



## Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Learning Japanese

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by university students in Padang, Indonesia, in learning Japanese and identifies key areas where instructional improvements may be beneficial. Using a descriptive quantitative research approach, data in this case study were gathered through questionnaires and interviews involving 26 students enrolled in a Japanese language course. The findings reveal that students encounter significant difficulties, particularly in Kanji recognition, comprehension of intermediate-level grammar, and spoken communication. While these aspects present challenges, students generally exhibit competence in basic vocabulary and sentence construction, demonstrating a foundational understanding of the language. Results showed that many students reported facing moderate to high levels of difficulty, particularly when engaging with complex grammatical structures and written characters. Despite these struggles, their overall ability to manage learning tasks suggests resilience and adaptability in language acquisition. The study highlights the need for more interactive and engaging teaching methods, such as enhanced kanji practice, increased speaking opportunities, and the integration of authentic materials into the curriculum. These strategies could foster a more effective learning environment and support students in overcoming their linguistic challenges. By examining these difficulties, this research provides valuable insights for educators and curriculum designers, emphasizing the importance of targeted interventions to improve students' proficiency in Japanese. The findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on language education and offer practical recommendations to help learners achieve greater success in their academic and professional endeavors.

### KEYWORDS

Case Study; Japanese; Learning Difficulties.

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages play a crucial role in securing qualified jobs, especially in Japan. Japanese is one of the foreign languages growing rapidly in Indonesia. This is proven by the increasing number of Indonesians studying Japanese for academic, communication, and professional purposes (Putri, 2021). According to data from the Japan

Foundation, the number of Japanese language learners in Indonesia increased by 21% in 2022 compared to the previous three years, positioning Indonesia as the second-largest country for Japanese language learners globally after China, with 3,984,538 learners (Republika.co.id). This trend highlights the increasing importance of Japanese language proficiency as an asset in both the academic and professional realms.

Japan is also a leading example of how public diplomacy can successfully promote foreign policy through cultural influence. Globally, Japanese culture—both traditional and pop culture—has become widely recognized and appreciated. Japanese language learning has been further fueled by informal mediums such as manga and anime, which captivate younger audiences and contribute to the global “Japanese fever.” However, despite its growing popularity, Japanese remains a challenging language for many learners, particularly because of its unique linguistic structure. For example, Japanese uses three writing systems—hiragana, katakana, and kanji—alongside a sentence structure based on the SOP (Subject-Object-Predicate) pattern, which contrasts with the SPO (Subject-Predicate-Object) pattern in Indonesian and its regional languages (Istiqomah, Diner, & Wardhana, 2015; Amril, Elfiondri, Irma, & Kartika, 2022; Amril, Kartika, Izmayanti, Immerry, & Agusli, 2022).

Additionally, Japanese phrase structures follow a Declared-Explained pattern, unlike the Described-Explained pattern found in Indonesian. These structural differences in language use present significant challenges for students. Observations during teaching sessions in the Japanese Literature Study Program reveal that many students struggle to understand the material presented by lecturers, perform poorly in assignments, and exhibit low scores in final semester examinations. This suggests a gap in addressing the specific difficulties faced by learners in mastering the Japanese language. Despite the increasing demand for Japanese language skills, research focusing on the detailed factors contributing to these challenges remains limited, particularly within the context of Indonesian learners studying in a formal academic environment.

This research seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the factors affecting the teaching and learning process of Japanese in the Japanese Literature Study Program. These factors include learning facilities, time allocation, textbook availability, and teaching methods employed by lecturers. A specific focus will be given to the *speaking skills course*, which spans from the first to the sixth semester and is critical in equipping students with practical communication skills in Japanese (Kusumadewi & Subroto, 2019).

In previous studies, learning difficulties have been broadly categorized into internal and external factors (Saptono, 2016). Internal factors include lack of basic abilities, low motivation, emotional challenges, and physical health issues. External

factors encompass environmental conditions, family support, and social influences such as peer relationships, cultural distractions, and exposure to non-educational content (Sinta & Wahyuni, 2023). While these studies provide a general understanding of learning challenges, specific challenges related to Japanese language learning—such as difficulties with pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary use, and cultural nuances like keigo (polite language)—remain underexplored in the Indonesian context (Eriawan & Putri, 2020; Fadzilah, 2021; Pramana & Aritonang, 2021; Nygaraha, 2021; Syarani, 2021; Febriyanti, 2022).

This research aims to address these gaps by examining the difficulties students encounter in mastering Japanese. It will analyze challenges in listening, speaking, reading, and writing and explore underlying causes such as linguistic interference, inadequate teaching strategies, and lack of real-life language application opportunities. Focusing on students enrolled in the 2021 and 2022 academic years, this study aims to provide actionable insights for lecturers to develop effective teaching methods and create a supportive learning environment.

Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to improved learning outcomes in Japanese language education. The findings are expected to help students become more confident and proficient in speaking Japanese, enabling them to pursue further education or career opportunities in Japan and fostering stronger cultural and professional connections between Indonesia and Japan. By addressing this gap, the study also aims to bridge the discrepancy between the increasing demand for Japanese language skills and the persistent challenges learners face in achieving proficiency.

## METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research method aimed at identifying students' difficulties in learning Japanese based on actual conditions (Jailani, 2023). The research focused on a single variable: students' challenges in learning Japanese in the Japanese Literature Study Program, in a university in Padang, Indonesia.

The population consisted of 26 students enrolled in the 2021 and 2022 academic years. The total sampling technique was used, meaning all members of the population were included as research samples.

Data collection combined the use of questionnaires and interviews to gain

comprehensive insights into students' difficulties. The questionnaire, designed in a closed format with predetermined answer options, used a Likert scale with four response levels: "Always" (4), "Often" (3), "Sometimes" (2), and "Never" (1) (Sugiyono, 2018). The questions explored factors such as personal obstacles, lecturer-related issues, teaching materials, teaching methods, and students' motivation for enrolling in the program.

The interview component used guiding questions to explore students' understanding and practical application of Japanese. Questions included topics such as understanding commonly used vocabulary, distinguishing *hiragana* and *katakana*, describing objects, family members, and personal items in Japanese, and identifying specific difficulties faced in learning the language.

The data analysis process, based on Zakariah, Afriani, and Zakariah (2020), involved several steps: preparing the data by checking the completeness of the questionnaires, tabulating and scoring responses, calculating total scores and percentages, and interpreting the findings. This analysis aimed to identify key factors causing learning difficulties and provide actionable insights for improving teaching and learning in the program.

Before distribution, the questionnaire underwent validity and reliability testing to ensure its accuracy and consistency (Kusumastuti, Khoiron, & Achmadi, 2020). Construct validity ensured the alignment of questions with the intended concepts, while reliability was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha formula (Gebang et al., 2022). By integrating questionnaire data with interview responses, this study provided a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by students and offered recommendations for enhancing Japanese language instruction.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that students in the Japanese Literature Study Program at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Bung Hatta University, face moderate difficulties in learning Japanese. Based on responses from 26 students, the total distribution of answers was as follows: "Strongly Agree" (27.43%); "Agree" (62.10%); "Disagree" (10.03%); and "Strongly Disagree" (0.44%), as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. These responses indicate an overall difficulty level of 75.72%, categorized as "Good" according to Arikunto's (1989) classification. This

suggests that while challenges exist, students manage their learning tasks adequately.

Table 1: Distribution of Data in Analyzing Students' Difficulties in Learning Japanese.

Alternative Answer	Total Respond	Frequency (%)	Result
Strongly Agree	432	27,43	75,72%
Agree	978	62,10	
Disagree	158	10,03	
Strongly Disagree	7	0,44	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1575</b>	<b>100</b>	

A closer look at the primary difficulties as seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 reveals that mastering kanji is a major obstacle for students. With its complex characters, Kanji requires significant time and effort to learn, especially because students do not always have ample practice opportunities. This lack of practice with kanji affects their reading comprehension (*dokkai*), hindering their ability to understand texts effectively. The challenge with kanji is compounded by the fact that Japanese uses multiple writing systems (*hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*), making it difficult for students to internalize these symbols and their meanings.

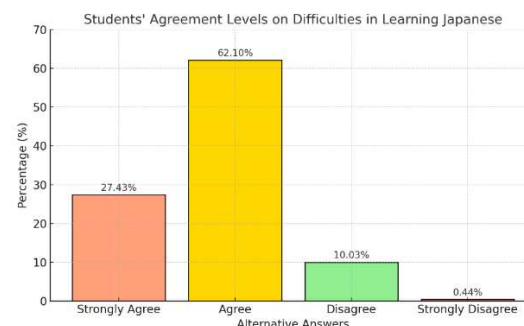


Figure 1: Structure of the Application Design.

In addition to Kanji, students also struggle with grammar, particularly at the intermediate level (*chūkyū*). Grammatical difficulties are commonly encountered when students try to apply more complex sentence structures. The Japanese language has different syntactical rules and particles that are unfamiliar to English speakers, and this complexity often leads to confusion. Moreover, the absence of a direct equivalent to Japanese grammar in the students' native language further complicates their understanding. As a result, students find it

challenging to form grammatically correct and natural-sounding sentences in Japanese.

Speaking skills (*kaiwa*) also pose a significant challenge for the students. Many students indicated that they lacked opportunities to practice speaking Japanese in real-life situations, which hindered their fluency. The limited conversational practice resulted in hesitancy when speaking, as students often struggled to formulate sentences quickly. This issue is common among learners of foreign languages, particularly when they do not have enough exposure to native speakers. As a result, students reported feeling unprepared for real-life interactions, which can affect their confidence and proficiency in communication.

Despite these challenges, many students demonstrated a strong understanding of basic vocabulary and sentence patterns, especially at the beginner level. They were able to engage in simple conversations and comprehend elementary texts. This indicates that while there are some difficulties, students can grasp fundamental concepts and apply them in basic communication situations. The results suggest that students will likely improve their skills in these areas with continued practice.

Furthermore, most students expressed satisfaction with the learning materials provided, citing them as relevant and accessible. The alignment between evaluation materials and the topics taught in class was also highly regarded. This suggests that the curriculum and materials were well-designed and effectively supported students' learning, particularly in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure. Constructive feedback from lecturers was also appreciated, as it provided students with valuable insights into their strengths and areas for improvement. This feedback plays an important role in helping students enhance their language skills.

Despite these positive aspects, the findings also highlight areas for improvement. Given the challenges in kanji, grammar, and speaking, educators need to implement strategies that address these difficulties. One possible solution is to integrate more interactive and contextualized kanji practice into the curriculum. This could include activities that allow students to associate kanji with real-world objects and situations, helping them internalize the characters more effectively. In addition, more opportunities for speaking practice, such as language exchange programs or conversational workshops, would help students gain confidence in using Japanese in everyday contexts.

Regarding grammar, instructors should consider providing additional resources and exercises focusing on intermediate-level sentence structures. These could include drills, role-playing activities, and grammar-focused lessons specifically designed to address the most common struggles at the intermediate level. These resources would allow students to practice and reinforce grammar knowledge in a structured, supportive environment.

A more important recommendation is to expand the use of authentic materials, such as videos, articles, and audio clips, to expose students to natural Japanese. These materials would help students develop a better understanding of how Japanese is used in various contexts and improve their listening and comprehension skills. Moreover, including more culturally relevant content in the curriculum could further engage students and make their learning experience more meaningful.

The importance of continuous feedback cannot be overstated. Lecturers should continue to provide constructive, personalized feedback on students' progress, as this is crucial for guiding their improvement. Regular assessments and feedback sessions could help students identify specific areas where they need more practice and give them the opportunity to address these challenges before they become obstacles to their overall learning.

Ultimately, the findings of this study emphasize the need for an evolving and responsive curriculum that adapts to the needs of students as they progress in their language-learning journey. By focusing on the areas of difficulty identified in this study—kanji, grammar, and speaking—educators can better support their students in achieving greater proficiency in Japanese. Through targeted interventions, additional practice, and an emphasis on real-world language use, students can overcome challenges and develop the skills necessary to succeed in academic and professional contexts.

In conclusion, while the students face several challenges in learning Japanese, they also demonstrate a solid foundation in basic language skills. Students can significantly improve their language proficiency by addressing specific difficulties, particularly in kanji, grammar, and speaking. This study highlights the importance of continuous improvement in teaching methods, resources, and feedback to meet the evolving needs of language learners. By focusing on these areas, educators can better prepare students for success in their academic pursuits and future careers in Japanese language and culture.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the Japanese students participated in this study face moderate challenges in learning Japanese, particularly in mastering kanji, grammar, and speaking skills. While students demonstrate a strong foundation in basic vocabulary and sentence structures, they struggle with kanji complexity, intermediate grammar, and a lack of real-life speaking practice. To address these issues, enhancing kanji practice, providing more speaking opportunities, and integrating authentic materials into the curriculum is recommended. Continuous feedback and targeted interventions will help students overcome difficulties and improve their proficiency in Japanese.

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