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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Engaging With and Exploring Autonomy, Creativity, and Well-Being for Learner Development” for Issue 9 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ9), edited by Stacey Vye, Robert Moreau, and Ivan Lombardi. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Exploring Japanese Language Literature to Enhance Higher Cognitive Skills in Intermediate-Level College American Students: Supplemental Materials and Motivation

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This study examined motivation, learning materials, and the application of Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) among intermediate-level students in a Japanese literature class, with the aim of enhancing their cognitive abilities and improving the course design in the target language. Using Yin's (2018) interpretive multiple-case study approach, qualitative data were collected from eight American students enrolled in a 300-level Japanese course according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) proficiency scale. Through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, students revealed a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives, offering insight into how they engaged with and interpreted the literature course. The findings revealed that novice-intermediate learners of Japanese require appropriate and sufficient learning support to comprehend literary content and develop higher-order cognitive skills aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy—such as comparison, analysis, synthesis, and creativity. Moreover, the study found that students were able to foster autonomous learning and well-being, which in turn promoted intrinsic motivation throughout the learning process.

本研究は、中級レベルの日本文学クラスにおいて、学生の動機づけ、学習教材、およびブルームのタクソミーを分析し、彼らの認知能力を向上させ、対象言語の文学コースを改善することを目的とする。質的データは、Yin (2018) の解釈的な複数ケーススタディ手法を用いて収集され、2023年春学期に全米外国語教育協会 (ACTFL) の習熟度ガイドラインに基づく日本語3年目のコースを履修した南カリフォルニア在住の8名のアメリカ人学生の経験と視点に焦点を当てた。アンケート、面談、教室内での観察を通じて、学生たちは日本の文学コースに対する異なる経験と視点を共有した。調査の結果、日本語の中級学習者は物語の内容を理解し、比較、分析、設計、創造などのブルームのタクソミーに基づくより高い認知スキルを養成するために適切かつ十分な学習補助が必要であることが明らかとなった。さらに、本研究では、学習者が自律的な学習やウェルビーイングを育むことができ、それが学習過程全体において内発的動機づけを促進したことが明らかになった。

Keywords

Japanese literature, motivation, supplemental materials, Bloom's taxonomy, cognitive skills, autonomy learning, well-being
日本文学、モチベーション、補足資料、ブルームのタクソミー、認知スキル、自立学習、ウェルビーイング

Teaching university students in California, I have often wondered how intermediate-level learners engage with Japanese literature and what motivates them to learn. One challenge I face as an instructor of Japanese language and literature for American students is helping them connect personally with the texts while developing deeper critical thinking skills. In order to understand this better, I explored how intermediate-level students in a Japanese literature course were motivated to learn, how they interacted with the course materials, and how they demonstrated learning through Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). The Taxonomy could be applied to deepen their understanding. My goal was to strengthen their cognitive skills and enrich the overall quality of literature learning in the target language. Qualitative data were collected using Yin's (2018) interpretive multiple-case study approach, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of eight undergraduate students enrolled in a 300-level Japanese course (novice-intermediate level by the ACTFL proficiency scale)

during the Spring 2023 semester. All participants had completed 200-level Japanese courses, were pursuing a minor in Japanese, and were raised in the United States, residing in Southern California. Ninety percent of the students expressed a strong desire to study abroad in Japan, driven by their fascination with the culture, language, and everyday life they encountered through the literature. Many shared dreams of immersing themselves in authentic Japanese settings—visiting historical sites mentioned in the texts, engaging with local communities, and experiencing firsthand the cultural nuances that had sparked their curiosity in class.

I employed the triangular data collection through surveys, interviews, and observations, and the students shared their diverse experiences and perspectives on the Japanese literature course. The findings revealed that intermediate learners of Japanese often needed more tailored and supportive learning materials to fully grasp the depth of the stories, and engage in higher-order thinking—comparing, analyzing, designing, and creating—based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. As they navigated these challenges, I observed a gradual transformation: students began to take more ownership of their learning, finding joy and confidence in the process. Through this journey, they not only strengthened their academic skills but also nurtured a sense of autonomy, wellbeing, and intrinsic motivation that sustained their engagement with the language and literature.

Literature Review

This section reviews studies on motivational factors (intrinsic and challenge), supplemental materials, and Bloom’s taxonomy. These frameworks inform my approach to teaching Japanese literature to American college students at the low-intermediate level. By connecting theory and practice together, I aim to illustrate how literature-based language learning can spark motivation, foster learner autonomy, and nurture cognitive growth through the students’ voices in the findings. Through the students’ voices and experiences, the study reveals how engaging with stories in the target language can become a transformative process—one that deepens both intellectual understanding and personal connection to learning.

Motivation

In my Japanese literature classes, I have observed that students show the highest engagement when they feel a sense of ownership over their learning. For instance, when they are given choices—such as selecting which story to analyze or deciding how to present their interpretations—their enthusiasm and depth of reflection noticeably increase. Students often express pride in tackling challenging texts, like Akutagawa’s *The Nose* or *Earless Hoichi*, even when the language is difficult. This sense of accomplishment and autonomy appears to foster persistence and curiosity, both hallmarks of intrinsic motivation. Witnessing their growth and confidence deepen through these moments is profoundly rewarding to me as a teacher; it reaffirms my belief in the transformative power of learner-centered education and reminds me why I am passionate about teaching literature.

Motivation plays a central role in sustaining this engagement. It can be understood as an internal condition that activates, directs, and maintains learners’ behavior (Woolfolk, 2019). Ryan and Deci (2000b) describe intrinsic motivation as engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for external rewards. Their theory aligns closely with my classroom experience: when students perceive freedom of choice and feel competent in using Japanese, their motivation and confidence grow. I observed this alignment through their reflections and classroom discussions, where students often articulated a sense of

pride and fulfillment when they successfully expressed complex ideas in Japanese. Their comments revealed that autonomy and competence were not abstract concepts but lived experiences that shaped their sense of progress and belonging in the learning community.

Educational research supports these observations. Intrinsic motivation has been shown to enhance learning, performance, and creativity (DiDomenico & Ryan, 2017) and is particularly critical in language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). Autonomy-supportive environments—those that encourage self-direction and acknowledge student perspectives—tend to increase intrinsic motivation, whereas overly controlled instruction can diminish it (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Moreover, intrinsic motivation contributes to psychological well-being (Bhat & Naik, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000c), a relationship I have also witnessed as students gain confidence and joy in expressing ideas in Japanese. In this study, I explore how students in my Japanese literature class experience and perceive intrinsic motivation, particularly as it relates to autonomy, challenge, and emotional engagement in learning through literature. Witnessing their growing curiosity, confidence, and joy in discovering meaning through Japanese texts affirmed for me the transformative power of intrinsically motivated learning.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning empowers students to take responsibility for their education, enhancing engagement and independence (Avazmatova, 2022). Chitashvili (2007) similarly noted that second language learners perform better when they develop autonomy. To support this, I begin each lesson by offering structured guidance—model sentences, key vocabulary, or guided reading questions—and then gradually step back as students gain confidence, while reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. In practice, this means that at the start of a lesson, I might demonstrate how to analyze a short passage, thinking aloud as I make connections between language and meaning. As students move into small-group discussions, I circulate, listening to their interpretations and asking questions that prompt deeper thinking. At the end of class, I often invite them to write a brief reflection on what strategies helped them understand the text. Through these interactions, students learn to trust their own insights, develop personalized approaches to learning, and continue building independence beyond the classroom (Zimmerman, 2002).

I further foster autonomy by offering meaningful choices tailored to my students' interests. For example, in a recent class of eight students, they selected presentation topics ranging from analyzing a particular character's moral dilemma to exploring themes of memory and loss in a short story. They also chose project formats, including group skits, written analyses, and creative visual representations, and selected literary passages that resonated with their experiences. A few students were not confident about making these decisions, unsure whether their choices were "correct," but with guidance and encouragement, they became more confident and engaged. My role is both facilitative and active: I scaffold learning, model critical thinking, guide reflection, and provide reassurance as students exercise choice, gradually shifting responsibility to them. This approach allowed the eight learners to become self-directed, confident interpreters of Japanese literature while still benefiting from structured support.

Supplemental Materials

According to New Zealand's Ministry of Education (2025), teachers should build disciplinary knowledge and use supplemental materials to enhance learning—especially in language education, where vocabulary, grammar, culture, and historical context are essential.

Studies support this: Dodd et al. (2015) found that supplementary materials increased motivation and participation, and Barzan et al. (2021) showed they improved linguistic and cultural understanding.

In my Japanese literature class, providing cultural context—such as Buddhist concepts of vanity and karma when teaching Akutagawa’s *The Nose*—deepens students’ comprehension and discussion. Following St. Olaf College’s (2025) guidelines for materials that are level-appropriate, relevant, and well-sequenced, I select literature that is both accessible and intellectually engaging. As a result, students not only strengthen their language skills but also their cultural empathy and critical thinking.

Bloom’s Taxonomy

Bloom’s Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) outlines six cognitive levels—remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create—and remains central to instructional design (World Language Classroom, 2017). In my Japanese literature course, the taxonomy guides the assignments that progress from comprehension to critical thinking:

- Remember: Vocabulary quizzes and factual questions
- Understand: Summarizing story themes
- Apply: Retelling from a new perspective
- Analyze: Interpreting lessons or commenting on key lines
- Evaluate: Predicting or justifying alternative endings
- Create: Writing an original continuation or adaptation.

This framework enables students, even with limited Japanese proficiency, to develop deeper analytical and creative engagement through scaffolding and language support. Their voices and creative analytical approaches are described in the findings.

ACTFL Guidelines and Cognitive Development

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (2012), intermediate readers comprehend familiar sentences but struggle with complex or abstract texts—reflecting the proficiency of students in my Japanese literature class. Accordingly, instruction follows Bloom’s (Krathwohl, 2002) taxonomy, moving from lower-order skills (remember, understand) to higher-order skills (apply, analyze, evaluate, create). Aligning ACTFL (2012) standards with Bloom’s framework fosters both linguistic comprehension and critical, creative thinking. Ultimately, this approach supports the study’s goal: to show how learning Japanese literature enhances motivation, autonomy, empathy, and a sense of interconnectedness.

Course Description of Japanese Literature

This section outlines the objectives, outcomes, and assessments of the Japanese literature examined in this study.

Course Description

This Japanese literature course for third-year students introduces modern and classical works, such as *The Tale of Heike*, *The Tale of Genji* (manga version), and *Earless Hoichi*. Conducted in both Japanese and English, it focuses on vocabulary, reading comprehension, literary analysis, and writing. Completion of 200-level Japanese is required. This is my first time teaching this course.

Learning Objectives (LO)

The learning objectives of the course (LO1-LO7) emphasize vocabulary and grammar development, summarizing and analyzing stories, understanding historical and cultural contexts, interpreting literary themes, and expressing ideas through discussion, presentation, and writing.

Assessments

- **Homework:** Q&A, 5W1H questions (what, who, when, why, when and how) reflections, and grammar exercises (Bloom: Understand–Evaluate).
- **Tests:** Story comprehension (LO1, LO3, LO6; Bloom: Understand).
- **Quizzes:** Vocabulary (LO1; Bloom: Remember).
- **Projects 1 & 2:** Integrative tasks covering LO1–LO7 (Bloom: Remember–Create).

These activities align with Bloom’s Taxonomy to build linguistic, analytical, and cultural competencies in the target language.

Method

Participants

The study involved eight undergraduate students pursuing a minor in Japanese. They had completed the 200-level Japanese courses and were enrolled in a 300-level Japanese course (novice-intermediate level) during the Spring 2023 semester. All participants were raised in the United States and resided in Southern California. Ninety percent of them would like to study abroad in Japan. The course, “Japanese Literature,” was an elective for their minor. As part of their Japanese program, they used *Genki I* for the 100-level courses and *Genki II* for the 200-level courses. (Please refer to Appendix A for the detailed grades.) The table below summarizes students’ performance to illustrate their learning outcomes. It is included here to highlight the extent of their progress and to provide a clearer picture of how the instructional approach influenced their achievement.

Table 1. Results of Students’ Achievements

	Students	Final Grade	5 Tests (content)	Quizzes (vocabulary only)	Project 1	Project 2	T or F quizzes
1	Amy	90%	92%	90%	91%	0-%	92%
2	Ariana	83%	78%	80%	80%	81%	83%
3	Akemi	90%	85%	80%	91%	89%	92%
4	Connor	81%	78%	7%	82%	83%	85%
5	Jennifer	98%	99%	99%	99%	98%	100%
6	James	99%	98%	98%	99%	98%	100%
7	Jim	82%	82%	89%	82%	82%	82%
8	Tom	99%	99%	100%	98%	99%	100%

Note: Table 1 shows the results of students’ final grades, tests, quizzes, and three projects.

Data Collection

The research employed an interpretive multiple-case study (Yin, 2018), focusing on the experiences and perspectives of eight students at the 300-level of Japanese. Participants shared their divergent experiences and perspectives on the Japanese literature course

through surveys and interviews at the end of the course in the 2023 spring semester. I also analyzed the data through observations and student discussions during the course. An interpretive multiple-case study was deemed an appropriate research approach to examine shared and divergent experiences. Additionally, thematic coding, a qualitative method, was used to analyze data and gather common contextual concerns. Triangulation was employed for validity (Bazeley, 2013), involving the collection of information through various methods and cross-referencing data obtained through different methods. I was an instructor as well as the investigator for this study.

Supplementary Materials

In each class I used Powerpoint presentations to introduce vocabulary, grammar notes, cultural information, and relevant YouTube videos related to the readings. Challenging vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar points were highlighted in the presentations to enhance comprehension. Additionally, I provided supplementary materials and uploaded them to the campus portal for students to prepare and review. Each class was also recorded, allowing students to revisit the lessons as needed. The following list outlines the flow of my lessons, presented in bullet points to clearly illustrate the step-by-step scaffolding process that supported students' learning trajectories. Each stage is built upon the previous one to facilitate progressive learning:

- PowerPoint slides that include the challenging words, phrases, and cultural aspects;
- Vocabulary worksheet that includes kanji (Chinese characters) with English translations;
- Grammar notes with examples;
- Cultural notes in English that explain Japanese culture, such as the samurai spirit;
- YouTube videos that provide stories both in English and Japanese with subtitles; When kanji (Chinese characters) lack furigana, I add it myself and create a vocabulary list along with an English translation (See Appendix – Sample of Video). Furigana—small hiragana placed above kanji—assists with pronunciation. In class, we read together as a group or individually, focusing on challenging sections that involve vocabulary, sentence structure, and aspects of Japanese culture; and
- English translations of Japanese literature were provided.

Summarizing the Procedures

This section describes the procedures for ethics, data collection, and data analysis providing transparency and clarity about how the study was conducted. The research took place between February and May 2023, during which I obtained informed consent from all participants prior to their involvement. I employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018), which allowed for an in-depth examination of students' experiences and perspectives. I used surveys, interviews, and classroom observations as the primary data collection methods, focusing on three key factors: learning materials, motivation, and cognitive skills. I transcribed all interviews verbatim to ensure accuracy. Then, I organized the collected data systematically and analyzed them according to emergent themes. I selected this study design because it enables a rich, detailed exploration of individual student voices while also allowing for cross-case comparisons, which helps identify patterns and variations in learning experiences.

Findings

Learning Materials

All the students in this study emphasized the usefulness of vocabulary and grammar notes for comprehending the content of the stories. This activity was particularly true for lower-level proficiency students like Ariana, who said:

To begin with, a challenge that I faced throughout the literature course was the proper grammar points and vocabulary that were used throughout the course. In some cases, I would misuse a grammar point that was provided throughout the lessons, but as we went over the grammar points throughout the PowerPoint slides, I was able to grasp the concept behind these grammar points.

Even higher-level proficiency students, such as James, Jennifer, and Tom, found vocabulary worksheets and grammar notes particularly helpful for understanding classical tales written in an older style of Japanese. For example, they noted the use of *nari*—a formal verb from classical and samurai-era Japanese—compared to *desu*, the polite copula used in modern Japanese. James, an “A” student, shared, “When I read the unlearned classical words, I got totally lost. However, with the supplemental materials, I started to grasp the story step by step.” He specifically requested a review of challenging vocabulary, including masculine and feminine terms, as well as the samurai-related terminology, which had not been covered in their 200-level Japanese course. Preparing the supplementary materials took extra time, but it was rewarding to see James’s comprehension of the story improve. These observations highlight the importance of supplemental language materials in enhancing comprehension at this level, particularly when dealing with historical or classical texts.

All the students expressed enjoyment in the variety of stories, particularly folklores. Ariana commented: “I really enjoyed the variety of Japanese folklore and stories that we covered during the course that show morals, Japanese customs, cultures, and way of thinking.” Additionally, several students reported gaining new insights into Japanese culture through the stories. For instance, Jennifer mentioned:

Aside from the wonderful stories, I like that I was able to learn more about the culture of Japan through them. For example, I learned that when there is a rain shower while the sun is out, there will be a fox wedding, and you have to smoke cigarettes to remove their illusions. It is a very curious thing.

These statements underscore the importance of effective and appropriate instructional materials in both content and language supplements for a better understanding of the stories (St. Olaf College, 2025). Curiosity is a higher order of learning. Tom’s feedback further emphasized the significance of language-related supplemental materials to comprehend the contents:

To begin with, a challenge that I faced throughout the literature course was the proper grammar points? And vocabulary that was used throughout the course. In some cases, I would misuse a grammar point that was provided throughout the lessons, but as we went over the grammar points throughout the PowerPoint slides, I was able to grasp the concept behind these grammar points.

This statement showed that appropriate supplements, including PowerPoint slides, grammar points, and vocabulary, are vital for understanding the story.

Tom also highlighted the importance of assignments in developing Japanese language skills:

I liked everything about this course, from the vocabulary worksheets to creating our own stories/retelling stories, and the other assignments as well. I enjoyed all of these assignments because I was able to engage my skills for the language throughout these assignments, and it furthermore deepened my interest in learning Japanese. I learned a lot from the literature courses and culture course [sic], as I was able to get a better understanding of the Japanese language through literature (such as stories, vocabulary worksheets, and so on).

His statement confirmed the importance of assignments related to both language and content tasks for gaining greater insight into Japan's lifestyle through culture and literature courses. Aligning assignments with readings and activities was suggested for teachers to create better outcomes (Center for Instruction and Research Technology, n.d.).

Alignment of activities and assignments becomes more critical when students study classical tales. When learning classical Japanese, students delved into samurai culture and old-fashioned ways of thinking. James shared:

When I read the classical tales such as *The Tale of Heike* and *The Tale of Genji*, I lost my mind and could not understand the stories at all since there are classical Japanese I have never studied. I suggest focusing on difficult vocabulary and grammars [sic] in the stories, especially classical stories. However, I learned so much from *The Tale of Heike* and *Earless Hoichi*, such as samurai culture and customs, like the way they talked, the way they viewed honor, and the way that they lived their lives.

Even though James is an "A" student, he had a challenging time comprehending the classical stories and requested more Japanese language supplements to align with the tales. Students unfamiliar with old Japanese faced challenges learning gender-related expressions. However, vocabulary worksheets and grammar notes were very useful for understanding the stories. Tom reported:

I had the challenge that I faced throughout the literature course was the proper grammar point and vocabulary that was used throughout the course. In some cases, I would misuse a grammar point that was provided throughout the lessons.

The intentional sequencing of easier to more difficult stories, especially using visual aids like YouTube for the easier ones and omitting them for the difficult ones, was noted. Akemi reported: "Started off [sic] the easy stories and moved from difficult to easy ones. Therefore, it was easier to follow the course." This statement aligns with the review of St. Olaf College (2025, January 10), which states that one of the qualities of effective instructional materials is whether the materials are appropriately sequenced.

Visual and Translation Assistance

A few students highlighted the importance of translation and visuals in comprehending content and utilizing the Japanese language, as observed by Ariana. She remarked: "I liked the stories that came with an English translation because I was able to check my work and match it with my translations." This practice became especially relevant when studying two classical tales (*The Tale of Heike* and *The Tale of Genji*), where the supplementation of English translation proved more useful. Ariana further explained that "Since I never learned old Japanese, it was very difficult to understand the classical Japanese stories. Besides, there were not many visuals, such as YouTube, to illustrate classical stories." Expressing a need

for English translation, she continued, "Besides, there are many difficult kanji. I really got lost. I wish there were an English translation."

In interviews about how they approached creating accurate Japanese sentences, the students revealed that the limited availability of tutoring sessions led them to rely on online translation tools such as DeepL and Google Translate. However, I advised them in advance that while Google Translate can be helpful for checking vocabulary, it is less reliable for sentence structures. I suggest that DeepL provides more accurate sentence translations.

Ariana valued visual aids, such as YouTube, in conjunction with written language. Despite expressing initial reluctance about being in the course, her Japanese language grade was 80%, as seen in quizzes. She stated, "Being able to be taught stories both in written language and visually was extremely helpful/beneficial."

For learners with lower language proficiency levels, the provision of not only language supplemental materials, but also visual aids were deemed helpful and beneficial. Incorporating individual differences into supplemental materials is essential for engaging diverse learners. To accommodate various learning preferences, I tailored visual resources such as YouTube videos and images, written materials like handouts, and auditory content, including recordings. Preparing these materials can be time-consuming, often requiring several hours for a single lesson. Yet, watching students engage with the resources, make connections, and demonstrate understanding is deeply rewarding. It gives me a sense of fulfillment and affirmation, reminding me that the extra effort invested in meeting diverse learning needs truly enhances their learning experience.

Motivation

Fun and Interesting

In the aforementioned students' report on various story genres, there was a notable interest in acquiring knowledge about Japanese customs, manners, and ways of thinking. The majority of students expressed their enjoyment, finding the stories both fun and interesting. Intrinsic motivations such as these are essential variables strongly associated with students' academic performance. Despite the linguistic challenges in creating Japanese sentences, all the students reported relishing the process of retelling the stories and crafting alternative endings. Even Ariana, whose Japanese language proficiency was below a "B," expressed that the experience was enjoyable and entertaining. Crafting new stories presents a challenge as students need to employ unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar. Creativity, identified as the highest cognitive skill in Bloom's taxonomy, was evident in the students' reports. These findings align with Ryan and Deci's (2017) study, asserting that intrinsically motivated learners can undertake highly challenging tasks without external pressure, fostering creativity alongside learning, performance, and optimal development.

Integrating interest-driven and enjoyable activities, such as storytelling, into language learning enhances both linguistic competence and cognitive skills. By tapping into students' intrinsic motivation and interest, educators can create engaging, meaningful, and compelling learning experiences that go beyond rote memorization, fostering creativity and deeper understanding.

Challenge

While students found most stories entertaining and engaging, they faced challenges with two classical tales: *The Tale of Heike* and *The Tale of Genji*. The archaic Japanese language and intricate narratives, particularly the complexities of the samurai code and terminology,

proved difficult to grasp. However, as Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest, intrinsic motivation enabled students to persist despite these challenges. Their engagement stemmed not only from enjoyment but also from the desire to overcome difficulties (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This struggle, in turn, fostered autonomous learning.

Before finalizing their presentation scripts, I organized individual Zoom meetings to review students' Japanese. As a prerequisite, they were required to submit a first draft of their script, allowing me to assess their Japanese sentences in advance. This process enabled students to double-check their work and refine their language use. All students appreciated the individual sessions and found them highly useful for improving their scripts.

Although this was a 300-level course for novice learners, students demonstrated remarkable initiative in overcoming challenges independently, fostering a sense of autonomy and confidence in their learning. By crafting their own original stories, they engaged creatively with the material, making their learning experience more meaningful. For the final presentations, they used PowerPoint to share their stories in both Japanese and English, without the pressure of memorization. This approach reduced anxiety and encouraged authentic expression, contributing to a supportive and engaging learning environment.

When engaging with challenging activities, I observed that open-ended questions and discussions about story content in Japanese often led to silence in the classroom. To encourage active participation, I introduced paired and group discussions in both Japanese and English. While verbal discussions in Japanese remained challenging, students successfully engaged in written discussions by utilizing supplemental materials such as vocabulary lists, grammar notes, English translations, and PowerPoints, along with additional tools like videos. When students encounter difficulties, we address them together by implementing various pair and group methodologies and incorporating additional resources.

The majority of students found the supplemental materials and discussions helpful in understanding the story and Japanese culture. As an instructor, I deepened my understanding of higher-order thinking skills through a case study of dynamic classroom processes. This approach enabled students to build confidence in expressing their thoughts before submitting responses and comments in Japanese. The structured framework supported their development in Japanese language proficiency, particularly in reading comprehension, written expression, and the gradual improvement of oral communication.

Cognitive Skills in Bloom's Taxonomy

Evaluation & Comparison

Jennifer, originally from the Philippines, conducted a comparative analysis between her heritage and Japanese culture. In the realm of literature, she noted significant similarities between Japanese and non-Japanese literary works, particularly in themes and moral lessons. The prevalent theme in Japanese literature revolves around the reward for kindness and good-hearted actions, while malevolent deeds face more severe consequences.

At this cognitive level, Jennifer exhibited an unexpected comparison between her native culture and Japanese culture. Additionally, she shared a cultural belief from the Philippines, mentioning that during a rain shower while the sun is out, a mythical creature called Kapre is believed to be smoking tobacco in the trees.

Design/Creativity

All the students, including those with lower language proficiency like Ariana, expressed enjoyment in crafting and reimagining their own stories. Tom specifically highlighted his

positive experience with the course, appreciating everything from vocabulary worksheets to the creation and retelling of stories. Furthermore, students relished the freedom to shape their narratives, with Jim expressing satisfaction in allowing students to change story elements and create their own endings, all while learning some Japanese in the process.

The students' enjoyment of this creative freedom aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000b) assertion that autonomy and choice enhance intrinsic motivation by providing a sense of autonomy. Interviews revealed that students actively sought and utilized tools like DeepL, an online translation tool, to construct meaningful and accurate Japanese sentences independently. This learning practice indicates that freedom of choice enhances intrinsic motivation, fostering autonomous learning.

Despite facing language challenges, Jim, who received a final grade of "B-", still found joy in creating his own story, which supports Ryan and Deci's (2000b) claim that intrinsically motivated learners can tackle challenging tasks with enthusiasm. Surprisingly, even students with lower Japanese proficiency, such as Jim, expressed enjoyment in the freedom to create story endings. Jennifer and James went a step further, suggesting the creation of entire stories, aligning with Ryan and Deci's (2000c) research on the benefits of less control in learning. On the contrary, Ariana struggled with Project 2, where students needed to rewrite the ending of the stories and did not enjoy the creativity involved in crafting her own story. Her frequent attendance at tutoring sessions reflected the challenges posed by complex vocabulary and new kanji that underscored the importance of supplementing language materials, especially for students with lower proficiency levels.

I observed that Conner perceived the projects as "a little easy" despite receiving a grade of B-, which stood in contrast to other students who found the classical tales challenging. This discrepancy may reflect a degree of overconfidence, though the exact reasons remain unclear. I found it insightful to see how students' perceptions of difficulty varied, highlighting the importance of differentiating instruction to meet diverse learning needs. Additionally, several students expressed enjoyment in listening to their peers' presentations, suggesting that the activity not only supported individual creativity but also fostered a sense of community and engagement within the classroom.

Autonomous Learning

Using the scaffolding techniques and supplementary materials I provided, I guided my students to understand the content and develop their Japanese language skills. I remember Tom sharing that he initially struggled with grammar and vocabulary, sometimes misusing points we had covered. However, by working through the PowerPoint slides I had prepared, he gradually grasped the concepts. He reflected:

To begin with, a challenge that I faced throughout the literature course was the proper grammar points and vocabulary that were used throughout the course. In some cases, I would misuse a grammar point that was provided throughout the lessons, but as we went over the grammar points throughout the PowerPoint slides, I was able to grasp the concept behind these grammar points.

Watching Tom work through this challenge reinforced for me the value of fostering autonomous learning. I was struck by how he actively engaged with the materials, reflected on his errors, and corrected them independently. Rather than relying solely on my feedback, he took the initiative to deepen his understanding. Observing this process firsthand reminded me of the importance of creating opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning, to

reflect critically, and to apply new knowledge—principles I now see as central to cultivating both competence and confidence in my students.

In teaching *The Tale of Heike*, I observed clear development in my students' learning, as reflected in Conner's reflections. To guide them toward higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and inference, I implemented a series of structured activities. I provided an English translation of the story, compiled by Donald Keene (2001) from the *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, and uploaded supplemental materials—including a vocabulary list, grammar notes, and cultural notes, such as explanations of the samurai spirit—to the campus portal for students to review at their own pace.

In class, we discussed ye/no questions and Wh-questions in both English and Japanese. For example, I asked students to consider: "What would you do in this situation?" referring to the old samurai who killed the young opponent. Students also submitted written responses as homework, allowing me to see how they processed and applied their understanding individually.

One student, James, shared his experience with this scaffolding approach: "At first, I felt overwhelmed by the classical tale because of the unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structures. With the help of supplemental materials, I was able to understand the content step by step." Witnessing his gradual comprehension reminded me of the value of scaffolding instruction and of providing multiple avenues for students to engage with challenging texts.

For the final project, students were tasked with either creating their own stories or altering the endings of stories studied in class. Before meeting with me individually, they submitted a draft along with a vocabulary list. During our meetings, I provided feedback on both linguistic and cultural aspects. After making revisions, they presented their work in class.

I found that students valued the individual meetings particularly highly, as these sessions gave me the opportunity to address their strengths and areas for growth directly and to guide them in refining their presentations. Providing individualized feedback allowed me to support students with different learning styles more effectively, tailoring suggestions to their specific needs. Through this scaffolding approach, I observed a noticeable boost in their confidence—not only in their understanding of the content but also in their Japanese language skills—which became evident in both their presentations and written assignments. I was especially encouraged to see how creating their own stories seemed to spark genuine engagement and a sense of ownership and responsibility in learning (Kise, 2020; Theesfeld, 2021). Most students, except those with lower proficiency, shared that they would enjoy doing this type of project again because it was fun, which was gratifying to hear and reinforced the value of creative, student-centered learning.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of motivation, learning materials, and higher cognitive skills based upon Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), on intermediate-level students in a Japanese literature class, with the aim of enhancing their cognitive abilities and improving the literature course in the target language. According to ACTFL (2012) proficiency guidelines for intermediate-level readers, students at this stage comprehend plain and simple sentences in familiar everyday situations but may struggle with the understanding of detailed texts and the sequence of stories. The findings of this study underscored the significance of supplemental materials, encompassing both language (vocabulary and grammar) and culture to facilitate a deeper understanding of the content. In addition, historical backgrounds in both English and Japanese are necessary to comprehend the content of the stories. I observed that

preparatory knowledge in English supports students' development of understanding at this level so that they can analyze the content in depth.

Despite the challenges associated with projects demanding the highest cognitive levels, such as design and creativity, students expressed enjoyment in creating stories, revealing an intrinsic motivation for this type of project. This outcome aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2017) assertion that students are more willing to tackle difficulties when they find the learning process enjoyable. The study's results suggest that providing appropriate supplemental materials is crucial for using the scaffolding instruction for success in the literature course in the target language, fostering higher cognitive skills. The inclusion of supplementary materials not only helped address the challenges effectively, but also contributed to students' enjoyment in the creation of stories.

Paying close attention to each student is essential in this literature class for this level of Japanese class. I observed that individual meetings significantly benefited students by enhancing their writing, comprehension, and creativity. However, conducting individual sessions for final projects can be challenging in larger classes due to time constraints and instructional limitations. Fortunately, with only eight students in this class, I was able to hold individual sessions, providing them with personalized guidance.

Teaching Japanese literature to American students for the first time has been a rewarding experience. I have observed that engaging with Japanese literature fosters a strong sense of community both in the classroom and beyond. Through structured discussions and shared reflections, supported by scaffolding instruction, students have deeply connected with the texts and with one another. This process has not only enhanced their cognitive skills but also deepened their understanding of Japanese culture, allowing them to expand their perspectives beyond their own country. As they recognize their own learning growth, they experience a sense of achievement that strengthens their motivation. Ultimately, this journey has enriched them both intellectually and personally.

Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Ellen Head and Jim Ronald of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

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Appendix

Sample of Video

Slide of PowerPoint with vocabulary list with furigana and English translation

Slide 2:

Izanagi (イザナギ) or Izanaki (イザナキ) is a creator deity (kami) in Japanese mythology. He and his sister-wife Izanami are the last of the seven generations of primordial deities that manifested after the formation of heaven and earth.



よみのくに: the world of the dead
 もどります: return
 けがれます: be corrupted, become unclean
 きよめます: purify

よみ くに から もど った イザナギ は、「けが れた くに だ っ た。 から だ きよ め なければ…」と い っ て、かわ い へ 行 き ま し た。 ふく め っ て い る と き、 じ かん や 道 の 神 様 が た く さ ん 生 ま れ ま し た。

単語	読み仮名	英語
イザナギ		See below.
黄泉の国	よみのくに	The world of the dead
戻ります	もどります	To return
脱ぐ	ぬぐ	To take off
けがれます		To be corrupted; to become unclean
清めます	きよめます	To be purified

Samples of Tests and Assignments

Sample Assignment

源氏物語: 夕顔 (The Tale of Genji, Yugao chapter).

p.40 ~ 44

内容質問 (Content questions)

Answer the following in Japanese.

質問1) はだれをいにいきましたか。

質問2) にかかいてありましたか。

質問3) だれが女の人に歌をあげましたか。

質問4) 女の人とはどんな人ですか。

単語の問題 (vocabulary question)

Fill in the blanks with the most appropriate vocabulary.

- 1 のがだったので _____ いにでかけました。
- 2 しいはなだ、_____ もらってきたくないか。
- 3 _____ 一度あってみたいものだ。
- 4 わたくしのように _____ がひくくこどもまでいる女に。
- 5 あなたはやさしくて _____ い人だ。

A. ぜひ B. _____ D. い E. おくゆかし F. _____

Sample test

Test: Earless Hoichi

(I) Vocabulary

Fill in the blanks with the most appropriate vocabulary.

(1) Slide 2~5

1. のはをいて、からへを_____。
2. _____をめたは _____でにました。
3. のを_____しました。
4. はをんでで_____させました。

A. _____ B. げました C. _____ D. _____

(2) Slide 6~11

- ① は _____になっておりませんでした。
- ② 芳一はびっくりしてすぐに_____ができませんでした。
- ③ はだとわかりましたから、_____ませんでした。
- ④ 芳一はもしかしたら、えらい_____の家へいくかもしれないと思いました。
- ⑤ _____がいのしでした。
- ⑥ はにわれて_____しました。

A. _____ B. れ C. _____
D. _____ E. _____ F. _____

(3) Slide 12~ 14

1. は、のいのをい_____。
2. のれがかわって、に_____になりました。
3. は_____ににされました。
4. _____すばらしいとはいませんでした。

A. _____ B. めました C. これほど D. _____

(4) Slide 18 ~ 21

- ① おをかけばおまえから_____はえなくなるはずで
- ② _____にをしたり、いたりしてはいけません。
- ③ いつものように侍の_____が近づきました。
- ④ 芳一は_____ましたが、をしませんでした。
- ⑤ 芳一の_____はひきちがれました。

A. _____ B. _____ C. _____ D. え E. _____

(II) Select one question each from (1) ~ (5) and answer in complete sentences in Japanese.

(1) Slide 2~5

:はだれをいて、をげましたか。

:たってから、がおきましたか。

:はをしましたか。

:はがでしたか。

(2) Slide 6~11

質問1:はどこでをいていましたか。

2:のにきたはだれですか。

3:はどうしてとにいったのですか。

4:は平家のどの場面を歌いましたか。

(3) Slide 12 ~ 17

① はどんなをいめましたか。

② どうしてがになりましたか。

③ はにをしましたか。

④ はどこでをしましたか。

⑤ 芳一はだれにをかせていましたか。

(4) Slide 18 ~ 21

① はのどこにおをかきましたか。

② 芳一はどこでをっていましたか。

③ 怖いのはだれのですか。

④ はのどこをもぎとりましたか。

(5) Slide 22 ~ 25

① のからがダラダラれていましたか。

② はをするのをれていましたか。

③ どんながのをききにきましたか。

(III) Organize sentences to accord with the story. Write the numbers next to each statement consecutively.

① がで、のををいっていると、かがからるがしました。_____

② くからやおちが、のをきにました。_____

③ はいました、「をれてました!」_____

④ のはのを、きちぎりました。_____

⑤ はので、のいのをいました。_____

5 はののにおをきました。_____

⑦ のくに、という、がえないがんでいました。_____

(IV) Select four from the list below and write meaningful sentences in Japanese using the indicated structures.

(1) ~ながら

In the tale: のはき**ながら**こたえました。

(2) ~させました

In the tale: で**させました**。

(3) ~かもしれない

In the tale: いのにくの**かもしれない**。

(4) ~はじめます

In the tale: ののいのをいめました。

(5) ~とは思いませんでした。

In the tale: これほどらしいとは思いませんでした。

(6) ~たら

In the tale: もし**いたら**、おまえはされる。

(7) ~ば

In the tale: おをけば、おまえはからえなくなるはずです。

(8) ~よう: Volitional form

In the tale: にみせよう。

Sample project 1 - Change the ending of Princess Kaguya

Students present the story with created ending using PowerPoint.

最後{さいご}のプレゼンテーションでは、かぐや姫の話{はなし}を選{えら}びます。スタジオジブリは最近{さいきん}その映画を作{つく}りました。日本で人気{にんき}のある話{ばなし}は、地球{ちきゅう}に住{す}む地球外{ちきゅうがい}の王女{おうじょ}についてです。シーンを追加{ついか}する/終{お}わりを変更{へんこう}します。私の考{かんが}えは、王女が月から戻{もど}ってきて、彼女{かのじょ}の友人{ゆうじん}や家族{かぞく}を訪{たず}ねることです。彼女{かのじょ}は特別{とくべつ}な泡{あわ}で彼女{かのじょ}の家族{かぞく}を彼女{かのじょ}の月{つき}の王国{おうこく}に連{つ}れて行きます。何{なん}らかの理由{りゆう}で、映画監督{かんとく}になりたかった。悲{かな}しいことに、シーンを徹底的{てっていき}に見直{みなお}して作業{さぎょう}する時間{じかん}はありません。

English:

For the final presentation, I chose the story Princess Kaguya. Studio Ghibi made a movie of it recently. The popular Japanese story is about an extraterrestrial princess living on planet earth. I am going to add extra scene/change the ending of the original story. My idea would be that the Princess comes back from the moon and visits her friends and family. And she brings her family to her moon kingdom by a special bubble. For some reason, I wanted to be a director. Sadly, I do not have feasible time to work and review the scenes thoroughly.