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Japanese Language Teaching at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam: A Survey on Students' Challenges and Preferred Learning Support

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Abstract. Difficulty in learning Japanese at the university level is often described in terms of discrete skills or linguistic components. What remains less clear is where these difficulties arise in actual use, and what kinds of support learners find workable in non-immersion contexts. This study draws on questionnaire data from 133 undergraduate students in Hanoi to examine both perceived challenges and preferred forms of support. What stands out is not simply variation across skills but that difficulty intensifies at the point where knowledge has to be used. This is most visible in regard to speaking—particularly in expressing ideas and managing anxiety under time pressure—but similar tensions also appear in listening and reading, where comprehension does not always hold in real-time processing. These patterns are reinforced by limited opportunities for use and uneven continuity in self-directed learning. Students' preferences follow these points of strain. Structure and feedback come first, while cultural materials and digital tools matter in how they extend learning beyond the classroom. The issue, then, is less how much learners know than how that knowledge applied—and whether that use can be sustained over time.

Keywords: Japanese language learning; non-immersion context; self-regulation; speaking anxiety; structured support

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1. Introduction

Japanese is now a familiar presence in Vietnamese universities, particularly in cities such as Hanoi. Students enter these programs with clear intentions—study abroad, employment, or cultural interest. Yet most of their contact with the language remains confined to the classroom. Outside it, opportunities for use are limited, and much of what is learned circulates within controlled instructional settings.

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Under these conditions, learning does not extend evenly. Some knowledge holds within exercises but does not carry over into use. Progress depends less on exposure alone and more on how learners manage what they encounter—how they organize it, return to it, and attempt to use it beyond the lesson. What appears, then, is not simply a question of content, but of how learning is sustained when conditions for use are constrained.

Difficulty tends to concentrate where multiple demands meet. Kanji is one such point—not only because of memorization, but because form, meaning, and multiple readings must be handled together, often within context (Everson, 2011; Mori & Nagy, 2011). Grammatical features such as particles introduce a different kind of uncertainty, where meaning is relational and small shifts in context alter interpretation (Kondo-Brown, 2006; Pawlak, 2021). These challenges become more visible when knowledge is required to be relocated. Listening unfolds in real time, leaving little room to resolve gaps in understanding while speaking adds further pressure, requiring lexical retrieval, grammatical control, and timing to align in the moment (Ellis, 2008; Saito & Plonsky, 2019). What learners know does not always remain available under these conditions.

At the same time, these demands are not only linguistic. Speaking, in particular, places learners in situations of immediate visibility. Many hesitate, not because they lack knowledge, but because performance unfolds in front of others. Anxiety, in this sense, does not sit outside learning; it shapes what learners are willing to attempt and how far they participate (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kruk et al., 2021; MacIntyre, 1999). Much of the responsibility for continuity therefore shifts to the learner. In non-immersion environments, learning must be maintained between classes. This places self-regulation at the center and planning, monitoring, and adjustment become necessary for sustaining progress (Fukuda, 2022; Oxford, 2016; Zimmerman, 2002). Yet continuity is not easily maintained. Without sufficient structure, effort disperses; learners may continue studying, but not always in ways that accumulate.

Additional resources—particularly digital tools—have begun to fill part of this gap. Recent work on AI-assisted language learning, including the use of tools such as ChatGPT, suggests that while such technologies can support idea generation and language production, their contribution depends on how learners engage with them (Wang & MacIntyre, 2021; Warschauer et al., 2023). Access alone does not ensure continuity; without orientation, these tools may extend activity without necessarily supporting progression.

What is less clearly understood is how these difficulties are experienced from the learner's perspective, and how they are related to the forms of support learners find workable. Research has often described challenges in terms of skills or linguistic components, treating them as separable. Less attention has, however, been given to how learners themselves prioritize these difficulties, or how such perceptions connect to the kinds of support that make continued learning possible—particularly in contexts where opportunities for use are limited.

This becomes especially relevant in Vietnamese higher education. While studies on foreign language learning difficulties are extensive, relatively few have examined how Vietnamese university students learning Japanese interpret their own learning conditions, or how they position different forms of support within those conditions. Differences in institutional settings, exposure, and learning practices suggest that insights from other contexts cannot be assumed to transfer directly.

Against this background, the present study examines how Vietnamese university students experience difficulty in learning Japanese and what forms of support they consider workable in a non-immersion environment. The study addresses the following questions:
RQ1: What difficulties do university students in Hanoi, Vietnam, perceive in learning Japanese?
RQ2: Which language skills and components are experienced as most challenging?
RQ3: What forms of learning support and teaching practices do students consider helpful?

By working from learners' own accounts, this study seeks to contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of Japanese language education in Vietnam. It also aims to inform the design of instructional practices that respond not only to what is taught, but to how learning is sustained and implemented into use.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Challenges in Learning Japanese as a Foreign Language

Japanese presents difficulty not only as a system, but in the way its elements have to be held together in use. Kanji illustrates this well. Remembering kanji is only part of the task, what makes it difficult is holding form, meaning, and multiple readings together—and doing so in context. For learners from non-kanji backgrounds, this difficulty is further shaped by the strategies they adopt to manage unfamiliar orthographic systems, which do not always align with effective integration of form and meaning (Mori & Nagy, 2011; Nakagawa, 2017).

These challenges have also been observed in empirical studies of Japanese language learners, where difficulties tend to cluster around the integration of form, meaning, and contextual use, often accompanied by the need for targeted instructional support (Takeda et al., 2022). What makes it difficult is holding form, meaning, and multiple readings together—and doing so in context. This is where the load accumulates, shaping both how learners read and how they write (Everson, 2011; Mori & Nagy, 2011; Mori et al., 2021).

Particles add another layer. Their function is not fully visible at the level of form; much of their meaning is relational and pragmatic. Knowing the rule does not guarantee use: learners may be able to explain a structure, but that knowledge does not always hold when it is applied in practice (Kondo-Brown, 2006; Pawlak, 2021).

These limits become more visible in listening and speaking. Comprehension relies on rapid processing of continuous, often reduced speech, while speaking draws on lexical retrieval, grammar, and timing simultaneously (Ellis, 2008; Saito & Plonsky, 2019; Wang & MacIntyre, 2021). The difficulty is not located in any single skill; it arises where these demands meet.

2.2 Speaking of Anxiety and Affective Dimensions

Linguistic difficulty alone does not account for learners' experience. Affective factors shape what happens when knowledge is put to use and classroom motivation is closely related to how learners engage with instructional activities and sustain participation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Yang & Wyatt, 2021). Foreign language classroom anxiety, especially in speaking, is closely tied to lower participation and uneven performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999).

Its effect becomes clearer in how tasks are experienced. Speaking allows little time to prepare and makes performance visible. Even when learners have the necessary knowledge, that knowledge does not always hold under these conditions (Kruk et al., 2021). Anxiety does not replace linguistic difficulty; it amplifies it (Yang & Wyatt, 2021).

In non-immersion settings, this effect becomes more pronounced: opportunities for use are limited, and speaking is concentrated within the classroom. Performance is therefore more exposed, and less buffered by everyday interaction. Affective and linguistic demands are not separate here—they operate together at the point of use.

2.3 Learning Context, Self-Regulation, and Continuity

The absence of an immersion environment changes the conditions of learning. Exposure becomes limited, and use is no longer distributed across contexts. Under these constraints, what sustains learning is not only input, but continuity.

In these conditions, learning depends more heavily on how learners regulate their own study. Planning, monitoring, and adjustment are what sustain engagement over time (Oxford, 2016; Teng, 2022; Zimmerman, 2002). Where external support is limited, this kind of regulation becomes closely tied to persistence (De Vrind et al., 2024; Fukuda, 2022; Panadero, 2017).

Continuity, however, is not easily maintained. Without clear structure, effort becomes difficult to direct, and learning tends to lose momentum; study becomes intermittent, and progress uneven (Wu, 2023). The difficulty here is not primarily linguistic, rather it lies in keeping learning in motion.

2.4 Learning Support as Structured and Mediated Practice

Support enters not as an addition, but as a condition for learning to continue. As such, structure plays a central role. Empirical research on Japanese language learners has similarly shown that difficulties are closely tied to how support is structured, particularly in relation to vocabulary, kanji, and contextualized use (Takeda et al., 2022). In vocabulary and kanji learning, progression that is visible

and cumulative helps reduce cognitive load and makes retention more manageable (Nation, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017). Feedback functions differently from simple correction; it provides a point of reference—something learners can work from when their own judgment is uncertain (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Janesarvatan & Asoodar, 2024; Richards, 2022). Focused, timely feedback is easier to work with; it remains usable without becoming excessive.

Digital tools and cultural materials carry this support beyond the classroom. creating additional points of contact with the language, often under lower pressure and with greater flexibility (Guo & Lee, 2023; Hang & Liu, 2024; Reinders & Benson, 2017). More than increasing exposure, they make it possible to return to the language—and to stay with it. More recently, AI-generated text has begun to reshape this space of support. Tools such as ChatGPT can provide immediate linguistic input, feedback, and model texts, offering new forms of assistance for L2 writers. At the same time, such tools may extend learners' sense of control over writing processes while complicating the pedagogical value of that support (Moorhouse et al., 2025; Warschauer et al., 2023). Learning support, in this sense, is not supplementary. It is part of how learning holds together over time.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative survey design to examine how university students experience difficulty in learning Japanese and what forms of support they consider workable. Data were collected at a single point in time, allowing the study to capture learners' current conditions within ongoing Japanese language courses.

A survey approach was chosen for its ability to gather comparable responses across a relatively large group of learners, making it possible to identify recurring patterns in perceived difficulty and support preferences in a non-immersion context.

3.2 Participants

The study draws on responses from 133 undergraduate students enrolled in Japanese language courses at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam. At the time of data collection, these students were at different stages of their programs, with proficiency ranging from beginner to upper-intermediate.

Participants were recruited from classes available during the semester, reflecting the cohort accessible to the study. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the sample is intended to capture recurring patterns in how learners experience difficulty and what forms of support they find workable within this context. As the study was conducted in a non-immersion environment, participants' engagement with Japanese was largely limited to classroom instruction, supplemented by individual study. This condition is central to interpreting both the difficulties reported and the types of support learners prioritize.

3.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a bilingual (English Vietnamese) questionnaire developed for this study. The questionnaire was written in both English and Vietnamese to avoid misinterpretation and allow students to respond in terms that felt clear to them. Using a single language was not considered sufficient, given the range of proficiency among participants.

In constructing the instrument, attention was given to how difficulty is actually encountered in learning. As such, items were not separated strictly by category; instead, they were arranged to capture how language skills, linguistic elements, and learning conditions intersect in practice, together with the kinds of support to which learners turn.

The questionnaire is organized in four parts.
Section A: records basic background information (e.g., year of study, learning duration, self-assessed proficiency, JLPT goals, study time, and learning habits).
Section B: moves to where difficulty emerges, covering skills, linguistic elements, and the conditions under which learning takes place.

Section C: addresses support, asking what learners turn to, having in order to manage these difficulties, including materials, feedback, interaction, technology, and cultural resources.

Section D**:** opportunities for participants to elaborate on difficulties and suggest forms of support.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

3.4 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Several steps were taken to ensure the adequacy of the instrument.
Content validity was established through expert review with two specialists in Japanese language education evaluating the questionnaire in terms of relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. Comments from the expert review led to small adjustments in wording and item alignment.

The revised questionnaire was then piloted with a small group of students (approximately 10–15) who shared similar learning backgrounds with the target participants. They were asked to note anything unclear or difficult to interpret and their feedback helped refine both the phrasing of items and the overall structure. To check consistency across items, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, showing an acceptable level of internal reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.70$).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during the semester while students were actively attending their Japanese language courses. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, that participation was

voluntary, and that their responses would remain confidential. Completion time was approximately 5–8 minutes. Participants completed the questionnaire either in paper form or online (via Google Forms), depending on class conditions. Only fully completed, responses were included in the analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

Analysis began with a descriptive overview of the Likert-scale responses, including frequencies, percentages, mean scores (M), and standard deviations (SD), in order to trace general patterns in the data.

Responses in Section B were used to map how difficulty is distributed across skills and language components, addressing RQ1 and RQ2. Comparisons of mean scores made it possible to identify where difficulty tends to concentrate. Section C responses were then considered in relation to these patterns to examine which forms of support learners tend to favor (RQ3).

Open-ended responses were read and coded thematically. Recurrent patterns—such as speaking anxiety, difficulties with kanji, and limited opportunities for practice—were identified and used to situate the quantitative findings within learners' own accounts.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and students could choose not to respond or withdraw at any point. No identifying information was collected. All data were handled in aggregate form to maintain confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1 Perceived Learning Difficulties (RQ1)

As shown in Table 1, students reported moderate to high levels of difficulty across all surveyed aspects of Japanese language learning, with mean scores ranging from 3.26 to 4.05.

Rather than clustering around a single domain, it can be seen that these difficulties are distributed across skills, linguistic components, and learning conditions. This distribution suggests that learners' challenges are not isolated technical problems but reflect a broader tension between knowledge acquisition and actual language use.

Table 1: Perceived Challenges in Learning Japanese

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD
1	B4	I have difficulty expressing my ideas in Japanese speaking activities.	4.05	0.92
2	B2	I often miss important information when listening to Japanese audio materials.	3.91	1.00
3	B5	Reading Japanese texts is difficult due to kanji and unfamiliar vocabulary.	3.88	0.99
4	B3	I feel nervous when speaking Japanese in front of others.	3.86	1.14
5	B6	Writing Japanese is difficult because I often make grammatical mistakes.	3.79	0.99
6	B12	I have limited opportunities to practice Japanese outside the classroom.	3.77	1.18
7	B7	I find it difficult to remember and use new vocabulary in context.	3.70	0.98
8	B10	I have difficulty applying grammar rules in real communication.	3.68	1.03
9	B13	I have difficulty maintaining regular self-study routines.	3.62	1.15
10	B8	Memorizing kanji (form, meaning, and reading) is difficult for me.	3.59	1.11
11	B9	I find it difficult to use Japanese particles correctly.	3.53	1.13
12	B11	The pace of the Japanese course is difficult to follow.	3.26	1.16

4.1.1 Difficulties across Language Skills

A closer examination of skill-based items reveals a clear pattern with speaking emerging as the most demanding domain. What appears most immediately in the data is not simply that speaking is difficult, but how that difficulty is layered. The highest ratings are attached to the inability to express ideas (M = 4.05, SD = 0.92), closely followed by anxiety when speaking (M = 3.86, SD = 1.14). These two factors do not seem to operate independently but, rather, they reinforce each other: limited expressive control makes speaking effortful, and that very effort amplifies the sense of unease in performance situations.

Students' comments make this interplay particularly visible. One participant wrote, "I often know what I want to say, but I cannot organize my thoughts into correct Japanese sentences" (Participant 12). Another noted, "*I feel nervous speaking in front of others because I am afraid of making mistakes*" (Participant 27). A third added, "*Even simple sentences become difficult when I speak under pressure*" (Participant 63). What emerges here is not a single problem, but a point of convergence where linguistic limitation and self-consciousness meet.

A similar tension, though less affectively charged, can be observed in listening (M = 3.91, SD = 1.00). The difficulty lies less in recognizing isolated words than in sustaining comprehension over time. As one student put it, "*When I listen, I can catch some words, but I cannot understand the whole meaning*" (Participant 45). Another remarked, "Japanese audio is too fast, so I often miss important

information" (Participant 78). In this sense, listening becomes a problem of continuity rather than access.

Reading (M = 3.88, SD = 0.99) presents a different configuration of difficulty. Here, the challenge accumulates at the intersection of kanji and vocabulary, where decoding and interpretation cannot be easily separated. Writing, while somewhat lower in mean score (M = 3.79, SD = 0.99), remains constrained by grammatical control, suggesting that accuracy becomes more fragile when learners are required to produce language rather than process it.

Across these skills, a pattern begins to take shape: difficulty does not simply increase in degree, but shifts in kind. Tasks that require recognition remain manageable to some extent, but once learners are pushed toward production—especially under time or social pressure—the demands multiply. Speaking, in this respect, is less a single skill than a site where multiple constraints come into alignment.

4.1.2 Challenges by Language Components

In addition to challenges based on the difficulty of the skill, when viewed through the lens of linguistic components, a different but related pattern emerges. The highest levels of difficulty are associated not with the acquisition of forms, but with their contextualized use.

Vocabulary use in context (M = 3.70, SD = 0.98) and grammar application in communication (M = 3.68, SD = 1.03) were both rated as moderately difficult. This suggests that learners possess partial knowledge of linguistic forms but struggle to deploy them in meaningful interaction.

This gap is evident in qualitative responses. One participant commented, "*I understand grammar when I study, but I cannot use it naturally when speaking*" (Participant 34). Another noted, "*I remember vocabulary, but I don't know how to use it in real situations*" (Participant 59). A third added, "*I forget vocabulary quickly if I don't practice regularly*" (Participant 88).

Kanji presents a slightly different profile of difficulty. Although it is often assumed to be one of the most demanding aspects of Japanese, its mean score (M = 3.59, SD = 1.11) does not place it at the top. This does not, however, necessarily indicate that kanji is less problematic. Rather, it may reflect a degree of adaptation: students seem to have become accustomed to the demands of memorization, even if that familiarity remains fragile.

While Kanji does emerge as the most heavily rated difficulty, the way students talk about it suggests something less straightforward. One participant wrote, "*Kanji is difficult because I have to remember form, meaning, and reading at the same time*" (Participant 21). Another noted, "*I can recognize kanji, but I cannot write it correctly*" (Participant 67).

What stands out is not simply the load of memorization, but how uneven the outcomes are. Recognition seems to settle earlier while production lags behind: the two do not move together.

Seen in this light, the issue is less about individual elements than about their coordination. Knowing a form, recalling a meaning, and using it appropriately in context do not unfold as a single process for learners; they remain partially disconnected. It is in this gap—between possession of knowledge and its deployment—that much of the difficulty seems to reside.

4.1.3 Contextual and Self-Regulation Challenges

The difficulty here does not come from language alone. Limited opportunities to use Japanese outside the classroom (M = 3.77, SD = 1.18) appear repeatedly in students' accounts. One participant wrote, "*I don't have many chances to use Japanese outside class, so I forget what I learned*" (Participant 14). Another noted, "*I know I need to study regularly, but I cannot keep a stable study schedule*" (Participant 52). A third added, "*I often feel lost when studying alone because I don't know what to focus on*" (Participant 90).

The problem seems to extend into how learning is sustained over time. Self-study is present, but not always stable (M = 3.62, SD = 1.15). What students describe is not simply a lack of effort, but a lack of direction.

By contrast, the pace of instruction (M = 3.26, SD = 1.16) is less frequently identified as an issue. The difficulty appears to sit elsewhere—outside the classroom, and between study sessions—where continuity depends largely on the learner.

4.2 Most Challenging Skills and Components (RQ2)

A pattern begins to emerge across the data. Among the four skills, speaking is consistently positioned as the most demanding, with listening and reading following behind. Writing, while not without difficulty, does not, however, carry the same weight. The difference is, however, not only one of degree. Tasks that require immediate production—especially under time or social pressure—seem to accumulate demands that are less visible in receptive activities.

A similar contrast appears at the level of linguistic components. Vocabulary and grammar are not reported as difficult in isolation but become more problematic when they are expected to function in context. What students know does not always extend to what they can use.

The difficulty, then, is less about acquiring elements than about bringing them together. It is in moments that require coordination—where meaning, form, and timing have to align—that the strain becomes most apparent.

4.3 Preferred Learning Support (RQ3)

All forms of support are rated positively (Table 2), but the differences between them are not negligible. What begins to emerge is not a list of preferences, but a

certain ordering—one that reflects how students position themselves in relation to learning.

Table 2: Preferred Learning Support in Japanese Language Courses

Rank	Item	Statement	Mean	SD
1	C6	I prefer structured vocabulary learning resources (e.g., flashcards, quizzes, spaced review).	4.24	1.01
2	C8	Learning Japanese culture through media and authentic materials increases my motivation.	4.22	1.01
3	C4	I need more teacher feedback on grammar and writing.	4.11	1.04
4	C3	I need more teacher feedback on pronunciation and speaking.	4.08	1.06
5	C5	I prefer structured kanji learning support (e.g., weekly plans and guided practice).	4.07	1.09
6	C7	Digital tools (videos, apps, LMS) help me learn Japanese more effectively.	4.05	0.98
7	C2	I want more role-play and real-life communication tasks in class.	3.73	1.07

4.3.1 Structured Learning Resources

Structured support is foremost and vocabulary learning resources (M = 4.24, SD = 1.01) and kanji support (M = 4.07, SD = 1.09) receive the highest ratings.

Students' comments return to the same point, albeit in slightly different ways. "*I need clear learning plans to remember vocabulary effectively*" (Participant 33). "*If there are weekly goals or structured materials, I can study more consistently*" (Participant 61). "*Without clear guidance, I don't know what to review or practice*" (Participant 84).

What is being asked for is not simply more material, but a way of organizing it. Learning seems to depend, to a large extent, on whether direction is externally provided.

4.3.2 Teacher Feedback and Classroom Support

Feedback is valued at a similar level with both grammar and writing feedback (M = 4.11, SD = 1.04) and speaking-related correction (M = 4.08, SD = 1.06) receiving high ratings.

Students describe feedback less as evaluation and more as orientation. "*Teacher feedback helps me understand my mistakes and improve faster*" (Participant 18); "*I need correction when I speak because I don't know if I am using Japanese correctly*"

(Participant 47).;"*Feedback makes me more confident because I know what to improve*" (Participant 72).

What seems to matter here is not only accuracy, but the sense of knowing where one stands. Feedback functions as a point of reference.

4.3.3 Cultural and Technology-Assisted Support

Cultural materials are also strongly preferred (M = 4.22, SD = 1.01). Students refer to media and authentic input as making the language more accessible: "*Learning through anime or videos makes Japanese more interesting and easier to understand*" (Participant 25); "*Real-life materials help me understand how Japanese is actually used*" (Participant 66).

Digital tools follow closely (M = 4.05, SD = 0.98), described less in terms of content than in terms of availability: "*Apps and online tools help me practice more outside class*" (Participant 69); "*Technology helps me review anytime, not only in class*" (Participant 91). What they seem to offer is continuity—something that extends learning beyond scheduled instruction.

Role-play and communicative activities (M = 3.73, SD = 1.07) are rated positively, but with less consistency. Some hesitation appears in the responses: "*Role-play is useful, but I feel shy when speaking in front of others*" (Participant 40); "*I prefer to prepare before speaking activities*" (Participant 76).

Participation, it seems, is not rejected—but it is conditional. Without prior preparation or support, it remains uneven.

5. Discussion

This study began with a relatively straightforward question—what difficulties learners report and what support they prefer—but the results point to something less straightforward. What emerges is not a set of isolated issues, but a recurring imbalance between what learners know and what they are able to do with that knowledge under actual learning conditions. Across the data, this imbalance appears most clearly at the point where language is required to be used, rather than recognized or recalled.

5.1 Speaking, Anxiety, and the Conditions of Use

Speaking stands out not simply because it receives the highest difficulty ratings, but because of how different pressures converge within it. Producing language in real time requires learners to coordinate lexical choice, grammatical form, and meaning, while at the same time remaining aware of how their performance is perceived by others. These demands are not sequential; they occur simultaneously.

Earlier research has often treated speaking difficulty as a function of limited linguistic resources. The present findings, however, suggest a more layered configuration. The difficulty lies not only in what learner's lack, but in what is

required of them at the moment of use. In this sense, speaking becomes a site where knowledge is tested under conditions that are both cognitive and social.

The role of anxiety needs to be understood within this configuration rather than as a separate variable. The relatively high levels of speaking anxiety reported here do not appear external to performance: they arise within it. When learners are required to produce language without sufficient control, the act of speaking itself becomes a source of uncertainty. Previous studies have linked classroom interaction and evaluation pressure to speaking anxiety (e.g., Cutrone, 2009), but the present data suggest that anxiety is also tied to the instability of language use at this stage of learning.

From an output-oriented perspective (Hinkel, 2011), opportunities for production are often seen as essential for development. The findings here do not contradict this view, but they complicate it. Output may expose gaps in interlanguage, yet the conditions under which output occurs—particularly in non-immersion contexts—can also amplify those gaps.

5.2 Receptive Processing and the Limits of Recognition

Difficulties in listening and reading show a different configuration. Here, the issue is less about producing language than about sustaining comprehension over time. Listening, in particular, is constrained by the speed and continuity of input. Learners are not only identifying words; they are required to maintain coherence as the input unfolds. Reading introduces another layer through kanji and vocabulary density. What is notable in the data is that kanji memorization itself is not rated as the most difficult aspect. Instead, the difficulty appears when kanji must be used in context—when recognition is expected to support comprehension or production.

This distinction resonates with research that emphasizes the importance of contextualized kanji learning (Mori & Mori, 2021), but the present findings point to a more general issue: recognition and use do not develop at the same pace. Learners may be able to identify forms without being able to mobilize them effectively. In this sense, receptive skills are not free of difficulty; rather, they are structured differently. The demands are distributed over time, but they still require coordination—between form, meaning, and context.

5.3 Learning Beyond the Classroom: Constraint and Continuity

The learning context introduces another dimension to this imbalance. In a non-immersion environment, opportunities to use Japanese remain limited, and much of the learning process unfolds outside structured instruction. What appears in the data is not simply a lack of exposure, but a lack of continuity: students do study on their own, but not in ways that hold. The issue is not about getting started but what happens after—when effort fades or loses direction.

Work on self-regulation has long stressed consistency and control (Oxford, 2016), but these are not simply present or absent here. They seem uneven, shifting from one moment to another. The present findings suggest that such control cannot be assumed. Without clear direction, learners are left to organize their own learning

processes, often without sufficient support. Interestingly, the pace of instruction is not identified as a major issue. This shifts attention away from teaching itself and toward what happens between classes. The classroom is not necessarily the point of breakdown; rather, it is the space outside it where learning becomes uneven.

5.4 Alignment Between Difficulty and Support

One of the more consistent patterns in the data is the alignment between reported difficulties and preferred forms of support. Students' choices cluster around the same points where learning begins to slip.

Structured resources—especially for vocabulary and kanji—are repeatedly brought up. Not for the content alone, but for the way they organize what would otherwise remain scattered. In contexts where self-regulation is uneven, structure appears to function as an external scaffold.

Teacher feedback occupies a similar position. It is described not only as correction, but as a way of locating oneself within the learning process. Feedback provides a reference point, especially in areas where learners are uncertain about their performance. Cultural materials and digital tools extend learning in another direction. They do not replace structure, but they supplement it by increasing exposure and maintaining engagement. In non-immersion contexts, this extension becomes particularly important.

By contrast, communicative activities such as role-play receive lower, though still positive, evaluations. This does not necessarily indicate rejection. but while participation in these activities does not seem to be rejected, it is uneven. Some students hold back, especially when interaction is open-ended. Without preparation or support, the task can feel beyond what they are ready to handle.
This hesitation is not incidental. Work in task-based language teaching has shown that participation in communicative tasks depends not only on task design but also on learners' readiness and their perception of risk (Littlewood, 2004;). When speaking requires immediate production in front of others, the conditions themselves can limit engagement, even when learners possess sufficient knowledge.

Work in task-based learning has pointed to similar constraints, particularly around task design and learner readiness (Littlewood, 2004). What appears here follows that line, though in a context where opportunities to practice remain limited.

5.5 Toward a Reframing of Learning Difficulty

Taken together, the findings suggest that learning difficulty in this context cannot be reduced to linguistic complexity alone, but nor can it be explained solely through affective or contextual factors. What appears instead is an interaction between these dimensions. The central issue is not simply what learners know, but how that knowledge holds under conditions of use. Difficulty becomes most visible at the moment when knowledge has to be put into practice—under time pressure, with limited support, and within a constrained learning environment.

This shifts where attention needs to be focused and the issue is not simply how much learners know, but how that knowledge is carried into application. What seems to matter is the support around that crucial moment—whether use is scaffolded, paced, and made manageable. The problem, then, is not only one of input, rather it lies in the movement from knowing to using, and in how that movement is sustained beyond the classroom (Hinkel, 2011).

6. Japanese Language Teaching Implications

The findings of this study pointless to isolated pedagogical adjustments than to a need for rethinking how learning is supported in contexts where opportunities for use are limited. What appears across the data is a recurring difficulty at the point where knowledge is required to become applied to use. The implications that follow are, therefore, not tied to individual skills alone, but to the conditions under which learners are expected to act on what they know.

6.1 Reconsidering Speaking as a Conditioned Practice

The issue is not simply that speaking is difficult, but that it concentrates multiple demands—linguistic, cognitive, and social—within a single moment. Instruction, therefore, needs to shift attention from performance itself to the conditions that make performance possible.

Rather than treating speaking as an immediate outcome, it may be more productive to approach it as something that is gradually made manageable. This involves creating conditions where learners can engage with language without the full weight of real-time pressure. Structured preparation, reduced audience exposure (e.g., pair or small-group interaction), and clearly bounded communicative goals can all function as ways of redistributing that pressure.

In this sense, fluency-oriented activity at early stages may not simply be a matter of prioritizing meaning over form, but of allowing learners to remain within a space where language use is still sustainable.

6.2 Structure as Support for Continuity, Not Just Content

The strong orientation toward structured resources points to a broader issue: learning does not break down primarily because of lack of input, but because of lack of continuity. What structure provides, in this context, is not only organization of content, but a way of holding learning together over time.

This suggests that instructional design may need to make structure more explicit and more visible. Regularized learning pathways—such as staged vocabulary and kanji progression, guided self-study sequences, and cyclical review—can function as external supports in contexts where internal regulation remains uneven.

Seen this way, structure is not supplementary. It becomes part of the mechanism through which learning is sustained.

6.3 Feedback as Orientation Rather than Correction

Feedback is not only about correction, but it also gives learners a point of reference—something to work from when their own judgment is uncertain. In

situations where learners are uncertain about their own performance, feedback provides a point of reference—something against which they can locate their progress.

This shifts the focus from quantity to function. Rather than attempting to address all errors, feedback may be more effective when it is selective, timely, and tied to patterns that interfere with communication. Short, targeted feedback tends to be more workable such as with focused sessions, annotated examples, and brief attention to recurring issues. It remains usable without becoming excessive.

Feedback also carries an affective charge but how it is delivered can either sustain participation or quietly shut it down. In contexts where anxiety is closely tied to performance, feedback also plays a role in stabilizing learners' willingness to participate.

6.4 Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom

In non-immersion contexts, the classroom cannot carry the full weight of language exposure. Learning depends, to a large extent, on what happens outside it. The question is less how to increase input, and more how to make engagement beyond the classroom sustainable.

Cultural materials and technology-assisted tools can be understood in this light. Their role goes beyond motivation: they open up additional points of contact—places where language is encountered under different conditions, often with lower stakes and more flexibility.

Used well, these resources stretch learning beyond the classroom. They make it possible to return to the language, to stay with it, rather than letting it end with the lesson.

6.5 Rethinking Curriculum as a System of Support

Curriculum design needs to shift away from a purely content-driven orientation. It is not just what is taught that matters, but how learning is carried across time, settings, and activity.

Linguistic development does not unfold separately from affective and contextual conditions: they move together. As such, a workable curriculum would need to hold these elements in relation—supporting use as it develops, while keeping tasks within a range learners can manage, even as that range is gradually extended. What is at stake is not simply efficiency of instruction, but the stability of learning itself—whether learners are able to carry over what they know into use, and to sustain that use beyond the classroom.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Regardless of the contribution of this study, it has a number of limitations. Firstly, the research design was a cross-sectional survey, which measured the perceptions of the students at a single time; thus, it was unable to determine the potential changes in the challenges and support needs as mastery of the learners grew.

Further longitudinal studies have the potential to offer greater understanding on developmental changes in the experiences of learners.

Second, it was based mostly on self-reported information that can be prone to personal bias. In order to increase validity, future research could consider triangulating the results of a survey with other sources, including observations of classrooms, learning performance data, and teacher assessments.

Third, the respondents were selected using convenience sampling in one university in Hanoi, which might restrict the transferability of the results to other institutional settings. More universities or regions need to be incorporated in future studies to determine whether the same trends are observed in different settings.

Besides this, the level of exploration of the personal experiences of learners was curtailed as it was quantitative oriented. Even though there were open-ended responses, qualitative or mixed-methods research (e.g., interviews/focus groups) might provide more detailed description of the views of learners. Lastly, future studies should take into address the relationship between perceived challenges, the desired support and learning outcomes (e.g., gains in proficiency or performance in the course). It would be more convincing to assess the outcomes of certain instructional interventions like structured kanji programs or technological-based learning methods to enhance the Japanese language teaching in the non-immersion setting.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how university students experience difficulty in learning Japanese in a non-immersion context, and what forms of support they consider necessary to sustain their learning. The findings point not simply to variation across skills and components, but to a recurring imbalance between knowledge and use. Speaking brings this into focus most clearly, where learners are required to mobilize linguistic resources under time pressure and social visibility. Similar tensions appear in listening, reading, and writing, where what is known does not always hold in use. These difficulties are further shaped by limited opportunities for practice and uneven continuity in self-directed learning.

What students ask for is concomitant from where learning begins to break down. Structured resources and teacher feedback come first and while cultural materials and digital tools also matter, this is mainly in how they extend learning beyond the classroom. What follows, therefore, is less a need for more content and rather for more sustained forms of support. In non-immersion contexts, the central issue lies in how learners are assisted in carrying knowledge into use, and in maintaining that use over time. Addressing this gap may be key to developing more stable and effective learning trajectories.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire (English Version)
Dear students,
I am carrying out research on the teaching and learning of Japanese in the university level. This survey is intended to examine perceived challenges of students in learning Japanese, as well as what they prefer to receive as a means of assistance. The findings will provide valuable information which can be adopted to enhance teaching techniques, classroom practices and learning materials that will enhance the learning experience and outcome of the students.

In this survey, we are not going to gather any personal data about you such as your name. Any answers will just be utilized in research and in order to enhance the teaching and will not influence your grades or grade rating of the course in any way.

You do not need to be there, and you can leave any time you do not want to. The survey will need between 5 and 8 minutes to complete.

Be frank about what you have learned. There is no right or wrong. Your suggestions are extremely useful and will contribute to the improvement of the classes of the Japanese language at the university. Thank you very much for your time and support!
Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Section A. Background Information
A1. Year of study:
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐4 ☐ Other: _____
A2. How long have you learned Japanese?
☐ < 6 months ☐ 6–<12 months ☐ 1–<2 years ☐ 2–<3 years
☐ > 3 years
A3. Self-rated proficiency
☐ Beginner ☐ Elementary ☐ Intermediate ☐ Upper-intermediate
☐ Other: _____
A4. Target JLPT level in the next 12 months:
☐ N5 ☐ N4 ☐ N3 ☐ N2 ☐ N1 ☐ No plan ☐ Other: _
A5. Average study time per week (class + self-study):
☐ <2 ☐ 2–4 ☐ 5–7 ☐ 8–10 ☐ >10 (hours/week)
A6. Self-study methods (choose all that apply):
☐ Textbooks/printed materials
☐ Videos/YouTube
☐ Apps (Anki/Quizlet…)
☐ LMS (Moodle/GC…)
☐ Study group
☐ Club/Speaking club
☐ Other: _____

A7. Main goals for learning Japanese (choose all that apply):
☐ JLPT certificate
☐ Graduation requirement
☐ Scholarship/Exchange/Study abroad
☐ Work at Japanese company in Vietnam
☐ Work/Internship in Japan
☐ Translation/Interpretation
☐ Teaching Japanese
☐ Communication with Japanese people
☐ Interest in Japanese culture/media
☐ Personal reasons
☐ Other: _____

Section B. Perceived Challenges (Likert scale: 1–5)
Please indicate your agreement with the statements below.
B1. Japanese listening is difficult because native speech is too fast.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B2. I often miss key information when listening to Japanese audio.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B3. I feel nervous when speaking Japanese in front of others.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B4. I have difficulty expressing my ideas in Japanese speaking tasks.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B5. Reading is difficult because of unfamiliar kanji and vocabulary.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B6. Writing is difficult due to grammar mistakes.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B7. I find it hard to remember and use new vocabulary in context.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B8. Kanji memorization (form/meaning/reading) is difficult for me.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B9. I find it difficult to use particles correctly (は/が/に/で/を…).
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B10. I have difficulty applying grammar rules in real communication.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B11. The pace of the course is challenging to follow.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B12. I have limited opportunities to practice Japanese outside the classroom.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
B13. I have difficulty maintaining regular self-study routines.
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Section C. Preferred Learning Support (Likert scale: 1–5)

Please indicate to what extent you agree that you WANT/NEED the following support.

C1. I prefer more pair/group speaking activities in class.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C2. I want more role-play and real-life communication tasks.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C3. I need more teacher feedback on pronunciation and speaking.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C4. I need more teacher feedback on grammar and writing.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C5. I prefer structured kanji learning support (weekly plan, practice sets).

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C6. I prefer structured vocabulary learning resources (flashcards, quizzes, spaced review).

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C7. Digital tools (videos/apps/LMS) help me learn Japanese more effectively.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

C8. Learning Japanese culture through media/examples increases my engagement.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Section D. Open-ended Questions

D1. What is your biggest challenge in learning Japanese? Why?

D2. What learning support or teaching activities do you want more in Japanese classes?