IDEAS

The Role of puns in Enhancing Japanese Language Learning for English Major Students

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Abstract

This study examines the role of puns in Japanese language learning among Indonesian students majoring in English who are taking Japanese elective courses. Puns have various functions in teaching and learning Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL). This study investigates the role of puns in Japanese language learning. This study used a mixed methods approach, collecting data through questionnaires from 54 students. The findings show that using puns in JFL classes has a positive effect on learning Japanese. The Beneficial Aspects of Using Japanese Puns in the Classroom, (1). Improving Vocabulary Comprehension; (2) Developing Speaking skills; (3) Introducing Aspects of Japanese Culture; (4). Improving Hiragana and Katakana Reading Skills. This research makes a novelty contribution by examining pun in the specific context of English majors studying Japanese. In addition, this study proposes a teaching model that utilizes pun as a tool to connect aspects of humor, creativity, and cultural understanding in the learning process.

Introduction

The use of puns in the language learning process can be an effective tool to improve students' learning and linguistic skills (Miller et al, 2021; Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Daumiller et al., 2019), especially in the context of teaching Japanese to English majors. Japanese is a language that has many homonyms that allow teachers to develop students' language skills through word games. However, the application of Japanese learning puns has significant challenges. For example, difficulties in understanding and interpreting puns can hinder the learning process (Takahashi, 2020; Miller et, 2021), especially for JFL learners.

However, puns can improve vocabulary, sentence structure understanding, and the ability to communicate creatively. Therefore, this study is of paramount importance to explore how puns can be integrated into foreign Japanese language teaching for English language students.

Japanese language learning in English majors has increased significantly over the years. They are highly motivated to study Japanese due to several factors; English majors have unique advantages that can affect their Japanese learning positively or negatively. English literature students have a strong linguistic understanding, which helps them understand the structure of Japanese. Vocabulary comprehension is relatively high because loanwords in Japanese are mostly absorbed from English. For example, the word テーブル (te-buru), which means table, has phonetic and meaning similarities with English. This can make it easier for English students to understand Japanese words, thus helping them expand their vocabulary without much difficulty. English Literature students are the same way. They can recognize simple vocabulary and phrases such as ありがとう (Arigatou. Thank You) or すごい (Sugoi - great) through anime dialogues. In this context, puns can be a relevant tool to utilize their knowledge of loan words and deepen their understanding of Japanese language structures.

Puns, known in Japanese as dajare (だじゃれ), are a form of wordplay that utilizes similarities in sound or pronunciation between words that have different meanings. Dajare is a linguistic phenomenon unique in Japan, where humor is created from the precision and ability to choose words with similar sounds but distinct meanings. In some contexts, in Japanese language learning, *dajare* (puns) can be used to introduce language concepts in a fun way. Fujioka (2008) reveals that word games can help students learn phonetics and syntax more entertainingly and memorably. Fujioka adds that *dajare* is a tool to hone creativity and critical thinking skills in a language context, as students are invited to think of other possible meanings of a word or phrase. Thus, *dajare* is not just about humor but can also be an effective learning medium for learning Japanese more thoroughly.
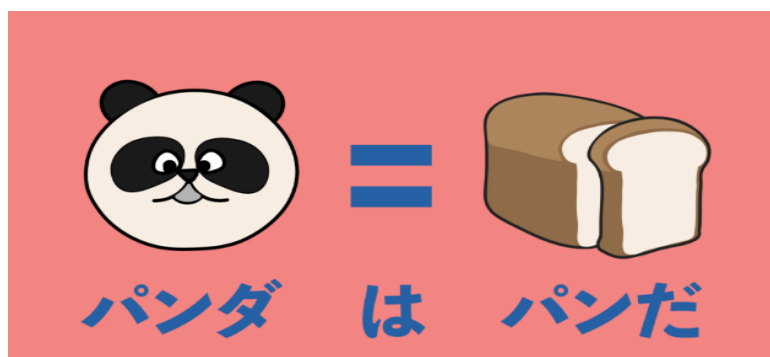

Figure 1. Homonim

Some previous studies indicate that word games can enrich the language learning process in a fun and challenging way (Yamamoto, 2022; Nakajima, 2023). For example, in Japanese language learning, word games help students enrich their vocabulary and engage them in deeper cultural aspects of the language, such as humor and idiomatic expressions (Kato & Tanaka, 2022; Syarif, & Nursidah, (2020). In addition, more in-depth research on how English language students process and apply puns in the Japanese context is limited. Most research has focused on linguistic analysis of Japanese puns (Sato, 2021).

Although previous studies have positively impacted the use of puns in Japanese language teaching, there needs to be an important gap in the focus on English language students as learners of Japanese as a foreign language. Most studies focus on learners of Japanese as a first or second language, which only partially captures the unique challenges English majors face learning Japanese as a foreign language. They often need a more profound cultural or linguistic background to understand the nuances of Japanese wordplay, which can slow down their learning process (Miller & Yoshimoto, 2021). Based on this gap, the current research focuses on how puns can be adapted for English language students studying Japanese, taking into account language and cultural differences.

Based on the identified gap analysis, the main research questions posed in this study are: How can the use of word games (puns) improve the Japanese comprehension and language skills of English majors? The main purpose of this study is to explore how puns can be adapted in the context of teaching Japanese to English language students and to identify the challenges and benefits associated with their use. This research aims to provide new insights into how the integration of pun in teaching materials can enrich students' learning experience, both linguistically and culturally.

This study used a mixed-method approach with a case study method to explore the effectiveness of puns in Japanese language learning in English majors. Data were collected through classroom observation, questionnaires and interviews, and analysis of learning materials containing puns. Questionnaires were given to students at the end of the lesson, aiming to evaluate the effectiveness of puns on vocabulary comprehension, sentence structure, and communication skills in Japanese. This research is expected to make a new contribution by examining puns in the context of English majors studying Japanese. This research offers a teaching model that uses puns as a tool to connect aspects of humor, creativity, and cultural understanding in the learning process. This model is expected to be a teaching alternative that can improve students' Japanese comprehension.

Method

This study used a mixed methodology design with quantitative and qualitative data collected through questionnaires. This approach was chosen as it allowed the researcher to dive deeply into the learning experiences of English majors in learning Japanese through the use of puns. The primary purpose of this study was to explore how puns can be adapted in the context of teaching non-native Japanese to English language students. The study involved 54 students from the fifth semester at the targeted public university. Participants were those taking an elective Japanese course. Sampling was purposive, considering that the participants had a reasonably homogeneous background in their Japanese language ability, which allowed for a more valid comparison of results.

Data will be collected through several instruments, including a written test designed to measure students' understanding of puns in Japanese, including their ability to identify and interpret puns, and a questionnaire conducted after teaching to explore students' perceptions of puns used in Japanese language learning. Classroom observations were conducted directly on students' interactions during the lesson to assess the extent to which students used puns in the lesson.

Data analysis procedures were carried out based on the established research objectives, identifying themes due to thematic analysis, evaluating and analyzing the data that had been collected, transcribing interviews, coding and identifying patterns in the data, constructing overarching themes, critically reviewing and defining these themes, and finally, reporting the findings (Arifah Drajati et al., 2023).

Results
The Beneficial Aspects of Using Japanese Puns in the Classroom

Several studies have shown that the use of puns in language teaching can improve students' language skills and abilities. Although puns are often regarded as light elements of humor, they have great potential to enrich students' learning experience, especially in vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and communication skills, including (Miller & Yoshimoto, 2021; Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Daumiller et al., 2019).

Improving Vocabulary Comprehension

Several studies have shown that using puns in language teaching can improve students' language skills and abilities. Although puns are often regarded as light elements of humor, they have great potential to enrich student's learning experience, especially in vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and communication skills, (Miller & Yoshimoto, 2021; Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Daumiller et al., 2019).

Table 1: Visual Puns

No	Word 1	Word 2	Explanation
1	あめ (雨, ame)	あめ (雨, ame)	*Ame* can mean "rain" (雨) or "candy" (飴), depending on the context or kanji. Often used in puns about weather or sweets.
2	はし (橋, hashi)	はし (箸, hashi	*Hashi* can mean "bridge" (橋) or "chopsticks" (箸), depending on the kanji. Commonly used in jokes related to eating or crossing locations.
3	かみ (紙, kami)	かみ (神, kami)	*Kami* can mean "paper" (紙) or "god" (神). This homonym is frequently used in puns in religious or mundane contexts
4	はな (花, hana)	はな (鼻, hana)	*Hana* can mean "flower" (花) or "nose" (鼻). Often featured in puns about beauty or fragrance.
5	かい (貝, kai)	かい (会, kai)	*Kai* can mean "shell" (貝) or "meeting" (会), creating wordplay opportunities when discussing gatherings or nature.
6	き (木, ki)	き (気, ki)	A pun using *sakana* (fish) and *sakanau* (resist), humorously describing someone "resisting fish," like a fisherman.
7	*Banana* (バナナ, banana)	*Banner* (バナー, banner)	バナナがバナーみたい。 (Banana ga banner mitai.) A pun comparing a banana to a banner, based on similar Katakana spellings and pronunciations.

8	*Camera* （カメラ, camera)	*Kameru* (噛める, can bite)	カメラは噛める。(Camera wa kameru.) Humorously suggesting that a camera is something you can "bite."
9	*Coffee* （コーヒー, coffee)	*Kouhi* （高費, high cost)	. コーヒーで高費。(Koohii de kouhi.) A pun on coffee being expensive, playing on its phonetic similarity to "high cost."
10	*Tomato* （トマト, tomato)	*Tomattoru* （止まっとる, stopped)	トマトは止まっとる。 (Tomato wa tomattoru.) Suggesting a tomato (*tomato*) has stopped (*tomattoru*), based on the similar sound.

Japanese puns rely heavily on the play of sound and meaning and are often used to create a light-hearted, humorous effect. Understanding puns in learning can increase vocabulary acquisition and improve students' language skills, especially those learning Japanese as a second language.

> I got a lot of new vocabulary with the puns game, so my Japanese vocabulary increased. However, guessing the words for the available pictures was difficult at the first meeting. It was a fun and engaging lesson. **(student_EM_01 reflection)**

This statement implies that she enjoyed learning puns and that her vocabulary increased. Correspondingly, figure (2) illustrates the Improve Vocabulary Comprehesion.
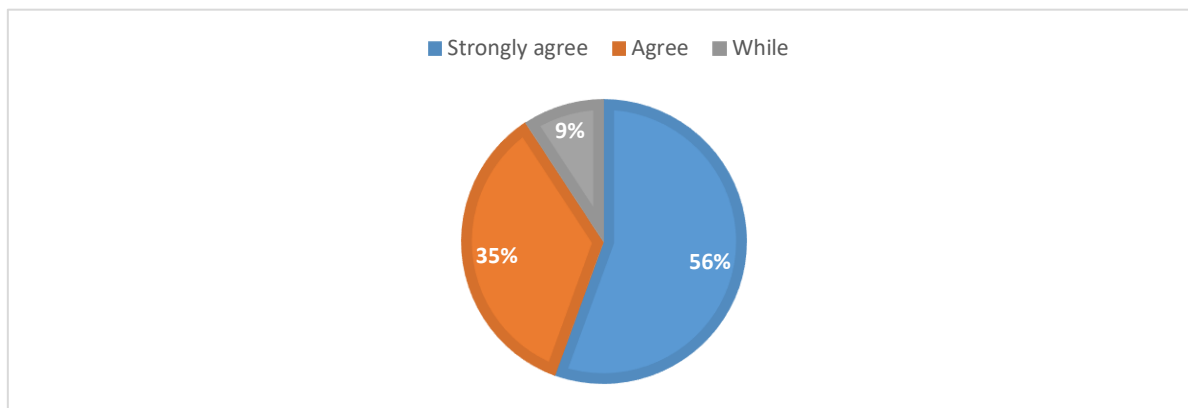
Figure 2: Improve Vocabulary Comprehesion

The figure 2 above shows that most students strongly agree that the use of puns can improve their new vocabulary in learning Japanese (76%), followed by those who agree (20%). While 4% who answered disagreed.

Developing Speaking skills

Using puns in Japanese language learning in addition to increasing Japanese vocabulary is also considered an effective method to motivate students to practice speaking simple sentences, so that by involving humor and puns in learning, it can increase their confidence in using Japanese in informal situations. This is in line with the opinion of Kato & Tanaka, (2022) that the use of puns in learning can reduce their anxiety when speaking the target language and can improve their speaking ability.

Table 2: Homographic Puns

No	Sentence	Explanation
1	Neko ga nekoronderu (猫が寝転んでる)！	Plays on *neko* (cat) and *nekoronderu* (lying down), humorously describing how cats tend to sleep anywhere.
2	Ashita, ashi ga itai. (明日、足が痛い。)	A pun on *ashita* (tomorrow) and *ashi* (foot/leg), implying that the leg pain will "arrive tomorrow."
3	Osushi wa suki sugiru! (お寿司は好きすぎる！	Repeats similar sounds *sushi* (sushi) and *suki* (like), creating a playful tone like a song.
4	Karee wa karai ree! (カレーは辛れえ)	A pun on *karee* (curry) and *karai* (spicy), where the pronunciations sound alike but have distinct meanings.
5	Kono hashi wa hashirenai! (この	Combines *hashi* (bridge) and *hashiru*

|		
	橋は走れない)	(run), humorously stating you "can't run on a bridge."
6	Sakana wo sakanau hito! 魚をさかなう人	A pun using *sakana* (fish) and *sakanau* (resist), humorously describing someone "resisting fish," like a fisherman.
7	Sushi shokunin wa sushi sugiru! (寿司職人はすしすぎる！)	Plays on *sushi* (sushi) and *sugiru* (too much), humorously describing a sushi chef's exceptional skill.
8	Tokei wa tomatte mo toki wo tomenai! (時計は止まっても時を止めない)	Plays on *tokei* (clock) and *toki* (time), emphasizing that while a clock may stop, time itself continues.
9	Kyou no tenki wa ame kamo ne, ame kamo ne! (今日の天気は雨かもね、飴かもね。)	A pun using *ame* (rain) and *ame* (candy), jokingly suggesting that today's weather might be rain or candy.
10	Ohashi de taberu no wa hazukashii! (お箸で食べるのは恥ずかしい。)	Combines *hashi* (chopsticks) and *hazukashii* (embarrassed), humorously linking chopsticks to feelings of shyness.
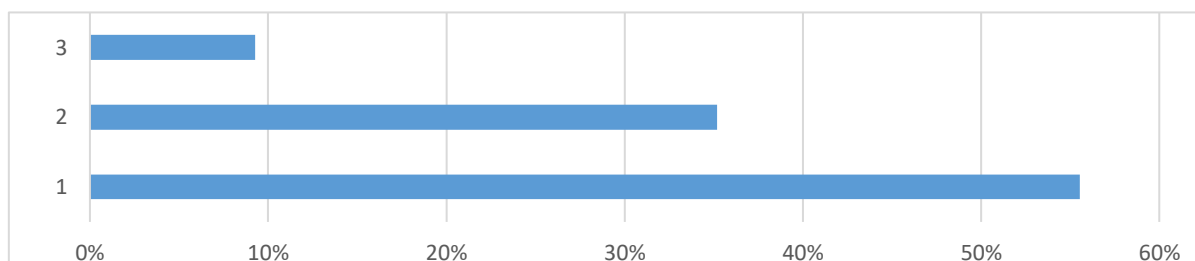
Figure 3: Developing Speaking Skills

Figure 3. In the students' responses to improving speaking skills, participants responded, 57% strongly agreeing, and 28% agreeing. The proportion of individuals who answered moderately in expressing their opinions was 15%. These results show that puns applied in Japanese language learning have a positive impact on improving students' speaking ability.

Introducing Aspects of Japanese Culture

In addition to improving Japanese language skills, puns in Japanese language teaching also introduce aspects related to Japanese culture. In puns, many words are related to cultural words or local cultural references that can only be understood by those who know Japanese culture. Therefore, Yamamoto (2022) emphasizes that introducing puns to students also brings students closer to a broader language context, which involves social, historical, and cultural aspects, because indirectly, the teacher introduces students to the cultural nuances contained in the Japanese language.

Table 3: Compound Puns

No	Sentence	Aspect of Japanese Culture	Explanation
1	Sakurambo wo sakura de taberu! (さくらんぼをさくらで食べる)!	Sakura (Cherry Blossoms)	A pun on *sakura* (cherry blossoms) and *sakurambo* (cherries), humorously describing eating cherries under a cherry blossom tree.
2	Ashita, ashi ga itai. (明日、足が痛い。)	Sushi	A wordplay on *sushi* and *sugiru* (too much), humorously highlighting how Japanese people might enjoy sushi excessively.
3	Osushi wa suki sugiru! (お寿司は好きすぎる！	Bonsai, Bon Odori	A pun on *bonsai* (miniature tree) and *bon odori* (traditional dance), imagining someone dancing inside a bonsai pot.
4	Karee wa karai ree! (カレーは辛れえ)	Kamaboko (Steamed Fish Cake)	A pun on *kamaboko* (steamed fish cake) and *kamatte* (to pamper), humorously implying treating food as if it were alive.
5	Kono hashi wa	Tea Ceremony	A pun on *cha* (tea) and

	hashirenai! (この橋は走れない)	(Sadou)	*wakasu* (boil), highlighting the Japanese philosophy that tea ceremony is more about emotional connection than just making tea
6	Sakana wo sakanau hito! 魚をさかなう人	Mount Fuji	A pun on *yama* (mountain), humorously describing eating a mountain-shaped food (yama) while looking at a mountain.
7	Sushi shokunin wa sushi sugiru! (寿司職人はすしすぎる！)	Kimono	A pun on *kimono* (traditional clothing) and *kiru* (to wear), suggesting that wearing a kimono also involves presenting one's heart.
8	Tokei wa tomatte mo toki wo tomenai! (時計は止まっても時を止めない)	Shinto Shrine (Jinja), Kami (God/Spirit)	A pun on *kami* meaning "spirit" or "god" in Shinto and *kami* meaning "hair," humorously asking the gods for beautiful hair.
9	Kyou no tenki wa ame kamo ne, ame kamo ne! (今日の天気は雨かもね、飴かもね。)	Washoku (Japanese Cuisine), Wa (Harmony)	A pun on *wa* meaning "harmony" and *washoku* (Japanese cuisine), emphasizing the harmonious balance in taste and presentation of Japanese food.
10	Ohashi de taberu no wa hazukashii! (お箸で食べるのは恥ずかしい。)	Tea (Ocha), Sake	A pun on *ocha* (tea) and *ochake* (sake), humorously suggesting that even when drinking tea, one might secretly enjoy sake in spirit.

Table 3 shows examples of puns containing cultural aspect words including; *Sakura* refers to the cherry blossom, which has cultural significance. Sushi is a world-famous Japanese dish consisting of rice combined with seafood, vegetables, and sometimes tropical fruit. *Bonsai* is the art of growing miniature trees in pots.

It symbolizes patience, harmony, and connection with nature. *Bon Odori* is a traditional Japanese dance performed during the Obon festival, which honors the spirits of ancestors. Kamaboko is a traditional Japanese food made from steamed fish paste. *Sadou* (茶道), or Japanese tea ceremony, is the ritual of serving and consuming matcha (powdered green tea). *Fuji-san* (富士山), Mount Fuji is Japan's highest and most iconic mountain. The mountain has a profound spiritual and cultural significance in Japan, and The *Kimono* is a traditional Japanese dress known for its long sleeves, intricate designs, and rich cultural symbolism. *Jinja* is a Shinto shrine, a place of worship dedicated to the Shinto religion. *Washoku* refers to traditional Japanese cuisine known for its emphasis on seasonal ingredients, balance, and presentation, consisting of rice, fish, vegetables, and soup. *Wa* (和), which means harmony. *Ocha* is the Japanese word for tea, which generally refers to green tea (ryokucha). *Sake* is a traditional Japanese alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice. These words not only represent key aspects of Japanese culture but also provide insight into the values, traditions, and outlook on life that shape life in Japan.

The Implementation of puns in learning, I gained a lot of new knowledge that is closely related to Japanese culture, so far, I don't really know what Wa (和) means in the word Washoku, Sadou (茶道), even though I often find the word in anime. This includes the mention of fuji mountain, not fuji yama but fuji-san. (student_EM'_03 reflection)

This statement implies that she enjoyed learning puns and that her new knowledge that is closely related to Japanese culture correspondingly, figure (4) illustrates the Introducing Aspects of Japanese Culture
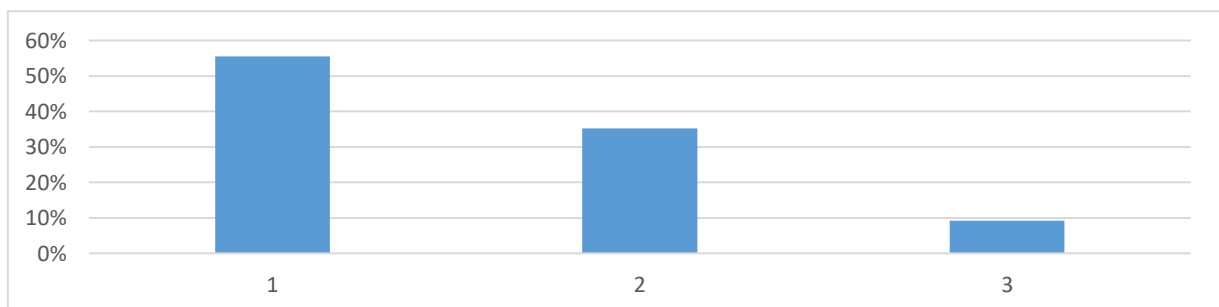
Figure 4: Introducing Aspects of Japanese Culture

Figure 4: In the students' responses related to learning puns that in addition to improving Japanese language skills, it also introduces aspects of Japanese culture, students who answered strongly agree, 50% strongly agree, and 31% agree. The proportion of individuals who answered moderately in expressing their opinions was 19%. These results show that puns applied in Japanese language learning positively impact both language skills and cultural aspects.

Improving Hiragana and Katakana Reading Skills

In foreign language learning, listening and reading skills are two very important aspects. Through the use of puns in reading texts or audio recordings, students can practice listening and understanding nuances of meaning that may not be immediately apparent at first glance. For example, puns can contain layers of meaning that require extra attention to understand, which can train students to be more careful in listening and reading Japanese texts (Sato, 2021). This improves their ability to understand context and intonation in everyday conversations.
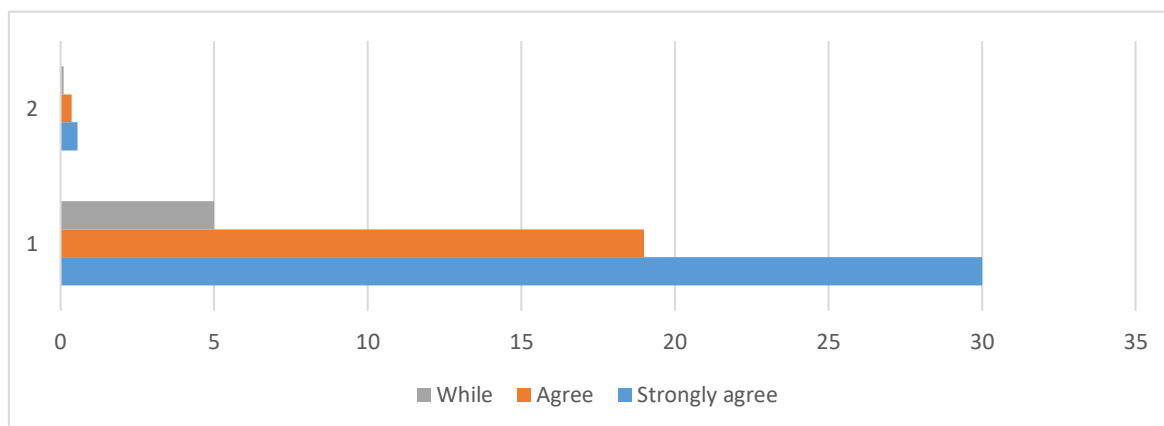

Figure 5: Improving Hiragana and Katakana Reading Skills

Figure 5 shows students' responses regarding the application of learning puns applied to Japanese language learning, impacting on students' ability to read hiragana and katakana, students who answered while 19%, 30% agreed and strongly agreed as much as 50%.

Discussion

This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of using puns in Japanese language learning for students majoring in English Literature. This research utilizes student responses in the form of questionnaires on Google Forms. It aims to obtain students' responses accurately related to the application of puns-based Japanese language learning. The results showed that using puns in language

teaching can improve students' language abilities and skills. Although puns are often considered elements of light humor, they have great potential to enrich students' learning experiences, especially in vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and communication skills (Miller & Yoshimoto, 2021; Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Daumiller et al., 2019).

Various approaches are taken in language teaching to improve students' language skills and abilities, both in the use of materials and training (Hermansyah et al., 2023). Although puns are often considered an element of light humor, they have great potential to enrich students' learning experience, especially in vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and communication skills, (Miller & Yoshimoto, 2021; Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Daumiller et al., 2019). In addition to improving Japanese language skills, puns in Japanese language teaching also introduce aspects related to Japanese culture. In puns, many words are related to cultural words or local cultural references that can only be understood by those who know Japanese culture. Therefore, Yamamoto (2022) emphasizes that introducing puns to students also brings students closer to a broader linguistic context, involving social, historical, and cultural aspects, as teachers indirectly introduce students to the cultural nuances contained in the Japanese language.

In foreign language learning, listening and reading skills are two very important aspects. Through the use of puns in reading texts or audio recordings, students can practice listening and understanding nuances of meaning that may not be immediately apparent at first glance. For example, puns can contain layers of meaning that require extra attention to understand, which can train students to be more careful in listening and reading Japanese texts (Sato, 2021). This can improve their ability to understand context and intonation in everyday conversation.

The implementation of puns in Japanese language learning faces some significant challenges. Firstly, the level of vocabulary acquisition of English language students greatly influences the success of the implementation, as reported by Takahashi (2020),

> **"word play, or puns, play an important role in learning the Japanese language because they enhance students' linguistic understanding and introduce them to cultural nuances that are often difficult to grasp without context. Using homonyms and wordplay allows students to see the multiple meanings of the same word, which often depend on specific social or cultural contexts. However, the biggest challenge faced is understanding the context needed to fully appreciate wordplay, especially for learners new to the Japanese language."Takahashi (2020) states, "This challenge becomes even greater when the wordplay involves**

cultural references that foreign learners may not immediately recognize. For example, using words in puns with symbolic or idiomatic meanings heavily depends on knowledge of the broader Japanese culture."

Secondly, implementation time and opportunities are very short, and time constraints in the curriculum often make it difficult for teachers to add creative elements like this without compromising the core material (Miller et al., 2021). Other obstacles include cultural differences, where students majoring in English may not understand the cultural references attached to Japanese wordplay. For example, homonyms in Japanese are often related to local customs or traditions, which may be less familiar to international students (Daumiller et al., 2019).

However, using puns in Japanese language learning for non-natives also presents some disadvantages that need to be considered by teachers. Effectiveness The effectiveness of using puns depends mainly on the ability of the students to speak Japanese. While some students find puns interesting, others find learning puns uninteresting. The subjective nature of puns means that what one student finds funny may not be funny to another (Bakar & Kumar, 2019). Puns can also create confusion and misunderstanding in interpretation, especially if the words are culturally charged (Tran, 2022). For students who struggle with language comprehension, jokes or puns may not be understood by them.

Conclusion

The implementation of learning by using puns in teaching Japanese as a foreign language to English major students who are non-native Japanese speakers is very beneficial. Using puns in the classroom provides opportunities for students to better understand Japanese culture and words, develop language skills, and improve hiragana and katakana reading ability. Using puns, teachers can create meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences for students, which can help the language acquisition process.

The study's results found some recommendations for teachers who want to implement pus in learning: Start with simple and familiar words (e.g., focus on basic homonyms) to complex levels. Words related to cultural context should be explained before starting the activity. If possible, use Visual Media: Use pictures, videos, or interactive tools to help students understand the different meanings of words in various contexts. At the end of the lesson, give thorough feedback.

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