

REVEALING THE COMPETENCY GAP: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS IN NONFORMAL TRAINING CENTERS

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Abstract. Japanese language instructors must be both professionally competent and effective teachers in non-formal education centers, such as job training centers (Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja, LPK) for aspiring migrant workers. It remains unclear how much practical experience in Japan versus academic credentials influences successful instruction in these settings. The instructional efficacy of two groups of LPK teachers, those with a degree in Japanese literature and those without formal education but with extensive job experience in Japan, was examined in this research. Semi-structured interviews with five instructors and observations of classrooms in three LPKs were used to gather data. In contrast to their academically qualified counterparts, who occasionally found it challenging to adapt lessons to meet vocational requirements, teachers with firsthand experience in Japanese corporate culture demonstrated superior contextual teaching skills, language proficiency, and student engagement, according to a descriptive qualitative analysis. The results suggest that professional job experience may be a viable alternative to official teaching qualifications in LPK contexts. To enhance teaching competence in vocational Japanese education, it is recommended that teacher development programs incorporate practical experience.

Keywords: Japanese teacher education, vocational Japanese, LPK, migrant worker training, experiential teaching

INTRODUCTION

"Just run away for now" sums up the mindset of many young Indonesians looking for quick job prospects abroad, particularly in Japan. Although language proficiency and cultural preparedness are lacking, this expression, locally spoken as "*kabur aja dulu*," highlights a tendency to prioritize departure over preparation (Oswaldo, 2025). Many young people have been driven to search for work overseas, often without sufficient preparation, due to economic stagnation, limited employment prospects, and salary inequalities locally, particularly in relation to language proficiency and intercultural communication skills. Unfortunately, sometimes the need to travel outweighs the understanding that working in a foreign country, such as Japan, requires more than just technical ability. Due to significant differences in language, cuisine, customs, and social conventions compared to their own culture, Indonesian migrant workers living and working in Japan may experience cultural shock. The issue under discussion is the significant cultural adaptation these employees must make in various aspects of their lives (Tatambihe et al., 2024). Without these skills, adaptation is difficult and can result in poor working performance or even isolation.

This observation fits the author's own three-year technical intern experience in Japan from 2012 to 2015. The author became JLPT N3 certified in the first year and advanced to N2 by the second year, which enabled more involvement in business communication and daily interactions.

These encounters underlined the critical need for linguistic and cultural understanding for success in the Japanese professional environment. Direct challenges of communication differences, strict hierarchical rules, and implicit cultural expectations underscore how inadequate preparation can hinder success.

People who are learning Japanese have come to see the increasing importance of nonformal institutions, including language schools, community centers, and internet resources. While conventional teaching strategies are still appropriate in some situations, they progressively fall short of the several needs of modern students. Modern students require customized, flexible, and interesting learning opportunities that fit their technologically driven way of life. Reform of Japanese language instruction has become increasingly vital (Anna, 2025). These universities allow students to match their schedules and goals through a flexible and customized approach to language acquisition, enabling them to adjust their study programs. Through events, seminars, and language exchanges, several non-formal institutions offer opportunities for cultural immersion, thereby enhancing interaction and participation in the educational process. The availability of nonformal Japanese language learning options has helped people initiate their language acquisition (Nurmasita Devi, 2025).

Many potential migrant workers register in nonformal educational institutions, including Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja (LPK), dedicated language and vocational training facilities, to solve this discrepancy. These institutions are indispensable in providing students with the cultural knowledge and Japanese language competency necessary for success in Japanese companies. The credentials of the teachers significantly impact the educational quality of LPKs. Two main groups of teachers exist: returnee professionals with secondary school degrees and significant job experience in Japan, and recent graduates from Japanese literature or school programs. While the latter provide vital contextual and experiential insights into Japanese society and business culture, the former usually possess theoretical and grammatical mastery of the language.

The discrepancy between formal academic credentials and practical experience has spurred debate on what constitutes effective instruction in vocational language environments. Although degrees are typically viewed as more qualified in theory, supervised work experience is a vital transitional phase that promotes social learning and drives changes in an individual's professional identity, thereby increasing career resources and employability, and positively influencing future career outcomes (Inceoglu et al., 2019). This result aligns with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of knowledge gained through experience and its fundamental role in guiding effective education (Kolb, 2015).

Previous research has underlined the need for pragmatic training tailored to the context for Japanese language instruction for migrant workers. Particularly for job-specific communication skills, Kadek Bayu Krisnawa (2023) said that direct and drill-based instructional strategies significantly improved learner results at LPK Babaking. Analogously, Yuni Azwita et al. (2023) analyzed the LPK Hikari Gakkai internship program and found increased student interest and preparedness for the workforce through practical experience. Still, neither study examined the professional backgrounds of teachers, a significant gap in research.

According to Triasningsih (2015), a teacher's performance is much influenced by their degree. Still, some teachers fall short of the required academic qualification standards, thus compromising the effectiveness of the learning process. This disorder suggests that teacher effectiveness is much influenced by academic qualifications; still, other factors also matter. Aspiring teachers should take advantage of field practice opportunities to enhance their teaching skills and regularly boost their self-efficacy, thereby preparing them well for their professional responsibilities, according to

Puspitasari et al. (2019). Examining the competencies and instructional effectiveness of Japanese language teachers in nonformal education environments helps this study to close that gap. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data are collected by semi-structured interviews with teachers from several LPKs and classroom observations. The goal is to investigate how teachers' professional backgrounds, academic or experiential, affect their teaching approaches, student involvement, and perceived efficacy. This study examines the essential skills required of Japanese language teachers in professional settings, including their ability to create context-appropriate materials, enhance student motivation, and adapt their approaches to diverse student profiles.

Preliminary findings indicate that teachers with Japanese life experience tend to be more effective in practical teaching than those with only an academic background. Returning from Japan with at least a JLPT N3 Japanese language certificate, teachers show mastery in contextualizing language use, clarifying cultural nuances, and foreseeing typical difficulties experienced by students in Japanese corporations. Simulations of real-life work scenarios, including daily conversations, customer service interactions, the use of *keigo*, and hierarchical communication, help make the classes more interactive, culturally rich, and successful in boosting students' confidence (Masuda et al., 2025). On the other hand, teachers with formal degrees may demonstrate mastery in grammar and theoretical concepts, but they sometimes struggle to provide courses closely aligned with job requirements, which can result in a tendency towards rigidity in their teaching strategies.

This interaction shows the general direction in occupational language education. Standardized assessments, grammatical accuracy, and a methodical curriculum define the effectiveness of education in a formal sense. Concurrently, nonformal education provides flexible, relevant, locally customized access, empowering communities (Mintarsih Arbarini et al., 2025). Nonformal education helps promote lifelong learning by providing flexible and inclusive educational opportunities to many communities, including underprivileged populations, while encouraging individual autonomy through the acquisition of pragmatic skills and critical thinking abilities. Cooperation across the official, non-formal, and formal sectors, with government and community support, is crucial to increase its efficacy.

The relevance of the topic greatly increases student involvement. When students see a clear connection between their coursework and potential job prospects, they exhibit greater motivation. Using personal stories and insights, experienced teachers help make abstract language and grammar more concrete, thereby improving their ability to form meaningful connections. For adult learners, contextual and relevant lessons drawn from real-world experience inspire drive and involvement (Wibowo, H. S., 2023). According to Zubaidah (2016), students of the twenty-first century need to have critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, cooperation, creativity, information literacy, and metacognition, among other vital skills. Education must be transformed using a student-centered, contextual, and cooperative approach that is practical and effective. These skills line up with the four UNESCO pillars of education: learning to know, to do, to be, and to live together (Scott, 2015).

According to studies, the demand for caretakers for the elderly has sharply increased in Japan due to depopulation and an aging population. China is one of the primary sources of Japan's healthcare workforce, and as a result, experienced nurses are in high demand. According to the study, Chinese people possess better job skills than local Japanese workers who have recently graduated from university, despite holding diplomas. This study highlights several issues that Chinese nurses face in the workplace, despite making significant contributions to the Japanese

healthcare system. Policies allowing improved cultural adaptation and professional integration are required to raise wellbeing and retention (Yang et al., 2023).

High school, diploma, or university graduates looking to learn Japanese without majoring in Japanese literature can register in a Japanese Language Training Centre (LPK) in Indonesia. Prospective migrant workers who study Japanese at LPK could be better prepared with the required language skills, cultural awareness, and work ethic orientation to minimize cultural shock upon their arrival in Japan within a limited time. Unlike formal education, non-formal education primarily focuses on equipping future migrant workers, especially in the nursing and other sectors, with the tools they need for employment in the global market. Along with helping migrant workers find jobs in Japan, LPK Sakura Gakuin, connected with PT. Japan Iku Mediatama promotes Japanese language education for those interested in studying there. Between local talent and the Japanese labor market, LPK serves as a vital intermediary, increasing technical readiness and intercultural understanding, thereby strengthening a more robust and flexible workforce (Japaniku Mediatama, 2023).

This research examines the contributions of lived experience and formal education to effective Japanese language instruction in LPKs. This approach promotes a nuanced and inclusive strategy for instructor recruitment and training in nonformal education, acknowledging the importance of both academic qualifications and practical experience. This study identifies essential teaching competencies and examines the impact of diverse instructor backgrounds on learner outcomes, with the goal of enhancing teaching strategies and facilitating the successful integration of Indonesian migrant workers into Japanese society.

METHODS

This study investigated the teaching competency and effectiveness of Japanese language teachers in non-formal education environments, specifically within LPK (Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja), which trains prospective migrant workers using a descriptive qualitative methodology. Three LPKs in Central Java, Indonesia, specifically selected for their intensive Japanese language training courses targeted at employment in Japan, were the sites of the research. The informants (instructors) were chosen based on two main criteria: minimum one year of teaching experience in LPK and the representation of two different profiles, those with academic qualifications (e.g., graduates from Japanese literature programs) and those with practical experience in Japan. Five teachers were selected as research informants.

The data collection techniques for this study primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Observations were conducted to assess each teacher's instructional strategies, classroom dynamics, and student involvement. The teachers underwent semi-structured interviews to provide a thorough understanding of their teaching philosophies, educational backgrounds, challenges faced, and opinions on teaching efficacy. To ensure consistency, a pre-made interview schedule was developed, yet it allowed for flexibility to probe emerging concerns throughout the sessions.

Along with these fundamental steps, relevant institutional records, including lesson plans, training courses, and student comment forms, were reviewed to support the findings and improve data accuracy. Using thematic analysis techniques as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), all qualitative data acquired underwent classification, identification of repeating patterns, and evaluation of the relevance of themes relevant to instructional efficacy and professional competence. Emphasizing ethical elements, including informed consent, voluntary involvement, and respondent confidentiality, the study process focused on analyzing the lived teaching

experiences of both academically qualified and experience-based teachers. This study aims to identify the specific skills that enhance effective Japanese language instruction in the unique context of non-formal education for migrant worker preparedness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal several consistent patterns regarding the instructional strategies and competencies of Japanese language teachers in non-formal educational environments (LPKs). Six teachers from three LPKs participated: Sakura Gakuin (Surakarta), Konomi (Cilacap), and Kaina (Indramayu). Every institution sent two teachers with different backgrounds: one was a recent graduate of a Japanese literary program, and the other was a repatriate from Japan with only a high school education. This study examines the effectiveness of various teaching strategies in different contextual backgrounds.

Table 1. Teachers' Profiles

Teacher	Background	Teaching Focus	Strengths	Challenges
A	SMA + Work in Japan (Sakura)	Role play, workplace simulation	Contextual relevance, learner engagement	Weakness in curriculum structuring
B	SMA + Work in Japan (Kaina)	SOP training, cultural context	Practical language usage, confidence building	Limited grammar explanation
C	SMA + Work in Japan (Konomi)	Drill with real-life terms	Realistic expressions, high motivation	Assessment design
D	S1 Japanese Literature (Sakura)	Grammar-based instruction	Strong linguistic foundation	Difficulty relating content to real-world use
E	S1 Japanese Literature (Kaina)	Reading and writing exercises	Structured lesson planning	Lack of workplace knowledge
F	S1 Japanese Literature (Konomi)	JLPT-style instruction	Grammar accuracy, test preparation	Low student engagement

One of the key topics that has evolved is how contextual education is influenced by real-life experiences. Teachers A, B, and C, who have practical experience in Japan, demonstrate a strong ability to incorporate professional etiquette, industry-specific language, and authentic communication styles into their lessons. Through role-play simulations of job interviews and customer service interactions, the instructor successfully engages students who are ready for employment in convenience stores and caregiving environments. This is consistent with Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, which posits that the most effective learning occurs through real-life experiences.

On the other hand, academically qualified teachers, such as instructors D, E, and F, mostly rely on methodical textbook exercises and grammatical drills. Though carefully organized and

linguistically accurate, their lectures lack contextual relevance. Instructor F stresses multiple-choice grammar assignments in JLPT style, which some students feel have little bearing on their job readiness needs. This inclination aligns with Kadek Bayu Krisnawa's (2023) assertion, particularly regarding job-related communication skills, that context-specific pragmatic training in teaching Japanese to migrant workers is necessary.

Observation and interview data often highlight student involvement. Many times, students find teachers with real-world job experience more approachable and relevant. Instructor B utilizes his experience in a Japanese restaurant to demonstrate effective language and problem-solving techniques. His lectures are obviously lively, with student pairs engaged in active Japanese conversation and inquiry. According to Wibowo, H. S. (2023), contextual interaction of this kind greatly increases motivation and retention among adult students seeking employment abroad.

As a result, graduates of universities, including instructors D and E, reported difficulty motivating students beyond conventional textbooks. Their academic knowledge does not line up with the actual standards for success in real Japanese companies. Although they have a strong awareness of language and terminology, their lack of practical experience limits their ability to answer pragmatic questions or fully explain job needs. Masuda et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of contextualized education in Japan for specific purposes, such as practical applications in daily life, highlighting the need for teachers with both academic knowledge and situational awareness.

The third element relates to the need for professional development. Although their backgrounds differ, all teachers agree that continuous professional development is essential. Instructors A, B, and C lack formal education; therefore, they seek assistance with curriculum development, class preparation, and evaluation techniques. On the other hand, graduates of universities, including teachers D, E, and F, express the need for practical teaching experience and industry exposure to gain a thorough understanding of the difficulties their students will encounter in Japan.

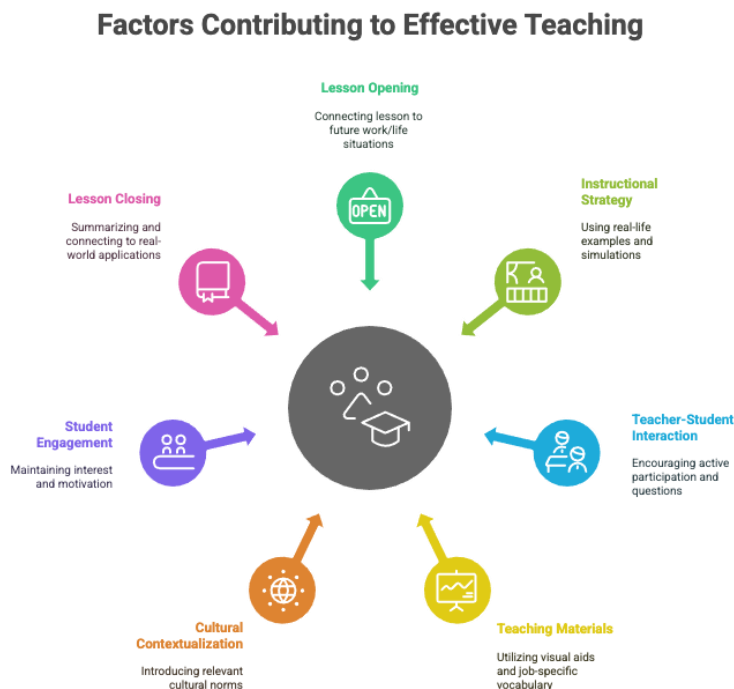


Figure 1: Factors Contributing to Effective Teaching

The results suggest that neither group possesses inherent superiority; rather, each exhibits complementary strengths. Educators with practical experience contribute authenticity, relevance, and motivational influence, whereas university-educated instructors offer linguistic precision and structured instruction. Wibowo (2023) indicates that the most effective teaching models may arise from the integration of both skill sets through professional development programs. LPKs and policymakers should consider comprehensive recruitment strategies and training that emphasize both formal education and experiential knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the teaching effectiveness and competency characteristics of Japanese language instructors in nonformal educational institutions (LPK) that prepare prospective migrant workers for employment in Japan. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with six instructors across three LPKs, each representing two contrasting backgrounds: returnees with working experience in Japan and fresh university graduates from Japanese literature programs. The findings suggest that instructors with firsthand experience in Japanese workplaces tend to provide more contextualized, relevant, and engaging instruction, particularly when simulating real-life workplace situations, explaining cultural norms, and utilizing job-specific language. Their ability to create authentic learning environments enhances student motivation and prepares learners for actual communication tasks in Japanese work settings. In contrast, academically trained instructors demonstrated strengths in grammar instruction, structured lesson planning, and test preparation; however, they often lacked the situational insight required to fully bridge classroom content with the realities of working in Japan.

The study concludes that both experiential and academic backgrounds bring distinct and valuable contributions to Japanese language education in vocational contexts. Therefore, LPKs should consider integrative professional development programs that support the strengths and compensate for the limitations of each teacher profile. Teacher training should not only emphasize linguistic competence but also cultural fluency, contextual teaching ability, and practical task design. Moreover, these findings suggest that experiential learning should be positioned as a legitimate source of pedagogical authority, particularly in settings where job readiness and cultural adaptation are primary goals.

For future research, it is recommended that the study's scope be expanded to encompass a wider range of LPKs across different regions, thereby gaining more diverse insights. Comparative studies involving student learning outcomes and performance after placement in Japan would also provide valuable data on the long-term impact of instructor backgrounds. Additionally, further exploration of blended teaching teams that combine academically trained educators with field-experienced mentors may reveal innovative models for effective and sustainable language education in the non-formal sector.

The study concludes that both experiential and academic backgrounds bring distinct and valuable contributions to Japanese language education in vocational contexts. Therefore, LPKs should consider integrative professional development programs that support the strengths and compensate for the limitations of each teacher profile. "A hybrid teaching model that integrates academic structure with real-world experience may serve as the most effective solution for preparing LPK learners to succeed in Japan's workplace environments."

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