

A Study of Thai Learners' Attitudes and Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Japanese

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Abstract— This study aimed to examine Thai learners' awareness of Japanese language learning, their vocabulary learning methods, and the relationship between these aspects among learners of Japanese as a foreign language. The study is grounded in vocabulary learning theory [1] and cognitive processing theory, particularly the levels of processing framework [2], which emphasizes the importance of meaningful and deep processing in vocabulary acquisition. A questionnaire consisting of 21 items was administered to 71 second-year university students in the 2025 academic year. The questionnaire explored learners' perceptions of learning difficulty and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis, cluster analysis, and independent-samples t-tests.

The results classified learners into two groups based on perceived learning difficulty: low-difficulty and high-difficulty groups. Three factors of vocabulary learning methods were identified: traditional methods, cognitive methods, and digital tools. The findings revealed that the low-difficulty group used cognitive strategies—such as relating new vocabulary to prior knowledge and learning words in context—significantly more frequently than the high-difficulty group.

These results suggest that the use of cognitive strategies is associated with reduced perceived difficulty and may facilitate more effective vocabulary learning. The study provides pedagogical implications by highlighting the importance of promoting cognitive strategies to enhance learners' autonomy and support vocabulary development in Japanese language classrooms.

Keywords— *Japanese Language Education, Vocabulary Learning, Learning Strategies, Learning Awareness, Thai Learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is essential for communication using a language, and memorizing vocabulary is crucial in foreign language learning. Yoshii [3] states that "without vocabulary, neither language comprehension nor communication through language is possible, and vocabulary learning is fundamental to language acquisition." However, Yoshizawa [4] summarizes the difficulty of vocabulary learning, noting that "in second language learning, learners often must learn a vast number of words in a limited time compared to L1, making vocabulary learning a greater burden." Furthermore, regarding vocabulary learning in foreign language acquisition in environments where the target language is not used, Dudzus [5] points out that "vocabulary learning often becomes a significant burden for learners studying in environments where the target language is not spoken."

To acquire a language, it is important to receive sufficient comprehensible input. Krashen [6] explains that "input must contain $i + 1$ to be useful for language acquisition, but it need not contain only $i + 1$. It says that if the acquirer understands the input and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ will automatically be provided." Additionally, when learners feel anxiety or difficulty toward language learning, their affective filter rises, making it harder for learning content to be absorbed. Krashen [6] notes that "low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety."

In addition to input and affective factors, the process of vocabulary learning itself can be explained from cognitive perspectives. According to Nation [1], vocabulary knowledge involves multiple aspects, including form, meaning, and use, and effective vocabulary learning requires repeated exposure and meaningful processing. Furthermore, cognitive processing theory, particularly the levels of processing framework [2], suggests that deeper processing—such as relating new vocabulary to prior knowledge or learning words in context—leads to stronger memory retention. These perspectives highlight the importance of how learners process vocabulary in successful language acquisition.

Japanese language learning in Thailand constitutes foreign language learning in an environment where the target language is not used. Therefore, it is difficult for learners to obtain sufficient input from their surroundings to promote language acquisition. Moreover, learners are considered to experience considerable anxiety and difficulty regarding foreign language learning. Due to insufficient input to promote language acquisition and negative emotions toward language learning, the burden on learners is thought to increase in foreign language Japanese learning environments. However, there are efficient learning methods for language acquisition. Vocabulary learning includes intentional vocabulary learning and incidental vocabulary learning techniques, and vocabulary can be acquired efficiently by effectively combining these approaches.

How do the learners we actually teach feel about Japanese language learning? Do they experience anxiety or difficulty? What vocabulary learning methods do they employ? By understanding the current situation of learners, we can provide effective advice and contribute to improving learners' vocabulary proficiency.

Research on vocabulary acquisition and learning in Japanese language education in Thailand remains relatively limited compared to that in English language education, and further research is required to advance vocabulary instruction in this area.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding vocabulary knowledge, Nation [1] divides it into three aspects: "form," "meaning," and "use." Nation further creates subcategories of "receptive" and "productive" for each of these aspects. "Form" refers to whether it is spoken or written language and what the component parts are. "Meaning" refers to the connection between form and meaning, the connection between concept and referents, and associations. "Use" refers to grammatical functions, collocational relationships, and constraints on use. Even when we simply say that we "know" a vocabulary item, Nation's framework of vocabulary knowledge demonstrates that it is not easy to specify which aspect of vocabulary knowledge is being referred to.

There are two methods of vocabulary learning: intentional vocabulary learning and incidental vocabulary learning. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages [7], [8]. Nakamura [9] states that vocabulary acquisition requires learning the correspondence relationships among the elements of orthography, phonology, and meaning.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to

- 1) Investigate the attitudes toward Japanese language learning among learners of Japanese as a foreign language.
- 2) Examine trends in their vocabulary learning methods.
- 3) Explore the relationship between their attitudes toward Japanese learning and their vocabulary learning strategies.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative research method was employed to collect and analyze data related to learners' awareness and learning behaviors. This section provides a detailed description of the research participants, the questionnaire used in the study, and the procedures for data analysis.

A. Population

The participants in this study were students enrolled in the Japanese for International Business program in the Faculty of Global Communication who registered for the course JIB-213 (Japanese Reading) in the first semester of the 2025 academic year and entered the Institute in the 2024 academic year. A total of 79 students were registered for the course, of whom 71 provided valid responses and were included in the analysis.

B. Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire was revised based on previous studies [10]. An online questionnaire was used for data collection, and the questionnaire consisted of two main sections.

Part 1: Awareness of Japanese Language Learning (Q1–Q7)

This section included items that asked about learners' perceptions of enjoyment and ease regarding Japanese language learning in general and each language skill.

Part 2: Vocabulary Learning Methods (Q8–Q21)

This section included items that examined the frequency of use of specific methods for memorizing vocabulary, such as repeated exposure, writing, learning words in context, and using applications.

No	Question
Q1	I feel that learning Japanese is enjoyable.
Q2	I feel that learning Japanese is easy.
Q3	I feel that listening to Japanese conversations is easy.
Q4	I feel that speaking Japanese in conversations is easy.
Q5	I feel that reading Japanese texts is easy.
Q6	I feel that writing Japanese compositions is easy.
Q7	I feel that memorizing Japanese vocabulary is easy.
Q8	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by looking at the words repeatedly.
Q9	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by repeatedly looking at the words and listening to their pronunciation.
Q10	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by repeatedly looking at the words and pronouncing them aloud.
Q11	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by writing the words repeatedly.
Q12	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by reading sentences repeatedly.
Q13	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by reading various texts, such as comics or short novels.
Q14	I memorize Japanese vocabulary by associating it with words that I already know.
Q15	I frequently use notebooks or paper to write down Japanese vocabulary in order to memorize it.
Q16	I frequently write Japanese vocabulary in the air rather than using notebooks or paper in order to memorize it.
Q17	I frequently read textbooks to memorize Japanese vocabulary.
Q18	I frequently read easy-level books to memorize Japanese vocabulary.
Q19	I frequently use mobile or tablet applications to memorize Japanese vocabulary.
Q20	I frequently use electronic devices to memorize Japanese vocabulary.
Q21	I frequently use websites to memorize Japanese vocabulary.

C. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using statistical analysis software. The specific analytical procedures were as follows.

1. Descriptive statistics: Descriptive statistics were used to identify the overall tendencies of all respondents.
2. Reliability analysis: To evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated.
3. Factor analysis: Factor analysis was applied to the items related to vocabulary learning methods (Q8–Q21) in order to extract the latent structure (categories) of learning methods.
4. Cluster analysis: Based on patterns in learners' responses, the participants were classified into several groups.
5. Independent-samples t-tests: Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether there were significant differences in learning awareness and the frequency of use of vocabulary learning methods between the groups identified through cluster analysis.

D. Data Collection

21 items of the questionnaire were input into Google Forms and distributed by posting on Google Classroom. The collection period was from October 6, 2025, to October 7, 2025.

V. RESEARCH RESULT

This section presents the objective data obtained through the analytical methods described in the previous section. First, the reliability of the overall survey is examined. Next, the results of the factor analysis, cluster analysis, and comparisons between groups are reported in sequence.

A. Reliability of the Survey

To examine the overall reliability of the questionnaire used in this study, reliability coefficients were calculated. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.802. [11], [12]

B. Factor Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Methods

Factor analysis was conducted on the items related to vocabulary learning methods (Q8–Q21). The results indicated that vocabulary learning methods could be broadly classified into three main factors (groups). Each factor and the specific learning activities included in it are presented below.

TABLE I. FACTOR GROUPS OF VOCABULARY LEARNING METHODS

Factor Group	Mean	Included Learning Activities
G1: Traditional Methods	3.67	Q8: Repeatedly looking at vocabulary words Q10: Repeatedly looking at and pronouncing vocabulary words Q11: Repeatedly writing vocabulary words Q12: Repeatedly reading sentences containing vocabulary words Q15: Memorizing vocabulary by writing it in notebooks or on paper Q17: Memorizing vocabulary by reading textbooks
G2: Cognitive-Based Methods	3.85	Q9: Looking at vocabulary words and listening to their pronunciation Q13: Memorizing vocabulary through context (e.g., comics, short novels) Q14: Associating new vocabulary with previously known words Q18: Memorizing vocabulary by reading easy-level books
G3: Digital Devices	4.11	Q19: Using smartphone or tablet applications Q20: Using electronic devices Q21: Using websites

C. Classification of Learner Groups Based on Cluster Analysis

Next, cluster analysis was conducted based on learners' response patterns. The results showed that the participants were clearly classified into two groups. To examine the characteristics of these groups in terms of their attitudes toward Japanese language learning (AC: Attitude Component), independent-samples t-tests were performed. The results revealed a highly significant difference in the mean attitude scores between the two groups ($p < .001$).

Based on these findings, the two groups were defined as follows:

Cluster 1 ($n = 34$): A group that perceives little difficulty in learning Japanese (mean attitude score = 3.41).

Cluster 2 ($n = 37$): A group that perceives difficulty in learning Japanese (mean attitude score = 2.55).

D. Relationship Between Learner Groups and Vocabulary Learning Methods

Finally, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the frequency of use of the three vocabulary learning methods (G1, G2, and G3) between the two learner groups identified above. The results of the analysis are presented in the table below.

TABLE II. COMPARISON OF VOCABULARY LEARNING METHODS BETWEEN LEARNER GROUPS

Learning Method Group	Cluster 1 Mean (SD)	Cluster 2 Mean (SD)	p-value
G1: Traditional Methods	3.68 (0.638)	3.67 (0.813)	0.958
G2: Cognitive Methods	4.16 (0.534)	3.57 (0.683)	< .001
G3: Digital Devices	4.01 (0.878)	4.21 (0.833)	0.335

These results reveal the core findings of this study. With regard to cognitive-based methods (G2), learners in Cluster 1, who perceived little difficulty in learning Japanese, used these methods at a statistically significantly higher frequency than learners in Cluster 2, who perceived greater difficulty. In contrast, no significant differences were found between the two groups in the frequency of use of traditional methods (G1) or digital devices (G3).

VI. DISCUSSION

This study found that learners who often use cognitive-based vocabulary learning methods (G2) tend to feel that learning Japanese is less difficult. One possible reason for this result is related to how information is processed in the mind. Strategies in G2, such as linking new words to words learners already know and learning vocabulary in context, help learners process information more deeply. Instead of simply memorizing words repeatedly, learners connect new vocabulary to existing knowledge and create more ways to remember it. This deeper processing helps learners better understand the meaning and use of vocabulary, as described by Nation [1], and can reduce the mental burden of learning Japanese.

In contrast, the absence of significant differences between the two groups in the frequency of use of traditional methods (G1) suggests that while repetitive practice has become a fundamental learning approach for many learners, it alone does not constitute a decisive factor in overcoming learning difficulties.

Similarly, no significant difference was found in the frequency of use of digital devices (G3). In fact, learners who perceived greater difficulty (Cluster 2) tended to use digital devices slightly more frequently. This finding suggests that access to tools does not necessarily equate to the effective use of learning strategies. Learners experiencing difficulty may

rely on digital tools in search of solutions; however, their usage may remain limited to superficial repetition.

When these results are interpreted in light of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [6], a positive cyclical model can be proposed. The use of effective cognitive learning strategies (G2) leads to successful experiences in vocabulary acquisition, which in turn reduces learning anxiety and lowers the affective filter. As a result, the intake of new input is further facilitated, creating a reinforcing positive cycle.

VII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study achieved its objective by clarifying the relationship between learning awareness and vocabulary learning strategies among Thai learners of Japanese. It also showed a strong relationship between learners' perceived learning difficulty and the vocabulary learning strategies they use.

The main conclusion of this study is that learners' perceived difficulty in learning Japanese is related to how often they use cognitive-based vocabulary learning strategies. Learners who connect new information to what they already know and learn vocabulary in context tend to feel that learning Japanese is less difficult.

This conclusion provides important pedagogical implications for Japanese language education. Rather than merely encouraging repetitive memorization of word lists, teachers should actively guide learners toward learning strategies that involve deeper cognitive processes, such as how to relate new vocabulary to prior knowledge and how to infer meaning from context. Such instructional practices can enhance learners' autonomous learning abilities, reduce learning anxiety, and support more effective vocabulary acquisition.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. The participants were limited to students from a single educational institution in Thailand and from a specific academic cohort; therefore, caution is required when generalizing the findings to the broader population of Thai learners of Japanese. Future research should include more diverse groups of learners and adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how the introduction of specific learning strategies influences learners' awareness and learning outcomes over time.

This study has several limitations. First, the data were based solely on self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias. Learners' reported strategy use may not fully reflect their actual learning behavior. Second, this study did not include objective measures of vocabulary proficiency.

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