

Understanding Japanese Language Learning Difficulties in an Indonesian Vocational Training Institution: A Phenomenological Study from a Teacher's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Japanese-language learning difficulties experienced by trainees in a vocational training institution or *Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja* (LPK) in Indonesia from the perspective of a Japanese-language teacher. LPK programs prepare trainees for employment-related pathways to Japan within compressed training periods, making rapid language development a central instructional demand. A qualitative phenomenological design was used to explore how one teacher perceived, interpreted, and responded to learner difficulties in daily instructional practice. Data were generated through an in-depth interview and supported by classroom observation, subsequently analyzed through data reduction, thematic organization, and interpretive conclusion drawing. The findings indicate four interrelated themes: (1) beginner-level entry combined with an accelerated curriculum; (2) vocabulary retention and Japanese particles as core linguistic bottlenecks; (3) limited language exposure, uneven learning pace, and motivational vulnerability; and (4) adaptive teaching through repetition, targeted tasks, evaluation, and individualized support. The findings extend previous Indonesian research by showing that learning difficulty in LPK settings is not adequately explained as an individual linguistic deficiency. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of linguistic distance, compressed instructional time, opportunities for language use, learner heterogeneity, and affective conditions. The study, therefore, argues for early diagnostic teaching, structured opportunities for meaningful Japanese use, and differentiated support in vocational language programs.

Keywords: *japanese language learning; phenomenology; teacher perspective; vocational training institution*

Submitted	Accepted	Published
14 August 2026	29 September 2026	30 September 2026

Citation	:	Putri, T.H., Rasiban, L.M., & Herniwati. (2026). Understanding Japanese Language Learning Difficulties in an Indonesian Vocational Training Institution: A Phenomenological Study from a Teacher's Perspective. <i>Jurnal PAJAR (Pendidikan dan Pengajaran)</i> , 10(5), 999-1010. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.33578/pjr.v10i5.1777 .
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INTRODUCTION

Japanese-language education in Indonesia increasingly intersects with vocational mobility and preparation for employment in Japan. In *Lembaga Pelatihan Kerja* (LPK), Japanese is taught as a functional resource for workplace communication, social adaptation, and employment readiness rather than only as an academic subject. Recent studies of Japanese training in Indonesia indicate that vocational programs operate under distinctive constraints, including short training periods, strong employment orientation, heterogeneous learner backgrounds, and substantial expectations for rapid progress (Arianingsih et al., 2025; Dianita & Arbarini, 2025; Nariyah & Shomedran, 2022; Widiанти et al., 2026).

These conditions make the study of learning difficulties particularly important. In formal education, learners may have years to develop linguistic knowledge gradually, whereas LPK trainees are often expected to acquire usable Japanese within several months. Arianingsih et al. (2025) found that learners in a five-month LPK program could make meaningful progress but continued to experience difficulties in sentence construction, complex vocabulary, and speaking confidence. Widiанти et al. (2026), examining vocational education and training centers across Indonesia, likewise identified teacher, teaching process and learner-related factors as interconnected contributors to inadequate Japanese-language knowledge and skills. These findings reveal that learning difficulty in vocational contexts should be examined as a product of the instructional ecology rather than solely as a property of individual learners.

At the linguistic level, Indonesian learners encounter substantial differences between Indonesian and Japanese. Previous studies have identified difficulties involving grammar, sentence structure, particles, kanji, vocabulary, and spoken communication (Amril et al., 2024; Istiqomah et al., 2015; Sarjani & Hartati, 2022; Sudipa, 2020). Particle use is particularly problematic because Japanese particles encode grammatical and semantic relationships that do not map directly onto Indonesian. Studies focusing specifically on Japanese particles have documented persistent confusion involving *wa*, *ga*, *o*, *ni*, and *de* (Alifah et al., 2020; Maarif, 2023; Safama & Diner, 2022).

Vocabulary presents a related challenge. Indonesian learners must retain unfamiliar lexical forms and learn how words operate in context. Research in Indonesian Japanese-language classrooms reveals that contextualized vocabulary instruction, interactive practice, and repeated exposure can improve lexical learning (Kharismawati et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2023; Wikarya & Putri, 2021). Evidence from second-language research also indicates that distributed practice is particularly useful for retention over time (Kim & Webb, 2022). Thus, a teacher's use of repetition in an LPK should not be interpreted merely as routine drilling; it can constitute a pedagogically meaningful response to a documented retention problem.

Non-linguistic factors further complicate learning. Motivation, anxiety, confidence, learning habits, and opportunities to use Japanese outside class influence how learners respond to instructional demands. In Indonesia, demotivating factors in Japanese learning include course difficulty, speaking anxiety, perceived devaluation of learning, and boredom (Yamashita, 2020). Foreign-language anxiety has also been associated with learners' perceptions of classroom experience and teacher behavior (Djafri & Wimbarti, 2018), while Japanese-specific research elucidates that greater exposure to discussion can be associated with lower anxiety (Chairunnisa et al., 2024). Motivation is similarly consequential: Indonesian learners report communication goals, personal aspirations, and employment-related purposes as essential reasons for studying Japanese (Suryadi & Rosiah, 2018; Patria & Alfariy, 2024).

Although this literature establishes that Indonesian learners experience linguistic, motivational, and contextual difficulties, a more specific gap remains. Numerous studies identify the difficulties themselves or examine learner outcomes quantitatively. Fewer studies investigate how a teacher experiences these difficulties as they unfold in the everyday life of an LPK classroom, how the teacher interprets their causes, and how that interpretation shapes pedagogical responses. A phenomenological perspective is, therefore, useful because it foregrounds the meaning of lived instructional experience. Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) What forms of Japanese-language learning difficulty are most salient among LPK trainees? (2) What factors contribute to these difficulties? and (3) How does the teacher respond instructionally to the problems encountered by trainees?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Japanese-language learning in Indonesian vocational contexts

LPK-based Japanese instruction is characterized by an employment-oriented purpose and accelerated progression. Research on vocational Japanese education in Indonesia reveals that programs must balance language development with workplace readiness, while teachers must translate general Japanese knowledge into practical communicative competence (Arianingsih et al., 2025; Dianita & Arbarini, 2025; Widiyanti et al., 2026). Nariyah and Shomedran (2022) similarly describe training efforts that combine formal instruction, practice, assessment, and learner participation to improve the competence of prospective workers. The vocational context, therefore, changes the meaning of “difficulty”: a problem that might be manageable in a long academic program can become consequential when the learner must demonstrate readiness within a short period.

Curricular alignment also matters. Kusumawati (2019) argues that Japanese-language outcomes in Indonesia are shaped by the targets established in the curriculum; low or limited proficiency targets can contribute to low achievement despite a large learner population. In LPKs, the reverse pressure can occur: employment-oriented targets can be ambitious relative to learners' initial proficiency. This tension provides an

essential context for interpreting the present teacher's observation that several trainees begin from a very limited baseline.

Linguistic distance, grammar, and particles

Research on Indonesian learners consistently identifies grammar as a major difficulty. Istiqomah et al. (2015) found substantial difficulties in sentence-pattern construction, Japanese scripts, speaking, and vocabulary among vocational-school learners. Sarjani and Hartati (2022) similarly reported persistent grammatical difficulties among Indonesian learners, while Sudipa (2020) demonstrated that Indonesian grammatical patterns can interfere with Japanese sentence construction and particle selection. The problem is, therefore, not simply the quantity of grammar to be memorized; it also involves restructuring learners' expectations about how grammatical relationships are encoded.

Particles provide a particularly clear example. Safama and Diner (2022) documented difficulties involving wa, no, ni, and de, while Alifah et al. (2020) examined difficulties in understanding o and ga. Maarif (2023) further demonstrated that knowledge of Japanese case particles is crucial for understanding more complex grammatical structures. These findings underscore the present study's emphasis on particles as a core bottleneck and justify interpreting particle confusion as a systematic linguistic difficulty rather than an isolated classroom error.

Vocabulary, scripts, and retention

Vocabulary and writing systems create additional cognitive demands. Studies of Indonesian learners have documented difficulties with Kanji recognition, reading, and acquisition strategies (Aneros et al., 2025; Fani et al., 2025; Amril et al., 2024). Mardani et al. (2024) reveal that mnemonic strategies and intensive reading practice can support the acquisition of Japanese scripts among beginners. At the lexical level, Kharismawati et al. (2021) found value in contextual vocabulary acquisition, while Wikarya and Putri (2021) reported positive effects of an active Power Teaching approach on basic Japanese vocabulary mastery. Putri et al. (2023) likewise found that Quizlet-supported learning improved Japanese vocabulary knowledge.

These Indonesian studies align with broader second-language research on repetition and retention. Kim and Webb (2022), in a meta-analysis of spaced practice, found a medium-to-large overall effect of spacing on second-language learning, with longer spacing showing advantages on delayed tests. The implication for the present study is not that repetition alone guarantees mastery, but that repeated and appropriately distributed retrieval opportunities provide a defensible basis for responding to vocabulary-retention problems.

Motivation, anxiety, and learner variability

Learning difficulty is shaped by affective and motivational conditions. Yamashita (2020) identified course difficulty, speaking anxiety, devalued learning, and boredom as demotivational factors among Indonesian university learners of Japanese. Djafri and Wimbari (2018) showed that foreign-language anxiety is related to learner motivation and perceptions of teacher behavior, while Chairunnisa et al. (2024) found that learners with greater Japanese discussion exposure tended to show less anxiety. Motivation is not, therefore, an independent background variable; it can influence persistence, participation, and willingness to use the target language.

Motivational research further emphasizes the importance of meaningful goals and teacher practices. Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) identified classroom practices that can support sustained motivation, including creating a pleasant learning climate, making course content relevant, and promoting learner involvement. In the Indonesian Japanese-learning context, Suryadi and Rosiah (2018) reported communication as a major motivation, while Patria and Alfariy (2024) found personal goals to be prominent among vocational college students selecting Japanese. These findings are particularly relevant to LPK learners, whose employment aspirations can provide strong motivation but may also create pressure when progress is slower than expected.

Adaptive instruction and diagnostic support

The literature sustains responsive teaching. Norris and Ortega (2000) found that focused L2 instruction can produce substantial target-oriented gains, while Lyster and Ranta (1997) demonstrated that corrective feedback can generate learner uptake and repair. Schmidt (1990) emphasized the role of attention and noticing in converting input into learning. Together, these perspectives imply that effective support should connect diagnosis, focused practice, feedback, and opportunities for active use. The present study extends this logic to an LPK context by examining how one teacher enacted such adaptation in daily practice.

METHOD

Research design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore Japanese-language learning difficulties as experienced and interpreted by a teacher in an LPK. The phenomenological orientation was appropriate because the study was concerned not with estimating the prevalence of difficulty but with understanding how difficulty became meaningful in everyday teaching and how it influenced instructional decisions.

Setting and participant

The study was conducted in an LPK in Tangerang, Indonesia. The key informant was a Japanese-language teacher with approximately three years of teaching experience in the institution. The participant was selected purposively because of sustained direct engagement with trainees preparing for Japanese-oriented employment pathways.

Data collection

Data were generated primarily through an in-depth interview with the teacher and supported by classroom observation. The interview addressed the types of difficulties encountered most frequently, perceived contributing factors, and strategies used to support struggling learners. Observation provided contextual information about classroom participation, instructional routines, and the implementation of the practices described in the interview.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analysis proceeded iteratively through data reduction, thematic organization and display, and interpretive conclusion drawing. Interview and observation materials were reviewed for segments relevant to the research questions, similar statements were grouped into thematic categories, and the emerging themes were interpreted in relation to the teacher's lived experience and relevant literature. Credibility was strengthened by comparing the interview account with classroom observations. Because the study involved one informant, its purpose is analytic and interpretive rather than statistical generalization.



Figure 1. Research Procedure

The research procedure presented in Figure 1 consists of five systematic stages. First, the study begins with problem identification and a literature review, focusing on Japanese language learning difficulties in the context of a vocational training institution (LPK) and examining relevant previous studies to establish the research focus. Second, the researcher applies purposive sampling to select an informant, namely a Japanese language teacher at an LPK in Tangerang with approximately three years of teaching experience, based on the relevance of the informant's experience to the research objectives. Third, data collection is conducted through an in-depth interview with the selected teacher, supported by classroom observation to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the learning process and difficulties encountered. Fourth, the collected data are organized through transcription, data reduction, and grouping into meaningful units related to the research focus. Finally, thematic analysis and interpretation are conducted by identifying recurring themes and patterns, interpreting their meanings, and examining their consistency with the classroom observation notes. Overall, this procedure enables the study to develop a systematic and contextualized understanding of Japanese language learning difficulties within the LPK setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview and observational material produced four interrelated themes: (1) beginner-level entry combined with an accelerated curriculum; (2) vocabulary retention and Japanese particles as core linguistic bottlenecks; (3) limited language exposure, uneven learning pace, and motivational vulnerability; and (4) adaptive teaching through repetition, targeted tasks, evaluation, and individualized support.

Theme 1: Beginner Baseline Meets an Accelerated Curriculum

The teacher described numerous trainees as entering the LPK with little or no prior knowledge of Japanese. The difficulty was, therefore, produced by the combination of a low initial baseline and an accelerated curriculum. Learners had to become familiar with new scripts, vocabulary, sentence structures, and classroom routines while simultaneously facing employment-oriented expectations. This interpretation is consistent with Indonesian studies implying that Japanese learners encounter difficulties across scripts, grammar, vocabulary, and communication (Amril et al., 2024; Istiqomah et al., 2015). It also corresponds to research on vocational training, where short programs create pressure for rapid progression (Arianingsih et al., 2025; Widiarti et al., 2026).

The theme is essential because it shifts the interpretation of “slow learning” away from an exclusively individual deficit. A trainee who requires more repetitions may appear to be underperforming when compared with faster peers, yet the need for repetition may be a predictable consequence of beginning from zero within a compressed program. The teacher's role is, thus, partly diagnostic: early observation is needed to distinguish ordinary beginner difficulty from problems that require additional intervention.

Theme 2: Vocabulary Retention and Japanese Particles as Core Linguistic Bottlenecks

The most consistent linguistic difficulties identified by the teacher concerned vocabulary retention and grammar, especially Japanese particles. Learners had to remember large numbers of unfamiliar lexical items in a relatively short period, and several trainees repeatedly forgot previously introduced vocabulary. This finding is compatible with Indonesian studies that identify vocabulary as a persistent learning challenge and support contextualized or interactive approaches to vocabulary learning (Kharismawati et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2023; Wikarya & Putri, 2021). It is also compatible with evidence from second-language research that distributed practice supports longer-term retention (Kim & Webb, 2022).

Particle use was especially difficult because learners needed to understand grammatical relationships that are not directly represented in Indonesian. Confusion involving *wa*, *ga*, *ni*, *de*, and *o* has been documented in Indonesian Japanese-language learning research (Alifah et al., 2020; Safama & Diner, 2022). Maarif (2023) further indicates that case-particle knowledge corroborates comprehension of more complex Japanese structures. Sudipa (2020) adds that Indonesian grammatical patterns can interfere with Japanese grammatical processing. The present teacher's observations, hence, reinforce an established pattern: particle difficulty is connected to cross-linguistic restructuring rather than simple memorization.

Vocabulary and grammar also interact. Limited lexical access can make sentence processing more difficult, while weak grammatical interpretation can prevent learners from attaching stable contextual meanings to vocabulary. For an LPK teacher, this indicates that vocabulary drills are most useful when connected to sentence-level use rather than isolated word recall. The teacher's combination of drilling, targeted tasks, and evaluation is, therefore, consistent with the broader literature on focused instruction and active learner processing (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Schmidt, 1990).

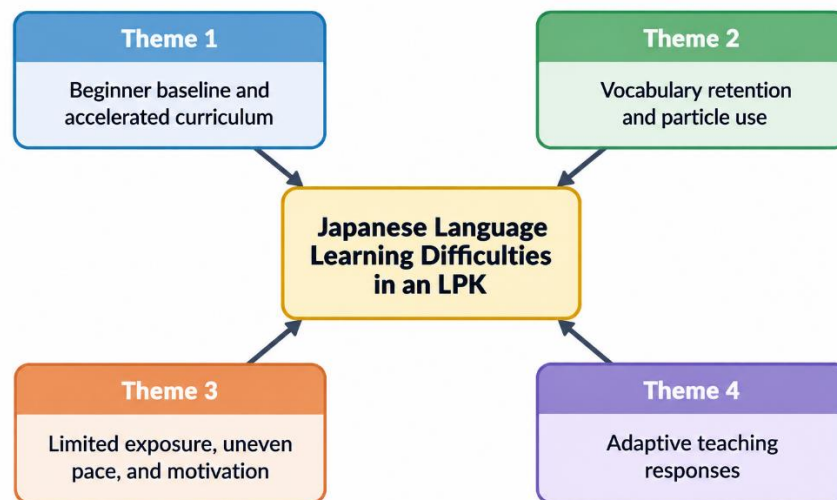


Figure 2. Thematic map of the main findings

Theme 3: Limited Exposure, Uneven Learning Pace, and Motivational Vulnerability

The teacher emphasized that trainees who reviewed lessons infrequently or had limited opportunities to use Japanese outside class were more likely to forget vocabulary and struggle with sentence construction. Limited exposure, therefore, operated as a reinforcing condition. This observation is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of practice, interaction, and meaningful use in second-language learning, as well as Indonesian studies that connect exposure with confidence and performance (Arianingsih et al., 2025; Chairunnisa et al., 2024).

A second issue was the uneven pace of learning within the same class. Several trainees needed substantially more time to understand the same material. Comparison with faster peers could reduce confidence and persistence. This pattern is compatible with research on demotivation and anxiety in Indonesian Japanese-language learning, where course difficulty and speaking anxiety are associated with negative learner experiences (Yamashita, 2020; Djafri & Wimbari, 2018). The teacher's observation, therefore, indicates that mixed ability is not merely a demographic characteristic of the class; it becomes a pedagogical condition that shapes participation and motivation.

At the same time, the employment orientation of LPK programs can provide a strong motivational resource. Learners often enter Japanese-language programs with concrete personal and career goals (Patria & Alfarisy, 2024; Suryadi & Rosiah, 2018). Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) emphasize that relevance, supportive classroom climate, and learner involvement can help sustain motivation. In the present context, encouragement and individualized attention can, thus, function as instructional interventions rather than as peripheral emotional support.

Theme 4: Adaptive Teaching Through Repetition, Targeted Tasks, Evaluation, and Individual Support

To respond to learner difficulty, the teacher reported using four complementary practices: regular drilling and repetition, targeted assignments, tests and ongoing evaluation, and individualized support. These practices form a practical diagnostic cycle. First, the teacher identifies an area of difficulty; second, focused practice is provided; third, learner performance is evaluated; and fourth, additional support is adjusted according to the learner's needs.

The use of repetition is supported by research on spaced practice and vocabulary retention (Kim & Webb, 2022). Targeted instruction is also consistent with meta-analytic evidence that focused L2 instruction can generate substantial learning gains (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Evaluation and feedback provide opportunities for learners to notice discrepancies between intended and actual language use; this connects with Schmidt's (1990) noticing perspective, and Lyster and Ranta's (1997) work on corrective feedback and learner uptake.

Individualized support is especially crucial in a heterogeneous LPK class. The teacher reported that learners' difficulties had different causes: some needed more repetition, several needed encouragement, and others needed slower or more explicit explanations of grammatical patterns. This finding complements research on Japanese instructors in nonformal settings, which emphasizes the need for teachers to adapt instruction to vocational requirements and learner characteristics (Dianita & Arbarini, 2025).

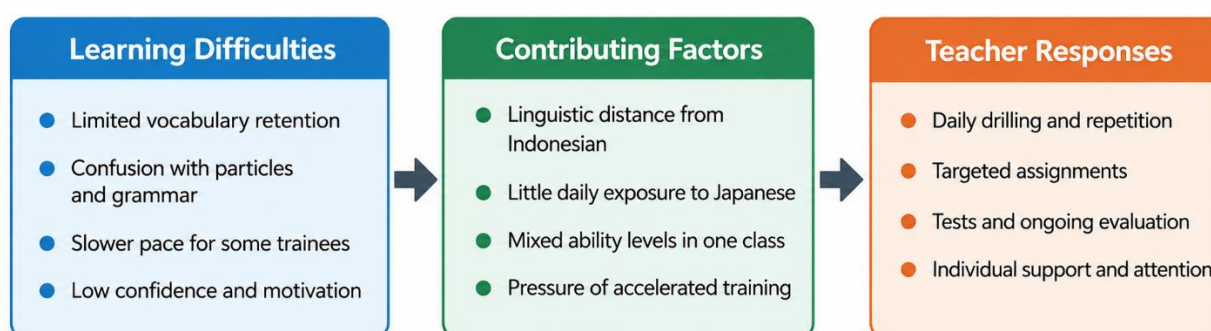


Figure 3. Relationship between learning difficulties, contributing factors, and teacher responses

Integrated Interpretation

The four themes indicate that Japanese-language learning difficulty in the LPK is multidimensional. Linguistic distance is crucial, but it interacts with program intensity, limited opportunities for Japanese use, mixed learner ability, and affective conditions. The central contribution of the present phenomenological account is, therefore, not a new list of difficulties; rather, it is the interpretation of those difficulties as an interconnected classroom process.

In addition, this interpretation clarifies why a single instructional method is unlikely to be sufficient. Vocabulary retention requires repeated and contextualized retrieval; particle and grammar difficulties require explicit attention to form and cross-linguistic contrasts; limited exposure requires structured opportunities for authentic use; and motivational vulnerability requires a classroom climate that protects persistence. Indonesian research on Japanese learning increasingly points in the same direction: effective instruction combines targeted linguistic support with interactive, contextualized, and learner-responsive practices (Arianingsih et al., 2025; Kharismawati et al., 2021; Syarani, 2021).

Practical Implications

The practical implications are listed to see what each required aspect is used for.

1. Early diagnostic teaching. Short formative checks should be used at the beginning of training to identify difficulties in vocabulary, particles, scripts, and study routines before learning gaps become larger.
2. Distributed and contextualized vocabulary practice. Repetition should be organized across sessions and connected to sentence-level or workplace-relevant contexts rather than relying exclusively on isolated word memorization.

3. Explicit particle instruction. Teachers should contrast Japanese particle functions with Indonesian sentence patterns and use controlled-to-communicative practice to help learners notice functional differences.
4. Structured exposure beyond the classroom. LPK programs should provide oral routines, Japanese-use days, role-play, and workplace simulations so that trainees repeatedly process and produce Japanese in meaningful situations.
5. Differentiated support. Mixed-ability classes require flexible grouping, additional repetition for several learners, and alternative explanations or tasks for others.
6. Affective and motivational support. As course difficulty and speaking anxiety can undermine persistence, feedback should be specific and constructive, and employment-related goals should be used to maintain relevance and engagement.

Limitations

The principal limitation is the single-informant phenomenological design. The findings represent the perspective of one teacher and are, therefore, not intended for statistical generalization. In addition, the study did not directly interview trainees; hence, the learner experience is mediated through the teacher's interpretation. Future research should triangulate teacher accounts with learner interviews, classroom observations across multiple sessions, learner performance data, and comparative evidence from several LPKs. Such research could also examine whether the diagnostic cycle identified here produces measurable gains in vocabulary retention, particle accuracy, speaking confidence, and workplace-oriented communicative competence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This phenomenological study examined Japanese-language learning difficulties in an Indonesian vocational training institution from the perspective of a teacher. Four interrelated themes emerged: beginner-level entry within an accelerated curriculum; vocabulary retention and particle use as core linguistic bottlenecks; limited exposure, uneven learning pace, and motivational vulnerability; and adaptive teaching through repetition, targeted tasks, evaluation, and individualized support. The findings indicate that learning difficulty in an LPK should not be reduced to individual learner weakness. It is produced through the interaction of linguistic distance, compressed instructional time, opportunities for target-language use, learner heterogeneity, and affective conditions. The teacher's response, therefore, needs to be diagnostic and adaptive. Repetition, targeted tasks, ongoing evaluation, and individualized support can form a practical instructional cycle, particularly when combined with contextualized Japanese use and motivational support. The study contributes a teacher-centered interpretation of Japanese-language difficulty in a vocational setting and strengthens the argument that LPK pedagogy should integrate linguistic accuracy, meaningful communication, and differentiated scaffolding. Future multi-site studies involving teachers and trainees are needed to test and extend these findings.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Tasya Hendri Putri: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, data analysis, and writing original draft. Linna Meilia Rasiban: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, validation, and writing review and editing. Herniwati: Methodology, supervision, validation, interpretation of findings, and writing review and editing. All authors contributed to the development of the study, critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical and privacy considerations, the full interview and observation data are not publicly available. Anonymized data may be provided upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate ethical and institutional approval.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the participant. The participant was informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All personal information and research data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. The participant's identity and other potentially identifiable information were anonymized in the reporting of the findings.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the Japanese language teacher and the participating institution (LPK) for their valuable cooperation, time, and support during the data collection process. The authors would also like to thank their colleagues and the academic community for their constructive feedback and encouragement throughout the research and manuscript preparation.

Generative AI Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT as a generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool to assist with language editing, grammar improvement, and refinement of the manuscript's academic wording and structure. The AI tool was not used to generate, analyze, or interpret the research data, nor to make scientific or methodological decisions. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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