

# JAPAN STUDIES AND BEGINNER MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: EXPLORING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the potential of Japan Studies courses to enhance the learning motivation of beginner-level Japanese language learners by identifying the characteristics of authentic materials that foster such motivation. Drawing on the Content-Based Instruction approach, the study investigates the *Culture and Society of Japan* course offered at a Malaysian university, which integrates cultural content without formal Japanese language instruction. Surveys and interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 revealed that over 70% of students felt more motivated to learn Japanese after completing the course. Analysis of classroom activities, including a media-based task, peer presentations, and an online exchange session, demonstrated that exposure to real-world Japanese in meaningful contexts stimulated curiosity and engagement. Three key factors contributing to this motivation were: the presentation of Japanese in authentic sociocultural contexts, the use of unmodified language without grammatical simplification, and the setting of task difficulty above learner proficiency. These findings have implications for identifying the characteristics of authentic materials in Japan Studies courses that can themselves serve as Japanese learning materials, despite the absence of modified language textbooks for novice learners. Provided that a psychologically safe learning environment is ensured, it has been demonstrated that, being at the university level, they are able to learn Japanese, even with beginner-level proficiency, by drawing on their prior knowledge of Japan Studies as a scaffold.

**Keywords:** culture and society of Japan, content-based Instruction, authenticity, complete beginner language learners

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, the concept of Content-Based Instruction [CBI] began to gain attention as an educational approach that involves teaching subject matter through a foreign language. CBI originated in the Canadian immersion programs of the 1960s, which aimed to provide English-speaking students with subject-based instruction in French in order to simultaneously develop second language proficiency and academic knowledge (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Over time, this approach expanded beyond language immersion contexts and has been implemented in diverse educational settings worldwide.

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Okazaki (2002) introduced CBI into Japanese language education, referring to it as “content-based second language education.” Okazaki argues that this approach shifts the instructional focus from linguistic form to meaningful content, positioning learners as active participants in constructing knowledge. In this model, instructors are encouraged to design lessons around themes that resonate with learners’ interests, thereby enabling students to engage with the material more deeply. When learners perceive a personal connection to the content, classes become more dynamic and meaningful. While subjects commonly covered in Japan Studies are inherently content based, the pedagogical implication is that such themes should also be personally relevant to students in order to maximize engagement and learning outcomes.

A shared theme across these studies is the emphasis on meaningful content as central to student learning. To provide high-quality education to 21st-century learners, educators must acquire a thorough understanding of CBI principles, particularly the importance of integrating content-rich and learner-relevant instruction. However, Japanese language educators often overlook the critical role of learner engagement with content and instead focus on linguistic form. As a result, beginner learners are seldom exposed to authentic materials; they study grammar in isolation and eventually lose the motivation to continue learning. Lightbown (2014) observes that, by incorporating intellectually rich and contextually relevant content, educators can enhance learners’ willingness to participate and sustain their interest in learning. However, the critical question remains as to what kinds of content can foster the motivation of beginner learners.

Importantly, drawing on Vygotskian perspectives, it is widely recognized that individual cognitive development cannot occur independently of its social context. Learning takes place through interaction with peers, instructors, and communities, where language functions both as a communicative tool and as a mediating instrument for knowledge construction. This perspective underscores the necessity of situating language learning within socially and culturally meaningful contexts.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

One of the institutions offering Japanese language education at the university level is the Japan Studies Program at university of Malaya. Given that English functions as an official language in Malaysia, students at this university generally possess a high level of English proficiency, and consequently, some course of Japan Studies programs are conducted in English, which also affords access to a wide range of scholarly literature published in that language. Within the Japan Studies Program, Japanese language courses are part of the core curriculum; however, Japanese language proficiency is not a requirement for graduation. While some students pursue Japanese language learning on their own initiative, a significant number of students—particularly those who have enrolled in Japanese language courses regularly conducted within the Japan Studies Program—have found it difficult to sustain motivation for continued study. Many struggle to overcome the so-called “threshold” between novice and intermediate proficiency levels.

According to the Japan Foundation ([JF], 2021), a total of 38,129 individuals were engaged in Japanese language learning across educational institutions in Malaysia, with 13,715 of them enrolled at the tertiary level. In contrast to other Southeast Asian nations—where Japanese language education is more prevalent at the secondary level—Malaysia is distinguished by a comparatively higher proportion of learners in higher education institutions. Nevertheless, an examination of Japanese language curricula offered at Malaysian universities

indicates a notable scarcity of intermediate-level courses. Furthermore, the number of candidates sitting for the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test [JLPT] in Malaysia remains relatively low compared with neighboring ASEAN countries where Japanese language education is more robustly institutionalized.

**Table 1: The number of JLPT Takers in July 2024**

JLPT level	Thailand (Examinees)	Indonesia (Examinees)	Philippines (Examinees)	Malaysia (Examinees)
(Novice) N4	3792	7360	3586	387
↓ N3	2824	3930	844	464
↓ N2	1989	1846	399	447
(Advance) N1	1078	654	192	262

Data from JF and Japan Educational Exchange and Service (2024), summarized by the author.

This structural gap highlights a persistent challenge. Many students begin Japanese language study at the tertiary level but encounter difficulties sustaining motivation when transitioning from novice to intermediate proficiency. Japanese language courses generally rely on instructional materials designed for beginners, with vocabulary and grammar carefully controlled to ensure comprehensibility. Particularly in reading classes, simplified and adapted texts are more frequently employed than unmodified authentic materials. This principle of adjusting materials to match learners' readiness levels has long been a cornerstone of language pedagogy, grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1934/2010) and Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982). According to these frameworks, exposure to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond learners' current competence ("i + 1") facilitates acquisition and supports progress (Takamizawa et al., 2016). Based on these theories, it is believed that presenting content does not deviate significantly from the learners' current proficiency level, which facilitates comprehension and promotes acquisition. This pedagogical approach has been recognized as an effective method in Japanese language education and is also included in teacher training curricula and textbooks (Japan Foundation, 2006; Takamizawa, 2016; Sakamoto et al., 2017).

In contrast, the *Culture and Society of Japan* course within the Japan Studies Program does not frame cultural and societal content as instructional resources for language learning. Rather, it presents such content as authentic, organically occurring discourse without pedagogical mediation. While *Japanese Language* courses prioritize graded comprehensibility, this course offers original cultural and social materials in their unmodified form. Despite this difference, a post-course questionnaire conducted in 2023 revealed that 71.1% of respondents reported increased motivation to learn Japanese as a result of taking the course. Notably, over two-thirds of these participants were non-majors in Japanese language or Japan Studies, and their proficiency ranged from complete beginner to elementary level. These findings suggest that, contrary to the step-by-step progression model assumed in language pedagogy, even beginner learners can experience enhanced motivation when exposed to unmodified cultural content.

Building on this observation, the study aims to examine the potential of Japan Studies courses to foster the learning motivation of beginner-level Japanese language learners by identifying the characteristics of authentic materials that stimulate such motivation. This paper draws on qualitative data from classroom observations, student surveys, and follow-up interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 to examine the teaching practice of this course.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, individual cognitive development cannot occur without a social context. When learners feel a personal connection to the content of a class, their learning becomes more active and leads to deeper, more engaging learning experiences. CBI is grounded in cognitive learning theory and reflects the principles of constructivist learning theory. CBI is recognized as a language teaching approach and is also defined as the integration of content with language teaching aims (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Its goal is to eliminate the artificial separation between language instruction and subject matter classes that exist in most educational settings. Therefore, the concept of CBI is particularly effective for integrating Japan Studies with Japanese language education. This study adopts CBI as the conceptual framework for connecting these two fields. The following section provides a detailed explanation of CBI.

CBI can be divided into three models, such as Sheltered Model, Adjunct Model and Theme based Model (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). As mentioned previously, CBI originated from the Canadian immersion programs were conducted in French. In the United States, where there is a high immigrant population, the Sheltered Model CBI courses are utilized to improve both the English proficiency and subject abilities for school of immigrant children (Stryker & Leaver 1997, as cited in Takami et al. 2015). In the Sheltered Model, language learners are grouped together and taught subject matter in the target language. Teachers use simplified language, visual aids, and other supportive strategies to make the content comprehensible for students. The focus is on helping learners understand the subject while simultaneously improving their language skills. Whereas, at the university level, “sheltered course, consists of content course taught in the second language to a segregated group of learners by a content area specialist, such as a university professor who is a native speaker of the target language” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche 2003). This model is often used in settings where students are not yet proficient in the target language. Therefore, sheltered courses involve modifications made for the students. For instance, the lecturer might use visual materials, such as presentation slides or pictures, and make linguistic adjustments to support students' comprehension, so that they can keep up with their academic studies.

On the contrary, the Adjunct Model in university can be said to be utilized to two linked courses, a language course and a content course (i.e. a subject-specific course). The language course is designed to support the content course by focusing on language skills needed to understand and succeed in the content course. For example, students might take a Japanese language course alongside a Japanese history course. This model allows students to apply their language skills in a relevant and meaningful context while learning the subject matter. It provides a curriculum that emphasizes enriching learners' knowledge of cross-cultural and specialized fields. In order to conduct this course, “a large amount of coordination is required to ensure that the curricula of the two interlocking courses complement each other, and modifications of both courses are usually required” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003).

Lastly, Theme-Based Model is literally a theme-based educational model. These themes are chosen based on students' interests or curriculum requirements and are used to teach language skills within a meaningful context. For example, a theme-based course might focus on Japanese culture, environmental issues, or global politics. When applied to second language education and foreign language education, this model also includes Language for Specific/Special Purpose (LSP) education. In LSP, the focus may be on areas like business or academic fields. The language activities and materials are centered around the chosen theme or specialty, helping students develop both language proficiency and subject knowledge

simultaneously. The Theme-Based Model primarily focuses on language learning, employing an approach where content (e.g., culture, history, etc.) is incorporated into second or foreign language classes.

CBI approach is not only effective in integrating Japan Studies with Japanese language education, but by focusing on meaningful and relevant content, it also serves to stimulate learners' motivation for engagement. This is consistent with Lightbown's (2014) observation that CBI, by embedding language learning within intellectually rich and contextually relevant subject matter, can enhance learners' willingness to participate and sustain their interest over time. As a pedagogical framework, CBI aims to facilitate integrated and purposeful language-learning activities, thereby moving beyond the constraints of one-way lecture formats to foster dialogue both among peers and within the learner. This aligns with Dörnyei's (2001) principles of motivating language learners, particularly the emphasis on interactive learning environment. Taken together, these features contribute to making Japan Studies courses more intellectually stimulating and pedagogically engaging.

The author teaches both Japanese language courses and Japan Studies courses, including *Culture and Society of Japan* and *Japanese Corporate Culture*, which do not require Japanese language instruction in the curricula of these Japan Studies courses. However, each is designed according to the sheltered CBI model. This choice reflects Lightbown's (2014) observation that CBI, by embedding language learning within intellectually rich and contextually relevant content.

Pinner (2022) observes that in some contexts, the term "materials" may be used synonymously with "content" (p.109). In language education, however, the question of what constitutes "authentic" has been a recurrent topic of debate (Tomlinson, 2011; Mehisto, 2012; Hanabusa, 2015; Pinner, 2013; 2018). Authenticity has often been defined narrowly as "language produced by native speakers for native speakers" (Gilmore, 2007, p.98). Beyond this, discussions of learning materials also raise issues such as whether tasks are embedded, whether the materials are age-appropriate, and whether they match learners' proficiency levels. Because precise definitions of both "authentic" and "materials" remain elusive, Pinner (2022), citing Tomlinson (2011), reminds us that materials can be understood broadly as "anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language" (p.2). In light of these debates, this paper will return in the conclusion to the question of what constitutes the characteristics of authentic materials.

## **THE COURSE CULTURE AND SOCIETY OF JAPAN**

### **Course Outline**

The course *Culture and Society of Japan*, is an introductory overview of Japanese social and cultural aspects, offered to first-year students in the Japan Studies program. This course is not a Japanese language subject. It is also available as an elective for students from other programs and mobility students. In 2024, 19 students from the Japan Studies program enrolled. 53 students from other programs registered for the course. These indicate that majority of students in this course have either just begun learning Japanese or have no prior experience with Japanese language.

A semester consists of 14 weeks, and the course is conducted in English, which is their second language, or common language between them and the author. For the first 10 weeks, the lecture's themes include such as geography, climate, food, religion, festivals, and performing arts of Japan. From the 11th week to 14th week, the lecture's theme shifts to the Japanese language. Japanese language learning is not part of the course's intended learning

outcomes. This course learning outcomes are the following.

At the end of the course, students are able to:

1. Explain the diversity that exists in Japanese culture and society;
2. Elaborate the important concepts that influence the culture and lives of Japanese society;
3. Discuss the uniqueness of lifestyle, thinking and aesthetics of Japanese society.

Meanwhile, the program learning outcomes are: Demonstrating comprehensive knowledge of East Asian countries, covering aspects such as language, socio-cultural dynamics, history, politics, international relations, security, economics, trade, and management. Language is clearly emphasized, and the learning outcomes of this course contribute to the construction of the program's overall learning outcomes. Thus, Japanese language should be included as part of the course content for *Culture and Society of Japan*, and the author teaches Japanese as both language and culture.

For the first ten weeks, in the classes, students engage in group research and deliver presentations in English, rather than just listen to a one-way lecture. While, in the final four weeks of the course, students work on individual research and give presentations. During these weeks, there are no Japanese grammar lessons, although the lecture's theme is Japanese language. Instead, students are instructed about the formation of Kanji characters, the differences between formal and informal speech styles, the Japanese writing system, and the role of onomatopoeia.

### **Tasks Assigned to Novice Japanese Learners**

Students have four individual assignments or tasks to complete outside of class. This section addresses two of the assignments mentioned. One involves listening to and analyzing a 60-second Japanese YouTube commercial of *Nissin Food's* products, *Donbei*. Another one requires students to find a Japanese onomatopoeia word they like, introduce it, and explain why they find it appealing. Given that most students have either never properly studied Japanese or are at a beginner level, many Japanese language instructors might be surprised that students can engage with these assignments. Nevertheless, in the 2024 course, 63 out of 72 students successfully completed the individual assignment 1: Japanese YouTube commercial video analysis, and all 72 students participated in the onomatopoeia research assignment and submitted their results as the individual assignment 2: Japanese onomatopoeia analysis, as well as all 72 registered students participated in the online exchange session with Japanese students.

Individual assignment 1, the video analysis task is described in detail here. The commercial video is short, lasting only 60 seconds for analysis task. The video is structured like a comic, using speech bubbles with brief dialogue. In other words, even if students cannot catch some sounds or read certain characters due to their Japanese proficiency level, they can easily pause the video to check them. The song used in the commercial is a parody of a track that was played 12 billion times on YouTube in 2024. Therefore, some students may find it familiar, while even those hearing it for the first time can likely recognize its rhythm easily. The analytical perspectives were provided by the instructor, which were presented as instructor-led questions, and students were required to respond in English. However, the students were allowed to use Japanese language within their answers. The following are the questions given: 1. The company created two types of instant cup *Kitsune Udon*, merchandize name: *Donbei*. What type of arrangement do you think the company made for *Donbei*? 2: Why do you think the company made that arrangement? Here are the pictures from the commercial video below.

**Figure 1. Promotional message encouraging the comparison of East and West *Donbei* flavors, highlighting a limited-time offer.**



Source: TV-CM JAPAN「Nissin Donbei『Hi. Yorokonde』Kocchi no Kent、Tozai no Aji no Chigai wo Kaeuta ni」 (NISSIN FOOD PRODUCTS CO.,LTD. released 14 October 2024) <https://www.advertimes.com/20241125/article481720/>

**Figure 2. Promotional message highlighting why customers should taste both East and West *Donbei*, due to differences in flavor.**



Source: TV-CM JAPAN「Nissin Donbei『Hi. Yorokonde』Kocchi no Kent、Tozai no Aji no Chigai wo Kaeuta ni」 (NISSIN FOOD PRODUCTS CO.,LTD. released 14 October 2024) <https://www.advertimes.com/20241125/article481720/>

**Figure 3. Promotional message emphasizing the contrast in soup stocks between East and West *Donbei*, aiming to prompt consumers to recognize and compare the differences.**



Source: TV-CM JAPAN「Nissin Donbei『Hi. Yorokonde』Kocchi no Kent、Tozai no Aji no Chigai wo Kaeuta ni」(NISSIN FOOD PRODUCTS CO.,LTD. released 14 October 2024) <https://www.advertimes.com/20241125/article481720/>

## OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS

### Japanese Youtube Commercial Video Analysis: Individual Assignment 1

The students listened to the commercial song and read speech bubbles with brief dialogue in *kanji* and *kana*. The *kanji* was supposed to help Chinese language learners to understand the meaning of the dialogue because of the similarity between the meaning that the Japanese *kanji* has and the meaning that the Chinese letter has, however, the pronunciations are different. Among the students of this course were Chinese international students from kanji-based language regions and ethnic Chinese students from Malaysia. However, many of the Malaysian Chinese students lacked knowledge of Japanese *kanji*. Out of 72 students, 63 students analyzed the commercial video and submitted their results. The author selected key points from their analysis, which were then categorized into four levels as follows: 1) No understanding of the content or no indication that they had interpreted the video material; 2) Only mentioned that the company had changed various ingredients; 3) Were able to mention the differences in flavor between the two types; 4) Referred to the fact that the company created two types of *udon* based on regional taste preferences between people in Eastern and Western Japan. For instance, the category 3 analysis is the following. (\*Underlines are by the author)

*The company likely used a product line strategy for Donbei, offering two types of Kitsune Udon to cater to different preferences. For example, they might provide a classic version and a spicy or premium version, varying features to appeal to diverse consumer tastes while keeping both under the same brand (Student A)*

The number of students categorized as Category 3 is 11, which is shown in Table 2 below with other categories.

**Table 2: Analysis of Question 1 categorized into four levels**

Category	The point of student's description	Number of Analysis
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1	No understanding of the content or no indication that they had interpreted the video material	11
2	Only mentioned that the company had changed various ingredients	10
3	Were able to mention the differences in flavor between the two types	11
4	Referred to the fact that the company created two types of udon based on regional taste preferences between people in Eastern and Western Japan	31
	Total	63

Category 4 which explained recognizing the link between regional taste differences and the company's strategy of producing two types of *udon* was delivered by 31 students. Some of 31 students were Chinese ethnic students, but they were not students who understood Japanese kanji or intermediate Japanese proficiency level learner. First of all, even if they recognize the meaning of the kanji 東 (East) and 西 (West), it is still not easy for them to realize that these refer to the eastern and western regions of Japan. Surprisingly, the best answer came from a complete beginner.

*The company created two types of Donbei Kitsune Udon by customising the flavour profiles to suit the traditional preferences of each region. The Eastern version (Kanto) has a darker, saltier soy-based broth, while the Western version (Kansai) features a lighter, more delicate dashi-forward broth. Additionally, the seasoning, noodle texture, and aburaage (fried tofu) are adjusted to match regional expectations. This arrangement showcases their dedication to reflecting the distinct culinary identities of Japan's regions. (Student B)*

The students categorized as Category 4 can be assumed to have analyzed a Japanese commercial video using the knowledge gained over the past ten weeks. The first group research assignment the students conducted was about Japanese traditional regional cuisine. The students must have repeatedly watched the visuals, listened to the lines, read the captions, and reflected on the lessons multiple times in order to analyze the meaning of the commercial—in other words, engaged in a dialogue with the content of Japanese culture. During the first 10 weeks the students had been studying geography, climate, food, religion, festivals, and performing arts of Japan in the course. Although, the students did not study regarding the difference of the taste of *udon* between Eastern Japan and Western Japan. Those lectures played the role of the adjunct model in the CBI framework. Regarding Question 2 analysis, about half of the students (30 out of 63) noticed that the company was trying to encourage consumers to purchase multiple products or compare the flavors. Among the 63 students, there were four whose Japanese proficiency was around JLPT N4 to N5 level, clearly higher than the others. They must have been able to understand the message of the commercial better than others.

However, the four Japanese high-proficiency students gave responses like “*Donbei* East, which suits the tastes of people in eastern Japan, is being sold in eastern Japan, while *Donbei* West, which suits western tastes, is being sold in western Japan.” This suggests that they may not have watched the commercial carefully. Interestingly, 17 students with very limited Japanese ability gave responses along the lines of “They are selling both *Donbei* East and *Donbei* West nationwide” and “They want people across the country to try them.” These

17 students analyzed critically the commercial content without Japanese high-proficiency.

Three out of the students analyzed the commercial video using marketing strategy learnt in other Japanese studies course that the author taught, *Japanese Cooperate Culture*. The following is the analysis of student C, who used the phrases or knowledge of marketing strategy gained from a course that functioned as an adjunct.

*...Offering distinct variations can increase appeal across diverse markets. Thus, expanding the customer base. By creating two product types, the company ensures they can reach both traditionalists (seeking authentic taste) and adventurous eaters (looking for something innovative or novel). Moreover, promoting brand loyalty and engagement also worked too. Providing variety keeps customers intrigued and loyal to the brand as they explore and compare the different options. Other than that, the marketing strategy could be creating two options that enable targeted marketing campaigns, generating buzz around consumer preferences or regional rivalries.*  
(Student C)

These results show that, regardless of Japanese proficiency level, students try to understand the Japanese message by watching it carefully using a variety of strategies and their knowledge gained from the adjunct course offered in English.

### **Japanese Onomatopoeia Analysis: Individual Assignment 2**

All the students—including complete beginners with no prior knowledge of Japanese—took on the following individual assignment, which involved researching Japanese onomatopoeia, and gave presentations on their findings. The students searched for onomatopoeia expressions they had encountered in manga or anime they had previously watched in English. The students must have explained why they selected the onomatopoeia to make their presentation. This presentation session was held for two weeks some students were apprehensive at the beginning. Most of students did not know about the Japanese onomatopoeia well because manga they read that had English onomatopoeia. Some of students started enjoying translating English onomatopoeia into Japanese onomatopoeia. A few students did not notice the exist of Japanese onomatopoeia, but they used hints from a classmate's earlier presentation to guide their own research. A student noticed that the author clapped and often said “*pachi pachi*” after each students' presentation, recognized it as onomatopoeia for applause, and chose to present on that. After that, another student realized “*pachi pachi*” has versatile meaning. This student explained, “*pachi pachi*” was the sound of a small fire storm. Most of students were getting excited to give their presentation because they found the meanings of those meaningless sounds or those meaningless strings of characters. Although, this individual presentation did not require group discussion, there was dialogue with peers or self-dialogue. The presentation started with the work of the senior or the student who was already ready to give presentation about Japanese onomatopoeia. Junior students watched the previous presentation and pondered why and how senior students selected the onomatopoeia. They sometimes translated the onomatopoeia into their own mother language once, such as Indonesian, Thai, Korean, Chinese, French, German or Polish; it was self-dialogue. They were occasionally confused by true homonyms. Some of students received advice to re-research from the author. After those interactions, they amended the findings and gave their presentation.

### **Assignments and Tasks Completion Rate:**

In the final week of the course, all 72 students participated in an online exchange event with 65 Japanese students who were not proficient in English. The students were divided into 30 breakout rooms, where they used both Japanese and English to communicate and interact. The task given to the Malaysian students was to catch Japanese vocabulary and the Japanese speech style used by Japanese students during conversation and write their reflection notes. This assignment is especially challenging for students, considering their current level of Japanese. Even so, 70 out of 72 students submitted their reports. Their complementation tells the challenging, more than “i + 1,” encourage the students communicate with Japanese students with their beginner Japanese.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Impacts on Students’ Japanese Learning

Among Japanese language educators, it has been still argued whether learners are able to engage with and gain insights from the content itself, regardless of their Japanese language proficiency. However, the practical teaching report clarified that, with appropriate scaffolding from teachers, senior students, or the learners themselves, even beginner-level students can engage with authentic Japanese materials and analyze them in ways that foster higher-order thinking skills—such as critical thinking and analysis. Moreover, by drawing on survey data and follow-up interview data, this section will discuss that CBI not only fosters interest in Japan studies but also enhances learners’ motivation to study the Japanese language and factors motivated the students to learn Japanese in the absence of Japanese language instruction.

The survey was conducted annually at the end of *Culture and Society of Japan* course to evaluate student satisfaction with the course content. In the 2024 academic year, the response rate was 81%. Satisfaction levels were assessed using a five-point scale, with 60.3% of students assigning a rating of 5, 36.5% rating it as 4, 1.6% rating it as 3, and 1.6% rating it as 2. Students were asked to select reasons for their level of satisfaction. In response to the statement, "This course increased my motivation to study Japan Studies," 82.5% of students answered Yes. The students were requested to write reasons why they select Yes. The following is a description from a student.

*She always makes sure that we understand what she thought during classes. Her assignments topics are interesting. I am looking forward to exchange activities. Hope there will be more such classes be held out so we can approach to the Japan culture.*  
(Student D)

Although the course does not allocate time specifically for Japanese language lesson, it is noteworthy that 76.2% of students responded Yes to the statement, "This course increased my motivation to study the Japanese language." This course was the first Japanese language lesson for a student, who noted as follows:

*The exchange session was really interesting for me, it was my first time talking to Japanese students. I find the session to very beneficial and allowed me to practice and learn some Japanese words too like Konnichiwa, Aligato Gozaimasu.* (Student E)

Additionally, in the open-ended response section, some students expressed the opinion that "More time for studying Japanese would be desirable." This course is offered as part of Japan Studies and does not include formal Japanese language instruction. However, despite the

absence of structured language instruction, the learning materials, which incorporate authentic resources, posed a challenge given students' current proficiency level. Nevertheless, their motivation to learn Japanese increased, suggesting that the course content played a significant role in fostering their interest in Japanese language studies. In the open-ended response section, one mobility student minoring in Japan Studies indicated that their insufficient grasp of Japanese grammar and vocabulary had prevented him from initiating own research in home university. However, this student and others noted in the open-ended response section, "This course provided me with the confidence to present my findings." Another student, who had previously assumed they possessed no knowledge of the Japanese language or culture, discovered that elements of Japanese mythology were embedded within the video games they regularly engaged with. In their reflection notes, they remarked, "Beyond the scope of the assigned tasks, I became increasingly interested in learning more about Japanese mythology." "I found the meaning of this vocabulary, such as *Orochi* or *Amaterasu*. I realized why *Amaterasu* is the important character in that game." Although another student confessed that they could not say any Japanese during online exchange session and only observed that the interaction between Japanese students and Malaysian students, "I caught *Kawai*," they typed it using Hiragana on their reflection notes. Overall, the students reflected, "Those conversations strengthened my motivation to further my Japanese language learning and deepened my interest in Japanese culture."

### **Motivations and Contributing Factors**

As observed thus far, courses that bridge Japan Studies and Japanese Language Education appear to enhance students' motivation for both fields of Japanese language learning and research for Japanese culture and society. Based on student responses, the observed increase in motivation for learning Japanese can be interpreted as a shift in mindset, characterized by the following attitudes:

- Reconnecting Japanese words previously encountered only in virtual game worlds with real-life Japanese culture and society (e.g., *Orochi*, *Amaterasu*);
- Typing and recognizing Japanese phrases that were previously just heard as English-sounding audio in anime (e.g., *Ohayo Gozaimasu*);
- Challenging tasks that go beyond predictable "i+1" input levels, aiming instead at "i+1+α" levels that may initially seem unattainable.

Three key factors were identified as contributing significantly to the enhancement of this motivation:

- Lexical and grammatical content was not simplified for beginner learners;
- Vocabulary and grammar were presented authentically through materials (e.g., self-discovered words, talk sessions with Japanese university students);
- Tasks required higher-level performance than students' current language ability would ordinarily predict.

These factors are closely related to the nature of the materials used in the courses, which leads to the following discussion on authenticity in teaching materials.

### **Motivation and the Characteristics of Authentic Materials**

It is necessary, at this point, to discuss the essential topic what authentic materials are.

Tomlinson (2011) emphasizes that authenticity should be viewed not merely as a static property of a text, but as emerging from meaningful interaction between the learner and the material. Similarly, Pinner (2022) focuses on authentic materials for Content and Language Integration

Learning [CLIL] and argues that “authenticity” involves providing learners with “an experience of the language in use” rather than simply delivering declarative knowledge about the language. Pinner (2022) further states:

*If authenticity is about experiencing the language, the motivational aspect comes from making that experience a positive and enjoyable one. In conceptualizing authenticity and motivation in this way, the concepts become very closely linked, and even to some extent a part of the same interrelated system. (p.106)*

In line with Tomlison and Pinner’s view that authenticity is created by teachers and learners working together, authenticity in this study is reflected in students’ attitudes, that I mentioned above, toward the assignments and tasks during the course. This corresponds to what Pinner describes as motivation. Building on these perspectives, the present study identifies the following characteristics of authentic materials for beginner learners: (1) lexical and grammatical content was not simplified; (2) vocabulary and grammar were presented authentically; and (3) tasks required higher-level performance than would ordinarily be expected from learners at their current proficiency level.

## CONCLUSION

Findings from student surveys and follow-up interviews conducted over two academic years suggest that increased motivation for learning Japanese is closely tied to affective engagement fostered through CBI approach pedagogy, as well as increased motivation for research Japanese culture and society. Characteristics of authentic materials are founded as follows: (1) lexical and grammatical content was not simplified; (2) vocabulary and grammar were presented authentically; and (3) tasks required higher-level performance than would ordinarily be expected from learners at their current proficiency level. However, observations and follow-up interviews clarified that students gained confidence in using Japanese and completing tasks when these tasks were assigned within a psychologically safe learning environment and when scaffolding was provided by senior peers. Moreover, their prior knowledge of Japan Studies further supported their learning. Pinner cited Morton, (2013, p. 121), “good materials can avoid underestimating learners linguistically and cognitively, by, for example, not treating linguistically low-level learners as cognitively low-level learners”. This indicates teachers should provide cognitively engaging activities even for beginners, by using strategies such as scaffolding, visual support, and collaborative learning. This ensures that learners are challenged intellectually while working within their current linguistic resources, thereby supporting both language development and content learning.

It is indicated that exposure to authentic materials, even when beyond learners' proficiency level, can stimulate learning motivation. Accordingly, integrating Japan Studies content into Japanese language instruction not only enhances language acquisition but also nurtures deeper intellectual engagement, ultimately contributing to the development of globally minded learners capable of navigating both linguistic and cultural dimensions of Japan.

In ASEAN countries, interest in Japan Studies has declined due to Japan’s diminishing economic influence. However, Japan remains an extraordinary subject of study, boasting a cultural and social landscape shaped by more than a thousand years of history and ongoing transformations. This field continues to captivate researchers, and new areas of inquiry will undoubtedly emerge in the future. In light of these challenges and potentials, it is essential for scholars currently engaged in Japan Studies to actively explore innovative research themes and

nurture the next generation of researchers. One promising strategy is to design and implement courses that bridge Japan Studies and Japanese Language Education. Such courses not only stimulate intellectual curiosity but also offer students a more integrated and engaging approach to learning about Japan in both linguistic and cultural dimensions.

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