

Language Education, Gender, and Inclusivity: Focusing on Japanese Language Education in Sri Lanka

S. K. A. Lokugamage

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

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Abstract:

In Sri Lanka, more women are involved in Japanese language education than men. Not only learners but also the number of female teachers is higher than that of the male teachers. Yet, such gender distribution is not specific only to Japanese language education because studies have observed that globally, male students are less interested in learning languages than female students. This stems from the boys' beliefs such as learning foreign languages does not lead them to lucrative careers and language learning is not for *real men*. Yet, each year, more male applicants than female applicants apply for visas to enter Japan from Sri Lanka. In 2019, Japan opened the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa category to Sri Lanka. To apply for a SSW visa, one should pass a recognized Japanese language competency test and skill test from the relevant field. This raises the question whether the increase in employment opportunities in Japan has any impact on the attitudes towards language learning among Sri Lankan males? Hence, this paper explores the current situation of Japanese Language education in Sri Lanka focusing on gender distribution. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for gathering and analysing data, and the findings show that though there is a growth in the number of male learners, the attitudes towards learning Japanese are not changing as fast as the rapidly increasing enthusiasm to work in Japan. The study also revealed that certain gender and racial prejudices of recruiters in Japan also form an obstacle for male applicants. To overcome these challenges, the present study recommends promoting interesting teaching methods tailored to suit the characteristics and needs of different genders to stimulate learners' interest in soft skills like cultural knowledge, manners and disciplines required to function in Japanese society, making changes to promote inclusivity in the Japanese language curriculum and encouraging the recruiters to be more inclusive.

Keywords: Japanese language education, gender, inclusivity, soft skills

1. Introduction

The female population engaged in Japanese language education in Sri Lanka is remarkably higher compared to the male population. This is true not only for the learners, but also the teachers

because the number of female teachers is considerably higher than that of male teachers. In the university where I teach, there were very few male students for Japanese from first year to final

year at the time of the research. However, such gender distribution is not specific to Japanese language education alone. Research related to Second Language Acquisition has highlighted that in many parts of the world male students show less interest in learning languages than their female counterparts (Carr and Pauwels, 2006). However, when considering the number of Sri Lankans who apply for a visa to enter Japan, the number of male applicants is significantly higher than females. In recent years, specialists in Information Technology have shown a higher tendency to get job placements in Japan. Further, in 2019, Japan opened its doors to Sri Lanka for a visa category called Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) which covers employment fields like nursing care, food service industry, agriculture, and construction (Sri Lanka Mirror, 2023). According to the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Tokyo, Specified Skilled Worker is a status of residence created to give foreign nationals more opportunities to work in Japan (Embassy of Sri Lanka 2023). It is mandatory for those who apply for this visa category to have a certain level of competency in Japanese language as well as knowledge specific to the skill category for which they apply. This context prompts the question whether this kind of employment opportunities could change the attitudes of males towards language learning?

2. Literature Review

Research has highlighted that in many parts of the world male learners are less interested in learning languages than female learners. A study done by Carr and Pauwels (2006) by interviewing more than 200 boys between ages 12-18 about learning a foreign language in English-dominant environments revealed that boys think that learning foreign languages would not lead them to lucrative careers and some believe that language learning is not something 'real boys' do or are good at. So, they avoided studying languages except when it is compulsory, which signals an attitudinal barrier to language learning.

However, other researchers have found certain biographical factors that have an impact on this. Gurian (1996), for instance, points out that boys

have a smaller corpus callosum that connects the left and right hemispheres which leads to difficulty both in accurately identifying facial emotions and in verbal skills due to fewer left-brain connections as well as less strong connections between the hemispheres in general. In contrast, girls have a thicker corpus callosum which results in greater crosstalk between the right and left hemispheres which contributes to better reading skills. Further, Bonomo (2010) suggests that boys have a larger inferior parietal lobe which leads to better spatial skills and mathematical reasoning, whereas girls' left brain develops earlier, corresponding to better language use in both verbal and written domains.

When looking at the language class, especially second language classes, differences between males and females become obvious. Teaching methods used in modern foreign, or second language classes are mainly developed based on the communicative approach where learners are always encouraged to talk, discuss, and communicate. However, Bonomo (2010) highlights that though boys struggle more with the current focus on the communicative approach, they would have excelled in a different period when the focus was the cognitive approach, e.g., with some aspects of the grammar-translation method. Boys are generally more adept at thinking in patterns and building things, including understanding symbolic systems, for example, as found in maths and the sciences (Bonomo, 2010). According to Carr and Pauwels (2006), boys also tend to be stronger visual and logical learners, and because of this, excel in learning more visual aspects of language such as developing proficiency with the Chinese writing system and finding patterns within the Japanese writing system. Li et al. (2020), on the other hand, studied the nature and structure of gender stereotypes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, and revealed that girls were rated by teachers as more enthusiastic, higher achieving and more gifted than boys. Their findings highlight the need to tackle gender stereotyping for educators, researchers, and policymakers in order to improve boys' engagement in language learning.

It is generally observed that people who speak more than one language have increased job prospects. Displaying language skills in a resume gives added advantages as many employers prefer to recruit bilingual and multilingual candidates, which motivates many people to learn languages other than their first language. Gardner and Lambert (1972) described motivation in terms of orientation or “goal” and distinguished such orientations as integrative and instrumental. Instrumental motivation (or orientation) in language learning refers to a desire to learn a language in order to fulfil utilitarian goals for material or educational benefit. In fact, Shahid and Grami (2013) state that motivation can very often be based on concrete interests and goals such as passing an exam, finding a job, migration to another country, and studying etc. (Shahid & Grami, 2013). On the other hand, integrative motivation refers to a desire to learn a language in order to integrate into the community of speakers of that language (Gardner, 1991). Akram and Ghani (2013), based on a survey done among Pakistani school students, state the males had considerably stronger integrative reasons for learning English as it is related to future jobs, university studies, and travelling abroad.

3. Research Gap

As mentioned above, female learners in general tend to have more biological advantages as well as intrinsic or integrative interests in learning languages than males. However, in some contexts, males are motivated to learn languages that would support their future careers. The female population of Japanese education in Sri Lanka seems considerably high, especially at the university level. For example, in the university where I teach, the gender distribution of the total number of current students is 225 females and 9 males. However, among those who do the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), the male population seems high (JLPT registration portal, 2023). As mentioned in the introduction, this could be because new avenues for work have opened in Japan since 2019. Hence, this research aimed to

explore the following question: “Does the increase in employment opportunities in Japan have an impact on the attitudes towards language learning among the male population in Sri Lanka?”

4. Objectives

Since 2021, Sri Lanka has been experiencing the worst economic crisis. According to the calculations of UNESCO (as cited in ICEF Monitor, 2023) 29,000 Sri Lankan students are in overseas higher education institutions in 2020. Among them, the second highest number of Sri Lankan undergraduates is in Japan (5,500). The departures for foreign employment in 2021 are 122,264, and in 2022, the number increased to 311,056 within one year (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022). Japan is one of the most popular destinations among Sri Lankans to seek employment or education opportunities. Although Sri Lanka has new opportunities in Japan, if we do not recognise language competency as a soft skill that goes beyond gender stereotypes, we will fail to gain the best of the available paths. Thus, the objective of this research is to find the current situation of gender distribution and gender related factors pertaining to Japanese language education in Sri Lanka and derive suggestions for future curriculum development.

5. Research Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in gathering and analysing data. The duration of data collection was from June to August 2023. Japanese is taught in secondary level education in some public and private schools. However, considering the difficulties in gathering data from secondary level education, in this study I concentrated only on universities and private institutions where young adult and adult learners enroll. To get the gender distribution, quantitative data were gathered from universities and Japanese language institutes in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, qualitative interviews were used to gather data from those who are involved in learning, teaching, and recruiting. Figure 1 explains the mixed method of data collection.

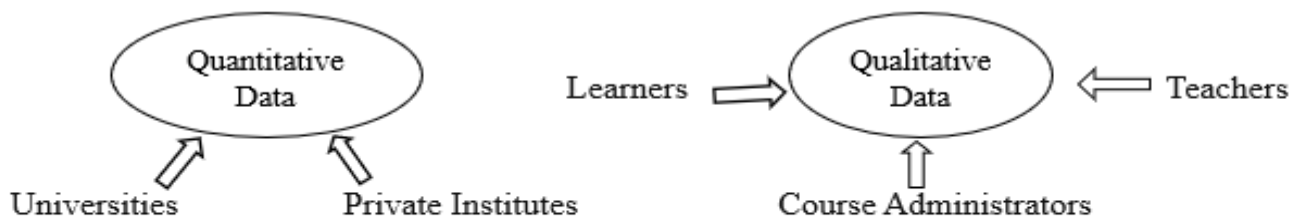


Figure 1: Mixed Method

Source: Author (2023)

6. Data Analysis

6.1. Quantitative Data

6.1.2. The number of Learners

In this study, I was able to collect data from three public universities that offer Japanese for degree courses and four private institutions where Japanese courses are conducted for various purposes including student visa, SSW visa, and Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) preparation. The numbers below are gender-wise student enrollment in public universities and private institutions.

	Public Universities	Private Institutions
Male	29 (7%)	1187 (70%)
Female	368 (93%)	461 (30%)

* All learners are school leavers aged 18 and above

* The number of learners was taken from on-going courses at the time of data collection.

Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Learner

Population Source: Author (2023)

The above data show that the Japanese degree courses in public universities are dominated by females while the majority of the learners in private institutions are males. This raises the question “why is the gender distribution of the learner population differ distinctively between university degree courses and courses conducted by private institutions?” The following are the features that could be identified in Japanese degree courses in public universities and Japanese courses in private institutions.

- In all the three universities, Japanese is taught in the Humanities faculties in which the student body is predominantly female.
- The objectives of the degree courses could be summarised as to give theoretical and

practical knowledge of the Japanese language, culture, literature, and history as well as foundation to research related to these fields.

- The outcome or the graduate profile of the degree programmes is someone with excellent language skills to use the language in real life scenarios and professional contexts like teaching, translating/interpreting, diplomatic contexts, and business.
- Most of the courses in private institutes target the basic levels (Level 5 and 4) of Japanese language Proficiency Test (JLPT).
- The ultimate objective of all the four private institutions and private courses are sending or assisting to send their learners to Japan for work or study whereas the universities do not necessarily play such a role.

The above factors could be the reason why there are many male learners in private courses while there are fewer male students in degree programmes.

6.1.3. Number of JLPT Applicants

It is important to investigate the gender distribution in JLPT because it is the most recognized international exam for Japanese language conducted by the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services. The exam is conducted twice a year on the first Sunday of July and December at many test locations around the world. The JLPT has five levels N1, N2, N3, N4, and N5. The easiest level is N5, and the most difficult level is N1. N4 and N5 measure the level of understanding of basic Japanese mainly learned in class, while N1 and N2 measure the level of understanding of Japanese used in a broad range of

scenarios in everyday life. N3 is the bridging level between N1/N2 and N4/ N5 (The Japan Foundation, 2012). In Sri Lanka, too, this exam is held in various test locations in Colombo. Figures 3 and 4 show the gender distribution of the applicants of the JLPT in July and December 2023 respectively.

Level	Female	Male	Total
N1	37 (86%)	6 (14%)	43
N2	121 (80%)	30 (20%)	151
N3	418 (85%)	76 (15%)	494
N4	2966 (52%)	2695 (48%)	5661
N5	3356 (50%)	3403 (50%)	6759
Total	6898 (53%)	6210 (47%)	13108

Figure 3: JLPT 2023 July

Source: (JLPT Registration Portal, 2023)

Level	Female	Male	Total
N1	38 (81%)	9 (19%)	47
N2	154(86%)	25(14%)	179
N3	382(77%)	116 (23%)	498
N4	2295 (55%)	1913 (45%)	4207
N5	2826 (57%)	2171(43%)	4997
Total	5695 (57%)	4233 (43%)	9928

Figure 4: JLPT 2023 December

Source: (JLPT Registration Portal, 2023)

The above data show that though there are fewer male students in university undergraduate courses, the number of male applicants for the JLPT exam is not negligible. Particularly for lower levels like N5 and N4, there is a considerable number of male applicants, and the gender distribution is almost equal. In July 2023 the number of male applicants for JLPT N4 was slightly higher than the number of female applicants. This shows that males are more interested in lower levels of JLPT, probably because N5 is the entry qualification for most of the Japanese language schools in Japan and N4 is the minimum requirement for SSW Visa.

The above data may imply studying basic level Japanese or getting a visa to go to Japan could be more popular among males rather than studying Japanese in a degree programme or understanding the Japanese language used in a broad range of real-life scenarios.

6.1.4. Popular Visa Categories to Enter Japan

As mentioned above considering the number of student migration the second highest number of Sri Lankan undergraduates is in Japan. Therefore, it could be said that getting a student visa to Japan is very popular in Sri Lanka. Since 2019, a new visa category called Specified Skilled Worker is open to Sri Lankans. Those who have cleared the language and specified skill requirements are eligible to apply for this visa for four types of industries which cover employment fields like nursing care, food service, agriculture, and construction. Compared to university degree programmes, the number of male learners is higher in private institutes and lower levels of JLPT have male applicants which is almost equal to the number of female applicants. This could imply that the male population in Japanese language education in Sri Lanka is primarily motivated for language learning by employment and education opportunities in Japan.

6.2. Qualitative Data

Semi structured interviews were conducted to understand what teachers, course administrators and learners think of gender related factors in Japanese education. I interviewed three people of each category (both male and female) via zoom. Each interview was 30 to 60 minutes long and the time of each interview was suggested by the participants. All were individual interviews and were recorded with the consent of the participants. Some participants switched on the video while some kept it switched off throughout.

The questions mainly asked from the participants are as follows:

1. When and how did you start learning Japanese?
2. Where do you teach/ work or learn?
3. What do you think of the gender distribution among Japanese learners?

6.2.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and after reading the data thoroughly, the following concept maps were developed based on the data.

6.2.1.1. Teacher’s Opinion on Japanese Language Studies and Gender

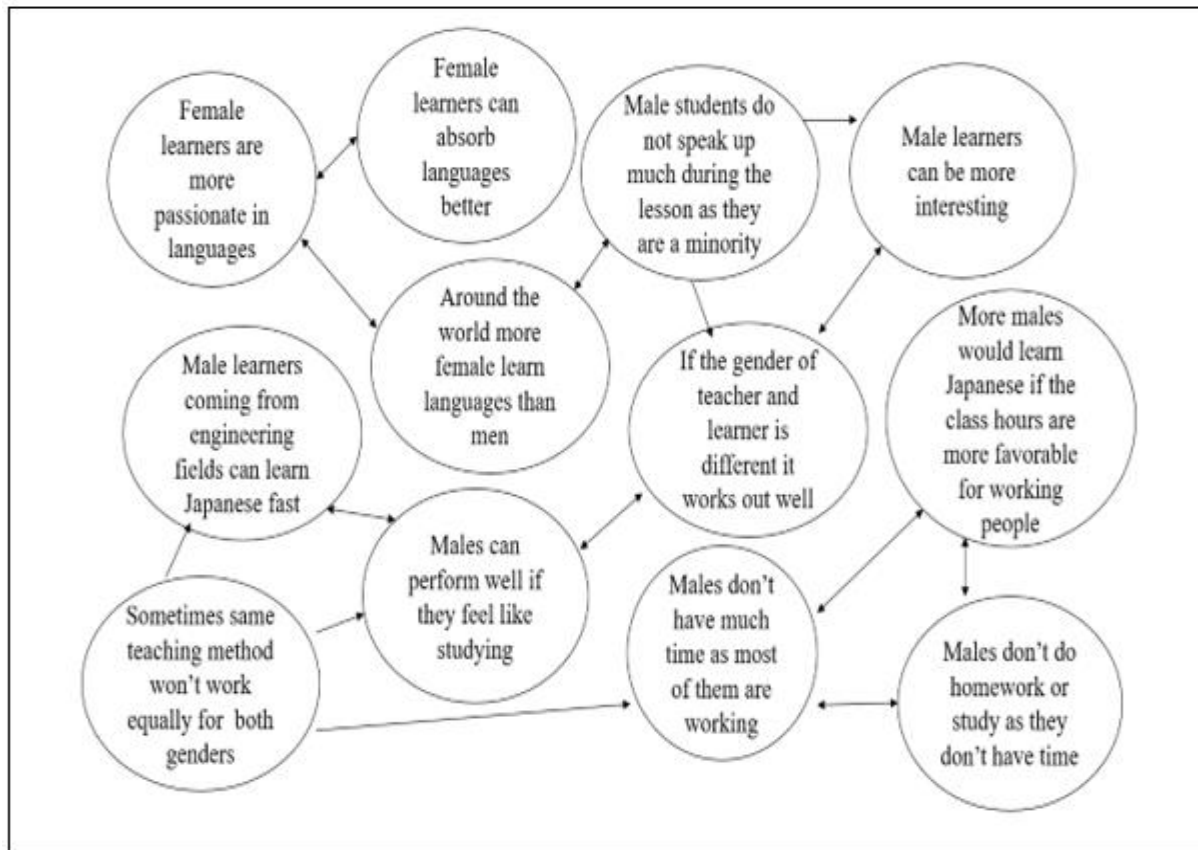


Figure 5: Concept map on teachers’ opinion

Source: Created by the Author (2023)

The teachers who participated in this study think that female learners are more passionate towards language learning and global language education is female dominated. However, they also think that male learners can perform well if they have the need and adequate time. Further, one teacher said if the class times are more favourable for those who are working, more male learners would learn Japanese.

“If the Japanese courses are job oriented and if the class times are friendlier for the working crowd more males will learn Japanese.”

(Participant 2, personal communication, June 18, 2023)

Teachers also have some experience of educating male learners from an engineering background who perform well in the Japanese lessons. One of the teachers who participated in the interview specially mentioned that some male IT engineers in her class were very enthusiastic and quick to learn whenever there were formulas and systems like grammar patterns. This resonates the findings of Bonomo

(2010) and Carr and Pauwels (2006) who claimed that language aspects with critical thinking and logical patterns can be easier for males. However, with the data of this study alone it is not possible to come to a conclusion whether it is a gender specific factor or whether it is something related to mathematical and logical thinking among the learners because one teacher said that a few female IT engineers who wanted to learn Japanese before they went to Japan to work in a Japanese company were also quick learners.

“In the class for N3 level, there were eight students, and out of them, two were girls. All of them were IT graduates and were studying Japanese before they went to Japan for an IT related company. The two girls were extremely quick in learning whereas the four boys could not catch up as fast as the girls did. I always had to teach them individually as each of them had different styles of studying.”

(Participant 1, personal communication, June 17, 2023)

During the interview, the same teacher mentioned that most of the activities in the classroom are for people who like to talk, and the topics mostly are for the interests of female learners whereas there are some people, especially male learners who do not have any topic to talk about. Sometimes when they are the minority in the class they hardly talk. Therefore, the teacher has to make extra effort to teach those learners.

“I recently realised one male student in one of my classes who is really good at maths remembers Japanese like a formula. That way, he can absorb grammar very well. For people like that I think there’s no point in using literature, thoughts and work that have an aesthetic taste which girls enjoy a lot.”

(Participant 1, personal communication, June 17, 2023)

Further, during an interview, one of the male teachers pointed out that the gender of the teacher can be one decisive factor to bring out enthusiasm in the learners; the teacher-learner dynamic in the

classroom would be better if they are of opposite genders.

“What I feel is that it is more effective for the male students if it’s a 女性の先生 (female teacher). If it is a 女性の学生 (female student) it is more interesting to have a 男性の先生 (male teacher).”

(Participant 2, personal communication, June 18, 2023)

A female participant corroborated the above saying that having male learners in her class adds some colour to the class, and it always is interesting to have them as they create the mood. However, she said it is not easy for male learners as when they are the minority the females tend to control the class. She further observed that sometimes there are male learners who become the centre of attention in the class because of their sense of humour.

6.2.1.2. Course Administrators’ Opinion on Japanese Language Studies and Gender

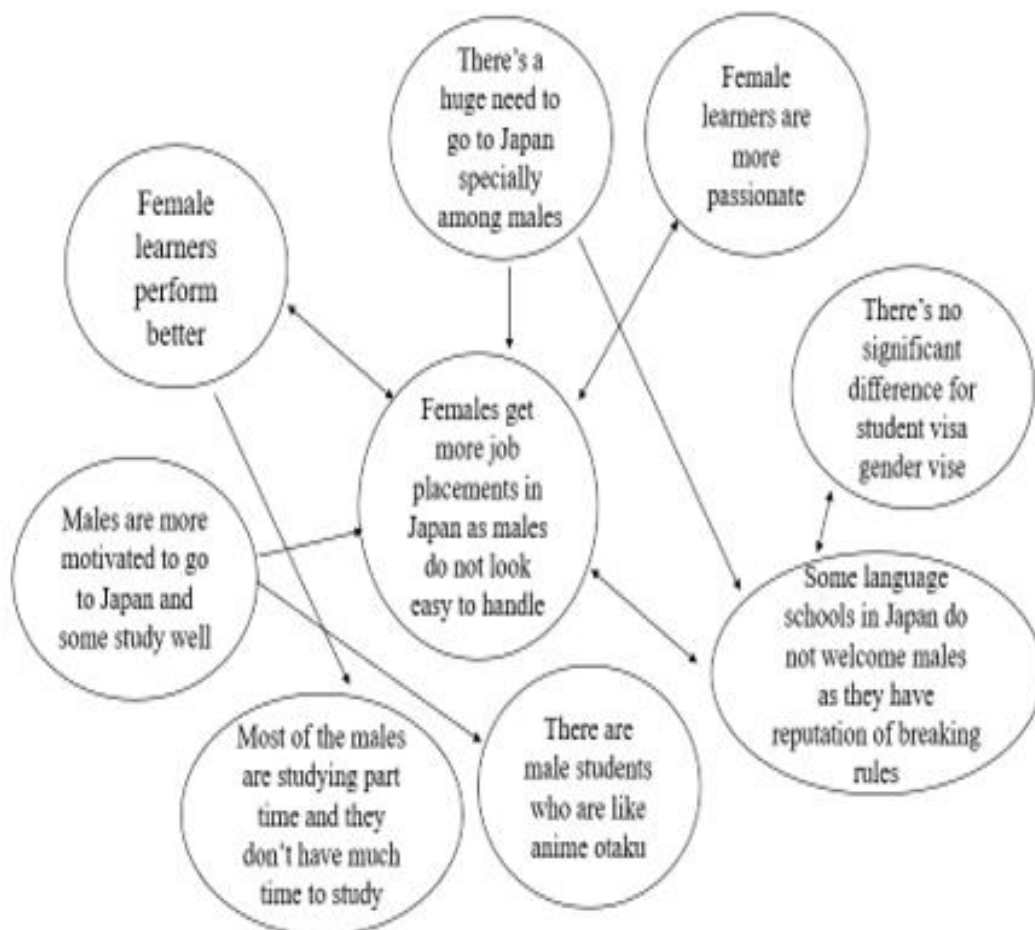


Figure 6: Concept map on course administrators’ opinion

Source: Created by the Author (2023)

When examining the data gathered from course administrators, they also state that females are more passionate about learning Japanese. However, there is a new insight as two of them mentioned that some language schools in Japan as well as some recruiters prefer females. One administrator even mentioned that in their institute males who have passed language exams, skill exams and fulfilled all the required criteria, have to wait long until they get recruited while females get job placements quickly, specifically referring to the SSW visa category. Looking at the job categories available for Sri Lankans, such as nursing care, food service industry, agriculture, and construction, both genders are likely to have similar job placements. Nursing care might provide more opportunities for females but the other three job categories, especially construction, are usually male dominated. However, the demand is still for female employees.

“Sending for SSW visas started recently in Sri Lanka. From the Japan side they prefer females at the moment. Especially for nursing care, though they must carry and handle elderly people, that requires strength, they want us to send girls.”

(Participant 4, personal communication, August 11, 2023)

According to the administrators, Japanese recruiters tend to feel Sri Lankan females are more easily manageable than males considering their outward appearance.

“Though we think there are many Sri Lankans in Japan, many Japanese people don’t know much about Sri Lanka. Sometimes they ask if we are a part of India. Therefore, as they do not know much, they think girls are 扱いやす (easy to deal with). So, they say specially for nursing care, send girls first.”

(Participant 4, personal communication, August 11, 2023)

In private institutions where they teach Japanese before sending people for SSW or student visa, there are many males. Sometimes they are the

majority. Some people study part time while working full time and some have quitted their jobs to learn Japanese hoping they can go to Japan. However, males do not get many opportunities compared to females.

“Some people say this is discrimination. So far there were many Vietnamese in Japan. Now it seems they don’t come to Japan as before. And now they take people from Nepal and Indonesia. When it comes to Sri Lanka, the skin colour too matters. Some people are a little reluctant considering our skin colour. The build of our boys too matters. For example, during an interview for agriculture, Japanese recruiters didn’t like tall people as they think it’s not easy [for tall people] to bend and work. Japanese people are not that big made, aren’t they? Anyhow, I think they don’t know much about our people still.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, August 13, 2023)

“After working in Japan under SSW for 5 years they can do [the]SSW2 exam and after working as SSW2 for 5 years they are entitled to get Permanent Residency. So many males are interested in this. I think one reason this has become popular is the downfall of our economy.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, August 13, 2023)

Some language schools in Japan do not like to have Sri Lankan males in their schools and they, too, prefer females.

“We send students to many language schools there. But some schools tell us not to send boys. Some schools stop accepting boys for about two years and restart accepting them. Because boys don’t behave well. Sometimes smoking, drinking, some don’t study, and some don’t go to school properly. Many issues.”

“But there are very good boys too. They study and work hard and go to technical colleges and get good jobs too.”

“Some schools request us not to send boys only groups. They want us to mix girls too. They say it is easier to manage when there are both girls and boys.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, August 16, 2023)

Considering what the administrators say, though there are male learners who want to go to Japan, they do not match what the Japanese expect of them. It seems that many of them do not give much time and attention to developing language skills and other soft skills that would help them to be successful and well accepted by the Japanese. Instead, they become engrossed in other things. Yet,

they wish to go to Japan for education and employment. At the same time, the society in Japan, too, must adjust in a way that they accept the differences and dynamic backgrounds of foreign workers and learners without prejudice if they offer employment and education opportunities to foreign countries. It seems that the language schools and employers opt to accept Sri Lankan females as they seem easy to manage. While this places the females in a better position in terms of opportunities in Japan, it is an act of discrimination against the males who are equally qualified.

6.2.1.3 Learners' Opinion on Japanese Language Studies and Gender

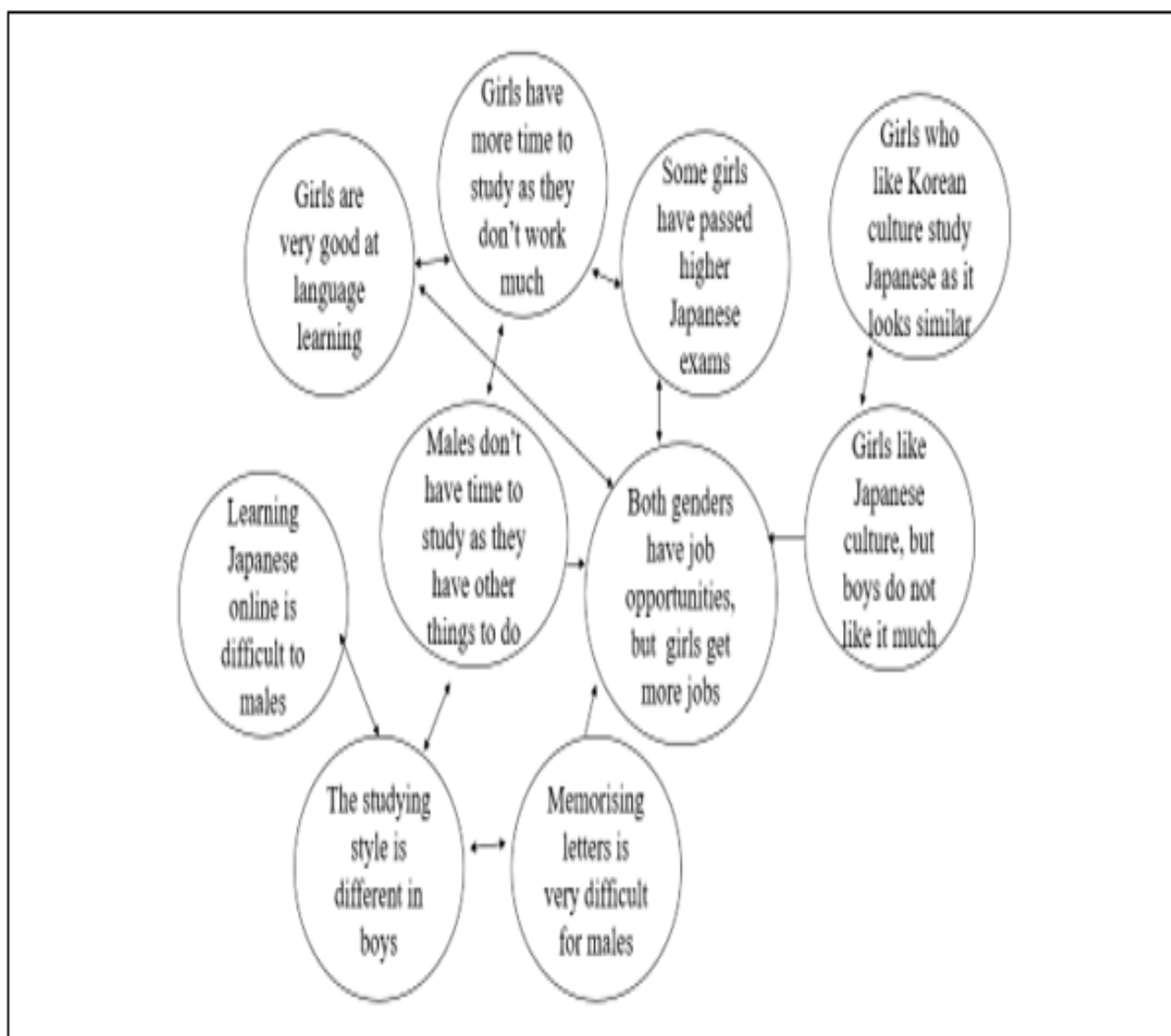


Figure 7: Concept map on Japanese learners' opinion

Source: Created by the Author (2023)

The opinions shared by the learners during the interviews could be summarised as above. The learners, too, pointed out that girls tend to perform better in Japanese studies. One girl said that the way the boys study is different.

“Boys don’t want to study like we do.

Sometimes they just listen to what the teachers are saying and don’t note down anything.

Sometimes they come to the class without doing any homework.”

(Participant 7, personal communication, August 03, 2023)

A new insight gathered from the interviews concerns the cultural aspect. It seems some females learn Japanese driven by integrative motivation. Some of them love Japanese culture and some love Korean culture. One participant was talking about the current K-pop fandom and Korean idols. As she and her friends couldn’t find Korean classes, and as they think Japan and Korea have the same culture, she and her friends learn Japanese.

“All my friends think Korean singers are so cute! Some boys in our class hate it when we talk about Korean idols.”

(Participant 6, personal communication, July 20, 2023)

However, males do not seem to be interested in Japanese culture or learning Japanese language for such reasons because what they want is to find employment in Japan. For that, they simply want to pass the exams. But the participants said that there are boys who love anime and think and behave as if they are Japanese. They further claimed that such learners are very good at Japanese and know uncommon words.

7. Findings

Analysing the quantitative and qualitative data gathered by this study, the following could be summarised as findings.

7.2. Number of Learners

- Japanese Degree programmes in public universities are dominated by females.

- In some private institutes, the male population is higher.

7.3. Females Perform Better than Males

- Teachers, administrators, and learners opine that females are better at learning Japanese.
- However, all agreed that there are some male learners who are good at Japanese studies in their own way.
- Many male learners cannot give much time for studying as they are busy with work.
- The voice of females is more prominent in the language class.

7.4. Opportunities in Japan

- There’s a strong need to go to Japan, and males in particular, are motivated by this.
- Though there are many male learners in private institutes who have cleared all the visa requirements, more females have job opportunities in Japan as the Japanese recruiters believe females are easy to handle.
- Some language schools in Japan prefer female learners.
- Females like Japanese culture more.

8. Conclusion

The reason why Sri Lankan universities have more female students while private institutions have a comparatively larger male population could be because of the objectives of the courses. University degree programmes target producing someone with excellent language skills groomed for professional contexts like teaching, translating, diplomatic services, business, and research. This process takes a long time and requires dedication. Private institutes, however, target the basic levels of JLPT like N5 and N4, which usually are six-month or one-year courses. The ultimate objective of all the four private institutions and courses offered by them are sending or helping to send their learners to Japan for work or study. During the interviews with all three parties, namely, teachers, course administrators, and learners, the fact that male

learners are busy with work, and they do not have time for studying was a common opinion. But they are studying Japanese in these courses. In other words, even though they do not have time for studying, the male learners have joined these private language institutions targeting to go to Japan for studies or for work.

During the interviews, one participant mentioned that since the existing Japanese lessons are more suitable for females, some males find it difficult to contribute to the topics in the lessons. Further, the fact that male learners do not have time for studies and homework appeared as a negative factor in all the interviews. This could, perhaps, be an issue of the curriculum itself. Bonomo (2010) highlights that boys struggle more with the current focus on the communicative approach, and Li et al. (2020) point out the necessity to tackle gender stereotyping and suggest that focus should be given to improving boys' engagement in language learning. This is corroborated by the findings of this study, which indicates the need to develop the curriculum to be more inclusive so that both males and females can participate in language classes without having to struggle or be negative. Therefore, more consideration should be given to developing teaching methods that support male learners to connect better and interact in language classes.

Furthermore, knowing about Japanese culture and etiquette would be an important tool to be successful in Japan. In the study, it could be seen that the females are more interested in learning about Japanese culture. Hence, there should be interesting methods to stimulate learners' interest in soft skills like cultural knowledge, manners and disciplines required to function in Japanese society. For that, we need to employ a variety of teaching methods tailored to suit the characteristics and needs of different genders.

In summary, although males want to go to Japan and work, they do not seem to pay much attention towards learning the language or the culture. Instead, they tend to be busy with their current jobs. At the same time, recruiters in Japan prefer females as they look easy to handle. This could be one

reason why males feel like keeping their current job as a safeguard for nobody is certain if or when more males will be accepted by Japan. To overcome this, schools and recruiters in Japan should be more inclusive in terms of gender, and refrain from being prejudiced based on physical appearance and behaviour of people from different regions of the world. This attitudinal change is vital because Japan has come to a point that they cannot survive with the limited labour available within the country. In fact, as mentioned by Nihon Care Business Cooperative (NCB) (2022), the Specified Skills is a system aimed at securing labour force, which is a means of dealing with the serious labour shortage in the country, and sooner or later, Japan will be compelled to accept workers of different ethnicities, builds, and genders.

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