

The Role of Japanese Children's Literature as a Resource in

Japanese Language Education

Misaki Shinohara
Doctoral Program of Language Education Science
Faculty of Language and Arts
State University of Semarang
Semarang Indonesia
misakishinohara@students.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the role of children's literature in Japanese language education, emphasizing its educational value and theoretical foundations. Children's literature not only aids students in enhancing their vocabulary and grammar but also provides insights into the culture, traditions, morals, and social perspectives that shape Japanese society. The study explores how children's literature can be utilized in Japanese language education, focusing on its educational benefits and theoretical background. The language used in children's literature is concise yet expressive, allowing learners to naturally encounter new words, common expressions, and stylistic patterns within the context of the story. Furthermore, these stories stimulate imaginations and emotions, making the learning process more engaging. From an educational standpoint, children's literature illustrates the strong connection between language, culture, and identity. It supports a student-centred approach, encouraging students to reflect, interpret, and take ownership of their learning. In contrast to traditional teaching materials that often emphasize grammar, children's literature provides a more comprehensive learning experience by integrating language and culture within narratives. This allows learners to envision scenes and characters, helping them understand words and expressions in real-life contexts. This study aims to discuss the rationale for incorporating Japanese children's literature into Japanese language education. Children's literature enriches the learning experience by serving as a meaningful bridge between language and culture. It also promotes communication skills, cultural awareness, and autonomous learning.

Keywords – Japanese children's literature, Japanese language education, Japanese society

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature not only helps children acquire language but also provides opportunities to learn about culture, society, ways of life, and values. Therefore, it is playing an important role in their development. In terms of language, children's literature uses simple and uncomplicated language. The feature of children's literature is also written in a natural language with repeated vocabulary. The task of "repeatedly reading simple words" is also a study method that helps with learning Japanese. Repeated reading and speaking may seem like an effective way to learn, but it's important to focus and work on understanding, rather than simply repeating it. Repetition can awaken our senses to look for similarity in patterns rather than similarity in appearances, an abductive form of reasoning that promotes deeper understanding of underlying relationships rather

than superficial resemblances (Atoofi 2018). A key characteristic of children's literature is its frequent use of simple words and sentences. This simplicity not only helps children in learning the language but also introduces them to the culture and morals of a country. Children's literature is particularly beneficial for studying the Japanese language as a national language. Therefore, why isn't it utilized more in the study of Japanese as a foreign language? Chatani (2020) argues that children's literature is rich in knowledge, and by reading it carefully, learners can increase their knowledge. Therefore, it can be an opportunity for growth. He further advocates the use of children's literature in university education.

Although learner centered and activity based approaches are widely used in Japanese language education, many institutions still depend on traditional instruction focused on grammar and vocabulary. Practical materials help students gain the Japanese needed for daily life, however, autonomous study is also necessary to develop a deeper understanding of culture and its connection to language. Media platforms such as YouTube and Ticktock give learners opportunities to observe cultural practices, yet these often reflect only personal and subjective perspectives. In this context, literature can serve as a valuable resource for both autonomous learning and traditional grammar focused learning. Moreover, the teacher can expand learners' learning by communication in the classroom. According to Yamade (2022), by using literature in lessons while engaging in "communication" with the teacher, students are encouraged to realize the significance of learning Japanese using literature, such as advancing their language learning, learning new vocabularies, and learning vocabulary used in conversation. Elementary level children's literature is especially accessible to Japanese language learners. Beyond language, children's literature naturally conveys lessons about culture, customs, and morals. For Japanese children themselves such literature has long played an essential role in learning the national language. However, the use of children's literature in Japanese language education has not been sufficiently discussed. This study reexamines the place of children's literature in Japanese language education. It considers children's stories not only as materials for language and cultural learning, but also as resources that can foster critical thinking and autonomous learning. It is also to explore the theoretical significance of using children's literature in Japanese language education.

Research Questions

Based on the above theoretical discussion and text-based analysis, this study aims to address the following research questions.

1. How can children's literature be reconsidered as a resource that extends beyond language acquisition to foster critical thinking and autonomous learning in Japanese language education?
2. How might children's literature be incorporated into learner-centered and activity-based approaches to create a balanced, comprehensive, and culturally responsive model of Japanese language education?

Previous Studies

Children's literature is a form of literature that embodies language, culture, and values. It is said that this role not only contributes to children's language education but also to their cultural understanding, moral development, critical thinking, and character formation. Traditional fairy tales contain ethical, moral, and social values, which help develop children's character (Widyahening 2020). Children's character development occurs not only in school, but also at

home. Widyahening states that character development practices at school include storytelling, role-playing, and sharing. The teacher's role is to help students enjoy the stories through activities, understand the moral values contained in the stories, and apply them to real life through role-playing and sharing. At home, parents should also read aloud to their children and ask questions to engage their children's interest in reading and ensure they understand the content of the stories. Research has shown that children's literature is useful not only for educating children but also for educating adults. Chatani (2020) advocates the use of children's literature in universities. He states that children's literature is packed with knowledge, and that reading it provides opportunities for further growth. He also states that careful reading of children's literature can increase knowledge. Chatani gives examples of children's literature that is packed with knowledge that is useful not only for children but also for adults. For example, children's literature from overseas teaches us about various customs and different cultures. It also gives us a sense of the changes and trends of the times. And above all, he states that there is an infinite amount to learn from the author's life.

The linguistic characteristics of children's literature include the use of vocabulary that is easy to understand, straightforward sentence structures, and repetition. It seems that language acquisition through reading children's literature and language acquisition through texts are different concepts. Sakai (2018) argues that word-based learning, a principle of language acquisition, can hinder natural language learning. To engage in real-time dialogue, learners need to apply their knowledge of syntactic structures fluently. However, Sakai contends that merely memorizing words and stringing them together creates a personal and creative language that does not facilitate proper language use. Regarding the insights gained from using literature in classes, Yamade (2022) found that students "realize" that by engaging with literature, they can learn vocabulary used in conversation. From this realization, students themselves understand that using literature can connect reading comprehension learning with conversation learning.

Children's literature not only teaches language, but also provides understanding of culture, customs, morals, and social perspectives. Kanasari and Gustaman (2019) use the children's picture book "Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters" by Barack Obama as an example, pointing out that the book presents five moral values: courage, love, peace-loving, self-confidence, and strong conviction. This book is a letter from the author to his daughters, and the "lesson" the author intended for his daughters and other children who read it is that "good deeds guide decision-makers to do what is right and good." The lesson of "good deeds" is a common moral principle around the world. Shimbo (2022) also cites the teachings of author Kunio Yanagida, explaining that exposure to the world of picture books through emotional reading aloud by parents from an early age not only develops children's sensitivity and reading comprehension, but also their diverse emotions.

According to Putra & Umemoto (2024), Indonesia and Thailand's different educational goals and cultural backgrounds result in significant differences in how Japanese culture is taught. Japanese language education in Indonesia emphasizes traditional and popular culture. In its educational philosophy, they aim to foster a broad understanding of Japanese culture. In Thailand, emphasis is placed on social, political, and economic aspects. However, despite these differences, Japanese language education in both countries shares the common goal of cultivating critical thinking skills, effective communication skills, and a deep understanding of Japanese culture through their curricula. Japanese children's literature offers insight into the changes in Japanese society, politics, and economics, as well as Japanese culture. According to Sato (2009), postwar children's literature focused on themes of "peace," "democracy," and "family reconstruction." During the rapid economic growth, social themes of "family ties" and "child development" became evident through reading children's literature. Today, children's literature is written on themes such as "family breakdown," "social diversification," "children's isolation," and social issues such as bullying, school refusal, inequality, and gender. Therefore, it can be said that

children's literature reflects not only cultural but also social, political, and economic changes. What about Japanese language education? While there are similarities between Japanese language education and Japanese national language education, the structure of textbooks is quite different. Using Japanese children's literature to help learn Japanese may be challenging for learners who depend on Japanese language textbooks; however, it is believed that the Japanese national language textbooks that elementary school students study in school can provide significant support for learning Japanese through Japanese children's literature. "National language" here refers to the Japanese language for the native Japanese people. Nishiyama (2024) presents the characteristics of traditional language culture and national language. The curriculum is divided into stages by grade level, and learning all four skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) is included. Isn't this the same for learners of Japanese?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant from both theoretical and practical perspectives for Japanese language education. From a theoretical perspective, it reconsiders children's literature not simply as a tool for basic language acquisition, but as a resource that fosters cultural understanding, critical thinking, and independent learning. This perspective contributes to new developments in learner-centered pedagogy. From a practical perspective, this research is expected to help Japanese language learners understand the Japanese language and learn Japanese culture and ways of thinking from children's literature. By selecting stories that embody language, culture, and values, educators can create a more meaningful learning environment. This can enhance communication skills and cultural awareness in ways that differ from traditional textbooks. Furthermore, literature is a valuable teaching material that balances language development with cultural and moral education, which are important for Japanese children receiving Japanese language as a national language education at school.

The significance of this research is to expand the role of Japanese children's literature and propose a new path for Japanese language education, evolving from the national language in Japan, to develop Japanese language education as a natural language education.

METHODS

This study employs **theoretical approaches** to examine the educational implications of incorporating children's literature into Japanese language education. This research focuses on the theoretical perspective of children's literature and the analysis of textual characteristics for learner-centered learning. It emphasizes its potential as a resource for language learning, cultural understanding, and the development of critical and autonomous learning.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is based on three major perspectives in language education:

1) **Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky)**: Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that cognitive development is a social process shaped by cultural context and interactions with others. According to his sociocultural theory of child development, cognitive development occurs as a result of social interaction. In learning, he emphasizes the importance of interaction, imagination, and mediation.

2) **Input Hypothesis (Krashen)**: Krashen's input hypothesis suggests that language learners learn a new language most effectively when exposed to language input that is slightly above their current proficiency level. This input should be challenging, yet understandable. Engaging with

this material allows learners to absorb the language more naturally, rather than relying solely on grammar-focused practice. This approach makes language learning more effective.

3) The Concept of Learner Autonomy (Holec and Little): This framework argues that engaging with children's literature in Japanese language learning, such as reading and critical thinking about the stories, fosters interest and promotes **autonomous learning**. Learners' exposure to Japanese children's literature helps them develop both linguistic and cognitive skills independently.

Subjects of Analysis

The teaching materials are carefully selected Japanese children's literature, particularly those at an elementary level that are easy for learners. These include traditional folk tales (e.g., Momotaro), picture books, and contemporary children's short stories. These texts were selected based on linguistic simplicity, narrative clarity, and cultural content, allowing for analysis of both linguistic structure and sociocultural values. This study will not test these texts in the classroom, but aims to clarify their educational potential through analysis.

Analytical Approach

This study's methodology combines **text analysis** and **theoretical interpretation**:

1. **Linguistic features:** The study analyzes the linguistic aspects including vocabulary, repetition, idiomatic expressions, and sentence structure. This analysis aims to demonstrate how these features align with principles of effective language acquisition.
2. **Culture and Moral:** The texts are examined for cultural and moral content, such as family, community, values, and traditional practices. This analysis supports the role of children's literature presenting learners with understanding of Japanese cultural and social perspective.
3. **Theoretical Integration:** The findings from the linguistic and cultural analysis are interpreted through a theoretical framework, linking these features to the educational concepts such as comprehensible input, sociocultural mediation, and learner autonomy.

Procedure

This procedure is divided into three stages:

1. **Literature Review:** Conduct a literature review of existing research on children's literature in language education and identify gaps in research on Japanese language education.
2. **Textual Analysis:** Selected children's literature texts will be analyzed. It focus on both linguistic elements and cultural content. It will be analyzed and evaluated how these texts contribute to language acquisition and cultural understanding.
3. **Theoretical Integration:** The results of the analysis will be integrated into a theoretical framework to explore how children's literature can promote critical thinking, language acquisition, and cultural understanding in Japanese language education.

Scope and Limitations

This study is theoretical and text-analytic. It does not include direct empirical data on classroom practices or learning outcomes. Therefore, the findings are interpretive and intended to provide theoretical support. However, this limitation is also a strength. By discussing established theory and text analysis, the aim is to contribute the findings of this study to the foundation of empirical research in actual educational settings.

Methodological Rationale

The theoretical approach was chosen because the study's objective is to conceptually examine and reposition the role of children's literature in Japanese language education. By focusing on the broader educational values of children's literature (language acquisition, cultural knowledge, learner autonomy), this paper provides a comprehensive framework applicable to academic settings. This theoretical foundation provides a basis for the effectiveness of children's literature in language education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of selected children's literature studied by Japanese students in their native Japanese language revealed several important findings. The children's literature studied by Japanese elementary school students is likely to be of value to Japanese language learners as well.

First, the story of Hans Wilhelm's *I'll Always Love You*, is analyzed. This story is one of foreign literature that Japanese children read in their Japanese language education. Hans Wilhelm is a German-American author of children's literature and picture book writer, and his work has been translated into many languages. His literature is popular worldwide. It has also been translated into Japanese and is included in Japanese textbooks for first-graders. It is written in easy-to-understand Japanese, and it is also considered an accessible learning tool. Here is an analysis of the language's conciseness and repetition:

The story *I'll Always Love You* portrays the shared growth of the main character and Elfie. It is written entirely in the **past tense**, with each sentence kept short and concise.

ぼくたちは、いっしょに 大きくなった。

Bokutachi wa, issho ni ookikunatta.

We together grew up

We grew up together.

ぼくらは、いっしょに ゆめを 見た。

Bokura wa, issho ni yue wo mita,

We together would dream .

We would dream together.

エルフとぼくは、まいにち いっしょに あそんだ。

Elfie to boku wa, mainichi issho ni asonda.

Elfie and I everyday together played

Everyday, Elfie and I played together.

As noted above, the story is told in concise, rhythmic sentences. All are in the past tense, except for the opening and closing lines. Some words are repeated throughout the text. In this case, the word “together” is used again and again. Appendix 1 shows the frequency of repeated words in the story. Regarding educational implications, Nakata (2017) found that repeated recall, even if inefficient, can be productive and particularly beneficial for long-term knowledge retention. Furthermore, interactions were significant, with all groups demonstrating significant vocabulary gains from pretest to post test, regardless of time, group, or number of repetitions. A study examining how learners’ listening ability moderated the effect of repetition on vocabulary learning found a significant interaction between time, repetition, and listening, supporting the finding that learners’ listening ability significantly moderates the effect of repetition on vocabulary learning. With nine repetitions, a significant effect of repetition was observed for learners with low listening ability. Increasing the number of repetitions from seven to nine significantly improved learning gains for learners of all listening ability levels. Therefore, based on the results of this study, it appears that the repetition of letters in children’s literature is more effective than simply repeating words to memorize them, and that repetition may also have long-term memory and listening comprehension effects. In terms of morality, the author of this story is German-American. Therefore, it can be said that it reflects American values regarding pets. Even in Japan today, there are similarities in values regarding pets. While we may express “I love you” to persons, we often do not verbally express affection for pets, which is a common theme. Children’s literature contains many illustrations, which also play an important role in language, cultural, and moral acquisition. Iwasaka (2024) recommends the use of visual images and non-verbal language in elementary foreign language activities, where children’s linguistic knowledge and skills are limited. Pictures are a way to express the shapes and sounds of language together, and can more deeply express the author’s intentions together with the words. Therefore, pictures in children’s literature not only supplement the meaning of the story and vocabulary but also play a significant role in aiding critical thinking.

In a study by Yamaide (2022), learners who generally have separate reading habits and Japanese language learning were given Japanese language learning materials that used literature. The study found that literature served as a stimulus, helping to advance their language learning, and that the learners realized that “Studying with literature not only helps with reading comprehension, but also allows for connection to conversation learning.” Furthermore, Bland and Lütge (2013) point out that book talks using children’s literature in the classroom can be student-centered and involve interactive meaning-making, in contrast to the trend toward teaching second

language texts. Therefore, literature and language learning can be a natural progression toward a learner-centered learning system.

The above are foreign children's literature that is read in Japan; however, Japanese literature also plays a significant role in teaching the Japanese language. In the lower grades of elementary school, literature with a lot of repetition and simple language is read, while in the middle grades, folk tales are often read. Then, from the upper grades, biographies of great people and historical literature are often read. There are several genres of literature, including stories, moral reading material, and poetry. Moral reading material is intended to foster children's sense of morality and is designed to be directly linked to practical training. The following examples are Japanese literature that is read in the upper grades of elementary school.

平和のとりでを築く (Build a bastion of peace) describes the history of Hiroshima's Atomic Bomb Dome, its environment before the bombing, the situation at the time of the bombing, the reasons for the Dome's preservation, the feelings and opinions of the people, and the process leading up to its designation as a World Heritage Site, accompanied by current and past photographs. The learning objectives for children are to understand the author's thoughts and what he is trying to convey, as well as to engage in critical thinking about war and peace. The characters *平和(peace)* and *世界(world)* are repeated throughout the story, and the most common characters include *爆(explosion)* and *建(construction)*. For Japanese people, this is a history that must never be forgotten, and literature encourages them to think about building a peaceful nation. Reading literature about Japanese history like this also allows Japanese language learners to learn about the nightmares and cruelties of Hiroshima during the war and engage in critical thinking about war and peace. *Building a Fortress of Peace* explains the history of the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome, the environment before the bombing, the situation at the time of the bombing, the reasons for preserving the Atomic Bomb Dome, people's thoughts and opinions, and the process leading up to its registration as a World Heritage Site, accompanied by three photographs. The learning goal for children is to understand the author's thoughts and message and to think critically about war and peace. Kawaguchi (2009) discusses "Building a Fortress of Peace" as a teaching material. What is required of this literary teaching material is for students to read the story, develop an open sensibility, think critically, and critique, confirm, and question the author's ideas, such as "Why has the Atomic Bomb Dome survived to the present day?" and "Why did the Atomic Bomb Dome become a World Heritage Site?" However, Kawaguchi states that whether this can be achieved depends on the circumstances of the classroom. Linguistically, words evoking war and peace are repeatedly used. The words "peace" and "world" are used multiple times. Furthermore, the Kanji characters "爆(Explosion)" and "建(Build)" are used very frequently as part of the characters. As Figure 1 shows, there are multiple words using 爆 and 建 in this story. This helps learners retain related vocabulary, and seeing the same kanji repeatedly allows them to follow and recall the story as they read, instead of just memorizing words. In addition, learners will learn that there are multiple ways to read 建 (build) and will be able to know how each word is read. Atoofi (2019) emphasizes that repetition of a form does not necessarily mean repetition of the same interpretation, however, rather that each repetition creates new understandings, new interpretations, and new connections. This can also be seen in Omuta's literature. As shown in the case of 爆 and 建, rather than a minor repetition of the same word, the words that come before and after 爆 and 建 make them related vocabulary, even if they are not synonyms, and the words that come before and after them allow for new interpretations.

爆 (baku)	建 (ken/ta/tate/date)
Explosion	Build

爆弾 bomb	建物 Building 13
bakudan	tatemono
原爆 Atomic bomb 17	建造物 Building
genbaku	kenzoubutsu
原子爆弾 Atomic bomb 2	建築 Architecture 2
genshibakudan	kenchiku
爆発 Explosion	建っている is building
bakuhatsu	tatteiru
爆風 blast 2	建てられた Built
bakufuu	taterareta
爆心地 Ground Zero	建築家 Architect
bakushinchi	kenchikuka
被爆 Radiation	3 階建 Three-story
hibaku	sangaidate

Figure 1 Common Kanji Vocabulary Used Repeatedly in “Building a Bastion of Peace”

Discussion

This study demonstrates that children’s literature in Japanese language education is more than just a vocabulary learning tool. It provides learners with opportunities to understand cultural values, morals, and diverse ways of thinking, fostering critical thinking. Through children's literature, learners can notice linguistic patterns, connect words to real-life contexts, and reflect on values. Kawaguchi (2009) points out that while the learning environment encourages critical thinking and flexible perception, it is also important for learners to empathize with the author's emotions and question them.

Repetitive expressions in children’s books help learners acquire vocabulary and sentence structure. At the same time, illustrations and concise sentences encourage deeper understanding. These features contribute not only to language learning but also to critical thinking. Iwasaka (2024) emphasizes that the core of language learning lies in experiencing language through the body, evoking emotions and revealing meaning. He argues that rote memorization alone cannot stimulate the sensitivity necessary for deeper understanding and questioning. Similarly, Sakai

(2018) points out that simply memorizing and combining words leads to the development of an individual's linguistic idiom, rather than to appropriate language use.

In this way, the use of children's literature creates balanced learning opportunities. Children's literature supports grammar acquisition while encouraging communication and self-reflection. Yamaide (2022) found that reading literature fosters learners' "awareness" and allows them to connect reading and conversation skills. In this sense, children's literature plays an essential role in language learning and supports independent learning. Therefore, children's literature should not be dismissed as simply children's stories but should be recognized as meaningful learning materials for learners at all levels. As Nakata (2017) points out, repetition in such texts helps learners build long-term vocabulary memory. Furthermore, as Iwasaka (2024) suggests in his research on elementary school foreign language activities, illustrations enhance comprehension and encourage critical thinking. As Vygotsky's sociocultural theory shows, learning improves when students study at a level slightly above their current ability. Furthermore, receiving support from others promotes learning improvement, therefore, it is thought to be significant to study language in the classroom using literature that is appropriate for the student's level. Krashen's input theory of foreign language acquisition also states that comprehensible input, in which language input at a level slightly more difficult than the learner's current knowledge, leads to natural language acquisition. This is exactly the $i + 1$ that Krashen advocates. In terms of learning methods, for example, exposing students to a wealth of meaningful input promotes language acquisition rather than being directly taught grammar. By exposing students to comprehensible literature and receiving sufficient input, output is thought to become more natural.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the educational value of children's literature in Japanese language learning using a theoretical and text-based approach. The results revealed that children's literature is more than just storytelling. It promotes vocabulary development through repetition, helps learners notice language patterns, and enhances memory. At the same time, it fosters the development of cultural understanding, moral reflection, and critical thinking, leading to more independent learning. Three key aspects were identified. First, repetition and short sentences facilitate memorization and comprehension, especially for beginners. Second, illustrations and story contexts work interactively to deepen understanding and promote reflection. Third, from the perspectives of sociocultural theory, the input hypothesis, and learner autonomy, children's literature can be understood as a tool that connects language learning with cultural and cognitive development. For this reason, children's literature should be considered an important resource in language education at all levels. Children's literature not only improves grammar and vocabulary, but also supports cultural awareness, moral sensitivity, and metalinguistic skills. This dual role can be meaningful for learners at various proficiency levels. This study is limited to theory and text analysis and has not been tested in an actual classroom. However, by highlighting the potential of children's literature for both language and cultural learning, it provides a foundation for future research. Future research should explore how learners from diverse backgrounds actually respond to these materials and how teachers can use literature to enrich language learning in multicultural classrooms.

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APPENDIX 1

Frequency of Repeated Words

	English	F	Japanese	F
1	Elfie	17	エルフ Elfie	25
2	I	11	ぼく Boku I (for boy)	10
3	we	3	ぼくたち Bokutachi we	3
4	together	4	いっしょ	4

			Isshoni together	
5	like love	7	すき Suki like /love	12
6	always	4	ずっと Zutto always	7

*F=Frequency