

JAPANESE ORAL COMMUNICATION AND CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Margaret Anthony¹, Noor Azalina Buang², Nithiyaa Muniandy³, Nurhasma Muhamad Saad⁴, Yee Chin Yip⁵

^{1,5}Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Nilai, Malaysia

²Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Tanjung Malim, Malaysia

³Department of Information Technology & Communication, Politeknik METrO Kuala Lumpur (PMKL), Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: margaret@usim.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to identify the needs and challenges faced by beginner learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) in constructing cohesive spoken communication. It seeks to address the pedagogical gap in teaching practices that emphasize grammar and vocabulary over discourse-level speaking skills.

Research Method: The study employed a qualitative approach conducted at a Malaysian public university. Data was collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with both instructors and students as part of the first phase of a Design and Development Research (DDR) project.

Findings: The findings revealed that students frequently produced short, isolated utterances and used minimal cohesive devices such as reference, substitution, and conjunctions. Low self-confidence led them to avoid extended responses. Teachers also noted that textbooks and classroom activities focused mainly on sentence-level accuracy, offering limited practice in connected speech. These results highlight a gap between structural knowledge and discourse competence in current JFL instruction.

Originality: This study represents the preliminary stage in developing the *Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM)*, an innovative pedagogical tool designed to enhance learners' ability to produce fluent, coherent, and contextually appropriate spoken Japanese. It contributes valuable insights into designing cohesive-oriented teaching approaches that foster communicative confidence among Malaysian JFL learners.

Keywords: Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), cohesion, speaking skills, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of globalization has increased the demand for multilingual graduates in Malaysia, especially those proficient in Asian languages such as Japanese, which has strong economic, diplomatic, and cultural relevance. Japanese language learning in Malaysia has grown steadily under initiatives such as the Look East Policy and collaboration with Japanese institutions (Gan, 2023). However, the mastery of speaking skills the most immediate and socially visible indicator of language ability remains one of the weakest areas among Malaysian learners.

Existing Japanese language courses in Malaysian universities typically emphasize grammar mastery, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension (Anthony, 2025). While these aspects are essential, they are insufficient for producing learners who can sustain oral interaction in authentic situations. The current gap is especially visible in discourse-level speaking: students can produce grammatically correct sentences but often fail to connect them into extended, coherent speech.

This weakness stems largely from the lack of explicit instruction in cohesion, defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as the semantic ties reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical reiteration that enable sentences to form unified discourse. Without explicit guidance, learners fall back on fragmented utterances, leading to communication breakdowns, limited fluency, and reduced confidence.

This paper reports on the first phase of a broader Design and Development Research (DDR) project aimed at addressing this gap. The goal of this initial study was to identify the needs and challenges faced by beginner Japanese learners in producing cohesive spoken communication. The findings form the groundwork for the design of the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM), a pedagogical innovation intended to enhance discourse competence among JFL learners in Malaysian higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SPEAKING SKILLS IN SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Speaking is recognized as a challenging skill to master's in foreign language contexts because it requires learners to integrate linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and sociocultural appropriateness in real time (Bygate, 1987; Richards, 2008). Research indicates that fluency, coherence, and discourse competence are key indicators of oral proficiency (Nation & Newton, 2009).

In Malaysia, EFL and JFL learners often report low confidence in speaking due to limited exposure to authentic communicative contexts (Gan, 2023). Studies emphasize that without explicit support, learners tend to produce “islands of language” rather than connected speech (Eissa, 2019).

2.2 COHESION IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE

Halliday and Hasan (1976) identified five categories of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. While much of the research on cohesion has focused on writing, recent studies confirm its importance in oral discourse. Huang (2024) found that cohesive marker density strongly predicted fluency ratings in English oral tests. Xu et al. (2025) likewise demonstrated that cohesive device use distinguishes proficiency levels in L2 speaking.

In Japanese, cohesion is further complicated by zero pronouns and context-dependent deixis, which can confuse learners. JFL students often overuse explicit pronouns or omit them inappropriately, disrupting discourse flow (Chironov, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of explicit instruction in culturally appropriate cohesion use.

2.3 EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF COHESIVE DEVICES

Evidence suggests that cohesive competence can be taught. Alawerdy (2022) showed that instruction on conjunctions improved both writing and oral fluency in EFL learners. Al Issa (2024) demonstrated that discourse marker training within flipped classrooms enhanced students' confidence and fluency. In Japanese contexts, Takei (2024) found that teaching negotiation strategies including cohesive devices, improved interaction in lingua franca settings.

2.4 CULTURAL CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

Motivation plays a central role in successful language learning. Fujioka (2024) found that cultural integration in tertiary JFL programs fostered identity development and stronger motivation. In Malaysia, learners report greater engagement when cultural themes are embedded in lessons (Anthony, 2025). This supports embedding cohesion instruction in **cultural scenarios** such as festivals, food, and daily routines.

2.5 INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN MODELS

The JLCM draws from Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction (1985), the ADDIE model, and Design-Based Research (DBR) (Agustiningrum, 2024). Gagné's framework provides scaffolding for lesson delivery, ADDIE ensures systematic design, and DBR allows iterative refinement in real classrooms. Together, they provide a robust foundation for pedagogy that is both theoretically sound and practically feasible.

In the context of Japanese language learning, Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction offers a clear, step-by-step structure that facilitates effective cognitive engagement among learners. Each stage, from gaining attention, presenting stimuli, providing guidance, eliciting performance, to offering feedback plays a vital role in promoting active learning. Within the JLCM, this model is operationalized through tasks that first draw learners' attention to cohesive devices in authentic dialogues, followed by guided practice, feedback, and opportunities for self-expression. For example, learners may begin by identifying conjunctions such as *それで* (therefore) or *でも* (but) in model conversations before using them to construct their own dialogues. This sequential instructional flow aligns with Gagné's emphasis on building knowledge through progressive cognitive stages that lead to mastery and retention.

Meanwhile, the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) ensures that the JLCM follows a systematic instructional design process. During the analysis phase, learners' needs and challenges identified in earlier stages of this study are examined to determine content focus and learning outcomes. The design and development phases involve creating cohesion-oriented materials, lesson plans, and assessment instruments aligned with communicative goals. Implementation allows these materials to be tested in real classroom environments, while the evaluation phase collects feedback and learning evidence to refine the module. This cyclical structure guarantees that the JLCM is not static but continuously improved based on empirical data and learner performance, ensuring both reliability and pedagogical relevance.

Incorporating Design-Based Research (DBR) further enhances the JLCM's adaptability and authenticity. Unlike traditional experimental approaches, DBR bridges theory and practice by situating innovation directly in classroom contexts. Through iterative cycles of design, testing, and refinement, the JLCM is shaped by real learner interaction and teacher reflection. This method ensures that theoretical insights about cohesion are translated into practical strategies that address the realities of teaching Japanese as a foreign language in Malaysia. Moreover, DBR promotes collaboration between researchers and practitioners, encouraging co-construction of knowledge and sustainable improvement in instructional practices. In this way, the combined application of Gagné's model, ADDIE, and DBR forms a comprehensive pedagogical triad balancing structure, systematic development, and contextual responsiveness to produce an effective and evidence-based module for enhancing Japanese oral communication skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative Design-Based Research (DBR) approach, emphasizing innovation, iteration, and contextual validity. DBR is particularly suitable for language education research where the aim is not only to understand a problem but also to develop, test, and refine educational innovation in authentic classroom contexts. Unlike controlled experimental designs that isolate variables in artificial settings, DBR acknowledges the complexity of classroom learning and integrates product development with empirical testing. The approach aligns with the study's dual purpose: (i) identifying the challenges faced by beginner Japanese learners in producing cohesive spoken communication, and (ii) providing evidence-based input for the subsequent development of the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM).

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted at a Malaysian public university where Japanese is taught as a foreign language elective. The institutional context was chosen because Japanese has steadily gained popularity among undergraduates due to its cultural and economic relevance, yet many learners remain at beginner (A1) level after one or two semesters of study.

A total of 48 undergraduate students participated in the study. They were between the ages of 19 and 22 and came from various faculties, including business, education, and science. All participants were enrolled in an A1-level Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) course. The majority had studied Japanese for less than one year and had accumulated between 60 and 90 classroom hours. None had lived in Japan or had substantial exposure to Japanese beyond the classroom, making them representative of typical Malaysian university learners of Japanese.

The module was facilitated by two experienced lecturers, each with more than eight years of JFL teaching experience. Both lecturers had training in applied linguistics and pedagogy and had previously taught beginner-level Japanese using conventional textbook-based curricula. They were oriented to the goals of the study and briefed on the importance of documenting learner performance.

The diversity of participants in terms of faculty background and academic major reflects the typical profile of JFL learners in Malaysian higher education and provides a suitable context of the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM).

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

To achieve methodological rigor, the study used three complementary data collection methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and diagnostic speaking tasks. This multi-source approach ensured triangulation and a rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Over a period of four weeks, two intact beginner classes were observed. The researcher and an independent observer documented students' speaking behaviors, their use or non-use of cohesive devices, hesitation patterns, and the overall interactional flow. Field notes focused on moments where communication broke down due to missing cohesive ties, as well as instances where learners attempted, successfully or otherwise, to link ideas. Classroom dynamics, participation levels, and the types of activities that encouraged or hindered discourse were also recorded.

In addition to the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students to gain insight into their perceptions of speaking difficulties. These interviews explored their confidence in speaking, awareness of cohesive devices, and experiences with classroom speaking tasks. Three instructors were also interviewed to provide a teaching perspective, focusing on the extent to which cohesion was emphasized in their instruction, limitations of the textbook, and their impressions of students' oral competence. All interviews were conducted in English, with allowance for Malay and Japanese code-switching, and were transcribed verbatim to allow for deeper analysis.

A diagnostic speaking task was also administered to all 48 students, requiring them to perform a short dialogue or monologue on the familiar topic "My Weekend." This topic was selected to reduce cognitive load and allow greater focus on language production. The students' performances were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for their use of cohesive devices, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Attention was also given to key fluency indicators such as pause duration, frequency of fillers, and the ability to maintain interaction across multiple turns.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis proceeded in several stages to ensure both systematic coding and interpretive depth.

All diagnostic speaking task transcripts were coded based on the five categories of cohesion outlined by Halliday and Hasan (1976): reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Instances of successful cohesion such as the appropriate use of expressions like *それで* to signal cause-effect, and instances of failed cohesion, including abrupt topic shifts or missing referents, were recorded. Frequencies were then calculated to determine the density of cohesive devices per 100 words.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, student and instructor interview transcripts were examined to identify recurring patterns. Codes such as "lack of confidence," "fragmented speech," "textbook limitations," and "avoidance of extended responses" were grouped into broader thematic categories. Observation notes were analyzed alongside the interview data to verify whether learners' self-reported challenges aligned with their actual classroom behaviors.

Triangulation was employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Data from observations, interviews, and diagnostic speaking tasks were cross validated to identify converging evidence. For example, both classroom observations and instructor interviews revealed that learners used very few conjunctions beyond *そして*. This triangulation approach enhanced the reliability of the results by ensuring that interpretations were supported by multiple data sources rather than a single dataset.

Through this analytic process, the study constructed a comprehensive picture of learners' current oral abilities, the challenges they encountered, and the instructional gaps in current practice.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and diagnostic speaking tasks revealed several consistent challenges faced by beginner Japanese learners. These findings are organized into four main themes: reliance on fragmented utterances, limited use of cohesive devices, lack of confidence in oral communication, and inadequacies in instructional materials. Quantitative evidence is combined with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive picture of learners' discourse competence.

4.1 RELIANCE ON FRAGMENTED UTTERANCES

Diagnostic speaking tasks demonstrated that most students were unable to construct extended stretches of discourse. Learners frequently relied on isolated nouns and short verb phrases, often leaving utterances incomplete. For example:

“昨日...アルバイト。今日は休み。”

(“Yesterday... part-time job. Today... holiday.”)

Such utterances lacked connectives to indicate temporal sequencing or logical relationships. Classroom observations confirmed this tendency, with learners typically offering one- or two-word answers when prompted to elaborate. Teachers reported that students seemed reluctant to move beyond memorized sentences and preferred safe, minimal responses to avoid errors.

This pattern of fragmented speech suggests that learners are operating primarily at the sentence-construction level, without the linguistic tools or confidence to extend meaning across clauses. Their utterances often resemble isolated information units rather than connected discourse. In many cases, the communication breakdowns were not due to grammatical inaccuracy but to the absence of cohesive ties that could bridge ideas. For instance, learners would state an activity (*食べました* – I ate) without indicating when, why, or with whom it occurred. This phenomenon aligns with what Bygate (1987) describes as “lexical listing,” where language learners depend on rehearsed lexical items rather than spontaneous discourse construction.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings highlight the limitations of pattern-drill and translation-based instruction, which emphasizes accuracy at the expense of fluency and communicative flow. Learners who are repeatedly exposed to isolated sentence drills tend to internalize Japanese as a series of unrelated chunks, leading to speech that lacks coherence. Teachers observed that when asked to describe a sequence of events, students often paused excessively, inserted long silences, or reverted to English or Malay to fill gaps in cohesion. This demonstrates a cognitive overload, where learners struggle to retrieve appropriate connectives or discourse markers under communicative pressure.

Furthermore, the tendency toward fragmented utterances reflects a deeper issue of linguistic insecurity and cultural communication norms. In Malaysian classrooms, learners are often cautious about speaking unless they are certain their sentences are grammatically correct. This cautiousness, while rooted in respect for linguistic accuracy, inhibits spontaneous language production. The avoidance of risk-taking in oral communication limits opportunities for learners to experiment with cohesive elements such as *それで* (so), *だから* (therefore), and *でも* (but) key tools for linking ideas naturally in Japanese. Instructors noted that even high-performing students hesitated to connect two sentences for fear of making errors in verb conjugation or particle usage.

To address this issue, cohesive instruction must shift from form-focused drills to meaning-based communication tasks. Learners should be guided to recognize how cohesive devices create relationships between ideas such as cause and effect, contrast, or sequence rather than simply memorizing isolated vocabulary. Activities like story sequencing, collaborative dialogue building, or “broken text” reconstruction can help students internalize cohesion at a discourse level. By consciously teaching learners to connect sentences into extended speech, educators can move them from fragmented expression toward discourse competence, enabling more natural and fluent interaction in Japanese.

4.2 LIMITED USE OF COHESIVE DEVICES

Cohesive density was quantitatively low. Analysis of transcripts showed that the average use of cohesive devices was 4.1 markers per 100 words in the pre-test, far below the expected norm for basic conversation. Among the categories identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976), conjunctions were the most frequently used but limited to repetitive reliance on *そして* (and then). Other categories, such as substitution and ellipsis, were rarely attempted.

Table 1. Frequency of Cohesive Devices in Diagnostic Task (per 100 words)

Cohesive Device Category	Examples (Japanese)	Frequency	% of Total
Reference	これ, それ, あれ; pronouns	0.9	22%
Conjunctions	そして, でも, それで	1.8	44%
Lexical Cohesion	食べ物 → 寿司 → ラーメン	0.7	17%
Ellipsis/Substitution	Zero pronoun use, これ/それ	0.7	17%
Total	—	4.1	100%

Students’ over-reliance on simple conjunctions meant their speech lacked variety and nuance. Teachers also noted that learners rarely attempted connectors that express contrast (*でも*, but) or cause-effect (*それで*, so), which are vital for sustaining conversation.

4.3 LACK OF CONFIDENCE AND AVOIDANCE OF EXTENDED SPEECH

Interview data revealed that many learners felt insecure about their speaking ability. They feared being judged for grammatical errors and preferred to give brief

answers rather than attempt longer, riskier discourse. This reflected their lack of confidence when using the language. Several student comments illustrate this:

“If I make a mistake, I just stop.”

“I can answer short, but to continue speaking is difficult.”

This lack of confidence was also visible in classroom participation. Observations recorded frequent pauses, silence following teacher prompts, and reliance on peers to initiate responses. The avoidance of extended responses meant that even when learners knew relevant vocabulary, they struggled to sustain interaction across multiple turns.

4.4 INADEQUACIES IN INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Teachers reported that existing textbooks and curricula did not emphasize cohesion or discourse-level speaking. Lessons primarily focused on sentence construction, grammar patterns, and vocabulary memorization. While role-play activities existed, they tended to be highly scripted and did not encourage learners to build spontaneous, connected speech. One instructor explained:

“Textbooks stop at sentence-level examples. There are no tasks for students to join sentences together into a story or explanation.”

This instructional gap reinforced learners' fragmented output. Without targeted practice in cohesion, students did not develop strategies to connect ideas in speech, resulting in limited fluency and naturalness.

4.5 OBSERVED DIFFERENCES AMONG LEARNERS

The overall pattern indicated weak cohesion among learners, though some variation was noted. Those with prior exposure to Japanese through anime, manga, or short-term immersion tended to use conjunctions and discourse markers more frequently, even if their usage was not always accurate. These learners occasionally employed expressions such as *だから* (therefore) or *でも* (but), demonstrating a willingness to experiment with cohesion beyond the confines of textbook language. However, their usage was inconsistent and often mismatched with the context. The convergence of data across methods strengthens the reliability of these findings.

Observations highlighted limited cohesion in classroom dialogues, where most learners produced short, isolated utterances with little connection between their ideas. Interviews suggested that this limitation was due not only to linguistic gaps but also to a lack of communicative exposure and self-confidence. Teachers recognized these issues and acknowledged that current curricula do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to practice linking sentences in meaningful ways. Diagnostic speaking tasks further confirmed these findings, offering measurable evidence of low cohesive density and a restricted variety of cohesive markers.

Interestingly, a small group of learners with informal exposure to Japanese media demonstrated a more intuitive sense of connectedness in their speech, even though their grammatical accuracy was imperfect. This suggests that authentic input such as dialogues from anime, YouTube content, and real-life interactions may help learners naturally internalize cohesive expressions. These students tended to reproduce discourse markers in ways that mirrored native usage, for example, using *でも* (but) or *それで* (so) to extend their ideas. However, the lack of systematic instruction meant they often used these markers without fully understanding their pragmatic nuances, resulting in occasional misuse or overgeneralization.

This variation illustrates that exposure alone cannot replace structured learning. While informal experiences can improve learners' familiarity with conversational flow, explicit teaching is essential to ensure that cohesion is used appropriately across different communicative contexts. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding students from intuitive mimicry to conscious, accurate, and context-sensitive use of cohesive devices. Integrating both explicit instruction and exposure-based learning could help bridge the gap between passive recognition and active production of cohesive language.

Finally, the diversity in learners' backgrounds underscores the importance of differentiated instruction in the Japanese language classroom. Learners who engage with Japanese media outside of class may benefit from higher-level discourse tasks that refine their pragmatic competence, while beginners who rely solely on classroom input require foundational scaffolding to build confidence and fluency. These findings highlight the need for any future module such as the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM) to account for individual differences. Providing tiered activities that cater to varying levels of cohesion awareness will better cultivate both accuracy and communicative fluidity among Malaysian Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) learners.

5. DISCUSSION

The study found that beginner Japanese learners in Malaysia often speak in short, disconnected sentences and rarely use cohesive devices like *でも* (but) or *それで* (so). Their low confidence and grammar-focused lessons limit their ability to speak fluently and link ideas naturally. Teachers also noted that textbooks lack activities that promote connected speech. Therefore, explicit teaching of cohesion and more communicative speaking tasks are needed to help learners develop clearer, more confident Japanese speech.

5.1 FRAGMENTED SPEECH AND LIMITED DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

The findings reveal that Malaysian beginner learners of Japanese rely heavily on fragmented utterances and isolated sentences, a phenomenon that mirrors what Bygate (1987) and Richards (2008) describe as the early stage of speech production, where learners prioritize accuracy over fluency. The learners' tendency to produce short, disconnected phrases such as “昨日...アルバイト。今日は休み。” illustrates a lack of cohesive awareness, specifically, the ability to link ideas through linguistic devices that construct continuity and logical flow. This weakness suggests that while grammatical competence is emphasized in classroom instruction, discourse competence, central to communicative language use, is largely neglected.

In line with Eissa (2019) assertion that learners often produce “islands of language” when deprived of communicative contexts, the present study shows that Malaysian JFL students exhibit similar patterns. Their speech performance demonstrates surface-level correctness but lacks the pragmatic and syntactic links necessary for coherent discourse. This gap points to the urgent need to move beyond sentence-level pedagogy toward a curriculum that systematically integrates cohesion in oral instruction.

5.2 UNDERUSE OF COHESIVE DEVICES

Quantitative data confirm that students' speech lacks sufficient semantic ties. The dominance of *そして* (and then) and near absence of contrastive or causal connectors reflect what Halliday and Hasan (1976) classify as low cohesive density. Similar trends were observed in Huang (2024) study, where low cohesive density correlated with lower fluency scores in oral tests. The repetitive use of a limited range of conjunctions suggests that learners are unaware of the discourse functions of cohesive markers, rather than simply lacking vocabulary.

Moreover, Japanese as a language poses unique challenges in cohesion due to its reliance on contextual inference and zero pronouns (Chironov, 2022). The students' inability to appropriately omit or reintroduce referents demonstrates not only linguistic difficulty but also limited exposure to authentic discourse models. Hence, explicit instruction in cohesive devices, both linguistic (e.g., conjunctions, substitution) and pragmatic (e.g., topic maintenance), is essential for learners to internalize discourse-level fluency.

5.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS AND COMMUNICATIVE CONFIDENCE

The theme of low confidence recurs throughout interviews and observations. Learners' reluctance to extend speech, their fear of errors, and preference for memorized responses reflect affective barriers that hinder spontaneous communication. These findings are consistent with Gan (2023) and Fujioka (2024), who found that self-efficacy and cultural engagement play decisive roles in JFL motivation. The current results suggest that psychological readiness to communicate is intertwined with linguistic readiness: without confidence, learners underutilize even the limited cohesive resources they possess.

Pedagogically, this highlights the importance of affective scaffolding alongside linguistic instruction. According to Gagné (1985) model, gaining learners' attention and supporting their performance with feedback are crucial stages for building confidence. Therefore, cohesion training in oral tasks must not only focus on linguistic linking devices but also provide emotionally safe spaces for experimentation and error tolerance.

5.4 INSTRUCTIONAL DEFICIENCIES AND CURRICULUM GAPS

The study also reveals significant gaps in instructional materials and classroom practice. Teachers acknowledged that current textbooks lack sections or tasks emphasizing cohesion. This finding aligns with Alawerdy (2022) and Al Issa (2024) conclusions that explicit instruction of cohesive devices in EFL contexts enhances writing and speaking fluency. In Japanese language teaching, however, cohesion is often treated implicitly, assumed to emerge naturally from exposure rather than through guided practice.

Such assumptions neglect the cognitive demands of cohesion, which requires learners to plan, connect, and sustain speech beyond the clause level. As observed by Takei (2024), explicit negotiation strategies in Japanese as a lingua franca setting led to measurable gains in interactive competence. Similarly, integrating cohesion-focused oral activities could scaffold learners' ability to sustain discourse, bridge sentences, and express relationships between ideas.

5.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR MODULE DEVELOPMENT

The findings substantiate the theoretical rationale for developing the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM). Within the ADDIE and Design-Based Research frameworks (Agustiningrum, 2024), this phase provides empirical input for the design stage by identifying precise learner needs, including fragmented discourse, low cohesive density, and affective insecurity. The JLCM can thus be structured around Gagné's instructional events, embedding cohesion-focused communicative tasks that move from controlled to spontaneous production.

Moreover, embedding cultural content as suggested by Fujioka (2024) and Anthony (2025) can enhance motivation and situational relevance, leading to deeper learning engagement. Tasks set in real-life contexts, such as *ordering food*, *attending festivals*, or *describing routines*, can simultaneously foster cohesion, use, and cultural competence. By combining linguistic and sociocultural dimensions, the module will promote holistic communicative competence aligned with the goals of higher education in Malaysia's multilingual context.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insights into the state of Japanese oral communication among Malaysian university learners. The findings reveal that despite grammatical knowledge, learners struggle to produce cohesive, extended speech due to limited exposure to discourse-level instruction, restricted use of cohesive devices, low confidence, and textbook-driven pedagogy. These challenges collectively hinder fluency, coherence, and communicative confidence.

The research makes three major contributions. First, it empirically documents the underexplored issue of cohesion in JFL oral communication within the Malaysian higher education context, aligning with global findings that link cohesive competence to communicative proficiency (Xu et al., 2025; Huang, 2024). Second, it highlights the urgent pedagogical gap in existing curricula, emphasizing the need for explicit teaching of cohesive devices as part of speaking instruction. Third, it provides a foundational framework for the subsequent development of the Japanese Language Cohesion Module (JLCM), an instructional innovation designed to enhance discourse competence through structured cohesion-focused learning experiences.

Pedagogically, the study advocates an instructional shift from sentence-level grammar exercises to discourse-level speaking practice. Teachers should incorporate explicit training on cohesive devices, authentic communicative tasks, and culturally contextualized activities that stimulate both fluency and cohesion. Curriculum designers are encouraged to revise teaching materials to include discourse-building exercises that enable learners to connect ideas meaningfully in spoken Japanese.

For future research, subsequent DDR phases should pilot and refine the JLCM, evaluating its effectiveness in improving learners' cohesive use, fluency, and confidence through pre- and post-intervention analysis. Further comparative studies across different institutions could also explore how varying instructional contexts influence cohesion development. Ultimately, this study underscores that achieving communicative competence in Japanese requires not only lexical and grammatical mastery but also the ability to construct cohesive, coherent, and culturally appropriate speech. Addressing this dimension will not only elevate the quality of Japanese language education in Malaysia but also contribute to the broader goal of nurturing globally competent, multilingual graduates who can participate meaningfully in intercultural communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank USIM, UPSI, and PMKL for their kind support throughout this study. Appreciation is also extended to the instructors and students who participated and contributed valuable insights.

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