

## Motivations and Challenges in Learning Hiragana among Filipino University Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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### Abstract

Foreign language learning in higher education has become increasingly important as universities respond to internationalization, global labor mobility, and the need to prepare students for intercultural engagement. In the Philippine context, Japanese language instruction has gained relevance, yet limited research has examined how Filipino students experience early Japanese script learning, particularly Hiragana, through reflective narratives. This study explored the motivations and challenges of college students learning Hiragana in a foreign language course at Isabela State University–Angadanan Campus during the first semester of School Year 2025–2026. Guided by the description phase of Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 75 students using a validated motivation questionnaire, while qualitative data were drawn from students’ reflection papers and analyzed thematically. Findings showed high overall motivation, with the strongest dimensions being the desire to become a global citizen and career and economic enhancement. Motivation did not significantly differ by sex or academic program, although ethnicity influenced career-related and global motivations. Qualitative results revealed motivations linked to employment, migration, cultural curiosity, media exposure, academic obligation, and personal growth. Students also faced challenges in memorization, character similarity, writing fatigue, time pressure, and self-comparison, but persistence, teacher support, and peer assistance supported their progress. The study highlights Hiragana learning as both a meaningful and demanding process, underscoring the value of reflective and well-scaffolded approaches in Japanese language instruction.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Learning, Japanese Language Education, Hiragana, Reflective Writing, Motivation, Mixed Methods

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## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to prepare students not only for local participation but also for global engagement. The internationalization of higher education has consequently made foreign language learning more relevant, particularly in institutions that seek to strengthen employability, intercultural competence, and academic mobility. This broader educational direction is closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, including education that fosters global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity. In the Philippine

context, this internationalizing direction is further supported by Republic Act No. 11448, or the Transnational Higher Education Act, which expands access to globally oriented educational arrangements and strengthens the legal environment for international academic collaboration.

Within this wider educational landscape, foreign language learning has moved beyond the narrow goal of mastering vocabulary and grammar. It now occupies a more strategic place in higher education because it contributes to communication across cultures, the development of global dispositions, and access to broader educational and employment opportunities. Moeller and Catalano (2015) argued that foreign language teaching develops learners' ability to communicate creatively and meaningfully while also expanding cultural understanding and interdisciplinary awareness. In the same vein, De Wit et al. (2015) emphasized that internationalization in higher education is no longer a peripheral project but a central dimension of institutional development. More recent work likewise shows that foreign language education has become intertwined with institutional efforts to produce globally competent graduates and to embed international perspectives into curricula (Kopus et al., 2021; Goh et al., 2024).

Japanese language learning deserves particular attention in this regard. Compared with English and other globally dominant languages, Japanese often occupies a more specialized yet highly meaningful position in Asian higher education. For many students, Japanese is linked to imagined futures involving employment, travel, technology, media, and cross-cultural interaction. At the same time, Japanese poses substantial early-stage difficulty because learners must navigate not only a new language system but also unfamiliar scripts and orthographic conventions. Jordan and Walton (1987) long ago described Japanese as a "truly foreign" language for many learners because of its structural, orthographic, and cultural distance from their linguistic backgrounds. That foundational insight remains relevant, especially for Filipino learners whose first and second languages are typically alphabetic. More recent evidence from Filipino learners confirms that Japanese language study can be difficult in listening, pronunciation, reading, and writing, with unfamiliar scripts such as Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji contributing to low confidence and reduced comprehension (Quintos, 2021). Similar difficulties have also been observed in other Asian contexts, where learners report Japanese as challenging because of writing systems, pronunciation distinctions, and cumulative memorization demands (Setiana et al., 2024; Wahyuni & Indraswari, 2024).

Among the components of Japanese, Hiragana is especially important because it serves as a foundational script for reading and writing. For beginners, Hiragana is often the first sustained encounter with Japanese orthography. Yet foundational does not mean easy. Students must memorize character forms, connect them to sounds, distinguish visually similar symbols, observe stroke order, and apply rules involving long vowels, consonant doubling, and sound variation. Even when students grasp the value of Japanese learning, the practical experience of beginning Hiragana can be cognitively and emotionally demanding. This makes it particularly important to understand not only whether students are motivated but also how that motivation is lived out while they struggle with a novel script.

Motivation remains one of the most widely discussed constructs in foreign language learning because it shapes effort, persistence, and engagement. Research across settings shows that language learning motivation is rarely singular. It commonly includes instrumental motives such as employment and academic benefit, integrative or intercultural motives related to communication and identity, and internal motives involving enjoyment, self-belief, and personal accomplishment (Busse & Walter, 2013; Lăpădat & Lăpădat, 2024; Yaqoub et al., 2023). More recent work also points to the importance of foreign language enjoyment, behavioral engagement, self-efficacy, and grit in sustaining students' willingness to continue learning even in difficult conditions (Lin & Wang, 2025; Xu & Hong, 2025).

At the same time, reflective practice has emerged as a valuable pedagogical and research lens in language education. Reflection enables learners to narrate what they experience, how they interpret difficulty, and how they understand their own progress. Zadorozhna (2017) argued that

reflective foreign language learning strengthens metacognitive awareness, self-regulation, and learner autonomy. Adeani et al. (2020) similarly found that Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle provides structure that helps students produce clearer and more organized reflections. More recent work has reinforced the value of reflective frameworks in higher education by showing that they support meaning-making, metacognition, self-awareness, and critical engagement with learning processes (Hashim et al., 2023; Sudirman et al., 2024; Warhurst et al., 2025).

This reflective dimension is important because much of the literature on language learning motivation still depends heavily on survey-based designs. Such studies are valuable for measuring trends, but they often miss the texture of students' actual learning experiences. In Japanese language education, this gap becomes more pronounced when the focus is on initial script acquisition. Questionnaire scores can show that students are motivated or challenged, but they do not fully reveal how students narrate confusion, fatigue, interest, pride, discouragement, or persistence. Narrative and reflective approaches are especially useful in motivation research because they make visible the dynamic, contextual, and lived character of learners' engagement (Consoli & Darnault, 2025).

In the Philippine setting, this gap remains significant. Japanese language instruction has long existed in the country, but much of the local literature either predates current internationalization policies or relies on quantitative descriptions of motivation and difficulty. Earlier work documented career opportunities, cultural interest, and academic requirement as common motives for studying Japanese, but it did not explore students' reflective accounts of Hiragana learning. The result is a limited understanding of how Filipino learners describe the actual experience of confronting a new script, coping with slow progress, and connecting language study to their aspirations. Quintos (2021) advanced this conversation by identifying the main areas of difficulty among Filipino learners, yet her survey-based design still leaves open the question of how students themselves narrate those difficulties and how their motivations are tested in everyday learning.

The present study responds to that gap by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. It examines the motivations of students enrolled in a foreign language course and then analyzes their reflection papers using the description phase of Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. This approach is appropriate because the descriptive phase focuses on recalling and articulating what happened during learning, making it especially useful for examining lived classroom experience without prematurely collapsing it into abstract evaluation (Galli & New, 2022). The study therefore asks not only what motivates students to learn a foreign language, but also how those motivations are expressed, strained, and sustained in the concrete experience of learning Hiragana. In doing so, it contributes a localized and student-centered account of foreign language learning in a Philippine university context and offers pedagogical implications for designing more reflective and responsive Japanese language instruction.

## **METHODS**

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase first examined students' motivations for learning a foreign language through a structured survey, after which the qualitative phase analyzed reflection papers to explain how those motivations were experienced in the actual process of learning Hiragana. This design was appropriate because the study sought both measurable trends and richer accounts of lived experience. Mixed-methods research is especially useful when the aim is not merely to identify whether a pattern exists, but to understand how and why that pattern takes shape within a particular educational context. In this case, the quantitative strand established the relative strength of four motivational dimensions, while the qualitative strand illuminated how these motivations were enacted, challenged, and sustained in classroom and out-of-classroom learning.

The qualitative strand was anchored in Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, but only its description phase was used. This decision was conceptually defensible because the study did not aim to evaluate students' reflective sophistication across the full cycle. Rather, it aimed to capture their factual and experiential accounts of what happened during Hiragana learning. The descriptive phase is especially appropriate when the goal is to recover students' narratives of challenge, motivation,

pace, and perceived progress before moving into deeper interpretation (Galli & New, 2022; Adeani et al., 2020).

### **Participants and Setting**

The study was conducted at Isabela State University–Angadanan Campus during the first semester of School Year 2025–2026. The quantitative sample consisted of 75 students enrolled in Foreign Language 1. The sample was purposively organized to include 25 students each from the Diploma in Agricultural Science, Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management, and Bachelor of Science in Information Technology programs. The resulting distribution across programs was therefore perfectly balanced. The sex distribution was also nearly even, with 37 male students and 38 female students. Ethnically, the group was diverse, consisting primarily of Ilocano and Tagalog students, with additional representation from Gaddang, Yogad, Ybanag, Itawis, Tausug, and Ilonggo backgrounds. A subset of students participated in the qualitative phase by submitting reflection papers that were later analyzed thematically.

### **Instruments**

The quantitative phase used a motivation questionnaire adapted from Shaharuddin et al. (2024). The instrument measured four dimensions of motivation: career and economic enhancement, desire to become a global citizen, desire for self-satisfaction, and self-efficacy. Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The instrument was reviewed by expert validators, including a psychologist, an English language specialist, and a Japanese language expert, and reliability testing was conducted before use. For the qualitative phase, students completed reflection papers in response to prompts anchored in the description phase of Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. The prompts asked them to describe their motivations for learning the foreign language, their classroom and out-of-classroom experiences, the challenges they encountered while learning Hiragana, and their perceptions of their own learning pace. These prompts were designed to elicit descriptive accounts rather than evaluative essays, thereby making the reflections suitable for thematic analysis focused on lived experience.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

After receiving institutional permission, the researcher distributed informed consent forms and explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of responses. The quantitative questionnaire was then administered to the identified respondents. After retrieval, the data were encoded and processed. Reflection papers were collected during the qualitative phase. Filipino responses were translated into English, and the translations were validated by a language expert to support accuracy and interpretive trustworthiness.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Frequency counts and percentages were used to summarize the profile variables. Means and standard deviations were used to describe the four motivational dimensions. Outcome variables did not meet the normality assumption; hence, nonparametric tests were used for group comparisons. Mann–Whitney U tests examined differences by sex, and Kruskal–Wallis H tests examined differences by program and ethnicity. Where significant Kruskal–Wallis results were obtained, post hoc comparisons were reported using superscript letters in the median columns.

The reflection papers were analyzed thematically. The researcher first read the texts repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data, then performed open coding line by line. Codes were grouped into subthemes and then consolidated into broader themes aligned with the focal areas of the study: push motivations, lived learning experiences, challenges and coping, and perceptions of learning pace. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme. Although the

analysis was data-driven, it was organized in relation to the descriptive phase of Gibbs' model and the study's research questions.

### Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were maintained throughout the data collection, storage, analysis, and reporting processes. Data were handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, and informed consent was secured from the participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No identifying information was disclosed in the report, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. No conflict of interest existed in the conduct of the study.

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative Phase

**Table 1.** Profile of the Respondents by Course, Sex, and Ethnicity

| Profile   | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Course    |           |         |
| BAT       | 25        | 33.3    |
| BHM       | 25        | 33.3    |
| BSIT      | 25        | 33.3    |
| Sex       |           |         |
| Male      | 37        | 49.3    |
| Female    | 38        | 50.7    |
| Ethnicity |           |         |
| Tagalog   | 20        | 26.7    |
| Ilocano   | 28        | 37.3    |
| Gaddang   | 10        | 13.3    |
| Yogad     | 8         | 10.7    |
| Ybanag    | 4         | 5.3     |
| Itawis    | 3         | 4.0     |
| Tausug    | 1         | 1.3     |
| Ilonggo   | 1         | 1.3     |

Table 1 displays that the respondents were evenly distributed across the three academic programs, and the sex distribution was nearly balanced. The sample also reflected substantial ethnolinguistic diversity. This profile is important because it suggests that the study captured responses from students situated in different disciplinary and cultural locations rather than from a narrow or homogeneous group.

**Table 2.** Composite Scores of Students' Motivations in Learning a Foreign Language

| Motivation dimension              | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Interpretation | Rank |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------------|------|
| Desire to become a global citizen | 3.34     | 0.48      | Strongly Agree | 1    |
| Career and economic enhancement   | 3.28     | 0.57      | Strongly Agree | 2    |
| Self-efficacy                     | 3.07     | 0.47      | Agree          | 3    |
| Desire for self-satisfaction      | 3.02     | 0.58      | Agree          | 4    |
| Overall                           | 3.18     | 0.37      | Agree          |      |

Table 2 shows that the students reported high overall motivation to learn the foreign language. The two strongest dimensions were outward-looking: the desire to become a global citizen ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) and career and economic enhancement ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). Self-efficacy ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) and self-satisfaction ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) were also positively endorsed, though at slightly lower levels. This pattern suggests that students approached Hiragana learning as both a

practical and an intercultural project. In other words, they did not see Japanese merely as a classroom subject; they associated it with future participation in a larger world.

At the item level, the strongest motivations involved perceived opportunities after graduation, broader intercultural communication, cultural knowledge, and professional advantage. Students strongly agreed that learning the language could provide more opportunities after graduation and help them interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. These results are consistent with the view that foreign language learning is driven by a combination of employability concerns and intercultural aspirations in higher education settings (Moeller & Catalano, 2015; Kopus et al., 2021; Lăpădat & Lăpădat, 2024).

**Table 3.** Mann–Whitney U Tests of Motivation for Learning a Foreign Language by Sex

| Motivation                        | Sex    | n  | Md   | U      | Z     | p    |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----|------|--------|-------|------|
| Career and economic enhancement   | Male   | 37 | 3.33 | 631.00 | -0.77 | .442 |
|                                   | Female | 38 | 3.33 |        |       |      |
| Desire to become a global citizen | Male   | 37 | 3.50 | 628.00 | -0.80 | .423 |
|                                   | Female | 38 | 3.00 |        |       |      |
| Desire for self-satisfaction      | Male   | 37 | 3.00 | 643.50 | -0.63 | .526 |
|                                   | Female | 38 | 3.00 |        |       |      |
| Self-efficacy                     | Male   | 37 | 3.17 | 684.00 | -0.20 | .839 |
|                                   | Female | 38 | 3.00 |        |       |      |
| Overall                           | Male   | 37 | 3.25 | 670.00 | -0.35 | .726 |
|                                   | Female | 38 | 3.19 |        |       |      |

Table 3 shows that no statistically significant differences were found by sex across any of the motivational dimensions or the overall score. The results suggest that male and female students were similarly motivated to learn the foreign language. This pattern supports the idea that the perceived value of Japanese language learning in this setting was shared across sex categories rather than being driven by distinctly gendered orientations.

**Table 4.** Kruskal–Wallis Tests of Motivation in Learning a Foreign Language by Course

| Motivation                        | Course | n  | Md   | H    | df | p    |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----|------|------|----|------|
| Career and economic enhancement   | BAT    | 25 | 3.33 | 0.98 | 2  | .612 |
|                                   | BHM    | 25 | 3.50 |      |    |      |
|                                   | BSIT   | 25 | 3.33 |      |    |      |
| Desire to become a global citizen | BAT    | 25 | 3.67 | 4.06 | 2  | .131 |
|                                   | BHM    | 25 | 3.50 |      |    |      |
|                                   | BSIT   | 25 | 3.33 |      |    |      |
| Desire for self-satisfaction      | BAT    | 25 | 3.00 | 1.58 | 2  | .454 |
|                                   | BHM    | 25 | 3.33 |      |    |      |
|                                   | BSIT   | 25 | 3.00 |      |    |      |
| Self-efficacy                     | BAT    | 25 | 3.00 | 1.36 | 2  | .508 |
|                                   | BHM    | 25 | 3.33 |      |    |      |
|                                   | BSIT   | 25 | 3.00 |      |    |      |
| Overall                           | BAT    | 25 | 3.29 | 3.99 | 2  | .136 |
|                                   | BHM    | 25 | 3.38 |      |    |      |
|                                   | BSIT   | 25 | 3.17 |      |    |      |

Table 4 reveals that no significant differences in motivation were found across the three academic programs. Although BHM students tended to have slightly higher medians in some dimensions, these differences were not statistically significant. The result suggests that the value of foreign language learning was broadly shared across students in agriculture, hospitality, and information technology. The commonality of motivational orientations across programs is notable because it indicates that Japanese learning was not viewed as relevant only to one disciplinary field.

**Table 5.** Kruskal–Wallis Tests of Motivation in Learning a Foreign Language by Ethnicity

| Motivation                        | Ethnicity             | n  | Md                 | H     | df | p      |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----|--------------------|-------|----|--------|
| Career and economic enhancement   | Tagalog               | 20 | 3.67 <sup>b</sup>  | 23.87 | 5  | < .001 |
|                                   | Ilocano               | 28 | 3.42 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Gaddang               | 10 | 3.25 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Yogad                 | 8  | 3.09 <sup>a</sup>  |       |    |        |
|                                   | Ybanag                | 4  | 2.83 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Itawis/Tausug/Ilonggo | 5  | 2.17 <sup>a</sup>  |       |    |        |
| Desire to become a global citizen | Tagalog               | 20 | 3.67 <sup>b</sup>  | 15.22 | 5  | .009   |
|                                   | Ilocano               | 28 | 3.50 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Gaddang               | 10 | 3.33 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Yogad                 | 8  | 3.17 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Ybanag                | 4  | 3.08 <sup>ab</sup> |       |    |        |
|                                   | Itawis/Tausug/Ilonggo | 5  | 2.50 <sup>a</sup>  |       |    |        |
| Desire for self-satisfaction      | Tagalog               | 20 | 3.00               | 3.07  | 5  | .689   |
|                                   | Ilocano               | 28 | 3.00               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Gaddang               | 10 | 3.00               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Yogad                 | 8  | 3.09               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Ybanag                | 4  | 2.92               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Itawis/Tausug/Ilonggo | 5  | 3.33               |       |    |        |
| Self-efficacy                     | Tagalog               | 20 | 3.17               | 1.53  | 5  | .910   |
|                                   | Ilocano               | 28 | 3.09               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Gaddang               | 10 | 3.09               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Yogad                 | 8  | 3.25               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Ybanag                | 4  | 2.75               |       |    |        |
|                                   | Itawis/Tausug/Ilonggo | 5  | 3.00               |       |    |        |

Table 5 shows that ethnicity emerged as a significant factor in two dimensions of motivation: career and economic enhancement, and desire to become a global citizen. Tagalog students recorded the highest median scores in both dimensions, whereas the combined Itawis, Tausug, and Ilonggo group recorded the lowest. No significant ethnic differences were found in self-satisfaction or self-efficacy. This pattern suggests that outward-looking motivations related to mobility, opportunity, and imagined global participation may vary by ethnolinguistic background, while inwardly focused motivations remain more stable.

### Qualitative Phase

The qualitative analysis complements the quantitative results by showing how these motivations were expressed in actual Hiragana learning.

**Table 6.** Themes on Students' Push Motivations for Learning Hiragana

| Central theme   | Themes                            | Subthemes  | Representative quotes  |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Motivated by a blend of intrinsic curiosity and practical aspirations | Career and employment aspirations | Future work and migration in Japan                               | “I wish to work in Japan as an agriculturist.” (BAT-R3); “I might be able to work in Japan soon.” (HM-R5)                    |
|   | Global mobility and travel        | Working abroad; communicating with Japanese and other foreigners | “We dream of going abroad to Japan someday.” (BAT-R7); “I can use it to communicate, especially in other countries.” (HM-R3) |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Cultural curiosity and media-related interest | Anime, films, curiosity about Japanese culture | “It helps me especially when I am watching anime and some Japanese movies.” (BAT-R4)  |
| Academic responsibility                       | Course requirement; obligation to pass         | “I need this for my course.” (HM-R6); “I have no choice, so I just faced it instead of failing.” (IT-R21)                                   |
| Personal growth and fulfillment               | Enjoyment of challenge; self-development       | “Each bit of learning pushes me to deepen my interest and gain confidence.” (BAT-R2); “The more I learned, the more I enjoyed it.” (IT-R20) |

As shown in Table 6, the first major theme revealed that students were motivated by a combination of practical aspiration and intrinsic curiosity. Career and migration goals figured prominently, especially the desire to work in Japan or to gain a professional edge. Yet these practical motives were interwoven with cultural curiosity, anime-related interest, and the enjoyment of learning something new. The theme, therefore, supports the quantitative finding that motivation was not purely instrumental. Rather, it involved a dynamic interplay of employability, identity, curiosity, and self-development.

**Table 7.** Themes on Students’ Lived Learning Experiences in Hiragana

| Central theme  | Themes  | Subthemes   | Representative quotes   |
|--|---|---|---|
| A multidimensional learning process involving skill, culture, career relevance, and social support | Mastery of writing rules and stroke order         | Precision, legibility, discipline                           | “There is a specific way of writing characters to ensure legibility.” (BAT-R5); “Stroke order and neat writing are important.” (IT-R8)                  |
|  | Awareness of language structure and pronunciation | Long vowels, small <i>tsu</i> , meaning changes             | “Proper pronunciation can change the meaning of words.” (BAT-R3)  |
|  | Cultural appreciation                             | Order, beauty, and respect in writing                       | “Hiragana has strict rules... This helps me appreciate Japanese culture, order, and beauty.” (BAT-R2)   |
|  | Career relevance                                  | Preparation for field-specific work and overseas employment | “This is important for me as a step toward my future work.” (BAT-R6); “Helpful for getting a job in Japan.” (IT-R3)                                     |
|  | Social and pedagogical support                    | Teacher explanation, quizzes, peers, shared interests       | “Studying Hiragana is fun... the teacher explains them in context.” (HM-R4); “I enjoy studying Hiragana since I have friends learning it too.” (BAT-R7) |

As indicated in Table 7, students described Hiragana learning as more than memorizing characters. It involved technical precision, awareness of pronunciation, sensitivity to Japanese culture, anticipation of future professional use, and support from teachers and peers. These accounts suggest that even at the beginner level, students were already interpreting script learning as a meaningful cultural and social practice. The data also show that supportive classroom interactions helped sustain effort, especially when the technical demands of the script became difficult.

**Table 8.** Themes on challenges encountered and coping strategies in learning Hiragana

| Central theme   | Themes   | Subthemes  | Representative quotes  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Students confront cognitive, emotional, and environmental challenges but navigate them through resilience and adaptive effort | Memorization overload and similarity of characters | Volume of characters; visually confusable forms      | “The challenge I experience is memorization.” (HM-R2); “The most difficult part is memorizing... especially when you see others learning faster.” (IT-R24) |
|   | Difficulty in writing and transcription            | Stroke order, board writing, Romaji conversion       | “Writing is not easy and memorizing is hard for me.” (BAT-R5); “Translating Hiragana to Romaji is very confusing.” (IT-R6)                                 |
|   | Time constraints and workload                      | Insufficient time, pace pressure, fatigue            | “We lack time before moving to another chapter.” (BAT-R3); “A culture shock entering college.” (IT-R20)  |
|   | Emotional responses                                | Stress, confusion, discouragement, but also passion  | “Sometimes it makes me lose the motivation to study.” (HM-R1); “Only passion and dreams can make the learning enjoyable.” (IT-R1)                          |
|   | Environmental barriers and coping                  | Classroom conditions; persistence; repeated practice | “Lack of sleep is really a big factor.” (IT-R19); students persisted despite discomfort and repetition   |

The challenge data, as shown in Table 8, reveal that Hiragana learning was experienced as cognitively heavy, emotionally uneven, and sometimes physically tiring. Students struggled with memorization, visually similar characters, the physical demands of writing, and pressure created by pace and workload. Yet the same accounts also show that difficulty did not simply produce withdrawal. Many students responded through repetition, persistence, and strategic effort. The qualitative findings, therefore, suggest that challenge and coping were deeply intertwined; in many cases, struggle itself became part of the students’ developing sense of commitment.

**Table 9.** Themes on Students’ Perceptions of Their Learning Pace in Hiragana

| Central theme   | Themes                                       | Subthemes                                     | Representative quotes  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Learning begins quickly with guidance but slows as complexity increases | Faster initial learning of vowels            | Teacher repetition and supportive instruction | “Our instructor keeps pushing us, and this motivates me to learn more.” (BAT-R4); “Because Sir repeatedly taught us until we understood, I learned it faster.” (HM-R1) |
|   | Slowing pace as content becomes more complex | More characters, more rules, more confusion   | Students reported that progress slowed once the script expanded beyond the initial vowel set   |
|   | Role of motivation and prior experience      | Interest, anime exposure, and dreams of Japan | Students with a strong interest or prior exposure described greater ease in sustaining practice  |
|   | Self-beliefs and persistence                 | Confidence, comparison, and repeated practice | Some students felt slower than peers, but continued through repetition and effort  |

As shown in Table 9, students generally perceived the earliest stage of Hiragana learning, especially the vowel set, as easier because of teacher repetition and guided practice. However, as complexity increased, students felt that their pace slowed considerably. Individual differences in

prior exposure, self-belief, and persistence also shaped this experience. The data suggest that students' learning pace was not determined by instruction alone; it was also affected by personal readiness, confidence, motivation, and the ability to tolerate difficulty over time.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that students' motivation to learn Hiragana was high, but more importantly, it was layered. The strongest quantitative dimensions, desire to become a global citizen and career and economic enhancement, indicate that the students did not regard the foreign language as merely a curricular requirement. Instead, they linked it to mobility, employment, intercultural communication, and future opportunity. This pattern resonates with recent work showing that language learning motivation in higher education is shaped by future selves, global imaginaries, and institutionally mediated aspirations rather than by narrow classroom goals alone (Busse & Walter, 2013; Kopus et al., 2021; Goh et al., 2024).

The fact that desire to become a global citizen ranked first is especially significant. Language learning here was strongly associated with broadened perspectives, confidence in dealing with culturally different others, and greater knowledge of other cultures. Such a result reinforces Moeller and Catalano's (2015) view that language learning expands learners' perspectives and deepens intercultural understanding. It also aligns with more recent work on intercultural learning, which argues that language classrooms in higher education can support identity development and intercultural communicative competence when they move beyond purely grammatical training (Fang et al., 2024; Yanping & Burhanudeen, 2023). In the present study, that global orientation was not abstract. Students explicitly linked Japanese learning to anime, media, values of discipline and order, and the imagined possibility of working or living in Japan. Their language-learning motivations were therefore embedded in a wider process of identity expansion.

Career and economic enhancement emerged as the second-strongest dimension, and the reflection papers show clearly why. Students repeatedly described Hiragana as part of their imagined professional future. Agriculture students linked it to work as agriculturists in Japan, hospitality students to global service interaction, and information technology students to employment in a technologically advanced country. This finding is consistent with a broad literature showing that instrumental motivation remains powerful in higher education language learning, especially when students can connect language study to concrete future opportunities (Ramírez, 2017; Lăpădat & Lăpădat, 2024; Yaqoub et al., 2023). Yet the present findings refine that insight by showing that instrumental motives were not dry or externally imposed; they were narrated by students as deeply personal, forward-looking, and often emotionally meaningful.

The qualitative results also make clear that students' motivations were not reducible to instrumental motives. Cultural curiosity and media-related interest played a major role in sustaining engagement. Students referred to anime, films, Japanese culture, and the pleasure of understanding even a small amount of written language. In this respect, the study supports earlier work suggesting that Japanese language motivation often evolves through a blend of practical goals and emerging intrinsic interest. As students begin to understand the script, motivation can deepen rather than remain fixed at the level of external reward. This process is visible in reflective statements such as "the more I learned, the more I enjoyed it," which suggests that enjoyment can grow through successful participation rather than preexist as a stable trait. This is consistent with research showing that foreign language enjoyment supports engagement, confidence, and willingness to continue learning even in demanding contexts (Handrianto, 2019; Lin & Wang, 2025).

A particularly important contribution of the study lies in its use of reflective writing. Survey data identified the strength of each motivational dimension, but the reflection papers revealed how those motivations were enacted, interrupted, and sustained in practice. Students did not simply say they were motivated; they described how motivation had to survive confusion, repetition, hand fatigue, time pressure, embarrassment, and slow progress. This is precisely where reflective writing becomes analytically valuable. Reflection can expose the lived micro-processes through which

motivation is either strengthened or undermined during learning. Previous scholarship has similarly shown that structured reflection supports metacognition, self-awareness, and more deliberate engagement with learning experience (Adeani et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2023; Sudirman et al., 2024). In this study, reflection made visible the daily labor of beginning Japanese literacy.

The challenges reported by students also deserve close attention. The qualitative findings demonstrate that Hiragana learning is not only cognitively demanding but affectively and physically taxing as well. Memorization overload, confusion caused by similar-looking characters, writing fatigue, transcription difficulty, and time pressure all appeared repeatedly in the reflections. These findings extend the survey-based results reported in local and regional literature. Quintos (2021) documented that Filipino learners struggle with Japanese language components including writing systems. Setiana et al. (2024) also reported widespread perceptions of Japanese as difficult among learners in Indonesia. The present study confirms those difficulties but moves beyond description by showing how students emotionally experience them: some compared themselves to faster learners, some felt discouraged, some became anxious about forgetting characters, and some struggled to manage the workload alongside other academic demands. In that sense, the study contributes a more humanly detailed account of what early Japanese literacy feels like for learners.

Yet the findings are not simply about difficulty. They are equally about resilience. The students' reflections repeatedly show that persistence, strategic repetition, teacher guidance, and peer support functioned as stabilizing forces. This is important because self-efficacy, while not the strongest motivational dimension, still appears to have played a sustaining role. Students did not claim effortless mastery. On the contrary, many were cautious about their ability to fully master the language. But they still believed they could keep up, improve, and continue. This pattern aligns with Bandura's (2000) classical argument that self-efficacy supports effort and persistence rather than guaranteeing immediate success. It also resonates with more recent work linking self-efficacy, resilience, and strategy use in language learning contexts (Rayyan et al., 2023; Meccawy, 2023).

The lack of significant differences by sex and academic program is also noteworthy. It suggests that the motivational value of Japanese learning was broadly shared across these groups, despite minor descriptive differences. In practical terms, this means that the educational appeal of the foreign language was not confined to one gender or one disciplinary cluster. Students across agriculture, hospitality, and information technology all saw value in Japanese learning, though perhaps through somewhat different imagined futures (Nengsih et al., 2022; Solfema et al., 2024). This finding is useful for curricular planning because it implies that foreign language instruction can be framed as institutionally relevant across programs rather than as a niche offering for only one field.

At the same time, the ethnic differences in career-related and global-citizenship motivation complicate any assumption that students begin from the same social horizon. The higher medians recorded among Tagalog students, together with lower scores among smaller ethnolinguistic groups, suggest that outward-looking motivations may be unevenly distributed. The study does not claim a causal explanation, but the pattern may indicate differences in exposure to global networks, access to media, or the degree to which specific communities imagine international mobility as part of student futures. What matters pedagogically is that language classrooms should not assume a universal motivational baseline. Some students may immediately connect Japanese learning to employment and international participation, while others may need more explicit help in seeing why the language matters to their own aspirations. That implication is consistent with inclusive educational frameworks emphasizing access, relevance, and the reduction of hidden disparities in learning opportunity (Utami et al., 2021; Arwin et al., 2022).

The theme of learning pace further strengthens this interpretation. Students generally learned the earliest vowel set more quickly when teachers provided repeated, scaffolded instruction. However, once the script became more complex, learning slowed. This suggests that effective Hiragana teaching requires more than initial exposure. It demands structured pacing, repeated guided practice, and room for individual differences in readiness and self-belief. Students who felt slower than peers did not necessarily lack motivation; rather, they needed more time, repetition, and

confidence support. This finding supports work showing that supportive instructional environments, reflective practice, and adaptive scaffolding can help learners persist even when content becomes more complex (Short et al., 2012; Abdullah & Hussin, 2021; Rook, 2025).

Generally, the results argue for a conception of Hiragana teaching that is simultaneously technical, reflective, and culturally situated. Students need help memorizing forms and rules, but they also need a classroom environment that validates difficulty, uses repetition without monotony, draws on meaningful cultural references, and helps them link language learning to future selves. Reflective writing appears especially useful here. Because students can describe where they are confused, what motivates them, and what pace feels manageable, reflection can serve both as a research method and as a pedagogical intervention. If used regularly, it can help instructors identify learning blocks, adjust pacing, and encourage students to see progress even when full mastery still feels distant. In this sense, reflective pedagogy does not merely document learning; it can actively support it (Adeani et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2023; Warhurst et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that Hiragana learning among Filipino university students is driven by strong and multidimensional motivations, especially the desire to become global citizens and to enhance future career opportunities. At the same time, learning the script is experienced as challenging, slow, and sometimes emotionally taxing. Students encounter memorization overload, visual confusion, writing fatigue, time pressure, and fluctuating confidence, yet many persist through repetition, teacher guidance, peer support, and personally meaningful goals. The study therefore demonstrates that foreign language learning, particularly at the level of initial script acquisition, is not simply a matter of linguistic input and output. It is a lived process shaped by aspiration, identity, effort, difficulty, and reflection. The findings also confirm the methodological value of combining motivation surveys with reflective writing. Quantitative results established which motivations were strongest, while qualitative reflections explained how those motivations were enacted and tested in actual learning. For Japanese language instruction, the implications are clear. Hiragana teaching should be scaffolded carefully, paced responsively, and supported by repeated practice, culturally meaningful examples, and structured reflection activities. Reflective activities may also serve as a useful pedagogical support by helping learners articulate difficulty, recognize progress, and connect language learning with personally meaningful goals.

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