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Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) As Japanese Language Learning Tool among Students

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 along with the rapid development of online devices has triggered the evolution of online learning, which its development has turned into an important modern teaching and learning tool. However, various information, such as its practicality, descriptions, innovative ways to apply and customise it to cater to a specific course is much needed for any electronic tools to be adapted into the teaching or learning a foreign language. What motivates the researchers to conduct this study is that with the evolution of online learning, Japanese language instructors need to provide more interesting and appropriate online learning materials to help students' cognitive understanding as well as to facilitate the online teaching and learning session. Generally, the purpose of this study is to investigate how students at one of Malaysia's largest public universities have been using Minato to learn Japanese online. Specifically, this study is conducted to explore how Cognitive, Situational, and Behavioural factors would affect students' online learning process. This study employs quantitative methods. 410 students who adopted Japanese language as an elective course participated as the sample of this study. A survey containing forty-seven questions about Cognitive, Situational and Behavioural factors is managed online. The survey is adapted from the Social Cognitive Theory by (Bandura, 1986). The findings have shown that between these three factors, Situational factors display a great imprint on the student's learning process. Behavioural factors rank second and the least impactful is the Cognitive factors. It has clearly shown that Minato has a significant influence on learning Japanese culture, vocabulary and pronunciation. However, Minato scores low among the students when it comes to assisting their understanding on grammar. Thus, it is suggested that more specific research on certain aspects of Japanese online learning should be conducted because online learning tools are not completely perfect without certain flaws.

Keywords: Minato, Japanese Language Learning Tool, Cognitive, Situational, Behavioural

Introduction

Background of Study

Online learning has become the norm in education since the rapid development of the internet. Recently, it has grown drastically due to the COVID-19 outbreak, thus urging educators to either develop or adapt to more effective and engaging online learning tools. In addition, there are schools, colleges and universities that have discontinued face-to-face teaching due to the outbreak (Dhawan, 2020), further creating a high demand for online learning tools. Abas et al (2021) mentioned that COVID-19 has triggered educators to equip themselves with various suitable online tools for improving the teaching and learning process. Meanwhile, Paul and Jefferson (2019) explained that traditional classrooms are teacher-centred and require passive learning by students. However, online learning is student-centred and requires active participation. Therefore, online learning tools should be used to help students so that they have a more student-centred learning experience. This online tool does not only focus on the syllabus but also incorporates social and cultural elements. Along with the unexpected situation due to the pandemic, students are expected to adapt to the independent learning process (Okamoto et al., 2021) where Minato is useful for guiding them through discovery learning, in contrast to the conventional one-way learning process.

One of the main online websites used in learning Japanese has been developed by the Japan Foundation. This website is known as Minato and is based on the content of the Japanese language textbook, Marugoto. This website does not only require students' active participation, but also uses an interactive interface to educate students about Japanese culture and society. According to Abas et al (2021), Minato is a website developed in 2014 as a progressive online Japanese language learning technique, based on Marugoto's textbook.

Most of the lecturers in this research have been using Minato since September 2019, just before the COVID-19 outbreak. Many scholars have found that Minato is a helpful and effective teaching aid for students to learn Japanese. Okamoto et al (2021) stated that Minato is an effective self-learning tool when learning Japanese characters, *Hiragana* and *Katakana*. Abas et al (2021) discovered that video and picture materials in Minato help students in learning Japanese culture, while audio materials can guide them in learning vocabulary. How Minato when applied as a Japanese online tool would influence students' online learning process?

Statement of Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a drastic shift into the online learning scenario that raises concerns about the effectiveness of websites like Minato for students as their interactive learning tools and which part of the Japanese language learning process will receive the greatest impact. Before the epidemic, Japanese was taught to students in physical classrooms. Conventional learning approaches are usually teacher-centred, and they involve one-way communication. Students are expected to play a passive role and they will participate with a minimum amount of interaction in the classroom. Students are required to attend class according to the class schedule and they will follow the syllabus presented by the teacher (Tran, 2016). Tran (2016) also added that physical classroom will focus more on traditional lecture approaches, homework or assignments and assessments such as quizzes, exams and projects. In this conventional method, students only rely on textbooks or written materials in their face-to-face classrooms which are inadequate and unreliable for their

learning progress. These textbooks and written materials are not only theory-based, but they are not interactive especially for the language learning process. Furthermore, traditional classrooms follow the phases or dynamics of their teachers (Paul and Jefferson, 2019), which can be difficult for students if they are conducted too quickly, unlike online learning which is more flexible and asynchronous. On the other hand, Gopal et al (2021) found that online course design used during online learning contributes a significant positive influence on students' performance. They also emphasized that the competence of the instructor is important for the satisfactory performance of the students.

Despite of the relevance of online learning especially in this unprecedented situation, there are still some questions raised about to which extent Minato can be applied in the online learning process and how it will affect Japanese language learning among students in Malaysia. Further research still needs to be conducted to see if it has the potential to be used continuously as a learning tool.

Objective and Research Questions

This study is initially carried out as to explore on the use of Marugoto in learning Japanese online. The use of this approach mirrors the theory of Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986). This study is specifically done to answer the following questions:

- 1.1.1 How do Cognitive factors influence the learning of Japanese online?
- 1.1.2 How do Situational factors influence the learning of Japanese online?
- 1.1.3 How do Behaviour factors influence the learning of Japanese online?

Literature Review

Social Cognitive Theory

For any language learners, the environment is one of the most important aspects to facilitate their learning process. According to Rahmat (2019), the environment can either hinder or facilitate the learning process. The emergence of online learning has changed the environment of the language classroom. In line with that, the Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986) emphasises on the symbiotic relationship (refer to Figure 1) between behaviour, environment and person as well as Cognitive factors. Cognitive factors included a student's perception toward their success or failure throughout the learning process. The student's behaviour is also influenced by his/her environment. It means that a positive environment will create a positive outcome and vice versa. Finally, the behaviour of the learner would result from the existing environment coupled with his/her cognitive perception of the learning process.

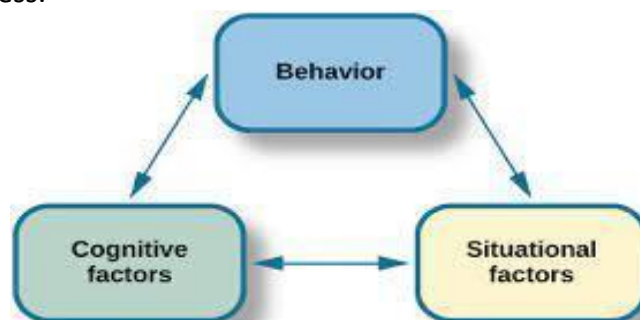


Figure 1 - Bandura, 1986

According to Rahmat et al (2017), the psychology of understanding language learning begins with the initial student's behaviour. This initial behaviour/perception influences the student's willingness to participate in the classroom environment (Situational factors). The cognitive factors are derived from the Situational factors and then would influence the student's future learning behaviour of the language. Similarly, the language learners are influenced by the situation around them (Rahmat, 2018). The circumstances of the situation could either slow or facilitate language learning.

Teaching and Learning Japanese Online

Japanese language teaching and learning has shifted from traditional face-to-face to online classroom with the support of IT technologies such as blended learning, flipped classrooms, e-learning or online learning via various platforms. For instance, Shen (2022) has investigated on the learning performance and the learning effect of the students through the experimental design of internet corpus. The study revealed that various factors have affected the internet corpus learning method and the internet corpus teaching method could have a positive impact on the students' learning performance. Abas et al (2021) on the other hand, conducted research on how students learned Japanese online utilising Minato and found out that teaching and learning using videos and pictures is the most effective ways for students to learn Japanese culture and lifestyle through an online platform. Chan et al (2017) in their study which opted for an anime course in their Japanese language classroom discovered that students like the idea of using anime as a teaching tool. Notwithstanding this various research that employing different approaches and platforms, to date, numerous problems, challenges, development and implementation aspects of language e-learning have been addressed by many researchers.

Problems Related to Teaching and Learning Japanese Online

Many previous scholars have discussed about some of the difficulties that can be encountered in teaching and learning Japanese online. Jin and Li (2020) have discovered that technical issues, specifically poor technical support and inadequate e-resources sharing platform are among the problems encountered by teachers while teaching Japanese online. Meanwhile, Lee and Chong (2008) have reported that students who are unfamiliar to online learning would find it is difficult to concentrate during the learning process due to mass online information available on the internet. Bray et al (2008), on the other hand, have brought to light that students face the issue of lack of teacher-student interaction during their Japanese online learning. When using anime as part of a Japanese learning tool, scholars have discussed the possibility that students make certain assumptions about Japanese culture and language (Chan et al., 2017). Although anime's audio-visual approach can entice students to Japanese language and culture, teachers will find it difficult to supervise every aspect of student learning (Ohashi and Ohashi, 2020).

Challenges Related to Teaching and Learning Japanese Online

Among the challenges discussed by previous scholars when teaching Japanese online is to create appropriate content and teaching methods that are compatible with online learning tools. Huynh (2020) has suggested that teachers consider the target and ability of students because there are differences in terms of age, gender, work, and learning goals among students. Similarly, Jin and Li (2020) also discussed that curriculum planning is among one of the challenges that need to be tackled when it comes to online learning. On the other hand,

Shen (2022) has stated that teachers who focus primarily on Japanese vocabulary when teaching will find their students unable to correctly use Japanese as a communication tool. The importance of using online tools in learning Japanese has also created the challenge of knowing which tools are considered suitable. For example, teachers who decide to use anime as part of their educational tools should consider the language skills their students learn when choosing appropriate anime. This is because not all anime can be used in Japanese classes (Chan et al., 2017).

Development and Implementation of Japanese Online Courses

The development and implementation of online Japanese language courses has evolved from blended learning to a full online curriculum due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Online tools that were once used as learning aids during face-to-face classes are now developed as stand-alone tools for students to learn independently. Ang (2014) has studied the adaptation of blended learning in a primary oral communication course for Japanese language for beginners. Ang (2014) has found that although blended learning mode is considered important for their course, students still need lecturer and peer support and encouragement in language activities to motivate and develop interest in learning Japanese. In 2019, just before the COVID-19 outbreak, Rosiah and Machawan (2019) developed an online-based learning for two high-level Japanese courses called *Chukyuu Bunkei* (Intermediate Grammar) and *Nihongo Indoneshiago Honyaku* (Japanese to Indonesian Translation). Similar to the issues discussed by Jin and Li (2020); Rosiah and Machawan (2019) stated that students would face technical problems related to online course registration, device issues and system lag. However, as 2020 approaches and the push for online learning increases due to COVID-19, online Japanese language courses have shifted to a more hands-on and interactive approach. The objective of this course is not focused on grammar and vocabulary alone but the pragmatics of the language itself. This can be seen in Shen (2022) because he has studied the use of corpus in learning Japanese. This internet corpus provides students and teachers with more useful and practical written, audio and visual materials that contain real language use in seconds (Shen, 2022).

The development of Japanese online courses is still developing. Many more online theories, approaches and materials are being developed and tested as online learning and teaching is prominent in current education. However, these created tools need to be constantly studied and analyzed for their effectiveness and usability. In addition, Japanese language education needs to adapt to the development of online education models and take full advantage of network technology (Hua, 2017). Therefore, this study will examine the effect of Minato as a Japanese online learning tool on students.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is rooted from the Social Cognitive Theory by (Bandura, 1986). The learning of Japanese through Minato is implemented through the behaviour of learners as well as the Situational factors of the classroom environment (online class). The learning is facilitated through cognitive factors. To begin with, in the context of this study, cognitive factors are portrayed through the learning of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. This is facilitated by Situational factors such as learning about the culture and lifestyle. Finally, learners' behaviour is influenced by communicative learning activities using language functions.

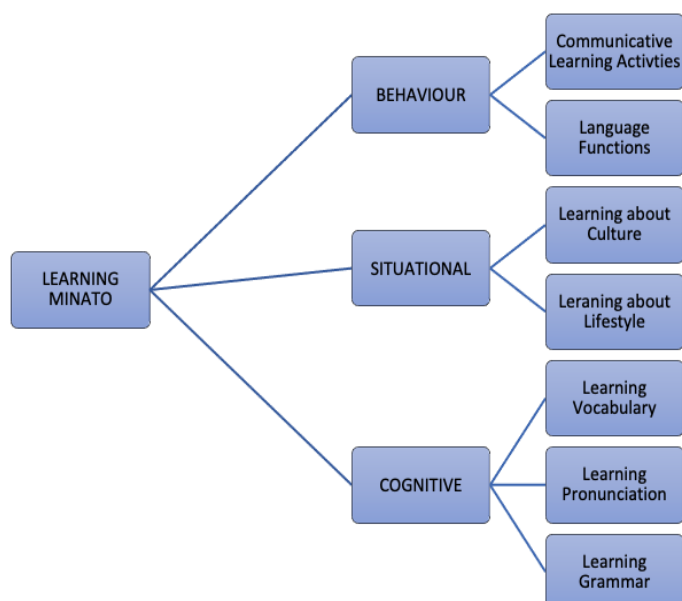


Figure 2 - Conceptual Framework of the Study: Learning Minato

Methodology

Method of Data collection and Data Analysis

This quantitative study is carried out to explore MINATO (Japanese Language Online Site) as a tool for learning Japanese language and 410 students have participated in this study. The instrument used is a survey (Table 1). It is adapted from the theory of (Bandura, 1986). Section A looks at the demographic profile, while Section B focuses on 22 items on Cognitive factors. Section C has 12 items on Situational factors and section D has 13 items on Behavioural factors.

Table 1

Distribution of Items on Survey

SECTION	FACTORS	SUB-FACTORS	NO. OF ITEMS
A	Demographic Profile		
B	Cognitive	Learning Vocabulary	8
		Learning Pronunciation	6
		Learning Grammar	8
C	Situational	Learning about Culture	6
		Learning about Lifestyle	6
D	Behavioural	Communicative Learning Activities	6
		Language Functions	
		a. Ideas Likes/Dislikes	3
		b. Describe people/places/things	3
		c. Describe action	1
Total			47

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.977	47

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .977 thus showing a high internal reliability of the instrument used. The data are collected online via google form. The data are then analysed using SPSS version 26. These analysed data are presented in the form of percentages and mean scores to answer the 3 research questions.

Findings

Introduction

This section is the analysis of the demographic profile using percentages and it is presented in the form of pie charts. The next section is the findings for Cognitive, Situational and Behavioural factors using 5-Likert scale (1-Never, 2-Rarely, 3-Sometimes, 4-Often and 5-Always). The data are analysed in the form of mean scores.

Findings for Demographic Profile

Section A: Demographic Profile

Gender

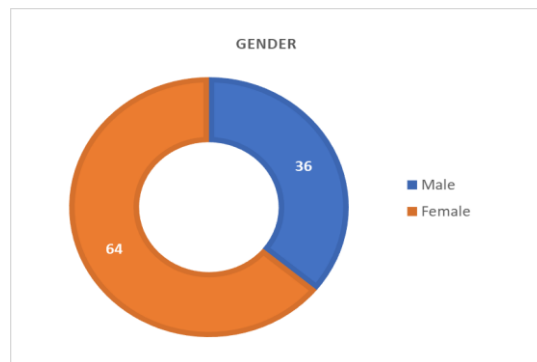


Figure 3 - Percentage for Gender

Of the 410 responses obtained for the percentage for gender, 64% are female and 36% are male students.

Faculty

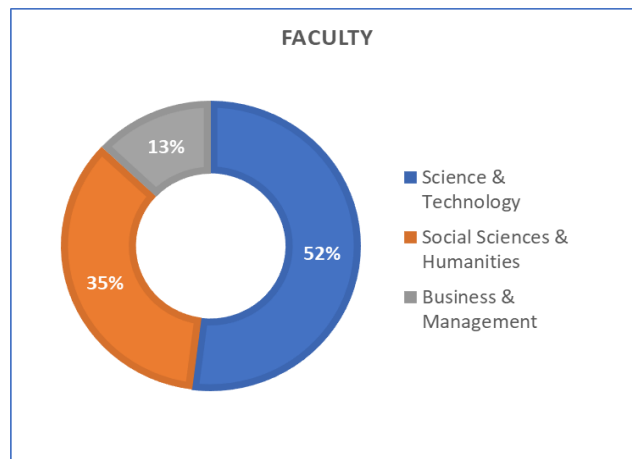


Figure 4 - Percentage of Faculty

The findings for percentage of faculty indicate that half of the respondents with 52% are from Science and Technology. Social Sciences and Humanities ranks second with 35% respondents and the least respondents with 13% are from Business and Management.

Current Semester

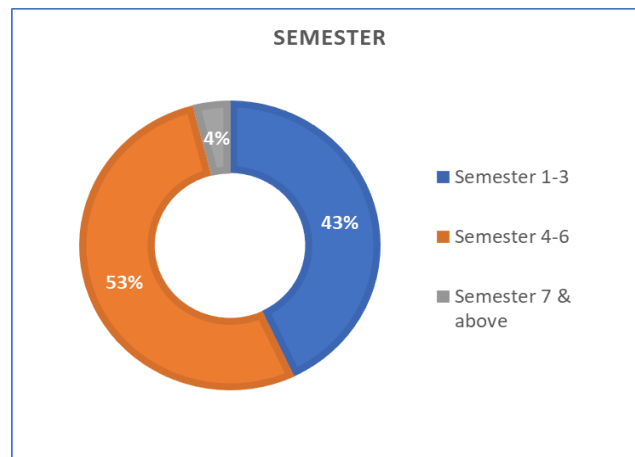


Figure 5 - Current Semester

Figure 5 delineates the percentage for the current semester of the 410 respondents, where 53% are from Semester 4-6, 43% from Semester 1-3 and only 4% are from Semester 7 and above.

Level

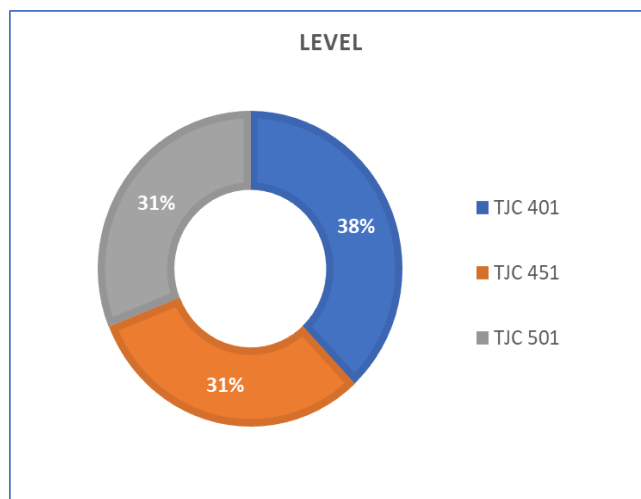


Figure 6 - Level

From the data collected, it is also revealed that 38% of the respondents are from Level I or Introductory Japanese I (TJC 401). Level II (Introductory Japanese II or TJC 451) and III (Introductory Japanese III or TJC 501) share the same percentage of students, i.e., 31% respectively.

Findings for Cognitive Section B - Cognitive Factors

i. Learning Vocabulary in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (6 Qs)

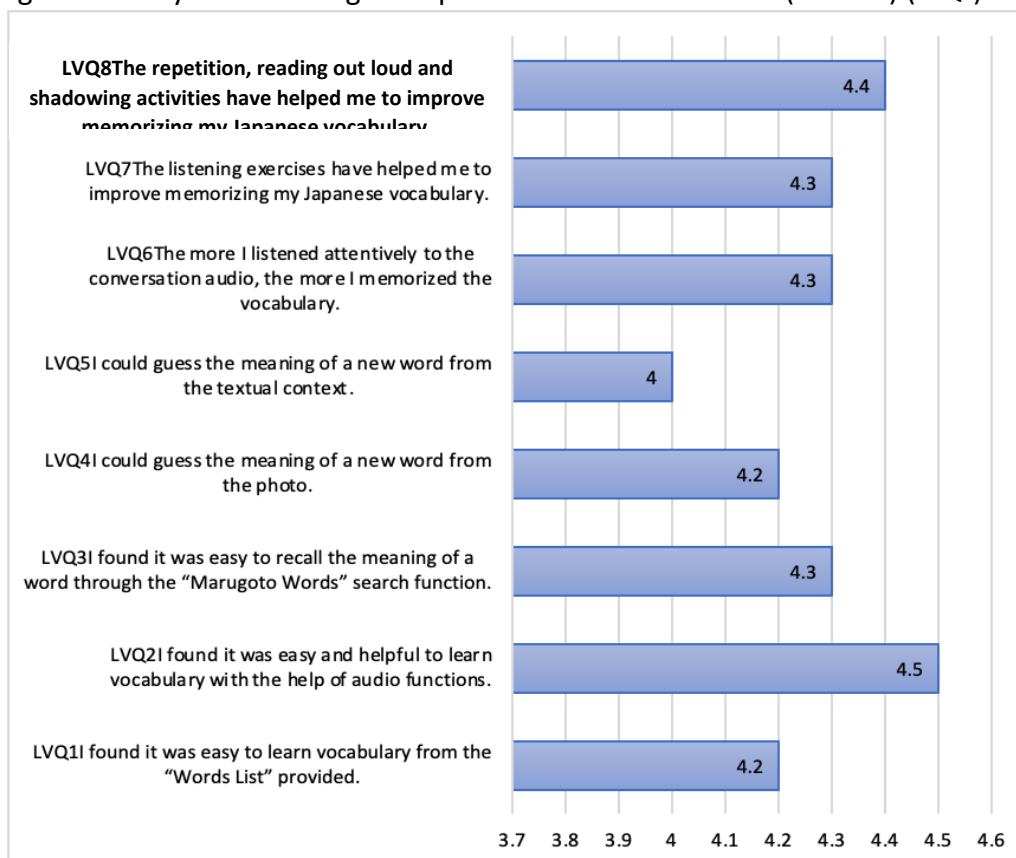


Figure 7 - Mean for Learning Vocabulary

Figure 7 above shows the mean for Learning Vocabulary. The findings show that the highest mean of 4.5 is for item Question 2. This is followed by the mean of 4.4 for item Question 8. Item Question 3, 6 and 7 share the same mean score of 4.3. Items for the second lowest mean score are Question 1 and 4 and the lowest mean of 4.0 is for item Question 5.

ii. Learning Pronunciation in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (6 Qs)

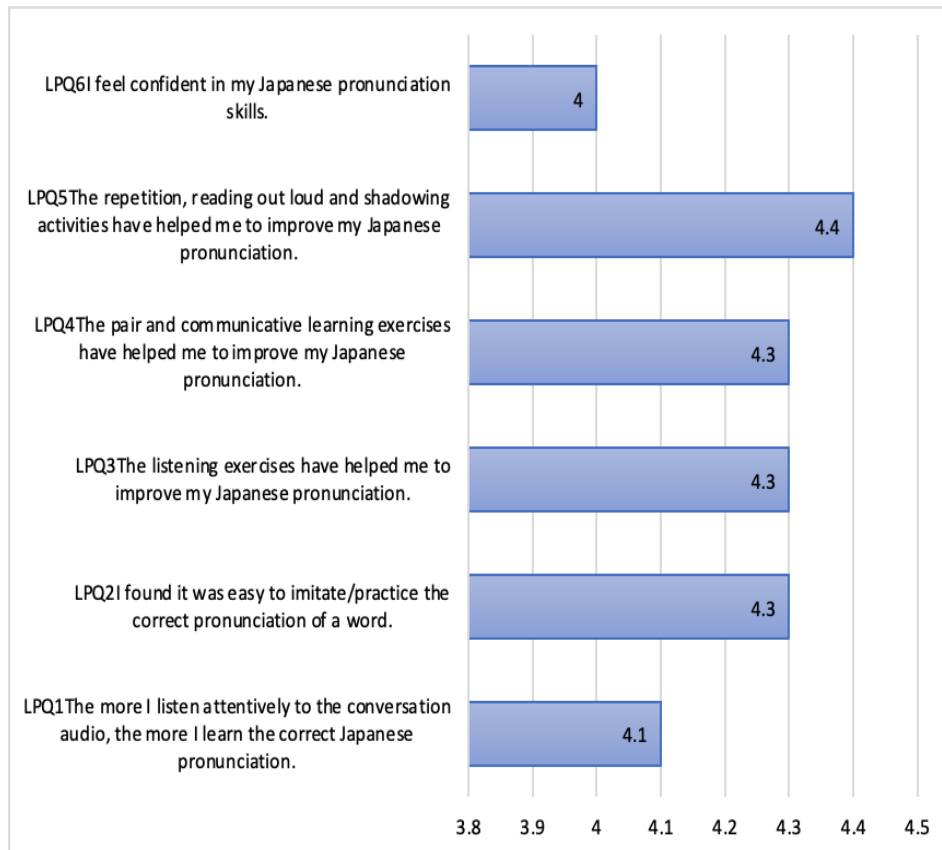


Figure 8 - Mean for Learning Pronunciation

Figure 8 above illustrates the mean for Learning Pronunciation. The highest mean of 4.4 is for item Question 5. Item Question 2, 3 and 4 ranks the second highest with the mean of 4.3. The third highest mean is for items Question 1 with the mean of 4.1. The lowest mean of 4.0 is for item Question 6.

iii. Learning Grammar in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (6 Qs)

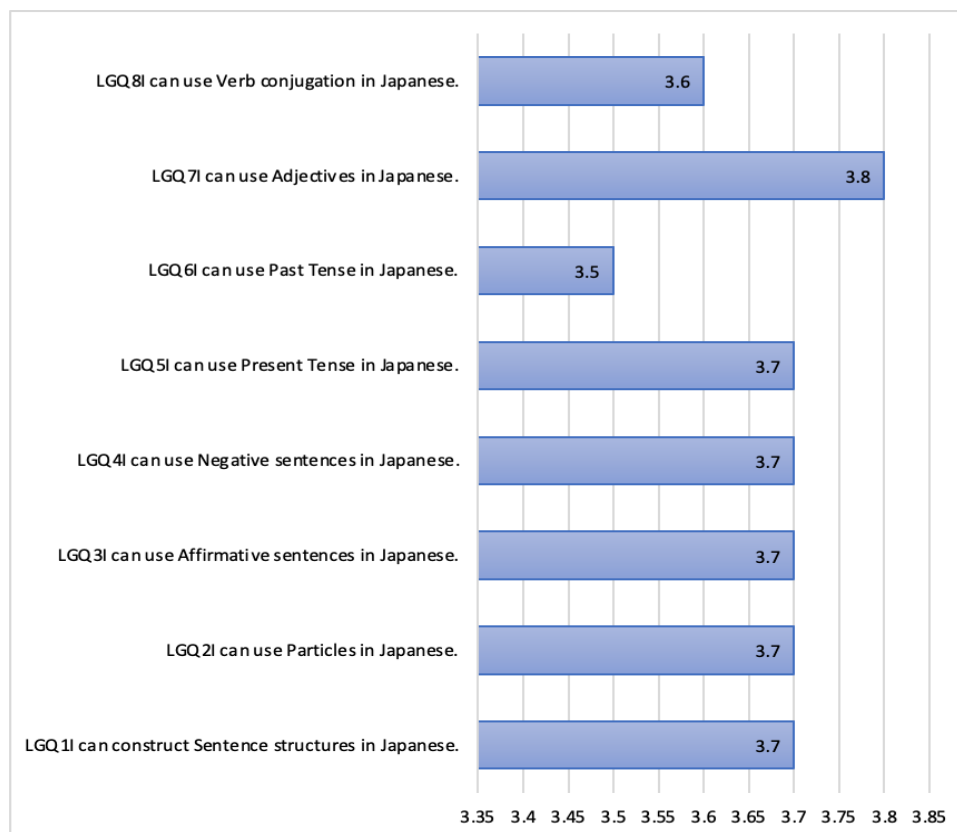


Figure 9 - Mean for Learning Grammar

Figure 9 above indicates the mean for Learning Grammar. All items score below 4 means. The highest score with the mean of 3.8 is for item Question 7. Five items share the second highest score with the mean of 3.7, which are items Question 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The third highest mean is for item Question 8 with the mean of 3.6. The lowest mean of 3.5 is for item Question 6.

Section C - Situational Factors

i. Learning Culture in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (6 Qs)

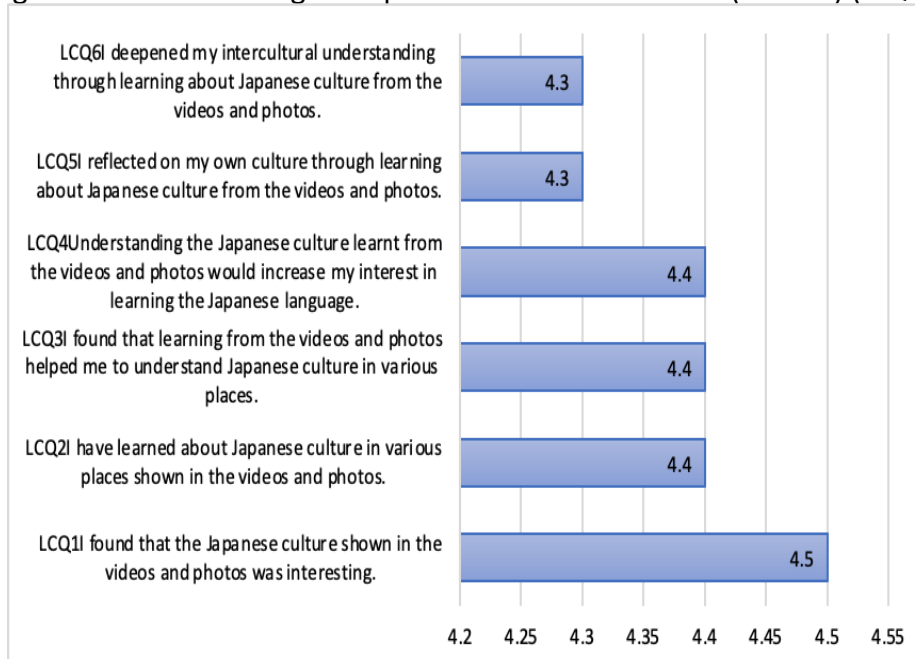


Figure 10 - Mean for Learning Culture

Figure 10 above explains the result for Learning Culture. The highest mean of 4.5 is for item Question 1. This is followed by items for Question 2, 3, 4 with the mean score of 4.4. The lowest mean of 4.3 are for items Question 5 and 6.

ii. Learning Lifestyle in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (6 Qs)

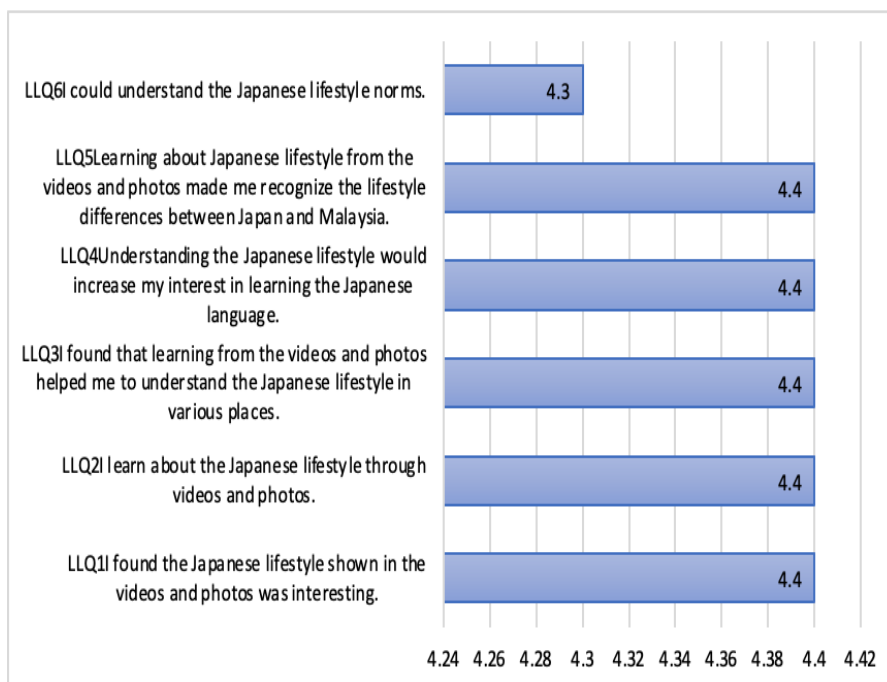


Figure 11 - Mean for Learning Lifestyle

For Figure 11 above, the mean for Learning Lifestyle shows only the highest and the lowest mean. The highest score of 4.4 is for item Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. There is only one item for the lowest mean of 4.3, which is item Question 6.

Findings for Behavioural Factors

i. Communicative Learning Activities in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (7 Qs)

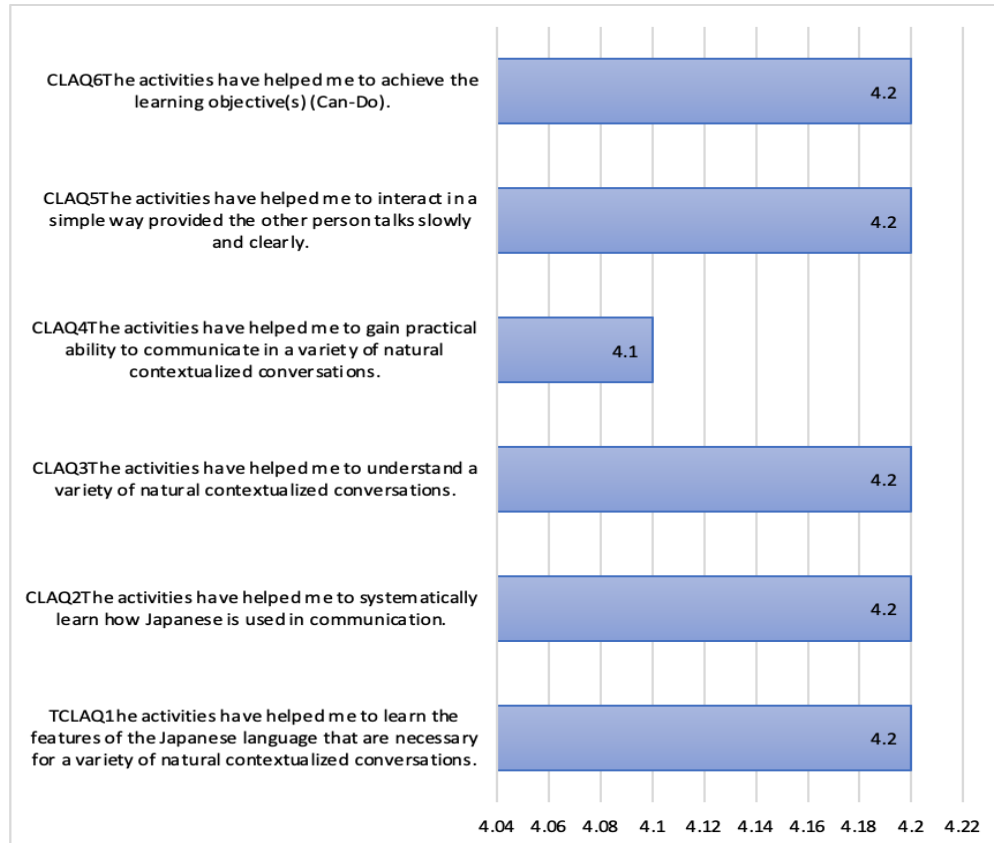


Figure 12 - Mean for Communicative Learning Activities

Figure 12 above represents the mean for Communicative Learning Activities. The findings show that the highest mean of 4.2 is for five items except for Question 4, which is also the only item with the lowest mean score of 4.1.

ii. Language Function in the Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site (Minato) (7 Qs)

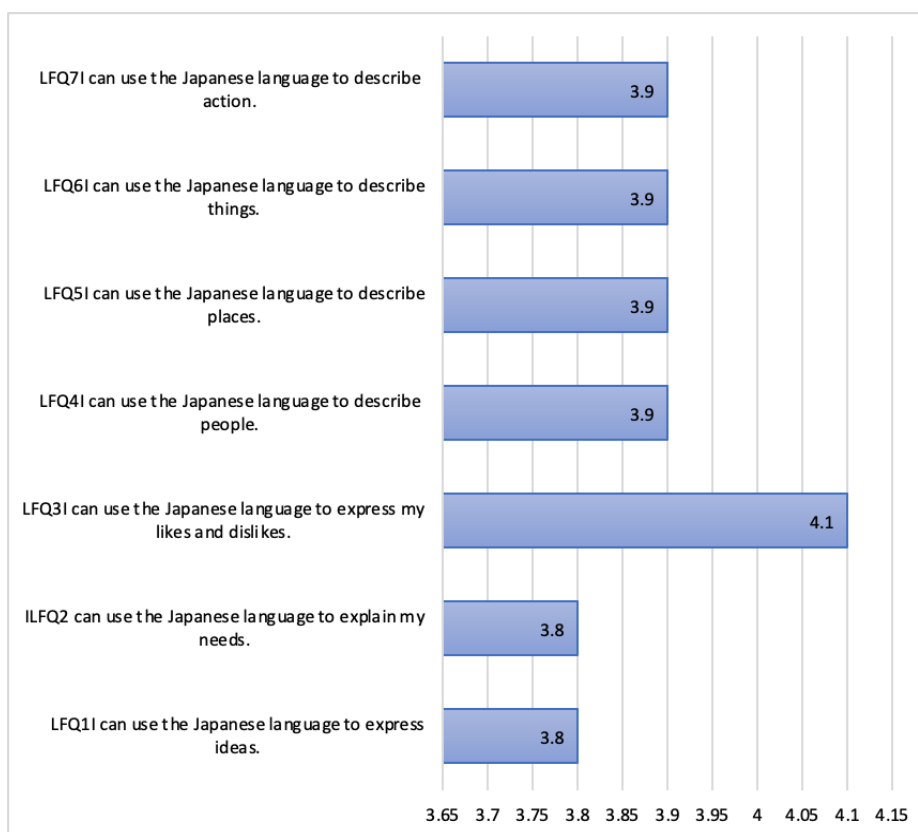


Figure 13 - Mean for Language Function

Figure 13 above shows the mean for Language Function. It is clearly observed that the highest mean of 4.1 is for item Question 3. This is followed by four items with the mean score of 3.9 for item Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7. The lowest score by the mean of 3.8 is for item Question 1 and 2.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

For Learning Vocabulary through the student’s responses for the sub-section of Cognitive Factors, it is evident that items for Learning Vocabulary and Learning Pronunciation show a gap with items Learning Grammar using Minato. The earlier two factors all score over 4 means while the latter factor scores all below 4 means. For items Learning Vocabulary, most students have found that it is easy and helpful to learn vocabulary with the help of audio functions provided in Minato (4.5 mean). On the other hand, lesser students could guess the meaning of a new word from the textual context (4.0 mean). Items Learning Pronunciation shows a quite similar result with items Learning Vocabulary. Question “The repetition, reading out loud and shadowing activities have helped me to improve my Japanese pronunciation” gets a 4.4 mean score and the lowest point with 4 mean score is item “I feel confident in my Japanese pronunciation skills”. This finding is in accordance with the study by Abas et al (2021), where students stated that audios in Minato is a helpful tool for them to learn vocabulary and to pronounce the Japanese word accurately. Activities in Minato seem to give the most scaffolding in terms of language development outside the classroom. In contrast to the above two sub-factors, question Learning Grammar for item “I can use Past

Tense in Japanese” contributes to the lowest point of 3.5 mean score, in fact the lowest of all 47 items in this questionnaire. However, the students are more confident to use Adjectives than Past Tense with a slightly higher point score of 3.8. The obvious reason from the data gathered is that 69% of respondents are Level I and Level II students who have not learned Japanese past tense yet. Another factor might be due to lack of comprehension and practice on the rules and structures of Japanese sentence patterns (Arfianty and Hasibuan, 2018).

For Situational Factors, although the difference in the scores is not that significant, the responses for sub-factor Learning Culture reveal that students find the Japanese culture shown in the videos and pictures is interesting (4.5 mean score) as compared to reflecting on their own culture and it deepen their intercultural understanding through learning about Japanese culture from the videos and pictures (4.3 mean score). The sub-factor of Learning Lifestyle is the most preferred item among all items in this survey. This is evident as they regard five items to be the best strategy for learning Lifestyle. Out of six questions, they share the same point score of 4.4 and there is only a difference of 0.1-point score for the least preferred item. In summary, the students prefer to learn Japanese culture and lifestyle via Minato with the aid of videos and pictures. This finding is supported by the research done by (Abas et al., 2021). Liu (2017) also suggested that understanding Japanese culture also needs to be integrated into the classroom and is essential when learning a foreign language because intercultural understanding is significance for the students to discover the differences and similarities between their culture and Japanese culture.

The score for all items for the Behavioural Factors is above 4 points and out of six items, five items share the same point score, which is 4.2 points. The students have regarded the Communicative Learning Activities are helpful for them to learn the features of the Japanese language, to systematically learn how Japanese is used, to understand a variety of natural contextualized conversations, to interact in a simple way and to achieve the learning objective(s). With a difference of 0.1 point, they believe that the activities have helped them to gain practical ability to communicate in a variety of natural contextualized conversations. These findings suggest that although the student’s learning process especially culturally and linguistically are not merely focused on textbook or face-to-face conversation in the classroom, knowledge input via online tools seem essential too. This appears to be in line with the study done by (Abas et al., 2021). On the other hand, studies conducted by Ang (2014) contrasted these findings with their students' preference for face-to-face class. The sub-factor of Language Function, however, shows a lower point score. There are three items for this sub-factor where there is only one item that scores 4.1 points, and the other two items score 3.8 mean. The students believe that they could use the Japanese language to express their likes and dislikes, but they seem to be less confident in using the Japanese language to express ideas and needs.

Basically, these findings have established that Minato serves its purposes to assist the Japanese language students to adapt to online learning taking into consideration how Cognitive, Situational, and Behavioural factors affect the process.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the data, it was found that Minato had a great impact on learning Japanese vocabulary and culture. The images and videos help students in shadowing and memorizing

Japanese. The findings show the importance of visual and interactive tools for a more effective learning process such as what Ohashi and Ohashi (2020); Abas et al (2021) have discovered. Teaching Japanese should use more visual aids and videos than regular textbooks or written materials. However, online learning is not perfect without any glitch. Paul and Jefferson (2019) state that online learning has limited communal synergy. Students are unable to interact with each other and create a sense of community because there is minimal contact when learning online. Jin and Li (2020) attribute the inability to implement a full online learning system due to minimal cooperation from smart technology and poor college management in decision making. Therefore, online learning needs further improvement or development to solve these current issues so that it can function effectively in the future.

For future research, it is recommended that a comprehensive study be conducted on specific aspects of Japanese online learning, for example, Japanese vocabulary, grammar or expressions should be carefully analysed. It is also suggested that research should be conducted on learning strategies implemented during online learning and what language teaching methods are most effective for students. This kind of study is expected to provide Japanese teachers with various samples of students' learning process while learning Japanese to improve their teaching methods.

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