Pathways to Mastery of East Asian Languages: Case of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Self-Directed Learners

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Abstract

The research aims to explore the journey through which learners of East Asian Languages, i.e., Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, learn the languages independently. Specifically, it investigates the motivations that drive their learning, the materials from which they source the learning, and the techniques they utilize to improve different language skills. The participants were comprised of two learners of Japanese, two learners of Korean, and two of Chinese, all of whom were students aged 19 to 21 years old. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, along with observations on their use of learning media. Findings revealed that cultural interest and career aspirations were their primary motivations, except for Chinese learners, whose heritage as Chinese descendants played a significant role in the motivation. Diverse learning resources were utilized, with platforms like Duolingo popular for learners at the initial stages, while authentic materials such as YouTube and social media proved effective for more advanced learning. Participants employed various strategies for their language skill development, often integrating listening, reading, and speaking. Authentic materials across different media, such as videos, songs, social media platforms, or comics, were widely favored for their contextual learning opportunities. These results suggest that language educators can enhance learning by incorporating gamification, fostering social interaction, and utilizing authentic materials in their curriculum.

Keywords: East Asian languages; Motivation; Learning strategies; Self-directed learning

INTRODUCTION

The growing economy and pop culture of East Asian countries have led to increased popularity of the learning of their languages, such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese (Yang, 2003; Chua, 2012; Sung & Padilla, 1998). To address the trend, numerous studies discussed the teaching and learning aspects of those languages. However, most of the studies shed light dominantly on learning that is organized or required by educators or academic institutions. To gain more holistic insight, it is also important to shift focus to research on language learning that is driven by the individuals' personal interest.

Referred to as self-directed learners, this type of learners exhibit exceptional qualities. (Saito, 2020; Sykes, 2015). They take responsibility for learning beyond what is dictated by the faculty, curriculum, or instructor while assuming ownership of their learning process. They actively set clear objectives and seek meaningful feedback. They also proactively search for relevant resources that align with their goals (Robinson & Persky, 2020). Moreover, they engage deeply with the material, fostering autonomy and personalized growth. This self-directed practice and proactive approach enhance their language proficiency and learning experience.

Several studies (Y.-L. Chen & Hsu, 2020; Hawkins, 2018; Sahin Kizil & Savran, 2016; Sun & Zhang, 2022) have investigated self-directed learning in English language. However, a noticeable gap exists regarding languages other than English. Therefore, this study will focus on the learning of less commonly taught languages: Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. These languages present unique challenges to learners, as individuals who study in a self-directed manner often encounter distinct features of each language, limited resources, and fewer opportunities to practice with native speakers.

Numerous studies have primarily focused on self-directed learning within classroom contexts, often initiated or led by educators. (Bursalı & Öz, 2018; Wong et al., 2019). Other studies have examined digital tools developed by teachers or researchers, including VR game-based learning (Y.-L. Chen & Hsu, 2020), flipped learning systems (Shyr & Chen, 2018), and open online courses (Wong et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research that explores language learning outside the classroom. The current study aims to explore language learning that takes place primarily outside the classroom, to reflect individuals' engagement with language beyond formal educational settings. Understanding these independent learning processes can provide valuable insights into effective language learning strategies and inform the development of more learner-centered educational approaches

Previous studies have focused predominantly on students at formal education institutions, as evidenced by the work of (Ambinintsoaa et al., 2020; F. H. Putri, 2019; Yakovleva et al., 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2019). These studies were carried out with university students in Russia, Japan, and Indonesia. The current study will look more closely into individuals whose learning is driven by personal interests, as opposed to institutional or academic requirements. The learners engage in language learning voluntarily, and their learning path might therefore differ from students whose learning is dictated by academic requirements. Unlike students whose language learning is mandated by academic programs, these learners engage voluntarily and may follow a different learning trajectory.

This research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, investigating the language journey of self-directed learners provides insights into the learning strategies and motivations of self-directed learners of East Asian languages, i.e., Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. Next, we close the gap by focusing on learners whose learning resulted from personal interest, rather than being imposed by academic or curriculum requirements. Practically, this research will inform language educators who need to teach students more learning strategies. Developers of language learning platforms can also refer to this study to provide features that suit learners' preferences and styles. Based on the background, the research questions of this study are: What motivated the learners of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese to study the languages? What language learning media did the learners use as the source of learning materials? How did they improve their different language skills?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Good Language Learners

Although many people have done various efforts to gain mastery in the target language, their learning success comes with various degrees; some people apparently are more successful at language learning compared to their peers. Several prominent scholars have proposed their views about what is called a good language learner. One of the earliest ones is Rubin et al. (1975) who suggests that the three factors that determine a good language learning are aptitude, motivation, and opportunity. He further suggests seven strategies good language learners employ, that allow him/her to outperform the other learners. According to Rubin, good language learners are willing and accurate guessers

who feel comfortable with uncertainty. They have a strong drive to communicate, and do things to get their message across and are often not inhibited and willing to make mistakes. Analysing, categorizing, synthesizing, and looking for patterns in the target language are their common strategies, besides seeking out opportunities to practice with native speakers. They consistently monitors their progress and performance and attend to meaning

According to Nakata (2010), self-regulation, as one characteristic of a good language learner, is closely related to motivation. Good language learners might be driven by several factors, namely instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, and intrinsic motivation. Instrumental motivation is the communicative needs and the learning purpose. Integrative motivation is the learner's attitude towards the people and the culture of the target language. Intrinsic motivation is related to the interest or the feeling of being involved in the learning process (Sykes, 2015). Similarly, (Kevin & Chu, 2016) stated that according to the Acculturation Model, a learner's primary motivation is the desire to "interact with foreigners in his travels and get to know the people and the culture beyond his country's borders".

Mobile Device for Language Learning

The landscape of language learning is rapidly evolving with the proliferation of mobile apps and online platforms. (Bączkowska (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of these popular resources, highlighting the diverse options available to learners. This abundance of choices necessitates careful evaluation to ensure language learning apps cater effectively to second-language learners' needs. Chen (2016) emphasizes the importance of such evaluations, underscoring the need for research that critically analyses the features and functionalities of these mobile apps.

However, the effectiveness of language learning extends beyond the platform itself. With the advancement of technology, various digital tools, apps, and websites have been used by language teachers and learners to gain structured and personalized support (Rifai et al., 2023). While research on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is an established field, there is a lack of studies on digital language learning, which occurs independently outside the classroom. To describe this approach to learning, Sauro & Zourou (2019) coined the term "wild", referring to "informal language learning that takes place in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts" (p. 2), as opposed to "curriculum-based, institutional frameworks and requirements, occasionally leading to paradoxical and unreal learner practices" (p. 1). Meanwhile, research by Al Harrasi (2023) sheds light on the online environment's role in self-directed learning, highlighting the importance of considering factors like learner autonomy and the potential challenges associated with an online learning environment, such as a lack of self-discipline. Understanding these challenges can inform the designers of online platforms to better support and empower self-directed learners exploring language learning opportunities.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design

To gain an in-depth and holistic insight into the participants' language learning experiences, a qualitative approach was employed. These methods are aimed at taking into account specific features of human experience. In contrast to the surface information that a Likert-scale questionnaire gathers, the qualitative method captures the richness and fullness of an experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). The narrative inquiry in this study attempted to grasp the complexity of the participants learning motivation, their learning source, and their learning strategies.Clandinin & Caine (2008) proposed that the approach

focuses on "relational engagement between researcher and participants" with the purpose of "making meaning of experiences."

Participants

Undergraduate students who were taking a study in Bali, Indonesia were recruited through a purposive approach. As students majoring in tourism and hospitality, foreign language proficiency is essential to their career. Six participants aged 19 to 21, from diverse academic backgrounds (hospitality management, hotel operations, and tourism management), were included in the study. All of the participants were recruited through a purposive approach. To protect their identity, they were assigned pseudonyms: J1 and J2 (Japanese learners), K1 and K2 (Korean learners), and C1 and C2 (Chinese learners). All participants were native Indonesian speakers. Unfortunately, most of them had not measured their target language proficiency through a formal assessment.

Data Collection

Interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection to delve into the participants interest and experiences. Specifically, a semi-structured interview was administered to allow for in-depth exploration. Prior to each interview, participants were given time to reflect on their language learning journey. The questions were focused on three aspects, namely 1) motivations that drove their learning, 2) their learning source, and 3) their strategies to improve their language skills. To complement the interviews, participants were asked to demonstrate the language learning platforms they utilized, such as YouTube, *manhua*, or Google Maps. This helped clarify how those artifacts were utilized to improve different language skills.

Data Analysis

The interviews ranged from 15 minutes 50 seconds to 38 minutes 41 seconds, and were transcribed verbatim. We analyzed the data, searching for themes and patterns, and interpretations by different researchers were cross-checked. The analysis focused on three aspects. First, we read through the transcript to identify the motivation that drove their learning. Second, we review that response again to explore the media, either printed or electronic, from which they source their learning material. Lastly, the transcripts were analyzed again so we could comprehend the strategies they used to improve various language skills. Admittedly, while the case study approach allowed us to gain deep insight into the participants' learning journey, the accuracy of the data should be treated with caution. While the case study approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, the small sample size limits the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the data collection may have influenced participants' recall of their learning journeys.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results

This study contributes significantly to the existing literature by addressing a relatively underexplored area: the phenomenon of self-directed learning of East Asian languages—namely Japanese, Korean, and Chinese—motivated by personal interest rather than formal academic obligations. While previous research has often concentrated on classroom-based or curriculum-driven language acquisition, this study highlights a growing trend in informal, interest-driven language learning, often fueled by exposure to pop culture, personal aspirations, or online communities. Such learning is increasingly facilitated by accessible digital resources and a strong sense of autonomy among learners. To ensure clarity and coherence, the findings are presented thematically and organized into three central themes. The first theme explores the participants' intrinsic and extrinsic

motivations, such as cultural fascination, career goals, or social connectivity. The second theme examines the language learning resources used, ranging from textbooks and language apps to online platforms and fan-subtitled content. The third theme delves into strategies for language development, including immersive practices, self-evaluation, and peer collaboration through social media. These themes collectively provide a nuanced picture of how learners structure their independent language journeys. An overview of the specific resources utilized by participants can be found in Table 1, which supports the thematic analysis with concrete data.

Table 1. Participants' Learning Sources

Participants	Learning Sources	Learning Strategies
Japan 1	Duolingo YouTube Channels	- Watched videos with subtitles to practice listening and reading -Repeated the speakers' uterance to practice pronunciation
Japan 2	Irodori Mina Nihongo News Novels	-Watched news regularly - Read novels
Korean 1	Koreanclass101.com Korean Dramas Songs' lyrics GPS	-Paused and revisited specific parts of a video for a review -Set the phone to the Korean language -Virtual travel on GPS
Korean 2	Instagram Weverse	-Conversed with Korean celebrities on social media platforms
Chinese 1	Manhua (Chinese comic) Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)	-Listened to conversations on videos -Read Manhua regularly
Chinese 2	Movies Talkshows	-Paused and reviewed the parts of the videos she watched

Motivation for Learning

Across all target languages, the majority of participants reported that enhanced career or academic opportunities became the primary motivator for language learning. This was exemplified by J1 who aspired to pursue a master's degree in Japan. J2 conveyed his goal to work in Japan before returning to Indonesia to establish a Japanese restaurant. K1 also expressed her desire to further her studies in Korea, while both C1 and C2 envisioned a career in China or Taiwan.

The secondary motivation was the interest in the target language's culture. J1 found enjoyment in Japanese anime and movies and even felt like embodying a Japanese samurai when speaking Japanese. J2's motivation rose from his interest in Japanese cuisine, leading him to watch an abundance of Japanese cooking videos on YouTube. Japanese culture and work ethic boost his interest even further. Similar to J1, K1 felt a kind of personality shift when speaking Korean, likely due to immersion in Korean pop culture. Both K1 and K2 loved K-pop, the food, the music, and many things the celebrities do.

Unlike the cultural immersion motivating Japanese and Korean learners, C1 and C2's primary motivation for learning Chinese stemmed from their familial heritage. A sense of responsibility to preserve their Chinese ancestry fueled their language learning journey. This emphasizes the profound impact of family ties and cultural identity on their motivation. However, like their Japanese and Korean counterparts, they were also drawn

to Chinese culture and entertainment, providing additional impetus for language acquisition.

Learning Resources
Japanese

J1 found Duolingo's engaging, game-like features particularly helpful for learning basic Japanese elements. He described using Duolingo to arrange Hiragana characters like "Ma," "Ku," and "Ru" to form the word "*Kuruma*" (car). The platform's emphasis on completing tasks and earning rewards kept him motivated. However, J1 acknowledged that a gamified platform was recommended for those who were still in the initial stage of learning To prepare for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), he transitioned to resources like online classes offered by websites (e.g., wkwkjapanese.com) and YouTube channels (e.g., Akane San). These platforms provided a more structured approach to learning, aligning with his focused exam preparation goals.

Meanwhile, J2's primary learning resource was Irodori, a Japanese language coursebook specifically designed for practical Japanese communication skills for daily life and work scenarios. For a more structured and comprehensive approach, particularly for JLPT preparation, he recommended the "Mina Nihongo" series, a comprehensive curriculum known for its structured approach suitable for all levels. J2 also leveraged YouTube as a valuable learning resource, engaging with channels like ANNnewsCH for authentic news content and Masaru's channel for immersive language learning through the context of seafood cooking.

Korean

K1 found talkedtomeinkorean.com's comprehensive approach ideal for her learning style. The website's structure, with chapter-based lessons, accompanying videos, and voice notes, provided a well-rounded learning framework that addressed various aspects of the Korean language. She also utilized downloadable materials from koreanclass101.com for additional practice. Unlike K1, K2 preferred user-friendly platforms like Instagram. Interestingly, she also subscribed to Weverse, a platform facilitating interaction between celebrities and fans. She could follow her favorite idols to stay updated, comment on their posts, ask questions, or see a behind-the-scenes glimpse of their lives - all while enhancing her Korean comprehension.

Chinese

In learning Chinese, C1 learned from YouTube or Spotify, along with listening to Mandarin songs. He also incorporated structured learning with Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) Books. Meanwhile, C2 mostly watched movies or talk shows. She found the subtitle at the bottom of the screen to be very valuable for vocabulary and comprehension. She said that "it is more fun than learning from the Mandarin lesson". She also enjoyed reading manhua, comics in Mandarin language, that she can access online. She favored Manhua because it displayed stories in large and attractive graphics, with short texts that aught her common expressions in Chinese. In contrast, she generally avoided text-heavy reading materials.

Improving Language Skills
Japanese

J1 employed a multi-faceted approach to enhance his language skills, incorporating listening, reading, and speaking. For example, when he watched a YouTube video, he would turn on the subtitle, allowing him to simultaneously study the spoken language and hiragana text. He would also shadow or repeat what he heard from the video to refine pronunciation. He would occasionally pause the video when encountering phrases that

were new to him. After he feels that he is already accomplishing a certain level, he assessed himself by watching a Japanese vlog Akane-san. He knew that his listening skill had improved, as he now no longer needed to rely too much on subtitle.

To enhance vocabulary retention, J1 emphasized the importance of contextual learning, suggesting that a good way was by using it in sentences. "When I picked a new word, such as *Kenkyu* (research), I would use it in sentences". Also, every time he saw colors, he would utter the color name in Japanese in his mind. "I said *akai* when I see something red". He was committed to memorize only three words a day, but he treated the words like friends, by using it in sentences in various contexts. In his spare time, when hanging out with his friends, or when walking his dog, J1 regularly reviewed his notes on vocabulary.

He dedicated 20-40 minutes a day to focus on new grammar or vocabulary. He would watch a grammar video up to three or four times, aiming for better retention. He did not enjoy heavy reading and preferred recording the teacher's lesson and listening to it later. He reported it was a fun moment for him when the words or phrases he learnt were spoken in by a native Japanese in a conversation or a movie. He made learning a routine and felt discomfort when ignoring it. "If I skip learning for one week, something feels off".

J2 enhanced listening comprehension by dedicating approximately 30 minutes daily to subtitle-free TBS News and anime on YouTube. To develop speaking fluency, he engaged in conversations with Japanese friends. Similar to J1, J2 also did self-talk to exercise his pronunciation. However, when it comes to writing, he reported that this is the skill he addressed the least because in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) there was no writing section. When watching Japanese videos on YouTube, he paid close attention to Japanese grammar points, observing the language patterns. To complement his language development, he incorporated Kanji-based novels into his reading practice.

Korean

When it comes to learning Korean, K1 believed that knowledge and mastery of *Hangul*, the Korean writing system, is the cornerstone of her learning approach. For listening, she immersed herself in Korean dramas, consuming approximately 40 episodes. She engaged actively, pausing, rewinding, and revisiting specific expressions to solidify her understanding. Furthermore, she complemented her listening practice by pre-reading song lyrics. "I read the lyric first before listening to the song". K1 found dramas more engaging and authentic compared to structured language learning platforms.

K1 implemented innovative strategies to bolster her writing and pronunciation. She creatively practiced writing Indonesian words using the Hangul alphabet to solidify her grasp of the Korean script. Additionally, she switched her smartphone language setting to Korean. To refine pronunciation, she practiced speaking in front of a mirror. For reading, she kept herself updated on what her favorite boyband said on social media. K1 persisted that knowing the Korean alphabet unlocked the learning of other language skills.

Similar to K1, K2 also believed that if one is to accelerate his/her Korean learning, it is crucial to start mastering the writing system at an early stage. She also watched Korean dramas to improve her listening skills while at the same time practicing reading through the subtitles. What distinguished K2 from K1, however, was the online media she used to improve reading. While K1 "traveled" around Seoul via GPS and read the city's street signs, K2 spent much time with Weverse, a platform that facilitated interaction between Korean idols and their fans. "Whenever one of the actors goes live, I would always keep track of his posts or conversations"

Chinese

C1 honed his reading skills by setting video subtitles to *hanzi* (Chinese characters). This strategy allowed him to connect spoken language with its written representation. To practice listening, he listened to Chinese conversations regularly. However, upon encountering unfamiliar words, he would simply proceed to listen. The context and the pictures helped him to grasp the overall narrative. Regarding Chinese characters, he suggested that it is possible to learn and communicate in Chinese without knowing its writing system. "The more important part is mastering when to use certain tone", he argued. The *pinyin* – romanization of Chinese characters – also helps bridge the gap between speaking and reading Chinese characters.

Unlike C1, C2 would consistently pause the video to consult a dictionary to ascertain its meaning. She knew how words sound, but sometimes had no idea how it was written. By paying close attention to subtitles, she effectively linked spoken language with its corresponding *hànzì* (Chinese characters). However, she believed that one did not necessarily have to have proficiency in the Chinese *hanzi* writing system, as the *pin yin* characters can fairly represent it. For reading, she read *Manhua* or comics written in Chinese. She preferred comics because they provided pictures and expressions that facilitated the learning. Also, comics provided the lesson in narrative format or story, which resonated with her learning style. Two times a week she regularly revisited the HSK Book to memorize what she had learned.

Discussion
Learning Motivation

The participants were motivated by different factors, such as the desire for a better career advancement, enjoyment or leisure, and building relationships with native speakers of the target language. For some learners, their initial interest stemmed from the culture associated with the language. J1 was interested in Japanese cooking, J2 in anime, K1 and K2 were drawn to Korean pop culture. In the case of C1 and C2, their Chinese heritage lineage was the earliest reason for their learning.

The majority of participants in this study were primarily motivated by the target language's culture, a finding consistent with Liu & Wang (2018). It is therefore suggested that teachers, administrators, and practitioners organize exhibitions, language exchanges, or other cultural events to raise awareness and stimulate interest. Besides resulting from personal interest in the target languages' culture, most of the participants aimed their language learning toward a better career, a finding that echoed that of Nakamura (2019), who linked ideal L2 selves to particular life domains. Curriculum designers or classroom language teachers can reflect on this insight to optimize language learning by emphasizing the connection between language mastery, cultural integration, and professional success.

Learning Resources

Participants in this study highlighted the important role of mobile devices in facilitating their language learning journey. This finding aligns with Jeong (2022) who attributed several benefits to mobile applications, including increased motivation, sustainability, accessibility, convenience, and learner autonomy. Consistent with this, (Bruzos, 2023) added that the internet has "annihilated the barriers of space and time in language learning". Collectively, these findings underscore the potential of mobile technology to transform language education into an accessible, engaging, and autonomous learning experience.

More specifically, it was found that Duolingo was intensively used to learn Japanese, due to its gamification nature that drove the participant to advance to a higher level. At the end of each lesson unit, the platform's short, frequent assessments and rewards system effectively reinforced their learning. According to (Portnoff et al., 2021),

Duolingo delivers Check Point Quiz and Review Exercise to reach better learning outcomes. These types of assessments are claimed to accurately measure learning progress and to encourage learners to reach higher levels. In classroom learning, teachers can also administer similar activities, such as giving small quizzes or revisiting previously learned materials, to better assess the students' progress. Nevertheless, the participant further noted that Duolingo is most suitable for learners at the beginner or pre-intermediate level. Those aiming for more serious goals, such as exam preparation, might not benefit too much from Duolingo. This view is supported by Bazan's (2022) research on the app's suitability for lower-proficiency learners.

Issues with Online Learning

The findings indicated that the participants opt for mobile learning due to the flexibility in terms of learning schedule and location. This finding concurs with Lai & Zheng (2018) who found devices facilitated personalized learning by providing anytime, anywhere access to materials. However, the flexibility afforded by mobile devices is not without drawbacks. Jeong (2022) highlighted the potential negative impacts of screen-based learning, such as eye strain and reduced readability, particularly on smaller devices. To mitigate these issues, language learning platform developers should prioritize eye-friendly design elements, including optimal layout and color schemes.

Another pitfall of online learning is that the flexibility and freedom that online learning may exacerbate poor time-management skills (Al Harrasi, 2023). It is therefore recommended for any learner hoping to take an independent path to prioritize studying time or task management skills, to help navigate through the learning where distractions from other interests are abundant. An additional strategy, as suggested by (Bursalı & Öz, 2018b), is encouraging students to set a personal mastery goal, to increase the success of their learning.

Developing Language Skills

With regards to vocabulary practice, J1 reported how he enjoyed learning with Duolingo as the platform features game-like activities. Bazan (2022) also found that learners' favorite vocabulary features of Duolingo are the sentence-arranging method and the picture-meaning matching method. Game-like activities, such as the ones provided by Duolingo, have a high chance of raising students' motivation (Ling, 2018). Nevertheless, for more advanced learners, who are encouraged by different motivations, Duolingo could provide longer text to improve vocabulary and reading comprehension.

In formal classroom learning, it is a common practice to provide students with graded reading passages, where the difficulties of the vocabulary and grammar are tailored to suit the language level of the students. This graded reading is proven to accelerate students' reading speed and develop a more positive reading motivation (Lake & Holster, 2014). However, our findings indicated that self-directed learners frequently gravitate towards personal preferences and relevance. For example, K1 practices reading by exploring Seoul's street signs in Google Maps, K2 engaged in a chat with her idols on the K-Pop platform, while C1 immersed herself in Chinese manhua comics. We recommend that educators complement structured or levelled reading passages with student-selected materials that align with their interests.

The finding asserts that most participants, either consciously or unconsciously, performed metacognitive strategies. They reported regularly checking their pronunciation accuracy, arranging learning schedules, deciding on learning resources, monitoring their progress, and consistently self-reminding to keep themselves on track. Reflecting on this finding, it is imperative for language educators to expose students to explicit metacognitive instruction. As proposed by Raoofi et al. (2013), such intervention raises students' learning awareness, enabling them to select and apply the most relevant strategies. Further, Lai &

Zheng (2018), Putri et al., (2024), and Zhang & Zhang (2019) invited educators to share and model the metacognitive strategies to transfer the skill to the learners. (Haukås et al., 2018) suggested several techniques to reach this aim, such as activating prior knowledge, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses, and modelling effective learning strategies.

For all participants, the languages they were learning were their second foreign language after English. Liu (2022) proposed that the former second language learning experience can serve as a starting point and foundation for the learning path, and gave valuable insights into the language learning process. In classroom settings, leveraging students' previous language learning experiences by encouraging knowledge sharing can be beneficial. It is noteworthy, however, that in the present study, the three Asian languages being learned, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, have a relatively distant linguistic relationship with English.

CONCLUSIONS

Through a narrative inquiry approach, in this research, we investigated the language learning journey of six self-directed individuals: two learning Japanese, two Korean, and two Chinese. Each participant exhibited diverse learning experiences and trajectories in terms of motivations, learning resources, and skill development. First, most participants were initially motivated by their intrinsic interest in the culture related to the target languages, except for the Chinese learners, whose motivation stemmed from their Chinese heritage. The next driving reason was their hope of advancing education and careers in the languages' native countries. To inspire potential learners, educational institutions or related communities may organize events to cultivate awareness or interest among learners.

Despite the shared motivations, the participants employed a great array of resources from which they gained learning materials. Duolingo, the popular language learning platform, was favoured by Japanese learners due to its game-like features. But for more advanced learning, authentic materials available on YouTube, movies, or talk shows were apparently more suitable. Social media, such as Instagram and Weverse, had demonstrated their popularity as learning resources, perhaps due to the social nature they offer. Language teachers may reflect on these findings in designing their lessons by facilitating gamified learning and encouraging social interaction between learners and native speakers.

The strategies used by the learners to improve language skills varied widely. Many adopted an integrative approach, with activities like watching movies facilitating the simultaneous development of listening, reading, and pronunciation. Media platforms such as movies and YouTube also served as grammar resources, allowing learners to pause, rewind, and review content for deeper understanding. Authentic materials, which are not designed or intended for learning purposes, including comics, news, social media, and even GPS, were preferred by most participants due to their real-world context.

RECOMMENDATION

This research offers valuable insights for both learners and educators, both in formal and informal learning. Independent language learners can draw inspiration from the strategies employed by participants in this study, such as leveraging authentic materials and integrating various language skills. Educators can utilize these findings to create more engaging and effective learning, incorporating authentic materials, gamification, and opportunities for social interaction, such as YouTube, social media, or even GPS. Furthermore, language learning platform developers can benefit from this research by designing platforms that prioritize user-centred features and gamification elements.

This study's findings should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. Firstly, the reliance on semi-structured interviews may have resulted in bias, as

participants' accounts of their learning journeys could be incomplete or inaccurate. Next research may complement the interview with a direct observation of participants' learning techniques. Second, this study had not addressed the relationship between the mastery of the writing systems of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese and the extent to which it accelerates learning. Future researchers can take these aspects into account. Finally, the influence of prior language learning experiences on subsequent language learning remains underexplored and warrants further examination.

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