

Challenges in learning a Foreign Language in three Philippine Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: Learning a foreign language is essential for some degree programs due to its industry relevance and graduate employability. Despite its importance, research on this topic, particularly in the Philippines, remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of the challenges and factors affecting foreign language learning among Filipinos across various educational institutions. Applying a descriptive research design and a quantitative research approach, this research aimed to determine the specific aspects of Nihongo language learning that pose challenges for students in selected educational institutions. Additionally, the research examines if there are significant differences in the perception of students and their sexuality. By identifying the specific challenges faced by students in learning Nihongo, educators and institutions can develop more effective teaching strategies, curricula, and support systems to address these challenges. Additionally, understanding the potential influence of students' sexuality on language learning experiences can lead to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Ultimately, the outcomes of this study have the potential to enhance the quality of Nihongo language education and improve students' overall learning experiences in Philippine higher education institutions.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution, Japanese Language, Learning a Foreign Language Nihongo, Students' Learning Challenges

Introduction

A foreign language is defined as a language that is neither an official language of a specific country nor commonly spoken within its borders (Rankin, 2023). Typically, individuals native to that country need to deliberately acquire this foreign language, often through formal education like language classes, self-guided learning, or participation in language courses. It's worth noting that a foreign language can also be learned as a second language; nevertheless, it's essential to distinguish between these two terms. A second language specifically pertains to a language that holds significant importance in the region where the speaker resides, whether for purposes of communication, education, business, or governance (Miao, 2015). Consequently, a second language isn't necessarily equivalent to a foreign language.

Lonsmann and Kraft (2018) underline that the phenomenon of globalization has significantly elevated the demand for individuals skilled in foreign languages. This surge is attributed to the ongoing internationalization of workplaces, which has led to a proliferation of cultures and languages. Consequently, individuals are compelled to adapt and acquire proficiency in new languages. Raewf & Mahmood (2021) elaborate that learning an additional language beyond one's native tongue offers a distinct advantage in both securing better job opportunities and competing effectively with peers. This advantage is rooted in the evolving needs of institutions and corporations that are increasingly inclined towards global business interactions, necessitating a workforce adept in multiple languages (Stein-Smith, 2017). This shift has led to the potential for multilingual employees to not only command higher salaries but also ascend the corporate ladder through promotions. Beyond its career-enhancing potential, mastering another language entails grasping the intricacies of its grammar and vocabulary (Mohammed & Thabit, 2015). This mastery brings about heightened mental agility and cognitive flexibility, culminating in the development of valuable skills like problem-solving (Athanosopoulos et al., 2015). Consequently, this cognitive engagement serves as an exercise for the human brain, fostering its overall well-being and contributing to the prevention of memory-related ailments.

Multilingualism confers a distinct advantage, especially in industries with extensive international interactions like tourism and hospitality (Suhaimi and Abdullah, 2017), where effective communication holds a pivotal role. In contexts such as Malaysia, language remains a substantial barrier for international tourists, particularly those hailing from non-English speaking countries, impeding their interactions with locals and consequently impacting their overall experiences within the country (Rogerson and Visser, 2007). Echoing this sentiment, Lily (2015) asserts that embracing multilingualism is imperative to navigate disruptive innovations in this fiercely competitive industry. The ability to communicate and engage in multiple languages across the globe unlocks myriad opportunities in international travel ventures, fostering extensive interconnections within Business-to-Business domains. This perspective is further endorsed by Tziora et al. (2016), advocating that multilingualism provides a competitive edge to both global hospitality companies and individuals pursuing careers within the sector. Responding to these imperatives, the Philippine education system has taken proactive measures by incorporating foreign language courses into the curricula of Higher Education Institutions

(HEIs), specifically within programs like Bachelor of Science in Tourism/Management and Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management. Significantly, these courses are categorized as professional requirements rather than mere electives, underscoring their fundamental importance (CHED Memorandum Order No. 62, Series of 2017). The foreign languages offered within these curricula vary among HEIs; some provide instruction in French or German, while others opt for Mandarin or Nihongo, among other options. Intriguingly, one of the researchers involved in this study is particularly engaged in teaching Nihongo across several Philippine HEIs. This commitment reflects the ongoing efforts within Philippine education to equip future professionals with the linguistic tools necessary to excel in the evolving landscape of global tourism and hospitality.

The process of learning a foreign language is notably challenging, particularly when dealing with languages that are unfamiliar to learners. Everson (2011) asserts that languages like Japanese and Chinese require a substantially longer period – at least four times – for learners to achieve proficiency compared to European languages. Racoma (2018), in a divergent perspective, highlights several potential determinants of learning ease, including unfamiliar accents, unique morphological structures, and significant deviations of writing systems from the Roman alphabet present in many native languages. Huyen et al. (2022) corroborate these contentions by emphasizing the inherent complexity of certain languages, citing vocabulary acquisition as a significant hurdle. They posit that the intricate nature of these languages necessitates repeated reading and writing exercises in the classroom, ensuring that students grasp and internalize word meanings. This dynamic, however, casts doubt on the efficacy of instructional approaches employed. These perspectives collectively shed light on the intricate interplay between linguistic complexity and language learning. The recognition of these challenges calls for a reevaluation of teaching methodologies to address the unique demands posed by languages with such distinctive attributes.

The advantages of acquiring a second language, particularly one that is foreign, are evident in the context of the professional work environment. This rationale has driven the inclusion of foreign language subjects in higher education curricula across numerous countries, including the Philippines. These subjects are particularly emphasized in courses geared towards industries that involve interactions with diverse nationalities. Consequently, it becomes imperative to ensure the efficacy of instruction in these

subjects. In addition, the researchers noted, through a thorough literature review, that despite its significance, this particular topic appears to have received limited attention from scholars within the Philippines. While it has been extensively researched in various countries, there is a noticeable dearth of studies focusing on foreign language learning within the Philippines. Only a handful of studies involving Filipinos have been found in open-access journals. Furthermore, these studies, though valuable, have been confined to individual educational institutions, leading to an absence of a holistic and comprehensive investigation into this topic. This observed research gap and the limited scope of existing studies underscore the necessity for a broader and more comprehensive study. Hence, the motivation for this research is not only to contribute to the existing body of knowledge but also to address the need for a more inclusive and encompassing examination of the subject matter. Precisely, the study aimed to; 1). to determine in which aspect among writing, reading, listening, speaking, and pronouncing Nihongo Language do students find more challenging, resulting in failure to successfully learn it, and 2). to determine if there are significant differences in the students' perception towards each aspect as a challenge in learning Nihongo Language when grouped according to their sexuality.

Method

Guided by a descriptive research design employing a quantitative approach, this study sought to investigate the challenges faced by a sample of 125 Filipino undergraduate students majoring in tourism and hospitality. These participants were drawn randomly from three distinct higher education institutions in the Philippines. The determination of the sample size followed Slovin's formula, employing a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. To explore the challenges, a questionnaire derived from Quintos (2021) was utilized. Using a 4-point Likert scale, the study gauged the degree of challenge encountered by students across various aspects of learning the Nihongo language. These aspects encompassed listening to instructors during classes, engaging in spoken interactions in Nihongo, enunciating words accurately, reading texts, and composing written content.

The goal was to ascertain which of these areas posed the greatest difficulty for students and subsequently impeded their effective learning in the classroom. Furthermore, the research aimed to discern whether there existed a significant difference in the perceived challenges across these areas based on the students' sexuality. To quantify the findings, frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were computed. Additionally, a

T-Test analysis was conducted to identify any noteworthy discrepancies. It is important to note that prior to participating, the respondents were provided with information about the researchers' identities, the study's purpose, and the nature of the questions they would be answering. Their voluntary participation was sought following their explicit consent. Moreover, to safeguard their privacy, no identifying information about the respondents, such as their names, was collected.

Results and Discussion

Diverse viewpoints exist regarding the challenges inherent in learning the Nihongo language among students. Quintos (2021) suggests that limited Nihongo vocabulary and a lack of cultural context in presented materials contribute to minimal retention and understanding of topics discussed. This deficiency in vocabulary comprehension consequently hampers effective listening and responding skills, impacting students' ability to express themselves verbally. However, Saito (2022) contends that the challenges faced by students are also influenced by psychological and sociocultural factors. These dimensions add an additional layer of complexity to the language learning process. Furthermore, several other studies suggest that the inherent difficulty of learning Nihongo stems from significant grammatical disparities when compared to other languages, coupled with the unique characteristic of each Japanese syllable being pronounced distinctly. In light of these perspectives, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the aspects that pose challenges for Filipinos in learning the Nihongo language. The ensuing data presentation sheds light on these areas of difficulty.

Table 1. Challenges in learning Nihongo Language

Variables	Mean	Descriptive Meaning
1. Listening to my teacher's discussion on Nihongo Language as a challenge.	2.18	Disagree
2. Using Nihongo Language in speaking as a challenge.	2.56	Agree
3. Pronouncing words in Nihongo Language as a challenge.	2.87	Agree
4. Reading words and sentences in Nihongo Language as a challenge.	2.32	Disagree
5. Writing words and sentences in Nihongo Language as a challenge.	2.37	Disagree

The data presented on this table shed light on the most formidable hurdle encountered by students in their quest to master the Nihongo language. Notably, the

students pointed out that the most challenging aspect revolves around mastering Japanese Pronunciation, with the next hurdle being the actual spoken component of the language. This underscores the intricate nature of Japanese language pronunciation, which proves challenging due to the subtle nuances in pronunciation that alter the meaning of words. This complexity contrasts with the Filipino language, which has relatively fewer instances of such intricacies, barring exceptions such as the dual meanings of "paso" as "burnt" and "clay pot." The presence of these complications in diction, syllables, and overall pronunciation contributes to the heightened difficulty Filipinos encounter in learning a language like Japanese. This complexity also offers an explanation for why many Filipinos tend to find the English language comparatively more approachable. Conversely, when it comes to the domains of reading and writing, the students contested the notion of difficulty.

This implies that Filipinos may find it relatively more manageable to convey their thoughts through writing in a newly acquired language as opposed to verbal communication. Lastly, an intriguing discovery was made in the realm of listening comprehension. The research found that listening posed the least challenge for Filipino students in their journey of learning the Nihongo language. This finding is indicative of their intrinsic motivation to learn and their capability to do so, provided effective instruction is available to acquaint them with the intricacies of Nihongo terminology. Unlike the study of Quintos (2021) conducted in a state university, which found that students encountered difficulties in learning a foreign language across all aspects including listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading, and writing, the current study conducted in private higher education institutions discovered that students only face challenges in the aspects of speaking and pronunciation. This suggests the possibility that private institutions offer higher quality of instruction allowing students to learn better and easier, which contradicts the findings of Rubab and Awan (2020). It also raises the possibility that students in private institutions may be quicker learners, a notion supported by Kunwar (2021).

Table 2. Differences in the perception of students towards the challenges in learning Nihongo Language when grouped according to their sexuality

	Variables	t	df	Sig.
1.	Listening to my teacher's discussion on Nihongo Language as challenge.	.346	39.414	.731
2.	Using Nihongo Language in speaking as challenge.	.772	42.054	.445
3.	Pronouncing words in Nihongo Language	3.101	33.282	.004

	Variables	t	df	Sig.
	as challenge.			
4.	Reading words and sentences in Nihongo Language as a challenge.	-1.226	43.766	.227
5.	Writing words and sentences in Nihongo Language as a challenge.	.284	41.454	.778

The outcomes of the T-Test analysis unveiled intriguing insights regarding the impact of sexuality on students' perceptions of challenges when learning the Nihongo language. Notably, the results indicate that across the domains of listening, reading, writing, and speaking, there exists no substantial disparity in how students perceive the challenges, regardless of their sexuality. However, a distinctive pattern emerged when examining the perception of pronunciation as a hurdle in acquiring proficiency in Nihongo. Here, a significant variance based on sexuality was discerned. Specifically, the data underscored that females tend to find pronunciation more challenging compared to their male counterparts. This suggests that, within the context of learning Japanese pronunciation, males might exhibit a relatively easier grasp of the intricacies, while females might encounter greater difficulty. This aligns with the notion that some second language learners progress rapidly and effortlessly, while others progress slowly and with difficulty, as discussed in a study by Zafar and Meenakshi (2012).

However, it contradicts the common suggestion that females, especially during their early years, have a well-documented advantage in language development, considering that most developmental disorders primarily affecting communication, speech, and language skills are more prevalent in males, as noted by Adani and Capanec (2019). Moreover, Getie (2020) argued that females generally hold more positive attitudes towards learning a second or foreign language than males. This discrepancy in findings prompts further exploration of the factors influencing gender-based differences in language learning, shedding light on potential implications for language education and its outcomes. It's also important to note that this finding doesn't inherently imply an inherent advantage for males in mastering Japanese pronunciation. Instead, it underscores that, with dedicated and earnest engagement with the learning process, both genders can effectively navigate the challenges of pronunciation in the pursuit of acquiring proficiency in the Japanese language.

Conclusion

This study delved into the intricacies of learning the Nihongo language and yielded insightful findings that contribute to our understanding of the challenges students

encounter in the process. Through a meticulous analysis of students' perceptions, the study uncovered a distinctive landscape of difficulties and disparities, shedding light on areas that warrant focused attention in language instruction. The primary findings of the study underscore that the complexities of Japanese language pronunciation and spoken communication are the most formidable challenges students face. This revelation, coupled with the discovery of a gender-based difference in perceiving the difficulty of pronunciation, accentuates the significance of targeted approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, the research highlights the noteworthy fact that students find written communication in Nihongo to be less challenging than its verbal counterpart.

These results offer invaluable insights for educators and institutions alike. The central recommendation stemming from this research underscores the critical importance of prioritizing the mastery of pronunciation when instructing Nihongo. Given that students commonly encounter difficulties in this area, focusing on enhancing their pronunciation skills could greatly alleviate the challenges they face, potentially leading to improved learning outcomes and subject success rates. Additionally, a significant implication revolves around the evaluation and selection of Japanese language instructors within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study underscores that the ability to accurately pronounce words is a pivotal factor in effective language instruction. Consequently, HEIs are advised to consider prospective instructors not solely based on their credentials but also on their proficiency in enunciating Nihongo words correctly. This shift in evaluation criteria could significantly impact the quality of language instruction within HEIs.

Furthermore, the observation that students find verbal communication in Nihongo less challenging than writing prompts a crucial recommendation for instructional strategies. Instructors are encouraged to channel their efforts towards honing students' verbal communication skills in the language. This can be achieved by placing greater emphasis on oral assessments rather than relying predominantly on written examinations. Such an adjustment aligns with students' natural aptitude and could potentially lead to more effective language acquisition. The study's novel revelations hold the potential to reshape how Nihongo is taught and learned. By acknowledging the nuanced challenges posed by pronunciation and tailoring instructional approaches accordingly, educators can enhance the language learning journey, resulting in more confident and proficient students.

Lastly, while this study offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by Filipinos in learning the Japanese language, it has certain limitations that could be addressed by future researchers. Subsequent studies may consider examining students enrolled in Japanese language short courses, commonly provided by training schools for Filipinos seeking overseas work in Japan, rather than focusing solely on students enrolled in higher education institutions. Additionally, researchers might investigate whether differences in challenges exist among learners when grouped by age and other demographic factors, as the current study primarily addressed differences related to sexuality.

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