficulty in writing Katakana characters.	4.12	Agree
3. I have difficulty in writing simple Japanese words and phrases.	3.65	Agree
4. I have difficulty in writing complete Japanese sentences.	4.45	Agree
5. I have difficulty in using Japanese particles.	4.67	Strongly Agree
6. I have difficulty in arranging words to form sentences.	4.59	Strongly Agree
7. I have difficulty in making notes when someone is talking.	3.88	Agree
8. I have difficulty in understanding Japanese handwriting.	4.25	Agree
9. I have difficulty in writing the correct characters.	3.91	Agree
10. I feel embarrassed when I cannot translate English words in Japanese.	3.07	Moderately Agree
Composite	3.98	Agree

Table 6. Summary of Students' Difficulties in Learning Japanese

Skill	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
Listening	4.20	Agree
Speaking	3.68	Agree
Pronunciation	3.40	Agree
Reading	4.13	Agree
Writing	3.98	Agree
Grand Mean	3.88	Agree

Hence, listening is a powerful tool for learning a foreign language; it allows for the acquisition of the sound side of the studied language, as well as its phonemic structure and intonation.

Motivational Orientation in Learning Japanese.

Based on table 7, the primary reason why students are learning Japanese is due to it being an academic requirement. Students are enrolled in the subject because they need credit units for a foreign language. On the other hand, the students are also motivated to learn the language because they are interested in the language, for future travels, and for future career.

It is noteworthy that students are interested in Japanese culture. Consequently, students are motivated to learn a foreign language because of their desire to have friends and have a higher-paying job.

Results suggest that the motivating orientation of students is towards their academic excellence, indicating that they need to complete a subject that will lead them to more opportunities in life.

Students are therefore extrinsically motivated: meaning, they desire to do more to achieve an external purpose or fulfill an externally defined constraint, rather than intrinsically motivated, or the motivation of doing something for enjoyment (Hennessey *et al.*, 2015). On

Table 7. Students’ Motivational Orientation in learning Japanese

Motivational Orientation	Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Interested in the language	355	74	18
Interested in the culture	255	53	13
Have friends	200	42	10
Required to take	377	78	19
Need it for career	269	56	14
Need it for travel	330	67	17
High paying job	188	39	9
Total	1974	409%	100%

the other hand, Dornyei's model (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) believes that motivation is not constant, but rather dynamic. As a consequence, motivation fluctuates, since it is affected by a multitude of factors in real-time, from moment to moment. A learner's enthusiasm can rise or fall depending on how motivated, interested, or involved their conversational partners are—whether native speakers, fellow learners, or classroom teachers. In other

words, motivation can be contagious.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Respondents believe that possessing skills and proficiency in Nihongo is not only to achieve a course requirement, but also to recognize the value of studying the language for future careers and travel endeavors. While this is acknowledged, students’ difficulties are largely contributed by resource constraints, such as limited exposure to Japanese dialogues and writing systems, time constraints, material appropriateness and sufficiency, and teaching strategies.

This study recommends to rationalizing teaching and learning Nihongo among students through seeking assistance from Nihongo professionals about exploring the modern contortions of Japanese language pedagogy. Consequently, learning activities must be revisited and reassessed in terms of the students’ target level of proficiency. Exposure to a variety of Japanese media is encouraged to stimulate language skills improvement. Thus, the university may consider conducting comprehensive trainings on instructional material development, so that they may integrate more appropriate materials adequate to the needs and difficulties of the learners.

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