

Effectiveness of Japanese Writing Exercise with Moral Values for Malaysian Students

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Abstract

This study examined the benefits of Japanese-language writing exercises based on a book with moral values written by a well-known Japanese entrepreneur. The researcher summarized it as six short texts written in basic Japanese to adjust the difficulty level of the original text's vocabulary and grammatical structures. The short texts emphasized the importance of expressing gratitude, developing good habits, appreciating small things in everyday life, taking actions to improve our lives, and keeping our surroundings clean. As participants, five Malaysian university students who had studied basic Japanese were asked to copy the short texts as a writing exercise. Malay translations of the texts were shown alongside the original Japanese sentences. In addition, the literal translation of each Japanese word was also demonstrated in Malay. Following the exercise, participants were asked to provide feedback on its benefits and educational effects. All of the participants stated that the content of the short texts helped them learn the vocabulary and grammatical structures included in the texts, as well as practice the things suggested by the Japanese entrepreneur. Most of the participants also realized similarities in the fundamental values of Japanese and Malaysian societies.

Keywords: appreciation, ethical advice, Japanese, moral value, writing

Entrepreneurs Relevant to the Present Study

This study examined the benefits of Japanese-language writing exercises based on a book written by Kagiya Hidesaburō, a well-known Japanese entrepreneur, and his coauthor, also a company owner. This paper briefly presents major events in Mr. Kagiya's life.

Mr. Kagiya was born in Tokyo in 1933. During World War II, his parents lost most of their assets because of the American air raids in Tokyo. In his childhood and adolescent years, he suffered from poverty, but surviving a miserable postwar period taught him the value of diligence and integrity. In 1953, he was hired by a company and learned the basics of business in the car industry. Then, he founded a car supply and accessory company in 1962. Because his new business was not widely recognized at the beginning, he endeavored to clean lavatories and other places in his company's building every day to promote a comfortable workplace. In the first 10 years of the company, most of Mr. Kagiya's employees were indifferent to his routine because they were unaware of the benefits of cleaning the workplace. Nevertheless, several employees began helping Mr. Kagiya in maintaining cleanliness in their company building. In addition, Mr. Kagiya and his supporters frequently cleaned the roads and parks around the company building. As more and more people willingly joined his daily volunteer work, he increasingly became famous as a company president who was passionate about cleaning lavatories and many public places.

Mr. Kagiya published many books and DVDs explaining his thoughts and philosophy based on his experiences. He primarily emphasized the advantages of cleaning the places and facilities we use every day, highlighting that cleaning lavatories enhances one's humility and

integrity of the mind (Kagiyama & Kamei, 2010). In addition, he suggested that people express gratitude for any experience regardless of its effect and consequence. According to him, building a habit of unconditional appreciation significantly and positively changes our mindset (Kagiyama & Kamei, 2016).

Mr. Kamei Tamiharu, who has written many books with Mr. Kagiyama, was born in 1946 in Kagoshima Prefecture, Kyushu Island. He completed his undergraduate studies in engineering at Tokyo Denki University. In 1975, he founded a company that manufactured environment maintenance equipment. In 2003, he established a management consulting company in Yokohama. He has actively delivered lectures throughout Japan and promoted Mr. Kagiyama's thoughts in the United States, Italy, and Brazil as well.

The author of this study prepared six short texts summarizing the content of a book titled *Mudana Doryoku-wa Nai (There Is No Useless Effort)* by Mr. Kagiyama and Mr. Kamei, the details of which will be described in the Methodology section.

Literature Review

Writing Letters of Appreciation

As a case study for raising awareness of the value of practicing good habits, the author of this study asked 102 Malaysian university students to write letters of appreciation addressed to lecturers, administrative employees, school janitors, and others who have supported them in their daily lives. A total of 20 groups of students wrote letters of gratitude in Malay, English, or Arabic according to the recipient's area of expertise and language repertoire. Among these groups, 17 wrote to their teachers, while the other three expressed their gratitude to a school janitor, an administrative employee in the college, and a Red Crescent officer. After finishing their letters, the students provided feedback to the author. All group representatives affirmed that the writing task enhanced their self-esteem and awareness of the importance of expressing their appreciation for others. Several students stated that the exercise helped them to strive to improve their vocabulary so that they could express their gratitude in a formal way.

The Benefits of Gratitude for Individuals

Sansone and Sansone's (2010) study defines "gratitude" as "a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation" and focused on its positive effect from a psychiatric standpoint, highlighting that gratitude can be flexibly utilized to heal mental illnesses and disorders. Lambert, Graham, and Fincham (2009) identified the scope of gratitude as a concept using narratives of associated events. Classifying gratitude into specific and general types, their study found that laypeople outside psychological fields considered that the concept of gratitude is broader than simply being a state of thankfulness and/or appreciation. This finding implies an interdependent existence among gratitude and other mental states. The essence here would be how gratitude and other emotions can improve our lives concretely.

Fagley (2018) explored the psychological benefits of appreciation, including the expression of gratitude. A total of 236 undergraduates at a large state university in the United States answered an online survey containing the Appreciation Scale, the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, and the Big Five Inventory. The results indicated that appreciation enhanced the five major personality traits: extraversion (being sociable and outgoing), agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (reflecting emotional stability).

The Concept of *Tahāra(h)* in Islam

Islam, practiced by Muslims in Arab nations, Malaysia, and other countries, teaches the paramount importance of religious purity and cleanliness, called ***Tahāra(h)* in Arabic (Esposito, 2004)**. This concept is primarily described in the 222nd verse of the *Surah Al-Baqarah*, the second chapter of the Qur'an. This verse suggests that male Muslims must stay away from their wives when they are menstruating, as blood is considered impure in the faith. The sixth verse of the *Surah Al-Ma'idah*, the fifth chapter of the Qur'an, also mentions the impurity of excreta. A religiously impure state is called ***Najāsa(h)* in Arabic**. After being in physical contact with anything unclean according to their faith, Muslims must purify themselves to resume the ***Tahāra(h)* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.)**. In addition, ***Tahāra(h)* refers to spiritual cleanliness related to good deeds (Kamali, 2021)**. From a moral viewpoint, this concept can be associated with generosity. For instance, the 271st and 274th verses of the second chapter of the Qur'an highlight the benefits of charitable deeds and the possibility of a divine condonation of past misdeeds committed by generous believers. Similarly, the 180th verse of the *Surah Ali 'Imran*, the third chapter of the Islamic scripture, places emphasis on the disadvantages of greed and mentions heritage in the heavens as a symbolic reward for believers' virtuous deeds during their lifetime.

Nilai-Nilai Murni as Essential Moral Values

Malaysian primary and secondary schools have promoted *nilai-nilai murni* ("pure values") as fundamental moral values that encourage students' practice of altruistic deeds such as helping the elderly and physically handicapped. Many educational institutions in Malaysia teach their students to respect and assist others, speak in an educated tone, and express gratitude to other people for their kind deeds. However, there are different lists of Malaysian essential values, among which more than 10 items are exemplified (Peng, 2010). Therefore, those values are far less specified than religious concepts such as ***Tahāra(h)***. This point can be their major defect. Moreover, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, and several other communities in Malaysian society may interpret the *nilai-nilai murni* differently because of their ambiguity. Instead, the primary moral concepts emphasized in each religious community are usually more important than religiously neutral values.

Recent Studies on Japanese-Language Learning by Malaysian Students

Uni (2021), focusing on the effectiveness of a diary writing exercise, analyzed the grammatical and lexical features of texts written by two Malaysian university students. The participants misspelled several Japanese verb conjugations as well as parts of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. One participant mentioned current topics such as the number of new COVID-19 infections in Malaysia. This diary writing exercise appeared to rapidly enhance learners' vocabulary. In addition, Uni (2022) explored the advantages of Malaysian university students' use of Instagram and WhatsApp for online Japanese lectures. That study found that uploaded drawings and pictures on Instagram encouraged students to study Japanese and deepen their geographical and cultural knowledge about Japan. Meanwhile, WhatsApp seemed to complement lectures specifically when the teacher corrected students' drafts for oral presentations. Uni's (2022) study stressed that, alongside the aforementioned errors in Uni's (2021) study, the use of short vowels instead of long vowels was frequently observed.

The Importance of Improving Writing Skills in Language Learning

Textbooks by Butler (2016) and Hogue (2016) are designed to help English-as-a-Second-

Language (ESL) students learn the basics of academic writing in English. Another writing textbook by Swick (2009) includes helpful writing exercises and also focuses on enhancing learners' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. There is a breadth of studies on writing exercises for ESL learners. Chan (2012) investigated grammatical and lexical errors in the writing outputs of Cantonese-speaking Chinese students in Hong Kong and found that many of them produced incorrect vocabulary items and word orders based on their first-language knowledge. Chan's (2012) study observed a frequent interference by the participants' first language. As the majority of ethnically Chinese Malaysians can communicate in Cantonese, Chan's findings may benefit ESL education in Malaysia. The absence of grammatical tenses is also frequently observed in English texts written by Malaysian learners regardless of their mother tongue (Manokaran et al., 2013). Similarly, Uni (2021), who analyzed grammatical and lexical errors in Japanese texts written by Malaysian students, observed the use of the present form of the Japanese adjective *oishii* おいしい ("delicious") instead of *oishikatta* おいしかった, namely, its perfect form. On the aspect of tenses, similarities are found between English and Japanese errors committed by Malaysian learners.

Methodology

The author of this study prepared six Japanese texts based on Mr. Kagiya and Mr. Kamei's book. While the content remained similar, the Japanese vocabulary and grammar used in the texts were simplified for beginner-level learners. While the focus of the appreciation letter writing exercise was on the practice of an altruistic habit, the main objective of this study was to enhance Japanese proficiency through writing texts with moral values.

The six texts used for this study are constructed as follows:

1. ひとつひろえば、ひとつだけきれいになる。
だいじなことは いっぽを ふみだす ゆうき。
あしもとにあるごみをひろうことが はじまりです。
ごみひとつひろえないひとになにができるでしょうか。

(translation)

"If you pick up a piece of trash now, the place becomes cleaner and more beautiful. The important thing is the courage to take a step forward. Picking up trash under our feet is a small but meaningful beginning. What can a person who cannot pick up any trash do?"

2. ざつようも だいにしましう。
じんせいでは、かんたんにみえることもしばしば やくにたちます。
まいにちのせいかつでは、ほとんど ぜんぶが ざつようです。
ざつようが できる のうりよくを たかめることが じんせいの ちかみちです。

(translation)

"We must cherish ordinary tasks. In our lives, things that seem easy are often valuable and beneficial. Almost everything in our lives consists of small ordinary tasks. Improving the skills of doing such simple tasks without hesitation is the shortcut we use in our lives."

3. ちしきより じっせんが だいです。
たくさん べんきょうしても、じっせんしなければ、
ぜんぜん やくにたちません。
じっせんしてはじめて、いきたちえになります。

(translation)

"Practice is more important than knowledge. Even if you acquire abundance of knowledge, it is completely useless without practical application. If you practice your knowledge, it will finally become living wisdom."

4. よいしゅうかんがよいじんせいをつくります。
 よいしゅうかんをみにつけているひとは
 すばらしいじんかくをもっています。
 そして、こうどうにじんかくがあらわれます。
 じぶんのしゅうかんをかいぜんすることで、
 じんせいがよくなります。

(translation)

“Good habits build a good life. People who have built good habits have great personality. Our character often appears in every action. When we improve our habits, our lives will become better.”

5. かんしゃすることはいちばんじゅうようなのうりよくです。
 ちいさなことにかんしゃしましょう。
 そうすれば、なやみがちいさくおもえます。
 そして、しあわせになることができます。

(translation)

“Being grateful is the most important skill. We must be thankful for the little things in life. In succeeding to do so, we can face troubles more objectively; therefore, they seem smaller, and we can feel happier.”

6. じんせいにおいて、じゆうにつかえるじかんはかぎられています。
 じかんはいのちそのものです。
 じぶんのじかんをたいせつにしましょう。

(translation)

“In our lives, the time that can be used freely is limited. Time is just as important as our lives. We must appreciate our own time.”

Analyses of Students' Outputs

This study randomly allotted numbers to the participants (e.g., student 1). To enhance students' comprehension, literal translation in Malay was presented after every Japanese word or sentence unit of the original texts.

Text 1

The first sentence of the first text states, “If you pick up a piece of trash now, the place becomes cleaner and more beautiful.” Student 1 forgot to write the second character of the word *dake* だけ (“only, just”). This Japanese adverb with various functions emphasized the change through picking up a piece of trash in the text; however, the student may not have realized that the adverb's semantic effect. The second sentence of the same text is a piece of advice: “The important thing is the courage to take a step forward.” Student 2 spelled *yuuki* ゆうき (“courage”) as *yuki* ゆき, which means “snow”; this misspelling may cause misunderstanding among Japanese readers. This error appears to be a phonetic interference caused by the student's first language, as vowels are usually pronounced shortly in Malay except when they are emphasized.

Text 2

The second sentence of the second text says, “In our lives, things that seem easy are often valuable and beneficial.” Student 1 wrote *kantan-ni* かんたんにな (“easily”) as *kanta*; however, *mieru* みえる (“seem”), which followed *kanta* hints at the meaning of *kantan-ni mieru* かんたんにみえる (“seem easy”) as a phrase.

The third sentence of the second text states, “Almost everything in our lives consists of small ordinary tasks.” Students 1 and 2 misspelled the Japanese noun *zembu* ぜんぶ

“everything”); one wrote it as *sembu* せんぶ, while the other wrote it as *zenfu* ぜんふ. Both errors were caused by the absence of *dakuten*, that is, a set of two small lines put on the upper right side of a phonetic Japanese character.

Text 3

The third sentence of the third text says, “If you practice your knowledge, it will finally become living wisdom.” The Japanese noun *chie* ちえ (“wisdom”) is written with the phonetic characters ち (*chi*) and え (*e*). However, student 3 wrote the word using the phonetic characters さ (*sa*) and え (*e*), which may be attributed to the formal similarity of the characters ち (*chi*) and さ (*sa*). The Japanese verb *naru* なる means “become,” and the verb’s polite form is *narimasu* なります. Student 2 spelled it as *rimasu* ります, wherein the character な (*na*) was missing. The particle *ni* に (“to, into”) preceding the verb may have confused the learner. In Malay, no preposition is required with the Malay verb *menjadi* (“become”). The student may have been influenced by this syntactic difference.

Text 4

The second sentence of the fourth text states, “People who have built good habits have great personality.” The Japanese words *yoi shuukan* よいしゅうかん mean “good habit(s).” The particle *o* follows the noun *shuukan* しゅうかん (“habit”), which is the object related to the verb *mi-ni tsukeru* みにつける (“learn, acquire”). Student 3 mistakenly put the particle *ga* が between the noun and the particle *o* を. The major function of *ga*, wrongly put by the student, is to indicate the subject in a sentence. The third sentence of the same text reads “Our character appears in every action.” The original Japanese text includes *jinkaku* じんかく (“personality, character”), the particle *ga* as a subject marker, and the verb *arawareru* あらわれる (“appear”). However, student 4 forgot the particle *ga* when writing this sentence. In Malay, the verb *muncul* (“appear”) requires no subject indicator; therefore, this error also appears to be caused by a negative transfer of the student’s first language.

Text 5

The meaning of the third sentence of the fifth text is as follows: “In succeeding to do so, we can face troubles more objectively; therefore, they seem smaller.” In the text written by student 2, *chiisaku* ちいさく (“small” as an adverb) was misspelled as *chiisaiku* ちいさいく, a mixture of the adjective *chiisai* (“small”) and its adverb form *chiisaku*. A similar morphological error can occur in casual conversations among native Japanese speakers. The redundant addition of the *-ku* ending to an adjective is often observed in colloquial texts among native speakers: *koku* こく (“densely, strongly”) is sometimes mispronounced as *koiku*. Certain native speakers may not appropriately recognize the one-syllable stem *ko-* of the adjective *koi* こい (“dense, strong”), and simply add the *-ku* ending to *koi*.

Text 6

The first sentence of the sixth text starts with the phrase *jinsei-ni oite* じんせいにおいて (“in our lives”). Here, the Japanese noun *jinsei* じんせい (“life, lifetime”) includes a long *e*, indicated as *ei* in the transliterated Japanese orthography. Student 4 mistakenly shortened the long *e*, perhaps because of an interference from the student’s native language, as Malay does not have long vowels.

Then, the third sentence of the same text means “We must appreciate our own time,” where the Japanese verb *taisetsu-ni suru* (“cherish, appreciate”) is conjugated as *taisetsu-ni shimashō* (“let’s cherish, let’s appreciate”). Student 5 misspelled it as *taisetsu shimashō*, which

lacks the particle *ni* に. Derived from *taisetsu-na* たいせつな (“important”), the word *taisetsu-ni* たいせつに means “with care” and “with caution.” The verb *suru* する (“do”) is usually used without a particle as in compound verbs such as *benkyō suru* (“study”) and *shōtai suru* (“invite”). When students are not accustomed to a less frequently used structure, they may neglect the uncommon existence of components such as particles. In such cases, it is beneficial to draw their attention to the oversight by giving them corrective feedback.

Conclusion

This study examined the advantages of Japanese-language writing activities based on a book of moral values authored by Mr. Kagiya and Mr. Kamei. First, the authors’ moral advice in the short texts motivated all participants to enhance their Japanese-language proficiency and practice good habits in their daily lives. Second, all participants concretely realized the grammatical and lexical knowledge they must enrich. After writing the text in Japanese, the students stated that the literal translation significantly facilitated their semantic analysis of each Japanese vocabulary item or sentence unit, thus also helping them understand the meaning of each sentence. Third, the hybridity of the short texts as an amalgam of language learning materials and ethical reading texts indicates the possibility of flexibly combining contents of multiple subjects for foreign language learners. With the abovementioned benefits, this study concluded that engaging in a writing exercise using short texts with ethical advice helped Malaysian students improve their Japanese proficiency.

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