

**Exploring Motivations and Language Learning Strategies for Learning Japanese:
Voices of Undergraduate Students in Kazakhstan**

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Dear **Madiar Berikuly**:

This letter confirms that the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University approved your research project titled **Exploring Motivations and Language Learning Strategies for Learning Japanese: Voices of Undergraduate Students in Kazakhstan**.

Yours sincerely,

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Abstract

Exploring Motivations and Language Learning Strategies for Learning Japanese: Voices of Undergraduate Students in Kazakhstan

As interest grows in the study of languages beyond English, research has increasingly turned toward the motivations behind learning languages other than English (LOTE). Despite Central Asia's rich multilingual environment, scholarly attention in the region has largely focused on English, leaving the study of motivations for learning LOTEs like Japanese underrepresented. To address this gap, the current qualitative research investigates the experiences of undergraduate students in Kazakhstan who are studying Japanese as a foreign language. The study specifically examines what drives these learners to study Japanese, the challenges they encounter throughout their learning process, and the language learning strategies (LLSs) they adopt to support their progress. The research is framed by Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System and Oxford's (1990) categorization of LLSs and draws on two qualitative methods: narrative writing and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). The analysis revealed that students were motivated by a combination of cultural interest, career-related goals, and personal affinity for the language. Many participants reported being drawn to Japanese due to its pop culture, aesthetics, and perceived professional value. At the same time, they described facing substantial obstacles, including difficulty with writing systems, limited practice opportunities, and inconsistencies in university-level instruction. Nevertheless, students demonstrated agency in navigating these challenges by employing various learning strategies—especially cognitive and social ones—including self-directed kanji practice, interaction with native speakers, and participation in language communities. Based on these findings, the study puts forward pedagogical

suggestions for improving Japanese language education in Kazakhstan and highlights the importance of exploring learners' perspectives in underexamined multilingual contexts.

Keywords: motivation, language learning strategies, SLA, L2 motivational self system, Japanese language

Аңдатпа

Жапон тілін үйренудің мотивациясы мен стратегиясын зерттеу: Қазақстандағы бакалавриат студенттерінің пікірлері

Ағылшын тілінен тыс тілдерді үйренуге деген қызығушылық артқан сайын, зерттеулер ағылшын тілінен басқа тілдерді (LOTE) үйренуге деген мотивацияға көбірек бет бұруда. Орталық Азияның көп тілді бай ортасына қарамастан, аймақтағы ғалымдардың назары негізінен ағылшын тіліне аударылады, нәтижесінде студенттердің жапон сияқты тілдерді үйренуге деген ынтасын зерттеу шектеулі болып қалады. Бұл алшақтықты жою үшін осы сапалы зерттеу Жапон тілін шет тілі ретінде оқитын Қазақстандағы бакалавриат студенттерінің тәжірибесін зерттеуге бағытталған. Зерттеудің мақсаты-сұрақтарға жауап беру: Қазақстандағы Университет студенттерін жапон тілін үйренуге не итермелейді, олар оқу процесінде қандай қиындықтарға тап болады, сондай-ақ өз прогресінің тиімділігін арттыру үшін қандай тіл үйрену стратегияларын қолданады. Зерттеу Дёрнъей (2009) ұсынған L2 мотивациялық жүйесіне және Оксфордтың (1990) әзірлеген тіл үйрену стратегияларының классификациясына негізделген және екі сапалы әдіске сүйенеді: баяндау және жартылай құрылымды сұхбат. Деректер Браун мен Кларктың (2006) сипаттаған процедураларына сәйкес тақырыптық талдау арқылы талданды. Нәтижелер студенттердің мәдени қызығушылықтардың, мансаптық ұмтылыстардың және жапон тіліне деген жеке сүйіспеншіліктің үйлесуіне түрткі болғанын көрсетті. Көптеген қатысушылар жапон поп-мәдениеті, эстетикасы және оның кәсіби құндылығын түсінуі арқылы жапон тіліне тартылатынын хабарлады. Сонымен бірге олар жапондық жазудағы қиындықтарды, тәжірибенің шектеулі мүмкіндіктерін және университеттің оқу жүйесіндегі кемшіліктерді қоса алғанда, айтарлықтай қиындықтарға тап болғанын айтты. Дегенмен, студенттер тіл үйренудің әртүрлі стратегияларын қолдана отырып,

осы кедергілерді жеңуге бел буды. Бұл негізінен когнитивті және әлеуметтік стратегиялар болды, мысалы, канжи иероглифтерін өз бетінше пысықтау, ана тілінде сөйлейтіндермен өзара әрекеттесу және тілдік қауымдастықтарға қатысу. Осы тұжырымдарға сүйене отырып, зерттеуде Қазақстанда жапон тілін оқытудың педагогикалық тәсілдерін жақсарту бойынша ұсыныстар айтылады және көп тілді контексте оқушылардың көзқарастарын ескерудің маңыздылығы атап өтіледі.

Түйін сөздер: мотивация, тіл үйрену стратегиялары, SLA, L2 мотивация жүйесі, жапон тілі

Аннотация

Изучение мотивации и стратегий изучения японского языка: мнения студентов бакалавриата в Казахстане

По мере роста интереса к изучению языков, выходящих за рамки английского, исследования все чаще обращаются к мотивациям изучения языков, отличных от английского (LOTE). Несмотря на богатую многоязычную среду Центральной Азии, внимание учёных в регионе в основном сосредоточено на английском языке, в результате чего исследования мотивации студентов к изучению таких языков, как японский, остаются ограниченными. Чтобы сократить этот разрыв, настоящее качественное исследование направлено на изучение опыта студентов бакалавриата в Казахстане, изучающих японский язык как иностранный. Цель исследования — ответить на вопросы: что побуждает студентов университетов в Казахстане изучать японский язык, с какими трудностями они сталкиваются в процессе обучения, а также какие стратегии изучения языка они применяют для повышения эффективности своего прогресса. Исследование основано на мотивационной системе L2, предложенной Дёрнхеем, и классификации стратегий изучения языка, разработанной Оксфорд (1990), и опирается на два качественных метода: нарративное письмо и полуструктурированные интервью. Данные были проанализированы с использованием тематического анализа в соответствии с процедурами, описанными Брауном и Кларком. Результаты показали, что студенты были мотивированы сочетанием культурных интересов, карьерных устремлений и личной привязанности к японскому языку. Многие участники сообщили, что их привлекает японский язык благодаря японской поп-культуре, эстетике и осознанию его профессиональной ценности. В то же время они рассказали, что столкнулись с существенными трудностями, включая сложности с японской письменностью, ограниченные возможности для практики и

недостатки в системе обучения в университете. Тем не менее студенты проявили решимость в преодолении этих препятствий, используя разнообразные стратегии изучения языка. В основном это были когнитивные и социальные стратегии, такие как самостоятельная отработка иероглифов *кандзи*, взаимодействие с носителями языка и участие в языковых сообществах. Основываясь на этих выводах, в исследовании выдвигаются предложения по улучшению педагогических подходов к обучению японскому языку в Казахстане и подчеркивается важность учета взглядов учащихся в многоязычных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: мотивация, стратегии изучения языка, SLA, система мотивации L2, японский язык

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Understanding what drives individuals to learn an additional language or languages has long been a central concern for language educators and researchers (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2024). This drive, commonly defined as motivation in academic research, plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA) because it directly influences the extent to which students engage with and persist in the language learning process. As Corder (1981) famously noted, “Given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if they are exposed to the language data” (p. 105). This statement highlights the importance of motivation in determining the effort, persistence, and overall success in acquiring a new language.

Historically, research on language learning motivation has predominantly centered on English. This focus is largely attributed to the global status of English as a *lingua franca*, its significance in international business, science, and technology, and its widespread integration into educational systems worldwide (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). Gardner and Lambert’s (1959) influential work laid the foundation for the field of motivation in SLA by demonstrating the critical role of motivation in learning English and thus, a significant body of research has focused primarily on English learning motivation (Boo et. al., 2015).

However, as studies on multilingualism have increased especially with the multilingual turn in SLA (May, 2014), language researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of SLA motivation in languages other than English (LOTES) (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). Another significant turning point in L2 motivation research is the recognition that most studies have focused on learners’ motivations without considering their enriching multilingual backgrounds (Henry, 2017). In this regard, language researchers increasingly advocate conducting further studies that examine language

learners' motivations holistically, paying attention to the dynamic interactions within their entire language repertoire.

In Kazakhstan, the context of the present study, no empirical studies have explored individuals' motivations for LOTEs, with the exception of one study focusing on university students' motivations for learning Korean as an additional language (Hajar & Manan, 2024). As regards to Japanese, only a few empirical studies have explored individuals' experiences of learning Japanese as a LOTEs across different settings (e.g., Jitpaiboon et al., 2024; Nakamura, 2015, 2017, 2023; Northwood & Thomson, 2012). However, no studies have been conducted on students studying Japanese as a target language in Central Asia despite its increasing interest in the region (JASSO, 2023).

Along with motivation, another crucial determinant of success in SLA is language learning strategies (LLSs), the tools that language learners use to deal with different challenges they encounter while learning the target language. LLSs are often defined as language learners' actions chosen consciously for active, self-regulated improvement in language learning (Griffiths, 2013; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). As individuals strive to enhance their educational and professional opportunities, mastering a second language through effective LLSs remains a key aspect of personal development (Oxford, 2017).

The constructs of motivation and LLSs are crucial determinants of a language learner's success in learning and mastering the target language(s). However, they have been largely examined separately in empirical studies. That is, they tend to be perceived as separate entities, although the scientific community has long established that motivation significantly influences a language learner's choice of LLSs (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). This interplay between motivation and LLSs use creates a dynamic where each reinforces the other, leading to more effective and sustained language learning outcomes.

With the above in mind, the present empirical study seeks to explore the motivations of a group of Kazakhstani undergraduate students to learn Japanese, the LLSs they use, and the challenges they may face.

1.1 Background of the Study

The present qualitative study takes place in Kazakhstan, a country known for its diverse linguistic heritage. As the largest country in Central Asia, Kazakhstan shares borders with Russia, China, and several other Central Asian nations, thus bridging Europe with Asia (Manan & Hajar, 2022). It is home to over 130 ethnic groups which makes it a multilingual and multicultural nation (Goodman et al., 2021). Kazakhstan stands out as the first country among the Central Asian nations to adopt a trilingual education system with Kazakh, Russian, and English. Additionally, Kazakhstan is home to more than 57 universities that offer English medium instruction (EMI), according to data from 2019 academic year (Tajik et al. 2023). This further proves that, like many other nations with an agenda focused on global economic advancement, Kazakhstan is also placing a high value on English (Reagan, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in learning LOTEs in Kazakhstan, including Japanese. Due to the scarcity of data, the specific reasons for this increase in the number of students studying Japanese in Kazakhstan are not entirely clear. Based on data from The Japan Foundation (2021), which is one of the largest organizations dedicated to promoting cultural exchange and Japanese language education globally, the predominant reasons for individuals in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to pursue Japanese language studies are driven by an interest in Japanese pop culture, such as *anime* and *manga*, a fascination with Japanese history, and the aspiration to access educational and professional opportunities in Japan.

As of 2020, eight institutions in Kazakhstan offer Japanese language education, including two national universities that provide Japanese language courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Rustemova et al., 2020). While Japanese is typically offered as an elective subject at many institutions, some universities, such as Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Eurasian National University, have integrated Japanese language education into their specialized programs. These institutions collectively employ a faculty of 40 teachers and professors dedicated to Japanese language instruction. Beyond these official figures, it is reasonable to infer that numerous private sector schools also offer Japanese language lessons (The Japan Foundation, 2020; 2021). Kazakhstan administers the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) annually in Astana, its capital, and in Almaty. According to official data from the JLPT, the primary motivations for candidates outside of Japan to take the test are to evaluate their own Japanese language proficiency, enhance their employment prospects, and fulfill admission requirements for universities or graduate schools. The number of examinees in Kazakhstan has increased significantly growing from 98 in 2016 to 265 in 2023 in a single city (Japan Foundation, 2016; 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the growing interest in learning Japanese as LOTEs in Kazakhstan, there are significant gaps that need to be addressed in both practice and research. Firstly, while there is a considerable amount of research on motivation in language learning, studies focusing on motivations beyond English are scarce, especially in Asian contexts (Hajar & Manan, 2024; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). In response to the multilingual turn in SLA (May 2014; Ortega, 2019), language researchers have been increasingly aware of the salience of conducting further empirical studies to capture individuals situated and dynamic experiences while learning LOTEs and how learning LOTEs can affect their

identity development and future selves (Takahashi, 2022). In this vein, the recent volume edited by Hajar and Manan (2024) can be considered the first volume that specifically addressed individuals' motivations for learning LOTEs across different Asian contexts, including Kazakhstan, Japan, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Syria, and Vietnam. However, the chapter on Kazakhstan focuses on university students' experiences learning Korean as a LOTE. Therefore, it can be concluded that no empirical study has been conducted in Central Asia to unravel individuals' situated experiences of learning Japanese. The present study conducted at one of the universities in Kazakhstan aims to address this gap.

The absence of empirical research exploring the experiences of Kazakhstani students learning Japanese represents a significant gap in the literature. Despite the growing interest reflected in the rising JLPT participation and events like Japanese Culture Day and classical Japanese theatrical performances of *Rakugo* (Embassy of Japan in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024), little is known about what motivates these students and the strategies they use to overcome challenges. This qualitative study reported in this thesis, therefore, is crucial as it represents the first attempt to empirically examine university students' motivations and strategic language learning efforts of this unique group learning Japanese in Kazakhstan. By filling this gap, the research not only contributes to a deeper understanding of language learning dynamics in Kazakhstan but also offers practical insights for educators and policymakers to motivate students to learn LOTEs and enhance their experiences in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This study can also pave the way for future research in similar contexts, thereby broadening the scope of inquiry into LOTEs and contributing to the global discourse on multilingual education.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Previous research indicates that students learning Japanese as LOTEs are primarily motivated by an interest in Japanese popular culture, including *anime* (shortened from animation, cartoons made in Japan), *manga* (Japanese comics), or history as well as opportunities for studying abroad (Marian, 2023; Nakamura, 2021; Osumi, 2019). This finding aligns with test-taker data from the JLPT (2023). However, there is an absence of empirical studies in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, investigating motivations for learning Japanese and their LLSs in dealing with a host of challenges they often encounter. With the above in mind, this empirical study aims to address this research gap by disentangling the motivations and LLSs exclusively of students from a university in Kazakhstan who are majoring in Japanese. The purpose of this empirical study is to explore and understand the diverse motivations that drive university students in Kazakhstan to learn Japanese. Additionally, it seeks to identify the effective LLSs used by these students in their pursuit of Japanese proficiency.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the motivational factors and strategic approaches of Kazakhstani university students learning Japanese as a LOTEs. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivated the participants to learn Japanese as an additional language?
2. What challenges did they encounter while learning Japanese?
3. How did they cope with these challenges (i.e. their strategy use)?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its pioneering exploration of Kazakhstani university students' motivations and LLSs for Japanese. As the first empirical study of its kind in Kazakhstan, it addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by providing

insights into the specific factors driving students to learn Japanese and how these factors influence their learning outcomes.

First, the present empirical study can uncover the unique motivational drivers behind Kazakhstani students' interest in Japanese, which can offer valuable context-specific insights that inform the development of more effective educational programs. Understanding these motivations will possibly allow educators and policymakers to tailor their approaches to better align with students' personal and professional aspirations. Second, by identifying the challenges faced by learners, the research can reveal the obstacles in the language acquisition process, enabling the creation of targeted strategies to address these difficulties. This practical guidance is essential for developing interventions that can improve student engagement and reduce demotivation. Third, the research can potentially advance theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field of multilingualism and motivation. Finally, the study addresses significant practical gaps in support and resources for Kazakhstani students studying Japanese. It can reveal the need for enhanced local resources, language immersion opportunities, and high-quality teaching tools.

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study by providing background information, explaining the rationale for undertaking the research, and detailing the study's aims and research questions. Chapter 2, the literature review, discusses recent research on language learning motivation and strategies, explores studies related to learning languages other than English, and presents the theoretical framework guiding the study. Chapter 3, methodology, describes the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the interviews, organized into three major themes: motivations to study Japanese, challenges in learning and advancing Japanese proficiency, and language

learning strategies. Chapter 5 critically discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, relevant literature, and the theoretical framework, highlighting new insights and connections. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, discussing the study's limitations, proposing practical implications, and offering directions for future research.

1.6 Summary

This chapter introduced the study and provided the necessary background for understanding it. The present study explores the motivations, learning strategies, and challenges involved in acquiring Japanese in Kazakhstan among undergraduate students. The importance of this study lies in its alignment with the current research trend focusing on motivations for learning languages other than English, as well as in its distinction as the first study of its kind in the region. In the problem statement section, three research questions guiding the empirical study were presented. Additionally, the academic significance of the study was described. The chapter concluded with an overview of the organization of the thesis, outlining the structure of the entire work. The next chapter, the literature review, will further expand on the recent body of research briefly introduced in Chapter 1 and present the theoretical framework underlying the empirical investigation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The previous chapter provided background information on Kazakhstan's linguistic landscape and outlined the research problems, objectives, and research questions. It highlighted the study's significance, which centers on a qualitative exploration of the motivations and language learning strategies (LLSs) employed by a group of undergraduate students in Kazakhstan learning Japanese as an additional language. This chapter is organized into five sections. It begins by defining the construct of motivation within the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The chapter then examines the dominance of English as a global lingua franca and its implications for learning languages other than English (LOTEs).

Following this, the chapter critically reviews LLSs, beginning with their emergence, definitions, and Oxford's (1990) influential taxonomy, which categorizes strategies into six subtypes across direct and indirect domains. The chapter continues with a review of empirical studies focusing on the motivations and strategic efforts of learners studying Japanese as LOTEs. The chapter concludes by presenting the theoretical framework underpinning this study, which integrates Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) and Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs.

2.1 Defining the term Motivation, its Emergence and Importance in SLA

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda the construct of motivation derives from the Latin term *movere*, meaning to move (2021). They define motivation as the force that determines why individuals select a particular course of action, how long they sustain it, and the level of effort they are willing to exert. They further claim that the notion of motivation is both vast and dynamic, making it difficult to define or capture fully, and state that "no existing motivation theory to date has managed or even attempted to offer a

comprehensive and integrative account of all the main types of possible motives for human behavior” (p. 3).

2.1.1 Early Developments in Motivation Research

Gardner and Lambert were the first to conduct research on motivation in language learning, introducing a socio-psychological model that consisted of two concepts of integrativeness and instrumentalism (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Integrativeness, or integrative motivation refers to a language learner’s positive attitude toward the language and culture and the individual’s openness to that culture. On the other hand, instrumental motivation focuses on the practical advantages of language learning, highlighting the benefits individuals associate with learning the target language, such as improving career prospects or gaining economic opportunities (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992).

Building on Gardner and Lambert’s foundational work, researchers have introduced other theories to further nuance the understanding of language learning motivation by exploring the connection between a language learner’s present and their envisioned future state. To elaborate, Higgins’s (1987) self-discrepancy theory posits that language learners are motivated to close the gap, or discrepancy, between their current self and their ideal or future self, as this gap often causes psychological discomfort which motivates students to achieve the envisioned self. The theory identifies three components, the ideal self, which represents the learner’s envisioned future self, embodying their hopes and aspirations for who they want to become, such as a fluent speaker of the target language; the ought self, which reflects the version of themselves they feel they should become, often shaped by external expectations or perceived obligations, such as meeting societal or familial expectations; and the actual self, which describes the learner’s current state, encompassing their present abilities and identity in relation to language learning

(Lamb et al., 2019, p. 73). This framework explains motivation as a process of striving toward self-alignment, where reducing discrepancies between these self-concepts can drive sustained language learning efforts.

Another significant influence on the foundations of motivation studies is Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory, which connects motivation with cognition by incorporating learners' aspirations, fears, goals, and perceived threats. Possible selves refer to the imagined versions of oneself in the future, encompassing both hopeful visions of success and fears of failure. For language learners, possible selves include images of oneself as a fluent speaker, a successful language user, or, conversely, struggling without proficiency (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Lamb et al., 2020). Both self-discrepancy theory and possible selves theory hold particular significance for the present study's theoretical framework, which employs Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS). By building on these foundational frameworks, the L2MSS provides a comprehensive model for examining language learner motivation, making it a crucial component of the present empirical study. This framework will be elaborated in detail in the theoretical framework section that guides the present qualitative study.

2.1.2 The Role of Motivation in SLA Research

Motivation has been extensively studied as a key factor influencing learners' outcomes in the field of SLA. This field examines how individuals acquire a second language (L2) as opposed to first language (L1) acquisition, which occurs naturally and subconsciously during early childhood. Learning an additional language, however, requires deliberate effort, strategic decision-making, and sustained perseverance to achieve proficiency (Ellis, 2008). This statement echoes Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) who defined motivation as the inner drive within an individual that initiates, directs, and regulates actions. The dynamic process of motivation stimulates and coordinates the cognitive and

physical activities necessary for transforming initial goals and desires into prioritized and actionable outcomes. Dörnyei (2005) argues that “motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent” (p. 65). Dörnyei’s statement emphasizes that motivation is not only a catalyst for starting language learning but also critical for maintaining the sustained effort required for continued progress. In the same vein, Ellis (2008) noted that “no single individual differences factor in language learning has received as much attention as motivation” (p. 677), highlighting its central role in SLA research. Elsewhere, Ellis (2015) claims that motivation profoundly influences a language learner’s ability to set and pursue goals with sustained effort.

While motivation has been a prominent focus within SLA research, much of the literature has concentrated primarily on English language learning motivation, often to the exclusion of other languages (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; May, 2019). This English-centric focus has shaped the field, with studies exploring motivations for LOTEs remain comparatively limited (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). The present study examines a group of university students’ Japanese language learning motivation in Kazakhstan, it is essential to consider how the global dominance of English has influenced both the scope and focus of language learning motivation research. This topic will be further discussed in the following section of this chapter.

2.2 Motivation Research in the Context of Global English

The prominence of English as a global *lingua franca* is well-documented, largely due to its significant economic advantages in the contemporary world (Hennebry-Leung & Gao, 2023). Several language researchers contend that English is a symbol of global economic power that creates language hierarchies, social exclusion, and linguistic

marginalization, thereby privileging English at the expense of other languages (Kubota, 2016; Manan & Hajar, 2022; Piller & Cho, 2013). In this regard, Ushioda (2017) argues that individuals' motivation to learn English has been largely associated with instrumental benefits—such as social mobility, economic advancement, and cosmopolitanism—more than a personal, idealized vision of language proficiency.

2.2.1 The Influence of Global English on Motivation to Learn LOTEs

Thus, learning English is often perceived as more important than learning languages other than English (LOTEs), positioning English as the preferred choice in language learning contexts (Takahashi, 2023). This phenomenon is captured by Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017), who describe the learning of LOTEs as taking place “in the shadow of Global English” (p. 457). Data collected in Europe, for example, shows that 79% of Europeans would choose English for their children to learn, reflecting the widespread recognition of its instrumental advantages (The Eurobarometer, 2012).

Language researchers have predominately focused on exploring the motivations of learning English by non-native speakers of English. To illustrate, Boo et al. (2015) reported that research on L2 motivation in Asian contexts has overwhelmingly concentrated on English, resulting in limited insights into the motivations behind learning LOTEs. They reported that over 70% of motivation studies conducted between 2005 and 2014 focused solely on English as the target language. English is the most in-demand foreign language in Central Asia (Hajar et al., 2023; Manan & Hajar, 2022) as well as in other Asian contexts (e.g., Hennebry-Leung & Gao, 2023). As a result, it increasingly risks overshadowing the motivation to study LOTEs, including Japanese.

Several empirical studies have shown the negative impact that English dominance can have on motivation for LOTEs (Csizér & Lukács, 2010; Henry, 2011; Ushioda, 2017). For instance, Csizér and Lukács (2010) found that Hungarian secondary school students

who initially learned English retained high motivation for both English and German. Yet, when German was introduced before English, motivational interference occurred, leading to a significant decline in motivation for German. Similarly, Henry (2011) found that dominant self-concepts tied to English as an L2 could reduce motivation for learning LOTEs. When English is prioritized as the primary pathway to social and economic mobility, students in English as a foreign language (EFL) may perceive less value in pursuing additional languages, thereby limiting their motivation to invest in LOTEs learning. Recent empirical studies examining the direct impact of English on LOTEs motivation consistently report that students often perceive little need to invest in learning additional languages, given English's widespread global utility and communicative reach (Henry, 2015; Takahashi, 2023)

2.2.2 The Multilingual Turn in SLA and Growing Interest in Learning LOTEs

Henry (2010) notes that, for over a decade, theoretical investigations into L2 motivation have primarily focused on contexts involving monolingual learners who study one specific L2, with a predominant emphasis on English. This focus, Henry argues, has shaped much of the discourse around L2 motivation, inherently limiting its applicability and scope to broader multilingual settings. Henry (2017) extends this critique by highlighting how the predominance of English in global L2 research is compounded by the theoretical limitations inherent in widely referenced paradigms. For instance, Gardner's (2001) socio-educational model and Dörnyei's (2009) LSMSS are built on monolingual frameworks, largely oriented toward understanding learners' motivation in contexts dominated by English language acquisition. This monolingual-centric approach risks marginalizing multilingual learners' experiences and may overlook the complex and dynamic nature of L2 motivation in increasingly multilingual and multicultural learning environments. Such theoretical paradigms, Henry (2017) suggests, need recalibration to

more accurately reflect and accommodate the realities of learners navigating multiple languages and diverse linguistic identities.

Although researchers in the field of L2 motivation have been criticized for adhering to a no difference assumption (Henry & Thorsen, 2018) that overlooks variations in language learning contexts, there has been a recent shift in scholarly focus. Increasingly, studies are moving beyond the traditional emphasis on English as a second language to explore motivations for learning LOTEs. Additionally, some research now concurrently examines motivations for both English and LOTEs, as demonstrated by recently published books such as Hajar and Manan (2024) and Takahashi (2023). This broader scope reflects a growing recognition of the diverse factors shaping multilingual learning experiences. These findings align with the multilingual turn SLA (May, 2014), marking a shift in how language learning motivation is studied. The multilingual turn-in SLA reflects a shift from idealized models of language learning—where a monolingual speaker is assumed to be acquiring a single L2—to frameworks that recognize the complex, fluid, and multicultural linguistic landscapes that characterize modern societies (May, 2014; Ortega, 2013).

At present, individuals frequently encounter multiple languages at different stages of life, making multilingualism normative experience rather than exception. Scholars argue that SLA research should better reflect the multilingual contexts in which learners operate, rather than centering exclusively on English (Henry, 2017; May, 2019; Ortega, 2019). This shift underscores the importance of studying LOTEs within SLA, recognizing that language learners' motivations and experiences may extend beyond instrumental benefits, such as those typically associated with English, to include cultural attraction and personal engagement. For instance, languages like Japanese often exhibit strong cultural appeal, which can be a powerful motivator for language learners (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

Given that the present study seeks to understand not only the challenges the participants have encountered while learning Japanese as a LOTE but also their LLSs in dealing with diverse challenges, the coming section will describe the main issues associated with the LLSs research.

2.3 Language Learning Strategies Research: Insights and Criticism

The previous section defined the concept of motivation and explored its role in language learning. Furthermore, it was stated that many scholars recognized the impact of Global English in shaping learners' motivation and that studies reveal that students prioritize learning English over LOTEs (Takahashi, 2023; Ushioda, 2017;). While motivation is crucial for initiating language learning, it is increasingly evident that motivation alone is not enough without strategic actions (Mercer, 2017). In this regard, Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) point out that a language learner's motivations to learn or master the target language should be underpinned by appropriate and effective procedural strategies that function as a structured pathway towards the intended goal, much like the meticulously planned training schedule of an elite athlete (p. 11).

In other words, the adoption of effective LLSs aligned with one's envisioned future is considered fundamental to realizing that vision; without such strategies, the vision risks devolving into an idealized notion lacking tangible ambition (Lamb, 2013). Furthermore, Oxford (2017) states that LLSs are essential to complement motivation, enabling learners to navigate challenges actively and sustain their language progress. Combining motivation with LLSs use is key to effective language acquisition (Hajar, 2024; Gao, 2010; Jun Zhang & Xiao, 2006). With this in mind, the present empirical study reported in this thesis aims to explore the motivations and LLSs used by a group of Kazakhstani university students learning Japanese as LOTE in Kazakhstan.

2.3.1 Defining Language Learning Strategies

The earliest emergence of LLSs research started with Joan Rubin's (1975) seminal study on the good language learner (GLL). Rubin sought to understand why certain language learners outperformed other counterparts despite similar backgrounds. Rubin's work identified behaviors and strategies that characterized successful learners, including self-monitoring their speech and actively engaging in practice opportunities, such as interacting with native speakers or watching films to enhance cultural understanding. (Rubin, 1975). Those strategies were identified by Rubin in order to teach the less successful language learners the ways GLLs acquired the L2 (Gao, 2010; Hajar, 2019, 2024). Rubin's work was fundamental and laid a foundation for subsequent studies that further classified and identified other strategies (Chamot, 2001; Stern, 1975).

Despite these early advancements, the definition of LLSs has remained a contentious topic, undergoing extensive debate and refinement over the years. Rebecca Oxford, a leading researcher in this field, critically examined and synthesized 33 widely accepted definitions in her seminal work (Oxford, 2017). She proposed a new, unbiased definition that avoids alignment with existing theoretical frameworks, defining LLSs as "the learner's plan of action for finding or following the desired track through experience, study, or by being taught" (Oxford, 2017, p. 13). Other prominent researchers in the field of LLSs have also introduced their own definitions of the construct of LLSs. For example, Griffiths (2008) emphasized the intentionality of strategies, describing them as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" (p. 87). Cohen (2011) provided a complementary view, focusing on the learner's conscious decision-making, defining strategies as "thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the intent to assist them in learning and using a language" (p. 7). These definitions highlight

the cognitive and regulatory dimensions of LLSs, underscoring their role in facilitating autonomous language learning.

2.3.2 Oxford's Taxonomy of LLSs

Regarding the classification of LLSs, Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of LLSs has significantly shaped the field, addressing limitations in prior classifications and offering a detailed framework that is still widely used. Her classification organizes LLSs into two main categories, direct and indirect, each comprising three subcategories. This taxonomy forms a key component of the theoretical framework for this study, as it provides a comprehensive lens through which the strategies employed by Japanese language learners can be analyzed.

Direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, all of which involve learners directly interacting with the target language. Memory strategies focus on storing and retrieving information, using techniques such as visualization, association, and repetition to aid retention. Cognitive strategies involve deeper language processing, enabling learners to understand, practice, and produce the language through methods such as analyzing patterns, using target-language media, or making connections to prior knowledge. Compensation strategies can help language learners overcome knowledge gaps by employing contextual clues, rephrasing, or using gestures to convey meaning. These strategies are particularly relevant in communicative contexts, as they enable learners to function effectively even with limited language proficiency (Oxford, 1990; 2017).

Indirect strategies, by contrast, support the learning process indirectly by regulating emotions, planning activities, and fostering social interactions (Oxford, 1990; 2017). Metacognitive strategies enable language learners to organize their approach to learning the target language, including setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on

outcomes. Affective strategies can be often used by language learners to address the emotional aspects of learning, such as managing anxiety, maintaining motivation, or taking risks in language use. Social strategies involve interacting with others to enhance learning, such as seeking feedback, collaborating with peers, or understanding cultural norms (Oxford, 1990). By breaking down O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) socio-affective category into distinct social and affective dimensions, Oxford's taxonomy provides a more granular understanding of how learners navigate both personal and interpersonal dimensions of language acquisition.

In addition to the categorization, Oxford has created the widely used strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) based on these six categories of the LLSs. This self-questionnaire has been used for students to assess their LLSs and reveal strong strategies that they can use in order to enhance their language learning further. This questionnaire has been translated into 20 languages and completed by more than 10,000 language learners worldwide. It comprises 50 items measured on a Likert scale and is widely regarded as a simple and user-friendly tool for assessing language learning strategies (Hajar, 2019; Oxford, 2017; Takeuchi, 2003).

2.4 Empirical Studies on Learning Japanese as an Additional Language

While there is substantial research on motivations in learning Japanese in countries such as the United States, China, and Australia (Gao & Lv, 2018; Nakamura, 2017; Northwood & Thomson, 2012), the experiences of students in regions such as Central Asia remains unclear. As the demand for Japanese language education grows in Kazakhstan, understanding the specific motivations, challenges, and strategies of learners in this region is critical. To frame the present study, it is crucial to analyze existing empirical studies on the motivations and learning strategies of Japanese language learners worldwide.

2.4.1 Research on Motivational Factors for Learning Japanese

The motivation for learning Japanese as L2 is shaped by a variety of factors across different contexts, including the United States, China, Australia, and Malaysia. Research indicates that the motivations for learning Japanese often fall into two key categories: instrumental goals, such as career advancement (Gao & Lv, 2018; Huang & Feng, 2019), and integrative goals, like cultural engagement and personal interest (Shintaku, 2021; Northwood & Thomson, 2012). For instance, a mixed-methods study conducted by Shintaku (2021) involving 270 students at a public university in the southwestern United States revealed that a strong attraction to Japanese popular culture—particularly *anime* and music—was the predominant motivational factor aspect of their engagement with cultural artifacts. Moreover, the students exposure to situational language use and cultural nuances was facilitated through the consumption of Japanese media, which provided a rich and immersive context for their language learning. In a similar vein, Huang and Feng (2019), in their cross-sectional study involving 55 Chinese students across three different years of study at a Chinese university, concluded that factors such as childhood interest in and early exposure to Japanese culture significantly influenced students’ motivations to pursue Japanese as a subject at the university level. These findings align with several other studies (e.g., Gao & Lv, 2018; Northwood & Thomson, 2012), further demonstrating the role of early cultural engagement in shaping individuals’ language learning motivations of LOTEs.

Moreover, Huang and Feng (2019) observed that the students in their study, particularly those in their first year of university, were primarily motivated by their initial exposure to Japanese culture. These students appeared to be in the “honeymoon” phase of their university experience, characterized by enthusiasm and idealism. During this period, academic choices were often guided by personal feelings and emotional connections, such

as a fascination with Japanese cultural elements or a desire to engage with subjects that resonated with their newfound interests. In contrast, second and third year students in that study tended to be more motivated by instrumental factors, including preparing for impending exams and developing skills to enhance their future employability.

Similar findings were reported by Teo et al. (2019) in their mixed-methods study involving 398 university students in China, supplemented by follow-up interviews with 12 selected individuals. The study revealed that potential employment opportunities were the key motivating factors, alongside intercultural communication and building friendships. Furthermore, the findings have been corroborated by research on Japanese language learners in other Asian contexts, such as Malaysia (Md Yunus et al., 2022) and Thailand (Jitpaiboon et al., 2024). The findings indicate that students in the later years of their university education are particularly motivated to learn Japanese by explicit career-related goals, emphasizing the importance of instrumental motivations in shaping their strategic language learning efforts.

2.4.2 Challenges of Learning Japanese in Different Contexts

As regards students' challenges for learning Japanese as an additional language, a few empirical studies have explored the challenges they often encountered to learn and master Japanese. These challenges are frequently linked to factors such as linguistic differences (de Burgh-Hirabe, 2019; Matsumoto & Obana, 2001; Saito & Samimy, 1996), which result in a steeper learning curve for students whose native languages differ significantly from Japanese. Japanese can be particularly challenging for students without prior exposure to writing systems similar to those used in the language. *Kanji*, commonly known as Chinese characters, are especially difficult to master. Matsumoto and Obana (2001) found that while *kanji* learning does not necessarily demotivate students, it poses significant challenges. Their quantitative survey, conducted in three Canadian universities

with participants from non-*kanji* backgrounds, highlighted that teaching ineffective methods and negative instructor attitudes presented even greater obstacles. Similarly, Mori et al. (2007) examined *kanji* learning among 80 college students in the United States with no prior *kanji* experience. Their study revealed that a lack of confidence and anxiety discouraged students, making their Japanese studies more difficult.

Additional challenges have been associated with societal pressures which perpetuated negative perceptions of learning Japanese in some cases, discouraging some students from pursuing their Japanese language studies (Gao & Lv, 2018; Teo et al., 2019). Language interference, particularly with English, further complicates the learning process, as students tended to struggle with prioritizing one language over another (Jitpaiboon et al., 2024; Nakamura, 2017; Shintaku, 2022). For example, Gao and Lv (2018), in their mixed-methods study involving 665 questionnaire participants and 38 interviewees from Chinese universities, found that many students were initially discouraged from studying Japanese due to sociopolitical tensions between Japan and China, and only later discovered motivations to continue their studies. These motivations were largely rooted in their desire to bridge the cultural gap between the two nations.

When examining the challenges of language interference during Japanese language studies, Nakamura (2017), in his PhD thesis, found that Korean participants learning Japanese experienced a decline in motivation due to the difficulty of studying Japanese alongside English. English was perceived as a language offering greater economic opportunities, hence often took priority. Similarly, Huang and Feng (2019) reported that second-year university students studying Japanese faced challenges in preparing for both English and Japanese proficiency exams within the same year. As a result, students frequently prioritized English, viewing it as more beneficial for their future economic prospects, often at the expense of their Japanese studies.

2.5 Theoretical framework

The preceding sections explored the motivations and challenges faced by learners of Japanese as LOTEs across different countries, situating this study within the broader context of SLA research. This section introduces the theoretical framework of the present study which is based on Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs explained in the previous section, and Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) which provides a robust basis for analyzing both the motivational orientations and the strategic efforts of students in Kazakhstan learning Japanese.

Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS represents an amalgamation of SLA research and mainstream psychological theories. It draws on foundational works by scholars such as Gardner and Lambert, Markus and Nurius, and Higgins (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Lamb et al., 2017; Nakamura, 2017). The L2MSS consists of three key components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self is conceptualized as an internally driven construct, representing an individual's envisioned future self, characterized by the attainment of desirable attributes. These attributes may encompass prosperity, happiness, success, and achievement, with a particular focus on linguistic competence and proficiency in the target language for L2 learners to fulfill personal ambitions like traveling to Japan, studying at a Japanese university, or working in a multinational company. This component is closely tied to language learners' hopes and long-term goals, serving as a powerful motivator to bridge the gap between their current abilities and their envisioned future selves.

In contrast, the ought-to L2 self represents what the learner believes they should become, often shaped by external expectations and obligations. For instance, learners may feel compelled to meet family expectations to study Japanese for career advancement or respond to societal pressures to master the language due to its prestige in academic or

professional circles. Finally, the L2 learning experience encompasses the learner's immediate environment and activities influencing their motivation. These include positive classroom interactions, such as forming study groups or participating in cultural events. Together, these components dynamically interact to shape the learner's motivation in the language acquisition process.

L2MSS redefines L2 motivation by focusing on the learner's internal vision of their future self as a language user, making the system dynamic and deeply personal. It integrates cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of motivation, offering a comprehensive framework that captures a broad spectrum of motivational factors. One of the model's most distinctive features is its adaptability across diverse learning contexts. Boo et al.(2015) emphasize that the L2MSS provides a holistic perspective on motivation by addressing critiques of earlier frameworks, particularly the lack of emphasis on learners' vision and agency. A meta-analysis by Al-Hoorie (2018) further confirmed the model's empirical robustness and significant contributions to understanding L2 motivation.

As explained in the previous section, Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs complements the L2MSS by providing insights into how learners operationalize their motivation through specific learning strategies. As explained earlier Oxford's taxonomy organizes strategies into direct and indirect types, encompassing six subcategories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (for more elaboration about these strategies, see the previous section of this chapter). This framework categorizes the tools learners use to navigate the complexities of language acquisition, addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of the process. Thus, the present study uses Oxford's taxonomy that offers a systematic approach to identifying and categorizing the strategic behaviors of study participants.

2.6 Summary

This chapter outlined the theoretical and empirical landscape underpinning this study. It began by defining motivation within SLA and tracing its evolution from Gardner's socio-educational model to the emergence of socio-dynamic perspectives. Next, it explored the dominance of English as a global *lingua franca* its impact on the motivation to learn LOTEs, highlighting the instrumental and cultural factors driving language acquisition. The chapter then addressed the multilingual turn in SLA, arguing that multilingualism fosters the value of multilingualism in understanding of LOTEs learning. Examples and discussions of empirical studies on Japanese language learning in global and Asian contexts were also provided to situate the present study. Finally, Dörnyei's L2MSS and Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs were introduced as the theoretical framework guiding this research. The next chapter, Methodology, will introduce the research design used in this empirical study, highlight the essential aspect of participant exploration, and describe the methods used to collect data from the participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The previous chapter provided an overview of the existing literature on language learning motivation and language learning strategies (LLSs) within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), with a particular focus on Japanese language acquisition. Key empirical studies were reviewed, highlighting the motivations, challenges, and LLSs Japanese language learners often use in various global contexts such as the USA, China and Australia. Additionally, the theoretical framework underpinning this study—Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS and Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs—was discussed in detail to establish the foundation for this research. Notably, this is the first empirical study into the motivations and LLSs used by university students studying Japanese language education in Central Asia, thereby addressing a critical gap in the existing literature.

To achieve the aim of understanding Kazakhstan's university students' motivations and the LLSs they employ to overcome challenges in learning Japanese, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivated the participants to learn Japanese as an additional language?
2. What challenges did they encounter while learning Japanese?
3. How did they cope with these challenges (i.e., their language learning strategy use)?

This chapter focuses on the research design adopted for the present empirical study and provides justifications for the selected methodology. It describes the research site and sampling process, details the data collection instruments and procedures, and explains the approach to data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative, multiple-case study approach, chosen for its ability to capture the complex constructs of motivation and LLSs among university

students learning Japanese in Kazakhstan. A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to exploring individual learners' experiences within specific social, cultural, and psychological contexts, providing depth and detail that quantitative methods often overlook (Boo et al., 2015; Johnson & Christensen, 2024). Ushioda emphasizes the importance of introspective research approaches to understand the qualitative developments in motivational experiences over time, particularly within institutionalized learning contexts (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). She notes that motivation is often characterized by flux rather than stability, with dynamic interplays between contextual factors and individual motivation. Such a qualitative lens allows for a deeper exploration of these dynamic processes, extending beyond static measures of motivational growth or loss to uncover the nuanced and evolving relationship between context and motivation.

In contrast to quantitative methods, which are more appropriate for identifying general patterns across large samples, qualitative research provides a more detailed exploration of the nuanced social interactions and psychological factors that students encounter while studying Japanese (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Takahashi, 2022). This depth is essential because L2 motivation, particularly in LOTEs, goes beyond general trends to encompass how language learners' situated experiences shape their motivations and the LLSs they undertake in the context of their lived realities (Dörnyei, 2007; Yan, 2023).

The present research employed an exploratory, instrumental multiple-case study approach because it sought to move beyond the predominant focus on motivation-counting questionnaire results (i.e., generalization) that characterize much of the existing research on L2 motivation. Instead, the present study emphasizes specificity and authenticity, viewing individuals' L2 motivations as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. The notion of a case is inclusive, encompassing both relatively simple entities—such as an

individual child, adult, learner, or a person's experiences and life stages—and more complex or collective entities, including institutions, campaigns, regions, or neighborhoods (Yin, 2014, p. 15). Additionally, the present study approach aligns with the theoretical foundations of Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS, which aims to uncover and explore in-depth the similarities and variations in how the participants perceive the target language and interact with their specific learning environments.

This methodological approach is well-aligned with the objectives of the present study, which seeks to examine the underlying motivations of students in Kazakhstan for selecting Japanese as their major, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they implement to address these challenges. It offers a robust framework for analyzing real-world phenomena within specific contextual settings, thereby generating nuanced insights into both individual and collective experiences that can be extrapolated to analogous contexts (Merriam, 2009).

3.2 Research Site and Sample

The present research was conducted at a selective university in Kazakhstan, renowned for its Oriental Studies program, which includes Japanese language courses. This institution was chosen due to its relevance to the present study's focus on Japanese language education and its accessibility to the researcher. While the university offers Japanese language courses to students from various departments, this study specifically targeted students majoring in Japanese as an L2 within the Oriental Studies program. This decision was made to focus on participants who had been engaging with Japanese language learning as a central part of their academic curriculum, ensuring that their experiences and insights were directly relevant to the research objectives.

To gain access to the research site, the researcher contacted Japanese language instructor at the Oriental Studies program university via email and requested permission to

conduct the study. The email included details about the research purpose, ethical considerations, and the proposed methodology. After receiving approval, a link to a Google Form was shared with students enrolled in Japanese courses, allowing them to express their interest in participating. In the participation form, students were first required to familiarize themselves with their rights as participants and were provided with a brief explanation of the study's objectives. Prior to initiating contact with the university, ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Graduate School of Education (GSE) Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

This study involves ten undergraduate students selected using a non-probability purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling was chosen to identify participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives and could provide in-depth insights (Cohen et al., 2007). In the present study, particular focus was placed on selecting students in their second year or higher of Japanese language study, on the grounds that these students were more likely to have developed advanced strategies and encountered significant challenges in their Japanese language learning journeys. The Google Form used for participant recruitment included questions about students' language abilities, specifically their Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) levels. The JLPT is an internationally recognized standard for assessing Japanese proficiency, with levels ranging from N5 (basic) to N1 (advanced). For this study, participants were required to have achieved at least an N4 level, ensuring they had sufficient experience with the language to discuss their motivations, challenges, and language learning strategies. The selection of students from the second year and above, coupled with a proficiency level of N4 or higher, was deliberate, as these criteria ensured participants had encountered more substantial

linguistic and academic challenges and had likely developed effective strategies for addressing them.

Additionally, all participants were over 18 years of age, had no prior personal relationship with the researcher to ensure they could express their perceptions more objectively while minimizing potential biases, and represented both genders, promoting objectivity and diversity. This diverse demographic composition allowed the study to capture a broad range of perspectives, enriching the findings and ensuring the reliability of the data. By focusing on this carefully selected research site and sample, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and strategic language learning efforts of Japanese language learners in a structured academic setting. The table below presents general information about the participants. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned in place of their real names.

Table 1
Demographic Data of the Participants

No	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Level of Japanese (JLPT)	Year of Study	Language of Instruction
1	Alisher	22	Male	N2	4th	Kazakh
2	Aigerim	19	Female	N3	3rd	Russian
3	Gilyana	22	Female	N3	4th	Kazakh
4	Jamilya	20	Female	N2	3rd	Russian
5	Arailym	20	Female	N3	4th	Kazakh
6	Malika	19	Female	N4	2nd	Russian
7	Anel	18	Female	N4	2nd	Russian
8	Aidyn	20	Male	N3	3rd	Russian
9	Andrey	20	Male	N2	3rd	Russian
10	Amina	21	Female	N3	4th	Russian

Note. Compiled by the author from the obtained data

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

To collect data, this study employed two qualitative research methods: narrative writing and semi-structured individual interviews. The use of multiple methods aligns with the principle of methodological triangulation, which enhances the validity and credibility of research findings (Denzin, 2017). By employing narrative writing, participants could reflect deeply on their experiences and motivations, providing rich, introspective accounts. Semi-structured interviews complemented this method by allowing for further elaboration and clarification, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives. Combining these methods ensured a more comprehensive exploration of the research topic, reducing potential biases and offering a multi-faceted view of the phenomenon under investigation.

Narrative writing served as a preliminary method, inviting participants to write essays about their experiences of learning Japanese as an additional language. This approach provided valuable background information, established rapport with participants, and helped the researcher shape interview questions based on their written reflections (Hajar, 2018). Narrative writing can offer deep insights into participants' personal experiences and views on language learning, capturing their inner perspectives and challenges (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Pavlenko, 2007). Participants were given the option to respond to the narrative writing prompts in Kazakh, Russian, or English, depending on their preference, allowing them to reflect on their Japanese learning journey and the challenges they encountered. The majority of participants chose to respond in Russian. Essay prompts were provided in their chosen language to guide their writing. To guide participants in the narrative writing task, the following open-ended questions were provided:

Table 2***Narrative Essay Questions***

№	Questions
1	Could you please write general information about your background (e.g. age, which year are you studying right now, your parents' job and education, the number of your siblings, the city or town you are from, your interests, etc.)?
2	How many languages can you speak and understand? What are they?
3	When did you start learning Japanese? Did you have prior experience of learning Japanese before entering the university?
4	Why did you decide to learn Japanese?
5	What challenges did you face/are you facing while learning Japanese?
6	What strategies did you use/plan to use to deal with these challenges?
7	What are your current learning goals in terms of the Japanese language?

Note. Compiled by the author from the obtained data

Participants were given 7 to 10 days to complete their essays and submit them via WhatsApp or email according to their preference. This preliminary method enriched the subsequent interviews by providing valuable context and depth, offering deeper insights into the participants' experiences. The complete list of narrative essay questions can be found in Appendix B.

In addition, this study employed semi-structured individual interviews, which are a qualitative data collection method involving a set of predetermined questions combined with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach allows for both consistency across interviews and adaptability to explore emerging themes in depth. During the interviews, the researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify or elaborate on responses, endowing each interview with a distinctive personality (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). This particular way of interviewing facilitated a nuanced exploration of how students navigated the challenges associated with their language studies and developed strategies to overcome them.

By enabling a comprehensive examination of participants' language learning processes, semi-structured interviews provided critical insights into the complex and multifaceted dimensions of their experiences (Lamb, 2009). The interviews were conducted face-to-face at mutually agreed-upon locations and at a time convenient for the participants, such as in an empty room at the university. Open-ended questions, with follow-up probes, were employed to gain deeper insights and clarify emerging ideas (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei, 2007). Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. The interview questions were designed to explore participants' motivations, experiences, and challenges in learning Japanese. The interview guide consisted of twenty open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their Japanese language learning journey. Key areas of focus included their initial interest in Japanese, the factors that sustained their motivation, the obstacles they encountered, and their strategies for overcoming those challenges. For example, questions such as "When did you start learning Japanese?" and "Who or what encouraged you to learn Japanese?" guided the conversation. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C. Participants were allowed to use Kazakh, Russian, or English during the interviews to ensure they could express their ideas comfortably. Most participants chose to respond primarily in Russian, occasionally incorporating Japanese phrases or words to better convey specific ideas or concepts. This was possible because the researcher was also proficient in Japanese, which allowed for seamless communication and understanding.

3.4 Procedures of Data Collection

The data collection for this study followed a carefully structured process to ensure reliability, ethical compliance, and the richness of the data obtained. The procedures

involved sequential stages, including ethics approval, piloting of instruments, participant recruitment, informed consent, and the collection and storage of data.

Prior to data collection, ethics approval was secured from the GSE Ethics Committee. This approval ensured that the study adhered to institutional and ethical standards for research involving human participants. The application for the ethics clearance included a detailed description of the study's aims, methods, participant recruitment strategies, and ethical safeguards, such as confidentiality and informed consent.

Following ethics approval, the researcher contacted the head of the Oriental Studies Faculty at the research site to seek permission to recruit participants and conduct the study. With the department's approval, recruitment materials, including a Google Form, were distributed to eligible students via email. The form was available in Kazakh, Russian, and English and included questions about students' demographic information, year of study, and Japanese proficiency levels, ensuring accessibility for all potential participants. Responses were screened based on inclusion criteria discussed earlier—students in their second year or higher of Japanese studies and with at least an N4 level of Japanese proficiency (as per the JLPT scale). The full contact email for the university is provided in Appendix D.

Participants were provided with a printed consent form during their first meeting with the researcher. The consent form outlined the purpose of the study, data collection methods, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights, including their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants signed the form before participating in the study, ensuring their informed and voluntary consent. Before starting the interviews, the researcher explained the main aspects of the research and reminded participants of their rights, including issues of anonymity and confidentiality, such as the

substitution of participants' names and secure data storage. The researcher also obtained oral permission to record the interviews for transcription purposes. At the end of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and contribution and were once again assured of data security and confidentiality.

Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were then coded using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis guidelines to identify key patterns and themes. This process involved systematically organizing and interpreting the data to uncover insights into participants' experiences, motivations, and strategies in learning Japanese. The coding process was essential for constructing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the research questions, contributing to a comprehensive analysis of the study's findings.

3.5 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, thematic analysis (TA) is a method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data. A theme represents a pattern of meaning that captures something significant about the data concerning the research question. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), themes are the broader interpretive ideas that arise from aggregated codes. In contrast, codes are smaller units of meaning assigned to specific portions of data, often at the phrase or sentence level, that highlight notable features relevant to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Howitt, 2011).

Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility and accessibility. It is particularly suitable for novice researchers as it does not require in-depth theoretical knowledge (Howitt, 2011). Additionally, it allows researchers to work inductively—letting patterns emerge directly from the data—or deductively, where pre-existing theories guide the analysis. This adaptability makes TA a practical choice for exploring the nuances of motivation and LLSs. While thematic analysis offers these advantages, it is essential to

acknowledge its limitations. Howitt (2011) notes that TA can lack standardization, with researchers sometimes providing insufficient detail about their analytical process. Furthermore, its flexibility may lead to superficial analysis if not carried out rigorously, potentially undermining the depth and reliability of findings. Despite these drawbacks, when conducted systematically and with transparency, thematic analysis serves as a robust tool for qualitative inquiry.

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013) six-phase approach, beginning with an immersive familiarization with the data through the transcription of interviews and repeated readings of the transcripts actively and analytically while highlighting the lines relevant to research questions and the theoretical framework adopted in this study. This foundational step allowed the researcher to deeply engage with the participants' narratives and gain a holistic understanding of their motivations and LLSs.

After becoming familiar with the data, the next phase involved generating initial codes, which were developed inductively to capture specific segments related to motivational factors, such as the desire to study in Japan or the challenges faced in learning Japanese. These codes were systematically applied across the dataset to ensure accuracy and depth in capturing the nuances of the data. However, the coding process was not static; it evolved as the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the data, requiring modifications and refinements to better reflect emerging insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Howitt, 2011).

Initial codes were revised, merged, or subdivided where necessary to achieve a closer alignment with the data's meaning and context. Table 3 provides concrete examples of the coding process, illustrating how raw data was transformed into codes and then organized into themes. The researcher then reviewed the themes, revisiting the coded data to ensure alignment with the research questions and the overall dataset. Redundant themes

were refined or merged, while others were split into sub-themes to account for nuances and differences within the data.

Table 3

Code Samples

Interview extras	Codes	Subthemes	Themes
I chose Japanese over Chinese and Korean because I liked it most. In 8th grade, I decided to take world history and English for the UNT, which suited fields like international relations and East Asian studies. East Asian studies seemed unique, so I chose it.	Preference for Japanese over Chinese/Korean	Ideal L2 Self: Attraction to the Japanese language's aesthetics.	Motivations for Learning Japanese
I did karate, and that influenced me. My interest was also due to <i>manga</i> , but not only. I knew Japanese better than Chinese or Korean. Plus, Japanese sounds more melodic. Chinese is too complicated for me, and Korean sounds rough. That's why I chose Japanese.	Interest sparked by karate and <i>manga</i>	Cultural Interests	Motivations for Learning Japanese
I lived in Aktau, and there were no Japanese courses there at all - only Chinese and Korean. So I decided to study on my own	Lack of local resources; reliance on self-study	Metacognitive Strategies: Independent planning and execution of study	Strategies for Learning Japanese
Honestly, I feel stuck. In East Asian Studies, you don't just focus on Japanese. We only had three hours of Japanese a week: one lecture and two seminars. It's very little compared to other programs where language classes happen almost daily	Limited classroom hours for Japanese	University Program Gaps	Challenges in Learning Japanese

Note. Compiled by the author from the obtained data.

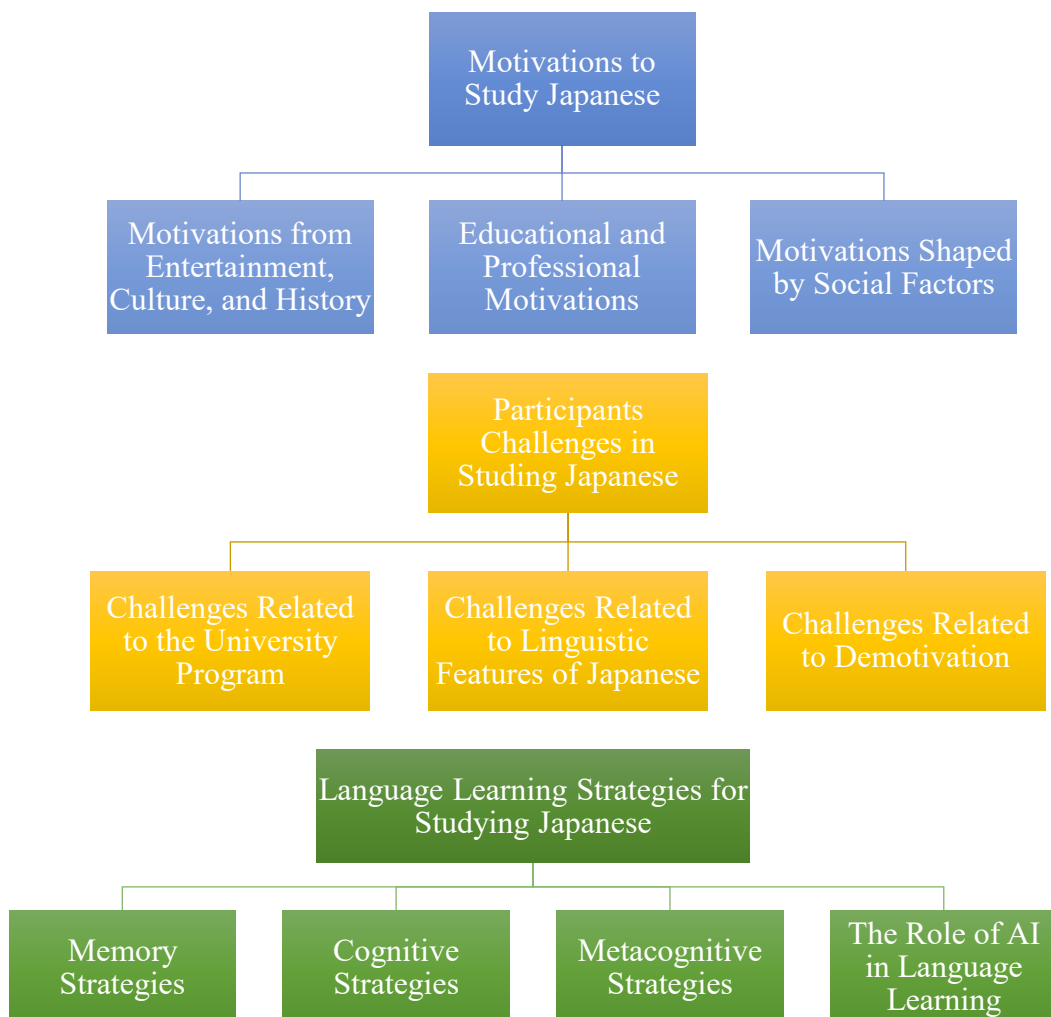
Once the themes were refined, they were clearly defined and labeled, ensuring each theme's relevance to the study's theoretical framework. Finally, the themes were integrated into a coherent narrative, illustrated with direct quotes from participants to

provide a rich understanding of how students navigated the interplay between motivation and strategy in their language learning journeys.

Thematic analysis proved invaluable for this study due to its ability to uncover both explicit and implicit patterns in the data. By emphasizing the participants' voices, TA enabled a comprehensive exploration of the dynamic interplay between motivation and LLSs, contributing unique insights into the field of language learning in Kazakhstan.

Figure 1

Thematic Map Based on the Participants' Data



Note. Compiled by the author from the obtained data.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the GSE Ethics Committee prior to any data collection activities. The approval process included a comprehensive proposal outlining the study's purpose, methods, and ethical safeguards. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying information, such as names or specific institutional affiliations, was omitted from transcripts and reports (Roberts et al., 2006). Ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is a fundamental aspect of ethical research. As Creswell (2011) highlights, safeguarding private information is crucial to prevent unauthorized disclosure and maintain the trust of participants. Participants were informed that their data would be securely stored on a password-protected cloud, accessible only to the researcher and their advisor, for a period of two years. After this time, all data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and narrative responses, will be permanently deleted.

Informed consent was a key component of this study. Participants were provided with a detailed consent form during their first meeting, which outlined the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The complete set of documents related to the ethics letter is provided in Appendix E. The researcher ensured that participants understood the contents of the form by explaining its key points orally and addressing any questions. During the interviews, participants were reminded of their rights, including the right to skip any questions or terminate their participation without penalty. To further protect their well-being, the researcher was sensitive to any emotional or psychological discomfort that

might arise from discussing challenges in language learning. In such cases, participants were offered the option to pause or discontinue the interview.

The researcher also took additional steps to minimize power dynamics. By maintaining a conversational and respectful tone, sharing personal experiences, and expressing gratitude for participants' willingness to share their stories, the researcher fostered a supportive and non-intimidating environment. All data collected during the study will remain securely stored and accessible exclusively to the researcher and their advisor for the two-year retention period. This measure ensures the confidentiality and security of the participants' information while allowing sufficient time for analysis and dissemination of findings.

3.7 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in the study, detailing the research design, site, sample, data collection instruments, procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations. By adopting a qualitative multiple-case study approach, this research aimed to explore the motivations, challenges, and language learning strategies of Kazakhstani university students studying Japanese. Narrative writing and semi-structured interviews were used as primary data collection methods, supported by thematic analysis to uncover patterns and insights within the data. The rigorous adherence to ethical guidelines ensured the protection of participants' rights and the reliability of the research findings. The next chapter will present the results of the study, offering a detailed analysis of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

Chapter 4: Findings

The previous chapter described the research methodology employed in this qualitative study, including the data collection methods (i.e., narrative writing and individual semi-structured interviews). It also explained the selection of participants and research site along with outlining the process of data analysis based on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). Ethical considerations, including the assurance of participant confidentiality and the procurement of informed consent, were also addressed.

This chapter presents the findings of the current research, derived from the data collected from 10 Kazakhstani undergraduate students learning Japanese as an additional language. As outlined earlier, this qualitative study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivated the participants to learn Japanese as an additional language?
2. What challenges did they encounter while learning Japanese?
3. How did they cope with these challenges (i.e., their language learning strategy use)?

The subsequent sections will begin with a summary of the participants' biographical profiles based on their narratives. Following this, the findings related to the participants' motivations, challenges, and strategies for learning Japanese will be presented according to the key themes and sub-themes that emerged during data analysis. These themes include motivations for learning Japanese, challenges in learning Japanese, and language learning strategies for learning Japanese.

4.1 Biographical Vignettes of the Research Participants

This section provides an academic account of the participants' biographical vignettes based on their written narratives detailing their background information and their

multilingual language learning experiences, with a specific focus on their learning Japanese.

Aidyn

Aidyn, third-year university student from Kegen village in Almaty, grew up in a large extended family of six. His father is a programmer, and his mother, a former accountant, now runs her own tailoring business. Aidyn is deeply interested in fantasy literature, particularly the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, *anime*, *manga*, and the histories and mythologies of different cultures. He is fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and Kyrgyz, with intermediate English proficiency and, approaching N3 level of Japanese. Aidyn's journey with Japanese began in the 9th grade through online courses, sparked by his fascination with *anime* and Japanese history. He leverages tools like the *Anki* flash card app and ChatGPT to streamline his learning and practices *kanji* in context for better retention. A five-month stay in Japan enriched his conversational skills, though he identifies *kanji* mastery as his most significant hurdle. He is currently aspiring toward N2.

Aigerim

Aigerim, a third-year university student, was born in the city of Aktau, situated along the Caspian Sea. She grew up in a family of four, with both parents holding higher education degrees and working professionally in their respective fields. She speaks four languages—Kazakh, Russian, English, and Japanese N3. Aigerim commenced her active study of Japanese at the age of 17, during her final year of high school, motivated by her fascination with Japanese culture and the language's melodic sound. Although she entered university with a basic grasp of Japanese, she struggled the complexity of its writing systems, particularly *kanji*. One of her effective strategies for learning Japanese is participating in a *kanji* marathon, where she ambitiously learned up to 100 *kanji* per day.

Gaukhar

Gaukhar, grew up in Astana in a family of six. She began studying Japanese at university but soon supplemented her learning with language courses to gain a stronger foundation and stay ahead in her studies. Gaukhar is proficient in Russian and Japanese with basic skills in Kazakh. She aims to reach N2 proficiency and possibly live and work in Japan. Gaukhar combines formal learning with self-study methods, including listening to Japanese podcasts, speaking with her younger sister, who also studies the language, and engaging with native speakers online. She integrates artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, for explanations and vocabulary building.

Anel

Anel was born in Russia but moved to Kazakhstan at the age of nine, settling in Petropavlovsk with her parents and older brother. Growing up with a love for *anime* and *manga*, she developed an interest in Japanese culture but only began studying the language during her final year of high school. Inspired by her *senpai* (upperclassman), a university student who taught Japanese courses, Anel pursued Japanese studies to achieve her dream of visiting Japan. She is a confident speaker of Russian, English and Kazakh languages, and has N4 level of Japanese. Anel also aspires to participate in cultural exchange programs and explore professional opportunities in Japan, driven by her fascination with the Japanese language, culture, and art.

Alisher

Alisher, grew up in Almaty. He is fluent in Russian, English, and Japanese N2, with a functional understanding of Kazakh. His journey with Japanese began in 2017, prior to entering university. Driven by his passion for *anime* and the martial art *kudo*, Alisher embarked on learning Japanese to broaden his horizons. As a fourth-year student, Alisher stayed in Japan on two separate occasions through a university exchange program, which

altogether lasted for almost a year. During his time in Japan, he was able to work and travel while continuing his university studies. He humorously admits that overcoming laziness is also part of his journey. His primary goal is to achieve N1 certification and pursue a career connected to Japan, combining his language skills with his passion for Japanese culture and professional aspirations.

Ayaulym

Ayaulym was born in Turkestan but spent most of her childhood in Astana before completing high school in Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan. As the eldest of five siblings, she comes from a family where her mother works as a doctor and her father serves as a judge. Fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and English, Ayaulym is also learning Japanese as well as Korean. Her passion for J-pop artists such as Eve, Yama, and Kenshi Yonezu, as well as *anime* soundtracks, motivated her to explore the language more deeply. Her journey with Japanese began through self-study during the summer before her first year at university. Ayaulym aspires to reach a level of fluency that enables her to read, write, and converse confidently in Japanese. She dreams of exploring Japan through exchange programs or postgraduate studies while continuing to learn about the country's language and culture.

Gilyana

Gilyana is from Astana and is fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and English. She has also attained N2 in Japanese and basic proficiency in Korean, Chinese, and German. Her fascination with languages and cultures is evident in her passion for Japanese *Kabuki* and *Noh* theaters. Gilyana's journey with Japanese began at 16 through self-study, supplemented by courses at the Kazakhstan-Japan Center. Inspired by her trips to Japan, Gilyana aims to achieve N1 proficiency and explore Japanese academic and cultural materials, from fiction to research articles. Although balancing multiple linguistic interests,

Gilyana remains steadfast in her pursuit of mastering Japanese, aspiring to connect deeply with the language and culture she admires.

Jamilya

Jamilya grew up in Astana and is a third-year student. Fluent in Russian, English, and Japanese N2, she also has basic proficiency in Kazakh, Italian, and Chinese.

Passionate about languages, Jamilya enjoys translating songs and gaming content, often sharing her work online. Her journey with the Japanese language began when she was 14 years ago, sparked by the closure of her favorite rhythm game, Dream Festival.

Determined to understand the stories behind Japanese games, she taught herself *hiragana* and *katakana*, later advancing her studies at university. Though Jamilya dreams of visiting Japan, she sees herself as an observer of its culture rather than a permanent resident. Her goal is to achieve N1 proficiency while continuing to explore the depth of Japanese language and literature.

Malika

Malika, is a second-year student from Astana. She grew up in a family of six. Malika speaks Russian and English fluently and has N4 level in Japanese. Her journey with the Japanese began when she was 15 years old. She attended a trial class at a language school inspired by her love for Genshin Impact (online game). Though she initially joined out of curiosity, the melodic beauty of the language and the desire to read untranslated *manga* deepened her interest. Her next goal is to achieve N3 certification in the and participate in an academic exchange program in Japan. She aspires to enhance her language skills and explore Japan's unique culture through immersive experiences.

Andrey

Andrey grew up in Almaty, Kazakhstan. From a young age, he was intrigued by Japanese culture, initially through *anime*, *manga*, and Japanese music. His passion for

Japanese culture grew during high school, leading him to pursue Japanese studies after graduation. Andrey began his language journey with preparatory courses at the Kazakhstan-Japan Center before delving deeper through university classes and self-study. He speaks Russian and English fluently and has achieved N2 certification in Japanese within two years of study. Currently preparing for N1, Andrey aspires to further refine his proficiency and explore opportunities in Japan through work, advanced studies, or teaching.

4.2. Motivations to Study Japanese

The data analysis identified several key motivational factors that influenced the participants' decision to learn Japanese. Firstly, the participants reported that they were motivated to learn Japanese because of popular Japanese media, a profound interest in both Japan's historical and contemporary culture, and an appreciation for the melodic quality of the Japanese language. Secondly the desire to live and study in Japan in the future emerged as a notable motivator. Thirdly, the influence of social agents, such as peers, teachers, and exchange programs, played a crucial role in shaping participants' motivation to pursue Japanese language learning.

4.2.1 Motivations Rooted in Entertainment, Culture, History, and Aesthetics

The main factor that first sparked participants' interest in the Japanese language and culture was their exposure to Japanese popular culture, such as *anime* (animated films and series), J-pop music, and Japanese video games. Nine out of the ten participants had engaged with various elements of Japanese culture before entering high school, with *anime* serving as the primary point. The participants acknowledged that this initial exposure to various forms of Japanese culture served as a gateway to their interest in learning Japanese. This is evident in the following extract from Malika:

Extract 1

I listened to the characters in *anime* in Japanese speak and really liked the sound of the language. I understood that Japanese speech in *anime* is very different from everyday Japanese. It was just out of curiosity - why not start learning it? (Malika, December 3, 2024)

Most participants highlighted the important role of Japanese media—such as video games, *anime*, *manga* comic books, and *ranobe* (light novels)—in shaping their interest. Notably, four participants (Jamilya, Aidyn, Alisher, and Alisha) said that the absence of translations of these cultural products into their L1 was a primary motivation to learn Japanese. The following extract illustrates this point:

Extract 2

I first watched the *anime* movie *Kimi no Na wa* at home in the original Japanese dubbing. Later, I went to the cinema to see it again on a bigger screen, but the Russian dubbing felt so off. That experience made me realize I wanted to understand Japanese in its original form. So, I found a school and began studying. (Alisher, December 7, 2024)

While *anime* is widely popular among individuals interested in Japanese culture, it does not fully encapsulate the motivations that drive students to study the language. Other participants (Arailym and Jamilya) shared how other parts of the Japanese culture were more alluring for them, motivating them to start learning the language:

Extract 3

I was into J-pop and I used to watch *anime* a lot in school. Because of that, I really liked the sound of Japanese, especially in songs. Over time, I became particularly fond of *Aimer* and her music, which deepened my connection to the language. (Arailym, December 2, 2024)

Similarly, Gilyana emphasized the significance of traditional Japanese culture, arguing that her motivation stemmed from a deep appreciation for classical Japanese traditions rather than contemporary pop culture.

Extract 4

At that time, I was already interested in Japanese history and culture, as well as *anime*, though *anime* didn't play a major role. I came across the *Edo* period—*samurai*, *geisha*, *kabuki* theatre—and became fascinated by it. This sparked my curiosity to explore how Japan evolved into the country we know today. All of this combined eventually led me to pursue oriental studies. (Gilyana, December 6, 2024)

While the participants had varying initial motivations for learning Japanese, they all described the language as “melodic”:

Extract 5

Well, it might sound sound clichés, but I find the Japanese language very beautiful and melodic. I was particularly drawn to how it sounds in *anime*, especially when spoken by my favorite characters. (Malika, December 3, 2024)

It appears that this perception of melodic qualities stemmed from participants' exposure to the language through the genre of music, movies, and most importantly *anime*.

Additionally, the phonetic and structural distinctiveness of Japanese, particularly in contrast to the participants' L1s (Kazakh or Russian), may have contributed to its perceived uniqueness.

4.2.2 Educational and Professional Motivations

The analysis further revealed that participants' motivations evolved as their proficiency in Japanese improved. More specifically, over time, their interest in the language shifted from cultural appreciation to more practical and goal-oriented purposes.

These emerging motivations were largely academic and career-driven, with participants expressing aspirations to study abroad in Japan, engage in cultural exchanges, travel to the country, or pursue professional opportunities requiring Japanese language skills.

The desire to study at a Japanese university was articulated by all participants. Five (Aigerim, Alisher, Aidyn, Andrey and Gilyana) said that they had already visited Japan for various purposes, including academic exchange, work-related activities, and travel. Their university offers short-term exchange program at partner universities in Japan for academically outstanding students. This opportunity serves as a strong motivator to study Japanese for both prospective applicants and enrolled students.

Extract 6

I started thinking seriously about it around March before graduating. I chose my university, though I hadn't picked a major yet. Then I found my *senpai* [upperclassman] who was on exchange in Japan—her blogs on Instagram really inspired me to go on exchange too. (Alisha, December 4, 2024)

Alisher, who had already spent over a year in Japan through two different programs, identified the exchange experience as his primary motivator for achieving high proficiency and obtaining the N3 level of the JLPT during his first two years at university.

Extract 7

The main goal was to pass the third level of JLPT as quickly as possible in order to go on an exchange. Moreover, getting good grades and having a good relationship with teachers was important too. (Alisher, December 7, 2024)

Alisher and four other participants who had already spent time in Japan through exchange programs expressed a desire to study Japanese at a deeper level than before. Their time in Japan allowed them to test their abilities, encounter new and unfamiliar challenges, and

experience the country firsthand, which further inspired them to continue their language studies.

Three participants (Gilyana, Aigerim, and Andrey) expressed aspirations to pursue a master's degree in Japan. This decision requires a greater level of commitment, as a graduate program in Japan typically spans at least two years, unlike short-term exchange programs that last no more than six months:

Extract 8

I would like to study at Waseda University, Department of Asian and Pacific Studies in Japan. There are professors there that I dream of working with. I even visited the campus on my second trip, and it was very inspiring. (Gilyana, December 6, 2024)

Amina and also noted that language proficiency would be very important to ensure a meaningful experience during their potential future life in Japan:

Extract 9

In the future, if I plan to live and work in a field where Japanese is the primary language, I will certainly need to speak it. Similarly, if I decide to study at a university in a Japan, I will have to face the reality that speaking Japanese is essential to understanding and engaging fully with my surroundings (Amina, December 8, 2024)

Obtaining higher JLPT certification levels was frequently mentioned as a crucial requirement for studying and working in Japan, making it a strong motivator. The necessity of passing the test influenced their study habits and long-term language learning goals:

Extract 10

In Japan, even the minimum wage is quite high. At first I thought about obtaining N1, but I realized that it was too labor-intensive and required a lot of resources. N2 is already enough for working and living in Japan (Aidyn, December 10, 2024).

4.2.3 Motivations Shaped by Social Factors

The analysis of interview data show significant factors that played a crucial role in the participants' language learning journey. The subthemes in this section relate to the social influences surrounding the participants, including the impact of peers, mentors, and societal perceptions of Japan that drive their motivation to continue learning Japanese.

Three participants (Arailym, Andrey and Alisha) mentioned that significant social agents—such as teachers and peers—played a pivotal role in sustaining their motivation for learning Japanese:

Extract 11

My senpai [upperclassman] posted on Instagram about offering Japanese lessons, and I signed up right away. After the first free class, I was hooked. She's only a year older than me but has accomplished so much, she's truly a role model.

(Alisha, December 4, 2024)

Another influential social factor was the presence of Japanese friends and acquaintances. For example, Aidyn shared his experience as an exchange student in Japan, emphasizing the role of his Japanese friend Taro, with whom he developed a close friendship during his studies:

Extract 12

On the last day, my friend Taro took me to the center of Tokyo in his car. We passed the parliament, and I looked at the buildings and the streets. At that moment, I thought: "I want to live here, walk these streets, drive on these roads."

This became my new motivation. Just coming to look wasn't enough. (Aidyn, December 10, 2024)

However, friendships made in Japan are not the only contributing factor. The presence of Japanese exchange students in Kazakhstan also played a crucial role for four participants. For instance, Andrey emphasized the importance of communication with these students:

Extract 13

One of the key moments was that our university had exchange programs with Japan. Japanese students came to us, and we had *kaiwa* [speaking] clubs where we communicated. They tried to learn Russian, and we tried to learn Japanese. This process was very inspiring. (Andrey, December 9, 2024)

4.3 Challenges in Learning and Advancing Japanese Proficiency

The previous section examined the motivational factors influencing students' decisions to learn Japanese, both prior to and after beginning their studies. Further analysis of interview data revealed significant challenges that were encountered during their language acquisition journey. This section will provide findings that correspond to the following themes, limitations of the university program, linguistic complexity of the Japanese, and other external factors that challenged the participants of this study.

4.3.1 Challenges Related to the University Program

One of the most significant challenges affecting participants' ability to study Japanese was related to the university's Japanese language program within the Oriental Studies Faculty. The participants frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the course design, the limited instructional hours, and the inadequate quality of the learning materials and shared the challenges directly related to the instructors and their impact on the learning process.

Participants (Aigerim, Gilyana, Alisher and Malika) stated that the insufficient instructional hours hindered their studies and created significant challenges:

Extract 14

Honestly, I feel like I'm a bit stuck. Unfortunately, Oriental Studies is a place where you learn more than just Japanese. We only had three hours of Japanese a week: one lecture and two seminars. It's very little and not enough. (Aigerim, December 5, 2024)

The instructional hours dedicated to Japanese language teaching varied depending on the students' year of study. However, the issue mentioned by Aigerim appears to persist across different academic years, as participants such as Malika and Alisher, second- and fourth-year students respectively, shared similar concerns.

Another challenge participants identified regarding the design and quality of learning materials used at the university. Arailym and four other participants (Amina, Jamilya, Aigerim and Alisha) expressed dissatisfaction with their textbook:

Extract 15

The textbooks we use are really outdated. In the first two years, we're using books like *Minna no Nihongo*, which are from the 90s. Honestly, they feel too old-fashioned for today's classes. Plus, we get almost no speaking practice, it's mostly theory with very little real-world application, which is definitely a downside.

(Arailym, December 2, 2024)

All participants reported that their initial textbook at the university was *Minna no Nihongo*, which has been used for an extended period by instructors in the Oriental Studies Faculty. According to participants the textbook lacks many essential elements necessary for effective Japanese language acquisition.

Another major institutional challenge that hindered the learning process was the lack of appropriate class placement. Participants, especially those with prior Japanese learning experience, frequently expressed frustration with the overall proficiency level of their peers. Since instructors adjusted the pace of instruction to match the majority of students, participants often felt that their learning progress was slowed. This issue is well illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with Amina:

Extract 16

I have more Japanese experience than my classmates, so I have to adjust to the group's level. We all follow the same pace—if you know less, you have to catch up; if you know more, you must slow down. (Amina, December 8, 2024)

Other participants (Andrey and Alisha) similarly mentioned how their prior exposure to Japanese, made university classes feel too slow-paced. Additionally, two participants (Arailym and Alisher) reported knowing classmates who had to take supplementary Japanese courses outside the university to keep up. However, one of the most demotivating challenges faced by participants was the discrepancies in proficiency levels among students. This issue was reported by Gilyana, Aigerim, and Jamilya:

Extract 17

The teachers were more focused on pulling them up, instead of working with us who wanted to develop further. This had a big impact. We had a difficult relationship in the group. I tried to help everyone, but in the end, I just burned out. (Gilyana, December 6, 2024)

Another category of challenges faced by the participants was the perceived inadequacy of teaching methods. It should be noted that the majority of faculty members in the Oriental Studies Faculty are local instructors, with a few exceptions when instructors

of Japanese nationality are present. Three participants (Alisher, Aigerim, Alisha) expressed dissatisfaction with their instructors as illustrated below:

Extract 18

Well, the *sensei*'s are generally good, but some of them, I would say, are not particularly interested. The lectures were conducted in a formal way. They explained the material, and that's it. The rest is up to you to figure out. (Alisher, December 7, 2024)

Other participants (Alisha, Gilyana, and Arailym) voiced concerns about the insufficient number of instructors available to support students adequately:

Extract 19

The problem is the lack of teachers. We had one teacher who tried to teach almost everything. Another was on maternity leave, the third came later, but her level was average, and she taught other subjects more. The Japanese [nationality] teacher only taught seniors, and even then with a limited number of hours. (Aigerim, December 5, 2024)

Additionally, three participants (Malika, Aidyn and Aigerim) reported frequent changes in their instructors, which further disrupted the learning process.

4.3.2 Challenges Related to Linguistic Features of Japanese

Another set of challenges described by the participants were inherent to the Japanese language itself. Japanese is widely regarded as one of the most challenging languages to learn due to its unique grammar, multiple writing systems, and extensive vocabulary. As a result, many participants expressed their struggles with various linguistic aspects. related to vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and *kanji*—Chinese characters that constitute one of the three writing systems used in Japanese.

Six participants (Gilyana, Aigerim, Alisha, Malika, Aidyn, and Arailym) identified Japanese grammar as a major obstacle in their language studies, as illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 20

The biggest difficulty is grammar. The first year was easy—just the basics. But now it's getting deeper, like how we studied Russian at school, with rules and sentence structure. The pace is faster, and I can't keep up even with extra study at home. (Malika, December 3, 2024)

A common challenge regarding Japanese grammar, as reported by participants, was the substantial number of grammatical structures and the difficulty of memorizing them. Three participants (Gilyana, Malika, Arailym) specifically noted that the similarity between certain grammar points in Japanese, further complicated their studies, as shown in the following extract:

Extract 21

Well, I understand N3 grammar for the most part. Sometimes I am asked to explain to others, as a teacher: what kind of grammar is this and what is it used for. But I myself sometimes make mistakes because there are so many similar grammars. (Gilyana, December 6, 2024)

As students progress to higher levels of proficiency, they are required to learn an increasing number of grammar points, many of which resemble each other in form and meaning, making the learning process even more demanding.

Although this next particular grammatical challenge was mentioned by only one participant (Alisha), it nonetheless represents a significant difficulty for learners of Japanese. As a second-year student, Alisha had recently studied counter suffixes in Japanese and shared her experience:

Extract 22

I remember one lesson where we learned numeral suffixes—how to count objects. It was around lesson 10 or 12. In Japanese, you can't just say numbers like in Russian, you have to use different counters depending on the object. For example, there's one for flat things like paper, another for long objects. Even now, I still can't remember all of them. (Alisha, December 4, 2024)

Alisha was referring to the Japanese counting system, which differs from languages such as English, Russian, and Kazakh, where numbers are used consistently across various contexts. In Japanese, the choice of counter suffix depends on the object being counted, which presents a challenge for learners unfamiliar with East Asian numeral systems. Alisha's account reflects a broader struggle among learners adjusting to structural differences in the language.

Moreover the participants whose L1 was Russian often reported greater difficulty with grammar compared to their Kazakh-speaking peers, who perceived greater similarities between Kazakh and Japanese. Three participants (Amina, Alisha, and Aigerim) specifically noted this disparity.

In addition to grammatical challenges, the Japanese writing system—particularly *kanji*—was another major source of difficulty. When asked about the most challenging aspect of Japanese, Arailym responded:

Extract 23

I struggled the most with the reading. You have to learn a lot of *kanji*, and it takes a lot of time and perseverance. Also difficult with grammar - you have to review it often, because I forget it easily. And the reading where everything is combined. (Arailym, December 2, 2024)

Notably, Japanese learners need to memorize over 2,000 *kanji* characters to achieve the highest level of proficiency. Participants are required to learn these characters progressively according to their language level, and many expressed their struggles with this aspect of learning.

The difficulty of learning *kanji* stems from several factors. First, the sheer number of characters poses a challenge. Second, each *kanji* can have multiple meanings and pronunciations depending on the context in which it is used. Third, as students advance in their studies, *kanji* characters become more complex, requiring more strokes to write.

Aigerim highlighted this challenge:

Extract 24

The first 100 or 300 *kanji* can be learned the way I did mnemonically with the drill exercises. But then the characters become more complex, their number increases, and it is simply impossible to learn them all. For example, one character, like “生” [*ikiru*], can have up to 19 readings. (Aigerim, December 5, 2024)

Since *kanji* are integral to vocabulary acquisition, students also reported difficulties with learning new words. Participants noted that vocabulary learning is inherently tied to mastering *kanji*, as many words incorporate these characters. The compounding effect of learning new vocabulary, alongside an increasing number of *kanji* and complex grammatical structures, contributes to the growing difficulty of mastering Japanese.

Beyond reading and writing, speaking was another major challenge identified by most participants. Speaking skills among Japanese learners often lag behind other language competencies:

Extract 25

Reading is one of the hardest parts for me now. But I want to learn to express myself in Japanese even better. I know that there are many people who have an N2

certificate but still can't communicate freely. If you can speak, that's already good.

(Andrey, December 9, 2024)

Although Andrey has attained N2-level proficiency, the level required for business communication in Japanese, he acknowledged that his speaking skills remained weaker than other language abilities. This issue was further emphasized by Alisher, who highlighted the structure of the JLPT. The JLPT assesses *kanji*, vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and listening skills, but it does not include a speaking component. Consequently, students and language instructors often neglect speaking practice.

Alisha also raised the issue of speaking clubs, which were mentioned by other participants as useful yet inconsistently maintained. While such clubs provide valuable speaking practice, Alisha noted that activities were often stalled or discontinued entirely. In addition to speaking clubs, some participants (Malika and Alisher) mentioned the presence of Japanese exchange students in their academic environment as an opportunity for language practice. However, these opportunities were not always structured or frequent enough to significantly impact their speaking proficiency:

Extract 26

When Japanese student people came to us, they were exchange students. In addition, our university cooperates with the Japanese embassy. We were sometimes invited to meetings with embassy staff. Once we even went bowling with them. We tried to speak Japanese, but mostly communicated in English, since our level of Japanese was not high enough for complex conversations. (Malika, December 3, 2024)

Beyond their university coursework, participants initially expected to engage more frequently with native Japanese speakers or highly proficient individuals to enhance their speaking skills. However, two participants (Arailym and Jamilya) expressed

disappointment upon realizing the scarcity of opportunities to converse with native speakers or advanced learners willing to engage in meaningful spoken interactions.

4.3.3 Challenges Related to Demotivation

While the previous sections reported the challenges stemming from the university program, additional factors related to demotivation emerged from the participants' accounts. For instance, Arailym shared her experience of being excluded from an exchange program in Japan due to unforeseen issues arising at her university's end. Instead of the promised opportunity to study in Japan, she was compelled to pursue Japanese studies in Korea instead:

Extract 27

During the first two years, my eyes were shining, I was very motivated to study Japanese. Now my motivation is becoming less and less. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I went to Korea for academic mobility. There I began to study Korean as a second language along with the Japanese, and now I am more drawn to Korean.

(Arailym, December 2, 2024)

Other demotivating factors were evident in the experiences of Gilyana and Andrey, who both struggled with preparing for the N1 level exam, the highest level of the JLPT.

For example, Gilyana shared the following:

Extract 28

To be honest, I feel very burnt out. It seems that I am already at an advanced level, I know a lot, but at the same time it seems like I know nothing. The methods that helped before no longer work, and looking for new ones also takes time and effort.

I started to feel this especially in my third or fourth year. (Gilyana, December 6, 2024)

Six participants (Aigerim, Gilyana, Jamilya, Arailym, Aidyn, and Amina) conveyed apprehensions regarding the obstacles they may encounter in adapting to Japanese society. The following interview extracts illustrate some of the participants' perceptions of Japanese people:

Extract 29

If you just ask a regular Japanese person on Instagram, they will most likely ignore you because they are not that open. I know from their mentality that they can only treat you as a stranger even if they have seen you personally or know you, or you work or study in the same field. (Amina, December 8, 2024)

Similarly Arailym and Aidyn both expressed their eagerness to work and live in Japan, yet they remain preoccupied with the challenges such a transition might entail:

Extract 30

Firstly, I think it will be difficult to integrate into Japanese society. You will still be a foreigner. Secondly, I don't really like their work hierarchy. No matter how long you live in Japan, you will always be an outsider. If you don't have a circle of people who are ready to accept you, it can be difficult. (Arailym, December 2, 2024)

Despite their strong motivation to learn Japanese and immerse themselves in life in Japan, they must undergo extensive mental preparation, which imposes an emotional burden even before their arrival.

4.4 Language Learning Strategies for Studying Japanese

This section will explore the strategies participants employed to overcome these challenges while learning Japanese as an additional language. To categorize these strategies, Oxford's (1990) LLSs classification is used (for more elaboration about this classification, see Chapter 2). The following table provides an overview of the strategies

reported by participants, highlighting which strategies were used by whom. Additionally, some categories have been expanded beyond Oxford's original framework to account for newly identified strategies that do not neatly fit within the existing classification.

Table 4

The Participants' Implementation of Japanese Language Learning Strategies

Strategy classification	Types of strategies	Strategies used by participants	Participants' names
Direct strategies	Memory	Using flashcards for <i>kanji</i> drills	Andrey, Alisher, Jamilya, Gilyana, Aigerim
	Cognitive	Using radicals in the <i>kanji</i>	Alisha, Jamilya, Amina
	Metacognitive	Creating a scheduled exercise	Alisher, Aigerim, Aidyn, Gilyana
Indirect Strategies	Social Strategies	Talking to native speakers	Aidyn, Andrey, Alisher, Aigerim

Note. Compiled by the author from the obtained data.

4.4.1 Memory Strategies

Memory strategies are one of the categories of direct strategies, which involve learners' direct efforts in language acquisition. These strategies encompass various techniques for storing and retrieving new information, such as mnemonics, word associations, and flashcards. Students often face challenges related to the vast number of *kanji* and vocabulary they need to learn. A predominant strategy reported by participants during the interviews falls under the umbrella of memory strategies. Given the complexity and sheer number of *kanji*, all participants mentioned using flashcard-based techniques at some point in their studies. For instance, participants frequently employed the *Anki*

memory strategy app to facilitate *kanji* learning through flashcards. The following extract illustrates this approach:

Extract 31

Anki is my main tool. I used to download ready-made cards for levels N3, N4, and N5, but now I add my own. For example, I watch *anime* or *dorama* (Japanese series), find interesting expressions, check them on Jisho.org (dictionary website), and then add them to *Anki*. Nowadays I repeat more than 200 *kanjis* and words in *Anki* every day. (Andrey, December 9, 2024)

However, *Anki* was not the only flashcard-based software mentioned by participants. Other applications, such as Discord and Quizlet, which share a similar structure to *Anki*, were also utilized. Aigerim, for example, reported using an additional website called *Kohii Kanji*, which employs Heisig's method (2011) for learning *kanji*:

Extract 32

There is a website that used this method to learn Heisig's method, the *Kohi Kanji* website, which worked as a dictionary and a trainer. This method focuses on memorizing the meanings of *kanji* through mnemonics, not on their readings. There you can create your own mnemonics or use existing ones. I set myself the goal of learning 100 *kanji* a day. It was a marathon that I finished in 40 days. (Aigerim, December 5, 2024)

Other participants, (Jamilya, Alisha, Gilyana, and Andrey) used alternative strategies for *kanji* learning. Since *kanji* can be challenging to write—often requiring more than ten strokes—participants leveraged their understanding of radicals, which are the fundamental components of *kanji* characters. For instance, complex *kanji* such as 語 (*go*, language) consist of smaller elements like 言 (*gen* speak), 五 (*go*, five), and 口 (*kuchi*,

mouth), each of which can facilitate the memorization of meaning and pronunciation. The following extract provides further evidence of this approach:

Extract 33

I learn them by keys (radicals). For example, the key “moon” - is also used in the meaning “meat”. I think this is useful, because radicals are needed for memorization anyway. (Alisha, December 4, 2024)

Alisha noted that recognizing radicals can be beneficial in the long term. For example, knowing that the radical 月 (often associated with meat or flesh) appears in several *kanji* related to body parts, such as 胃 stomach and 背 back, can aid in *kanji* recognition and retention.

While flashcard applications, mnemonics, and radical analysis are popular learning strategies among students, some participants, including Jamilya, Arailym, and Malika also mentioned traditional methods such as repeatedly writing *kanji* characters along with new vocabulary is crucial part of their learning process.

4.4.2 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies, according to Oxford (1990), involve direct manipulation of language material through various techniques such as practicing, analyzing, reasoning, and creating mental linkages. One common cognitive strategy among students was structured practice within the university curriculum. Aigerim described how lessons incorporated multiple learning approaches, such as reading texts, discussing vocabulary meanings, and completing grammar exercises:

Extract 34

In the last lesson, for example, we worked with the textbook *Chūkyū kara Manabu Nihongo*. It's a level N3 textbook, and we used it along with *Kanzen Master*. In the

lesson, we read texts, learn new words, discuss their meanings, and then do exercises on the grammar that appeared in the text. (Aigerim, December 5, 2024)

Similarly, Arailym highlighted how grammar application was reinforced through writing activities during her studies at the university, noting that structured practice allowed her to internalize grammatical rules more effectively. Several participants reported using cognitive strategies when reading authentic materials in Japanese. Jamilya described how she analyzed Japanese texts by comparing them with their translations:

Extract 35

Last summer I finished reading Natsume Soseki. I held the original in one hand, and the translation in the other. I really liked it. After reading it, I understood the references in the games. I realized that the translation can greatly change the context of the scene. (Jamilya, December 1, 2024)

By actively comparing, analyzing, and deriving meaning from texts, participants engaged in cognitive processing that reinforced language comprehension and retention.

Participants also shared their listening strategies and noted that they play a crucial role in cognitive engagement. Arailym noted that exposure to podcasts and subtitled dramas helped her process authentic speech, while Andrey and other participants improved their listening skills by watching *anime* in original:

Extract 36

When I was preparing for N3, I watched *anime* in Japanese with subtitles, but I tried not to read them, so that I could listen and understand more. I also read light novels. It was not easy for my level, but it gave me an idea of what I could strive for. (Andrey, December 9, 2024)

Moreover, Arailym emphasized the importance of application rather than mere memorization, stressing that using grammar in writing and speaking was crucial for

retention. She found that practicing sentence formation and incorporating new structures into her daily communication allowed her to grasp grammatical concepts more naturally.

4.4.3 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies involve learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their language learning process. The participants in this study demonstrated a strong awareness of their learning habits and used structured approaches to enhance their efficiency. Participants employed a variety of metacognitive strategies to structure their learning process effectively. Many participants emphasized the importance of organization and time management to maintain a sustainable study routine.

For instance, Arailym reported adopting a structured approach by designating specific days for different language skills, listening, reading, and *kanji* study

Extract 37

I divide my studies into different aspects. For example, I spend one day listening, one day reading, and one day learning *kanji*. This way, everything doesn't get mixed up, and it's easier for me to concentrate. (Arailym, December 2, 2024)

Time management is another key aspect of metacognitive regulation. Gilyana and Andrey describe allocating multiple hours per day to language learning, particularly on weekends when they have more uninterrupted time.

Another metacognitive strategy used by Alisher and Aidyn was the studying during commute time to university in order to engage with Japanese, effectively turning passive moments into active study sessions. In addition to managing time, some students take a strategic approach to immersive learning. Amina and Jamilya said the importance of surrounding oneself with Japanese content including reading news, listening to podcasts, watching videos, and conversing with native speakers:

Extract 38

It might sound extreme, but if there are 24 hours in a day, I spend at least 12 in the Japanese world. I'm always surrounded by songs, Twitter, novels, games. These days, I make sure to watch at least one episode of Kamen Rider every day.

(Jamilya, December 1, 2024)

Several participants (Aigerim, Alisha and Amina) reflect on their experiences with textbooks, highlighting the challenges of finding suitable materials for self-study. This ability to critically assess and select appropriate learning resources reflects an advanced level of metacognitive awareness.

Extract 39

I found other textbooks like *Soumatome*. In addition, there are other series like *Try!* N4 and N3. These books are clearly divided by levels and cover topics that are not covered in *Minna no Nihongo*. (Malika, December 3, 2024)

Despite variations in individual approaches, a common thread among participants was the proactive regulation of their learning process, ensuring efficiency and long-term engagement.

4.4.4 Social Strategies

Students employ a range of social strategies to enhance their Japanese proficiency, often seeking opportunities for conversation practice despite limited formal instruction time. These strategies include participating in language clubs, engaging with native speakers, and integrating Japanese into daily interactions.

Language clubs offer an avenue for social learning where students can interact with native speakers. However, participation varies based on individual personality traits, some students actively engage, while others, particularly introverts, struggle to establish connections with Japanese speakers. Beyond institutional settings, students take

independent steps to incorporate Japanese into their everyday lives. Alisher shared how he engages in online conversations with Japanese friends and practices shadowing techniques to refine his spoken skills. Shadowing is a method that involves listening to native speech and repeating it simultaneously. This approach helps him improve pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm, making his spoken Japanese sound more natural.

Direct engagement with native speakers is considered a crucial learning opportunity. Andrey, for example, deliberately avoids using English when communicating with Japanese acquaintances:

Extract 40

I only spoke Japanese with Japanese friends at university. Some people preferred to use English, but for me, that felt like a missed opportunity. I wanted to work on the language through practice, even if it was small conversations or questions.

(Andrey, December 9, 2024)

While structured learning environments provide some support, the most dedicated learners actively create their own opportunities—whether by attending language clubs, forming study groups, or maintaining consistent interactions with Japanese speakers. These efforts highlight the importance of social engagement in language acquisition, particularly in contexts where access to native speakers is scarce.

4.4.5 The Role of AI and English in Learning Japanese

The previous sections explored how students employ various social strategies to enhance their Japanese language skills, including engaging with language clubs and native speakers. However, beyond face-to-face interactions, many learners also rely heavily on artificial intelligence (AI), and their knowledge of English to support their studies. This section reports how students strategically use online platforms, AI-based tools, and English-language materials to facilitate their Japanese learning process.

With the rise of AI-based tools, all participants reported finding ways to enhance their learning experience. AI-powered platforms provide instant explanations, facilitate conversation practice, and even generate customized learning materials. The following extract highlight how AI has become an integral part of participants' study process:

Extract 41

I enter the missing topics into ChatGPT, and it explains where these constructs are used, what the exceptions are, and even links them to radicals if needed. This is very helpful, especially when there is no one to explain the material. (Aidyn, December 10, 2024)

Usage of AI chatbots such as ChatGPT among participants, to simulate conversations in Japanese is very frequent. Amina shared her experience using ChatGPT as a speaking partner:

Extract 42

When it comes to learning Japanese—and even just having a conversation—AI can now talk in pretty much any language, including Japanese. And honestly, the level is so good, it feels like you're chatting with a native speaker. (Amina, December 8, 2024)

Additionally, AI-assisted translation services such as DeepL, help learners refine their sentences by comparing their own translations with AI-generated suggestions. Some students also rely on AI-generated flashcards to streamline vocabulary acquisition, making it easier to review and memorize *kanji*.

Lastly, given the vast amount of Japanese language resources available in English, many students strategically leverage their English proficiency to access high-quality learning materials. The participants (Aidyn, Gilyana, Andrey and Aigerim) shared their experiences during the interviews in the following extract demonstrates how English plays

a crucial role in their Japanese language studies. Moreover, English opens the door to a broader range of online content, including academic articles, video tutorials, and discussion forums. Some students also use their English skills to connect with Japanese speakers who are learning English, engaging in language exchange partnerships that benefit both parties. For those using digital applications, English is often the default interface language, making it essential for accessing AI tools, mobile apps, and language learning software.

4.5 Summary

This chapter presented in detail the key findings obtained from the data collection procedures described in the methodology chapter. The findings were organized into three major themes: motivations, challenges, and LLSs used by the participants during their process of learning Japanese. The major conclusions from each theme are as follows: participants had become interested in Japanese, mainly through popular culture, long before entering their university programs. Over the years of studying Japanese, they developed their motivations further, with more senior students demonstrating a more complex network of motives, that include aspirations to study in Japan and a desire to engage with Japanese culture at a deeper level. Acquiring the language, however, was revealed to be challenging. Both the university program and the linguistic features of Japanese were cited as significant obstacles. University-related issues, for example, included insufficient instruction time and a rigid cohort system, while language-related challenges often involved an overwhelming amount of vocabulary and *kanji*. Nevertheless, participants shared various strategies they used to overcome these difficulties, such as special memorization techniques, the use of language learning applications, and novel tools like AI. The next chapter, Discussion, will further analyze these findings, compare

them with previous empirical studies, and present the analysis according to each theme identified in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the current research presented in Chapter 4, which were derived from data collected through two qualitative research methods: narrative writings and individual semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that undergraduate students vary in their motivations to learn Japanese and identified the key factors that sustain their commitment despite the challenges they face, both in the university setting and with the language itself. The findings also shed light on the language learning strategies (LLSs) they use to overcome these difficulties and continue progressing in their language learning journey.

As explained in Chapter 1, this qualitative study is the first Central Asia to explore the experiences of a group of undergraduate students learning Japanese, with a specific focus on their reasons for learning their Japanese language proficiency and the LLSs they used to overcome various challenges. The present study was theoretically underpinned by Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) and Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies (LLSs). This chapter begins by revisiting the theoretical framework used in this study before discussing the findings in relation to the three research questions and previous relevant literature. The discussion is structured around three main sections, each corresponding to a specific research question of this study:

1. What motivated the participants to learn Japanese as an additional language?
2. What challenges did they encounter while learning Japanese?
3. How did they cope with these challenges (i.e., their language learning strategy use)?

5.1 Revisiting the Theoretical Framework

While Chapter 2 offered a detailed analysis of the theoretical framework shaping this qualitative study, a brief recap here is necessary before discussing the research

questions. This study used Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS, which consists of three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self reflects language learners' aspirations, linking language proficiency to their personal ambitions (Dörnyei, 2009). That is, it embodies a representation of one's hopes, ambitions, and long-term objectives of learning the target language across multiple life domains, including personal growth, career development, and social relationships. The ought-to L2 self represents an individual's future vision shaped primarily by the expectations and demands of influential figures such as parents, teachers, and society. It reflects the pressure to conform to external obligations or to avoid potential negative outcomes rather than personal aspirations (Ushioda, 2014). The L2 learning experience encompasses immediate influences on motivation, including classroom interactions, engaging lessons, and supportive feedback. The present study explored the motivations of students learning Japanese in Kazakhstan, demonstrating how their motivations are shaped by their ideal L2 selves, personal aspirations, external pressures, and learning environments.

The present study also explored the strategies that the participants used to study Japanese. These strategies were grouped according to Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs. Oxford categorizes LLSs into direct (memory, cognitive, compensation) and indirect (metacognitive, affective, social) strategies (for more elaboration of Oxford's LLSs classification, see Chapter 2). By integrating L2MSS with Oxford's taxonomy the present study explored the interplay between motivation and strategic behaviors in Japanese language learning.

5.2 What Motivated the Participants to Learn Japanese as an Additional Language?

Building on the thematic analysis presented in Chapter 4, the key themes that emerged from both the narrative writings and semi-structured interviews highlight participants' motivations, which were primarily driven by cultural interest and aspirations

for linguistic proficiency. This section is structured around factors that motivated the participants the most: the ideal L2 self, international posture, near-peer role models, and ought-to L2 self.

5.2.1 Ideal L2 self

As the findings showed, *anime* and *manga* (Japanese animated series and films and comics) were the primary cultural influences. Other media, such as music and video games, influenced four. Some participants also shared that their appreciation of traditional Japanese culture also shaped academic choices. Through the lens of Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS, the aforementioned motivational factors of participants can be categorized under the ideal L2 self, which conceptualizes motivation as the desire to close the gap between one's current self and envisioned future self.

Before learning Japanese, the participants passively engaged with Japanese pop culture without a fully formed ideal L2 self. This aligns with Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) Process Model of L2 Motivation, where interest in Japanese media marked the preactional phase. For example, two participants (Malika and Aidyn) initially appreciated Japanese culture, but only after choosing formal language education and Oriental Studies did they transition into the actional phase, as described in the Rubicon model of action phases (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2017). This finding aligns with de Burgh-Hirabe's (2018) study on 16 university students learning Japanese as a foreign language in New Zealand, which similarly revealed the evolving nature of motivation in language learning. The study found that students' initial motivations stemmed from cultural interest and positive experiences with the language, reflecting an early preactional phase where enthusiasm for Japanese media and culture played a significant role.

Similarly, Huan and Feng (2019), in their quantitative study on Chinese university students' motivational expressions through metaphors, found that first and second-year

students often described their motivations using terms such as Japanese idols, games, and *anime*.

5.2.2 International Posture

As participants progressed in their studies, their motivations increasingly aligned with academic and professional aspirations, such as studying, traveling, or working in Japan. Many pointed to exchange opportunities and graduate programs as key motivators, alongside the desire to attain advanced language proficiency for future careers. These evolving goals reflect a growing alignment with their ideal L2 selves, particularly in connection with long- and short-term study abroad experiences (see Extracts 8-10).

Furthermore, a significant number of participants aspired to live and work in Japan, even expressing a desire to integrate into Japanese society, reinforcing the presence of a well-developed ideal L2 self. This was particularly evident among third and fourth-year students. Moreover, achieving high levels of Japanese proficiency was another defining trait of participants with strong ideal L2 selves, as all participants expressed the goal of attaining advanced linguistic competence. This finding aligns with Yashima's (2002) concept of international posture, which was originally introduced in the Japanese context to describe English learners' openness toward international communication and their desire to study or work abroad.

Although international posture initially focused on English language learners, recent research has extended its relevance to languages other than English (LOTes), particularly within the multilingual turn (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Henry, 2017). These studies demonstrate that international posture is not limited to English but can also be observed in learners of Japanese and other LOTes, where similar desires to engage with the target language community and culture shape learners' ideal L2 selves. In this study, the participants' aspirations to study or work in Japan, and their increasing interest in

integrating into Japanese society, reflect this expanded, multilingual understanding of international posture.

The emergence of a stronger ideal L2 self is also reflected in Nakamura's (2015) qualitative study on 13 Australian university students enrolled in Japanese language courses. Students in that study reported that their motivation initially stemmed from an interest in Japanese media and culture, but as they progressed in their studies, they developed a clearer vision of themselves as future users of the language, whether as students, professionals, or long-term residents in Japan.

However, while most participants of the present study, linked higher proficiency with the goal of living and working in Japan, Jamilya provided an exception, as she stated that residing in Japan was not part of her long-term vision. This suggests that while the ideal L2 self often aligns with aspirations to live in Japan among the participants, it does not universally necessitate relocation, highlighting the individualized nature of language learning motivation.

5.2.3 Near-Peer Role Models

Another important finding concern the crucial role is the crucial role of peers in motivating and supporting participants in their language learning journey. The participants noted that close relationships and speaking clubs significantly contributed to their motivation. This aligns with the NPRMs concept, which refers to individuals who are at a similar proficiency level, such as classmates or colleagues, and share common characteristics, including interests, goals, and social status (Murphey, 1998). NPRMs have been linked to motivation studies, as they can enhance and sustain language learners' motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Similar to the benefits of speaking clubs reported by the participants in this study, Murphey and Murakami's (1998) quasi-empirical mixed-method study involving 130 Japanese university students found that NPRMs

increased students' motivation and excitement toward learning English. Additionally, NPRMs can contribute to the development and maintenance of a learner's ideal L2 self. For instance, Hajar's (2025) qualitative study on Arabic language learners in Kazakhstan concluded that establishing relationships with NPRMs significantly increased participants' motivation.

Recent research continues to affirm the motivational potential of NPRMs in language learning. For instance, Hooper et al., (2025), in a study conducted in Japanese higher education, explored how NPRMs can support learners' basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—within English language classrooms. Their findings demonstrate the powerful influence of relatable role models in fostering a more engaging and self-determined learning environment, thereby highlighting the social-emotional dimensions of language motivation.

Moreover, even outside the Japanese context, near-peer modeling remains highly relevant. Wang (2023), working with Chinese undergraduates learning LOTE, demonstrated that exposure to NPRM contributed significantly to learners' construction of ideal LOTE and multilingual selves. This suggests that such interventions are not only effective in English learning but also play a central role in promoting motivation for a wide range of languages. These insights support the idea that NPRMs influence serves as a bridge between learners' current selves and their aspirational identities in multilingual contexts.

5.2.4 Ought-to L2 self

Another key component of Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS is the ought-to L2 self, which reflects external pressures and obligations that drive language learning. Participants such as Amina and Alisha highlighted how their university environment played a significant role in shaping their motivation. Their language learning was driven by structured

academic requirements, including assigned coursework, regular exams, and instructor-imposed deadlines, which compelled them to engage with Japanese. Unlike the intrinsic aspirations associated with the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self stems from perceived responsibilities, expectations, or situational constraints.

The findings of the present qualitative study align with previous research on the ought-to L2 self in second language acquisition, which similarly identifies external obligations as a key driving force in language learning motivation (Thompson, 2017). For example, a qualitative study by Siridetkoon and Dewaele (2017) on seven Thai university students majoring in languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese found that the ought-to L2 self played a significant role in students' motivation, as they feared failing exams due to their direct impact on future career prospects.

However, despite family influence being one of the most influential factors in ought-to-self-motivation, the present study did not find a correlation between family and motivation. These differences contrast with studies on foreign language learners in other similar Asian contexts, such as Taguchi et al. (2009) and Kormos et al. (2011), who observed that family expectations played a major role in shaping students' motivational thinking. For instance, Su et al., (2023) found that family influence on motivation was high, among Chinese second-year students learning Korean as a mandatory language course for the first two years.

The differences from previous studies conducted in Asian contexts may be due to the present study focusing on students learning Japanese as a foreign language, specifically those who chose it as their university major. These findings concur with studies by Huang (2019) and Thompson (2017), which examined learners of LOTEs and found that their ought-to L2 self tends to be weaker than ideal L2 self. Similarly, de Burgh-Hirabe's (2018) study on New Zealand students studying Japanese reported the lowest mean value for the

ought-to L2 self, implying that students chose to study Japanese voluntarily, similar to the findings of the present study. One possible explanation for this can be found in a meta-analysis by Patall et al. (2008), which concluded that having a choice can positively affect intrinsic motivation among both adults and children. Although Patall et al. (2008) did not focus specifically on language learning, their findings on intrinsic motivation align with the L2MSS framework and provide insights into the motivations of the present study's participants. Similarly to the present study, mixed methods study by Yang and Liang-Itsara (2024) on Thai undergraduate students learning LOTEs (Japanese, Korean, French, and Chinese) found that their motivation was primarily driven by intrinsic factors such as cultural interest and personal aspirations rather than external pressures like family expectations.

5.3 What Challenges Did the Participants Encounter While Learning Japanese?

The main themes presented in Chapter 4 regarding the challenges participants faced while studying Japanese as a foreign language can be summarized into two categories: challenges related to the language learning experience at the university and difficulties specifically tied to the process of learning Japanese.

5.3.1 Institutional Challenges in University-Based Language Learning

The challenges associated with university-based language learning were primarily connected to curriculum design and the quality of teaching materials in the Oriental Studies Faculty. Several studies have reported that curriculum design has a significant impact on students' motivation and overall language acquisition. For instance, Brown (2009) argues that a well-structured curriculum should balance explicit grammar instruction, communicative activities, and cultural immersion. However, Butler (2015) found that many Asian university programs, particularly those teaching foreign languages, tend to emphasize rote memorization and test preparation rather than interactive and

meaningful learning experiences. This parallels the findings of Wang and Kirkpatrick (2019), who observed that Chinese university students often struggle with a rigid curriculum that prioritizes passive knowledge over active language use.

Additionally, participants in the present study discussed issues related to the quality of instruction, particularly regarding teacher-student interaction and the shortage of qualified teaching staff. This aligns with Jeon and Lee's (2006) study on Korean EFL programs, which found that large class sizes and teacher-centered instruction often limit students' opportunities to practice speaking. Similarly, Nagatomo (2016) observed that in Japanese university settings, language instruction tends to focus heavily on grammatical accuracy rather than communicative competence, leading to frustration among learners. These institutional challenges reflect broader structural issues in language education, where a lack of qualified instructors and outdated teaching methodologies can hinder students' progress.

5.3.2 Linguistic Challenges in Acquiring Japanese as a Foreign Language

Beyond the structural aspects of language learning, participants also encountered significant difficulties with Japanese itself. Many reported struggles with understanding and memorizing Japanese grammar due to the sheer quantity and uniqueness of grammatical structures. Similarly a quantitative study by Kanno (2008) argues that Japanese grammar presents significant challenges for learners due to its topic-prominent structure and the heavy reliance on context, which contrasts with subject-prominent languages like English. Likewise, Mori (2020) found that the complex system of particles, verb conjugations, and politeness levels in Japanese can lead to cognitive overload for second-language learners.

Vocabulary acquisition and *kanji* memorization was also a major obstacle for the participants of the present study, as they found the extensive character-based writing

system challenging to master (see Extracts 20-25). This finding aligns with McBride (2016), who argues that learning logographic writing systems, such as *kanji* or Chinese characters, requires a significantly different cognitive approach compared to alphabetic scripts. Research comparing Japanese and Chinese language learners shows that while both groups struggle with character memorization, Chinese learners tend to develop more efficient mnemonic strategies due to their early exposure to character-based writing (Shen, 2005). Conversely, learners from alphabetic language backgrounds often find *kanji* acquisition particularly difficult due to the lack of phonetic cues, making memorization more effort-intensive (Koda, 2007).

Furthermore, participants expressed considerable difficulty with speaking Japanese, particularly in terms of pronunciation, fluency, and confidence in real-life conversations. Some noted that the lack of sufficient speaking practice within their academic environment, coupled with limited opportunities to engage with native speakers, hindered their ability to develop oral proficiency. This is consistent with Dörnyei and Kormos (2000), reported that speaking anxiety and lack of exposure to authentic language use are among the biggest barriers to oral proficiency in second-language acquisition. Similarly, Park (2011) found that Korean students who had more interaction with native speakers and engaged in real-world communication activities developed better speaking skills compared to those who relied solely on classroom-based instruction.

However, for Japanese language learners, Taguchi (2014) notes that a lack of readily available immersive experiences often results in lower fluency and hesitancy in conversation. This highlights the importance of incorporating more speaking opportunities into Japanese language programs, such as conversation partners or structured interaction with 'native' or competent speakers of Japanese (Matsumoto & Obana, 2001).

5.4 How Did the Participants Cope with Their Challenges While Learning Japanese?

The previous sections outlined the key challenges faced by participants while learning Japanese, ranging from institutional limitations to linguistic complexities. This section discusses the strategies participants employed to address these difficulties, using Oxford's (1990) LLSs framework. Additionally, newer strategies, such as the use of AI tools, are explored to reflect evolving learning practices.

5.4.1 Direct Strategies

One of the most frequently reported strategies involved memory techniques for mastering *kanji* and vocabulary. Participants primarily relied on flashcards, particularly Anki, to systematically review *kanji* and words (see Extracts 31-35). This aligns with findings from Kornell and Bjork (2008), who demonstrated that spaced repetition significantly enhances long-term retention. Other learners incorporated mnemonics and radical decomposition, using Heisig's (2011) method to break down complex *kanji* into recognizable components. Research by Shen (2005) on Chinese language learners similarly found that radical awareness plays a crucial role in character memorization. However, while some participants preferred digital flashcards, others emphasized traditional handwriting practice to reinforce memory through muscle movement. This mirrors Tan et al.'s (2013) study, which found that writing Chinese characters by hand improves recall compared to typing. While digital tools offer efficiency, writing-based recall remains essential for *kanji* mastery.

To internalize grammar and vocabulary, learners engaged in cognitive strategies such as structured reading and contextual learning. Many followed a step-by-step reading progression, moving from simplified materials (e.g., fairy tales, graded readers) to authentic texts (e.g., Natsume Soseki's novels, online articles). This supports Nation's (2001) argument that comprehensible input at an appropriate difficulty level accelerates

language acquisition. Listening strategies were also widely used, with participants watching *anime* and dramas with and without subtitles to train comprehension. This aligns with Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) study, which emphasizes active listening strategies—starting with subtitles and gradually transitioning to pure audio input—to enhance language processing. Grammar learning posed significant challenges, prompting participants to shift from rote memorization to learning grammar in context. This is consistent with Ellis (2006), who argues that exposure to grammatical structures in meaningful contexts is more effective than isolated rule learning.

5.4.2 Indirect strategies

Effective time management and study planning were key metacognitive strategies employed by participants. Many structured their study routines by allocating specific days for listening, reading, and *kanji* study, ensuring a balanced approach. Wenden (1991) similarly found that successful learners actively plan and monitor their language learning progress. Participants also integrated language study into their daily lives, using commuting time for flashcard review and listening practice. This aligns with Dörnyei's (2005) self-regulation theory, which highlights the importance of incorporating language learning into daily routines for sustained motivation. Beyond scheduling, self-evaluation and resource selection played a critical role. Learners frequently reassessed their materials, opting for textbooks that best suited their needs.

Participants reported using various social strategies to compensate for limited speaking opportunities. Peer collaboration played a crucial role, with learners practicing with classmates and forming study groups. However, when it comes to speaking with natives, some of the participants found it challenging, particularly due to language anxiety. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified foreign language anxiety as a key factor inhibiting speaking performance.

5.4.3 The Role of AI as a Facilitator in Language Learning

The participants' accounts also reflected the emerging trend of using AI tools.. Many reported relying on AI-powered chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT) to generate explanations, provide grammar breakdowns, and create example sentences (see Extract 41). Additionally, some learners used AI-based pronunciation and conversation simulators, engaging in text-to-speech and speech recognition exercises. Al-Hoorie and Al-Shakhori (2025) argue that AI tools such as ChatGPT have great potential for use in classroom settings for language learners. More specifically, they claim that such tools are capable of enhancing students' engagement with the target language through conversations with AI and the creation of hands-on games, facilitating and automating self-learning by allowing students to study independently with appropriate AI language assessments, thereby enabling students to check their work at any time.

Similarly, Çobanoğulları (2024) asserts that ChatGPT can be used by students anytime and anywhere to provide teacher-like assistance and serve as an interactive tool for practicing both written and spoken language. However, research warns that such AI tools may bring to both learners and teachers, noting that their use involves certain risks (Al-Hoorie & Al-Shakhori, 2025; Çobanoğulları, 2024). Nevertheless, the findings from the present study suggest that, due to limited exposure to native or proficient speakers and restricted language instruction time with university teachers, the participants benefited from using ChatGPT and shared several ways of interacting with such large language models to support their Japanese learning. This reflects findings by Godwin-Jones (2022), who concludes that AI-assisted learning can enhance personalized language acquisition by adapting to learners' needs.

5.5 Summary

This chapter critically discussed the main findings of the study in relation to the three research questions posed by the present thesis, additional relevant literature not addressed in the literature review chapter, and the theoretical framework underpinning this empirical study. It highlighted participants' motivations and connected them to the theoretical framework, particularly notions such as near-peer role models and international posture. Moreover, the challenges encountered by participants were correlated with findings from previous studies, along with the strategies they adopted to overcome these difficulties, including the emerging role of AI tools. The next chapter, Conclusion, will summarize the key findings, discuss the study's limitations, propose practical implications, and suggest directions for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The previous chapter presented a discussion of the significant findings of the current research, focusing on the key factors that motivated ten undergraduate students, aged 19 to 22, majoring in Oriental Studies, to learn Japanese as a primary language. It also examined the challenges they encountered while learning Japanese and the language learning strategies (LLSs) they employed to overcome these obstacles. This qualitative empirical study, grounded in narrative writing and semi-structured interviews, aimed to explore what motivated students to learn Japanese as an additional language, what difficulties they faced in the process, and how they coped with these challenges. This final chapter presents the central conclusions of the study, acknowledges its key strengths and limitations, and concludes by discussing pedagogical and policy implications, followed by recommendations for future research.

6.1 Summary of Major Findings

The first research question of the present study was to explore the motivations for learning Japanese at the university among students in Kazakhstan. Initially, cultural interest was the major driving force behind their decision to pursue higher education in this field. However, this motivation further developed and evolved as the participants became more aware of the potential uses of the language and their future aspirations, such as hopes of living, studying, and working in Japan. Thus, the goal of mastering the language became a crucial motivating factor for all participants, albeit at varying levels of proficiency. These findings can be connected to the notion of the ideal L2 self within Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS framework, as well as the concept of international posture proposed by Yashima (2002). Other motivational factors included the NPRMs concept introduced by Murphey (1998). This helps explain why participants reported being positively influenced by their peers—such as upperclassmen and international friends—

who were also learning Japanese. These peer influences encouraged them to persist in their studies despite various challenges.

The second research question of the present study was to identify the challenges faced by students learning Japanese at the university level in Kazakhstan. It was revealed that there were two major categories of challenges: those directly related to the Japanese language itself, and those stemming from structural barriers within the university program. Language-related challenges were largely attributed to the uniqueness of Japanese—its grammar, writing system (particularly the Chinese characters, or *kanji*), pronunciation, and the overwhelming volume of content to memorize. Program-related challenges included issues with instructors and their teaching methods, inadequate and outdated teaching materials provided by the university, and a rigid cohort system where students of varying proficiency levels studied together. The influence of global English, which is often associated with decreasing motivation to learn other languages, was not found to be a demotivating factor in this study. In fact, participants noted that their knowledge of English helped them learn Japanese more effectively, as many textbooks and learning materials were available in English.

Finally, the third research question of the present study focused on identifying the LLSs used by participants to overcome challenges and make their learning journey more efficient. The strategies were categorized according to Oxford's (1990) LLSs framework. Findings revealed that participants relied heavily on memory strategies, which is understandable given the nature of Japanese, which requires the memorization of extensive vocabulary, *kanji*, and grammar. The learning of *kanji* also aligned with cognitive strategies such as the use of mnemonics, where learners assigned meanings to characters to facilitate memorization. Participants described how they organized their language learning processes and allocated time across various language disciplines, indicating the use of

indirect strategies, particularly metacognitive ones. To compensate for the lack of formal speaking lessons, the participants reported often relied on speaking clubs initiated by their peers at the university to practice dialogic skills. Beyond the traditional strategies outlined in Oxford's (1990) framework, the findings revealed how students use innovative approaches, such as the use of artificial intelligence tools to practice grammar, expand vocabulary, and simulate speaking practice. These findings suggest that language learners are creating their own methods independently and are continually seeking new ways to acquire language through the integration of emerging technologies.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of This Study

The present study has several noteworthy strengths that contribute to its originality and scholarly significance. First, it is the first empirical study in Kazakhstan that examines university students' motivations and LLSs for learning Japanese, thereby filling a critical research gap in Central Asia, English has predominantly been the focus of SLA research. By centering on Japanese—an underrepresented language in SLA studies, particularly in Kazakhstan—this study expands the scope of the multilingual turn and supports recent calls by scholars such as Ushioda and Dörnyei for greater attention to LOTEs.

Another strength lies in the qualitative nature of the research, which allowed for a rich, in-depth exploration of students' experiences. As supported by Ushioda (2021), qualitative research is particularly effective for capturing the situated, dynamic, and personalized nature of L2 motivation. The use of semi-structured interviews alongside narrative essays provided a means of triangulating data sources, thus enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings. These methods facilitated the participants' self-expression and allowed for the emergence of nuanced insights into their motivation, identities, and strategic responses to challenges. Importantly, the study explored both

motivational factors and LLSs, offering a more holistic picture of the participants' language learning journeys.

This dual focus reflects a more integrated approach, which many studies in the field have overlooked by focusing exclusively on either motivation or strategy. Moreover, the participants were drawn from a highly selective university, and all had demonstrated significant proficiency in Japanese (JLPT levels N4–N2), ensuring that their insights were informed by sustained engagement with the language. The sample also maintained a gender-diverse balance (3 male and 7 female participants) and represented students from different years of study and linguistic backgrounds (Kazakh and Russian mediums of instruction), allowing for a diverse yet coherent understanding of the phenomenon.

However, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small with 10 participants, which is common in qualitative studies aiming for depth over breadth, but it may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the participants offered rich insights, they represent a specific demographic—high-achieving university students in one academic program—which may not reflect the broader population of Japanese learners in Kazakhstan, such as school-aged learners or self-taught individuals.

Secondly, although the study successfully explored individual learners' perspectives, it did not include the voices of language teachers, who could have offered valuable contextual information and triangulated the students' self-reported motivations and strategies. Including teacher perspectives in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical dynamics that influence motivation and strategy use.

Thirdly, another limitation relates to the timeframe of the study, which was relatively short. Since motivation is a dynamic and evolving construct, a longitudinal

design would have allowed for tracking changes in motivation and strategy use over time, especially as students progress through different academic stages.

Finally, while the study effectively employed qualitative methods, it did not use a larger-scale qualitative data set such as diaries or classroom observations, which might have added further depth and authenticity to the findings. However, despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights and paves the way for future research to build upon its findings in other underrepresented contexts and languages.

6.3 Implications of This Study

The following sections present the practical implications of the present study, categorized into pedagogical and policy-level recommendations. These implications are grounded in the participants' reported experiences and are intended to inform improvements in language teaching practices and institutional policies.

6.3.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have seven pedagogical implications for improving Japanese language education in Kazakhstan. First, it is evident that while senior students demonstrated a well-developed ideal L2 self, the same cannot be said for younger learners in the earlier years of their studies. This highlights the need for instructors to actively integrate motivational strategies into their teaching practices—particularly those that help students envision their future selves using Japanese. According to Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS, cultivating learners' ideal L2 selves can significantly enhance their persistence and goal-oriented learning behavior. Thus, educators should incorporate classroom activities that encourage learners to imagine themselves living, studying, or working in Japan.

Second, another key pedagogical insight from this study is the critical role that leisure activities, such as *anime*, *manga*, and Japanese pop culture, played in sparking and

sustaining student motivation. Given the strong influence of such cultural interests, instructors are encouraged to incorporate these elements into their lesson plans in meaningful ways. Doing so not only validates learners' interests but also promotes higher engagement through content that resonates with students' everyday lives and aspirations.

Third, the study found that many participants viewed English not as a competing language but rather as a facilitating tool for learning Japanese. In fact, participants noted that English-language resources were instrumental in helping them access Japanese textbooks and media. This suggests that it is important to encourage multilingual awareness and showing students how proficiency in one language—particularly English—can serve as a resource in learning others, a finding that aligns with the multilingual turn in SLA (May, 2014; Ortega, 2019).

Fourth, this study revealed that participants' LLSs were largely self-developed. Students frequently stated that they had not been formally taught effective strategies by instructors but rather discovered them through personal experimentation. This points to an urgent need for educators to introduce, model, and scaffold a wider range of LLSs, which is beyond traditional memory strategies for *kanji*. New strategies that include radical memorization, metacognitive time management, and the use of AI-based language learning tools should be implemented for better language acquisition (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2017).

Fifth, the findings of this study demonstrated that interactions with senior students and alumni, serving as NPRMs, were highly effective in fostering learner's motivation and sustaining engagement. This aligns with Murphey's (1998) concept of NPRM, which emphasizes the motivational impact of relatable figures slightly ahead in the learning journey. Therefore, instructors should intentionally facilitate structured opportunities for interaction between current students and advanced learners, such as peer-mentoring programs, alumni panels, or collaborative projects. These connections can play a crucial

role in developing learners' ideal L2 selves and promoting sustained motivation in learning Japanese.

Sixth, the participants voiced frustration with outdated textbooks and teaching materials, which they felt were increasingly irrelevant to contemporary language use and learner interests. Instructors and program coordinators should review and update their curricular materials to better align with modern pedagogical practices and learner needs.

Seventh, a recurring challenge identified by participants was the cohort-based structure of the program, where students of varying proficiency levels were grouped together solely based on their year of enrollment. This mismatched grouping created difficulties for both advanced and beginner learners. Several participants suggested reorganizing classes by Japanese proficiency rather than academic year to allow for more targeted instruction. To address this, universities should consider curriculum reforms that allow for more flexible grouping based on ability levels and expand the number of instructional hours dedicated to active language practice.

6.3.2 Policy-Level Implications

At the policy level, the findings suggest a need for broader structural changes in Japanese language education in Kazakhstan. Firstly, increasing opportunities for international student exchange could significantly impact learners' motivation. Having more Kazakhstani students study in Japan would foster stronger goal-setting behaviors while bringing more Japanese students to Kazakhstan would offer local learners valuable interaction with native speakers. This kind of internationalization would enhance authenticity in language use and build students' confidence in real-world communication.

Secondly, policymakers and university administrators can invest in updating curricular frameworks to reflect the realities and needs of multilingual learners. These updates may include curriculum differentiation, increased classroom contact hours for

Japanese, and the incorporation of contemporary media, AI tools, and pop culture into official teaching resources. Additionally, teacher training programs can incorporate modules on motivation-building techniques, multilingualism, and strategy instruction to ensure instructors are better equipped to meet the needs of today's learners.

Lastly, it is essential to fund more research-driven reforms that are based on actual learner experiences, as reported in this study. Institutional efforts must shift from purely test-based or prescriptive models to more student-centered, motivation-informed frameworks.

6.3.3 Suggestions for Future Research

This study, as the first of its kind in Kazakhstan to explore university students' motivations and LLSs in Japanese learning, opens several avenues for further inquiry. Future research could benefit from adopting a mixed-methods design to triangulate qualitative findings with quantitative data, thus ensuring broader generalizability. It is important that future studies consider the limitations identified in this research, including its small sample size and single-institution focus. Subsequent studies might include a wider range of participant demographics, such as master's students or even Japanese language instructors, to provide a more holistic view of the motivational and strategic landscape of Japanese language education in Kazakhstan. In particular, examining instructors' perspectives on student motivation and strategy use could reveal important gaps in teacher training or curricular design that may not be visible through student interviews alone.

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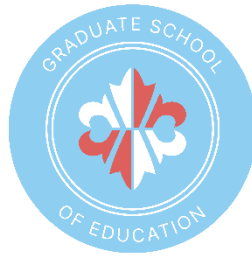
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Appendix A: AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title: Exploring Motivations and Language Learning Strategies for Learning Japanese: Voices of Undergraduate Students in Kazakhstan

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of generative AI tools and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of generative artificial intelligence tools, or
 without the use of generative artificial intelligence tools.

During the preparation of this thesis, I used ChatGPT to support idea development, improve clarity in academic writing, and refine grammar. All content was critically reviewed and edited by me.

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of generative AI tool(s),
 have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
 am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
 have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of generative AI tools in this work, and
 acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have breached NU Student Code of Conduct or not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Madiar Berikuly

Date: 30.01.2025

Signature:

Appendix B: Prompts for the Narrative Essay

Dear research participant,

Please, write an essay in Kazakh, Russian, or English covering the following points:

1. Could you please write general information about your background (e.g. age, which year are you studying right now, your parents' job and education, the number of your siblings, the city or town you are from, your interests, etc.)?
2. How many languages can you speak and understand? What are they?
3. When did you start learning Japanese? Did you have prior experience of learning Japanese before entering the university?
4. Why did you decide to learn Japanese?
5. What challenges did you face/are you facing while learning Japanese?
6. What strategies did you use/plan to use to deal with these challenges?
7. What are your current learning goals in terms of the Japanese language?

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. When did you start learning Japanese?
2. Who or what encouraged you to learn Japanese?
3. What did you think of the Japanese language before learning it? **Probe:** Why did you have such impressions?
4. Have you learned Japanese before entering university? **Probe:** If you had, where did you learn it (e.g., in private courses, the Japanese Cultural Center, or yourself)?
Follow-up question: How did you find that experience?
5. What motivated you to learn Japanese?
6. Are you now interested in learning or using Japanese? If yes/no, why?
7. What are your current goals or aspirations for learning Japanese?
8. What kind of activities or steps have you adopted/do you intend to use to achieve your goals?
9. What proficiency in Japanese do you want to attain?
10. Which particular aspects of Japanese do you think you still have problems with?
11. What strategies did you use/do you want to use to improve this aspect/these aspects of your Japanese?
12. How much time do you invest in Japanese learning weekly?
13. What do you think about the instructors in the Basic Japanese course? **Probe:** Are they using their own materials?
14. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of this Japanese course?
15. How is this course assessed?
16. Do you feel that you are doing well on the Japanese course? Why?
17. Have you found sufficient chances to communicate with competent or native speakers of Japanese in Kazakhstan? If yes, how? If not, why not?

18. What about the role of technology in your learning Japanese?
19. What do you want to do after university?
20. What's the role of English in your education?

Appendix D: E-mail to University

Dear [Gatekeeper Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Madiar Berikuly, and I am currently working on a research project for my Master's thesis at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education.

I am reaching out to request permission to enter your university and recruit participants – second-year bachelor's students majoring in “Oriental Studies” who are learning Korean – for individual semi-structured interviews.

With approval from the Nazarbayev University Research Ethics Committee, this research will use semi-structured interviews to explore the motivations, challenges, and language learning strategies of Kazakhstani students studying Korean. These interviews are expected to take place over one month, from November to December 2024, and will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for the participants in accordance with their academic schedules. I would only need to arrange suitable times to conduct these individual interviews. Please rest assured that all responses and research findings will remain strictly confidential.

If this is possible, kindly confirm by emailing me at this email or by phone at +77716060714 to indicate your willingness to grant access to the participants, assuming they consent and are happy to participate.

Thank you for your consideration. I hope to hear from you soon.

Best regards,

Madiar Berikuly

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a **research study** conducted by Madiar Berikuly, a second-year Master of Arts in Multilingual Education student at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. The aim of this study is to explore the motivations of Kazakhstani university students learning Japanese as a foreign language, the challenges they face, and the language learning strategies (LLS) they use to overcome these challenges.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to write an essay about your background, your experiences in learning languages, and the specific strategies you have used to overcome challenges in learning Japanese. Following that, I will conduct individual semi-structured interviews with 15-20 questions to gain deeper insights into your language learning journey. With your consent, these interviews will be audio-recorded to facilitate further analysis.

You will have 7 to 10 days to complete your narrative essay, after which the individual interviews will be conducted. Each interview is expected to last around 35 to 45 minutes.

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. To protect your privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used instead of your real name and university during all phases of the research. Interview transcripts and any identifying information will be stored securely on a password-protected computer. At the conclusion of the study, all audio recordings will be deleted, and any remaining files will be removed. Additionally, all personal details will be excluded from the final thesis and any subsequent reports.

While there is no financial compensation or direct personal benefit for your participation, your contribution will help broaden understanding of the experiences and motivations of Kazakhstani students studying Japanese. This research could indirectly help raise awareness of the unique challenges and strategies involved in learning Japanese in Kazakhstan. Any public dissemination of the research findings will not include your name or other personal details.

Participation is **completely voluntary**, and you have the right to **withdraw at any time** without **any penalties or consequences**. You may also refuse to answer specific questions. Your responses will only be used for research purposes and will not be assessed. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; the focus is entirely on your experiences. The findings from this study may be presented at academic conferences or published in scholarly journals. If you would like a copy or summary of the research results, please contact me or my supervisor using the contact information provided below.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, you can contact me at +7 771 606 07 14 or madiar.berikuly@nu.edu.kz. You can also reach my Master's Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Anas Hajar, via email at anas.hajar@nu.edu.kz or phone at +7 747 323 15 62, or contact the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz.

Please sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

- I understand the purpose and the procedures of the study described above.
- My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that my information will be confidential and be only seen by the researcher.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without a reason.

- I agree to participate in the study and record my responses and I have been given a copy of this form.

Participant

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher

Signature: _____

Date: _____