

Enhancing Japanese Language Learning: The Role of Technological Tools and Supplementary Materials Among JFL Learners

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Abstract

This study explores the technological tools and supplementary materials used by Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) learners to enhance their language learning. Interviews were conducted with 24 Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in JFL courses, focusing on their resource preferences and learning strategies. The findings highlight significant challenges in memorizing vocabulary and Japanese characters, attributed to the high volume of required content. To address these challenges, many learners supplement traditional textbooks with digital tools such as Japanese Study, Obenkyo, and Busuu. Additionally, platforms like Google Translate and YouTube are leveraged for vocabulary practice, pronunciation guidance, and cultural immersion. Recreational digital content, such as anime and language-optional computer games, supports informal learning by reinforcing listening and contextual understanding. Insights from this study underline the importance of integrating diverse technological tools with traditional study methods to overcome language-learning challenges.

Keywords: *Technological tools, supplementary materials, JFL learners, mobile applications, digital resources*

A. Introduction

The learning of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) presents unique challenges for learners, particularly in acquiring vocabulary and mastering the complex writing systems: Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. These challenges necessitate innovative approaches to support traditional classroom learning. As Dewanty et al. (2024) emphasize, technological advances in education

have significantly transformed language learning, making it more engaging and accessible. Applications, translation tools, and multimedia platforms enable learners to engage in interactive and self-directed study, addressing some inherent difficulties in JFL learning,

Furthermore, the role of technology in enhancing language acquisition has been widely documented. For example, Haristiani

and Rifa'i (2020) observed that integrating social media with learning applications fosters personalized learning environments and facilitates continuous skill development. Given the cultural and linguistic intricacies of Japanese, digital tools offer the potential to bridge gaps in traditional classroom methodologies. This study investigates the technological tools and supplementary materials utilized by Malaysian undergraduate students in JFL courses to explore their efficacy in overcoming specific language-learning challenges.

B. Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed through semi-structured interviews with 24 Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in beginner-level JFL courses across five public universities. Participants were purposefully sampled to ensure diversity in academic disciplines, gender, and learning preferences. Interviews were conducted between weeks 10 and 13 of the semester, focusing on learners' challenges and the tools and materials they utilized to overcome them. The data were

transcribed and thematically analyzed following Wellington's (2015) seven-stage model.

C. Findings

The findings were categorized into three themes:

1. Challenges in Language Learning

Students reported difficulties in memorizing vocabulary and Japanese characters due to the sheer volume of material. Challenges with grammar and pronunciation were also highlighted. For example, 17 students cited issues with Hiragana and Katakana, while 14 struggled with vocabulary acquisition. The burden of memorization was often linked to the differences in linguistic structures between Japanese and the learners' native languages, necessitating additional effort and practice.

"Memorizing those symbols is already hard work. However, writing is more difficult. Katakana is more challenging because it is rarely used compared to Hiragana,"* shared Syahida, who spent over two hours twice a week practicing character writing.

2. Utilization of Technological Tools

Many learners supplemented traditional textbooks with digital tools. Applications like Japanese Study, Obenkyo, and Busuu were widely used for vocabulary practice, interactive exercises, and pronunciation guides. Google Translate was employed for translating and cross-referencing words, while YouTube provided resources for observing native speakers and learning writing techniques. Learners expressed a preference for applications with gamified features, as these helped sustain their motivation and engagement over time.

Angela noted, "When I first started studying Hiragana, I used YouTube videos to learn how to write. Watching real people write helps me recall the strokes better."

3. Recreational Digital Content

Informal learning through anime, manga, and language-optioned computer games supported listening and contextual understanding. Students noted that engaging with recreational materials

helped reinforce their language skills while maintaining their interest and motivation. Several participants highlighted the value of cultural exposure through these mediums, which deepened their understanding of Japanese societal norms and conversational nuances.

"I feel Japanese novels are interesting because of their style,"* said Sam, who reads Japanese literature in both English and Japanese. "The original language conveys nuances that translations sometimes miss."

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D. Discussion

The findings align with prior research emphasizing the role of technological tools in enhancing second language acquisition. Dewanty et al. (2024) highlight that integrating technology into language learning not only enhances material comprehension but also improves learners' engagement through innovative approaches. The interactive nature of mobile applications like Busuu supports vocabulary retention and pronunciation practice, making them effective supplements to traditional learning materials. These tools enable learners to practice consistently, bridging the gap between formal instruction and self-directed learning.

Similarly, Google Translate and YouTube provide accessible means for learners to engage with authentic language content and improve their listening skills. As Haristiani and Rifa'i (2020) note, digital tools that combine authentic resources with interactivity

significantly enhance learners' autonomy and competence. The combination of these platforms ensures that learners can address specific challenges, such as understanding unfamiliar vocabulary or refining their pronunciation through repeated exposure to native speakers.

Recreational digital content, such as anime and computer games, complements formal learning by immersing learners in cultural and linguistic contexts. This aligns with Gardner's (1985) assertion that successful language acquisition requires integrating the cultural and behavioral norms of the target language. Participants described anime as a particularly effective tool for understanding natural speech patterns, idiomatic expressions, and contextual language use. However, learners must be guided to select appropriate resources that align with their learning objectives to maximize the benefits of these tools (Zakaria et al., 2017).

The findings also highlight the importance of self-regulated learning. Many students demonstrated agentic

behavior by actively seeking supplementary materials and engaging in informal learning activities. This supports Wolters and Taylor's (2012) framework, which emphasizes the role of self-regulation in achieving language proficiency. Learners who take ownership of their studies are better equipped to navigate the complexities of JFL learning, as they can tailor their approaches to suit their individual needs and preferences.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Some students expressed frustration with the lack of structured guidance when using digital tools, indicating a need for instructors to provide clearer recommendations. Additionally, while recreational content fosters motivation, its efficacy in achieving specific linguistic outcomes varies. Therefore, balancing structured and informal learning is crucial.

E. Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of technological tools and supplementary materials in addressing the challenges faced by

JFL learners. By integrating digital resources with traditional learning methods, learners can enhance their proficiency and overcome barriers to acquiring Japanese vocabulary and characters. Language instructors are encouraged to incorporate and recommend appropriate technological tools to support autonomous learning and sustain learner motivation. For example, blending traditional textbooks with applications like Busuu and incorporating authentic audio-visual materials into the curriculum can foster a holistic learning environment.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of these tools on language proficiency and their applicability across different proficiency levels. Investigating how learners balance formal instruction with informal resources would also provide valuable insights into optimizing JFL learning strategies. Moreover, expanding the sample to include learners at intermediate and advanced levels could shed light on how technological tools evolve in their utility as learners progress.

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