

Critical Analysis of the Japanese Language Studies Curriculum in Kazakhstan's Universities

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Introduction

Japanese language and cultural studies have been integral to Kazakhstan's multilingual education landscape, driven by a growing interest in Japanese pop culture, history, and professional opportunities. As of 2020, eight institutions in Kazakhstan offer Japanese language education, which provide specialized programs supported by a dedicated faculty of forty educators (Ayako, 2017). However, the curriculum and materials currently used in Japanese Studies programs in Kazakhstani universities rely heavily on outdated resources and traditional teaching methods. These inadequacies hinder students from developing practical language skills and engaging meaningfully with modern Japanese culture.

The present critical analysis aims to reveal the current issues with the curriculum of Japanese language studies at two major universities in Kazakhstan with programs specifically designed to teach Japanese as L2. Furthermore, this analysis will propose possible solutions to the challenges faced by Japanese language programs, including modernizing teaching materials, incorporating practical language learning strategies (LLS), and leveraging technological advancements (Oxford, 1990; Oxford et al., 1993). By implementing these changes, such programs can better equip students for academic, cultural, and professional success, fostering deeper language acquisition.

Kazakhstan is home to over 130 ethnic groups, which makes it a multilingual and multicultural nation (Goodman et al., 2021). The government's multilingual education policies emphasize the importance of mastering Kazakh, Russian, and English to prepare citizens for a globalized world. However, as Japan remains a key economic and cultural partner, students increasingly seek Japanese language education (Ayako, 2017). Universities first adopted the Japanese language programs in Kazakhstan in 1992.

Currently, the Japanese language is being taught to students of Oriental studies and to students from other departments such as international relations and translation studies. According to the curriculum documents, these programs introduce students to Japanese grammar, literature, and history. However, the curriculum documents reveal that the educational programs at these universities rely on textbooks like *Minna no Nihongo*, which emphasize rigid grammar structures, rote memorization, and artificial dialogues, offering minimal engagement with real-life language use or contemporary cultural contexts.

Methodology

This paper employed qualitative document analysis (QDA) to critically examine the curriculum of Japanese language programs at two major universities in Kazakhstan. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting documents to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). This method is particularly useful for analyzing educational curricula, as it allows for the identification of patterns, gaps, and underlying pedagogical frameworks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The primary data sources for this study include official curriculum documents, course syllabi, and textbooks currently in use. These materials were gathered from publicly

available university records. Furthermore, the selection of documents was guided by their relevance to language pedagogy, learning objectives, and instructional materials used in Japanese language education.

Key Issues with the Current Curriculum

Reliance on Outdated Materials and Weak Kanji Instruction

The syllabus revealed a predominant reliance on *Minna no Nihongo*, a textbook that was first published in 1998. The textbook is well known for its grammar-translation and audio-lingual method and is complemented by the university instructors' tasks such as reading and translating texts or rote grammar exercises. While this approach provides a solid foundation in grammar, it fails to engage students in real-life communication, leaving the students ill-prepared for interactive and spontaneous use of Japanese in practical settings. The courses try to address the lack of speech during the lessons by making the students repeat the dialogues from the lessons in the book. Thus, speaking and listening—critical components of language acquisition—are treated as supplementary and the writing tasks dominate the curriculum. This imbalance limits opportunities for students to build conversational fluency and engage dynamically with the language.

Additionally, the syllabus includes kanji-focused lessons and brief cultural notes, which function as standalone components. Kanji, commonly known as Chinese characters, is one of the three writing systems used in the Japanese language, and it poses significant challenges, especially for people with no kanji background (Mori et al., 2007). This fragmented approach neglects the integration of effective language learning strategies (LLS) which are crucial for mastering complex orthographic languages like Japanese (Oxford, 1990). However, the syllabus lacks a focus on strategy-based learning for kanji, relying instead on the ineffective practice of rote memorization and repetitive tasks, such as endlessly filling notebooks with written kanji.

Insufficient Cultural Awareness and Limited Technological Integration

Another shortcoming of the curriculum is the insufficient incorporation of cultural awareness in the textbooks. According to Ciubăncan (2022), fostering intercultural awareness in Japanese language textbooks is essential, as embedding cultural context within language instruction promotes authentic intercultural competence. Textbooks like *Minna no Nihongo* (1998) often fail to address fundamental cultural peculiarities, leaving learners unaware of critical nuances in Japanese communication. For instance, the first chapter of *Minna no Nihongo* introduces basic greetings and self-introductions by presenting the dialog between the main figure of the book Mr. Mike Miller, and his new Japanese coworker. However, the chapter does not give any explanation of culturally significant elements of body language and manners of speech shown by both characters. Ciubăncan (2022) critiques this omission, noting, "the ab-

deprives learners of an essential component of communicative competence” (p. 23). Although the textbook is highly informative regarding aspects such as grammar, it lacks explicit explanations for the subtle cultural elements.

Finally, the current curriculum lacks integration of modern technological tools, such as interactive online platforms, language-learning applications, and artificial intelligence. This deficiency limits students’ opportunities for self-directed learning and exposure to diverse, innovative language acquisition methods. Studies emphasize the importance of incorporating computer-assisted language learning (CALL) resources to enhance collocational understanding in Japanese language education, highlighting the need for technological integration to improve language proficiency (Srđanović, 2011).

Proposed Modernization Strategies

The following sections address the weaknesses in the current curriculum, emphasizing the need for comprehensive modernization. This includes updating teaching materials, incorporating practical applications, leveraging technology, and enhancing teacher training. Implementing these updates has the potential to significantly improve students’ understanding of Japanese culture, balance writing and speaking exercises, equip learners with effective strategies for mastering kanji and other vocabulary, and integrate modern technologies into the learning process.

Updating Teaching Materials and Curriculum

The first and most crucial step would be to replace outdated textbooks with contemporary resources and textbooks. One of the possible textbooks that can replace the current *Minna no Nihongo* is *Marugoto* (2013). *Marugoto* integrates cultural understanding with practical language skills, offering content that aligns with the Japan Foundation Standard for Japanese-Language Education (Concept and special features of *Marugoto*, n.d.).

Moreover, *Marugoto* serves as the cornerstone of teaching methods at the Kazakhstan-Japan Center for Cooperation (KJC), which operates in Astana and Almaty (Uchebnyye Materialy, 2021). Established in 2000, KJC offers a comprehensive program for Japanese language learners, leveraging *Marugoto*’s communicative and cultural approach to language teaching. These methods could prove highly beneficial for both teachers and students in universities due to the proximity and accessibility of KJC’s resources. Integrating these practices into the national curriculum, supported by major universities and KJC, could significantly enhance Japanese language education across Kazakhstan, creating a cohesive and well-resourced framework for language instruction.

Next, incorporating LLSs and explicitly teaching students to use them is crucial for effective language acquisition and overcoming the challenges of kanji learning. Studies reveal that while rote memorization remains a widely used method, metacognitive strategies, such as employing morphological cues, radicals, and component characters, can significantly enhance learners’ ability to decode and learn new kanji (Grainger, 2005; Mori et al., 2007; Oxford et al., 1993). Teaching these strategies equips students with tools to tackle the inherent complexities of kanji, fostering both their language proficiency and their confidence in approaching challenging linguistic tasks. Learners

who employed strategies tailored to kanji, such as repeated use of word cards, and context-based guessing, demonstrated higher proficiency compared to those relying solely on rote memorization (Grainger, 2005). These findings suggest that the curriculum should incorporate explicit instruction on strategy use.

Leveraging Technology for Language Learning

Modernizing the learning experience through technological tools is another critical step. Providing students with access to online platforms like the *Minato* online course created by the Japan Foundation may help students with their self-studies that supplement classroom instruction (Abas et al., 2021). Updating the curriculum with crucial information about the language-learning apps such as *Anki* and *Quizlet* used for vocabulary building offers personalized and engaging ways to strengthen language skills. Furthermore, Song and Ma (2024) state that the recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) powered systems such as *ChatGPT*, can transform Japanese language instruction. These systems enable students to engage in real-time, culturally contextualized speech exercises, offering features like pronunciation assessment, instant feedback, and dynamic scenarios ranging from everyday conversation to more serious workplace situations. Incorporating innovative technologies into the curriculum could significantly enhance learners’ proficiency by enabling them to engage in near-real-life conversations with AI systems capable of near-native language proficiency. Such tools address a critical gap for students who lack conversational experience with native-like speakers, providing them with opportunities to practice dialogue, receive instant feedback, and build confidence in their spoken Japanese. This approach not only supplements traditional classroom instruction but also ensures that learners develop the practical communication skills necessary for real-world interactions.

Limitations of the Current Review

While this paper proposes comprehensive strategies to modernize Japanese Studies programs in Kazakhstan, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may influence the feasibility and effectiveness of the suggested approaches. First, the analysis and recommendations are primarily based on the current curriculum documents of Kazakhstani universities, which may not fully capture the nuances of actual classroom practices or informal teaching methods used by instructors (Morgan, 2022). Second, the proposed methods—such as integrating new teaching materials, incorporating advanced technological tools, and emphasizing LLSs—would require substantial changes to the existing curriculum. These changes demand considerable time, effort, and financial investment to retrain educators, restructure lesson plans, and acquire updated resources. Given that the current curriculum has been in place for many years, there may be resistance to change from both faculty and institutional administrators accustomed to traditional methods. Finally, while the author of this paper has professional experience as a Japanese language teacher, he is not a certified university professor. This distinction could introduce potential biases in favor of teaching methodologies more suited to smaller, informal classroom settings. As such, the proposed strategies may require additional validation and input from academic experts to ensure they are scalable and effective in

Conclusion

Modernizing Japanese Studies programs in Kazakhstan is essential to align language education with contemporary needs. Addressing outdated teaching materials, emphasizing language learning strategies, and integrating modern technologies can significantly enhance students' linguistic

proposed changes require investment and effort, they offer a pathway to more effective and relevant language education. Collaboration among stakeholders can ensure these reforms benefit students and strengthen Kazakhstan's cultural and educational ties with Japan.

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