



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i10/11096> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i10/11096

Received: 08 August 2021, **Revised:** 30 August 2021, **Accepted:** 21 September 2021

Published Online: 09 October 2021

In-Text Citation: (Mamat, 2021)

To Cite this Article: Mamat, R. (2021). The Use of Popular Cultural Products in Language Learning: A Case Study of Japanese Language Students in Malaysian Public Universities. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(10), 412–417.

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Vol. 11, No. 10, 2021, Pg. 412 - 417

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The Use of Popular Cultural Products in Language Learning: A Case Study of Japanese Language Students in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Language teaching and learning has become easier with the advent of the internet and the rapid pace of information technology. If in the 1990s, teachers or instructors still used face-to-face medium in language teaching, but little by little, the function of educators is declining in the classroom or lecture room. Some students have already learned this language and can communicate in Japanese by watching anime and reading manga. They have already gained the skills to listen and understand the meaning of some catchy vocabulary and phrases. When they take Japanese language courses at university, learning to recognize writing, pronunciation, grammar, and conversation become more accessible and more exciting. This paper aims to identify Japanese popular culture products that can be used for learning purposes. Two surveys distributed through Google Form were involved in this study, namely 2020 and 2021 and one hard copy survey in 2018. The findings show that in addition to anime and manga, students also use computer games, Seiyu and VTuber as Japanese language learning tools. The students can minimize conventional face-to-face learning hours with the teacher and use their own space and time without reducing learning Japanese.

Keywords: Japanese, Popular Culture, University Students, Malaysia, Language Learning

Introduction

Japanese popular culture products such as manga, comics, shodo (Japanese calligraphy), and computer games are famous worldwide to this day. Some of their cultural products have evolved, such as shodo, divided into traditional shodo: regular shodo and performance shodo. The regular shodo are written on paper, and performance shodo are written on paper but extensive, accompanied by drum beats or music and dance performances. Shodo is back in popularity after the manga received a very encouraging response from overseas fans. Japanese language educators and researchers have discussed the use of manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation) as a medium of learning Japanese among fans of Japanese culture. Mamat et al (2018) have conducted a study on manga and anime by students at Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Malaya. 79% of respondents in their study stated that manga and anime improve Japanese language skills in writing, pronunciation,

vocabulary and specific phrases making essays more exciting and conversation or dialogue more natural.

With the Covid-19 pandemic hitting the whole world, including Malaysia, educators in universities and schools have moved from classroom-centred teaching or lectures to online teaching and learning. Online teaching allows students to minimize conventional learning. On the other hand, students can use space and time according to their convenience without reducing their learning of Japanese. This paper aims to:

- identify Japanese popular culture products as a learning alternative to students and teachers.
- suggest to Japanese language teachers to use VTuber as one of the teaching aids so that students can learn Japanese naturally.

Literature Review

Anime nowadays refers to Japanese animation, although it was a general term for all types of animation in the world. Nowadays, all anime forms with big eyes, snouts, blonde hair for men, and outrageous expressions are named anime even if other countries release them. For example, Malaysia also produces an anime titled 'Satria 7' or 'warrior 7' in collaboration with National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS), Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) and Japanese Animation Producer, targeting young people who love anime such as Doraemon and Naruto (Jalaluddin, 2019). Previously, South Korea and China also adapted manga sketches, story plots and genres as the original products from Japan. Japanese manga or comics were also adapted by South Korea and China and are known as *manhwa* and *manhua* in their respective countries. The BL genre or Boy's Love is prevalent in Japan. BL is also produced in Thailand and the Philippines and has produced many BL genre films, dramas and anime due to the influence of BL products in Japan. According to Andrada in Antonio (2021), BL stories were first written in Japan by women. Until now, the writers of BL anime are primarily women, and in Malaysia, the fans of BL are primarily women (Mamat et al., 2021). One can learn the Japanese language through popular culture and can be addicted to BL anime. The situation proves how anime can influence young people worldwide both from good and bad angles depending on their respective communities' values, religion, and culture.

It is common knowledge that songs, dramas, manga and anime are mediums used by Japanese students to improve their Japanese language skills. Teenagers or children interested in Japanese popular culture products, especially manga and anime, pick up catchy words or phrases. They compile a list of Japanese vocabulary little by little until they understand simple sentences without reference to translations or subtitles. Mamat et al (2018) concluded that manga and anime are popular learning media among Japanese language students at Public Universities. This statement is true, at least among students at Universiti Putra Malaysia who take Japanese language proficiency as an elective course and students at the University of Malaya who take a Japanese language proficiency as a compulsory course.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on two surveys in the form of Google Form in 2020 and 2021 and one hard copy survey in 2018. The theme of the study is based on the use of anime and anime sub-culture among students at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), University of Malaya (UM), the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the

University of Malaysia Sarawak (UMS) . Overall this paper includes 470 respondents from five universities. The three surveys are as follows in Table 1:

Table 1: Study data related to anime culture among public university students in Malaysia

YEAR	TITLE OF THE RESEARCH	NUMBER OF THE RESPONDENTS	UNIVERSITY INVOLVED
2018	Manga and anime consumption as a learning media among Japanese learners in Malaysian public universities	86	UPM & UM
2020	Anime culture	104	UPM & UMT
2021	Japanese language learners' views on LGBT elements in Malaysia	280	UPM, UMT, UM, UKM & UMS

Result

Mamat's (2021) study of 280 students at five Public Universities studying Japanese showed that 92.1% of respondents chose anime as the main Japanese cultural product used. Next are songs (72.1%), manga (62.9%), drama and film (50.4%), seiyu or voice actor (30.7%), fashion (18.2%), cosplay (27.1%), VTuber (14.6%) and video games (0.7%). The products of Japanese popular culture that are directly related to the Japanese language are anime, manga, drama, film, seiyu and VTuber. 12.1% of respondents spend more than ten hours a week watching anime and reading manga, while 7.6% of respondents watch anime and read manga between eight to ten hours a week. 15.7% of respondents watch 5-7 hours a week. 42.5% of respondents also watch 2-4 hours a week.

The result indicates that 77.9% of respondents watch anime at least 2 hours a week. The same study showed that 80% or 224 respondents knew the Japanese word *otaku*, 43.6% knew *fujoshi*, and 35.4% knew *fudanshi*. Only 14.6% per cent of students do not know word of *otaku*, *Fujoshi* and *Fudanshi*. According to the respondents of this study, *otaku* is fans of any Japanese culture, and they have fun and enjoy it. *Fujoshi* refers to women who like manga and anime in the BL genre, while *Fudanshi* refers to men who like the BL genre. The interviews also showed that they learned Japanese through anime, manga, drama, film, *seiyu* and VTuber. According to Mamat et al (2021), VTuber is a new Japanese popular culture that started in 2016. VTuber stands for Virtual YouTuber, where Vtuber or YouTube account owner creates anime characters and makes cute voices while communicating live with the audience. Because communication takes place directly with Vtuber sharing experiences while telling stories about various anime, movies, computer games and so on, interactions occur spontaneously and naturally. VTuber also responds spontaneously to the audience's live text with 'cute' behaviours and phrases or sentences. Almost all of the viewers are male if based on the author's random research on YouTube.

The following are respondents' statements taken at random to show that respondents use VTuber as a medium to learn Japanese. It is the result of Mamat's (2020) research on anime culture among students who take Japanese language skills courses at UPM and UMT as elective courses.

1. Because they always speak in Japanese, I wanted to learn how to pronounce their language correctly.
2. Improve my Japanese, and for translation, sometimes I need lots of time to search the memes about what they said and let me know the cultures about Japan.
3. It gains my knowledge about Japanese
4. I can remember a few words Japanese language
5. Can learn Japanese in a casual way
6. More fluent in speaking Japanese
7. Can understand more Japanese and English conversation.

Mamat et al (2020)

The following are the findings of a study by Mamat et al (2018). They each took Japanese language skills courses as elective and compulsory courses. The respondents are from University Putra Malaysia learning Japanese language proficiency courses as an elective subject. In contrast, respondents from the University of Malaya are from the Japanese studies program and take Japanese proficiency courses as compulsory subjects.

PM5: It makes me easy to memorize the vocabulary.

PM18: Whenever I watched anime, I learned a new paraphrase

PM11: It helps a lot in speaking.

PM15: It will help us learn while doing our hobby

LM12: New words and platform/structure.

PM17: When you watch Japanese tubbed anime might improve your vocabulary.

PM16: Because I can try to read a few words in Japanese.

PM22: It does give some skill to pronounce the word in Japanese.

LM19: It has included the hiragana, katakana, and kanji to explore more about it.

PC20: The script repeats some of the vocabularies; it is easier to learn.

Mamat et al (2018: 307)

The authors conclude that the study's objective, i.e. identify the Japanese popular culture as a learning alternative to students and teachers, has been achieved. Students' popular culture products to improve their Japanese language skills are anime, manga, film, drama, seiyu, song, and VTuber. The three most popular products are anime, seiyu and songs, while the seiyu and VTuber are increasingly getting more attention from time to time.

Conclusion

Using drama, film, song, manga and anime in Japanese language teaching has become a standard approach for language teachers. However, many teachers might not be aware of using seiyu and Vtuber in teaching and learning the Japanese language. The researcher is also not knowing that seiyu and VTuber are part of students tools in learning natural Japanese conversation.

For successful communication, language learners should have a clear understanding of the lexicon, grammar, cultural patterns, and the pragmatic background of the situation. In

other words, learners need to understand how context contributes to meaning to construct meaningful and effective communication in a foreign language (Chan and Wong, 2017). Thus anime, manga, games and recently, VTuber became the effective medium in learning and teaching Japanese, naturally.

The researcher concluded that the use of VTuber among Japanese students is shallow considering that it has only just begun, and many students or fans of Japanese popular culture still do not know what is VTuber yet. However, VTuber will get due attention from anime fans because VTuber has its uniqueness such as live chat, live performance, knowledge sharing, hobbies and current affairs in Japan. VTuber's utterance is also very natural; the voice and character are cute and attract the trendy pronouncing.

So, are Japanese language educators aware of the existence of VTuber? The answer is 'NO', at least for lecturers at Universiti Putra Malaysia, as Vtuber is still new. Some students do not know the terms of VTuber before the study on them is done by the researcher. Generally, Japanese language teachers at the Universities still use textbooks as the primary source. They give their students various assessments such as quizzes, dialogues, essays, exams but not exposing students to other online sources. The students may lack Japanese pronunciation because almost 100% of Japanese language teachers in Malaysian universities are not native speakers. During the covid-19 pandemic, where most lectures in Malaysia are still conducted online, instructors can use popular culture products, including VTuber as a tool in teaching.

Acknowledgement

Sumitomo Foundation Grant, 2020. No. 208402.

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