

**JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG  
MALAYSIAN JAPANESE SPEAKING GRADUATE  
EMPLOYEES: A STUDY IN JAPANESE  
COMPANIES IN MALAYSIA**

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**UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

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EMPLOYEES: A STUDY IN JAPANESE  
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by

**YEOH LEE SU**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BJC	Business Japanese Competencies
BJM	Business Japanese Major Program for Business Purpose
CLA	Communicative Language Ability
DFI	Direct Foreign Investment
FL	Foreign Language
IS	Interactional Sociolinguistics
JDI	Japanese Direct Investment
JETRO	The Japan External Trade Organization
JFKL	Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur
JLPT	Japanese Language Proficiency Test
JLQ	Japanese Language Questionnaire
JCM	Japanese Companies in Malaysia
L2	Second Language
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
LEP	Look East Policy
METI	Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry
MEXT	Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology
MJLS	Malaysia Japanese Language Society
MJSGEs	Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees
MNCs	Multinational Companies
NEP	New Economic Policy
NHK	Japan Broadcasting Corporation
PJLS	Penang Japanese Language Society

PMJFS	Perak Malaysia-Japanese Friendship Society
PPBLT	Pusat Pengajian Bahasa, Literasi dan Terjemahan
QUAL	Qualitative
QUAN	Quantitative
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
TFL	Truly Foreign Language
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia

**KAJIAN KEMAHIRAN BERBAHASA JEPUN DALAM KALANGAN  
SISWAZAH MALAYSIA YANG BERKHIDMAT  
UNTUK SYARIKAT JEPUN DI MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian kaedah gabungan telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji kemahiran berbahasa Jepun dalam kalangan siswazah Malaysia (Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees (MJSGEs)) yang berkhidmat untuk syarikat Jepun di Malaysia (Japanese Companies in Malaysia (JCM)). Kajian ini menyelidik keperluan kemahiran mendengar, bertutur, membaca dan menulis bahasa Jepun. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga menyelidik tahap kepentingan keempat-empat kemahiran berbahasa iaitu mendengar, bertutur, membaca dan menulis. Akhir sekali, kajian ini menyelidik cabaran-cabaran yang dihadapi oleh MJSGEs dalam penggunaan bahasa Jepun di JCM serta langkah-langkah yang diambil untuk mengatasi cabaran tersebut. Soal selidik telah digunakan untuk memperoleh data kuantitatif daripada 65 peserta manakala temu bual semi struktur digunakan dalam temu duga dengan 17 MJSGEs dan dengan 8 majikan berbangsa Jepun di JCM untuk memperoleh data kualitatif. Data kuantitatif dianalisis dengan menggunakan Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Data temu duga semi berstruktur ditranskripsikan dahulu, kemudian dianalisis dengan menggunakan analisis tematik. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kemahiran berbahasa Jepun yang dianggap penting oleh JCM di tempat kerja ialah kemahiran mendengar (memahami arahan lisan dan mampu menentusahkan maklumat) dan kemahiran bertutur (komunikasi kerja dan komunikasi harian dengan

rakan sejawatan Jepun). Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kemahiran mendengar dan kemahiran bertutur paling penting; disusuli oleh kemahiran membaca dan akhir sekali kemahiran menulis. Kemahiran mendengar dan kemahiran bertutur merupakan kemahiran yang mencabar untuk MJSGEs. Seterusnya, kajian ini mendapati bahawa langkah-langkah yang digunakan untuk mengatasi cabaran yang dihadapi oleh MJSGEs ialah bimbingan daripada komuniti dalaman tempat kerja seperti rakan sejawatan dan pihak pengurusan atasan serta penggunaan internet. Peserta juga bermotivasi intrinsik untuk menghadapi cabaran yang dihadapi dalam penggunaan Bahasa Jepun. Dapatan ini boleh dijadikan sebagai panduan untuk mempromosikan program major dalam bidang Bahasa Jepun Perniagaan kepada institusi pengajian tinggi di Malaysia. Penggubalan program tersebut ialah sumbangan penting kajian ini.

**JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG MALAYSIAN  
JAPANESE SPEAKING GRADUATE EMPLOYEES: A STUDY IN  
JAPANESE COMPANIES IN MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this mixed methods study was to investigate Japanese language skills' proficiency among Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees (MJSGEs) in Japanese Companies in Malaysia (JCM). Specifically, the requirements and level of importance of Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing among MJSGEs were examined. This study also investigated the challenges faced by MJSGEs in using the Japanese language in JCM and the measures they adopted to overcome these challenges. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 65 respondents. Qualitative data were collected by employing semi-structured interviews with 17 MJSGEs and eight (8) Japanese employers in JCM. While the quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically. The results revealed that the Japanese language skills' proficiency requirements considered important by employers in JCM in the workplace were the listening skills (understanding oral instructions and the ability to confirm information) and speaking skills (work-related and daily communication with Japanese colleagues). The findings indicate that listening and speaking skills were ranked more highly than reading and writing which is ranked the lowest. Listening and speaking were also the



most challenging skills faced by MJSGEs. To overcome the challenges, MJSGEs employed certain measures including getting guidance from the internal workplace community such as their Japanese colleagues and superiors and the external measure of utilising internet sources. MJSGEs are found to be intrinsically motivated to solve all their Japanese language skills-related issues. The findings of this study can support the setting-up of a Business Japanese major programme for Malaysian higher education institutions. In such a manner, this study become more significant.

## **CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Overview of the Study**

The competitive environment in international markets as well as international trade policies has resulted in the escalation of rapid globalisation of Japan's industries since the late 1980s. As the economy of Japan has expanded rapidly, international communities have witnessed some increased opportunities to do business with Japan. In the Malaysian context, the business sectors and workforce are also afforded these opportunities. Among the key factors contributing to the success of the Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971– 1990) is Japanese direct foreign investment (DFI) (Smith, 2003). After the introduction of the NEP, there was a significant increase in the number of Japanese joint ventures and subsidiaries (Imaoka, 1985). By 1979, approximately 43% of the joint ventures Japanese firms had in Malaysia were involved in the manufacturing sector in electronics, chemicals, and wood-related products (Smith 1994, 2003).

Japan positions itself as one of the main trade partners for Malaysia as well as a major provider of direct foreign investment and economic assistance (Furuoka, Lim, Mahmud, & Kato, 2007; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). In the early 1980s, Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed, the Malaysian Prime Minister at that time, introduced the country's "Look East" policy which was one of the factors that enhanced the bilateral relations, especially those related to commerce and economics, between the two nations. Since then, not only economic relations but also diplomatic and cultural relations and exchanges between Malaysia and Japan have strengthened and flourished.

The 'Look East' policy and better diplomatic and cultural relations and exchanges have resulted in more Japanese firms opting to invest in Malaysia. This has been highlighted by Shigeru Nakamura the Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia who declares that "Malaysia has five (5) "plus-points"; growing economy, stable politics, free of natural calamities, good infrastructure such as water, electricity and gas supplies, as well as an English-speaking workforce" (The Star Online, 27 Jan 2012). These five points are, essentially, pertinent requirements for investments to grow because they can create more jobs and can boost the local economy.

Additionally, an increasing number of Japanese firms have relocated their head offices or key operations to Singapore to oversee new investments in Southeast Asia especially in neighbouring Malaysia (The Japan Times, 14 Aug 2012). Rahil (2012) observes that the trend of expanding and relocating abroad was accelerated after the March 2011 double catastrophes of an earthquake and tsunami in Japan that made Japanese companies realise the need for the diversification of their operations as a part of their risk management policies.

Associate Professor of Strategic Management at Singapore Management University, Dr. Yoshikawa, states that the trend indicates that Japanese companies are now focusing on the fast-growing Southeast Asian markets as the economy of China experiences a cooling-off period. Dr. Yoshikawa adds that "Japanese companies' plan to globalise their operations by hiring staff with diverse cultural backgrounds, and although Japan has highly competent engineers and managers, they do not have much experience operating in multicultural environments" (Rahil, 2012, para 12).

Nowadays, governments in developing countries are addressing the need to produce employable multilingual and multicultural graduates for the global society

(Qiu, 2016). As the world becomes more interconnected, the knowledge of foreign language has become an economic commodity that enables job seekers to access foreign technology and be functionally associated with constructive, purposive and meaningful involvement in politics, security, global trade and education, amongst others (Maeno, Katsuda, & Larpsrisawad, 2013; Qiu, 2016).

Malaysia acknowledges the importance and significance of developing its human capital for the knowledge economy (k-economy) as well as for the global workplace by equipping them with the knowledge and proficiency in a foreign language (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, p.62). The knowledge of and proficiency in a foreign language for effective communication can surely enable Malaysian job seekers to succeed within a global workplace in a global economy (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

In the wave of globalisation and interconnectivity, Malaysia and Malaysians are not spared. Malaysian graduates and job seekers also are required to possess employability skills that include knowledge of a foreign language and foreign companies' business practices. Malaysian leaders have also taken the initiative to embrace globalisation since the 1990s and provide education that can enable Malaysian graduates to enter the global workforce and integrate effectively with others from around the globe as part of the national economic agenda (Omar, 1982). This agenda of promoting foreign language proficiency among students has been consistently carried out (Ainol, Isarji, & Mohamad Sahari, 2007; Christian, Pufahl, & Rhodes, 2005; Tsubosaka, 2012; Welles, 2004; Zeszotarski, 2001).

## **1.2 Background to the Study**

The relationship in commerce and business between Japan and Malaysia has been rapidly developing and expanding in recent times. This is evident in the increase of the number of joint-ventures between Japanese and Malaysian firms as well as Japanese subsidiaries in Malaysia. Consequently, the workplace in Malaysia is described to be more diversified.

In April 2014, there was a total of 1,412 Japanese Companies in Malaysia, (JCM) which are either joint ventures or wholly-owned Japanese companies (JETRO, 2014). As a result, there was a dramatic rise in the demand for individuals who possess Japanese language proficiency to work in Japanese companies. Taking this into account, Japanese language proficiency has become vital for Malaysians who look for jobs in JCM (Ooi, 2013).

Therefore, Malaysian job seekers are also increasingly seeking proficiency in the Japanese language because the sociocultural, economic, and technological developments have made the mastery of Japanese language important. Malaysian professionals are aware of the need to possess fluency in a foreign language, especially the Japanese language. This is because they believe that fluency in a foreign language can enable them to participate and compete effectively in the multinational companies, especially Japanese companies. Training professionals who possess effective foreign language communication proficiency is required for Malaysia to develop its workforce for the globalised environment. This is because knowledge of foreign languages and familiarity with practices in foreign companies and businesses are viewed to be contributing factors for success (Ainol, Isarji, & Mohamad Sahari, 2007; Hamada, 2012; Nagai, 2011; Uehara & Tao, 2015).

The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia in its National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 stipulates that “Proficiency in the third language is vital for developing human capital that drives the k-economy as well as gears the country towards competitive innovation in the international arena,” (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, p.62). Malaysian universities, therefore, are required “to provide learning opportunities for students to be proficient in a third language such as Mandarin, Tamil, Japanese, French, or Spanish” (p. 66). In addition, the knowledge of and a working proficiency in a third language can give graduates an added and competitive edge in an increasingly globalised, multicultural, and diverse work environment. Furthermore, graduates with the knowledge of and a working proficiency in a third language can have opportunities to access the current and latest technology and information. The knowledge of foreign languages in a borderless world is more important, especially when nation building is highly dependent on the acquisition and transfer of foreign technology. Cross border and intercultural communication abilities are considered features of strengths for those working in JCM. Thus, successful communication is vital to the functioning of JCM.

Steinberg (2003) argued that workplace oral communication involves all communication processes within an organisation, which can be both internal within an organisation and externally carried out with other organisations. Internal communication mainly focuses on work-related issues and creates a conducive environment for individuals within an organisation to work together. For this research purpose, the study will focus on the internal communication process because this kind of communication is work-related, and it is hoped that the findings

from this research can contribute to the JCM and Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees (MJSGEs).

In JCM, Japanese employers and Malaysian employees engage in enormous amounts of organisational communication which is more complex than communication in homogeneous organisations and cultural diversity poses an additional potential problem in communication (Horii, 2012; Wiseman & Shuter, 1994). Heterogeneous workplaces pose greater risks than homogeneous ones because the existence of differences can result in conflicts, misunderstanding, low productivity, and poor performance (Horii, 2012; Salk & Brannen, 2000). JCM consider communication abilities as an added advantage because successful communication ensures efficiency and effectiveness of any organisation. As mentioned by Qiu (2012) and Suzuki (2012), information correctly passed, received, understood, and carried out is vital to the success of a company. In JCM that are diverse in nature, Malaysian employees interact and work with other foreign employers and managers, colleagues, clients, customers, suppliers, and distributors that come from vastly different social, cultural, and communicative backgrounds.

Although both language and cultural differences pose challenges to and may have an influence on communication in multinational companies (MNCs), the language component has either been neglected and even relegated to a secondary role behind those of cultural values by international business scholars (Van & Peltokorpi, 2010). However, previous studies have revealed that cultural values influence linguistic style in a communication process and affect how individuals understand and interpret messages. Furthermore, it has been argued that culture determines how individuals interpret the meanings of messages, and culture also affects the

conditions under which messages may or may not be sent, taken note of and interpreted (George et al., 1998; Kim & Gudykunst, 1988).

Additionally, Agar (1994) further states that “language carries with it patterns of seeing, knowing, talking and acting. Not patterns that imprison you, but patterns that make the easiest trails for thought and perception and action” (p. 71). Therefore, the Japanese language that MJSGEs know and use can affect their understanding of JCM and the way they construct and transmit messages. As such, although the MJSGEs are using the Japanese language in JCM, it does not guarantee smooth and error-free comprehension, because cultural values that are manifested through language usage and communication styles act as barriers to effective perceiving, analysing and decoding of messages (Henderson, 2005). This is particularly true when it occurs in a Japanese speaking environment because the main concern of the Japanese communication style is surface harmony. Surface harmony is the glue of both the group and society as a whole in Japan and this communication style varies among MJSGEs working in JCM (Fileva & Docho, 1991; Kato & Kato, 1992).

The Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur (2014) reports that Malaysia ranked ninth (9<sup>th</sup>) worldwide in terms of the number of Japanese language learners. In 2014, the number of Malaysians studying Japanese reached 33,077. In view of this huge number of Japanese language learners and the increasing expectations for graduates to be proficient and competent in a foreign language, especially in the Japanese language, there arises a need to conduct more and greater in-depth research studies on Japanese companies’ workplace requirements of Malaysian employees particularly in multinational companies such as JCM.



In addition to the responsibility of ensuring smooth and effective communication between MJSGEs and their Japanese employers, the local higher education institutions also have a role to play to prepare local graduates to be proficient in the Japanese language and to acquire the skills of smooth and effective communication with their future Japanese employers.

Based on the registration records in the School of Languages, Literacies, and Translation [Pusat Pengajian Bahasa dan Terjemahan (PPBLT)] in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in June 2016, the Japanese language is the most popular foreign language among the nine foreign languages offered in this School (509 in PPBLT in the 2015/2016 Academic Session, Semester II). Furthermore, according to JETRO's report in 2014, there were 11,000 Malaysians working in JCM. Taking into account this increasing number of Malaysian learners of the Japanese language, this current study aims partly to investigate the requirements of the Japanese language proficiency by JCM in order to be able to design language programmes that can produce the graduates who can meet the requirements of the workplace and industry.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Several Japanese businesses have invested and started or relocated their operations abroad, especially in the Southeast Asian countries. In relation to this exercise, in recent years, bilateral trade relationships between Japan and Malaysia have expanded. One of the reasons for this rapid development of Japanese businesses in Malaysia is the decreasing and aging population due to its declining businesses in Japan. Therefore, Japanese companies in Japan are under pressure to transform into globally-focused companies (BBC News, 2013; Izumi, Ito & Ishihara, 2014). Consequently, Malaysian job seekers need to acquire a specific level of Japanese

language proficiency in order to find employment in JCM. Furthermore, the increasing number of Japanese companies has attributed to the need for employing ASEAN countries' university graduates such as those from Malaysia who have both good proficiency in the Japanese language and knowledge of Japanese business practices (Izumi et al., 2014; Maeno et al., 2013, 2015).

Malaysians who possess a certain level of Japanese language proficiency are needed by JCM of which more than 70% of these companies are manufacturing companies (JETRO, 2014). Therefore, there is a crucial need for MJSGEs to possess the required level of Japanese language proficiency to perform effective communication at their workplace. However, it has been reported that MJSGEs face several challenges that can be attributed to their inadequate proficiency in the Japanese language. This has been reported by Yeoh, Sepora, & Manjet (2011, 2016) in their exploratory studies which have focused on the business communication needs of JCM.

Although helping students to acquire a good level of Japanese language proficiency is one of the major requirements for Japanese language education in the Southeast Asian universities (Horii, 2012; Izumi et al., 2014; Kodaira, 2012, Tsubosaka, 2012), it is extremely difficult for Japanese language learners to develop all types of competency such as linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural competences within a limited period of time, especially when they are learning a foreign language in their native-language environment (Berns, 2008, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2013; Yoshida, 2004).

No doubt, several studies such as Harada (2004) and Maeno et al. (2013) have been done in Malaysian neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Singapore. These studies reported that business vocabulary, business expressions,

and business manner are the priority issues in Japanese-related companies. Besides that, other studies in the similar context have reported that the graduates' Japanese language proficiency and communication ability should be improved (Horii, 2012; Maeno et al., 2015; Tsubosaka, 2012). Furthermore, Izumi et al., (2014) argued that several Malaysian graduates encounter varied linguistic and socio-cultural difficulties, such as use of honorific expressions, difficulties with technical terms, problems with the act of listening and expressing ideas in conversations, reading social cues behind words, hierarchical issues and so on.

However, most of the studies conducted in the Malaysian context are related to teaching and learning the Japanese language (e.g., Ang, 2003; Curriculum Development Centre, 2011; Sazlina, 2015; Wei & Sulaiman, 2009). However, this current study does not focus on these teaching and learning Japanese issues. Some other studies have focused on Japanese management style and workplace practices (e.g., Imaoka, 1985; Shaari, 2010; Taha, 2015; Yeap & Richardson, 2008; Zailani, Shaharudin & Saw, 2015). Thus, very limited number of studies have focused on requirements of Japanese language proficiency and importance of Japanese language skills among employees in JCM, especially in the Southeast Asian context.

Shimada and Shibukawa (1999) reported gaps between expectations by Japanese offshore companies and local employees working for Japanese companies in five major Asian cities, namely Seoul, Dalian, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Bangkok and concluded that Japanese offshore companies also have high expectations on the use of the Japanese language among their non-Japanese employees. However, their study did not identify the required level of Japanese language proficiency and challenges faced by the non-Japanese employees in Japanese language proficiency in these five Asian cities.

In the Malaysian context, the two preliminary studies that have focused on Japanese language issues on a smaller scale are Kan (2012) and Yeoh et al. (2011). Yeoh et al.'s (2011) preliminary study was conducted on a small scale involving 23 graduates and 15 employers. Yeoh et al. (2011) reported that 70% of the graduates showed that their proficiency in the Japanese language is insufficient to handle the demands of their existing work requirements because they have not mastered the Japanese language, especially its business vocabulary and expressions.

Kan (2012) showed that communication problems occurred between Malaysian and Japanese communicators due to the fact that the Malaysian workers cannot speak Japanese, while the Japanese workers can only communicate in Japanese. This setback had a direct effect on the work process and progress. The study also found that many conflicts arose due to the varied working cultures of the Japanese and Malaysian employers and employees. Intra-company cooperation, consequently, was affected.

Existing literature shows that a number of researchers (Ong, Leong and Paramjeet, 2011) focused on the need of English language skills at the Malaysian workplace but there is a lack of similar studies done in the Malaysian context for the foreign language especially the Japanese language. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study to investigate the Japanese language skills needed by the MJSGEs in JCM.

Thus, the main purpose of this study was to investigate Japanese language skills' proficiency among MJSGEs working in JCM. The study examined the requirements and level of Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing among MJSGEs. This study also investigated the challenges

faced by MJSGEs in using the Japanese language in JCM and the measures employed by MJSGEs to overcome these challenges.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The current study addresses the following research objectives:

1. To examine the requirements of Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing among JCM.
2. To measure the level of importance of Japanese language skills which are used by MJSGEs working in JCM.
3. To investigate the challenges faced by MJSGEs working in JCM in their Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing among JCM.
4. To identify the corrective measures taken by MJSGEs working in JCM to overcome the challenges they face in the Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

This current study intends to answer the following four (4) research questions:

1. What are the requirements of Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing among JCM?
2. What are the levels of importance of Japanese language skills which are used by MJSGEs working in JCM?
3. What are the challenges faced by MJSGEs working in JCM in their Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

4. How do MJSGEs working in JCM overcome the challenges they face in their Japanese language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study are significant from various perspectives. First, it is hoped that the findings of this research will narrow the gap in literature and add to the world of knowledge by investigating Japanese language proficiency that is necessary for the MJSGEs to work successfully in JCM. Second, it is hoped that the findings of this research will provide feedback and guidelines for further improvement of the Japanese language curriculum in universities that offer Japanese language courses or programmes to cater to the Japanese language requirements and demands of JCM.

Third, this study is worth investigating because the existing literature indicates clearly that business communication is an important aspect at the workplace. This was revealed by Yeoh et al. (2011) who found that graduates responded that their proficiency in Japanese language is insufficient to enable them handle and cope with their work demands because they have not mastered the Japanese language especially business vocabulary and business expressions.

Fourth, the findings of this study are important for the MJSGEs. Specifically, the findings can provide insights for developing the Japanese language proficiency that MJSGEs need in order to work and perform effectively in multinational companies especially in JCM. Therefore, this study will help local MJSGEs to understand how to overcome challenges they face when they want to communicate effectively with their Japanese employers in JCM. This in turn can help

them to know how to carry out their work-related tasks and to exchange workplace-related information effectively.

Fifth, the findings of the study can pave the way for MJSGEs working in JCM to overcome the Japanese language proficiency gap between Malaysians and Japanese communicators and to minimise the barriers that hinder communication within JCM. This is necessary to ensure success in managing Japanese business communication challenges. Sixth, the findings of the current study can also provide innovative insights for understanding both successful communication and relationship building between JCM and the MJSGEs. Consequently, this will result in a higher job satisfaction for the employees and reduce the turnover rate. Indirectly it will help JCM to have employees with great experience and to obtain higher retention rate.

Seventh, feedback from the MJSGEs and JCM obtained from this study will provide a clear guideline for the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education to prepare the graduates to meet the Japanese communication entry-level for employment requirements for JCM. Additionally, the findings of this study will assist to improve the curriculum and upgrade the teaching as well as teaching materials in Japanese education in order to meet the local staff and needs of JCM.

Eighth, the findings of this study will shed light on how to strengthen the Japanese language curriculum and teaching materials at Malaysian universities where Japanese language programmes and courses are offered. In other words, the findings of this study can be considered to be useful resources for Japanese language education in Malaysia. Finally, this study will pave the way for a greater Malaysian and Japanese cooperation because this study recommends the establishment of Japanese language degree programmes in the Malaysian universities.

## **1.7 Definition of Key Terms**

The operational definitions of the major key terms that are used in this study are stipulated in this section.

### **1.7.1 Japanese Language Proficiency**

Proficiency refers to the ability to carry out or perform an action or function. Language proficiency refers to one's ability to use language to achieve real world linguistic tasks, across a wide range of topics and settings (ACTFL Proficiency Guideline, 2012.). Stern (1983, 2003) defined proficiency as the actual performance of learners using linguistic, cognitive, affective, and sociocultural codes and meanings.

Additionally, Taylor (1988) affirmed that proficiency refers to the skills needed to put the linguistic knowledge into practice. In other words, proficiency refers to the ability to transform knowledge into language use. Therefore, Japanese language proficiency refers to what individuals can do with their knowledge of the Japanese language and how well they can use the Japanese language to communicate in the real world. Proficiency in the Japanese language refers to students' abilities in the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing).

### **1.7.2 Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT)**

The JLPT is administered by Japan Foundation (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, 2017) worldwide to evaluate and certify proficiency in the Japanese language of non-native speakers. It evaluates candidates' knowledge of Japanese language vocabulary and grammar and their ability to use the knowledge in



communication in real life. It also measures Japanese language communicative competence in a comprehensive manner through three components: language knowledge, reading, and listening. While ‘Language Knowledge’ measures learners’ knowledge of Japanese language vocabulary and grammar, the reading and listening components are used to measure learners’ ability to use the knowledge in communication. The linguistic competence required and the levels for the JLPT are illustrated in this thesis on p.85 in table 2.1.

### **1.7.3 Japanese Companies in Malaysia (JCM)**

Japanese Companies in Malaysia (JCM) refers to manufacturing companies in Malaysia which are either joint ventures or wholly-owned by Japanese (JETRO Kuala Lumpur, 2014).

### **1.7.4 Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees (MJSGEs)**

In this current study, the concept of Malaysian Japanese Speaking Graduate Employees (MJSGEs) refers to Malaysian Japanese speaking graduate employees who graduated from Malaysian public universities (the MJSGE are those who majored or minored in Japanese language, or took Japanese language as an option or elective course in university) and are currently working in one JCM.

### **1.7.5 Business Communication**

Norisada (1993) defined business communication as “Communication in the workplace with the goal of having fixed, practical efficacy” (p. 47). It is a kind of communication that increases business profits to reach economic goals.

## **1.8 Limitations of the Study**

Similar to other studies, this current study has its limitations. One of the limitations of this study is related to the sample of the study. This study focuses on JCM in three states in the northern region of Malaysia (Penang, Kedah, and Perak) and Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Furthermore, the companies selected for data collection are seven companies. Taking into account this small sample size, this research might not sufficiently provide strong support towards conclusive findings that can be directly generalised and applied to all JCM in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the research data and findings obtained from these samples are still able to provide beneficial insights on Japanese language proficiency requirements of JCM. This is because there is paucity of research that has been done on Japanese language proficiency requirements among MJSGEs working in JCM.

It is crucial to note that although only eight Japanese employers participated in this study, the views of these Japanese employers on the requirements of Japanese language in JCM could further enhance the thick description provided by the participants regarding the requirements of Japanese language proficiency required by JCM in the semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Future research could include more employers from JCM across the country in order to enrich our knowledge of the requirements of the Japanese language skills in JCM.

## **1.9 Organisation of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One outlines the statement of the problem, issues, and gaps that highlighted the need to conduct a research study of this nature. Chapter One also provides detailed explanations regarding the significance of the study. Chapter One also lists the research objectives and research

questions that have guided the study. The limitations of the study are also presented in Chapter One. At the end of Chapter One, operational definitions that are relevant to this research study are presented.

In Chapter Two, relevant literature on the theories and research from a variety of fields pertinent to the topic of this research is reviewed. The *Ethnography of Communication* (Hymes, 1995), *Interactional Sociolinguistics* by Gumperz (1982) *Cultural Dimensions* by Geert Hofstede (1980) and *High-Low Context* by Hall (1987) which form the framework for this study are presented. These theories were chosen because they are related to the Japanese language proficiency in Japanese multinational companies in Malaysia.

Chapter Three describes the overall research design. The methodology used to collect data, the sample of the study, the research instruments, the procedures to collect data are also explained in Chapter Three. Chapter Three also includes the description of the statistical analyses performed on the data followed a discussion on the techniques and procedures used for the analysis of qualitative data.

The results of data analysis are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four presents the analysis and findings of the quantitative data. Specifically, Chapter Four presents the answers to two research questions: Research Question Two and Research Question Three. On the other hand, Chapter Five reports the analysis and findings of the qualitative data. Answers to all research questions are presented in Chapter Five.

In Chapter Six, which is the final chapter, the key findings are summarised, interpreted and the results are discussed in relation to the related studies reviewed in Chapter Two. The pedagogical implications and recommendations presented in Chapter Six to serve as a useful guide to improve the Japanese language education in

Malaysia which intends to prepare the graduates to meet the Japanese language entry-level requirements for employment in JCM.

### **1.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided important background to the study. The statement of the problem, research objectives, and research questions are also dealt with in this current chapter. Additionally, this chapter presents the significance of the study and the definition of the most important key terms used in this study.

## CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate this research within the context of the existing published works in this area of study. It is hoped that this literature review fully reflects the researcher's intention to apply a theoretical and scholarly framework to investigate the Japanese language proficiency requirements of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) by the JCM and the challenges faced by MJSGEs. Furthermore, theoretical and scholarly frameworks are intended to help the researcher to explore the level of importance of Japanese language skills and measures taken by MJSGEs working in JCM to overcome the challenges they face in their Japanese language proficiency in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the language. Specifically, the following literature review is divided into four major sections:

- Japanese Language proficiency requirements in a multinational workplace
- Japanese Language in Malaysia
- Theoretical frameworks
- Related Studies

According to Scott et al. (2002), participants of diverse backgrounds in a communication process are required to combine their background knowledge, experiences, culture, and language skills for the purpose of sharing information with other participants. This section, therefore, explores available literature on the variables investigated in this study. It mainly focuses on proficiency in the Japanese language in the context of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

To facilitate the discussion on proficiency in the Japanese language in the context of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, a global overview will be presented on issues related to these variables. The wider scope of these variables entails language, cross culture communication and JCM. Therefore, this chapter first presents literature review on language in great depth. This is followed by literature on culture, communication, and proficiency in Japanese language skills.

## **2.2 Language**

In order to gain better understanding about Japanese language in the context of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, this section will begin the discussion regarding the functions and components of language. According to Kaur (2014), language is not only a means of communication, it is also a medium through which most of our knowledge is acquired. Language involves the cognitive faculty that enables humans to learn and use systems of complex communication. This shows that language is closely-linked to the thinking process of understanding. The link between language and the thinking process is obvious when one considers how language is acquired, especially, among children.

Communication, however, goes beyond how we learn a language. Communication is made possible by the mental process of encoding and decoding information (McLaughlin, Rossman & Mcleod, 1983). This process is quite complex and the complexity manifests itself when we are unable to decode information in a language whose system we have not acquired. Our mental faculty would, at the same time, be open to learning the symbols of any language if we decide to learn it (Pinker & Bloom, 2011).

According to the definition provided by Searle (2007), when the focus is on language as a means of making meaning, language is studied in three broad areas; phonology, syntax, and semantics. Language consists of three components: phonology, syntax and semantics. While the phonological component determines how words and sentences are pronounced, a syntactical component identifies the arrangement of words and morphemes in sentences. The semantic component assigns a meaning or interpretation to words and sentences. Searle (2007) argued that there must also be a pragmatic component that is not internal to specific languages that can be applied in any language.

However, using the sociolinguistics approach, according to Risager (2005), language should be conceptualised as an integrated part of society, culture and the psyche. Thus, language is always cultural in some respects. In an interconnected globalised world, it is very useful to understand the relationship between language, culture, and society. The importance of this relationship reflects that any language is a social phenomenon that must be situated in a global perspective.

Various definitions of language have been proposed, which all have a common thread among them. For example, Henry Sweet (2004), an English phonetician and language scholar, stated that language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words, and words are combined into sentences. This argument by Henry Sweet shows that language is a tool that enables us to utter distinct sounds, join them into words, and into meaningful sentences for the purpose of communicating our ideas and thoughts. On the other hand, American linguists, Bloch and Trager (1942, 1981) stated that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.

All the above definitions illustrate that language is a system of signs that people use to communicate among themselves. According to Henry Sweet (2004), the signs are speech-sounds. However, language also has written signs which are the alphabets that we use in writing. Therefore, communication, in any language, is only possible through the use of linguistic symbols that operate based on rules and conventions. It is these rules that give us the underlying conventions on how to form phonemes into morphemes. These rules also explain how to derive words from morphemes. It is the same rules that govern every aspect of a language such as its grammar, syntax, phonology, and semantics.

Taking into account the definitions and concepts presented in this section, it can, therefore, be concluded that language is what enables us to utter distinct sounds, join them into words, and into meaningful sentences for the purpose of communicating our ideas and thoughts. Yet, it should be noted that language is a social phenomenon where the function of language goes beyond conveying information.

In this study, the use of the Japanese language is considered to be the way the linguistic medium is used in communication. It is also understood as a dynamic and dialectical communicative process involving both relationship building and knowledge sharing (Cooren, 2006) between employees in JCM and MJSGEs.

### **2.2.1 Background of Language**

Noam Chomsky introduced the era of generative grammar when he proposed that language structures should be viewed as internalized sets of rules that are stored in the brain (Chomsky, 1957). Chomsky's cognitive approach that attempts to integrate the structures and the functions of language within a conceptual



framework, however, was criticised by other linguists, especially those who emphasise social anthropology. Thus, it can be understood that social anthropologists are of the view that language should not be studied as an autonomous system reproducing itself more or less independently of social and cultural structures of society (Hymes, 1996).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the theory of language in society has gained a noticeable importance in the field of social anthropology (Evans-Pritchard, 1951). Linking the concepts of language to those of both culture and society has gained prominence among social anthropologists and other researchers in recent years (San Antonio, 1987).

Hymes (1964) was one of the first anthropologists who have reintroduced the important role that language plays in the field of social anthropology. Regarding this, Hymes (1996) postulated that linguistic forms should be viewed also in terms of their social significance. As both a linguist and an anthropologist, Hymes researched, on the one hand, linguistic theory, and on the other hand, the socio-cultural aspect of language. Hymes (1972) pointed out that the notion of competence by Chomsky that deals with the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community has no provision for competency for language use. In other words, Chomsky's theory of competence fails to account for language use in the overall socio-cultural dimension. According to Hymes, the successful ability to perform in a language is important and performance refers to the actual use of language in a concrete situation. The limitation of Chomsky's linguistic competence resulted in Hymes' coining the term 'communicative competence' (1971) which refers not only to linguistic knowledge but also to knowledge that encompasses a set of sociolinguistic codes and rules for using them in a real situation. He believed that communicative competence is "the

most general term for the speaking and listening capabilities of a person. And the competence is dependent on two factors: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use” (p. 16).

After Hymes has introduced the notion of communicative competence, a number of researchers wrote about communicative competence. They also used a variety of definitions. For Hymes (1972) and Campbell and Wales (1970), communicative competence should not only include grammatical competence and explicit and implicit knowledge of the rules of grammar. Rather, it should also include contextual and sociolinguistic competence and knowledge of the rules of language use. Additionally, these researchers recognised the distinction between communicative competence and communicative performance in which communicative performance is related to the actual use of a language.

In the field of language learning and teaching, linguistic competence is a term that is used to refer to the learner’s knowledge of both the structures and vocabulary of the language and his ability to produce and comprehend well-structured sentences in a language (Fischer, 1984). Savignon (1972) defined foreign language communicative competence as the ability to function dynamically in a truly communicative setting adapting to all of the informational elements in the context, regardless of whether these elements are verbal or non-verbal language. Thus, it is clear that although communicative competence implies an underlying knowledge of grammatical rules and a potential to communicate well, it also encompasses competence in an actual performance in a social situation. Therefore, linguistic and communicative competences are interdependent and having competence in one of them is inadequate. Canale and Swain (1980) refer to this combined overall proficiency as one’s true communicative competence. Therefore, integration between