

Bridging the Gaps: Enhancing Learners' Job Interview Performance Focusing on 'Clarification Questions'

Izumi Walker

(clsiw@nus.edu.sg)

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Saeko Kitai

(clskita@nus.edu.sg)

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Akiko Ito

(ito.aki@nus.edu.sg)

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

Japanese-speaking graduates are in high demand not only from Japanese companies but also from multinational companies, in order to expand their Japan-related operations and promote diversity. However, for university learners in Singapore, it can be difficult to achieve a high enough competency level to match their requirements because Japanese is only provided as an elective. Therefore, the authors conducted a three-week summer intensive programme aiming at preparing intermediate learners of Japanese for job interviews by collaborating with experts from a Japanese recruiting agency. Previous research shows that there are differences between the expectations and evaluation of businesspeople and Japanese language teachers. Thus, we conducted this study to examine if there are gaps and to explore how to improve learners' job interview performances. It was found from the mid-term test that the learners lacked ability in 'Clarification Questions', which is essential for interviews. Furthermore, it was found that although focused training in the second half of the programme helped to strengthen this skill, mastering it adequately within the programme duration was too difficult. This paper not only addresses the academic gap in current pedagogical practices but also connects with broader educational goals of equipping learners with skills that are directly applicable in real-life situations, including the workplace.

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Walker, I., Kitai, S. and Ito, A. (2024). Bridging the Gaps: Enhancing Learners' Job Interview Performance Focusing on 'Clarification Questions'. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching [e-FLT]*, 21 (Supplement), 120–140. <https://doi.org/10.56040/isza2123>

1 Introduction

Japan has a declining birth rate and an aging population and is predicted to have a shortage of 6.4 million workers by 2030 (Persol Research and Consulting, 2020). To compensate for this and to maintain international competitiveness, Japanese companies are trying to increase the employment

of talented foreign nationals with Japanese proficiency. Initially, the primary focus was on recruiting foreign students studying at Japanese universities, but it has widened to include students from foreign universities and due to not being able to find enough talented foreign students in Japan, beginning in 2010 more and more companies started trying to recruit graduates from foreign universities (Konrad, Koyama and Meyer-Ohle, 2019). Singapore is no different, with the Nikkei Asian Recruiting Forum established in 2013, as well as increased recruitment activity by major recruitment agencies and direct recruitment by companies.

Since gaining independence in 1965, the number of Japanese companies in Singapore has been increasing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the number reached 2,136 in 2022 and the number of Japanese nationals living and working in Singapore has also steadily increased. However, recently, the Singapore government policy for foreigner employment has tightened so that more job opportunities will be available to Singaporeans. It has thus become increasingly difficult to employ Japanese nationals in Singapore (Wong 2013). According to the Ministry of Manpower of Singapore, from 1 January 2025, the monthly qualifying salary for new Employment Pass (EP) applications will be increased to at least \$5,600, and at least \$6,200 for the financial services sector. In addition, a new points system for EP assessment, the Complementary Assessment Framework, 'COMPASS', was introduced in 2023 and the contribution of companies to local job creation became one of the criteria for EP assessment of Japanese nationals (JETRO, 2022). In other words, the system has been strengthened to the extent that Japanese employees cannot be hired without increasing the proportion of Singaporeans employed.

The situation in both Japan and Singapore has increased the demand for Singaporeans with Japanese proficiency, and to meet this demand has become one of the key issues for Singaporean universities. However, it is challenging for university learners in Singapore to acquire sufficient Japanese to meet employer needs because Japanese is offered only as an elective subject with 3 to 4½ hours of class hours per week. As a start, there is an urgent need to enhance Japanese language education to prepare for job interviews undertaken in the Japanese language since there are no career centres to assist learners in applying for employment in Japanese companies. It is hard to use class hours for job interview practice within Japanese language classes since not all learners wish to enter Japanese companies, even those studying Business Japanese. Therefore, the university in Singapore, where the authors work, conducted a summer intensive programme for job interviews sponsored by a Japanese recruiting company where students could participate free of charge.

2 Background

This study was conducted during a three-week intensive summer programme to prepare Japanese language learners for job interviews, by the authors, three Japanese language teachers, one coordinator and two instructors. It was conducted as practical research focusing on enhancing job interview performance, based on the summer intensive programme as an educational field trial. The main motivation for conducting the present study was that it had been noted that there are differences between Japanese language teachers and non-teacher Japanese or businesspeople in assessing learners' oral abilities (Koike 1998, 1999, Watanabe 2004, Choi 2013, Chiao 2015, Ogura 2021).

For example, Koike (1998) reports that teachers tend to use a point deduction scoring system from the level to be reached, while Japanese people in general do not have such a fixed evaluation scale and seem to evaluate the performance in consideration of the individual learner. She also points out that when learners' ability to express themselves in Japanese language is low, Japanese people in general have a high tolerance for errors and unnaturalness, but when learners' ability to express themselves is high, the expectations are also high, and tolerance for errors and unnaturalness may be low.

Watanabe (2004) investigated which aspects of Japanese learners' performance are perceived positively or adversely by Japanese language teachers and non-teachers. The findings demonstrate that both tend to score grammar and pronunciation badly while praising vocabulary and expression,

discourse competency, and communication strategies positively. Japanese teachers tend to rate sociolinguistic competency negatively, whereas non-Japanese teachers rate it positively.

Ogura (2021) reports that by exploring the relationship between evaluations and impressions in learners' speech in business situations, she found that pragmatic appropriateness, phonetic features, communication strategies, and clarity of delivery, are important in influencing impression formation.

Based on these previous studies, it was suggested that having job interview training conducted only by language teachers may not be sufficient for learners. Collaboration with the recruiting experts who supported the summer intensive session could reveal any gaps between the Japanese language teachers and the recruiters. It was also envisioned that this study would not only address the academic gap in present pedagogical practices but would also link to broader educational aims of providing learners with communication skills that could be applied in real-life situations, including the workplace.

3 Study

3.1 Purpose

The objectives of this study are to discover discrepancies in the questioning and evaluation methods used by recruiting experts and language teachers, as well as to highlight the major criteria addressed in corporate interviews. Furthermore, the study aims to detect shortcomings in learners' interview abilities. Based on these findings, the study intends to enhance teaching methods for job interviews and reflect their efficacy through practical implementation. The ultimate goal is to address the academic gap in present pedagogical practices and to link to broader educational goals of providing learners with communication skills that can be applied in real-life situations, including the workplace.

3.2 Methodology

To accomplish the goals of this study, the following methodologies were implemented:

Step 1: Engage in collaboration with a Japanese recruitment agency to establish the interview methods.

Step 2: Conduct the first half of the summer intensive programme.

Step 3: On the eighth day, conduct a mid-term interview test. One recruiting expert and two teachers act as interviewers, while three teachers and two experts, including the interviewers, serve as evaluators, using the evaluation criteria provided by the recruitment agency.

Step 4: Conduct review sessions of the mid-term interview test with all five evaluators to identify differences in scores between the teachers and the recruiting experts, and to pinpoint areas for enhancement in learners. Additionally, enhance the evaluation criteria in order to more accurately assess language proficiency.

Step 5: Execute instructional strategies aimed at enhancing the identified deficiencies in participants and conduct the second half of the summer intensive programme.

Step 6: On the fourteenth day, conduct a final interview test. Two recruiting experts and one teacher act as interviewers, while three teachers and two experts serve as evaluators, using the revised evaluation criteria.

Step 7: Organize review sessions of the final interview test with all five evaluators to analyse participants' performances.

Step 8: Utilize Zoom recordings to generate transcripts of the interview tests and evaluate the interviewees' performances. Conduct an online survey with participants to assess their perceptions of the summer programme after a period of five months.

It should be noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the sessions were held using the Zoom platform.

3.3 Participants

The participants consisted of intermediate-level Japanese learners who had successfully completed at least the fifth level out of the eight courses in the Japanese language programme or passed the placement test, at a university in Singapore. A total of 13 undergraduate students from different faculties, ranging from Year 1 to Year 4 participated in the study after a selection process.

3.4 Programme Outline

The programme was administered virtually through Zoom, taking place every morning over 14 days in May 2021. The 13 participants were segregated into two groups. The daily lessons consisted of two-hour classes, with one class dedicated to JLPT N2 (Japanese Language Proficiency Test second highest level) instruction by one teacher, while the other class focused on job interview practice with another teacher. The overall duration of the programme was 28 hours. Table 1 displays the class schedule for one of the two classes. In the other class, the order of the class contents was reversed.

Table 1. Class Schedule

	Date	9:00 – 9:50 (Interview Class)	10:00 – 10:50 (JLPT Class)
1	17 May, Mon	- Opening ceremony - Mock interview (Placement Test) - Self-introduction - Programme Orientation	
2	18 May, Tue	- Interview Manners - Personal Appeal: Preparation for 'Strong Point'	- Chapter 8: At a Client
3	19 May, Wed	- Personal Appeal: Presentation 'Strong Point' - Question and Answer session	- Chapter 9: All-You-Can-Eat (1) - Quiz
4	20 May, Thu	- Personal Appeal: Preparation for 'Weaknesses and the power to overcome them'	- Chapter 9: All-You-Can-Eat (2)
5	21 May, Fri	- Personal Appeal: Presentation 'Weaknesses and the power to overcome them' - Question and Answer session	- Chapter 10: A Full Train (1) - Quiz
6	24 May, Mon	- Personal Appeal: Preparation for 'University major'	- Chapter 10: A Full Train (2)
7	25 May, Tue	- Personal Appeal: Presentation 'University major' - Question and Answer session	- Chapter 11: Introduction to Ramen - Quiz

	26 May, Wed	Hari Raya Puasa (Public holiday)	
8	27 May, Thu	Mid-term interview test (9:00 to 11:00)	- Chapter 12: Developing Walking Shoes (1) - Quiz
9	28 May, Fri	- Personal Appeal: Preparation for 'Extracurricular activities' - Feedback for Mid-term test - Introducing additional clarification questions	- Chapter 12: Developing Walking Shoes (2)
10	31 May, Mon	- Personal Appeal: Presentation 'Extracurricular activities' - Question and Answer session	- Chapter 13: A Turning Point in One's Life (1) - Quiz
11	1 Jun, Tue	- Personal Appeal: Preparation for 'Your future, your skills, reasons for wanting to work in Japan'	- Chapter 13: A Turning Point in One's Life (2)
12	2 Jun, Wed	- Personal Appeal: Presentation 'Your future, your skills, reasons for wanting to work in Japan' - Question and Answer session	- Chapter 14: Hosting the Olympics - Quiz
13	3 Jun, Thu	- Preparation for Job interview	
14	4 Jun, Fri	- Final interview test (9:00 to 11:00) - Closing ceremony	

3.5 Textbooks

In this programme, two textbooks were used:

1. “*Shadowing Nihongo o Hanasoo!: Shuushoku, Arubaito, Shingaku Mensetsu hen*” (Saito, H. et al, 2016)
2. “*TRY! Nihongo Nooryoku Shiken N2 Bunpoo kara nobasu Nihongo Kaiteiban*” (Machida (ed), 2017)

Textbook 1 was used in the job interview preparation class. It contains a wealth of sample questions and responses that are typically asked in actual interviews and is structured to facilitate shadowing practice. Based on this textbook, participants were tasked with deepening their thoughts about themselves and compiling them into written form.

Textbook 2 was used in the JLPT class. This provides grammar, reading, and listening practice required for the JLPT N2 level. Each chapter is composed of scenarios depicting the daily lives of working adults in Japan. This textbook was selected considering the level of the participants as well as the fact that many companies generally require a Japanese proficiency level of JLPT N2 or higher when hiring foreign personnel (Willtec 2024, Hirose 2023, Nihon Kyooiku Kiban Zaidan).

3.6 Procedure of Mid-term Interview Test

A 10-minute mid-term interview test in a pair was administered on Day 8 by a panel consisting of one recruiting expert and two teachers. During the interview, a Japanese instructor posed an initial question, while another Japanese teacher and a recruiting expert posed further questions. The questions encompassed topics such as self-introduction, personal strengths and weaknesses, and the individual's chosen field of study at university. The evaluation criteria provided by the recruiting professionals were utilized.

1. Japanese language proficiency (expression)
2. Contents (clear, relevant, and detailed information)
3. Non-verbal behaviour (appearance, facial expression, attitude, aizuchi (back-channel responses), voice volume, posture, eyesight, etc.)
4. Intention to work in Japan
5. Academic grade

3.7 Findings from the Mid-term Interview Test

On the same day, the Japanese language teacher reviewed the midterm interview test. On Day 11, the Japanese teachers and the recruiting experts met to examine the evaluation criteria and the participants' key deficiencies. The main conclusions of the mid-term interview test were as follows:

Firstly, overall assessments were remarkably similar across all categories although language teachers scores were consistently though marginally lower, with a more detectable difference found in the category of proficiency, similar to previous studies (Koike 1998, 1999, Watanabe 2004, Choi 2013, Chiao 2015, Ogura 2021).

Table 2. Average Score of Final Interview Test

	Japanese language proficiency	Content	Non-verbal behaviour	Intention to work in Japan	Academic grade	Total
Recruiting experts	4.27	4.15	4.23	3.85	4.19	20.69
Japanese teachers	3.87	3.95	3.95	3.54	4.18	19.49
Difference	0.40	0.20	0.28	0.31	0.01	1.2

Secondly, it was found that two of the five evaluation criteria; intention to work in Japan and academic grade, were inapplicable because it was difficult to judge during the interviews despite being the key concerns of the recruiting experts. As a result, the teachers proposed replacing them with two new criteria: comprehension and reaction, and fundamental social readiness, which were agreed upon by the recruiting agents.

1. Japanese language proficiency (expression)
2. Contents (clear, relevant, and detailed information)
3. Non-verbal behaviour (appearance, facial expression, attitude, aizuchi (back-channel responses), voice volume, posture, eyesight, etc.)
4. Comprehension and response
5. Basic social readiness (independence, ability to take actions, problem finding, collaboration, aspiration, etc.)

Thirdly, the teachers discovered a lack of 'Clarification Questions' ability among the participants. The recruiting experts also pointed out that it is basic manners that interviewees clarify questions they do not understand.

Sample 1 indicates the failure of Clarification Questioning during the interview. The interviewer asked the participant what kind of company he/she wanted to join. The participant, unsure of the question, responded, "Aa? Watashi wa? (Eh? Do you mean me?)" in Line 6, seeking clarification. The interviewer misunderstood this and encouraged the participant to continue with, "Hai, hai, hai, hai. (Yes, yes, yes, yes.))" in Line 7. Consequently, the participant explained what they wanted to do, not the type of company. Realizing the misunderstanding, the interviewer rephrased the question

more directly in Line 12, asking, “*Aa, ja, tokuni donna kaisha to yuu no wa, doko demo ii desu ne?* (Ah, then any company would be fine, wouldn’t it?)”, to which the participant replied, “*Hai, doko demo ii desu.* (Yes, any place is fine.)” in Line 13. This gave the impression that the participant did not care where he/she worked. This misunderstanding could have been avoided if the participant had clarified with questions like “Do you mean company name?” or “Do you mean industry?”.

Sample 1

- 1 Interviewer: *Sono, sore wa doo yuu kaisha desu ka. Donna kaisha?*
Um, what kind of company is that? What kind of company?
- 2 *Meekaa desu ka?*
Is it a manufacturer?
- 3 *Soretomo, kenkyuu desu ka?*
Or is it research?
- 4 *Soretomo nanka no buhin no kaisha?*
Or any parts manufacturer?
- 5 *Donna kaisha? Donna kaisha de shigoto o shitai n desu ka?*
What kind of company do you want to work for?
- 6 Participant: *Aa? Watashi wa?*
Eh? Do you mean me?
- 7 Interviewer: *Hai, hai, hai, hai.*
Yes, yes, yes, yes.
- 8 Participant: *Eeto, watashi wa hokano hito no seikatsu toka, shigoto toka, benri ni shitai, to omoi,*
Well, I want to make other people’s lives and their work more convenient.
- 9 *Hai, kono kanren no,*
Yes, this related...
- 10 *A, hoka no hito ni tetsudatte moraeru shigoto o shitai desu.*
I want to do a job where I can get help from other people.
- 11 *Demo, aa, a, iroirona kaisha demo, eto, kono shigoto wa, eto, yaku ni tateru, tateru wa, motto hitsuyoo desu.*
But, uh, even in various companies, uh, this job, uh, can be helpful and more essential.
- 12 Interviewer: *Aa, ja, tokuni donna kaisha to yuu no wa, doko demo ii desu ne?*
Ah, then any company would be fine, wouldn’t it?
- 13 Participant: *Hai, doko demo ii desu.*
Yes, any place is fine.

Fourthly, it was observed that recruiting experts progressively asked deeper questions on the same topic during the interviews. They intentionally posed challenging questions, including difficult content, to assess how participants would handle real-life problems. In contrast, Japanese language teachers tended to ask straightforward and easy-to-understand questions. This difference in questioning techniques highlights a key distinction between language teachers and recruiting experts.

The third and fourth points above reveal shortcomings in the learners’ performance during the interview test. Consequently, the teachers decided to emphasize strategy training in the second half of the programme, focusing on enhancing the use of ‘Clarification Questions’ and preparing for in-depth questions.

3.8 Clarification Questions

Prior to delving into the educational practice implemented by the teachers, it is crucial to define the ‘Clarification Questions’ strategies employed in this study. Clarification questions are a type of communication strategy. They are defined as techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language (Stern, 1983). Some scholars explain that these strategies are used by not only language learners but both native speakers and L2 learners to overcome communication problems that arise from a lack of linguistic resources or the inability to access them (Ellis, 1997). This study stands on the latter position.

The list of communication strategies varies depending on the researchers, but the typical strategies include the following:

1. Circumlocution
2. Approximation
3. Appeal for help
4. Request for repetition
5. Request for hearing confirmation
6. Request for understanding confirmation
7. Semantic avoidance
8. Word coinage
9. Language switch
10. Asking for clarification
11. Non-verbal strategies
12. Avoidance

Faerch and Kasper (1983) discusses the role of these strategies in the process of language learning, highlighting how they can contribute to the learner's linguistic and communicative competence. Communication strategies in Japanese language education have also been extensively researched. Japanese language researchers commonly classify techniques 4, 5, 6, and 10 as 'Clarification Questions'. Ozaki (1992) refers to them as '*kikikaeshi*' and defines them as "strategies to work with the other person to resolve the problem when one is faced with the problem of not being able to hear or understand what the other person is saying" (Ozaki 1992: p.252). The strategies are listed as follows:

Functional Classification:

1. *Hanpuku yookyuu* [Repetition Request]: When the listener did not catch the speaker's words and asks for them to be repeated
2. *Kikitori kakunin yookyuu* [Confirmation Request]: When the listener is unsure about their understanding and seeks confirmation.
3. *Setsumeji yookyuu* [Explanation Request]: When the listener heard the words but needs further explanation about their meaning.
4. *Rikai kakunin yookyuu* [Understanding Confirmation Request]: When the listener wants to confirm their understanding of the speaker's words.

Form Classification:

1. Verb form: Ends with verbs like "*Wakarimasen.* (I don't understand)," "*Moo ichido itte kudasai.* (Please say it again)," "*Yukkuri itte kudasai.* (Speak slowly)."
2. Repetition form: The listener repeats the part they understood.
3. Interjection form: Uses interjections, response words, or question words like "*Ee?* (Eh?)," "*Hai?* (Yes?)," "*Nani?* (What?)."

Ikeda (2003) also states that even at an advanced level, B JL could only use a fixed form for clarification or avoidance strategies such as silence. Consequently, there were instances where they were unable to obtain the necessary information from the other party by requesting clarification. This is an example from Ikeda's study in 2003.

JBP: *Jaa, asu made ni mitsumori to seikyuu o isshoni,*

Well then, by tomorrow, quotation and invoice together,

B JL: *Mitsumori....*

Quotation....

JBP: *Soo, mitsumori to seikyuu ne.*

Yes, quotation and invoice.

In this case, BJL failed to comprehend the definition of the term “quotation”, resulting in their repetition of the same word when requesting an explanation. However, the other party interpreted this as a request for confirmation of their listening comprehension, and thus answered by repeating the same word instead of providing an explanation for “quotation”. According to Ikeda (2003), the business Japanese student may have avoided making the mistake if they had been able to employ phrases like “What is quotation?” or “What does quotation mean?”.

Horiuchi (2011) analysed conversations between three pairs of beginner and intermediate non-native Japanese speakers and five pairs of native speakers and found that not only the listening responses used by non-native speakers differ from those used by native speakers, but they also differ depending on the level of Japanese language learning. For example, non-native speakers lack the subject matter and expressive forms of Clarification Questions, which may cause confusion in communication, burden both parties, and interrupt communication because the intent of Clarification Questions and the content of what is being heard is not conveyed precisely. This can cause confusion, strain both parties, and interrupt communication. Based on the results, the study suggests that by learning strategies for Clarification Questions, the participants need to be able to overcome communication difficulties and continue communicating with each other.

These studies highlight the significance of ‘Clarification Questions’ and acknowledge the difficulty learners face in acquiring them. Consequently, educational intervention is deemed required to facilitate their acquisition.

Following these studies, this study defines ‘Clarification Questions’ as the act of requesting clarification or confirming anything that has been communicated to enhance understanding. This includes situations where the listener is unable to hear or may not have fully understood the other person’s message. It is a frequently employed strategy used in communication, which is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and ensuring accurate information transmission. It also recognizes that the resolution of the issue may not just depend on the actions of the listener but might also involve collaborative efforts as a mutual action. This study refers to ‘Clarification Questions’ as CQ from now on.

4 Educational Practice

As stated in 2.7 Findings from the Mid-term Interview Test, the second half of the programme focused on strategy training. The major learning objectives were enhancing the use of CQ and preparing for in-depth questions.

The teacher emphasized that interviewers in a real job interview would ask questions without consideration of the participants’ Japanese language level, unlike questions asked by their language teachers in the classroom. Therefore, there is a high possibility that the participants might not fully understand them, thus, making it vital to master CQ strategies.

Additionally, the teacher shared the feedback from the recruiting experts that answers should be kept brief. This is because they want to expand their questions based on the initial responses. What they want to see is how the interviewees react to the challenging and in-depth questions by engaging them in conversational exchanges rather than focusing solely on the contents.

4.1 To prepare In-depth Questions

The teacher advised the participants to anticipate several subsequent questions, and to prepare answers to those questions. In other words, they should prepare themselves as if they had several ‘drawers’ in their minds for each question. The metaphor of ‘drawer’ here refers to resources such as experience, knowledge, and ideas that may be articulated in the Japanese language. The goal should be to answer any questions by opening these drawers. By storing many small ‘drawers’ in

one's mind, one can effectively address a wide range of questions by opening one drawer or combining multiple drawers. For example, in the context of discussing a 'university major,' the participants are expected to begin by giving a concise explanation. They should then anticipate follow-up questions and answer them by either selecting the appropriate drawer or combining multiple drawers.

4.2 To enhance Clarification Questions

To promote the usage of CQ, the teacher undertook three primary actions. To begin, the teacher utilized words that the participants were unfamiliar with during the interview practice to increase the number of occasions in which they requested clarification. Second, the teacher monitored whether the participants utilized CQ during practice and introduced extra CQ when acceptable CQ was not used. In addition to the forms that the participants were already familiar with, the following forms were introduced during practice.

1. *Goshitsumon wato yuu koto deshoo ka.*
I guess your question is.....?
2. *Goshitsumon wato yuu koto de yoroshii deshoo ka.*
Am I right in thinking that your question is?
3. *Goshitsumon wato yuu koto de tadashii deshoo ka.*
Is it correct to understand that your question is?
4. *.....to yuu goshitsumon deshoo ka.*
Is your question?

Third, the teacher encouraged the participants to avoid the following expressions, which are not often used by Japanese language speakers despite being introduced in elementary-level textbooks: "*Moo ichido itte kudasai* (Please say it again)," "*Moo ichido onegai shimasu* (One more time, please)".

5 Outcomes

5.1 Findings from the Final Interview Test

On Day 14, a 10-minute final interview test in pairs was administered by one teacher and two recruiters to conclude the training. During the interview, a Japanese teacher posed a question, and one of the two recruiting experts proceeded to ask follow-up questions. The question posed to all participants was regarding 'Extracurricular Activities'. The rationale behind prioritizing this topic was its suitability for all participants and its potential to elicit more profound information from the interviewees.

Below is a summary of the outcomes. According to Table 3, the Japanese language teachers exhibited a somewhat higher level of strictness in terms of Japanese language competency compared to the recruiting experts, which is consistent with the findings of the mid-term interview exam. Nevertheless, there were no significant disparities between the two groups.

Table 3. Average Score of Final Interview Test

	Japanese language proficiency	Content	Non-verbal behaviour	Intention to work in Japan	Academic grade	Total
Recruiting experts	4.42	3.74	4.15	4.27	4.12	20.70
Japanese teachers	3.74	3.97	4.23	4.09	3.94	19.97
Difference	0.68	0.23	0.08	0.18	0.17	0.73

5.2 Participants' improvement in 'Clarification Questions'

The teachers also analysed the participants' performance of CQ by transcribing both the mid-term and the final interviews. The strategies used by the participants were classified based on Ozaki (1992) as follows:

Functional Classification:

1. Repetition Request: When the listener did not catch the speaker's words and asks for them to be repeated. [RR]
2. Confirmation Request: When the listener is unsure about their understanding and seeks confirmation. [CR]
3. Explanation Request: When the listener heard the words but needs further explanation about their meaning. [ER]
4. Understanding Confirmation Request: When the listener wants to confirm their understanding of the speaker's words. [UCR]

As a result, the utilization of CQ significantly rose, as evidenced by the data presented in Table 4. The expressions also exhibit greater diversity. Their utilization of polite expressions also increased throughout the final interview. However, it was shown that the participants encountered difficulty in achieving success in CQ. Multiple iterations were required, as demonstrated in Sample 2.

Table 4. Samples of 'Clarification Questions'

Mid-term interview	Final interview
6 asking for clarifications were used by 4 participants	11 asking for clarifications were used by 6 participants
[RR] <i>"Ano, shitsumon mo ichido..."</i> Well, question once more... <i>"Sensei, sumimasen, ima chotto setsudan..."</i> Teacher, sorry, it was just cut off... [CR] <i>"Eh, ... desu ka?"</i> Um, is it ...? <i>"... desu ka?"</i> Is it ...? <i>"... desu ne?"</i> Is it ..., right? <i>"Ah, ...?"</i> Oh, ...?	[RR] <i>"Ano, sumimasenga, goshitsumon mo ichido onegai..."</i> Well, sorry, but your question once more please... <i>"Ano, sumimasen, moo ichido kiite itadakemasenka?"</i> Well, sorry, but could you please ask me again... <i>"Etto, sumimasen, moo ichido onegai shimasu."</i> Well, sorry, once more again please. <i>"Etto, sumimasen, moo ichido itadakemasenka?"</i> Well, sorry, once more again please? <i>"Sumimasen, moo ichido kudasai."</i> Sorry, once more please. [CR] <i>"... desu ka?"</i> Is it ...? <i>"... desu ne?"</i>

	<p>Is it ..., right? [ER] “A, <i>sumimasen</i>, [unknown word] <i>to yuu, ano imi wa nan desu ka?</i>” Ah, sorry, what does [unknown word] mean? “[repeat unknown word and pause] ...” [repeat unknown word and pause] ... [UCR] “E, <i>sumimasen, shitsumon wa ... desu ka?</i>” Ah, sorry, is the question ...? “A <i>desu ka</i>, B <i>desu ka?</i>” Is it A or B?</p>
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Sample 2 shows that participants struggled with asking effective CQ when encountering unfamiliar terms. For instance, a participant repeatedly failed to grasp the word “*kuroo* (struggle)” during the interview, resulting in multiple requests for repetition. The interviewer attempted to aid comprehension using the synonym “*komatta* (in trouble)”, which helped the participant understand the context (in Line 9). Despite this, the participant faced difficulty when the term was used again (in Line 14 and Line 17), underscoring the challenge of incorporating new vocabulary in the interview. This sample highlights the complexity and necessity of multiple attempts to succeed in CQ in real-life situations.

Sample 2

- 1 Interviewer: *130-nin no nakama de dorama o tsukurimashita to osshattemashita kedo, nakanaka taihen datta deshoo ne.*
You mentioned that you made the drama with 130 mates, and it should be a great work.
- 2 *Hai, de, etto donna hito ni kuroo shimashita ka.*
Well, then, what kind of people did you have a struggle with?
- 3 Participant: *A, goshitsumon arigatoogozaimasu.*
Well, thank you for your question.
- 4 *A, sumimasen, demo, etto, mooichido, itadakemasu ka.*
Oh, I'm sorry, but, um, could I have it once more, please? [RR]
- 5 Interviewer: *Hai, gomennasai ne.*
Yes, I'm sorry,
- 6 *130-nin hito ga imasu.*
There are 130 people.
- 7 *Otoko no hito mo onna no hito mo imasu.*
There are both men and women.
- 8 *Ne, yoku wakaru hito mo iru shi, chikoku suru hito mo iru shi, gohan takusan taberu hito mo iru to omoimasu ne.*
Right? There are people who understand well, there are people who come late, and there are people who eat a lot, I think.
- 9 *Anata wa riidaa to shite, donna hito de, konna koto de komatta naa tte yuu no ga attara oshiete moraemasu ka.*
As a leader, can you tell me what kind of people and what kind of matter you had trouble with if you have any.
- 10 Participant: *Hai, wakarimashita.*
Yes, I understand
- 11 *Jitsu wa zenbu wa gakkoo no tomodachi desu kara, sukoshi, a, shirite, shi, shi, shitte ita node,*
Actually, they are all my school mates, so I knew them a bit, ah, I know, I have known them,
[omitted] [The participant answered that he did not have much trouble with his school mates. The interviewer asked more follow-up questions, and the participant talked that if someone did not follow their rules, everyone was punished by having them run 2km.]

- 12 Interviewer: *Anoo, dorama no nakama wa minna yoku shitte iru hito dakedomo,*
Well, you know your drama company were all people you know well.
- 13 *Tatoeba, dorama o suru basho da toka, ee, shoomee da toka, chiketto da toka,*
For example, the place you play drama, um, lighting or ticketing,
- 14 *Tsumari, nakama igai de kuroo shita koto tte arimasu?*
Namely except the drama company, did you have any other struggles?
- 15 Participant: *Eh, nakama..., sumimasen, moo ichido kudasai.*
Er, company..., sorry, give me, once more? [RR]
- 16 Interviewer: *Nakama igai de, tatoeba, dorama no kaijoo o yoyaku shinakereba ikemasen, ne, sore-kara nyuujooken, chiketto o watasanakya ikenai,*
Apart from your company, for example, you must book the drama venue, right? Then you need to give entrance tickets
- 17 *So yuu tokoro de, kuroo shita koto wa arimasen ka.*
Have you ever had any struggles with that kind of things?
- 18 Participant: **Kuroo...**
Struggle... [ER]
- 19 Interviewer: **Kuroo, komatta koto wa arimasen ka.**
Struggles, did you ever have any struggles or trouble?
- 20 Participant: *Uun, chiketto ni tsuite desu kara, chiketto deshoo.*
Hmm, it is about tickets, so it would be tickets.

To summarize, the outcome of the final interview test revealed that while there were some observed improvements, the acquisition of CQ techniques was not achieved to a satisfactory level. The primary factor is likely the limited duration, only 14 days in this programme. This implies that it is crucial to engage in long-term practice, commencing from the novice stage.

5.3 Learners' Perception on the importance of 'Clarification Questions'

A survey was administered to the participants five months following the conclusion of the training. The participants were also given a hyperlink to access the programme materials and resources, which would assist them in recollecting their experiences. The survey was distributed by the programme organiser, rather than the teachers themselves, in order to encourage participants to provide candid feedback.

The initial and subsequent inquiries were designed to evaluate participants' perspectives on the programme and their progress from the mid-term interview to the final interview test, employing a 5-point Likert scale. On this scale, a rating of 1 corresponds to 'Strongly disagree,' while a rating of 5 corresponds to 'Strongly agree'.

12 out of 13 participants responded, and most of them responded positively to their participation in the programme, as well as their progress from the mid-term interview to the final interview tests (refer to Figures 1 and 2). Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on improving the use of CQ in the second half of the programme, not all participants reported experiencing this improvement.

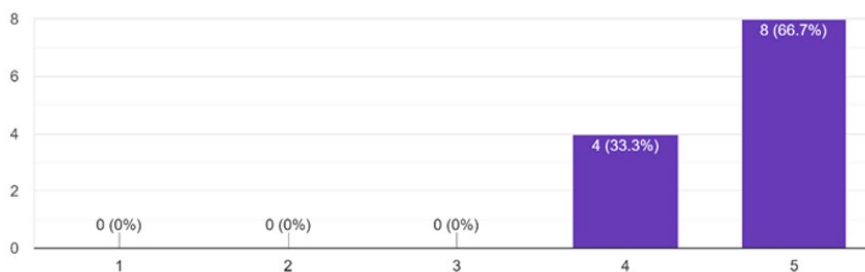


Fig. 1. Do you think it was beneficial to join the Asia to Japan Summer Intensive Programme? (n=12)

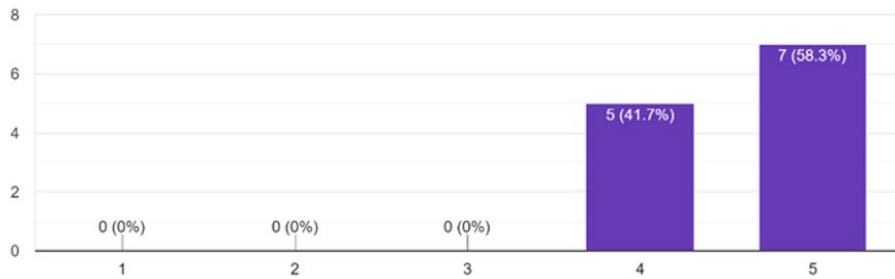


Fig. 2. Did you find any improvement in your performance between the mid-term interview and the final interview tests? (n=12)

Figure 3 provides a summary of the participants' replies regarding the areas that showed improvement. The participants chose several responses from a pool of 14 options. Among the 12 participants, 7 opted for the choice of 'Asking to repeat the question' while 5 chose 'Clarification on the question asked'.

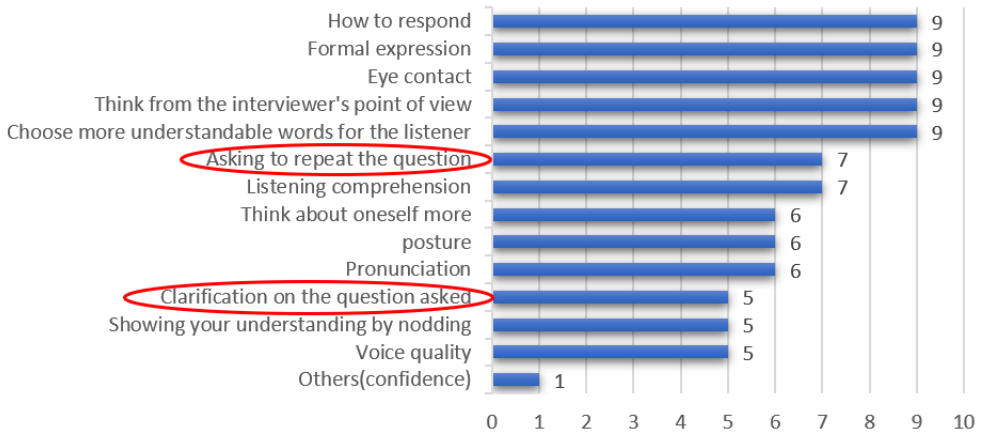


Fig. 3. Which areas improved? (n=12)

This survey examined the participants' self-perceptions of their progress in CQ and may not provide an accurate representation of their actual performance. Hence, the teachers juxtaposed the responses with the interview performance, as outlined in Table 5 below. As a result, it was discovered that participants H, J, and L, who chose both alternatives, were successful in using CQ, however, participant C, who did not select any, was unable to utilize CQ. This suggests that the learners' self-assessment aligned with their objective performance. Nevertheless, despite their achievement, participants G and K did not opt for these options. This could be attributed to their elevated self-assessment criteria.

Table 5. Individual participants' selection related Clarification Questions

Participant	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	Total
Asking to repeat the question		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	7
Clarification on the question asked	✓							✓	✓	✓		✓	5

In summary, three students were cognizant of the significance of CQ and also acknowledged that they had been enhanced. However, three students said that they did not experience any improvement in their CQ.

6 Discussion

The results from this study indicate that one of the major problems of job interview performance was a lack of CQ strategies by the participants. Why did the participants have such problems? Is it because CQ phrases are not presented in the textbooks? Or is it because they are presented but not practiced well in the language classroom? To make suggestions for educational practice, this study briefly reviewed some Japanese language textbooks and analysed if and how CQ phrases are presented. Based on that, issues of teaching practice and teaching implications are discussed.

6.1 ‘Clarification Questions’ in Japanese textbooks

This study briefly reviewed the following two major textbook series, searching for CQ phrases, and categorized them based on Ozaki (1992):

“*Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I Second Edition*” (3A Corporation (Ed.), 2012)

“*Minna no Nihongo Chuukyuu I*” (3A Corporation (Ed.), 2008)

“*Marugoto: Japanese and Culture Starter A1 - Coursebook for Communicative Language Activities*” (Kijima, et al, 2013)

“*Marugoto: Japanese and Culture Starter A1 - Coursebook for Communicative Language Comprehension*” (Kijima, et al. 2013)

“*Marugoto: Japanese and Culture Intermediate B1*” (Isomura, et al, 2016)

As a result, it was found that both textbooks present CQ phrases in drills and dialogues such as below from the beginning of the textbook. CQ phrases are underlined as below:

Elementary level textbooks

Lesson 1 (Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I, 2012)

A: Shitsuree desu ga, onamae wa?

Excuse me, but your name, please?

B: Ii desu.

I am Yee.

A: Rii san desu ka?

Are you Ms. Lee? [CR]

B: Iie, Ii desu.

No, I am Yee.

Lesson 7 (Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I, 2012)

A: Kore wa Nihongo de nan desu ka?

What is this in Japanese?

B: ‘Hasami’ desu.

It is ‘scissors.’

A: ‘Ha-sa-mi’ desu ka?

Is it “Sci-ssor-s”? [CR]

B: Hai, soo desu.

Yes, it is.

Lesson 9 (Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I, 2012)

A: *Itsu desu ka?*

When is it?

B: *Raishuu no kinyoobi no ban desu.*

It is Friday evening next week.

A: *Kinyoobi desu ka? Kinyoobi no ban wa chotto....*

Is it Friday? Friday evening is a bit inconvenient for me.... [CR]

Lesson 3 (Marugoto A1 Comprehension, 2013)

A: *Hajimemashite. Yamada desu. Anoo, onamae wa?*

How do you do? I am Yamada. May I have your name, please?

B: *Wan desu.*

I am Wan.

A: *Wan san desu ne. Doozo yoroshiku.*

Mr. Wan, right? Nice to meet you. [CR]

Lesson 6 (Marugoto A1 Comprehension, 2013)

A: *Kyoo doko de hiru gohan o tabemasu ka.*

Where will you have lunch today?

B: *'Ippo' de tabemasu.*

I will eat in 'Ippo.'

A: *'Ippo'?*

'Ippo'? [ER]

B: *Hai. Raamen ya san desu. Oishii desu yo.*

Yes, it is a ramen noodle restaurant. It is nice to eat.

Lesson 15 (Marugoto A1 Comprehension, 2013)

A: *Kakkoi tokee desu ne.*

It is a cool watch!

B: *Arigatoo. Kyonen Nihon de kaimashita.*

Thanks. I bought it in Japan last year.

A: *Kono akusesarii mo?*

You bought this accessory in Japan too?

B: *E, kore? Tomodachi ni morai mashita.*

Er, this one? My friend gave it to me. [UCR]

Intermediate level textbooksLesson 2 (Minna no Nihongo Intermediate I, 2008)

A: *Aa, kore wa fuzai renraku hyoo desu.*

Well, this is an absence contact form.

B: *Fuzai-renraku...? Nan no koto desu ka?*

Absence contact? What does it mean? [ER]

A: *Maria san ga inai toki ni nimotsu o todoke ni kita to yuu oshirase no koto desu.*

It is a notice that they came to deliver luggage to you, Maria, while you were away.

Topic 1 (Marugoto Intermediate B1, 2016)

A: *Seikaku wa warito shakoo teki da to omoimasu.*

I think my personality is sociable.

B: *Anoo, chotto wakaranakatta n desu kedo, seikaku wa nan to iimashita ka?*

Well, I did not understand, but what did you say about your personality? [RR]

Topic 2 (Marugoto Intermediate B1, 2016)

A: *Tori ya yasai kara totta dashi o tsukatte te...*

They use dashi from chicken or vegetables and....

B: *Dashi?*

Dashi? [ER]

A: *Aa, suupu no koto desu ga, kore ga oishii n desu yo.*

Oh, it is *dashi* soup stock. This is so tasty.

As shown from the aforementioned instances, CQ are included in textbooks. Nevertheless, two concerns were identified regarding the presentation of ‘Confirmation Requests (CR)’.

Firstly, despite their frequent usage in beginner-level textbooks, there is a lack of clarification regarding their definition and the importance they have in effective communication. Therefore, teachers must focus on the CQ given in the textbooks and enhance learners’ understanding of their significance.

Furthermore, ‘Confirmation Request (CR)’ is the prevailing type of CQ found in textbooks introduced for beginners. However, they may find CR to be excessively demanding due to potential difficulties in comprehending essential terminology or accurately repeating the information conveyed. Hence, the utilization of ‘Repetition Request (RR)’ would be a more advantageous and pragmatic strategy for novice learners. However, introductory textbooks rarely provide ample examples of RR, other than phrases such as “*Moo ichido onegai shimasu* (Once more, please)” or “*Moo ichido itte kudasai* (Please say it again)”, which are not commonly used by native Japanese speakers. This results in a significant gap between the CQ expressions used by learners and those used by native Japanese speakers. It is therefore advisable to present more natural and practical alternatives for effective communication, such as interjections like “*Ha?* (Huh?)” or “*E?* (Eh?)”, or partial repetitions of what was heard. It should be emphasized that these statements can be perceived as impolite, depending on the tone and circumstances. Hence, teachers must deliver guidance on the proper usage of these terms.

6.2 Teaching Implications

The aforementioned findings suggest that Japanese language textbooks inadequately address CQ, leaving room for improvement. Teachers should offer learners opportunities for practice by gradually expanding the range of expressions, considering the learners’ progress. This process should begin at the beginner level and move towards the intermediate/business level. This is due to the fact that acquiring proficiency in utilizing CQ necessitates a significant investment of time. Here are four recommendations for teaching approaches to assist and promote learning.

Firstly, teachers should pay attention to the examples provided in the textbooks and ensure that learners have adequate opportunities to practice, even though the textbooks may include a limited selection of ‘Confirmation Request (CR)’ as stated in section 5.1. Furthermore, the ‘Repetition Request (RR)’, which was previously determined to be a more appropriate type of CQ for learners at a basic level, can be included in exercises by substituting or expanding the drills or conversations presented in the textbooks.

For example, the following drill is presented in *Minna no Nihongo* (2012).

A: *Shitsuree desu ga, onamae wa?*

Excuse me, but your name, please?

B: *Ii desu.*

I am Yee.

A: *Rii san desu ka.*

Are you Ms. Lee? [CR]

B: *Iie, Ii desu.*

No, I am Yee.

By including an expression such as the one below into *****, learners can also be engaged in the practice of 'Repetition Request (RR)'.

A: E, sumimasen?
Er, excuse me? [RR]

B: *Ii desu.*
I am Yee.

The following is another example found in Minna no Nihongo (2012).

A: *Kore wa Nihongo de nan desu ka?*
What is this in Japanese?

B: *'Hasami' desu.*
It is 'scissors.'

A: *'Ha-sa-mi' desu ka?*
Is it 'Sci-ssor-s'?'
[CR]

B: *Hai, soo desu.*
Yes, it is.

By replacing the statement in the box with statements such as those listed below, a variety of 'Repetition Request (RR)' expressions can be practiced.

A: E?
Er. [RR]

A: E, sumimasen?
ha, pardon? [RR]

A: 'Ha-sa...'? Nan desu ka?
[partial repetitions of what was heard] What is it? [RR]

The form of "to yuu no wa? (which means?)" is also suitable to present and practice from the beginner level because it can be used in a variety of situations, including 'Repetition Request (RR)' and 'Explanation Request (ER)'.

A: *B-san no senmon wa?*
What is your major?

B: *Sumimasen, to yuu no wa?*
Excuse me, it means? [RR]

A: *B-san no senmon wa?*
What is your major?

B: *Sumimasen, senmon to yuu no wa?*
Excuse me, 'senmon' means? [ER]

Secondly, opportunities for CQ should be presented regularly throughout daily contact with students. The few opportunities for learners to feel confused during teacher-student conversations in the classroom are believed to be a significant factor in the lack of CQ. There are fewer instances

where learners ‘don’t understand’ because teachers inevitably select vocabulary and sentence structures that learners can understand. As a result, learners miss out on the opportunity to develop these communication strategies. Furthermore, these ‘unintelligible situations’ are insufficiently diverse. Teachers need to reconsider their speaking style to allow learners to practice the various CQ they will encounter in the real world.

Furthermore, the assumption by textbooks and educators that a single CQ will suffice may be problematic. As illustrated in Sample 2, it is important to provide opportunities for learners to successfully clarify unclear points through a series of exchanges. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers not to be overly accommodating. Learners need to be made aware that successful clarification might not occur in just one exchange and that it may take several attempts.

Thirdly, in the training of CQ strategies, the process of teachers’ modelling of the CQ strategies is also important. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation outlines the gradual process through which learners become proficient through social practice. This theory emphasizes that learning is not merely the transmission of knowledge but occurs through participation as a member of a community. Following this theoretical framework, it is essential to recognize the importance of teachers’ modelling of CQ strategies and learners observing and imitating these models. For instance, a student with unclear speech should be questioned by repeating CQ such as “Pardon? What is it?” “Which means?” and so on. Even if teachers can infer what learners intended to say, if they venture to act confused and ask CQ, the student will recognize the error and correct it. Learners will become accustomed to such exchanges and learn how to use CQ by observing the teachers’ good modelling. Furthermore, creating a classroom environment where learners can observe each other’s attempts at using CQ strategies is equally important for deepening learning. By doing so, learners can learn from diverse approaches and expressions, thereby refining their own CQ strategies.

Fourthly, it is critical that teachers pay close attention to learners’ performance when asking CQ and recommending the most suitable expressions. It is because learners can fail to elicit the information they need from the other party by using the wrong strategies or expressions as Ikeda (2003) and this study found (see Sample 1). For instance, if a learner says, “Excuse me, could you repeat that?”, teachers should assess whether the learner comprehended the whole utterance or a particular word. If the learner did not comprehend or misunderstood a specific word, teachers should advise them to use phrases like “What do you mean by [specific word]?” or to rephrase the question with “Do you mean that [rephrased understanding]?” This approach helps in pinpointing the exact part of the communication that was unclear. Such careful attention to learners’ use of strategies and repeated practice from an early learning stage will certainly aid in the learners’ overall language acquisition and improve their ability to effectively use CQ strategies. Furthermore, such observation of learners’ performance would undoubtedly assist in identifying the strategies that learners are lacking.

7 Conclusion

In this study, three Japanese language teachers collaborated with experts from a Japanese recruiting agency to conduct a three-week summer intensive programme aimed at preparing intermediate Japanese learners for job interviews. This practical investigation sought to identify discrepancies between the questioning and evaluation methods used by recruiting experts and language teachers, as well as to pinpoint deficiencies in the learners’ interview skills.

There were three major findings. Firstly, a disparity was observed in the questioning techniques and evaluation criteria between the recruiting experts and the language teachers. Recruiting experts employed a mix of simple and challenging questions to gauge participants’ ability to handle pressure, whereas language teachers focused on questions that could be answered with previously learned vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Secondly, a significant challenge for learners was their inability to effectively use Clarification Questions (CQ), which are crucial for successful job interviews. In response, the latter half of the

programme concentrated on enhancing CQ strategies. Although the final interview tests showed improvements in interview performance due to this focused training, the diversity of CQ strategies employed by learners remained limited.

Thirdly, another noteworthy finding was that Japanese language textbooks do not adequately introduce CQ, leaving space for further development. For example, a gap between the CQ described in the basic textbook and the use of them by native Japanese speakers was found. To fill in the gaps, certain instructional approaches to assisting and promoting CQ learning were offered.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that it is vital for Japanese language curricula to incorporate strategy training for CQ starting from the beginner level. This is particularly crucial as beginners often struggle with understanding the target language, and the mastery of CQ strategies requires time to develop and implement effectively. Addressing these educational gaps will not only help students prepare for job interviews but will also improve their overall communication and language abilities.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the integration of CQ strategies into Japanese language education, encountered several limitations. The small sample size and the singular context of an intensive programme limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the short duration of the programme and the brief interval between the mid-term and final tests may not have allowed sufficient time for the full development and operationalization of complex CQ strategies. Furthermore, the pedagogical implementation aimed at improving CQ was not properly investigated, restricting our capacity to fully assess the effectiveness of the instructional approaches used. Future studies should be conducted over a longer period and with a more diversified participant pool to draw more thorough and generalizable conclusions.

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About the Authors

Izumi Walker (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5374-7835>) is the Director of the Centre for Language Studies at the National University of Singapore, overseeing 13 language programs and leading over 100 faculty members. She has advanced Japanese language education in Singapore, including founding the Japanese Language Teachers' Association in Singapore. Her research interests encompass Business Japanese education, Japanese language pedagogy for “Taigu Communication”, Project-based Curriculum Design, and qualitative study employing TEA: Trajectory Equifinality Approach. She is an editorial board member of e-FLT, Journal of Society for Business Japanese Research, and Journal of Taigu-Communication.

Saeko Kitai (<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5054-3421>) is a Lecturer in the Japanese Language Programme at the Centre for Language Studies, National University of Singapore. She specializes in teaching elementary Japanese and Business Japanese. Her current research interests focus on the integration of AI in Japanese language pedagogy and sociolinguistics. Beyond academia, Ms. Kitai has made significant contributions to cultural preservation and promotion. She is the founder of the NUS koto ensemble, KotoKottoN, and a founding member of the non-profit organization “Global Koto Music Network,” which supports English-speaking koto learners globally.

Akiko Ito (<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5043-7479>) is affiliated with multiple institutions in Singapore, serving as a Part-Time Tutor at National University of Singapore, an Adjunct Lecturer at Singapore Management University, and a Part-Time Lecturer at Nanyang Technological University. She has made a significant contribution to the improvement of Japanese language education in Singapore by serving as the President of the Japanese Language Teachers' Association. Her research interests encompass the development of curriculum in higher education and interactive task-based learning in Japanese language pedagogy.