

Anime as an Educational Approach for Language Learning

Mako Iwaki

Canadian Academy, Kobe, Japan

Abstract

With its global popularity, Japanese anime has been recognised as an effective tool to learn Japanese. Previous studies have explored how anime-based learning can support student motivation. This paper examines the two questions: How does anime help people stay motivated to learn Japanese and understand the language and culture better, and what are the limitations of using anime to learn Japanese for educational purposes? Building on a limited but developing body of research on anime's impact on word recognition, listening, and pronunciation, this study used a mixed-methods online survey of anime viewers, combining quantitative questions about Japanese proficiency and audio/subtitle preferences with qualitative open-ended responses about motivation, learning strategies, and perceived limitations. The results suggested that anime-based learning was associated with learner motivation and recognition of daily Japanese phrases, particularly when original Japanese audio with subtitles was used. However, it was also implied that limitations exist as exaggerated or overly casual expressions common in anime may limit the effective application of language skills in real-life contexts. Future research could also examine how anime can be systematically integrated into curricula and evaluate whether it promotes cultural awareness as effectively as it supports language acquisition.

Keywords: Japanese as a foreign language (JFL), anime-based language learning, language learning motivation, audiovisual input in second language acquisition, informal language exposure, popular culture in education, multimodal learning, vocabulary recognition

1. Introduction

“[Anime] motivates me to learn more Japanese, so I can understand without subtitles.”

—Anonymous survey respondent (2/23, 2025)

Japanese popular culture, such as J-pop, J-dramas, and manga novels, has become a significant cultural force in recent years. This includes anime, and its popularity has led to a growing interest in Japanese culture. However, educators and institutions have not greatly promoted the integration of anime as an educational tool in Japanese learning. This paper contributes to research on anime and Japanese language learning by focusing on learners' own perceptions of using anime as a learning tool outside the classroom. Rather than examining only formal classroom uses of anime, the study investigates how learners describe their independent anime-watching practices and how these practices relate to motivation, phrase recognition, listening, and cultural understanding. While anime grew more popular, fewer people have become interested in learning Japanese. This research explores how anime can support Japanese language learning and benefit language acquisition by examining whether and how anime helps learners stay motivated, better understand Japanese language and culture, and recognize the limitations of using anime as a learning tool.

2. Background and Literature Review

Anime does not appear to be widely integrated into formal Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) curricula worldwide, it has been used in language education since the late 1980s in Japan, significantly contributing to students' linguistic skill development (Iida and Takeyama, 2018). These early recommendations were suggested by Japanese language teachers in schools, as experts thought anime could serve as a motivational factor for their students (Allison, 2018). Considering that students from Japanese high schools and colleges often participate in anime circles and clubs outside of school, teachers first came up with the integration of anime into their classes. It was to reinforce their exposure to the language and strengthen the students' connection with the language itself.

Chan and Wong (2017), for example, have explained the impact of anime on linguistic skill development in terms of vocabulary recognition and listening comprehension. Building on the findings, anime allows students to explore formal textbook language alongside slang and casual expressions. These repeated phrases can help learners recognise words more easily and improve their pronunciation through listening practice. Fukunaga (2006) and Chan and Wong (2017) speculate that this linguistic development also comes from cultural awareness in the anime context. Students gain insights that are often not covered in formal language-learning methods, such as Japanese social contexts, daily conversations, and traditional practices. Learning about these daily contexts with cultural understanding will help students to link and apply the acquired vocabulary and language in real-life situations. Especially in Japanese, which has a complex system of politeness (such as keigo, casual, and humble forms), these subtle nuances are difficult to fully grasp through textbooks alone. Anime dialogue, however, demonstrates how these speech levels vary across different social contexts.

Expanding on this, Han and Ling (2017) emphasise anime's potential to be incorporated in classrooms, noting that anime-based activities, such as active viewing, freeze framing, dubbing, and role play, could create a learner-centred environment that stimulates both linguistic and critical thinking skills. They explain that anime helps learners practice pronunciation, vocabulary, and social nuance by encouraging students to analyse dialogue in a specific context. More importantly, they stress that anime's variety of speech styles, from polite forms to dialects and informal slang, exposes learners to linguistic registers rarely found in textbooks, thus improving adaptability in communication. Additionally, Razali (2014) further supports that anime fosters multimodal learning, where subtitles, sound, and imagery combine to strengthen comprehension and encourage engagement in language-related practices such as fan translation or online discussions. These findings suggest that anime can fill in the gap between traditional instruction and informal, everyday Japanese, making it a complement to existing methods.



3. Research Purpose

This paper investigates the relationship between anime and Japanese language education, specifically comparing anime-based language learning methods with traditional approaches. This paper will examine the advantages and limitations of integrating anime into Japanese language learning. Moreover, this paper will also explore whether and how anime can serve as an effective tool for language acquisition in both formal and informal settings. Previous research has largely focused on structured classroom use (e.g., Chan and Wong, 2017), but because learners also engage with anime independently at home, it is necessary to evaluate its potential across both contexts.

This research examines how anime could expose learners to various linguistic features, such as informal and casual speech, to develop word recognition and pronunciation through content. The paper first reviews existing research on anime and Japanese language learning, then presents the survey methodology and results. The discussion is organised around the main themes identified in the responses: language and subtitle practices, motivation and language development, classroom integration, contextual benefits, and challenges or limitations of anime-based learning. Through analysis of the survey responses, this paper will provide new insights into how anime can be utilised to enhance linguistic development in foreign Japanese language learners, particularly by supporting the shift from textbook Japanese to natural, everyday speech.

4. Hypothesis

This study's research question is "Does anime-based learning improve Japanese language acquisition and motivation compared to traditional textbook-based learning?" Hence, it could be hypothesised that learners who watch anime with Japanese audio and subtitles in their home language will show greater improvements in word recognition and pronunciation compared to learners who rely only on textbooks (Hypothesis A). Building on previous research (Chan and Wong, 2017; Fukunaga, 2006), it is hypothesised that repeated exposure to casual and everyday phrases in anime will result in stronger comprehension and recall than exposure to formal textbook Japanese (Hypothesis B). Finally, it is hypothesised that individual factors such as demographic background, anime-watching frequency, and prior Japanese proficiency will influence how effective anime is as a tool for both linguistic development and cultural learning (Hypothesis C).

5. Methodology

This study utilised a 10-minute survey to explore the role of anime in Japanese language development within current education systems. An online survey method was selected to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling participants to report their learning experiences, strategies, and perceptions in their own words. The survey included 15 questions, ranging from multiple-choice to open-ended. Twenty individuals participated and provided responses. The research utilised the online platform SurveySwap to gather respondents.¹ SurveySwap was used to recruit participants through a voluntary survey exchange. Because the survey was written in English and SurveySwap supports English, Dutch, and German but not non-Latin languages, the sample may reflect English-speaking respondents more strongly than other groups. Respondents were screened for eligibility by confirming that they were studying Japanese and engaged with anime. It helped reach a global community and obtain diverse insights based on their demographic information and

¹ The survey was purposely written in English to look for a global audience. SurveySwap only supports English, Dutch, and German and does not support non-Latin languages.

theme-specific answers, including their home language, level of Japanese literacy, and anime-watching frequency.

Closed-ended items were organised into quantitative summaries. Responses indicating “never watching anime” were excluded from analyses focused on anime-watching practices. Open-ended responses were reviewed multiple times and grouped into frequently addressed themes based on common experiences with representing quotes. These themes became the basis for the discussion subheadings, including “Language and Subtitles,” “Motivation and Language Development,” “Classroom Integration,” and “Challenges and Limitations of Anime and Language Integration.” The findings are exploratory at this stage as this study serves as a pilot project aimed at addressing an existing gap in the literature. Given this, the findings are not generalizable, but should rather be seen as exploratory and may support and inform future research with larger participant groups.

6. Results

6.1. Demographics and Linguistic Profile

The demographic and linguistic profile of the survey respondents reflects the young population of anime-engaged people who are globally diverse but mostly speak English. The average age range for anime watchers worldwide is 13 to 24 years old, while the average age group for SurveySwap users is said to be 18 to 28 years old, consisting mostly of university and graduate students. The majority of the respondents for this survey were between 25 and 29 years old (60%), followed by 10 to 18-year-olds (30%), and 30 to 34-year-olds (10%).

6.2. Languages Spoken at Home

For the question on languages spoken at home, because this question allowed participants to select more than one language, the percentages represent the proportion of respondents who selected each option and are not expected to total 100%. English was selected by 80% of respondents, followed by Hindi (30%), Japanese (20%), Mandarin (10%), and Italian (10%). Several participants reported multilingual backgrounds in addition to English. A smaller portion (20%) selected Japanese, either as native speakers or as learners with high confidence in their proficiency.²

² Because this item allowed participants to select all languages that applied, the percentages were not expected to total 100%.



What language do you speak at home? Select all that apply.

20 responses

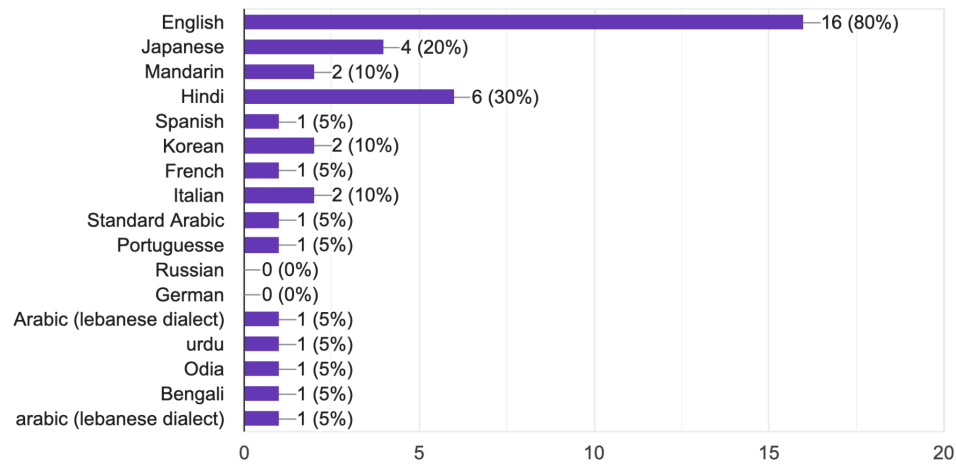


Figure 1: Languages spoken at home by survey respondents.

6.3. Anime-Watching Frequency

Anime-watching frequency was shown to vary, with 30% of respondents reporting as watching every day, 20% as watching once every two weeks, and 10% as never watching anime. Outliers who indicated that they “never” watched anime (10%) were disregarded from further analysis.



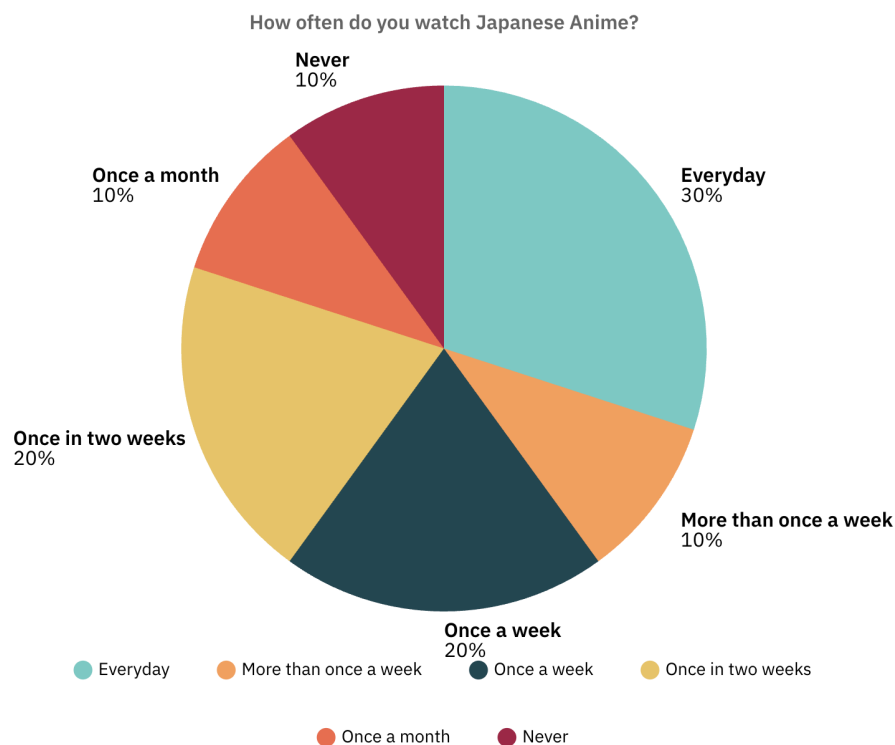


Figure 2: Frequency of anime watching among respondents.

6.4. Audio and Subtitle Preferences

As participants were asked what language they usually watch anime in (audio), multiple responses were allowed. Since the audio-language question allowed multiple responses, the percentages represent the share of respondents who selected each option rather than mutually exclusive categories.³ When asked ‘In what language are the subtitles in?’, most respondents chose English (94.4%), with Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin each being reported by 5.6% of respondents⁴.

³ One response was incorrectly submitted.

⁴ Two respondents mentioned they watched anime in Korean, which may imply a possibility that they may have answered based on the anime of a Korean production. Moreover, for those who watch anime in English with Japanese subtitles, there are two possibilities: they are either native Japanese speakers wanting to learn English or non-native Japanese speakers attempting to improve their word recognition through subtitles. If the second is true, it is reasonable to assume that their level of Japanese listening is quite advanced as they are able to understand the context by ear.

When watching anime, do you usually use subtitles in your home language?

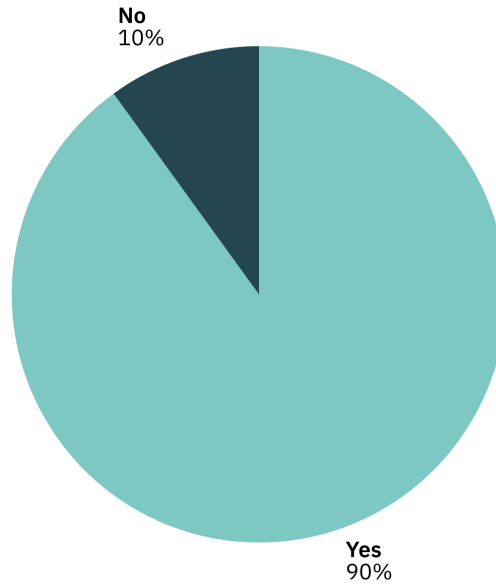


Figure 3: Subtitle language preferences.⁵

Table 1: Frequency of language audio and subtitle choices among respondents.

Audio Choices	% of Respondents
Japanese	85
English	45
Korean	10
Hindi	5
Mandarin	5

Subtitle Choices	% of Respondents
English	94.4

⁵ It is reasonable to assume that their level of Japanese listening is quite advanced as they are able to understand the context by ear.

Spanish	5.6
Korean	5.6
Mandarin	5.6

6.5. Motivation to Learn Japanese

Motivational perspectives were also gathered through the survey question: “Do you find watching anime to be a source of motivation when learning Japanese?” The responses revealed that 35% of participants answered “yes,” 45% answered “sometimes,” and 15% answered “no.”⁶ Because the largest group answered “sometimes,” these results suggest that anime should not be treated as a universal source of motivation. Instead, motivation appears to work alongside other factors, such as subtitle use, repeated exposure, prior proficiency, and cultural interest.

Do you find watching anime to be a source of motivation when learning Japanese?

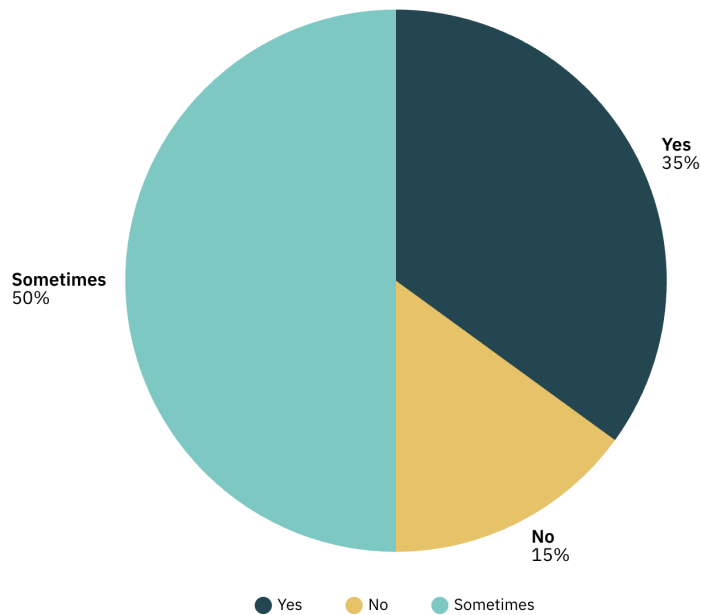


Figure 4: Motivation to learn Japanese through anime across respondents.

Participants who answered “yes” often connected anime viewing with improvements in word recognition and phrase acquisition.

⁶ One response was incorrectly submitted.

One respondent wrote, “I have been watching anime for over 15 years and was able to pick [up] the language[.] I no longer need to focus so much on the subtitles [...] as I naturally understand what they say[.]” Another explained, “[A]fter watching anime for so many years[,] you come across some words very frequently[.] [...] [Thanks] to subtitles[, you] get to know the meaning too[.] [...] [W]hen [you] hear th[at] word again[,] you kind of get to know what the character is saying without looking at the subtitles.”

Respondents who answered “sometimes” also expressed their motivations. For example, one stated, “Sometimes, it motivates me to learn more [J]apanese so I can understand without subtitles[.]” Another added, “I want to visit [J]apan and somewhere at (sic) the back of my mind[,] [I] feel like anime might help me as well in the process[.]”

6.6. Classroom Integration

In response to the survey question, “Have you ever watched anime as part of your school language curriculum?” (e.g., watching an excerpt during class), 70% answered “No” while the remaining 30% answered “Yes.”

Among the open-ended responses of “If yes, in what way was the anime incorporated into class?” one participant explained: “I watched it in my Japanese class when we were done with a unit (sort of like for fun).” On the other hand, another response was simply: “a movie study, about [J]apanese culture.”

7. Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that anime-based learning may support motivation alongside recognition of everyday Japanese phrases, particularly when motivation is understood as part of a broader framework that also includes linguistic development and cultural literacy. These findings suggested Hypothesis A, as learners who combined Japanese audio with subtitles also described word recognition compared to those relying on translations, according to the open-ended responses. The results also suggested Hypothesis B, as several participants described repeated exposure to casual expressions as helpful for comprehension compared to textbook language. Evidence related to Hypothesis C was mixed, as individual factors such as multilingual backgrounds, prior Japanese knowledge, and frequency of anime-watching were described as influencing outcomes and motivation. Overall, the results imply that anime serves as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for textbooks, connecting textbook learning with more authentic spoken Japanese, though the responses also suggest the importance of being mindful of exaggerated or overly casual expressions. Rather than treating motivation, linguistic development, and cultural literacy as separate outcomes, this study presents them as connected elements within a single framework of anime-based language learning. Within this framework, motivation may encourage continued exposure to Japanese, while repeated listening and contextual viewing may support phrase recognition and cultural understanding.

7.1. Demographics and Language Use

It was revealed that the respondents of this survey were mostly college students on the SurveySwap platform who frequently watched anime and may have been drawn to this survey due to its topic. Although SurveySwap allows global participation, English was the predominant language in responses. This is a limitation as the sample may reflect English-speaking learners more strongly than other groups.



It was also shown that several respondents reported multilingual backgrounds, including Hindi, Mandarin, Italian, and even Japanese. This suggests that anime attracts a linguistically diverse audience, but English dominance still shapes their language-learning process. The fact that everyday anime watchers formed a large portion of the respondents shows that anime is already a part of their daily lives, which makes it an accessible and motivational tool for learning. The disregard of “never” watchers reflects that the survey effectively targeted individuals already engaged in anime only.

7.2. Language and Subtitles

The frequent use of Japanese audio with subtitles suggests that learners engaged with spoken Japanese while relying on written support for comprehension. Several responses described gradually recognizing recurring phrases through repeated listening combined with subtitles, which participants associated with word recognition and phrase acquisition.

Some responses also described watching anime in English with English subtitles (or other non-Japanese audio/subtitle combinations). In these cases, participants did not emphasize Japanese learning goals as strongly, suggesting that anime may function primarily as entertainment unless viewers intentionally choose settings or strategies that support language learning.

7.3. Motivation and Language Development

The responses indicate that anime serves as a source of motivation for many learners, particularly through repeated exposure to common phrases, which improves recognition and recall. The comments also described gradual recognition of common phrases over time.

These findings were supported by previous research conducted by Chan and Wong (2017), in which the worksheets of university students who attended a 10-week course on Learning Japanese Language Through Anime in Malaysia were analysed. In that study, repetition exercises were also emphasised as supporting the memorisation of useful phrases. It was found that anime, unlike the polite speech styles presented in textbooks, was more casual and practical in real-life situations. Interactions between anime characters, such as those between students and teachers, were observed to be informal, reflecting real-life conversations often missing from classroom contexts. Repetition exercises based on anime dialogue were also included in the course, which helped students gradually memorise useful phrases. In this paper’s original survey, respondents described a similar process, noting how repeated listening helped them understand Japanese without relying on subtitles.

However, unlike Chan and Wong’s study (2017), which was conducted in a classroom setting, the respondents here were self-motivated learners engaging with anime independently. This added the insight that anime was not only supporting formal learning, but was also serving as an independent way to learn casual phrases and maintain motivation outside the classroom. For many respondents, anime was described as an engaging way to learn the language through repeated exposure and genuine interest.

Moreover, according to Razali (2014), anime has not only gained large global popularity but has also contributed to the promotion of literacy in the Japanese language. Anime fans have used online platforms to engage in Japanese linguistic activities such as commenting, reviewing anime-related posts, and creating fan sites, all of which involve reading and



writing skills. When doing so, the process of translation in these contents often unconsciously develops new vocabulary and introduces Japanese sentence structures. The combination of spoken dialogue, subtitles, images, and sound can be considered a form of multimodal learning as learners engage with Japanese through several modes of communication at the same time.

Multimodal learning reflects the respondents' interest in engaging more deeply with anime culture. This includes creating content that uses Japanese language skills, translation, and cultural interpretation. These practices are also common in the broader anime community, where fans often engage in creative, language-based activities such as fan subtitling, translation, and content creation (Ito et al., 2012).

7.4. Classroom Integration

These results suggest that anime integration in Japanese language learning is not widespread in formal education systems. Where it was used, the responses indicate that anime was often treated as entertainment rather than as a structured learning tool. However, the response mentioning a “movie study, about Japanese culture” directly reveals how cultural factors can support the learning of practical usage of Japanese in real-life situations. By observing character interactions, gestures, and contextual language use, students may deepen both their linguistic and cultural understanding.

Such practical anime integrations in class are recommended. Classroom activities such as analysing anime dialogue can help students engage with the linguistic structures of particular quotes and expressions. Historical contexts represented in anime can also be studied, which not only enhances language development but also provides cultural and historical insights for learners hoping to live or work in Japan. Including subtitles while watching may further engage students, since learners are able to match auditory Japanese with written forms in their textbooks. In this way, anime can serve as a complementary tool alongside traditional materials, particularly in developing reading comprehension skills.

The survey responses also align with prior research emphasising anime's contribution to literacy development. Experts note that anime boosts linguistic acquisition by supporting word recognition, listening skills, pronunciation, and motivation. Fukunaga (2006), for example, found through group discussions and interviews with JFL students that learners gradually became familiar with frequently spoken phrases through repetitive expressions often absent in textbooks. In the same way, the responses in this study show that anime motivated learners to recognise and remember everyday phrases through repeated listening. As one participant explained, “After watching anime for so many years, you come across some words very frequently. Thanks to subtitles, you get to know the meaning too. When you hear that word again, you kind of get to know what the character is saying without looking at the subtitles.”

These responses suggest that repeated exposure may help learners become familiar with frequently used phrases. Overall, the findings suggest that anime may support literacy development through word recognition, listening, and pronunciation, while also sustaining motivation. Within this exploratory sample, anime appears to function as a complementary tool alongside traditional instruction. In this way, new daily phrases can be constantly acquired, making anime a valuable complementary tool to traditional instruction in Japanese language learning.



8. Benefits of Anime and Language Integration

This is another benefit from learning Japanese through anime: many are motivated to understand the cultural context of anime or get familiar with Japanese culture. For example, the gendered pronouns commonly heard in anime, such as “俺” (used for men) and “あたし” (used by young girls), not only reflect gender-based differences in Japanese but also indicate the character’s age and social context. According to a study by Chan and Wong (2017), students were surprised to hear the elderly female character in the anime *Hanasaku Iroha* using masculine language, specifically words like “お前” (omae) and “こいつ” (koitsu), which are typically considered rough or informal and usually associated with male speech. Notably, the researchers observed that some grandmothers in real life also use these expressions instead of more traditionally polite or feminine language. These language variations can also be observed in various social contexts, such as in the workplace, where formal language is required, and at school, where the language may be more casual. Chan and Wong (2017) also observe that social hierarchies in anime influence character dialogues, helping language learners distinguish between polite and informal speech. Hence, it can be inferred that JFL learners may use anime to observe how language style changes across social relationships and communicative contexts, which can support their understanding of when formal or informal expressions are appropriate.

9. Challenges and Limitations of Anime and Language Integration

Despite the benefits introduced above, anime-based language learning also presents risks and limitations for non-native Japanese speakers. Anime often incorporates overly casual and sometimes inappropriate phrases, especially in shounen and action genres. As a result, the survey response “I believe some wording can be wrong” might represent those who prefer to learn Japanese in the traditional way to avoid wording misinterpretations from anime dialogues. Another challenge for learners is to distinguish the gap between anime speech and real-life Japanese. According to Fukunaga (2006), some find it difficult to apply their knowledge in real life due to exaggerated expressions and fictional vocabulary used in anime. Dialogue reflecting characters’ social roles, such as the speech patterns of high school students, small children, or samurai, may also be stylised or inaccurate at times, so learners must be guided to distinguish between natural Japanese and stylised anime dialogue that are uncommon or outdated in real life. Overall, these limitations may discourage some learners from using anime as a language-learning tool, especially if they are unsure how to distinguish stylised anime dialogue from everyday Japanese.

To counteract these limitations, anime is recommended to be used with guidance rather than treated as a complete replacement for textbooks or classroom instruction. Teachers can test students to identify whether a phrase is formal, casual, outdated, or exaggerated, and then compare it with a more standard expression used in everyday Japanese. Learners can also be encouraged to keep vocabulary logs that mark where an expression was heard, who used it, and whether it would be appropriate in real-life contexts. These strategies would allow anime to remain engaging while reducing the risk of misusing stylised or overly casual language.

10. Conclusion

The effectiveness of anime as a tool for Japanese language learning was investigated, focusing on the comparison of anime-based learning methods and traditional textbook learning methods. A survey targeted at JFL learners on the



SurveySwap platform was conducted so that respondents could be gathered globally and qualitative data could be sought. By this approach, a diverse range of experiences and different levels of familiarity with the Japanese language were allowed. Based on these results, the trends and potential correlations in the respondents' demographics and varying linguistic backgrounds when acquiring Japanese were to be analysed. By comparing and analysing traditional language learning methods with anime integration, the issue of declining Japanese language learners was approached through popular culture. Through this survey, perspectives and understandings of Japanese learners on how their anime-watching habits have impacted their language learning experiences were shared.

Based on the survey and prior research done with external sources, the findings suggest that the anime-watching method may have a positive impact on Japanese language acquisition for foreign learners. The findings suggested that, depending on the various combinations of subtitles and the language the anime was watched in, word recognition and phrase memorisation in real-life contexts improved.

Moreover, the open-ended questions supported the claim of most researchers that anime is widely a motivational factor to start learning Japanese: to understand the context of the anime, to get familiar with Japanese cultural norms, and to enhance their travelling experiences by improving their speaking skills. However, some responses challenge this view as respondents discussed the limitations of anime learning methods, such as overly casual and inappropriate phrases that can cause mistaken interpretation. As a result, it showed that some prefer learning in traditional learning methods rather than through anime.

Although anime-integrated learning does not yet appear to be widely adopted in formal educational curricula, this paper suggests possible benefits that anime could bring as well as some practical recommendations to be used in the classroom. In order to realistically apply this new method, though, it is crucial to explore how traditional teaching methods can be combined with anime-based learning and whether educators are able to effectively balance both approaches to mitigate the limitations of misinterpretations of certain speeches.

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Research Ethics Statement

This study involved a minimal-risk, anonymous, voluntary survey and did not collect personally identifiable or sensitive information. The research was conducted independently by a secondary school student. The author's school does not maintain an institutional review board (IRB) or formal ethics committee capable of issuing ethics approval or exemption determinations; this is confirmed by a designated school official. Accordingly, the study followed ethical principles appropriate to minimal-risk social research.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation through a consent statement presented at the beginning of the survey. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents could discontinue at any time without penalty. Responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was recorded.

Survey data were stored securely in a password-protected account accessible only to the author. Data will be retained until completion of the publication process and then permanently deleted. The study involved no deception or intervention and posed minimal risk. Because the sample was self-selected and recruited online, the results may be subject to sampling bias and may not be fully representative.

I affirm that the ideas, arguments, and analysis in this paper are my own. AI tools were used only for minor language editing (grammar and clarity), not for generating content or analysis.

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Author Biography

Mako Iwaki is a high school student at Canadian Academy in Kobe, Japan. Her academic interests are centered on human geography, particularly the ways in which culture, media, education, and society shape people's experiences and identities. She has conducted independent research and participated in international academic programs focused on social analysis,



cultural inquiry, and research-based learning.

