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Language Proficiency: Preliminary View on Malaysia Japanese Language Teachers

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the current situation of the importance of maintaining fluency in teaching foreign languages. It is a preliminary report on previous studies regarding teachers' proficiency and its relevancy to the Malaysian Japanese language teachers. The focus on foreign language education in Malaysia has increased significantly following its inclusion in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 by the Ministry of Education in 2007. The policy was strengthened with the announcement of Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 with ten new paradigms as a game changer in higher education scenario. This move has resulted in rapid growth, evident through the adoption of foreign language programs in major public universities, elite secondary boarding schools, and selected secondary schools. Despite this, the literature in foreign language education suggests that most educational institutions do not provide many opportunities for foreign language teachers to maintain or improve their language skill (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010). Although teachers by profession, non-native speaker teachers of foreign language are still at risk of language attrition, especially if its use is only limited to simple structures and basic vocabulary (Wlosowicz, 2017). This is often the case in Malaysia where most institutions only offer elementary level courses for foreign languages, which includes the Japanese language. Most universities in Malaysia offer elementary level of Japanese language course except for few universities such as Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia (Yeoh & Singh, 2020). According to Richards et al. (2013), teachers need an advanced level of proficiency to provide students with meaningful and knowledgeable explanations on language and culture. Furthermore, their proficiency can have a direct impact on students' learning. This is because it influences the amount of language used in the classroom and shapes the teaching approach used, thus playing a pivotal role in the overall student learning experience (Valmori & De Costa, 2016). Research on the proficiency of non-native Japanese language teachers in Malaysia is scarce, and not much is known about how they maintain or develop their proficiency.

Keywords: Japanese language; teacher's proficiency; learning experience

1. Introduction

Malaysia is recognized for its rich diversity in people, languages, and culture. The populace typically communicates in a minimum of two languages, predominantly Malay and their respective mother tongues, such as Mandarin or Tamil. Malay serves as the national language, while English holds official status, particularly in the private sector and industries. Osman et al. (2010) elaborate on Malaysia's language education, which is segmented into three categories: i) language proficiency courses encompassing Malay, English, Asian, and European languages, aimed at equipping students with essential language skills for social, academic, and employment contexts; ii) language programs tailored for degrees in specific languages, linguistics, and literature studies; and iii) programs for teaching languages, focusing on training educators, particularly in schools. Fig. 1 shows the category and type of languages offered in education institution in Malaysia.



Figure 1. Language Education in Malaysia (cf. Osman et al., 2010)

1.1. Malaysia Japanese language education background

Japanese language education in Malaysia has its roots in World War II, during the Japanese occupation of Malaya (1941-1945). The establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Malaysia in 1964 marked the beginning of formal Japanese language education. The significance of Japanese language education increased after Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, launched the Look East Policy in 1982. Under this policy, many students and trainees from Malaysia were sent to Japan for further studies or technical training. Given Japan's monolingual reputation, proficiency in the Japanese language became crucial for students and trainees pursuing studies in their respective fields. During the early implementation of the Look East Policy, Malaysia relied on Japanese teachers specially sent by the Japanese government. Most of these educators came from Japan through collaborations with the Japan Foundation (JF) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This initial phase heavily influenced the development of Japanese language education in Malaysia, with trained Japanese teachers playing a prominent role. However, the scenario in higher education institutions had slight variations. The first Japanese language course was established at the University of Malaya in 1964. Subsequently, with the implementation of the Look East Policy, institutions like the University of Malaya, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi MARA were to offer preparatory programs for further studies in Japan. Recently, according to Mustafa's (2022) online survey, there are 28 higher education institutions provided Japanese language courses, encompassing both public and private establishments. However, most of the institutions offer elementary level of Japanese language except for few universities such as Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia (Yeoh et al., 2020). As per the findings in the Japan Foundation Survey Report for the year 2021, the current enrollment for Japanese language courses across diverse institutions in Malaysia stands at 38,129 students and to break down the specifics, there are 19,140 students in secondary schools, 13,715 students in higher education institutions, and 5,257 in private institutions.

Table 1. Japanese language learners in Malaysia

Institutions	Number of learners
Secondary education	19,140
Higher education	13,715
Private education	5,257

Despite a consistent yearly increase in the student population, the number of Japanese language teachers has remained nearly stagnant in recent years.

1.2. Japanese language teachers

Based on Ministry of Education data regarding schools' teacher and Ministry of Higher Education statistics concerning academic staff in secondary schools, public universities, private universities, polytechnics, and community colleges, there is a total of 256,464 teaching staff contributing to Malaysia's educational landscape. This figure excludes primary school teachers, as the introduction of foreign languages typically begins at the secondary school level. Notably, Japanese language teachers or instructors constitute only 0.2% of this overall educator population, rendering their presence almost negligible. According to the Japan Foundation Survey 2021, the Southeast Asian region has a substantially higher number of non-native teachers, reaching 15,000, in comparison to the relatively lower count of native teachers at 2,198. This pattern is also observed in Malaysian higher education institutions. In 2022, the Malaysian Japanese Language Instructors Society (MAJLIS), conducted a survey focused on Japanese language education in higher education institutions. Questionnaire were distributed and from 18 institutions responded, the number of Japanese language teachers distributions could be summarized as below.

Table 2. Japanese language teachers in higher education institutions

Teachers background	Number of teachers
Non-native full-time teachers	48
Non-native part-time teachers	16
Native full-time teachers	8
Native part-time teachers	2

On the other hand, teachers in secondary schools are mostly native due to the employment regulations under Ministry of Education. Thus, the role of non-native Japanese language teachers is pivotal and need further research.

2. Problem Statement

Japanese language educators in Malaysia encounter challenges due to inadequate teacher education, impacting their ability to effectively support diverse educational settings (Zaharuddin et al., 2023; Zoraida, 2022). Fig. 2 illustrates the number of Japanese language teachers, sourced from the Japan Foundation's biennial survey on Japanese language education abroad.

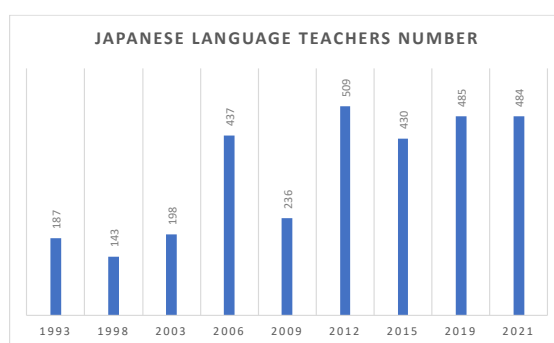


Figure 2. Japanese language teachers number in Malaysia

Notably, the teacher count has remained almost consistent since 2012 when the Ministry of Education concluded the Special Program for Japanese Language Teachers Education in Japanese universities. While a few programs have been introduced locally to meet the demand for Japanese language teachers, their impact has mainly sustained in secondary education without substantial replacements. The figure suggests that a significant proportion of teachers have accumulated 10 to 15 years or more of teaching experience. Consequently, an important question arises: How do these teachers maintain their proficiency in Japanese language, and does it influence the overall landscape of sustainable Japanese language education in Malaysia. Based on prior research and the data presented in the 2021 Survey on Japanese Language Education Abroad by the Japan Foundation, challenges and issues regarding Japanese language teachers' proficiency in Malaysia manifest in the following domains.

1. The number of Japanese Language Teachers (JLT) has remained nearly constant with slight variations over the past few years, indicating that a significant portion of teachers have been in the profession for 10 to 20 years.
2. Many teachers predominantly teaching at the elementary level due to the prevalence of proficiency courses offered by institutions in Malaysia.
3. Teachers rarely use the Japanese language in their daily tasks, except for class activities, influenced by the local working environment.
4. There is a deficiency in the ability of teachers to train new colleagues or develop plans for succession within their institutions.

The identified challenges may result in the underdevelopment of Japanese language education in Malaysia, primarily catering to learners with only elementary proficiency levels. Simultaneously, industries are increasingly seeking individuals proficient in Japanese, typically with a minimum proficiency level of Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N3 or higher, for employment in Japanese companies or roles as Japanese instructors. This situation poses a potential threat to the realization of the higher education blueprint paradigm introduced by the Malaysian government in 2015, which aims to cultivate a cadre of multilingual global talents.

3. Research Method

This paper aims to provide an overview derived from literature review, delving into the issues concerning the significance of sustaining proficiency in the target language, specifically Japanese, among Malaysian teachers.

1. The significance of maintaining proficiency in the target language.
2. The types of support that could prove beneficial in sustaining Japanese language proficiency among teachers.

4. Discussions and Findings

In seeking the idea of proficiency, Elder (2001) explored the distinctiveness of teachers' language proficiency as a domain, questioning whether it can be differentiated from other areas of professional competence or general proficiency. Hence, in this paper the language proficiency is defined as linguistics ability in terms language competency in the target language possessed by teachers. In Fraga- Cañadas (2010), in response to the growing Spanish-speaking population in the United States, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and the ACTFL emphasized the necessity of high Spanish language proficiency for all Spanish classes. Thus, a survey on teachers' language proficiency revealed that deterioration occurs when educators are not regularly engaged in teaching advanced-level classes, suggesting the importance of providing opportunities for improvement through educational institution-supported programs.

In Włosowicz's (2017) study on non-native English teachers, she indicated that a high proficiency level might not be necessary for lower education levels. Although the correlation between teachers' proficiency and teaching effectiveness is low, proficiency attrition is a consequence. Faez & Karas (2017) found a positive correlation between language proficiency and teachers'

confidence, with teachers often assuming higher proficiency and greater confidence in their instructional abilities. However, Kissau & Algozzine (2017) argued that advanced proficiency doesn't guarantee effective language teaching, showing contrasting results in teaching effectiveness between candidates with weak and strong language proficiency.

On the other hand, Choi & Lee (2016) emphasized the interconnection of language proficiency and self-efficacy in non-native English teachers, underscoring the continual development of skills even after achieving basic proficiency. This notion aligns with the findings of Richard et al. (2013), highlighting the capacity to handle essential aspects of language teaching irrespective of target language proficiency. These fundamental aspects include 1) exploit the target language resource; 2) provide some appropriate language models; 3) offer corrective feedback, and; 4) use the target language to manage class. Nevertheless, an advanced level of target language proficiency is essential for teachers to furnish meaningful explanations, provide substantial language input to learners, and adeptly respond to questions regarding language and culture. The level of proficiency in the classroom has direct impact of teachers' proficiency on the classroom language used and teaching approaches, playing a pivotal role in overall student learning experiences (Valmori & De Costa, 2016). As per the research conducted by Valmori and De Costa, teachers should actively participate in professional development activities and engage with the teaching community to uphold their language proficiency. The study's results also suggested the development of in-service professional courses, emphasizing the importance of aligning these programs with teachers' requirements within their specific educational environments.

In 2015, Chooi and Mohamed endeavored to enhance self-advancement awareness among Japanese language teachers in Malaysia. They initiated a portfolio project involving in-service Malaysian Japanese language teachers from secondary schools. The outcomes revealed that participants emphasized the importance of rigorous self-discipline in self-directed learning and the ongoing enhancement of Japanese language skills. Teachers encountered difficulties in completing the time-consuming portfolios, especially while juggling multiple tasks within their administrative school workload.

Based on the data and articles examined, it can be inferred that Japanese language teachers in Malaysia possess significant experience, evident from their years of service and a substantial number holding bachelor's degrees from Japanese universities in related fields. However, Japanese language education in Malaysia seems to predominantly revolve around an elementary level of Japanese in most institutions, potentially impacting the proficiency of teachers. Regarding student quality, there might not be substantial concerns if the proficiency of teachers exhibits a weak correlation with teaching effectiveness, as indicated by Kissau & Algozzine (2017). Nevertheless, this situation could contribute to an underdeveloped Japanese Language Education in Malaysia, characterized by learners primarily attaining an elementary level of proficiency. Hence, maintaining the target language proficiency is crucial to ensure the sustainability and expansion of Japanese language education in Malaysia.

In practice, attaining a specific level of language proficiency is a fundamental prerequisite for instructing the target language. Furthermore, sustaining proficiency in the target language is essential to bolster and enrich the learning experience for students. As per Stewart (2014), the norms of teacher professional development are evolving from passive and individual practices to a more communal approach, such as within the workplace community. Therefore, the involvement of institutional administration becomes crucial to facilitate and endorse the professional development of teachers. Next Fig. 3 cited from Stewart (2014), showed the approach and activities that could be conducted to enhance teachers' development whether for the language proficiency or teaching practices, from an individual to a communal approach.

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 workshop	Change practice	Content focus, Active learning, Duration, linked to teacher beliefs and standard
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

Figure 3: Professional Development Activities and Relation to Depth of Learning (cf. Stewart, 2014)

In the Malaysian context, training and professional development are presently offered through the Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur, with support from the Malaysia Japanese Language Instructors Society (MAJLIS). Various initiatives, including Japanese language education seminars, teacher workshops, and pedagogy training, have been organized to foster a supportive community

for teachers. Despite these efforts, there is a gap of involvement in these activities between secondary school teachers and higher education institutions' instructors. On the bright side, Malaysia's teachers' community is normally governed by the Ministry of Education; nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the Japanese language teaching community in Malaysia accounts for only 0.2% of the entire population, making the amount of support received is still unclear.

5. Conclusions and Future Studies

This paper seeks to illuminate the existing challenges and issues faced by Japanese language teachers in Malaysia, particularly focusing on the attrition of teachers' proficiency and strategies to sustain proficiency within a non-target-language speaking environment. Previous studies on foreign language teachers' proficiency have indicated a weak correlation between proficiency and teaching effectiveness. While advanced proficiency may not guarantee effective teaching, maintaining a certain level of proficiency remains crucial for delivering meaningful explanations and adeptly responding to students' inquiries. Ongoing professional development activities and institutional support play pivotal roles in enabling teachers to meet the evolving demands of language education, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of Japanese language education in Malaysia, which currently centers around an elementary level.

Examining the current trend among learners in Malaysia reveals a consistent increase, particularly in higher education institutions and private education. Conversely, the number of Japanese language teachers, especially in higher education, remains limited. The stagnation in the number of Japanese language teachers since 2012 raises concerns about their ability to adapt to evolving teaching methodologies and cater to the needs of students aspiring for higher proficiency levels. Simultaneously, there is apprehension regarding how Malaysia can sustain Japanese language education without a comprehensive succession plan or program to support teachers' development.

This conclusion serves as a precursor for future research, addressing three key questions to delve into the real situation among Japanese language teachers in Malaysia:

1. What is the Japanese language proficiency level of Japanese language teachers?
2. How do teachers actively maintain their Japanese language proficiency?
3. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the importance of fluency in teaching Japanese languages?

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