

Unlocking Fluency: Evaluating The Japanese Language Mastery Program

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Abstract

The Japanese language and culture were first introduced into Malaysian education through the Dasar Pandang ke Timur (DPT) (literally “Look East Policy”), initiated by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1982, aiming to emulate successful East Asian practices for Malaysia's development, particularly Japan and South Korea. Initially, Japanese was taught primarily at higher education institutions and selected secondary schools, but not at the elementary level. The Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam was introduced in two foster schools in the Klang Valley as part of the university's commitment to University Social Responsibility (USR), addressing this educational gap. This study evaluates the program's effectiveness in improving students' Japanese proficiency and cultural understanding. Using pre- and post-surveys conducted via Google Forms, involving 61 respondents, the study assessed participants' satisfaction, knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards Japanese. The findings revealed a significant increase in students' interest in Japanese, notable improvements in language skills, and a deepened appreciation for cultural diversity. The JLMP not only enhanced language proficiency but also broadened students' cultural awareness, fostering a greater appreciation of Japanese culture. This initiative not only fills educational gaps but also fosters collaboration between higher education and schools. Future programs should consider longer class durations, explore various foreign languages, and conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term benefits of early language and cultural exposure.

Keywords: *Japanese Language and Culture, University Social Responsibility, Mastery Program*

Introduction

Background of Study

The Japanese language and culture were primarily introduced into Malaysian education through the Look East Policy. Known as Dasar Pandang ke Timur (DPT) in Malay, this policy was established by Malaysia's 5th Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, with the main objective of adopting Japanese and Korean working cultures (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). One of the measures under this policy includes educating Malaysian students in Japanese tertiary institutions and training them in Japanese companies (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). The involvement of Malaysian students in these Japanese organizations has created a need for learning the Japanese language and culture. Consequently, these students are required to achieve a certain level of Japanese language proficiency before being sent to Japan.

However, exposure to the Japanese language at the elementary school level remains limited compared to universities and secondary schools. This gap can be addressed through the implementation of the University Social Responsibility (USR) Program, which is part of the national higher education agenda

aimed at benefiting the local community. Such initiatives allow universities to share knowledge and expertise with the community, fostering interaction beyond the campus and enabling mutual benefits through various activities.

Statement of Problem

There is an increasing demand not only for tertiary-level students to learn a third language but also for primary-level children to acquire one. Calabrese and Dawes (2008) explain that early foreign language education benefits overall language development and fosters a positive attitude towards different cultures. Despite this, primary school students in Malaysia still have limited exposure to the Japanese language and culture. This gap is evident from the lack of literature or scholarly research on Japanese language education in Malaysian primary schools. Sazlina Abdul Jabbar (2012), in her thesis on Japanese language education in Malaysia and New Zealand, notes that Japanese is primarily taught as an elective subject at the secondary school level in Malaysia. Furthermore, a pre-survey conducted before this program revealed that 86.1% of 36 primary school students had never been exposed to Japanese language and culture. Although there are academic experts in Japanese language and culture in Malaysia, their expertise is not effectively utilized to educate local primary school students.

To address this issue, the Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP) was established as a community service initiative led by the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, in collaboration with two public schools in the Klang Valley: Sekolah Kebangsaan Seafield 3 (SKS3) in Subang Jaya and Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Jawa 2 (SKKJ2) in Klang. The program was initially established following a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between APB and SKS3, which facilitated collaboration to develop research and programs such as the JLMP. SKKJ2 later joined the program after seeking APB's assistance with extracurricular activities, becoming an APB foster school alongside SKS3.

Historically, students at these schools have lacked exposure to the Japanese language and cross-cultural knowledge. To address this gap, the program was designed to enable APB experts to impart their knowledge to students at no cost. This initiative aligns with Poston et al. (1992), who stated, "A school is a reflection of the community it serves. At the same time, a community is a reflection of its schools." By enhancing students' cultural and linguistic exposure, the program aims to foster a more interconnected and culturally aware community. As the first of its kind implemented by UiTM lecturers with the local community, the program received a 3-star rating in PRIME (Publication Repository Information System Management), a web-based application developed by UiTM for managing research data, including grant applications, publications, intellectual property, and star ratings, and which serves as the reference platform for Malaysia Re-

search Assessment (MyRA) at UiTM. Teaching and learning are conducted through flexible online sessions according to a scheduled plan, utilizing computers and internet access.

Objective and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the JLMP in enhancing students' proficiency in Japanese and their understanding of Japanese culture. The study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What impact does early exposure to the Japanese language have on elementary school students' language acquisition and interest in further language learning?
- RQ2: How does exposure to Japanese culture through educational programs influence elementary school students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity?

Literature Review

Language Teaching and Learning through Community Service

In recent years, there has been an increasing overlap between language teaching and community service. The literature highlights how language learning and teaching can benefit local communities through community service, the challenges faced, and the strategies to overcome these challenges. Lee et al. (2018) provided an overview of the problems and opportunities in community-based service-learning (CBSL) programs focused on community action. They identified three overlapping challenges in CBSL: (1) discussions on service, communities, and learning; (2) methodical execution of these discussions in CBSL partnerships; and (3) adaptation of localized best practices in innovative pedagogies. Lee et al. (2018) argued that addressing these challenges is crucial for shaping the future of CBSL and language education. They also explained that CBSL, combined with language education, offers opportunities for participants to interact, collaborate, and strengthen community ties. Sarbunan (2023) explored how language classes can benefit from involving community service to train students in effective communication for social change. Through secondary and desktop research methods, Sarbunan (2023) found that multilingual learning communities can foster inclusion and cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, cultural understanding can be enhanced through inclusive language education and digital identity.

Exposing Japanese Language and Culture to Schools

Recently, more schools have begun introducing Japanese language and culture to their students. Early exposure to a foreign language can enhance children's overall language development and education by nurturing positive attitudes towards diverse cultures (Calabrese & Dawes, 2008). Mardani et al. (2020) examined the implementation of the 2013 curriculum for Japanese in elementary schools in Bali, where Japanese has tradi-

tionally been taught only at the high/vocational school level. Their data, collected through questionnaires and interviews, revealed that 20% of schools had implemented the 2013 curriculum for Japanese language. Additionally, 67.4% of students showed a preference for Japanese, expressing interest in Hiragana, Katakana, and Japanese culture and food. Conversely, 33.6% of students found Japanese characters difficult to memorize and were less interested. The study also identified the lack of curriculum-based learning tools as a reason for the suboptimal implementation of the 2013 curriculum. Meanwhile, Mahoney (2009) aimed to investigate the teaching of Japanese culture, as well as teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching Japanese culture. Through interviews and observations of two non-native Japanese language teachers from a secondary school in New South Wales, Mahoney (2009) found that teaching Japanese culture was perceived as easier than teaching the Japanese language. However, the approach to teaching Japanese culture varied between the two teachers: one relied on personal experience, while the other encouraged students to reflect on their own backgrounds and experiment with Japanese culture.

Conceptual Framework of The Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP)

The JLMP aims to enhance Japanese language proficiency and cultural understanding among primary school students. The program is designed to introduce students to the basics of the Japanese language, while also providing them with insights into Japanese culture, fostering a deeper appreciation and interest in both.

The approach used is based on the Instructional Research Design Method, which involves the design and development process of the program. The program flow (Figure 1) was developed with input from both the JLMP team and the administration of the participating primary schools. The program was then implemented and evaluated for its acceptance and effectiveness. Data collection and analysis primarily focused on assessing the program's effectiveness.

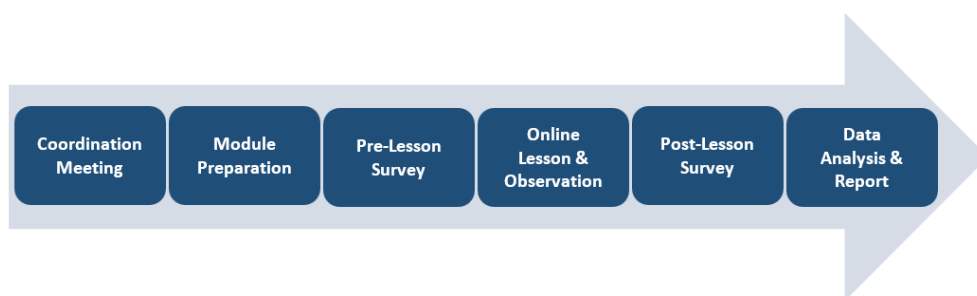


Figure 1: The Flowchart of Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP)

Methodology

Program Implementation

The program began with an online coordination meeting between APB, SKS3, and SKKJ2 on Friday, June 9, 2023, from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm via Google Meet (see Figure 2). The meeting introduced the program's

background and established connections between the institutions. It was decided that the program would be conducted every Saturday from November 9, 2023, to December 2, 2023, with each one-hour lesson taking place via Google Meet. The JLMP module, detailing the schedule, topics, and instructors, was prepared following the meeting (see Table 1).

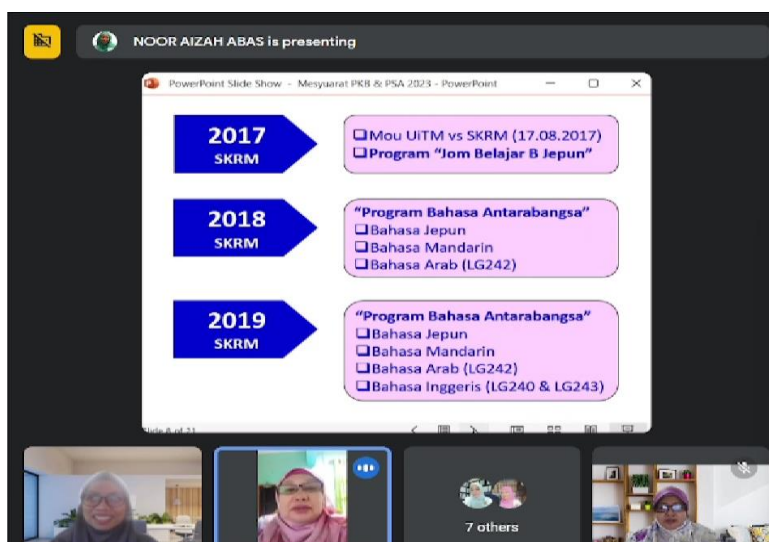


Figure 2: Photo of Coordination Meeting Between APB and SKS3 and SKKJ2

Table 1: The JLMP Module

No	Day/Time	Date	Topic	Instructor
1	SATURDAY (10:00-11:00 am)	19.08.2023	Greetings	Noor Aizah binti Abas
2		09.09.2023	Self-Introduction	Nadiah binti Zubbir
3		16.09.2023	Number	PM Dr Sarinah binti Sharif
4		23.09.2023	Family	PM Dr Normah binti Ahmad
5		30.09.2023	Time	Simah binti Md Noor
6		07.10.2023	Day	Zaiton binti Md Isa
7		14.10.2023	Date	G Sharina binti Shaharuddin
8		21.10.2023	Hobbies	PM Choong Pow Yean

Participants

The program involved 61 primary school students from SKS3 (31 students) and SKKJ2 (30 students), aged 10 to 11 years (Standards 4 and 5). Participants needed internet access and a smart device, laptop, or computer with a camera and microphone for virtual lessons and surveys conducted via Google Forms. The les-

sons were designed to engage students in Japanese language exercises and activities, with interactive components like self-introduction in Japanese (see Figure 3).

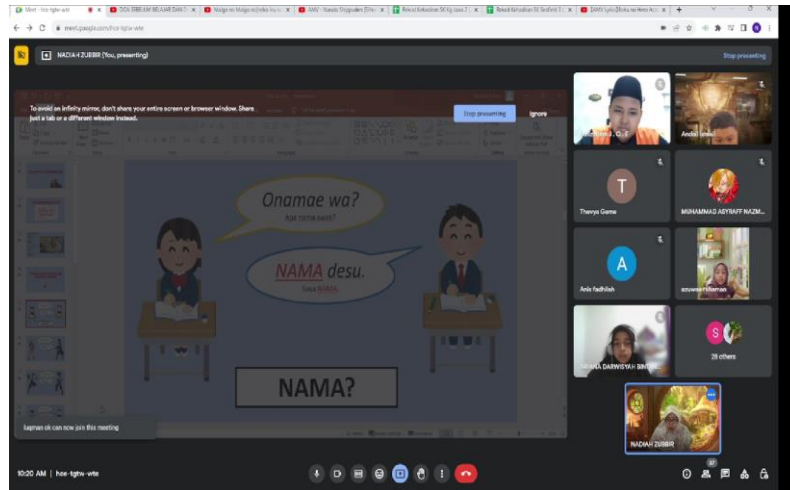


Figure 3: Participants Learning How to Introduce Themselves in Japanese

Data Collection and Analysis

A quantitative approach was utilized, involving the distribution of questionnaires via Google Forms to the 61 participants. The pre-survey assessed prior exposure to Japanese and was divided into four sections:

- Section A: Assessed interest and satisfaction (five questions).
- Section B: Evaluated Japanese language knowledge (two questions).
- Section C: Measured language skills (four questions).
- Section D: Gauged attitudes towards Japanese (three questions).

Questionnaires were distributed in the first and eighth weeks of the program. Closed-ended questions were used for their simplicity and suitability for primary school students. A post-survey was administered to measure the program's effectiveness and identify significant changes. Data was presented in tables showing percentage differences before and after participation and analyzed descriptively.

In addition to surveys, participant observation was employed to assess engagement and performance. According to Guest et al. (2012), this qualitative method involves immersion in the context to understand behavior. Observations aimed to evaluate participants' engagement in Japanese exercises, their performance, and any improvements over time. The Japanese language instructors, also acting as researchers, conducted these observations while maintaining anonymity and engaging with students. Photos and videos were collected and analyzed to complement survey findings. Additionally, instructors incorporated Japanese-related activities, such as cultural information and songs (see Figure 4), which increased participant interest and engagement.

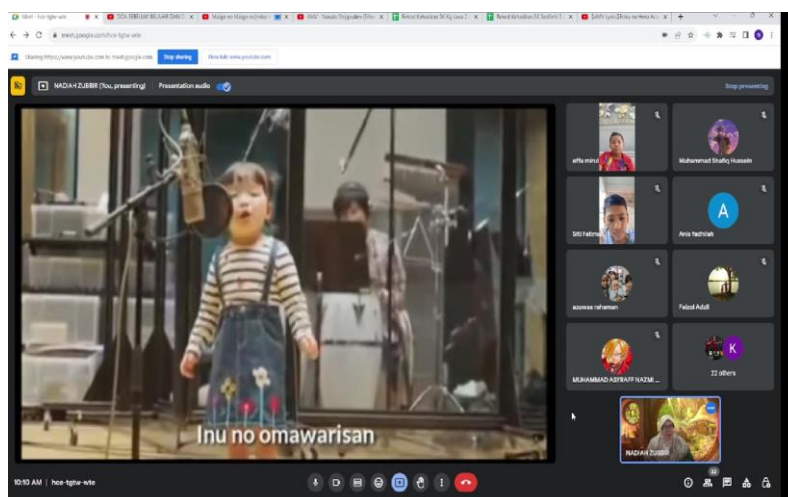


Figure 4: Participants Sang Japanese Children's Song

Findings

In this section, the analysis of the pre- and post-surveys will objectively assess the program's effectiveness. This analysis covers items such as interest in and satisfaction with the program, knowledge of the Japanese language, language skills, and attitudes towards Japanese. The data are presented in table format.

Section A: Interest and satisfaction with the program

Table 2: Interest and Satisfaction

Item		Yes	No
1.1	I am happy that the Japanese Language Class is conducted using Google Meet.	94.7%	5.3%
1.2	I like the way the Japanese language teacher teaches.	100%	0%
1.3	I think 1 hour is enough to learn Japanese.	47.4%	52.6%
1.4	I like the topics covered in the Japanese Language Class.	100%	0%
1.5	I like the activities in the Japanese Language Class.	100%	0%

Table 2 reveals the percentage of participants' interest and satisfaction levels after the program. The data shows that all items received positive feedback: 100% of students expressed that they liked the teaching methods used by the Japanese instructors, the lessons taught, and the activities conducted during the class. Additionally, 94.7% of participants found Google Meet to be a suitable platform for Japanese lessons, while 5.3% disagreed. However, 52.6% of students felt that one hour was insufficient for a Japanese class, with

47.4% considering it adequate. This indicates that more than half of the students prefer Japanese classes to be longer than one hour.

Section B: Knowledge of the Japanese language

Table 3: Knowledge of the Japanese Language

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
2.1	I like learning Japanese.	100%	0%	100%	0%
2.2	I know a lot of words in Japanese.	13.9%	86.1%	68.4%	31.6%

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of participants' knowledge of the Japanese language before and after the program. The findings show that all participants (100%) expressed an interest in learning Japanese both before and after the program, indicating sustained enthusiasm for the language throughout the program. As for the percentage of students with knowledge of the Japanese language, before the program, only 13.9% of participants reported having knowledge of many Japanese words, while 86.1% did not. After the program, there was a notable improvement, with 68.4% of participants now indicating that they know a lot of Japanese words, demonstrating a significant enhancement in their vocabulary knowledge.

Section C: Japanese language skills

Table 4: Japanese Language Skills

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
3.1	I can pronounce a few words in Japanese.	63.9	36.1	94.7	5.3
3.2	I can read a few words in Japanese.	36.1%	63.9	68.4%	31.6
3.3	I can understand when I hear a few words in Japanese.	63.9%	36.1%	89.5%	10.5
3.4	I can write a few words in Japanese.	22.2%	77.8	47.4%	52.6

Table 4 presents the findings related to Japanese language skills among students in the program. Initially, the pre-survey showed that 63.9% of students possessed Japanese speaking skills, while 36.1% did not. After the program, the post-survey revealed a significant increase, with 94.7% of students acquiring speaking

skills, leaving only 5.3% unable to do so. Regarding Japanese reading skills, 36.1% of participants could read Japanese before the program, while 63.9% could not. After the program, 68.4% of participants gained reading skills, with 31.6% still unable to read Japanese. As for Japanese listening skills, the pre-survey indicated that 36.1% of students could understand Japanese when listening, while 63.9% could not. Following the program, 89.5% of students improved their listening comprehension, with 10.5% still struggling. Lastly, in terms of Japanese writing skills, only 22.2% of participants could write in Japanese before the program, while 77.8% could not. Post-program, the number of students who could write in Japanese increased to 47.4%, although the majority (52.6%) remained unable to do so.

Section D: Attitudes towards the Japanese language

Table 5: Attitudes Towards the Japanese Language

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
4.1	I am interested in learning Japanese.	100%	0%	100%	0%
4.2	I think Japanese is difficult to learn.	33.3%	66.7%	5.3%	94.7%
4.3	I am happy to be able to join the Japanese language class.	100%	0%	100%	0%

Table 5 shows the percentage of participants who found Japanese interesting before and after the program. In both the pre-survey and post-survey, 100% of participants expressed interest in Japanese. The table also illustrates the percentage of participants who found learning Japanese difficult before and after the program. Initially, 66.7% of participants perceived Japanese as easy to learn, while 33.3% did not. After the program, the percentage of participants who found Japanese easy to learn increased significantly to 94.7%, with 5.3% finding it difficult. Additionally, the survey results indicate that 100% of participants were happy to join the Japanese lessons both before and after the program.

Discussion and Conclusion

The JLMP has demonstrated a significant positive impact on elementary school students' language acquisition and cultural understanding. Regarding Research Question 1, “What impact does early exposure to the Japanese language have on elementary school students' language acquisition and interest in further language learning?”, the JLMP significantly impacted students' Japanese language acquisition and interest in further learning. The program was well-received, with 100% of students expressing satisfaction with the teaching methods, lessons, and activities, and many preferring longer class durations. Notable improvements were

observed in language proficiency: Japanese vocabulary knowledge increased from 13.9% to 68.4%, and speaking skills improved from 63.9% to 94.7%. Observations during the program confirmed these findings, as students were actively engaged in exercises, frequently volunteered to participate, and demonstrated enthusiasm in refining their language skills. The program also promoted student interaction and communication in Japanese, reflecting benefits similar to those observed in community-based service-learning (CBSL) programs, as discussed by Lee et al. (2018).

In addressing Research Question 2, “How does exposure to Japanese culture through educational programs influence elementary school students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity?”, the JLMP significantly enhanced students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The program was praised by students, with 100% expressing satisfaction with the teaching methods, lessons, and activities. Observations revealed students' enthusiastic participation and engagement with Japanese cultural elements, such as cultural information and songs, underscoring a deepened appreciation for Japanese culture. This sustained interest aligns with findings from Mardani et al. (2020), which indicated that similar programs foster interest in Japanese language and culture.

Overall, the JLMP effectively broadened students' cultural awareness through engaging educational experiences. The observations supported the quantitative findings, showing that students not only improved their language skills but also became more engaged with Japanese culture. The program has proven to be an effective educational initiative, advancing language skills and promoting cultural diversity among young learners. These findings suggest that similar programs could be beneficial in other educational contexts, contributing to a more culturally aware and linguistically proficient student population.

Implication and Recommendations for Future Research

The JLMP aligns with the DPT Policy, emphasizing the value of early Japanese language education and training for Malaysian students (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). The program demonstrated significant improvements in elementary students' Japanese language skills across speaking, reading, listening, and writing, validating the effectiveness of structured language programs for early acquisition. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from students, who appreciated the teaching methods, lessons, and activities, suggests that well-designed educational experiences can greatly enhance enthusiasm for language learning. Additionally, the preference for longer class durations indicates that extending class time could further improve language skills and student engagement. The program also likely fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture, consistent with research showing that exposure to foreign languages and cultures enhances cultural awareness and diversity.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of early Japanese language exposure on proficiency and cultural appreciation. Additionally, exploring the impact of different class durations could provide insights into optimizing program structure. Comparative studies of various foreign language programs can help identify effective strategies for diverse language education. Gathering feedback from instructors and parents can offer a fuller picture of program effectiveness and areas for improvement. Additionally, examining the effectiveness of language programs in rural versus urban settings could reveal disparities and inform resource allocation. Lastly, integrating community-based service-learning (CBSL) elements into language programs should be explored to understand how real-world experiences influence language skills and cultural awareness. Addressing these areas will enhance language education programs and promote greater cultural understanding among students.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.A.A.; methodology, N.Z., N.A.A. and H.U.H.; formal analysis, N.A.A. and N.Z.; investigation, N.A.A. and N.Z.; data curation, N.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, N.A.A. and N.Z.; writing—review and editing, N.Z. and N.A.A.; supervision, H.U.H.; project administration, N.A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly, as they are primary school students.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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