

# Students' Response to the Direct Teaching Method: A Case Study on Malaysian Learners of the Japanese Language

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## I. Introduction

Classrooms that restrict students to the use of only the target language (L2), specifically those that do not allow students to use their mother tongue, first language (L1), or an intermediate language, are considered to be a conducive environment for students to learn a language as it enables the students to be fully immersed in the language classroom (Vermes, 2010). This style of the classroom is the result of the direct teaching method that has dominated since the Reform Movement in 1880 (Cook, 2010). The direct method aims to enable students to think in the target language without interference from other languages (Rivers, 2018), and learning a language for actual use (Cook, 2008). The direct method can be further broken down into different approaches and techniques, but they always retain the same concept of focus on the use of target language only and alienate the use of students' own language or translation. Cook (2010) defines the direct method as follows:

“Any and all teaching which excludes the use of the student's (first) or own language from the classroom, whether for translation or for explanation and commentary. . . . including major approaches such as graded structures, situational teaching, audiolingualism, communicative language teaching, task-based instruction, lexical syllabuses, and so forth” (p. 7)

While the direct method is considered to be a successful teaching method, linguists have argued that it is still insufficient and has space for improvement (Cook, 2008; Hall, 2017). However, despite its shortcomings, research shows that the direct method

remains the highly favored teaching method in the context of Japanese language education.

## II. The Direct Method in Japanese Language Education

The direct method monopolized Japanese language education starting from the year 1950 (Takamizawa, 2004). This was largely influenced by the Naganuma teaching style which was originally used to teach the Japanese language to U.S. military officers (Sawada, 1990). The teaching style mainly follows the rules and beliefs of the direct method and due to its popularity, eventually became the mainstream teaching method in Japanese language education.

Despite the effort to introduce the communicative approach (CA) in 1980, CA did not manage to have a significant impact on Japanese language education, especially in the beginner levels (Nishiguchi, 2017). Benati (2009) concludes that grammar teaching in Japanese language education is largely traditional, consisting of paradigmatic explanations that are followed by pattern practice and substitution drills. These drills, however, have been disputed by Wong and Van Patten (2003) to be ineffective because its main focus is only learner production and not learner comprehension. Moreover, Hall (2017) states that constant repetition and drilling can be demotivating for students.

Nishiguchi (2017) reports that there is still a form of eclecticism in Japanese language education which incorporates some form of the audiolingual method and CA. However, it retains the principle of the direct method of not allowing translation or intermediary language use. Sawada (1990) states that this is because the classrooms tend to be multinational. Since most

students come from different countries and do not have a shared language, it leaves teachers with no other option than to only use the target language in the classroom (Yamamoto, 2013). Furthermore, Nishiguchi (2017) argues that the overwhelming increase of not only Japanese language teachers, but also the increase of diversity in the teachers in the past decade required more specific textbooks and manuals for teaching. However, teachers were not provided with the necessary instruction manuals, textbooks, and teaching materials. As a result, Arashi (2018) believes that this may be the basis for why the Japanese language teaching methodology remains adhered to methods and approaches before CA.

Sawada (1990) summarized the criticisms focused on the direct method, which includes the nature of the method to be overly grammatical, and only focusing on the correct native-like output. Due to this, are trained to become mere parrots instead of being encouraged to think and speak (Sawada, 1990). Furthermore, students are placed in situations that do not emulate real-life instances, accompanied by practice that is implemented with no clear context (Benati, 2009). Cook (2008) supports this argument, stating that “even if students can master the content of a direct method class, they still need much more to function in a real-life situation” (p. 246).

The direct method’s approach to learning grammar inductively has also been criticized in language teaching research. Students are required to learn grammar by interpreting contextual and situational cues, which are highly favorable for students with well-developed induction skills (Rivers, 2018). This results in an average classroom to quickly diverge in terms of their language acquisition, discouraging the less gifted students (Rivers, 2018). Cook (2008) adds on to this, stating that the direct method can be a disadvantage for students with analytical bias due to its focus on practice. The inductive nature of the direct method is also susceptible to misunderstanding. For example, the use of picture cards that, if not explained carefully, can lead to confusion among students (Tomoizawa, 1991).

Despite these arguments against the direct method, Yamamoto (2013) believes that the criticisms towards the direct method are due to misconceptions of the method and that utilizing it based on proper theory and technique is effective. For example, he argues against explicit grammar teaching, stating that introductory or elementary level Japanese grammar does not require such detailed explanations. Even if teachers explain the differences between *ga* ( が ) and *wa* ( は ), there is no guarantee that students will be able to use them properly. As long as there is a well-developed structural syllabus coupled with a proper teaching technique and use of context, the direct method can help students learn the language effectively (Yamamoto 2013).

Thus, it would appear that, while the aim of the direct method to enable students to think in the target language without interference from other languages is a laudable one, there seems to be room for improvement to aid students’ learning difficulties. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to investigate the direct teaching method being practiced in Japanese language schools in Malaysia. The research question that this paper aims to answer is, what are the students’ responses to the direct teaching method in the classroom?

### III. Methodology

#### 1. Participants

The study was carried out on a Japanese language preparatory college in Malaysia. The participants of the study consisted of 37 Malaysian ethnic Malay JSL learners, who are aged from 18 to 19 years old. These students are enrolled in the Japanese university preparatory program where they are required to study Japanese for 21 months in Malaysia before being accepted in a university in Japan. The students observed in the study are beginner learners who have undergone 45 to 300 hours of Japanese lessons. The teachers observed in this study are all native Japanese language speakers.

## 2. Procedure

A student questionnaire was used to determine how much of the class content that the students can follow and understand. The questionnaire is divided into two sections. The first section is a close-ended question that asked students how much of the class they understood. It required them to choose from a scale of 10 (*very little*) to 100 (*fully understand*). The second section is an open-ended question that asked students to give comments on words or grammatical terms that they found difficult to understand. According to Lewis (2001), the use of student comments can provide hints for developing strategies to address specific concerns in language teaching and is also a form of qualitative research. Furthermore, appending specific questions help students structure their written comments concisely yet addressing the question that is of interest (Lewis, 2001). By utilizing this instrument, we can give insight into how students respond to the direct teaching method in Japanese language education.

In addition to the questionnaire, classroom observation was adopted as another

qualitative research method. After obtaining permission from the university and the participating school for class observations and receiving informed consent from all the participants, the researcher made five visits to the school and observed 90-minute lessons for five native teachers. Because the sessions could not be recorded on video, the researcher took careful field notes during observations. The researcher was, however, allowed to record the audio of the sessions which were then transcribed and used for further detailed analysis.

9 hours (540 minutes) of grammar learning classroom time were observed with notes taken in 10-minute intervals. Student questionnaires were distributed to students at the beginning of the class and later collected at the end of each class session.

## 3. Data Analysis

The five teachers observed are Teacher P, Teacher Q, Teacher R, Teacher S, and Teacher T. The first part of the questionnaire was calculated and tabulated in

the form of descriptive statistics. Next, the open-ended comment section was coded following the principle of thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) by two researchers to ensure inter-rater reliability. Five different difficulties are identified in the analysis of the student comments. A matrix is used as suggested by Lewis (2001) to categorize the students' comments into the most relevant difficulty (Table 1.).

**Table 1. Components of Difficulty Faced in the Classroom**

Type of Difficulty	Definition
Particles	Relates to particle use such as <i>ga</i> , <i>wa</i> , <i>de</i> , to and
Grammar Comprehension	Relates to difficulty understanding and usage of the grammatical term that is being taught in the class and confusion
Memorization	Relates to difficulty in remembering or recalling words and grammatical terms
Pronunciation	Relates to difficulty in pronouncing or repeating words and grammatical terms
Visual and Kinetic Stimuli	Relates to the difficulty of not being able to write or refer to notes or books
No Difficulty	Student has no difficulty in understanding what is being taught in the class.

## IV. Results and Discussion

### 1. Classroom Observation

The school observed follows the direct method as the general policy in their teaching, and in the beginner classes, students are not allowed to take notes or have books open on their tables. The teachers are also observed to have minimal use of the blackboard, with the main focus of learning being on the student's listening, repeating and focus skills. All the classes have a similar lesson plan despite being taught by five different teachers. The classroom was also observed to similarly follow the four effective conditions for the direct teaching method as stated by Tomozawa (1991) which are 1) small number of students 2) use of picture cards and items as required by the lesson 3) use of body language and fast repeat drills 4) explanation by using only the vocabulary of previous studies and sentence patterns.

All five native teachers had minimal use of translation in the classroom. The English words that are used are mostly English loan words (外来語) with Japanese pronunciation. Commonly used words are ‘repeat’ (リピート), and question (クエスチョン). For instance, a student asked what the meaning of the word ‘kaigi’ (会議) is, to which the teacher responded with the word ‘meeting’ (ミーティング).

## 2. Student Questionnaires

The first section of the questionnaire reported positive responses concerning the students’ level of comprehension (Table 2.). At least 80% of students from classroom Teacher P, Q, and S answered that they had 90% to 100% level of understanding, with the highest score was from Teacher P’s class where 63% of students answered that they had understood 100% of what was being taught.

**Table 2. Summary of Student Comprehension Level**

Comprehension Level	Teacher						Total (n)
	P	Q	R1	R2	S	T	
50							
60			3				3
70			5	1	1	2	9
80	1	2	7	6	2	3	21
90	5	11	2	6	7	8	39
100	10	4	1	5	8	5	33

However, the comment section of the questionnaire revealed that students’ in all classrooms had difficulty with their grammar comprehension (Table 3.).

**Table 3. Summary of Student Comment Sheet**

Type of Difficulty	Teacher						Total (n)
	P	Q	R1	R2	S	T	
Particles	7		2				9
Grammar Comprehension	1	6	4	6	7	7	31
Memorization			4	2			6
Pronunciation			1	5	2		8
Visual and Kinetic Stimuli			8	2			10
No Difficulty	4	7			8	7	26
No Comment	5	4		4	2	5	20

This reinforces Wong and Van Patten’s (2003) observation that drills focus on learner production

and not learner comprehension. The most significant way in which students had difficulty understanding grammar in this study appears to be with the meaning of words and grammatical terms. For example, the following comments are representative:

Sometimes sensei's explanation wasn't enough, so I found it's hard to understand the lesson sometimes. (Student, Teacher Q Classroom)

I can't differentiate between こまります and しんばいです. In terms of the time of use or how to use it. (Student, Teacher R2 Classroom)

I don't fully understand the grammar because there wasn't a clear explanation. Maybe using more example sentences will help. (Student, Teacher S Classroom)

I can't tell the difference between もうありません and まだあります. (Student, Teacher T Classroom)

Students from Teacher R's classroom had the most difficulty with the lack of visual and kinetic stimuli. This supports Rivers’ (2018) view that students feel insecure when they are forced to depend only on their listening, especially when most of the sounds are new and unfamiliar. Furthermore, since adult students are used to using books, and have developed their learning styles, “the pure aural-oral style can hinder them in the learning of language” (Rivers, 2018, p. 58). The students prefer the teachers to write on the board and allow them to take notes as they believe that it can help with their learning. Example of those comments are:

Today's vocabulary is pretty hard to understand since sensei didn't write down the words on the blackboard. And some terms are kinda hard to pronounce. (Student, Teacher R1 Classroom)

I think that it is better if we are allowed to write

down the new vocabulary in notes. This way it'll help the process of memorization. (Student, Teacher R1 Classroom)

Sensei needs to write the grammatical terms on the board so that we can understand it better. (Student, Teacher R2 Classroom)

Furthermore, the students commented that their memorization and pronunciation difficulties can also be attributed to the lack of visual and kinetic stimulation in the classroom. Following are some of their comments:

I found out that it was way too difficult to pronounce new words which sensei told us to imitate. Also, under new circumstances, I think that it is better if we are allowed to write down the new vocabulary in notes. This way it'll help the process of memorization. New words are difficult to memorize during class. (Student, Teacher R1 Classroom)

Only after I open the textbook, I can memorize it properly. (Student, Teacher R2 Classroom)

I think I can understand it, but I can't seem to pronounce it. (Student, Teacher S Classroom)

This is reinforced by comments from some students that indicated that they were appreciative of the teacher's use of the board, stating:

Today's class was fully understandable since sensei method is acceptable for us students. Which is writing new sentences we are going to learn on the blackboard and たくさん練習とてもいいです。 (Student, Teacher S Classroom)

The teacher's illustration on the board today helped with my understanding of the grammar. (Student, Teacher T Classroom)

Students from Teacher P's classroom largely commented on the difficulty of learning particles. Specifically, the use of particles *ga* ( が ) and *wa* ( は ). This is in line with Mori's (2008) observation that *wa* and *ga* are among the most difficult linguistic items to acquire. Her study revealed that students with visual and music intelligence prefer teachers to give the students handouts with many examples, and for teachers to frequently use the particles in their interaction. This seems to agree with Yamamoto's (2013) stance on maintaining the inductive teaching style of Japanese grammar. Moreover, in contrast to students that commented on their difficulties, students that reported no difficulties in learning support Rivers' (2018) observation that the direct method can cause the average class to diverge in understanding due to its preference towards students with high inductive skills.

To summarize, the direct method can be further improved to help students overcome specific difficulties. The students' lack of understanding was a consistent thread throughout the student comments in the study and allowing visual and kinetic aid can support the students' learning difficulties, at least in the beginner levels because they are still not familiar with the target language. More importantly, teachers need to learn to listen to their students' different needs. As pointed out by Deacon and Miles (2018) "collecting feedback on student responses of learning, in particular, can help teachers examine their practices and expand their teaching approaches to more effectively enhance student learning" (p. 133).

## V. Conclusion

This paper first offered an overview of the teaching methods in the JSL/JFL context, including perspectives on the reason it is often limited to methods and approaches before CA. Classroom observations and questionnaires were conducted in a Japanese language school in Malaysia revealed that the school has a strict direct method policy which is practiced by all teachers observed in the study.

Returning to the research question of this study, the students' response to the direct method is positive



with a majority of students from five out of six classrooms reporting to have understood at least 80% of the classroom content. However, the comment section of the feedback form revealed that students still had difficulty understanding what was being taught. Following the comments of each classroom, students prefer teachers to use visual stimulation such as writing on the blackboard and allowing them to take notes during class. This is because they believe that it can help facilitate their memorization as well as their pronunciation. Implications of this study suggest that there is room for improvement in the direct method to foster better student understanding.

The findings of this paper are, however, limited to a small sample. The parsimonious research design and analysis is also a limitation factor considering the research only focused on the data observed from the feedback questionnaires and might overlook external aspects that could have affected the findings. Furthermore, as the study was only limited to ethnic Malay students, the result cannot be generalized to all JSL learners. It is hoped that through the future development of research on teaching methods in the context of Japanese language education, teachers will be able to determine the most suitable method or approach in teaching their classrooms to help all their students in learning language and foster new ideas for teaching methods which include the students' diverse language skills.

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## **Students' Response to the Direct Teaching Method: A Case Study on Malaysian Learners of the Japanese Language**

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### **Abstract**

Despite its shortcomings, the direct method has remained the mainstream teaching method in Japanese language education. This paper aims to investigate the students' responses to the direct teaching method by conducting classroom observations and distributing student questionnaires in Japanese language schools in Malaysia. The questionnaires reveal a high level of comprehension from the students. However, the students commented that they still had difficulty in understanding the classroom content and prefer that their teachers use visual aid and allow notetaking to facilitate their memorization and pronunciation. Implications of this study suggest that there is room for improvement in the direct method to foster better student understanding.

### **要約**

直接法は、短所があるにもかかわらず、日本語教育において依然として優勢な教授法となっている。本論文では、マレーシアにおける日本語学校の教室で観察を行い、学習者へのアンケートを配布することにより、直接法に対する学習者の反応を調査することを目的とする。アンケート調査の結果は、直接法の授業において学習者の理解が高かったことを示している。しかし、学習者のコメントを分析したところ、学習者は授業の内容を理解するのが依然として困難だったことが明らかになり、学習者は暗記と発音を容易にするために教師が視覚補助教材を使用し、メモを取ることを認めてほしいと感じていることが明らかになった。この論文は、学習者の理解を促進するためには、直接法に改善の余地があることを示唆している。

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