

FELLOW FOLLOW UP:

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Introduction & Background

Can you share a little about your academic background and current role in UKM?

I studied Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Gunma University for four years and later worked as an R&D engineer in Japan. Although engineering was not my passion, my experience working with Japanese engineers and corporate sectors gave me valuable exposure to Japanese culture and work practices. After returning to Malaysia, I decided to change my career path and discovered my interest in teaching Japanese through tutoring high school students. This led me to become a Japanese language teacher at UKM, where I later joined The Japan Foundation's one-year Japanese Language Teaching Training Program.

As per Japan Foundation's application process, you had nominated Rikkyo University as your host institution and supervisor. How did this collaboration take place and how was your experience learning under their wing?

For this grant, I first had to obtain approval from the host institution. I reached out to several universities, and fortunately, the process went smoothly. I was accepted by Rikkyo University, where the staff were very supportive. My supervisor, who was the dean at the time, guided me through the application process, including preparing the required recommendation letter. She went to great lengths to help with all the paperwork, and I was very grateful for her support.

What inspired you to pursue research in analyzing formal and polite conversational styles in Japanese Manga?

My interest in analysing formal and polite conversational styles in Japanese manga came from the opportunity to connect Japanese language studies with broader Japanese Studies. Since language reflects Japanese society, I chose manga as my research material to explore how politeness, formality, and communication styles are represented through linguistic and cultural contexts.

I selected manga because many students are already interested in reading manga and watching anime, but the use of *keigo* and politeness expressions in these materials is often underutilized as a learning resource. Through manga, students can understand conversations through context and observe how different expressions are used in various social situations. My research also

found that conversation styles are closely connected to cultural values, where elements such as gestures, social relationships, and visual cues in manga help convey meanings beyond words. Therefore, manga can be an effective tool for students to learn not only Japanese language but also the cultural aspects behind communication.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while developing your research project before applying for the grant, during your fellowship period and after returning to Malaysia?

Before going to Japan, my research on politeness strategies in manga was quite broad. Access to extensive research materials, journals, and the JF Library in Tokyo helped me refine my research focus. More importantly, living in Japan showed me that politeness goes beyond grammatically correct language. Concepts such as *kikubari* (consideration for others), *wakimae* (understanding one's role), and honorific expressions like *kenjōgo* and *sonkeigo* demonstrated that politeness must be understood within its social and cultural context.

Looking back, how has this fellowship experience contributed to who you are today as a researcher, educator and individual?

Given the timeframe of the fellowship, I initially focused on literature research and visited the Manga Library and Manga Museum in Kyoto. Through these experiences, I realised that manga is deeply connected to society, as people of all ages engage with different genres. Manga is not only a creative work but also a form of communication between artists and readers, allowing stories and social perspectives to be shared across generations.



Fieldwork & Experience

Considering that your research centers around manga, how do you promote students to use their hobby as a tool to learn Japanese? How do you promote students to use their hobby as a tool to learn Japanese?

Many of my students wanted to learn Japanese. Some of them would tell me, "I don't really read manga or watch anime. Can I still become good at Japanese?" I always tell them yes.

When I was younger, the anime we watched was dubbed, so I didn't even know the original language was Japanese. Yet I still went on to learn the language and eventually became proficient in it, just like many of my students.

So, I don't think you need to like manga or anime to learn Japanese. The language itself is unique and fascinating. Manga and anime may motivate some learners, but they are certainly not the only reason to study Japanese. There are many other aspects of Japanese culture and society that students can enjoy and appreciate.

Can you describe what it was like conducting fieldwork in Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur? Were there any surprising contrasts between the two? Do you think physically being in Japan

was essential for gaining a deeper understanding of your research topic compared to studying it from afar?

Being physically in Japan allowed me to better understand how natural conversations are conducted in Japanese and how these expressions are represented in manga. Although information can be accessed online today, finding original manga materials and related cultural resources can still be challenging. My placement at Rikkyo University was especially valuable, as the professors supported my data collection by facilitating interviews and providing access to research resources, including library networks and manga-related materials such as artist interviews in magazines.

Did you receive institutional or local support while in Japan and how did that shape your fieldwork?

Besides my main research topic, Rikkyo University also provided me with the opportunity to organise a symposium and lecture on my previous research about Japanese-Malay translation. I presented my findings on Japanese food packaging, particularly how untranslated catchphrases may affect consumers' understanding of the product's cultural meaning. Through this experience, I also discovered resources such as manga and discourse corpora, which are used in areas including language research and AI development. These opportunities and discoveries were possible because of my research experience in Japan.

Was there anything else memorable other than your research during your stay in Japan under the fellowship?

One of the most memorable parts of my fellowship was organising a 10-day mobility programme for my UKM students in Japan. We visited several universities, including

Gunma University, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), and Rikkyo University's Niiza and Ikebukuro campuses, as well as a local junior high school. Many of the Japanese students knew very little about Malaysia, so it was a meaningful opportunity for my students to introduce Malaysian culture and foster mutual cultural exchange.

Is there a particular project, publication or initiative that was directly or indirectly inspired by your Japan experience?

Currently, I've submitted chapters in books and another in an academic journal which is still on the way. For the study of politeness in Japanese, you only encounter it in higher levels as a Japanese learner but politeness or *keigo* is used in daily life in Japan. Beginner students don't understand *keigo* so it is necessary to introduce basic *keigo*.



What are the implications of your research especially among the youth in Japan and Malaysia? What do you hope is the long-term impact of this study?

What we consider common is not necessarily common in Malaysian society. When I first presented my research on manga in Malaysia, many people asked about the difference between Japanese manga and Western comics. Even visual cues that seem obvious to manga readers, such as a sweat drop indicating a character is in trouble, were unfamiliar to them. Similarly, to explain Japanese honorific language (*kenjōgo*), I compared it to Bahasa Istana in Malay. The difference is that while royal language is used only in specific contexts in Malaysia, *kenjōgo* is part of everyday communication in Japan.



Experience with JF grant

How has the Fellowship continued to impact your work or academic visibility even after the project ended?

The research data I collected, particularly the corpus database, continues to support my current work. Although I can no longer travel to Japan for fieldwork, the data allows me to continue conducting research from Malaysia. The knowledge and resources I gained from the project have remained valuable long after it ended.

What would you say distinguishes JF's support from other academic or cultural grants?

I think JF's grant is all-rounded. The researcher not only can perform but they are also given the chance to experience the culture. Some prior background work must be done before your departure.

If you were to recommend this grant to another researcher, what would you highlight as its greatest strengths and points of improvement?

I would highlight the strong support provided by the Japan Foundation as one of the greatest strengths of this grant. Access to research resources, including the JF Library in Tokyo, together with JF's guidance, greatly supported my research. I would encourage future applicants to actively engage with JF throughout their projects.

One area for improvement would be to offer more hybrid or online opportunities for grant recipients to interact. JF Headquarters organises symposiums for fellowship recipients, and making these sessions more accessible would allow more researchers to exchange ideas and experiences.

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