

CHALLENGES AMONG JAPANESE LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN LEARNING SPEAKING USING THE COHESION MODULE

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Abstract: *In Malaysia, Japanese language learners face several challenges that hinder their ability to achieve proficiency in speaking, particularly due to difficulties in using cohesive elements effectively. In response, this study investigates the challenges encountered by Japanese language learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in learning to speak Japanese through the implementation of the Cohesion Module. Specifically, the study aims to identify the obstacles learners face in applying cohesive devices in verbal communication, their levels of confidence and anxiety, and their perceptions of the learning process using the Cohesion Module. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative research approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and learner reflections. Data were analysed using descriptive analysis to examine the learners' struggles in applying grammatical and lexical cohesion, their ability to structure coherent spoken discourse, and their overall speaking performance. Findings revealed that while the Cohesion Module contributed to improvements in certain cohesion elements, learners continued to face challenges in verbal communication, fluency, and confidence. Additionally, anxiety and limited speaking practice remained key obstacles to effective communication. The study concludes that despite the potential benefits of the Cohesion Module, learners require more interactive and immersive activities to strengthen their ability to apply cohesive elements in real-world conversations. The findings contribute to Japanese language pedagogy by providing insights into how cohesion impacts speaking skills and suggesting enhancements for instructional design. The study also underscores the need for Japanese language educators to incorporate more communicative and structured cohesion-focused strategies to support learners in achieving spoken proficiency.*

Keywords: *Japanese language learner, cohesion module, challenges, speaking skills*

Introduction

Speaking several languages has become essential in today's more interconnected world, especially in academic and professional settings. For students in Malaysia, where there are close cultural and economic ties to Japan, learning Japanese, one of the most widely spoken languages in Asia, is crucial. But many Japanese language learners find it difficult to become proficient, particularly when it comes to speaking. Proficiency in a variety of language components, such as grammar, vocabulary, and cohesive devices that support the flow of ideas, is necessary for effective verbal communication (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2015).

Japanese language learners in Malaysia encounter challenges that impair their speaking abilities at schools like Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). According to research, students frequently struggle with using cohesive elements effectively, even though these elements are essential for creating meaningful and coherent discourse (Halliday & Hasan, 1976); McCarthy, 1991). For learners to be able to articulate their ideas clearly and participate in meaningful conversations, cohesion which is defined as the linguistic connections that hold sentences and ideas together is essential (Yashima, 2002; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

Learning to speak Japanese presents a variety of difficulties, including psychological ones like anxiety and insecurity in addition to linguistic ones. Learners' performance and willingness to engage in oral communication can be severely hampered by language anxiety, especially when speaking (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Furthermore, learners' motivation and involvement in language learning are strongly correlated with their level of self-confidence, with higher confidence levels being associated with a greater desire to practise speaking (Dörnyei, 2005; Bandura, 1997).

Using the Cohesion Module, this study seeks to understand the difficulties Japanese language learners at USIM encounter when attempting to learn the language. This study aims to shed light on the learning process and make recommendations for improvements to instructional design by determining the challenges students face when using cohesive devices in verbal communication, as well as their confidence and anxiety levels. By emphasising the effect of cohesiveness on speaking abilities and providing useful suggestions for teachers, the results will advance the field of Japanese language pedagogy. Finally, this study emphasises the need for more immersive and interactive exercises that help students develop their capacity to use cohesive elements in authentic conversations, which will aid them in their quest for spoken proficiency (Nation, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Literature Review

The acquisition of language particularly in the context of learning Japanese as a foreign language has received growing attention in recent years. Among the four core language skills, speaking presents unique challenges, as it demands not only grammatical and lexical competence but also pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness. This review synthesizes existing research related to the speaking difficulties experienced by Japanese language learners, with particular emphasis on cohesion in spoken discourse, as well as the emotional and instructional factors influencing learner performance.

Speaking is widely regarded as a primary indicator of language proficiency and often serves as the ultimate benchmark for successful language acquisition. According to Brown (2007) and Bygate (2001), effective oral communication necessitates the integration of multiple linguistic subsystems, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse organization. In the Japanese language learning context, fluency and coherence are especially critical for interaction in both academic and social environments. However, many learners struggle to produce extended speech that is both fluent and cohesive, resulting in communication breakdowns that may lead to frustration and diminished motivation (Richards, 2008).

Japanese language learners frequently encounter structural and sociolinguistic complexities that pose substantial challenges to speaking. One such challenge lies in the intricate grammar of Japanese, which includes sentence-final particles, hierarchical honorific forms, and context-sensitive politeness levels (Hasegawa, 2014; Shibatani, 1990). For learners whose native languages lack such features, mastering Japanese speech patterns can be particularly daunting. Additionally, insufficient exposure to authentic Japanese-speaking environments further hinders learners from effectively transferring classroom knowledge to real-world interactions (Kikuchi, 2010; Krashen, 1982). These barriers can ultimately delay the development of coherent and natural spoken discourse.

Cohesion refers to the linguistic elements that bind sentences and ideas into a unified discourse. Halliday and Hasan (1976) categorized cohesive devices into five main types: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These tools are essential for constructing meaningfully connected speech that listeners can easily follow. In the realm of Japanese language education, the explicit teaching of cohesion is often overshadowed by vocabulary and grammar instruction, leading to a gap between sentence-level accuracy and discourse-level fluency.

Studies have shown that learners often possess limited awareness of how to use cohesive elements effectively in speaking tasks. Yashima (2002) found that many Japanese EFL learners produced fragmented speech due to insufficient control over cohesive markers. This lack of cohesion often reflects not a deficiency in grammatical knowledge, but rather a gap in discourse competence. As learners are rarely given explicit opportunities to practice cohesion in authentic speaking situations, this skill remains underdeveloped, especially in spontaneous communication.

To address the dual challenges of cohesion and learner affect, the development of a Cohesion Module has emerged as a promising instructional intervention. This module aims to offer learners targeted instruction on the use of cohesive devices within the framework of spoken Japanese discourse. By combining explicit instruction with interactive, low stakes speaking tasks, the module is designed to reduce anxiety, build confidence, and improve learners' ability to produce coherent speech.

Previous research supports the effectiveness of such targeted approaches. O'Grady (2005) and Swain (2005) found that learners who received explicit training in cohesion demonstrated significant gains in discourse fluency and structure. Similarly, Chun (2008) and Long (1996) highlighted how the integration of technology and multimedia in language instruction can heighten student engagement, thereby facilitating deeper language processing and retention. These findings suggest that a structured cohesion-based curriculum, reinforced by learner-centered activities, can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Research Gap

The literature indicates that speaking proficiency in Japanese is influenced by a convergence of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors. While foundational elements such as grammar and vocabulary remain important, the ability to link ideas coherently through cohesive devices is equally critical to communicative success. However, many learners lack opportunities for sustained practice with cohesion in speaking, often due to anxiety, limited classroom time, or curriculum constraints.

The introduction of a Cohesion Module represents an innovative step toward addressing these needs. Yet, despite promising findings, further research is needed to evaluate how such modules impact learner performance in naturalistic settings, how they shape learner perceptions and confidence, and how peer interaction can support cohesion use in authentic discourse.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by Japanese language learners in developing speaking skills through the implementation of the Cohesion Module. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To explore the linguistic challenges faced by Japanese language learners when applying cohesive devices during speaking activities.
2. To examine emotional factors, particularly anxiety and self-confidence, that influence learners' ability to speak effectively using the Cohesion Module.
3. To investigate learners' perceptions of the Cohesion Module in supporting the development of their speaking proficiency.
4. To identify the role of peer interaction in enhancing learners' ability to use cohesive elements in spoken Japanese.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives above, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What linguistic difficulties do Japanese language learners face when using cohesive devices in spoken Japanese?
2. How do anxiety and self-confidence affect learners' speaking performance when using the Cohesion Module?
3. What are learners' perceptions of the Cohesion Module in improving their spoken Japanese?
4. In what ways does peer interaction support learners in applying cohesion during speaking activities?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate, specifically through the Cohesion Module, the difficulties Japanese language learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) encounter when learning the language. Because it can offer deep insights into learners' experiences, perceptions, and challenges with speaking proficiency, the qualitative methodology was selected. Three main techniques for gathering data were part of the research design: learner reflections, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews.

Research Design

This study's research design was based on qualitative research principles, specifically using the naturalistic inquiry framework. This method is distinguished by its focus on comprehending

participants lived experiences in their natural environments, which is especially pertinent in language learning environments where social interactions and cultural quirks are important.

Naturalistic Research

By emphasising the investigation of phenomena in their natural settings, naturalistic inquiry is a qualitative research paradigm that enables researchers to learn about participants' viewpoints and experiences without enforcing preconceived notions or external frameworks. When studying complex behaviours like language acquisition, where the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and social factors can greatly impact outcomes, this method is crucial in educational research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The naturalistic inquiry framework in this study allowed researchers to examine in detail the difficulties faced by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) Japanese language learners. The study sought to capture the depth and complexity of the learners' challenges with using cohesive elements in spoken Japanese by concentrating on their real-life experiences. This knowledge is essential for creating instructional strategies that meet the needs of students and improve their speaking ability.

Learners' Experiences

Rich, descriptive data was collected using a variety of techniques, such as learner reflections, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, made possible by the qualitative research design. Every approach was selected to give a thorough grasp of the experiences and difficulties that the students faced when interacting with the Cohesion Module.

Semi-structured interviews gave participants the opportunity to express their ideas, emotions, and experiences regarding their difficulties speaking and using cohesive devices. Because of the semi-structured format's flexibility, participants were able to expound on their answers and offer personal tales that emphasised their distinctive experiences.

Observations in the Classroom: Seeing students in their typical classroom environment gave us a better understanding of how they interacted with teachers and peers and how they used cohesive elements when speaking. By using this approach, researchers were able to put the students' experiences in context and pinpoint elements that might have an impact on their engagement and performance.

Learner Reflections: Participants were given the chance to reflect on and express their ideas about their educational journey through written reflections. This approach gave important information about how students saw themselves, including their anxiety, confidence, and the perceived usefulness of the Cohesion Module.

Effectiveness of Cohesion Module

The main goal of using a naturalistic inquiry-based qualitative research design was to collect information that would help determine how effective the Cohesion Module was. The study aimed to pinpoint areas where the module could be enhanced or modified to better suit the needs of students by comprehending their experiences and difficulties. For instructional design, the knowledge gathered from this research design is essential. They enable teachers to modify their methods to tackle the issues that have been identified, which improves students' speaking ability and language learning in general. The study intends to advance Japanese language pedagogy

by concentrating on the subtleties of learners' experiences and providing practical suggestions for teachers to create a more encouraging and productive learning environment.

In conclusion, a strong framework for investigating the difficulties encountered by Japanese language learners at USIM was offered by the qualitative research design informed by naturalistic inquiry. The study sought to capture the complexity of participants' interactions with the Cohesion Module by giving priority to their viewpoints and experiences. This method yielded rich, descriptive data that not only helped determine the module's efficacy but also provided insightful information for improving instructional design in Japanese language instruction. The development of pedagogical strategies that connect with students and ultimately aid their path to becoming proficient in spoken Japanese requires a focus on comprehending the real-life contexts of learners.

Sample

Japanese language learners taking classes at USIM participated in this study. Participants with different levels of Japanese proficiency who had used the Cohesion Module were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. About 15 to 20 students made up the sample, guaranteeing a varied representation of backgrounds, language proficiency, and learning preferences. Understanding the various difficulties that students encounter when utilising cohesive devices in their speech was made possible by this diversity.

Data Collection Method

Semi-Structured Interviews

To learn more about learners' experiences and perceptions of their speaking difficulties, semi-structured interviews were performed. Open-ended interview questions guided participants in discussing Cohesion Module elements while allowing them to freely express their opinions. Among the main subjects were:

Learners' understanding of cohesion and its relevance to speaking.

- Challenges faced in using cohesive devices during verbal communication.
- Levels of confidence and anxiety experienced while speaking Japanese.
- Perceptions of the Cohesion Module and its impact on their speaking skills.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent for accurate transcription and analysis. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and supportive environment to encourage open dialogue.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observations were conducted to contextualize the learners' experiences and to observe their interactions during speaking activities. The researchers attended several classes where the Cohesion Module was implemented, focusing on how learners engaged with the material and applied cohesive devices in their speech. The observation protocol included:

- Noting instances of cohesive device usage during speaking activities.
- Observing learners' interactions with peers and instructors.
- Monitoring learners' levels of engagement and participation in discussions.

Field notes were taken during the observations to capture relevant details and contextual factors that could influence learners' speaking performance.

Learners' Reflection

Learner reflections were collected through written journals or reflective essays, where participants were asked to articulate their thoughts on their learning experiences with the Cohesion Module. Prompts for the reflections included:

- Describing specific challenges encountered while learning to speak Japanese.
- Reflecting on the effectiveness of the Cohesion Module in enhancing their speaking skills.
- Discussing personal growth in confidence and fluency over the course of the module.

These reflections provided valuable insights into learners' self-assessments and their perceptions of their progress in using cohesive elements in their speech.

Data Analysis

A descriptive qualitative analysis approach, which is especially useful for examining complex phenomena like language learning, was used to analyse the data for this study. By employing this methodology, researchers were able to explore the complex and varied experiences of Japanese language learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) and pinpoint the difficulties they encountered when utilising cohesive elements in their spoken language. Several crucial steps made up the analysis process, all of which were designed to guarantee a comprehensive and methodical review of the information gathered from learner reflections, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations.

Transcription

Transcribing the audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews was the first stage in the data analysis process. To ensure accuracy and faithfulness to the participants' responses, every interview was transcribed verbatim. Because it preserves the subtleties of participants' speech, such as pauses, emphases, and emotional tones, this painstaking transcription process is essential to qualitative research. By using the transcriptions as the main source of data for further analysis, researchers were able to delve deeply into the participants' narratives.

Coding

Once the transcripts were prepared, the next step was coding the data. Coding is a pivotal aspect of qualitative data analysis, as it involves categorizing and labelling segments of data to facilitate systematic analysis. In this study, the transcribed interviews, classroom observation notes, and learner reflections were systematically coded u

- Initial Coding: Researchers began with open coding, where segments of text were examined for recurring themes and concepts related to learners' experiences. Initial codes were generated based on specific challenges identified in the data, such as struggles with grammatical and lexical cohesion, confidence levels during speaking, and perceptions of the effectiveness of the Cohesion Module.
- Focused Coding: After the initial coding, focused coding was employed to refine and consolidate the codes. This process involved reviewing the initial codes and determining which ones were most significant in addressing the research questions. Codes that emerged frequently across multiple data sources were prioritized, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' actual experiences.

Theme Development

The next step in the analysis process involved grouping the codes into broader themes. This thematic development allowed researchers to identify patterns and relationships within the data, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by learners in applying cohesive devices.

- **Identifying Themes:** The researchers analysed the coded data to identify overarching themes that encapsulated the learners' experiences. Themes such as "Cohesion Challenges," "Anxiety and Confidence," and "Perceptions of Instructional Effectiveness" emerged as significant categories that reflected the learners' struggles and insights.
- **Interconnections:** The thematic framework also allowed for the exploration of interconnections among themes. For example, the relationship between learners' anxiety levels and their ability to use cohesive devices effectively was examined, revealing how emotional factors influenced their speaking performance.

Descriptive Analysis

Performing a descriptive analysis of the results was the last phase in the data analysis procedure. This required presenting the themes that were found in a logical and organised way, backed up by direct quotes from participants that described their experiences. **Rich Descriptions:** The goal of the descriptive analysis was to give a detailed account of the experiences and difficulties of the students, emphasising the intricacies of their problems with cohesive devices. Through the incorporation of quotes from the participants, the analysis effectively communicated the contextual and affective aspects of their educational experiences.

Researcher insights into the efficacy of the Cohesion Module were made possible by the thematic organisation of the findings. A thorough grasp of how the module affected students' speaking abilities and their capacity to use cohesive elements in discourse was provided by the discussion of each theme considering the research questions.

This study's methodical and exacting data analysis procedure made sure that the rich qualitative information gathered from learner reflections, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations was carefully looked at. The researchers were able to learn a great deal about the difficulties faced by Japanese language learners at USIM through transcription, coding, theme development, and descriptive analysis. This thorough approach helped to improve instructional strategies in Japanese language instruction by shedding light on the learners' difficulties with cohesion in spoken language and guiding the Cohesion Module's evaluation.

Ethical

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were of utmost importance. All participants gave their informed consent before beginning the study. Participants received guarantees that their answers would be kept private and that their identities would remain anonymous in any results that were published. Participants also had the freedom to leave the study at any moment without facing any consequences. The study's methodology offered a thorough framework for comprehending the difficulties Japanese language learners at USIM encounter when attempting to learn the language. The study collected rich qualitative data that shed light on the complexity of learners' experiences using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and learner reflections. This method provided insightful information for improving teaching techniques in Japanese language pedagogy in addition to informing the assessment of the Cohesion Module.

Findings

The study's conclusions are based on a qualitative analysis of information gathered from learner reflections, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Several major themes emerged from the analysis, highlighting the difficulties Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) Japanese language learners encounter when attempting to apply cohesive elements during speaking exercises. These results shed light on learners' experiences, opinions of the Cohesion Module, and the variables affecting their ability to communicate verbally.

Problem With Lexical and Grammatical Coherence

The learners' challenges with grammatical and lexical cohesion were among the most notable themes to emerge from the data. To create coherent discourse, participants often reported difficulties using cohesive devices like lexical ties, reference words, and conjunctions. **Inconsistent Usage:** A lot of students complained about how inconsistently they were able to use cohesive devices in their speech. One participant wrote, for example, "I frequently forget to use linking words when I speak, which makes my sentences sound choppy and disconnected." **Lack of Understanding:** A few students expressed a lack of knowledge regarding the proper application of cohesive devices in various settings. This misunderstanding frequently resulted in mistakes that made it difficult for them to express ideas clearly. "I know the words, but I don't always know how to connect them in a way that makes sense," said one student.

Level of Confidence and Anxiety

The emotional components of language learning, specifically anxiety and confidence levels, were the subject of another noteworthy discovery. Speaking Japanese made many participants nervous, which made them less inclined to practise and participate in discussions.

Fear of Mistakes: Students' anxiety was exacerbated by their worries about using cohesive devices incorrectly or making grammatical mistakes. "I'm afraid of speaking because I worry, I'll make mistakes, especially with grammar," said one participant.

Effect on Participation: During speaking exercises, this anxiety frequently led to a decrease in participation. Less confident learners were more likely to say nothing at all or to respond sparingly, which reduced their practice opportunities. One participant thought, "I don't want to talk at all when I'm nervous." I simply listen.

Perception of The Cohesion Module

The study also looked at how students felt about the Cohesion Module, which was created to improve their comprehension and use of cohesive devices. Participants' opinions on the module's overall efficacy were divided.

Positive Aspects: A few students valued the Cohesion Module's methodical approach, which offered concise descriptions and illustrations of cohesive devices. They believed the module made it easier for them to understand how crucial cohesiveness is to communication. "The module made me realise how important it is to connect my ideas when I speak," one student said. **Practical Application Needed:** Nonetheless, several participants indicated that they would like to see more opportunities for practical speaking in the module. They said they needed more practice using cohesive devices in actual conversations, even though theoretical knowledge was helpful. "We learnt a lot about cohesion, but I wish we could practise speaking more in class one student noted. class,"

Peer Review

Observations in the classroom demonstrated how important peer interaction is for supporting students' speaking development. Collaborative speaking exercises made participants feel more at ease when utilising cohesive devices.

Supportive Environment: Students reported that working with peers produced a safe space where they could practise speaking without worrying about being judged. "Talking with my classmates makes it easier for me," one participant said. We support one another and work together to fix errors.

Enhanced Confidence: Students' confidence levels rose because of these activities' collaborative nature. When engaging with peers, many said they felt more open to trying out cohesive devices. One student said, "I feel more comfortable trying new words and connections when I practise with friends."

The results of this study provide important new information about the difficulties Japanese language learners at USIM encounter when utilising cohesive elements in speaking exercises. Significant themes included perceptions of the Cohesion Module, anxiety and confidence issues, difficulties with grammatical and lexical cohesion, and the value of peer interaction. These results highlight the necessity of teaching methods that not only improve students' comprehension of cohesive devices but also offer lots of chances for hands-on practice and group projects. Supporting students on their path to becoming proficient in spoken Japanese requires addressing these issues.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the difficulties Japanese language learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) encounter when speaking, with an emphasis on how they employ cohesive elements as described in the Cohesion Module. Through learner reflections, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, the study collected rich, descriptive data using a qualitative research design based on naturalistic inquiry. Learners had a lot of trouble using grammatical and lexical cohesion in their spoken Japanese. A lack of coherence and fragmented speech were the results of many people's inconsistent use of cohesive devices. Learners' speaking performance was significantly influenced by emotional elements like anxiety and confidence. Many participants said they were afraid of making mistakes, which made them less willing to practise and less engaged in speaking exercises. Views of the Cohesion Module: Although some students felt that the Cohesion Module was useful in comprehending the theoretical facets of cohesion, there was a strong desire for more opportunities for speaking in a practical setting. According to the participants, using cohesive devices in the real world were crucial to enhancing their speaking abilities.

Peer interaction is important because classroom observations showed that it improves students' speaking development. Students' confidence and willingness to use cohesive devices in conversation increased because of the encouraging atmosphere created by collaborative speaking for exercises. The results highlight the necessity of instructional strategies that tackle Issues that have been identified. Among the suggestions are including more speaking practice. Teachers should give students lots of chances to practice speaking in encouraging settings, with a focus on using cohesive components in authentic dialogues.

Improving Emotional Support: Techniques to boost self-esteem and manage anxiety, like peer review sessions and low-pressure speaking exercises, can motivate students to participate more actively in their language practice. Integrating theory and practice to ensure that students can successfully apply their understanding to spoken interactions, the curriculum should strike a balance between theoretical knowledge of cohesion and practical application. In conclusion, this study offers insightful information about the difficulties of learning Japanese, especially about the application of cohesive elements. Teachers can create focused strategies to improve speaking proficiency and assist students on their path to language mastery by knowing the difficulties that students encounter and how they view the Cohesion Module. The results highlight the significance of addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of language learning which advances the field of language pedagogy.

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