

# JAPANESE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING USING ROLE-PLAYING GAME

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate university students' perception of role-playing games (RPG) implementation towards conventional teaching and learning approach after undertaking three semesters of Japanese language class. As a part time lecturer for Japanese language course at Universiti Malaysia Sabah-Labuan International Campus, the first author found that some of the students were having difficulties to understand basic Japanese content even after attending Japanese language class for three continuous semesters. With the aim of improving Japanese learning process, this study was carried out towards 27 voluntary Japanese language course students. Students were interviewed and asked to fill an open-ended questionnaire regarding their experience of conventional teaching and learning approach, as well as their perception of RPG implementation for Japanese language learning. Qualitative data analysis method was used along this study. Results indicated that boredom of learning by conventional teaching approach decreases the students' study motivation. In order to attract the students' attention towards language learning, students supported the RPG implementation towards conventional teaching approach as it is interesting and increases the students' study motivation. Throughout the study, it is hoped that the analysis will further improve the Japanese teaching and learning approach in university. As the RPG implementation suggests improving current language learning approach, it aims to produce more undergraduate students who are competitive in terms of language ability. Students were preferably learning Japanese by conventional teaching approach, in addition of RPG implementation towards class lesson. The finding is in fact a good suggestion for the government to reconstruct current varsity teaching and learning approaches in terms of not only Japanese, but other foreign languages learning in public higher educational institutions as it is important to produce high quality graduates with extra foreign language skills.

**Key Words:** Role-playing games (RPG), Japanese language, learning

## INTRODUCTION

According to a report done by Ministry of Higher Education (Study Committee for the Future Direction of the Language Education in Malaysia, 2010), Asian and European languages including Arabic, Japanese, French and German had been introduced in

public universities as proficiency in a third language becomes a vital element for the economic development in Malaysia. In 2014 (The Star Online, 2014), to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Look-East Policy a second wave was established, with aims to further strengthen the cooperation between Malaysia and Japan. In order to achieve the objective, Japanese language learning becomes the main aspect to be focused on. The public universities in Malaysia become the government's first step of developing the third language proficiency among undergraduates. An effective learning approach is very crucial in order to develop basic third language skills among undergraduates. In recent years, the video game industry has grown globally. Since video games are being favoured by the people, various researches had been carried out to find out the benefits of video gameplay other than its entertainment purpose. Among the benefits, video gameplay is found to be effective towards language learning. Even though video games for learning is still not widely adopted in Malaysia context, the authors hope to benefit the use of video game, specifically Role-playing video game (RPG), to improve the current teaching and learning approach for Japanese language course offered in Universiti Malaysia Sabah- Labuan International Campus. While other researchers made use of the current available video games to improve learning, the proposed tailor-made RPG with necessary learning content embedded will produce more precise data regarding the effectiveness towards language learning process through its gameplay. Current teaching and learning approach will not be replaced but it aims to be enhanced with the introduction of the RPG as a supplementary revising tool.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENTS**

Currently, Japanese language is offered by Universiti Malaysia Sabah as an elective course, in which undergraduates have to complete three levels of basic Japanese course once they chose Japanese as the elective course for foreign language. Upon completing the three semesters' study, the student is expected to gain the basic proficiency in Japanese language. Unfortunately, as a part time lecturer for Japanese language course, the first author noticed that some students were facing difficulties to understand basic Japanese content even after they have completed the three semester basic Japanese course. As a consequence, they have gotten lower cumulative grade point average (CGPA) due to the bad performance in Japanese course. The objective of developing a third language skill towards students was not successfully achieved and university's policy of providing foreign language course as a compulsory course started to be questioned. It is definitely a waste of time and money for both university and students if man power for teaching and money allocated for the teaching materials were not used wisely and effectively.

In order to achieve the objective of developing undergraduates with basic third language skills upon completing the three semesters study, the authors have proposed a Role-playing video game (RPG) to be implemented towards current teaching and learning approach with the aim to improve learning process. The RPG will be designed as a tool for students to revise what they have learnt in the class. This will indirectly save time as the lecturer can focus more on important tasks rather than doing revision during class lessons.

Since the class is conducted 3 hours per week, 14 weeks per semester, an effective revising tool is becoming extremely crucial towards language learning in a limited time frame.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In a survey report of Japan Foundation (Japan Foundation, 2012), there were a total of 33,077 learners recorded in Malaysia in year 2012, as compared to 22,856 in year 2009. As the number of learners increased, the institutions which serve this language course were also increased. A study of the effectiveness of foreign language program in Malaysia (Ainol et al., 2007) stated that foreign languages are offered in almost all major public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. There are reasons and purposes to learn Japanese language. Therefore, researchers are searching numbers of approach for language learning as well to serve the different needs of the learners. One of the language learning approaches is through playing video games. A study of 3D role playing games to be used as language learning tools (Y.Rankin et al, 2006) showed that through playing massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), it improved the vocabulary and conversation skills of English as a second language (ESL) students. In another research conducted in Turkey showed that young learners who played online games promotes language learning and especially vocabulary skills. (Yildiz, Pelin, 2009). In Malaysia, a study of exposure of computer games among IHL students shows that students with early exposure score higher in their academic result when compared to those with late exposure to games. (Hasiah et al., 2010). In this research, video games that require a big production cost and time were not taken into account. Instead, a bitmap type of RPG named Earthbound is being referred during the game creation process. The RPG will be created with Japanese content embedded into it. Reference books "*Minna no nihongo*" which consists of the whole learning content for three semesters' study will be used in the game as well. Figure 1 shows the screen shot during Earthbound gameplay.



Figure 1 Screen shot of Earthbound

## METHODOLOGY

The process of data gathering involved 27 voluntary Japanese language course students 17 females and 10 males, age between 21 to 22 years old, who completed three semesters of basic Japanese course at Universiti Malaysia Sabah- Labuan

International Campus. Briefing was given by the first author on the objective of the study being carried out. The definition of role-playing game was explained to avoid confusion over the main elements of this research. Students were then interviewed in groups and asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire regarding their perception and experience after undertaking three semesters of Japanese language study. There were 8 questions in the open-ended questionnaire that aims to obtain precise answer from the voluntary students. Since the majority of students that took part in this study were Chinese, they are allowed to express their opinion in Mandarin as well, which they can use to express themselves better. Qualitative data analysis method was used to analyse the data collected from the students. There were three main questions taken from the questionnaire and will be discussed later on. Since the raw data collected from the students were open-ended, the authors used a table to categorize the data collected. There were overlapped numbers of students because they can give more than one opinion or suggestion in one question. Due to the misunderstanding towards questions asked or some other circumstances, some irrelevant answers and opinions from the students were not included during data analysis.

## RESULTS

In question 3, all voluntary students think that video game can improve learning and the reasons are shown in Table 1. 59.2% of students think that video game is interesting.

**Table 1** Question 3

No.	Do you think video games can improve learning? Why?	No. of student
1	Interesting	16
2	Easier to memorize	9
3	Easier to understand	5
4	Easier to learn	2
5	Attractive	1
6	Improve reading skill	1

Next, in question 5, students were asked about their perception towards current teaching and learning approach. Majority of students stated that specific teaching and learning material is good. Apart from the good comments, there were 10 comments clearly stated that the current teaching and learning approach is boring, not practical and too common. In this question, some of the irrelevant comments and wrong answers were not included.

**Table 2** Question 5

No.	What is your perception toward the current teaching and learning approach in Japanese Language course?(powerpoint, visual aids, listening task, whiteboard, homework.)Please write in detail.	No. of student
1	Homework is useful/good	15
2	Listening is useful/good	10

3	Power point is good	7
4	Overall is good	6
5	Boring	6
6	Not practical/ Too common	4

Last, in question 6, students were asked to describe their understanding towards content taught by the lecturer in class. Only four students stated that they are not so understand about the content taught by the lecturer. Table 3 shows the categorized answer from students.

**Table 3** Question 6

No.	How is your understanding towards the content taught by the lecturer in class?	No. of student
1	Very well understood	6
2	Well understood	4
3	Understand	4
4	Quite okay	6
5	Not so understand	4

During the process of categorising the students in this question, the authors noticed that a few students who wrote “Very well understood” do not actually perform well throughout the three semesters and vice versa, the students who scored well in three semesters have given the comment that they are “Quite okay”, and “Not so understand”. One of the well performed students wrote that her understanding towards the content taught is “50%. not very easy to catch up content quickly. need to spend much more time to revise again then only can remember content memorise content [sic]”. Another student in average performance wrote “I understand very well. But after few days without revision I will tend to forget [sic]”. Even though it seems that the comments written by the students did not match the actual performance, students from the different performance levels highlight the same point that no matter how is their level of understanding, revision is very important when it comes to language learning.

## **FUTURE WORK**

The study to understand the students’ perception of current teaching and learning approach and opinion towards game implementation as a revising tool is part of the postgraduate’s research on how Japanese language could be improved through RPG game play. Other questions included in the questionnaire, which did not mention in this paper will be further analysed as well. Based on the data collected from the students and results analysed from the data, it motivates the authors to further proceed towards game creation as the concept of RPG implementation is favoured by all of the participated students. In order to produce an RPG which suits the learning context, the RPG will be created by referring to the main textbook for Japanese language course, “Minna no nihongo”. With the aim to produce a bitmap type of RPG, “Earthbound” is being used as the main reference. Since the game created will serve a purpose of revising the contents learnt in classroom, before each game play, the game will prompt out 3 selections of level, which suits the Japanese course level 1 to level 3 students

respectively. English will be the main language used to create the game and tasks will be shown in Japanese that has been learnt by student in prior as target students are all in basic Japanese level. Throughout game play, user will have to overcome some challenges in order to proceed onwards and experience point will be gained for each successful game play. With the RPG created as a revising tool for Japanese language course, it aims to further improve the learning process of the language and further improved the students' academic result.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, the authors have discussed the students' experience and their perception towards RPG implementation to improve learning. There are needs of transforming language learning process to a much active process with the implementation of RPG instead of the conventional teaching and learning approach, which seemed passive overall. RPG would act as a supplementary learning material to improve the learning process without replacing current teaching and learning approach, at the same time it aims to increase the students' motivation for language learning as more than half of the students think that learning through game playing is interesting. The idea of RPG implementation towards language learning in classroom would remain a challenge since it is still not widely adopted in Malaysia context. From the fact that all students that participated in this research agreed that they are interested towards the RPG implementation to improve language learning, the research work is currently in progress to further implement the RPG game to the real class lesson and effectiveness is yet to be identified in the next stage of this research. RPG is suggested to be a good supplementary teaching and learning material. In fact it saves time for student to revise the content learnt in the classroom, which is very important to improve language proficiency. Since this research is focused on improving language learning process in terms of vocabulary and sentence pattern; the listening comprehension and oral skills which were not include in this research will be an issue to be discussed further on.

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