

## **JAPANESE LANGUAGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF USING ANIME AS A TEACHING TOOL**

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### **Abstract**

Studies showed that interest in anime motivates students to learn the Japanese language and culture (Manion, 2005; Fukunaga, 2006; William, 2006). However, little has been written about the practical use of anime in a Japanese language classroom. By employing the method of classroom research, this study will try to narrow the gap between theory and practice of using anime as a teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom. This qualitative study will focus on discussing what the participants think about the use of anime as a teaching tool. A course named "Learning Japanese language and Culture through Anime" was planned and conducted in a public university in Malaysia. During the administration of the course, the data were collected via the participants' learning diaries at 7 intervals and a group interview at the end of the semester. The findings presented from the data analysis on the participants' perception of the use of anime as a teaching tool include motivation, language and cultural awareness, critical thinking, sense of prejudice, and stereotypes. The findings reveal that giving a place for anime in the Japanese language classroom is like opening a new door for educators to connect with the students and deepen understanding about the students' learning experiences of using anime as a language and culture learning tool. This is important to provide insightful ideas to the Japanese language educators regarding the option of using anime as a teaching tool.

**Keywords:** anime; popular culture; teaching Japanese as a foreign language

Nowadays, with the rapid growth and availability of technology, traditional teaching approaches are often complemented by new innovations such as computers and audio-visual equipment as additional teaching aids along with the textbooks to teach language. Over the years, the advantages related to the use of audio-visual aids in language classrooms have been a topic of vigorous debate. Sources of authentic audio-visual aids which are commonly used in the foreign language classroom include news, movies, songs, and cartoons. According to Cheung (2001), "popular culture is a rich source of authentic materials, developing learning based on students' daily experience, personal values, attitudes, and feelings" (p. 60). Yet, "popular culture has been looked down upon in the education field" for a long time (Fukunaga, 2006: 220). People have been criticizing the negative influence of popular culture on children and youth since the 1990s and they also perceived popular culture as "evil" (Stack & Kelly, 2006: 15).

While some educators are concerned with the negative influences from popular culture texts, some advocate incorporating popular culture elements into the curriculum. Many studies have found success by putting popular culture to work in the language

classroom (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Alim & Pennycook, 2007; Black, 2008). Frey and Fisher (2004) made use of graphic novels to enhance their students' reading and writing abilities. "Having begun with the idea that graphic novels were comic books at best and a waste of time at worst, we now realize the power they have for engaging students in authentic writing" (Frey & Fisher, 2004: 24). Hip-hop culture and rap are highly popular among youth worldwide and have been recognised as an influential transformative educational tool despite their controversial position in mainstream education (Alim & Pennycook, 2007). According to Black (2008), incorporating popular culture in the classroom could unite the students and encourage possible connection with one another based on their interest outside of school.

The use of audio-visual materials, such as movies, dramas, news, and cartoons in teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) has become a common approach for the ESL/EFL educators. However, in the context of teaching the Japanese language, many educators may not be fully aware of the option of using anime as a language and culture teaching tool. According to the Survey Report on Japanese-language Education Abroad

2012, among the reasons and purposes to study the Japanese language, “interest in Japanese language” was the most frequently cited (62.2%). The next most frequently cited reason was “communication in

Japanese” (55.5%) and followed by “interest in manga, anime, J-Pop, etc.” (54.0%) (The Japan Foundation, 2012b) (see Figure 1).

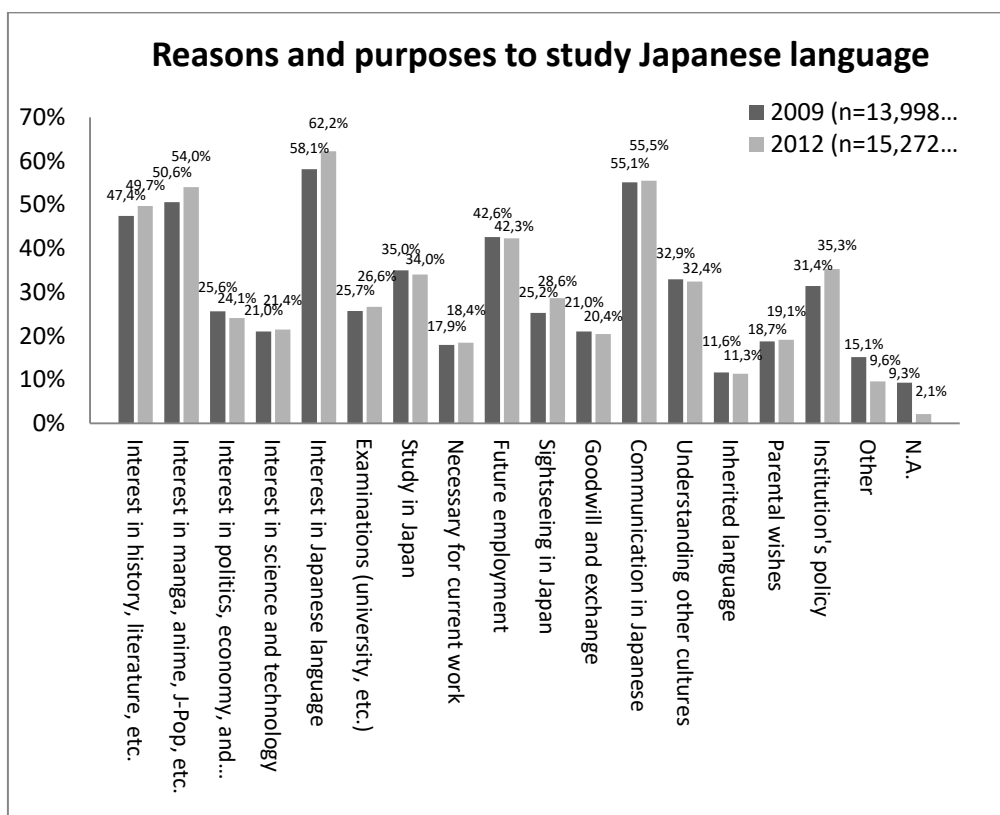


Figure 1. Reasons and purposes to study the Japanese language

The survey report stated that, “the fact that ‘interest in manga, anime, J-pop, etc.’ was more frequently cited than ‘interest in history, literature, etc.’ makes it clear that Japanese pop culture has made its mark throughout the world, establishing itself as a starting point for interest in and involvement with Japan and the Japanese language” (The Japan Foundation, 2012b: 4). Based on the survey report, there is evidence to suggest that there may be some connections between interest in anime and Japanese language learning. This apparent connection has led us to consider the potential of using anime as a language and culture teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom. Therefore, it is worth exploring the question of what happens when Japanese language students encounter anime in the classroom.

**What is anime?**

There are several ways of defining anime. Anime is often related to the concept of cartoons. Napier (2005) explains,

“To define anime simply as ‘Japanese cartoons’ gives no sense of the depth and variety that make up the medium. [...] Essentially, anime works include everything that Western audiences are accustomed to seeing in live-action films –

romance, comedy, tragedy, adventure, even psychological probing of a kind seldom attempted in recent mass-culture Western film or television. [...] Unlike cartoons in the West, anime in Japan is truly a main-stream pop cultural phenomenon” (p. 6-7).

The term “anime” (depicted in Japanese katakana as アニメ) is believed to be a borrowed word abbreviated from the English word, “animation”. Recently, the word “anime” has been included in several English dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Longman Dictionary. In other words, “anime” has become a twice-borrowing word, where it was originally borrowed from the English word “animation” but being borrowed back to English as a clipping of a loanword, “anime”. According to Martin (2012), “the most famous Japanese boomerang word is probably anime, used in English to refer to Japanese animation, but in Japan to mean animation generally”. Therefore, the term anime is used to define and differentiate animation made in Japan and other region’s animation in this paper.

The development of television had opened up a new potential market for anime. In 1963, *Mushi Production*, a studio founded by the famous manga

(Japanese graphic novel) artist, Osamu Tezuka began showing its first TV anime entitled *Astro Boy*. Osamu Tezuka was named the "God of manga" (Poitras, 2000: 18) due to the success of his manga, *Astro Boy*. This was the starting point where anime began to gain global popularity. Although most anime are based on highly popular manga, manga is not the only source of inspiration of anime. For instance, the *Pokémon* anime series is based on Nintendo's (a video games company) worldwide hit video game, *Pokémon*. One of Japan's most successful and famous animators is Hayao Miyazaki from Studio Ghibli, which was founded in 1985. He has created numerous original animated films which have gained popularity across the world. Napier (2005) claimed that, "Japanese animation is more popular than ever following the 2002 Academy Award given to Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*" (p. back cover). Some of Miyazaki's most famous masterpieces included *My Neighbour Totoro* (1989), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1990), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2002), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2005). Miyazaki's works touched not only children's hearts, but also adults from all over the world.

In general, anime are released in two ways: theatrical released animated films and television released animated series. The TV animated series are the major distribution channel for anime. The theatrical-release anime films can be stand-alone stories like Miyazaki's works, or related to earlier TV series such as the *Doraemon* movies and the *Naruto Shippuuden* movies. These theatrical released animated films and television released animated series are later commercially released and licensed in VCDs, or DVDs throughout the world. Generally, the visual characteristics of anime can be identified by exaggerated physical attributes such as large eyes and colourful hair styles. The visual styles of anime vary greatly from artist to artist.

Apart from general classification which is similar to other forms of media such as action, adventure, romance, comedy, horror and slice of life (daily life), the classification of anime genres are not only restricted to these categories (Poitras, 2000). Similar to manga, anime in Japan are produced for targeted gender and age groups. Anime genres are also often uniquely classified by target demographic such as *kodomo* (children's), *shoujo* (girls'), *shounen* (boys') and various ranges of genres targeting the adult audience such as *josei* (women's), and *seinen* (men's).

### **Interest in anime and the learning of the Japanese language**

Studies show that interest in anime motivates students to learn the Japanese language and culture (Manion, 2005; Fukunaga, 2006; William, 2006).

Manion (2005) used questionnaire surveys to get an overview of what type of person is interested

in anime, and to what extent manner and interest in anime is linked to interest in Japanese culture. She conducted questionnaire surveys with two different groups of samples, (i) the Japanese language students, and (ii) anime club members. She suggested that by looking at these two different sample sets, the relationship between anime and studying the Japanese language can be observed from two different angles, which are (1) to what extent the Japanese language students are interested in anime, and (2) to what extent the anime fans express their interest in learning the Japanese language. Manion (2005) concluded that anime can stimulate interest in Japanese culture among youths. She claimed that,

"The anime community is eager to learn about Japan, and that their enthusiasm for obtaining anime leads them to find ways to interact with Japanese culture. I also found that among Japanese language students, more and more of them, particularly younger ones, associate learning about Japan with understanding anime and Japanese popular culture, and that anime is a significant presence in the minds of students learning Japanese language today" (Manion, 2005: 17).

Inspired by the growing interest in anime among the students, Fukunaga (2006) carried out an interpretive, qualitative interview with three intermediate level students who had particular interest in anime and Japanese popular culture. The interviewees were found to be able to utilize the prior linguistic and cultural knowledge they gained from anime and applied them in the class where they learn grammar, writing system, speaking and culture of the language. She also noticed that when these students re-watched the anime, they recognised "more words than before and reviewing things they learned in the past" (Fukunaga, 2006: 215).

William (2006) carried out focus group and individual interviews to find out the connections between anime fandom and Japanese language learning. She discovered that interest in anime did actually contribute to the interviewees' decision to learn the Japanese language. However, to fully understand the phenomenon, she suggested that classroom-based research is necessary for future studies.

### **Research gap**

Many studies about Japanese language learners' interest in anime have appeared within the past ten years (i.e. Manion, 2005; Fukunaga, 2006; William, 2006). However, there is still a lack of focus on the implications of using anime within the language and culture learning context. Some of the problems reflected in a search of literature are: (1) underdeveloped theory on facilitating learning through anime in a classroom context (William, 2006; Spindler, 2010) and (2) lack of teaching

manuals for language educators intending to use anime as a teaching tool in the classroom (Furo, 2008). To date, little has been written about the practical use of anime in a Japanese language classroom. Most studies have presented results based on students' perspectives through interviews and questionnaire surveys, rather than practically studying the potential of using anime as a teaching tool in a language classroom. William (2006) and Spindler (2010) both have suggested that classroom research should be conducted in future studies. By employing the method of classroom research, this study will try to narrow the gap between theory and practice of using anime as a teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom. This paper will focus on discussing the participants' views and thoughts on the use of anime as a teaching tool.

### METHOD

This study employed the method of qualitative research in order to address the purpose of the study which is intended to explore the phenomenon of using anime as a teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom and to understand the participants' feelings and experiences. The nature of this study was specifically constructed as a phenomenological study. "Phenomenology is a design that best fits research problems that are unstructured, and for which there is little or no research or evidence in the literature" (Goes, 2013). According to Spindler (2010), "anime and manga are a type of popular culture that has not been looked at in depth, specifically in the context of a Japanese foreign language classroom" (p. 4). As noted in the research gap, although much has been written about the relationship between interest in anime and Japanese language learning, there has been very little research reported on the practical

use of anime in the Japanese language classroom. Therefore, phenomenological study was chosen for this study to closely examine the students' perception and experience of learning the Japanese language and culture through anime in the classroom.

### The participants

This study used purposeful homogenous sampling in order to choose participants with similar backgrounds and experiences (Patton, 1990). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The participants involved comprised of 11 students, aged between 20 and 21, who have particular interest in watching anime. All the 11 participants involved were lower-intermediate learners in their second year of the Japanese language studies in one of Malaysia's public universities. All the participants have learnt the Japanese language for at least 18 months and have at least passed the Japanese-language Proficiency Test (JLPT) Level N4.

The JLPT is the largest-scale Japanese language test in the world. It has five levels: N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5 with the easiest and lowest level being N5 and the most difficult and highest level being N1. A student who has passed the JLPT Level N4 at the minimum seems to be a suitable participant for this study because according to the JLPT website, a student who has passed Level N4 will be "able to listen and comprehend conversations encountered in daily life and generally follow their contents, provided that they are spoken slowly" (The Japan Foundation, 2012a).

The participants' profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic profiles.

No.	Name	Age	Gender
1	Alice	20	Female
2	Betty	21	Female
3	Evelyn	21	Female
4	Frank	20	Male
5	Kevin	20	Male
6	Mandy	21	Female
7	Nancy	21	Female
8	Natalie	21	Female
9	Olivia	21	Female
10	Sharon	20	Female
11	Susan	21	Female

These 11 participants were invited to attend a 10-week course named "Learning Japanese Language and Culture through Anime". Prior to the course, the participants were given sufficient information about the study and the consent forms for participation were signed. All participants'

names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

### The procedures

In this study, a 10-week course named "Learning Japanese language and Culture through Anime" was planned and conducted. The course was carried out

in a public university in Malaysia. There was one lesson per week and time allocated for each lesson was approximately 120 minutes. The lessons took place in a classroom equipped with a projector, computer, and connection to the internet. The

participants' learning diaries were collected at 7 intervals (Lesson 1, 2, R1, 3, 4, 5, R2) and a group interview was conducted at the end of the semester (see Table 2).

Table 2. Course outline

Number of Week	Anime	Themes	Classroom activities
Week 1		Course introduction	
Week 2 (Lesson 1)	<i>Working!!</i> (Episode 1)	Workplace conversation & Japanese surnames	Active viewing & Follow-up discussion
Week 3 (Lesson 2)	<i>Hanasaku Iroha</i> (Episode 1)	Workplace conversation & Japanese traditional inn ( <i>ryokan</i> )	Active viewing & Follow-up discussion
Week 4 (Lesson R1)		Revision lesson 1 (Lesson 1 & 2)	Repetition of short scenes & Follow-up discussion
Week 5 (Lesson 3)	<i>Kimi to Boku S2</i> (Episode 13)	School conversation & Japanese tea ceremony ( <i>sadou</i> )	Active viewing & Follow-up discussion
Week 6 (Lesson 4)	<i>Hanasaku Iroha</i> (Episode 19)	School conversation & Cultural festival ( <i>bunkasai</i> )	Active viewing & Follow-up discussion
Week 7 (Lesson 5)	<i>Kimi to Boku S2</i> (Episode 1)	Family conversation & Japanese bath ( <i>ofuro</i> )	Active-viewing & Follow up discussion
Week 8 (Lesson R2)		Revision Lesson 2 (Lesson 3, 4, & 5)	Repetition of short scenes & Follow-up discussion
Week 9		Concluding lesson	
Week 10		Group interview	

Other than ensuring the anime selection should correspond to the course objectives, other criteria such as cultural appropriateness, length of the anime, availability of hardware, visual quality and compatibility are equally important as well (Syaifuddin, 2010). In terms of teaching the Japanese language, anime which are driven by "human relations (*ningenkankei*)" and daily life situations are more suitable for use as a teaching tool as compared to anime which focuses heavily on action and fighting. In this study, the anime chosen were *Working!!* (workplace), *Hanasaku Iroha* (school life), and *Kimi to Boku S2* (school life).

### Course design

Robinson (2007) suggested two approaches to the teaching of drama/theatre texts: (1) The 'a' type analytical approach to drama/theatre texts and (2) The 'b' type experiential approach to drama/theatre texts. The 'a' type analytical approach to drama/theatre texts treats drama as the object of instruction. Using this approach, the educator or the course designer places emphasis on language analysis such as the phonological and lexical components of language to help the learners become aware of these components and be able to practice them. In the 'b' type experiential approach to drama/theatre texts, emphasises is on the inductive method of learning through the students' experience. The language is regarded as a tool to encourage comments, responses, and expressions from the

students based on the text itself or its theme/topic. This study integrate the analytical and experiential approaches into practical instructional methodology in the classroom to ensure a successful outcome in language and culture learning, as there are some classroom techniques or activities that should benefit both educators and learners. Figure 2 illustrates the course design model (Chan & Wong, 2017).

The classroom activities incorporated into the course include active viewing, repetition, and follow-up discussion.

- 1) Active viewing: In contrast to "passive" viewing where the audience is only exposed to the media content but does not engage with the media content at any critical level, "active" viewing requires the audience to analyse and discover the meaning communicated through the media during the viewing experience. Before the active viewing of the chosen anime, the participants were guided with a pre-viewing briefing. The pre-viewing briefing was important to inform the participants about the general background of the anime. The trailer of the respective anime was shown to the participants by using the YouTube website. During the active viewing activity, the participants' were asked to start analysing the anime from the aspects of literary (narrative, characters,

setting and theme), language, culture, and personal responses simultaneously. To achieve this goal, the participants were encouraged to jot down keywords of what they noticed from the anime for further discussion afterwards. For example, the participants were given a sheet of paper to jot down keywords relating to linguistic features such as different level of politeness

and vocabulary or keywords related to culture such as cultural objects and cultural manners portrayed in the anime. The exercise of jotting down these keywords will help to maintain the participants' focus on the anime as well as to raise the participants' consciousness for specific language features and cultural elements.

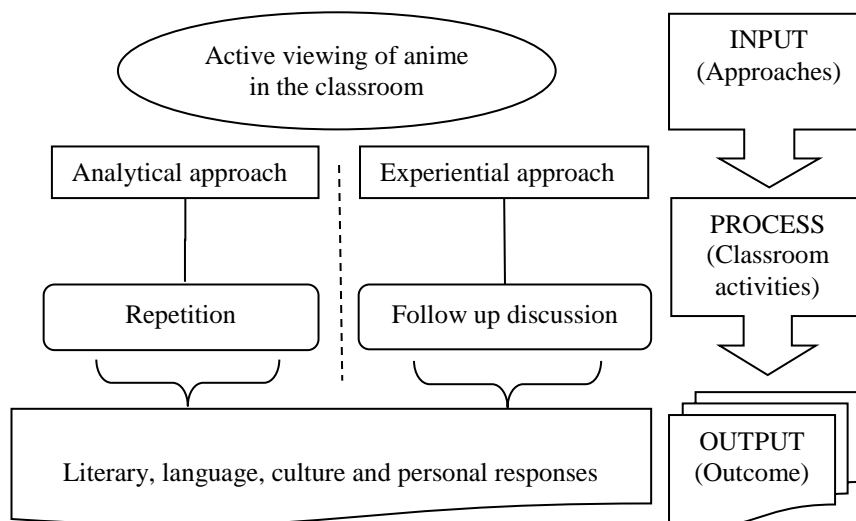


Figure 2. Course design model (Chan & Wong, 2017)

- 2) **Repetition:** The repetition activity was carried out using the analytical approach where the participants were asked to critically analyse certain language patterns in the dialogues. Prior to the lesson, several scenes with important or difficult dialogues were identified. The dialogue lines in these 1 to 3 minutes short scenes were then transcribed and the transcript was distributed to the participants. While the participants went through the dialogue transcripts, the short scenes were replayed one by one and the participants were required to analyse the language patterns in the dialogues. After that, the participants were given time to discuss and share their findings. This is important to raise the participants' consciousness for a detailed comprehension of the linguistic features which appeared in the dialogues. For instance, one of the language patterns analysed and discussed by the participants was the different level of politeness in the language used by certain anime characters in various contexts. Participants were also able to examine and learn new linguistic features such as casual (kudaketa) forms, gender differences in pronouns and vocabulary.
- 3) **Follow-up discussion:** The follow-up discussion activity was carried out using the experiential approach where the participants were encouraged to give comments and responses based on the anime watched. This activity was used to stimulate communication among the participants, as well as to develop sharing and co-operative skills. For example, questions such as “What is the story about?”, “How would you describe the characters?” etc. were asked to stimulate communication and the participants would summarise the story and discuss their personal impression of the anime watched. The follow-up discussion is important in generating a more learner-centred classroom. In a learner-centred classroom, the learners get more “talking time” (Jones, 2007). Giving the participants plenty of time to think, organise and share their ideas while reducing interruption from the educator helps in lowering the participants' speaking nervousness. On the other hand, although the educator should minimise his or her interruption in this activity, the educator also plays an important role in helping the participants to clarify doubts and misunderstanding by asking questions such as “How does the anime relate to what

we were studying in class?”, “What are your impressions of the cultural issues portrayed?”, etc. By doing this, the participants were allowed to express their personal responses towards the anime, clarify any misunderstanding of cultural issues portrayed, and relate the learning from anime to real life situations.

### Data collection

The data were collected via learning diaries and group interview.

- (1) Learning diaries: Apart from recording the students' own learning and skill development during the classroom learning process, learning diaries contain the students' record of their own experiences, thoughts, feelings and reflections. The participants were given the option to write their diaries in whichever language they felt most comfortable with when recording their thoughts. All the participants chose to write their diaries in English. The function of these learning diaries were to record the participants' feelings, impressions, perceptions, and experiences in the classroom. The learning diaries were collected at 7 intervals (5 active viewing lessons and 2 revision lessons) and a total of 77 diaries were collected.
- (2) Group interview: Unlike the learning diaries which revealed only the participants' individual opinions and feelings, the group interview was able to gather multiple points of view at one time. For example, the participants were able to respond to

each other's answers and to some extent, reduce the anxiety the participants might feel in an individual interview. In addition, the group interview data could also be used to triangulate findings from the participants' personal learning diaries on a broader scope. The semi-structured group interview consisted of all 11 participants who had attended the anime course and was conducted over a 2-hour period. The participants were allowed to give their opinions in whichever language they felt most comfortable with when expressing their thoughts and all the participants chose to speak in English. The group interview was recorded using a sound recorder. The group interview was centred on three questions probing the participants' responses and perceptions of the anime course, benefits of the anime course, and their future suggestions (see Appendix A). Upon completion of the group interview, the data recorded were transcribed verbatim into a text transcript.

### Data analysis strategy

The learning diaries collected were analysed through the ongoing and “continual reflection” analysis methods (Cresswell, 2003: 190). The data were reduced, typed and organised accordingly. Then, the data were read repeatedly in order to achieve a sense of the whole. To look for categories and emergent themes, a coding system was used (Saldana, 2009). The data collected from the group interview were analysed using the same coding system utilised in the learning diaries (see Figure 3).

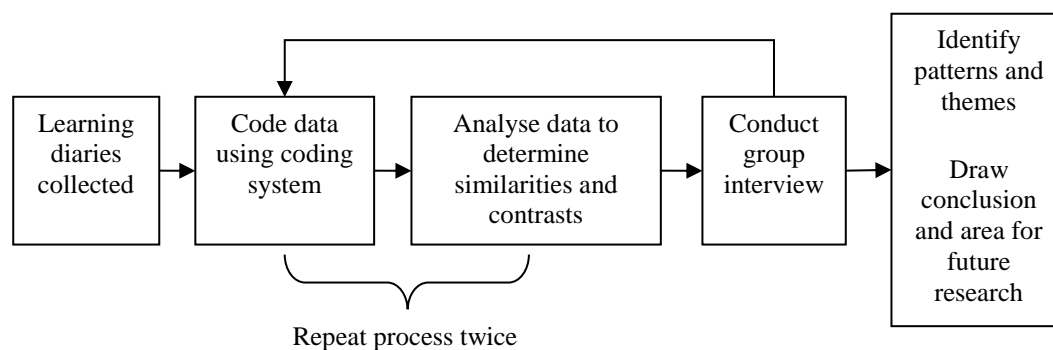


Figure 3. Data analysis process

The coding process started with a First Cycle Coding (Saldana, 2009: 45). Each sentence was analysed to determine keywords and phrases that were common amongst the participants. Keywords and phrases were then assigned with a suitable category label. Memos were used to take note of themes emerging in the data for later reference. After the codes were categorized, they were compared to one another. Next, in the Second Cycle

Coding, the Pattern Coding method was used to reduce the initial codes developed by grouping similarly coded data. Finally, the Axial Coding method was used to further analyse the categories coded from the first two stages. A table of themes was constructed and sub-themes were nested with supporting quotes from the participants. This study adheres to Smith (2011)'s guidelines concerning scientific rigour and trustworthiness by using

sufficient quotations from the data to illustrate each theme and to demonstrate the density of evidence. Smith (2011) suggested that for a sample size of one to three participants (n=1-3), quotations are needed from every participant per theme and for a sample size of four to eight participants (n=4-8), quotations are needed from at least three participants per theme.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the group interview were analysed for emergent themes. This data from the group interview was also triangulated with the participants' learning diaries. Both of these data sources will be discussed in the analysis result. The emergent themes from the data analysis are as follows: Motivation, Language and cultural awareness, Critical thinking, Sense of prejudice, and Stereotypes

### Motivation

All the participants affirmed that they were excited about watching anime in the classroom. Most of the time, all the participants felt motivated to attend the anime class because they thought it was "fun", "relaxing", and "exciting". Frank, Sharon, and Evelyn expressed,

"I love the idea of learning Japanese language through watching anime because it enables us to learn Japanese language and culture in a more **relaxing** and **fun** way" (Frank, diary 1).

"The class atmosphere is very good and **not stressful**. This is very **motivating**. I'm **excited** to see what anime *sensei* (teacher) will show us next week" (Susan, diary, R1).

"My *kouhai* (junior) was envied when I told them our *sensei* (teacher) is using anime to teach us Japanese language. I feel **motivated** and I think this is quite a sophisticated way of teaching" (Evelyn, diary 3).

However, one participant, Olivia voiced concern regarding the implementation of an anime course in the curriculum system. She was concerned that the enjoyment and excitement would decrease if watching anime in the classroom becomes a task. According to Olivia,

"The reason why I like to watch anime is because I want to relax myself during free time. Well I did enjoy watching anime in the class too, but somehow... somehow I'm worried [frown]. I felt like **it has become a task** to complete... like I have to fully focus when watching the anime in order for me to fill in the worksheet" (Olivia, interview).

According to Brophy (2004), intrinsic motivation "emphasizes curriculum content and learning activities that connect with students' interests". "It is hard to just enjoy an activity and

'go with the flow' when the activity is compulsory and your performance will be evaluated" (Brophy, 2004: 14). When asked whether they liked the idea of using anime as a teaching tool, it is revealed that all the participants welcomed the use of anime in the classroom if they see it as an intrinsic motivation. This is an important point that will help the educator to plan the lessons effectively so that it does not affect the students' passion and interest in learning language and culture through anime in the classroom.

### Language and cultural awareness

Another benefit of using anime as a teaching tool in the classroom was to build up language awareness. It also provides active viewing training to the participants so that they can use the technique of active viewing when they watch anime at home too. The participants revealed that they usually watched anime passively at home without paying much attention to the language features in anime. However, after the anime course, they were trained to become more active when watching anime not only inside the classroom, but also outside the classroom. Frank mentioned that,

"Before this (course), when I was watching anime at home, I just focussed on the story. I skipped through the dialogues which I didn't understand. But now that I have adapted to the way we watch anime in class, I **become more attentive** when I watch anime at home, for example... I usually watch anime on *YouTube*. So now I will press the pause button whenever I notice something which I don't understand and try to figure it out" (Frank, interview).

All the participants agreed that they could learn more about Japanese linguistics features such as men and women's languages, plain and polite forms, phrases, vocabulary, and intonation by paying more attention to the anime dialogues. Furthermore, by using anime in the classroom, it intensified the effectiveness of language and culture learning because through classroom discussions, students would become more aware of the language and cultural details that appeared in the anime they watched. In regards to this, Betty said that,

"My friends and I were actually using "*-desu*" [polite form] in our conversations. We had already gotten used to it and it was hard for us to speak to each other using plain form. It was because we didn't really **expose** to plain form speech styles in daily context. I think it is good to have this class because politeness level and gender differences could be **clearly seen from some anime**" (Betty, diary 1).

Many people perceive anime as merely children television shows, but "Napier confirms that anime reaches far beyond the children's cartoon and often portrays important social and cultural themes" (Napier, 2005: back cover). Apart from Napier's



statement, Poitras (2010) also claimed that “paying attention when watching anime can be a productive way of noticing many cultural details.” He gave examples of some obvious cultural aspects which could be observed from anime such as “furniture, school customs, clothing, folklore, religion, food, etiquette, geography, landmarks, sounds, seasonal clues” and also, the more subtle aspects such as “feelings, perseverance, cinematic effects and social problems”. For example, in the interview, Susan commented that,

“When we’re learning from anime inside the classroom, we could get some kinds of new information about Japanese culture. We have discussion about the cultural issues... for example, the *sadou* (Japanese tea ceremony). *Sensei* (teacher) will give explanation about whatever questions we have when watching the anime. So I think this is very useful to let us to **become aware** of the cultural thing portrayed in the anime. If I were to watch it outside the classroom, I don’t think I will get as much information as I can get from the class” (Susan, interview).

These findings showed that the use of anime as a teaching material in the classroom could train the student to transform their interest in watching anime into language learning opportunities not just inside the classroom, but also outside the classroom when they watch anime for leisure.

### Critical thinking

Different people might have different views about certain social or cultural themes. Watching anime and having discussions about it in the class helped to provide the students’ a medium to express their point of view and improve the students’ critical thinking skill. In addition, the teacher also plays an important role in guiding students to think critically by facilitating discussion with questions that allow the students to explore different avenues and stimulate creativity. For example, “What do you think about the ending of this anime?” and “What are the differences and similarities between Japanese and Malaysian culture?” One participant, Susan said that,

“Watching anime is fun, but sometimes we don’t think too deep. After listened to my classmates’ opinion, it opened my eyes. I never think of it (particular issue in the anime) this way. [...] the anime class makes you more like an adult, rather than a child. It makes us think about **the message behind the anime**” (Susan, interview).

When asked to give examples in regards to this, Sharon mentioned that,

“Sometimes new topic related to the anime came up in the discussion, for example... in the first lesson where we learned about interesting surnames in Japan. From the discussion about the interesting surnames, someone in the class raised the issue of how Japanese switch surname when

the parents divorced... Also I learned about the use of ‘*hanko*’ (name stamp or seal) in Japanese society. I think this is good because we are not only discussing about what inside the anime, but actually **think critically about the issues in real life**” (Sharon, interview).

This findings support Napier’s statement that, “in some ways the content of anime– its particular themes, issues and icons– is inevitably culturally specific. For example, many anime comedies are set at school, since education is one of the major pivots around which Japanese society revolves. [...] anime does not simply reflect society; it problematizes aspects of the dominant social culture” (p. 23). The participants were able to envision cultural issues beyond what they have seen in the anime and relate it to real life cultural and social issues. This will certainly help to develop their critical thinking and critical viewing skills.

### Sense of prejudice

Some of the participants also noticed a sense of prejudice towards anime from their parents. Evelyn said that,

“I love to watch anime, but I used to watch anime in secret because my mother thinks it will teach me **bad things**” (Evelyn, interview).

Another participant, Olivia said that,

“I remember one time when I watch an anime... I forgot the anime title. It was about ‘*onsenryokou*’ (hot spring trip) among best friends. Then my mother saw me watching a scene where all the friends... all female, were taking bath together. My mother thought I was watching something bad [laugh]. This is one of the Japanese cultures, but I don’t know how to explain to her [laugh]. I guess they have this negative... **negative impression** because they don’t understand Japanese culture” (Olivia, interview).

In response to Evelyn and Olivia’s comments, one of the participants, Kevin admitted that there are some anime which contain sex and violence elements such as anime targeting the adult audience. For example, anime genres such as “*hentai*” and “*ecchi*”, which are characterised by overtly sexualised characters, as well as sexually explicit images and plots. However, Kevin also argued that other types of media such as movies and dramas also contain negative elements and it is unfair to regard all anime negative. He said,

“If you look at **all kinds of media or entertainment** like movies, drama, and... and even some novels... even some famous movies that won the Academy Awards, some of them also contain sex and violence elements to certain extent” (Kevin, interview).

As far as anime is concerned, it is undeniable that not all the anime produced is suitable to be used

as a teaching tool. Anime can be divided into various genres and there are anime which contain excessive violence, nudity, overused profanity, or sensitive religious issues. Therefore, the educators have to make careful decisions by analysing the suitability as well as the academic qualities of the particular anime that they intend to use in class.

### Stereotypes

“A stereotype is a simplified concept or image and/or standard that is common to people on another group. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and usually occur when we have minimal knowledge about a group of people” (Ion & Cojocar, 2015: 278). Cultural stereotypes are always assumed as something that is common-sense, thus the visual media viewers might not be conscious of the ways in which they shape their opinions (Ramasubramaniam, 2010). As an authentic material, anime does play important roles in shaping the viewers’ perception towards the cultural elements portrayed in it and also reflecting the present society’s image of it. One of the participants, Natalie was concerned that anime might mislead people’s perception about Japanese people and culture. She said,

“Some issues portrayed in anime might **influence our perception** about the real Japanese... For example... one common stereotype in anime is the pervert... [laugh] I came across a lot of this in *harem* anime. I know not all Japanese men are perverts, but... but we must be careful with this kind of stereotype in anime too” (Natalie, interview).

Stereotypes are also reflected in language use in anime too. In terms of speaking tone, anime voice actresses usually use high-pitched and squeaky sounding voices to represent children characters or the young innocent characters they portrayed. According to one participant, Nancy,

“I think overall it is good to learn Japanese language through anime, but... sometimes it is quite annoying when the voice actor, especially young girl tries to imitate children’s voice and act cute [laugh]. And... if someone watch anime too often, I think he or she will pick up this bad... maybe it’s not bad, but **unnatural way of speaking**... habit” (Nancy, interview)

Another participant, Mandy also mentioned stereotyping in anime in her diary,

“I like to watch *shounen* anime, but I noticed that *shounen* anime often contains a lot of dirty words. Some of my friends tend to use the **dirty words** without knowing the meaning. I think this is a common stereotype in most of the *shounen* anime especially the *Yakuza* (gangster). I think we should be taught about the vulgar language pattern too in order to avoid embarrassment when communicating with the Japanese (Mandy, diary 3).

Since educators cannot control what the students learn and see outside the classroom, one of the main concerns about the learners’ interest in anime is that they may make broad judgements or assumptions about the Japanese language and culture based solely on the anime they watched. Since many studies have shown that anime has become a significant presence amongst most of the Japanese language learners, it has become part of the Japanese language educators’ responsibility to dispel stereotypes in anime. For example, students should be reminded not to expect the Japanese to talk exactly as in anime and not to use the words or phrases learned from the anime until they are certain of the meanings. This explains why anime should be introduced in the Japanese language classroom not just because it can serve as good teaching material, but also to warn the learners about the stereotypes in anime.

### CONCLUSION

The findings from this paper showed that giving a place for anime in the Japanese language classroom is like opening a new door for educators to connect with the students and deepen understanding about the students’ learning experiences by using anime as a language and culture learning tool. This is important to provide insightful idea to the Japanese language educators regarding the option of using anime as a teaching tool. The findings show that Japanese language educators should be encouraged to seriously consider the use of Japanese popular culture as a teaching tool. By combining our efforts together, hopefully a more solid theoretical framework of using anime as a teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom can be developed in future.

Although anime is a useful Japanese language teaching tool which can attract learners’ interest and attention in the classroom, the educator’s role in the teaching and learning processes is equally important too. Therefore, future research should also focus on investigating the educators’ perceptions and practical ways of using anime as a teaching tool in the Japanese language classroom such as their choices of anime, classroom activities, task designs, and instructional strategies.

It is important to admit the fact that this study was conducted with a small sample size (n=11) from only one higher institution, which may not represent the complete scenario for broad generalisations. It cannot be assumed that this would be the case with all language learners. Future research may focus on different groups of participants with different level of Japanese language proficiency (e.g., beginner level or advanced level). **The findings of this study suggest that there are many anime titles which are suitable to be used as a teaching tool targeting Japanese language learners from different levels of**

Japanese language proficiency. Finally, another area of potential future research relates to the use of experimental or quasi-experimental design to produce empirical evidence on the evaluation of the learners' performance. It would be valuable to evaluate and provide empirical data regarding the differences in motivation and performance between the Japanese language learners who are anime fans and non-fans.

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**APPENDIX A**

Interview questions:

- 1) What do you think about the use of anime as a teaching tool in the classroom? Do you like it? Why?
- 2) What do you think about the anime-related classroom activities? Do you think they are helpful in facilitating language and culture learning? Why?
- 3) Do you have any suggestion to the use of anime as a teaching tool?