

# Investigating and Improving Classroom Activities to Enhance Japanese Language Learning

Hui-Suan, Wei, Farihan Abdullah, Roselan Baki, and Veeramuthu Veerapan

**Abstract** —The importance of foreign languages is evident particularly as nation building is highly dependent on the transfer of foreign technology. Japanese Language is considered to be a difficult foreign language to learn among the foreign languages because of its complicated writing system. Teaching the writing system within a constant time period is a challenge in the institute of higher education. In order to inform my teaching and to improvise my teaching of Hiragana, an action research has been carried out to explore how I made the participants learn Hiragana. Reflection on the lessons has been done critically on my teaching styles. Students learning style has been examined to inform the teaching style. Consequently, using Japanese input to enforce the reading and writing of Hiragana has been taken as an action to address the problem. Results showed that majority of the participants have demonstrated a significant improvement. However, there were a few students who were unable to improve their Hiragana ability. Reflection need to be done to address the problem in the next cycle.

**Keywords** — Action research, Japanese language, Hiragana, Learning style, Multiple intelligences

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Malaysian higher education, foreign language learning has become increasingly significant due to globalisation and economic needs. Graduates who are fluent in a foreign language often have an upper hand especially when it comes to securing job opportunities where competency in a specific foreign language is required. Foreign language has become an important medium with regards to access and transfer of latest technology and information from more advanced countries. The importance of foreign languages is evident when nation building is highly dependent on transfer of foreign technology.

The implementation of "Look East Policy" has raised the awareness of learning Japanese Language in Malaysia and Japanese language was in the shed of light among the foreign languages offered in higher education. The University of Malaya was the university that initiated the program for Japanese Language called Special Japanese Preparatory Program under The Centre for Foundation Studies in Science in 1982. This course prepares students for the Monbukagakusho examination, a special entrance exam to enter Japanese Universities. The Centre had successfully

enrolled 2,100 students into Japanese universities since 1984. Enrolment into foreign language programs both at public and private higher institutions has since been very active.

Foreign language has been defined as a language which is not used nor spoken in that particular environment. In Malaysia where we live within a multiracial context, foreign language refers to languages other than national language Bahasa Malaysia, English and one's mother tongue such as Tamil and Mandarin. However, in some monolingual country like Japan, China and Korea, second language is deemed as foreign language due to the absence of the spoken environment of that specific language. Nevertheless, both the learning of second language and the learning of foreign language involve the same fundamental processes in different situations.

There are many factors that contribute to effective foreign language learning. These factors can be generally divided into Individual cognitive ability: intelligence and language aptitude; individual learning preference: learning styles and personality; environmental influence: first and second language background; teaching and learning strategies and others such as motivation.

Japanese Language is considered to be a difficult foreign language to learn. This is certainly true for native speakers of the Malay and English Language, because Japanese is fundamentally different from Indo-European languages as well as the Malay language. One of the biggest challenges in learning Japanese language involves mastering the complex writing system. Japanese Language comprises of three types of writing letters: Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji. Many years of study are necessary to achieve complete literacy. As native learners, Japanese students learn about 2000 kanji until the end of junior high school and continue to learn more until the end of their schooling years.

Another difficulty in the learning of Japanese language is the fact that speech can vary depending on the situation and the person whom are talking to. To master the language, it is necessary for students to study and understand the Japanese society and custom. This facilitates understanding of the detailed rules of different levels of speech. The focus of this study is the learning of Japanese language as a second language particularly in recognizing and reading Hiragana. This research is aimed to address the research question on how to improve student's recognition of Hiragana writing system via classroom activities?

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Multimedia University (MMU), Japanese Language was offered as an elective subject since the Year 2000. It is

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offered as one of the co-curriculum subjects together with French and Mandarin. The course title is Japanese level 1. The target students were beginners in Japanese Language. In the year 2004, the Faculty of Management initiated business and communication courses in foreign languages as elective subjects and Japanese Language for Business and Communication for level 1 and 2 has been offered since 2006. In 2007, foreign languages were offered as a university subject to students of foundation studies. The course named Japanese for Beginners was one of the subjects offered. In the same year, Japanese for Communication and Culture was also initiated and was offered as an elective subject for local students too. The demand for foreign language as an elective subject has consistently been on the rise since year 2000.

The Japanese for Beginners syllabus focuses mainly on reading and writing skills. Hiragana and Katakana are the fundamental and pre-requisite knowledge to acquire in order to be able to read and write in the language. Kanji is taught to foster understanding of new vocabulary but it is not the essential writing system in this subject. Over the years, remarkable efforts have been made to enhance students' Japanese Language Proficiency especially in Hiragana and Katakana. However a desirable level of the language proficiency among the students is yet to be reached. Many are still struggling with Hiragana and Katakana writing and reading after 42 contact hours of learning (3 hours in a week) in a trimester.

A plethora of research in the understanding and practices of foreign language programmes have been done on the understanding and practices of Japanese language teaching and learning in foreign countries. Krashen (1982) suggests that second language acquisition has been influenced by both linguistic and psychological theories. Learning style manifests the inner cognitive process of how an individual learnt (Barrington, 2004). Studies have proven that there is a relationship between learning style and cognitive (hemispheric processing model) and academic achievement (Fazeli, 2011). To make learning interesting, motivating and meaningful teaching should encompass an appropriate mix of learning strategies, use a wide range of teaching and learning resources, accommodate different learning styles according to student's need and employ different classroom activities in small groups or at individual level. In 1983, Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 2004; 1983) challenged traditional beliefs in the fields of education and cognitive science, which emphasized on the different intelligences that students possess. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences views intelligences as eight distinct capacities that exist in all human beings (Gardner, 2004; 1983). The eight intelligences are linguistics intelligence, mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, spatial intelligence, kinaesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and naturalistic intelligence. These eight intelligences reflect eight kinds of learning styles that learners have. Apply multiple intelligences in the classroom is crucial to enhance the teaching and learning effect (İşİsağ, 2008). Moreover, musical intelligence has been proved to have significant relationship with foreign language learning (Aysel Saricaoglu & Arda Arikan, 2009).

There are many different methods of second language teaching that can be adopted. They include the Direct

Method, the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audio-Lingual Method (clearly influenced by audio-lingual research and the behaviourist approach), the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, the Total Physical Response Method, and the Communicative Approach (highly influenced by Krashen's theories). These approaches provide educators with varieties of teaching style. Some styles are more popular than others because they are viewed to be more effective. Most educators employ a variety of teaching in their teaching in order to cater to students of a variety of learning styles by providing a more balanced approach to teaching. In view of this, the study explores the learning of second language in both psychological as well as pedagogical perspective. Anyway, Dinçol, Temel, Oskay, Erdoğan, and Yılmaz (2011) has proved that there is no relationship between teaching style and learning style.

Sulaiman, Sulaiman, and Suan (2011) suggested that activities based on multiple intelligences and technology could be embedded into classroom activities to enhance the learning of the Japanese language. Moreover, Suan and Sulaiman (2009) found that there is a significant correlation between multiple intelligences and Japanese language learning, therefore Japanese language learning could be enhance and enforce by inducing multiple intelligences based activities. Yamaguchi (2012) found that the speaking practice has a statistically significant effect, while no significant effect was detected with the conventional writing practice in verb conjugation acquisition by using video viewing method. In fact, well-planned activities may exculpate the learning effect.

However, more information is needed on improving the policies and practices of Japanese language teaching at Malaysian institutions of higher education. Considering the nation's quest to be recognized as a centre of educational excellence, a systematic planning and development of program based on the cognition strength of students to learn foreign particularly Japanese language effectively is necessary.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Action research was employed in this paper to explore and reflect on my own teaching strategies and students' preferred learning process for learning Hiragana. The participants were forty students from the Faculty of Management. First, students were given quiz 1 to gauge their ability in Hiragana. The quiz was to spell the Hiragana letter of the words given during lesson 1. There are ten words given and students have to re-write the name of the items in Hiragana. Based on the feedback on their learning of Hiragana, students have shown little ability of writing the words. Spelling mistake and Hiragana letter has been written wrongly. Therefore, teaching style was altered accordingly by using flash card embedded into class activities and students were tested again through quiz 2 to observe the effectiveness of the action taken.

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

Since the results of students differ from one trimester to another, I would like to know how the learning activities I designed for them benefited them. I would like to explore how the students learnt well and what I can do to arouse their interest in learning Hiragana. Time is constant and I cannot go

back to teach as I did in week 1 and 2. I made a decision to proceed with my teaching by using different strategies. I want to know if typing (Japanese input) the answer to questions will improve students' Hiragana reading and writing ability. Based on these research questions, an action research on enhancing students' Hiragana's ability has been carried out to explore the effective methods in teaching and learning Hiragana.

## V. REFLECTION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

I am aware that recognising the writing system of Japanese Language is a challenge in adult learning. Failure in recognising the Hiragana letters would lead to difficulties in comprehending subsequent lessons, ultimately leading to failure in this subject. Students may not be able to read Japanese text at all without this prior knowledge. In actuality, this knowledge is at the simplest level on the Bloom Taxonomy (level 1). Though it involves mainly memorisation, it is essential for students. Students typically have to and can master Hiragana reading and writing by week 4, which is after 12 hours of classroom instruction. As for this trimester, they should be able to do so after three-week reinforcement activities in Hiragana. To my surprise, I discovered that about 50% of the students still could not read the words in lesson 1. In order to examine their ability in reading and writing, a quiz on Hiragana which consists of Hiragana chart and basic vocabulary was given to them in week 5. The impairment in reading and writing was reflected in this first quiz I gave them to assess the Hiragana ability.

Reflecting on my teaching, I thought I have consciously plan the lessons on recognizing (reading and writing) Hiragana by adopting the "Three stage model of memory" and "Theory of Multiple Intelligences" in my teaching and learning. I went through the activities from short term memory in order to transfer to long term memory. I taught systematically from easy to difficult from narrow to broad by demonstrating to read the letter one by one on the white board, making them write the letters repetitively as homework and correcting their mistakes. I checked their interests in this language at the entry point and found that they are rather interested in learning the language; hence motivation is not an issue.

In terms of teaching strategies, I adopted activities which involved at least 4 kinds of intelligence in the classroom to address their multiple intelligences need. I used songs that they are familiar with such as "Doraemon" as a learning material to address musical intelligence, flash cards for them to read aloud to make sure they could recognise and read the letters to address their linguistics intelligence, collaborative activities for interpersonal intelligence and physically involved them by forming a word in front of the classroom for kinaesthetic intelligence. I also used meaningful learning approach to address the adult learners' need by relating the words and sounds to their daily lives. Finally they have to do the translation of the Doraemon song in Hiragana to the "Romaji" sound as drilling exercise in recognising the reading of Hiragana sound.

I went through the lessons with the class by making them, read, write, act and repeat to memorise the sound and the

shape of the writing. In addition, I explored and collected data about their concerns in learning Hiragana in order to find out what I have not done or carried out that could have enabled them to reach better understanding of it. To explore how do they learnt well and which activities excite them in my previous class, I utilise "Padlet" as a data collection tool. Below are the results of the question "How do I learn Hiragana effectively as shown in Table I.

TABLE I: METHODS OF STUDY BY STUDENTS

Methods of study	Number of students
Repetition/drilling	11
Writing the text	1
Memorising by reading	5
Reading and writing	3
Read comic	2
Online Dictionary	1
Relate to familiar things or shape	1
Total	24

The results of "What methods in the classroom learning are useful for you in learning Hiragana?" are shown in Table II.

TABLE II: TEACHING METHODS AND STUDENTS PREFERENCE

Methods of teaching	Number of students
Flash cards activities	15
Spelling / quizzes	7
Written exercise	6
Lesson notes	1
Total	29

The results show that I relied heavily on traditional methods like flash cards, quizzes, written exercises and lesson notes. It was found that students preferred to learn by heart and drilling too. I assume these were the methods in our traditional education since primary school. There is one feedback for method of study that is "online dictionary" which arouses my awareness of using technology in teaching. I have not actually blended my teaching and learning with technology which would have excited the Y generation. As technology is an integral part of "Gen Y" lives, I planned to incorporate the use of PCs in another round of Hiragana reinforcement lesson.

## VI. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION

The students were asked to use Japanese input to type the answer of the exercises for chapter 1 and 2. The process of learning required them to read the letters and words whilst typing, making it necessary to recognise the sound of the letter to enable them to use Japanese input. When they typed the answer, the letters that appeared on the screen would foster the recognition of the Hiragana shape, a method that closes the gap between the shape and the sound of Hiragana. The process of learning is illustrated in Figure 1. The completed work was to be submitted for checking.

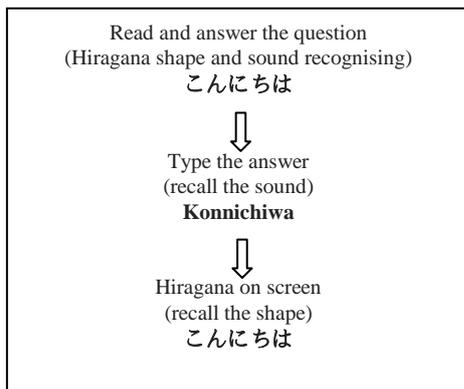


Fig. 1. The students process of learning Hiragana

### VII. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Figure 2 shows Quiz 1 Hiragana results. The quiz was 60 marks. 28 percent of participants scored less than 30 marks which is 50 percent in the test. 53 percent of participants scored more than 50 percent and 20 percent were at the border line in the quiz. Therefore the passing rate is about 50 percent. The results show that the participants' ability in reading and writing Hiragana is weak overall.

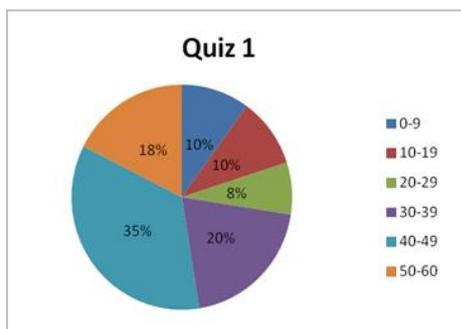


Fig. 2. Percentage of Hiragana's Quiz 1 marks

Figure 3 shows the results of Quiz 2. The results show that majority of participants (53 percent) scored high score in Quiz 2. 83 percent of the participants has passed the quiz. The failure rate is 13 percent. The results indicate the overall participants' ability of reading and writing Hiragana is strong.

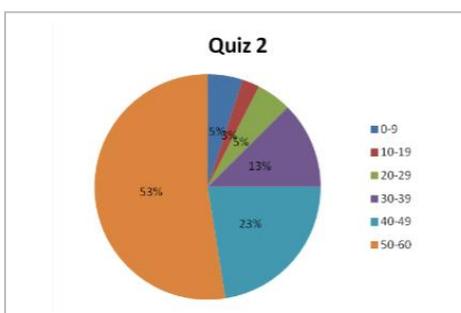


Fig. 3. Percentage of Hiragana Quiz 2 Marks

Subsequently, the difference of marks achieved from Quiz 1 to Quiz 2 was examined to gauge the level of improvement in Hiragana reading and writing ability amongst the participants. Therefore a summary of the improvement in percentage has been generated. Figure 4 shows the difference of the marks obtained by the participants from Quiz 1 to Quiz 2.

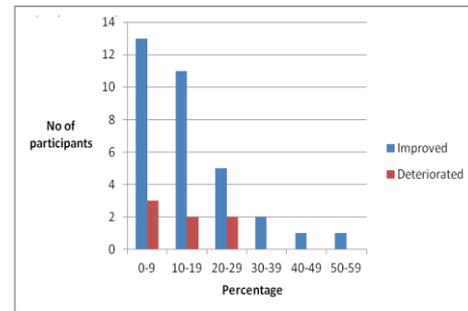


Fig. 4. The Difference of the Students' Marks from Quiz 1 to Quiz 2

The results show that after action was taken by incorporating technology in the learning process, 33 participants have improved their Hiragana ability from while 7 participants showed deterioration. 32.5 percent of participants has improved below 10 percent, 27.5 percent has improved 10-19 percent, 7.5 percent improved 30-39 percent. However, 7.5 percent of the participants' results deteriorate between 0 to 9 percent, 2.5 percent deteriorated 10 to 19 percent and 2.5 percent deteriorated 20-29 percent. Overall, a majority of 82.5 percent of the total participants showed improvement in their Hiragana reading and writing ability.

### VIII. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

The process of the research has been shared with a group of five members who are concerned about improving teaching and learning. Feedback from the members such as understanding the students' background and intention in taking the course has been taken into consideration in planning for better teaching strategies. Progress of the study and data has been revealed and discussed with the group members.

Eight faculties of multiple intelligences address eight different teaching and learning styles. Among the intelligences, linguistic, musical, kinaesthetic and interpersonal intelligence were addressed before Quiz 1. The input had given certain impact on learning; nevertheless, reflections on teaching and learning were done critically to examine possible shortcomings in teaching. Based on the data collected, it was found that I have left out the technological approach in my teaching. Hence, the Japanese output typing was introduced to enhance the learning effect. The results have shown that using Japanese input enhanced the ability of reading and writing Hiragana.

However, there are a number of participants who showed deterioration in their results. The cause of the deterioration needs to be explored and planning and action need to be taken in the next cycle to address the problem.

Theory of multiple intelligences informs different learning styles that promote the teaching and learning. In this research, I have found that technological intelligence is the element that missed out from current technological world. Therefore, the technological intelligence is suggested to be added on the existing theory in order to promote teaching and learning via technological approach which is another crucial path for the educators to reflect on their own teaching.

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