



# Students' Learning Autonomy: A Case Study of Undergraduate Course of Japanese Language Program

Huang Liyuan<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This research aimed to determine the impact of the effectiveness in the application of an independent method of teaching students on their progress in achieving a certain level of Japanese. The study used key methods that implied the experimental involvement of 60 3rd- and 4th-year American and Chinese students with the N3 and N2 levels of Japanese to pass a simplified version of the international JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) after applying the autonomy learning methodology. The analysis and processing of the experimental exam results were performed using the Microsoft Excel program and derivation of the average statistical percentage of the number of points scored at each stage of the N3 and N2 exams. The results of the study and the test scores led to the conclusion that the most difficult tasks for American students are those in writing and reading. On the other hand, Chinese students have difficulties in listening and speaking Japanese over linguistic phonetic differences and complex grammar compared to Chinese. Referring to the N2 group of American and Chinese students, their scores are somewhat equal due to the total complexity of this level, which requires utmost care for all four skills of foreign language learning. The present findings can serve as auxiliary material for the educational sphere in terms of an individual approach in autonomy learning to more effectively study Japanese and obtain positive results when passing the JLPT test.

**Keywords** Autonomy learning · Collaborative learning · Covid-19 · Hatsuon (pronunciation) · Japanese language proficiency test · Kanji

## Introduction

Since the language is an integral part of the culture and customs of another country, it is worth considering that its grammatical structures, writing, phonetics, and vocabulary can have a specific character. Therefore, without knowledge of the country's history and traditions, as well as having no idea about society, what is the carrier of this language as such, learning its specific parts will be more difficult (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Motivation and a correctly set goal play an important role in independent language learning (Volkova et al.,

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✉ Huang Liyuan  
02438@qqhru.edu.cn

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Language, Qiqihar University, Qiqihar, China

2021). They should continuously give an incentive for further learning, as well as finding new methods and approaches for learning all 4 aspects of the language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) or working on one of them that is given to a particular student the hardest. Japanese culture can be one of these targets. Yet, it is a big plus for a foreigner studying Japanese, being already familiar with a specific topic regarding the structure of the language in advance, which has been adjusted to the culture and customs of the people (Qureshi et al., 2021).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in learning Japanese in China, driven in part by economic and cultural ties between the two countries (Northwood, 2018; Tan, 2019). Japanese language proficiency is seen as an asset for Chinese students seeking job opportunities in Japanese companies or pursuing higher education in Japan. Japanese language courses are offered in many universities and language schools in China, with some institutions offering specialized programs in Japanese language and culture (Gao & Lv, 2018). There are also private language schools and tutoring services that cater to those who want to learn Japanese for personal or professional reasons. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is a widely recognized standard for measuring Japanese language proficiency, and many Chinese students take this test to demonstrate their proficiency level (Teo et al., 2019). In addition, there are various study abroad programs and exchange programs between Chinese and Japanese universities that provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the language and culture. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted international travel and study abroad programs, which may have affected the ability of Chinese students to study Japanese abroad. Huang and Feng (2019) examined how Chinese university students perceive Japanese learning in their subsequent article. To compare and contrast the motivational patterns of Chinese students as they advanced in their studies, the researchers used a cross-sectional design, recruiting three cohorts of university students, and combining elicited metaphor analysis and stimulated interviews. The metaphor and interview data showed a progressive transition from first-year students' more integrative cultural interest to third-year students' more instrumental approach toward studying Japanese.

Tan (2019) chose as the theme of his work the investigation of the impact of new virtual ways of learning on people studying foreign languages and their opinions and experiences regarding learning Japanese online using specially designated programs. However, it lacks specifics as regards the influence of positive or negative results and changes on international students' progress in online language learning. Li and Yang (2020) explore a 3D virtual reality program, which, as they believe, will help to cope with the future culture shock when learning a foreign language outside the relevant language environment. The program allows immersing fully in the culture and characteristics of the country of the language being studied, therefore, significantly improving the efficiency and speed of assimilation of the materials required for the curriculum. Meanwhile, the work omits points related to the program malfunction or not quite right for everyone learner approach with online learning without the participation of real people.

Setting a goal and the right motivation is one of the core things that a person who is just starting to learn a foreign language should do (Ismailov & Ono, 2021; Putra, 2021). Without a specific need to learn a new language, further study at more difficult stages may be in danger of the student's complete or partial refusal to continue learning the new language. Deldeniya et al. (2018) choose the motivation of secondary school students and their attitudes toward language learning as the topic of their scientific work. Among the survey participants, integrative motivation was in the lead that is the desire to communicate freely with native speakers, while the instrumental motivation with the practical use of acquired

skills at work came to the background. However, the study failed to consider the motivation for independent language learning without a teacher's help.

Japanese is ranked as one of the hardest languages to learn, especially for English native speakers. In 2013, Japanese was the 6th most popular language that American students wanted to learn (Dos Santos, 2021). According to a recent study, anime and manga are a big reason why people want to learn the Japanese language. American students' interest in Japanese popular culture has been greatly influenced by media from that country, including anime, manga, and video games. These cultural exports have sparked interest in the Japanese language and culture, inspiring many students to take language classes so they can interact with their favorite media more effectively (Škof, 2018). Osumi (2019), revisiting the theme of motivation in learning Japanese, indicates that personal goals and plans for further study should be researched locally, taking into account the characteristics and learning abilities of each student. A survey conducted among American students learning Japanese showed that most of the motivation in the early stages is centered around popular elements of Japanese culture, namely anime, manga, music, and festivals, while students with a high level of N2 choose their interests and motivations more carefully, demonstrating interest in life itself in this country and the Japanese mentality. Meanwhile, the study lacked learning outcomes among American students, depending on the goal they set. Studying Japanese at American universities can be a rewarding experience for students interested in learning the language and culture of Japan. Many universities across the United States offer Japanese language courses as well as courses on Japanese literature, history, and culture (Xu, 2020). One of the benefits of studying Japanese at American universities is the availability of experienced and qualified Japanese language instructors. Many universities have language departments that offer courses in Japanese taught by native speakers or experienced instructors with advanced proficiency in the language (Nishihara et al., 2018). Varied parts of the United States may have varied levels of Japanese language proficiency. Larger cities and places with sizable Japanese populations or reputable academic institutions typically provide more extensive resources and learning opportunities (Kato, 2016). A review of studies showed that cultural, economic, and individual factors are driving an increase in American students' interest in learning Japanese. The popularity of learning Japanese in the United States is largely due to the accessibility of educational resources and the acknowledgment of the value of the language in a variety of contexts.

Durbidge and McClelland (2022) describe the challenge of Japanese autonomy learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to a full or partial transition to online learning through computer programs, instant messengers, and social networks. Autonomy learning refers to the process of acquiring knowledge or skills through self-directed and self-motivated activities, rather than relying on traditional forms of instruction or guidance (Lee, 2016). In other words, autonomy learners take responsibility for their own learning and take an active role in determining what and how they learn. Autonomy learning can take many forms, including online courses, self-study, experimentation, and collaboration with peers (Kintonova et al., 2022). It requires a certain degree of self-discipline and motivation, as well as a willingness to seek out resources and support when needed (Firat, 2016). It entails students actively participating in goal-setting, decision-making regarding their learning, and ownership of their development. Understanding how learners can become more self-directed and independent in their learning pursuits is the main goal of research on learning autonomy. Learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation are closely related concepts.

According to research (Khotimah et al., 2019), students who feel that they have some control over their education are more motivated, interested, and persistent in it. They also perform

better in the areas of goal-setting, time management, and progress tracking. Learner autonomy calls for metacognitive abilities including self-awareness of one's learning styles, aptitudes, and limitations. Metacognition and reflection are important in promoting learner autonomy. Deeper comprehension and greater autonomy result from encouraging students to consider their learning tactics, evaluate their approaches, and make changes (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Moreover, learner autonomy is strongly influenced by the learning environment. The importance of teaching strategies that enable autonomy, such as those that offer options, encourage learner accountability, and foster interaction and collaboration (Tsai, 2021). Increased autonomy results from fostering an environment that values students' autonomy and promotes their active participation.

Referring to the experience of online Japanese language teaching at the university in Australia, the author considers the more active use of modern technologies against the previous years can positively influence the self-setting of the goal of learning Japanese by Australian students and understanding their plans and requirements to achieve a certain language level. But there is still a problem in the approach to new online learning methods and their use by teachers, as well as student performance in the absence of more stringent controls inherent in offline learning.

Continuing the theme of self-regulated online learning, the study by Abas et al. (2021) cites one of the Japanese language learning aid programs or Marugoto Japanese Online Course Site called Minato (Jap. 港) as an example. The results of the study based on a survey of students learning Japanese on this platform showed that the use of photos and videos to develop skills such as listening, speaking, and writing, as well as learning about the culture and society of the country, had a positive impact on foreign students and their progress in learning Japanese. However, the said method is still not effective enough, while aspects such as the language grammatical constructions still require a detailed explanation in the classroom for their better understanding.

This paper is focused on conducting a comparative study between American and Chinese students studying Japanese through independent learning and online resources. The aim is to determine the impact of the autonomy learning methods on foreign language studying and identify new approaches on the part of teachers to more modern virtual training of students to meet their needs and goals.

The implementation of the goals involves consideration of the following tasks:

- Finding out the motivation, major goals, and objectives foreign students set for themselves while studying Japanese;
- Making a comparative analysis of the progress between students studying Japanese on their own or online and those who are studying in an offline class; and
- Investigating the natural difficulties that arise in the autonomy learning of Japanese by American and Chinese students, as well as the impact of online learning on their performance and progress.

The study involves the further application of the obtained data in the educational process for foreigners studying Japanese on their own or online at the N3-N2 level to identify a more appropriate approach to achieving their goals.

## Methods and Materials

### Participants

Participants for the mock version of the written JLPT and oral questions were sixty 3rd- and 4th-year students with N3 and N2 level knowledge of the Japanese language, respectively, at the School of Foreign Language, China-based Qiqihar University. They were invited through an announcement on the university's official website, as well as the request of teachers to undergo training before passing the exam and gaining additional points in the Japanese language. Every participant took part in the experiment voluntarily.

60 participants were divided into 4 groups of 15 people. The first two groups included Chinese 3rd- and 4th- year students, whereas the other two involved American students. After distribution by nationality, the level of Japanese proficiency was taken into account. Chinese group N3, and American group N3, respectively Chinese group N2 and American group N2. Yet, 5 more students agreed to be in an additional reserve group if one of the selected students could not continue to participate in the experiment for objective reasons.

Objective assessment of the preparation of students engaged in autonomy learning to pass the JLPT also required a group of teachers directly dealing with the organization of the exam (3 people), those (4 people) who prepare students for the successful passing of the exam in groups, and specialists (2 people) who elaborate the JLPT question forms. They were asked to use the following online resources: JapanesePod101, Rocket Languages, Hiragana and katakana online quiz, Free kanji radicals book, Remembering the Kanji, Tae Kim's Japanese Grammar Guide, and Manabi reader app. An autonomous learner is someone who takes responsibility for his learning (has the right to choose some of the learning methods, deadlines, etc.). It is precisely in this sense that the teacher, who encourages him to be independent, plays a major role in the student's autonomy. Therefore, the use of Internet resources for language learning was taken as an element of autonomy learning.

### Process and Materials

The experiment took three months that is, approximately 66 days, excluding weekends. It was implemented in three phases. **The first stage** (the first working week of the experiment, 2 academic hours per day) envisaged testing students to determine their level of Japanese proficiency at the beginning of the investigation. **The second stage** (10 weeks, approximately 1–2 academic hours per day) implied direct preparation of students using an autonomous approach, i.e. teachers' supervision on the key tasks of preparing for the test, which students had to perform independently throughout the experiment. **The third stage** (the last week of the experiment, 1 h a day) assumed interviewing teachers from the expert commission, as well as participants in the experiment to form a common opinion about the effectiveness of teaching methods. Each group of students received a form with examples of tasks (Table 1) that will be given on the official JLPT exam for N3 and N2 confirmation. The list of tasks included writing (kanji), reading, and listening. At the end of taking and checking the tests, the students were also asked to take the oral part of the examination before the commission on personal experience and progress in learning Japanese outside the classroom.

The participants were tasked to answer the submitted exam questions within 45 min. Each separate stage of testing, due to the simplified version of the JLPT, was assessed

**Table 1** Demonstration of tasks from the JLPT N3 mock test. *Source:* author’s elaboration + Easy Japanese app (2021)

Writing	Reading	Listening	Speaking
1	Task 2	1	Tell about your
Task 1	Read the text below,	Task 3	personal
Select the right	fill in the gaps and	Read the answers, then	experience
reading for the kanji	answer the questions	listen to the	connected with
from 1 to 4		conversation and	autonomy
1.1	この薬の使い方	choose the right answer	learning of
1ヶ月前から、乗車	ご使用の前にこの説	例 1	Japanese
券を買うことがで	明書を必ずお読みく	1. 4時	language.
きます。	ださい。また、必要	2. 4時半	
ぞうしゃけん	なときに、	3. 5時	
じょしゃげん	(Durbidge &	4. 5時半	
じょうしゃけん	McClelland, 2022) 大	1.1	
じょしゃげん	切にしまっておいて	1番	
1.2	ください。	ハンバーガーとサラ	
正社員がアルバイ	この薬はかゆいとこ	ダ	
トをすることは、	ろに速く、よく効き	ハンバーガーとカレ	
きそく	ます。さらっとした	ー	
会社の規則で認	えきたい	カレーとラーメン	
められていない。	液体ですが、	ラーメンとサラダ	
もとめ	ようき	1.2	
みとめ	容器の先にスポン	2番	
つとめ		350円	

Table 1 (continued)

まとめ	ジがついているので	500円
1.3	、 (Abas et al.,	510円
近所に有名人が住	2021) になっています	570円
んでいます。	むこうりょう	1.3
きんじょ	。 無香料 なの	3番
きんじょう	で、においを気にせ	ちかてつ
こんじょ	ず使用できます	地下鉄 で行く
こんじょう	(Bias, 2021) 。まず	電車で行く
1.4	きず	歩いて行く
外国にいる友だち	、 傷 があるところ	バスで行く
から、	、目のまわり、くち	1.4
たんじょうび	びるなどに使用しな	4番
誕生日 プレ	いでください。それ	か なお
ゼントが届いた。	から、同じところに	レポートを書き直
とどいた	つづ	す
ついた	続 けて長く使用し	としょかん しら
いただいた	ないでください。	図書館 で 調
といた	(Andriyani et al.,	べる
1.5	2019)、顔は2週間	けんきゅうしつ
その店は、駅から	いない た	研究室 で
徒歩1分のところに	以内 、その他のと	しら
あります。	いない	調 べる
とほ	ころは4週間 以内	いえ かえ しら
		家 へ 帰 っ て 調

Table 1 (continued)

とぼ	にしてください。以	べる
とうほ	上のことに気を付け	1.5
とうぼ	ないと、	5番
1.6	しょうじょう 症状 が	子供に薬を飲ませる
知人にいい病院を	(Gayevska &	。
紹介してもらった	Kravtsov, 2022)。使	子供にマスクをさせ
。	用したところが赤く	る。
しじん	はれた場合や、5, 6	子供の食事に気につ
しにん	日間使用しても <sup>なお</sup> 治	ける。
ちじん	らない場合は医師に <sup>いし</sup>	子供をお風呂に入れ
ちにん	そうだん <sup>いし</sup>	る。
1.7	相談 <sup>いし</sup> してくださ	1.6
来週、選挙が行わ	い。	6番
れる。	3.1	書類を作る
せんきょ	読むために	かみ と
せんぎょ	読めるために	コピーの 紙 を取り
せんきょう	読むように	い
1.8	この信号を渡って	に行く
まっすぐ行くと、	読めるように	ざっし か
駅があります。	3.2	雑誌 を買いに行く
とおって	つけやすく	山田さん呼びに行
	つけやすいに	く。



**Table 1** (continued)

まがって	つけるように
もどって	つけられやすく
わたって	3.3 注意する点がありま す いい点があります 悪い点があります すごい点があります 3.4 つまり もちろん たとえば それとも 3.5 悪くならずにはいら れません。 悪くなることになっ ています。 悪くなるにきまっ ています。 悪くなるおそれがあ ります。

from 1 to 25 points, where the student received 5 points for each correct answer. At the same time, students were forbidden to use Google translate and all kinds of other electronic dictionaries. The test was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the experiment

to assess progress or regression in Japanese proficiency. The experiment started with N3 tasks, the complexity of which ultimately grew to the N2 level.

After completion of the forms in 3 stages, the participants were given 15 min to prepare an oral response to the commission on the topic indicated in the assignment. All oral responses were processed by professors from the two universities involved in the study. Based on this it was proposed to draw up a diagram of a personal plan and approach to learning Japanese outside the classroom to determine the main motivation of an individual student and the most effective teaching methods for their successful preparation.

## Methods for Processing Statistical Data

The analysis and processing of the experimental exam results were performed using the Microsoft Excel program and derivation of the average statistical percentage of the number of points scored at each stage of the N3 and N2 exams.

## Study Limitations

The study builds a simplified version of the JLPT to check the Chinese and American students' Japanese language proficiency, as well as to determine each student's progress depending on the Japanese level and an independent approach to learning it. The exam was divided into 4 stages, namely writing, reading, listening, and speaking. The participants' additional creative task was to outline their language learning schedule, highlighting the key motivation for autonomy learning. The experiment involved only 4 groups of Chinese and American students, divided by N3 and N2 levels. Because of limited resources and a simplified and abbreviated version of the international exam, it is impossible to pinpoint the main challenges in learning Japanese by the Chinese and Americans, as well as to identify the principal source of progress and success during autonomy learning. Moreover, the issue of the impact of gender on the effectiveness of training failed to be considered as a separate item.

## Results

### Results of the Control Test at the Beginning of the Experiment

Initially, American and Chinese students in N3 groups were given a JLPT control version to check their level of Japanese proficiency at the beginning of the experiment. The tasks included an oral part, where students were asked to speak in Japanese, covering the communication topics (hobbies, environment, friends, family, ecology, etc.). The results of the first test are presented in Table 2.

The results revealed that Chinese students outperformed the American ones in Japanese writing and reading being already familiar with the Chinese character system, while the latter performed better in the listening and speaking parts of the test. The main difficulties arose with the use of social networks, which did not always give accurate results of self-testing during online tests and delayed the download of educational materials over network failures.

**Table 2** Demonstration of the final scores of the control test for JLPT N3 among American and Chinese students. *Source:* developed by the authors

Group N3		High score (20–25)	Average score (10–15)	Low score (1–9)
American students	Writing	2	9	4
	Reading	2	8	3
	Listening	4	9	2
	Speaking	4	10	
Chinese students	Writing	6	9	
	Reading	6	9	
	Listening	3	12	
	Speaking	2	13	

**Table 3** Demonstration of the final scores of the mock test for JLPT N3 among American and Chinese students. *Source:* developed by the authors

Group N2		High score (20–25)	Average score (10–15)	Low score (1–9)
American students	Writing	5	7	2
	Reading	4	8	2
	Listening	7	8	
	Speaking	7	8	
Chinese students	Writing	9	6	
	Reading	8	7	
	Listening	5	10	
	Speaking	5	10	

## Process and Control Results of Participants After the Experiment

Table 3 presents the results of an experiment conducted with the 3rd- and 4th-year American and Chinese students of the N3 and N2 levels, respectively, after studying Japanese according to the autonomy learning method using online resources.

Based on the results presented above, American students studying Japanese outside the language environment and through autonomy learning had the greatest challenges with writing and reading. The major cause was the difficulties associated with remembering the spelling of individual keys in the hieroglyph (as well as their correct location in keeping with the features of a single character), as well as the problem that the hieroglyph has not only Chinese and Japanese readings but also equally pronounced words or expressions, differences and meaning of which can be determined only based on a visual understanding of the meaning of a certain hieroglyph or the availability of a context. Reading hieroglyphs using kango (Jap. 漢語), that is elements of Chinese reading of signs, may be incorrectly reproduced due to the presence of many similar-sounding kango. So, memorizing both readings of a particular hieroglyph may be ineffective in mastering Japanese writing since Japanese hieroglyphs will have not only similar Chinese readings but also features that differ imperceptibly for a foreigner learning Japanese. However, students from

the United States did significantly better in listening and speaking than in the other stages of the written test. Taking into account hatsuon (Jap. 発音), i.e., Japanese pronunciation, Americans had no difficulty understanding a native speaker's speech, as well as with the Japanese homonyms said above, as it was possible to focus on the context and emotional intonations more clearly expressed in Japanese. As mentioned before, each participant was given a 15-min preparation for the oral part. Grammar, vocabulary, and writing at the middle and final stages of learning N3 are partially similar in structure to the grammar of the English language. However, because it is at this level that more complicated grammar emerges in turn, which at first glance has the same meaning, but differs only in the context and the social status of the interlocutor, while the vocabulary can often repeat the same hieroglyphs, which is necessary to study for N3 and similarly differ in context, oral speech and compositions are presented much more clearly and quickly than at the initial levels, where only a couple of short phrases and sentences would be enough. In the oral part, the Americans relied more on learned grammar, texts they have read, and their samples of several variants of oral topics.

The results of Chinese students, which are presented in Table 4 below, showed that they coped with hieroglyphs and their reading much better than those from the U.S. This is because hieroglyphics and writing came to Japan just from China, and over several centuries, they underwent various changes, adjusting to the Japanese grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics. The only visible difference between modern Chinese and Japanese characters is their reading and the lack of a simplified version in writing Japanese characters, unlike Chinese ones. However, Chinese students mostly have no problem writing and remembering Japanese characters, especially those that are similar in meaning to Chinese. Listening and speaking were slightly worse due to the strong difference in Chinese and Japanese pronunciation. In particular, the main role in Chinese is played by tones, while in Japanese the mora is important, i.e. the smallest phonetic unit (one syllable would equal one more). Despite the diversity of grammar and vocabulary that the N3 intermediate level provides, the Chinese still get confused in the application of grammatical structures due to the more complex Japanese grammar system based on the context of its use. They also cannot adapt to Japanese speech by pronouncing the words with a visible Chinese accent and not always making the right stress on a particular word.

The JLPT N2 level is sufficient for a comfortable life in Japan and getting a decent job with above-average salaries implying the usage of Japanese. Many students passing

**Table 4** Demonstration of final scores of the mock test for JLPT N2 among American and Chinese students. *Source:* author's elaboration

Group N2		High score (20–25)	Average score (10–15)	Low score (1–9)
American students	Writing	2	13	
	Reading	4	13	
	Listening	4	13	
	Speaking	5	12	
Chinese students	Writing	10	5	
	Reading	9	6	
	Listening	3	12	
	Speaking	8	7	

the relevant test have more than an acceptable stock of knowledge, allowing them to communicate freely and easily with native speakers, ranging from everyday topics to scientific, medical, and technical formulations. Reaching the basic, intermediate level N2, studying Japanese in the home country, is a completely feasible task, depending on which method and what materials an individual student chooses for learning.

The participants in this experiment were predominantly involved in autonomy learning. But before that, they followed the teacher's plan closely in several classroom sessions. The table shows that the results of Japanese and American students having N2 are more balanced among themselves, whereas the main difference is the number of those who obtained an average score. Writing and reading are still confusing due to the even more complex characters required for N2 and the grammar for changing verbs and nouns. It is also necessary to consider *gairaigo* (Jap. 外来語), i.e., words borrowed from foreign languages, written in the manner of their Japanese pronunciation and onomatopoeia (Jap. オノマトペ), that is imitative and mimetic words, thus similar to each other, which is why they are often difficult to distinguish in meaning and role in the context. As for grammar, N2 complements N3 in terms of slightly more complex, mostly official constructions for use in writing or when working in a Japanese office. However, all of them can have a meaning similar to the N3 grammar, only the context and individual rules for their appropriate use change. *Keigo* (Jap. 敬語), a polite form of Japanese, can be one of the main obstacles in grammar tasks because simplified versions of the polite language are not allowed for work and it is required to be able to use it on the same level as the Japanese. Listening and writing were not as difficult as initially thought for Americans learning for N2. So, all participants scored high and average at the test assessment stages. As in the N3 group, students were asked in the oral part to describe in Japanese their approach to learning this language and determine their motivation for focusing on regular and uninterrupted work to this end.

Meanwhile, Chinese students excelled in hieroglyphs, reading, and oral presentation of thoughts. This is because it is much easier for them to deal with Japanese characters and remember their readings, as the rules for writing hieroglyphic strokes do not have to be relearned by Chinese students due to their hieroglyphic writing. Listening comprehension was one of the most difficult tasks for Chinese students over the complicated vocabulary, hieroglyphics, and several versions of official grammar with similar meanings, even though they have much fewer problems with understanding and reproducing Japanese speech than Chinese students with N3. Because of the large vocabulary and the ability to use several types of grammar, Chinese students can speak on any topic at a level close to the native speaker, without making gross grammatical and phonetic errors.

## Interviewing Stage

The following will provide the written results of the oral examination of American and Chinese students from group N2 who obtained the highest score during the assessment.

I'm a judo professional, studied Japanese for many years, and entered the university after high school to major in Japanese. But, even after that, I couldn't improve my skill to the desired level until I started talking with native speakers and practicing outside of class. So, I'm just saying self-study is more effective than learning theoretical information at the university by rote.

### 4th-Year American Student

My father worked for Toyota in Japan long time and often sent me souvenirs. Over time, I grew to love Japanese architecture and decided I would become an architect and work in Japan just like my father. Therefore, I need a JLPT N2 certificate. I realized self-study develops positive thinking, motivation, and flexibility in learning. So, I tried to improve my speaking and listening skills while watching lectures by Japanese architects on YouTube and sometimes chatting with commentators in Japanese.

### 3rd-Year Chinese Student

Below are the quotes from teachers of the admissions committee regarding the effectiveness and impact of applying the autonomy learning methodology on students' overall progress in studying Japanese.

From my experience, visible results that can satisfy both the teacher and the student in educational work always depend on the equal use of their forces. That is why teachers try to find as many teaching methods as possible. Autonomy learning is one of the methods often used in Japanese schools and universities. In particular, this practice gained popularity during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. A few months later, this technique yielded quite positive results with most of the students starting to understand more about what and why they spend their time, and exactly how they are ready to use Japanese.

### Japanese Language and Literature Teacher

The alternative to classical teaching methods and the search for new techniques find positive feedback from both teachers and students. This is an opportunity for teachers to freely choose the way of teaching a foreign language, as well as relevant materials, from the choice of specialized books to computer programs. As for students, they are more likely to develop a way to memorize Japanese grammar via reading Japanese texts and compiling dialogue, or vocabulary by reading manga or watching anime.

### Japanese Morphology American Teacher

Progress in learning Japanese will depend, first, in part on the grammatical and phonetic structure of the native language of a foreigner studying Japanese (as with Chinese students being already familiar with the hieroglyphic writing system), and, second, on a student's independent approach to learning with motivation and incentive to achieve the highest level of language proficiency. The study showed that most of the students primarily face the problem of understanding grammatical structures or the Japanese accent rather than the difficulties caused by autonomy learning. However, the right approach and a clear goal are still fundamental elements of self-study because the student may regress in learning and even refuse to learn the language altogether.

## Discussion

Research on Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) has been ongoing for several decades, and it covers a wide range of topics such as language acquisition, teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and cultural aspects. Speaking of curriculum development, a study was conducted to develop an android application that utilizes Information and Communication Technology to facilitate the learning and retention of Japanese kanji (Haristiani & Firman-syah, 2016). The application is designed to be user-friendly and accessible to students who prefer to study independently using their smartphones. The software includes Indonesian translations, vocabulary examples, and exercises with a countdown timer. This application enables users to learn independently about kanji, its readings, meanings, and uses in vocabulary. The research showed that Indonesian students found the software easy to use and comprehend.

The research work by Bias (2021) examines the difficulties of Japanese based on Germanic and Romance languages. In particular, it describes the challenges that a foreigner who starts to learn Japanese may encounter. The work includes not only vocabulary, grammatical constructions, the Japanese alphabet, and other systematic aspects of this language proficiency but also psychological ones, such as anxiety during a conversation with a native speaker that the author suffers from as well. The present study also touched upon the difficulties in learning Japanese related to its comparison with the native language and the difference in their phonetic, lexical, and grammatical systems.

The study by Andriyani et al. (2019) touches on the topic of learning a foreign language using the Kahoot! for senior students at the Indonesian high school. According to the paper, this application develops interaction and allows students to enjoy learning Japanese, thus motivating and inspiring them to discover new things and be more involved in learning online. The present investigation also includes the results of testing the knowledge of students learning Japanese online. However, there was no specific interactive platform, and the training was independent.

Kurniawan et al. (2021) consider the introduction of a computer game into the educational process when learning Japanese, which will facilitate learning the vocabulary and elements of Japanese culture by solving problems and answering questions. According to a survey of 40 people who were involved in the game, 85% of the participants consider the game acceptable for the initial acquaintance with Japanese, although certain questions were difficult to answer. But the complexity of the level motivated them to go further. In the present research, the topic of student motivation and determination of their goals for more effective learning of the Japanese language was similarly touched upon.

Another study examined the motivation of Japanese language learners in the Midwestern United States (Osumi, 2019). The results of the survey indicated that self-study may not be the best motivating factor for learning Japanese, as the characteristics of the Japanese language differ from those of English, which is widely spoken around the world. Interest in Japanese anime, manga, and games did not correlate with participants' L2 ethos and perceived effort, although interest in other cultural subjects showed a moderate correlation with these factors.

Tumelius et al. (2022) choose changes in foreign language teaching methods with the advent of modern technologies as the main topic of their article. Unlike the previous papers, it is negative about the solid introduction of computers and phones into the educational process, arguing that it worsens students' concentration and leads to their unwillingness to perform the main tasks assigned by the teacher, which can become a problem for

the latter. There is also a problem with the teacher's adaptation to the new environment, where electronic boards and computer programs will be the main means of teaching.

Marshall (2019) discusses the autonomy of teachers of English courses in a Japanese university. The survey showed that 17 out of 18 respondents answered positively and agreed that they can independently plan the educational process. The author believes that such freedom will help to quickly find an approach to an individual student, while the teacher to be creative in class conducting and test new ways of teaching online. The current paper also touches the autonomy learning, where a student may choose the approach to learning Japanese and prepare a daily plan for practical studies.

## Conclusions

This research was based on an experimental study of the progress in learning Japanese by students to pass the JLPT exam when studying the language independently. Four groups of 3rd- and 4th-year American and Chinese students (15 people each) with N3 and N2 levels of Japanese were selected and asked to pass a simplified version of the JLPT test. The difference was considered in achieving a specific goal in learning between students of the two nationalities, given that those from China were familiarized with the hieroglyphic writing system in advance, while the Americans with grammatical structures, a small part of which were similar to the English grammar structure.

The results of the study and the test scores led to the conclusion that the most difficult tasks for American students are those in writing and reading with the need to use Japanese characters *kanji*, which are quite difficult for foreigners to remember. Listening and speaking are easier for Americans than for Chinese students since certain grammar in meaning and structure can be understood by a native English speaker due to semantic similarity. On the other hand, Chinese students have difficulties in listening and speaking Japanese over linguistic phonetic differences and complex grammar compared to Chinese. Referring to the N2 group of American and Chinese students, their scores are somewhat equal due to the total complexity of this level, which requires utmost care for all four skills of foreign language learning.

The present findings can serve as useful material for further consideration of the autonomy learning methodology with the incorporation of new ways and types of learning Japanese, which the student can choose individually. The conclusions and information that was revealed will also allow determining the progress and opportunities of an individual foreign student, depending on the native language's systematic structure, the approach to learning Japanese, as well as goal and motivation for learning.

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**Data Availability** Data will be available on request.



## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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