

Beyond Memorization: Vocabulary Learning Difficulties and Instructional Support Needs among Vietnamese School Students Learning Japanese

Van Hong Nghiem¹, Lan Anh Thi Nguyen², Nam Hoang Tran^{3*}

^{1,2}*Hanoi University, Hanoi, Vietnam*

³*Tokushima University, Tokushima, Japan*

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Abstract

Research on Japanese-language learning has widely examined communication skills, motivation, and general vocabulary acquisition, yet limited evidence explains how Vietnamese school-level learners experience the interconnected difficulties of vocabulary form, sound, meaning, and contextual use. This study investigates these difficulties and identifies learners' instructional and technological support needs. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted with 37 Vietnamese junior and senior high school students studying Japanese. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering learning background, vocabulary-learning habits, perceived difficulties, desired lesson content, preferred exercise types, and expectations for vocabulary-support tools. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical and multi-select items, and Spearman's rank correlation analysis was used to examine associations between learner characteristics and the total number of reported difficulties. The most common challenges were remembering word meanings, distinguishing similar kanji forms, using words appropriately in context, and differentiating near-synonyms. Greater weekly study time and having a personal vocabulary-management system were associated with fewer reported difficulties. The study contributes novel exploratory evidence by integrating learners' perceived vocabulary difficulties, study practices, and support expectations within a single school-level sample. The findings support instructional approaches that combine Vietnamese explanations, kanji support, contrastive examples, structured review, contextualized practice, and feedback. Theoretically, the study extends multidimensional models of vocabulary knowledge by showing that Japanese vocabulary difficulties among Vietnamese school students reflect an interconnected form–sound–meaning–use burden rather than isolated memorization problems.

Keywords: Japanese language education; vocabulary; kanji; Vietnamese learners; technology-supported learning

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³*Corresponding Author. E-mail: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp*

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is central to foreign-language learning. Learners cannot understand texts, participate in communication, or progress toward higher proficiency without sufficient lexical knowledge (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). In Japanese as a foreign language, however, vocabulary learning is particularly demanding because learners must often connect several layers of information at the same time: orthographic form, kanji recognition, kana reading, pronunciation, meaning, collocation, register, and situational use (Chujo et al., 2006; Hunt, 2009). For school students, these demands may be even more challenging because their learning habits, metacognitive strategies, and self-regulated learning capacity are still developing (Mizumoto, 2010).

In Vietnam, Japanese has become an increasingly relevant foreign language due to education, culture, employment, study-abroad opportunities, and interest in Japanese popular culture. Japanese-language education in Vietnam has expanded beyond universities and private language centers into secondary-school settings. Japanese education had already been introduced at high-school, junior-high, and even elementary levels, while also identifying the need for further improvement in learners' Japanese proficiency (Tran, 2019). Japanese learning in Vietnam is also linked to broader aspirations for study and work abroad, which have been examined in recent research on Vietnamese undergraduates' overseas orientation (Nghiem & Tran, 2024). Previous research on Vietnamese learners of Japanese has shown that language learning is closely connected to communication needs, learning motives, and perceived language-use challenges (Tran et al., 2023). However, while speaking skills and communication needs have received research attention, less is known about the specific vocabulary-learning difficulties experienced by school-level learners. Many learners begin studying Japanese before university, including at secondary and high-school levels through formal classes, clubs, language centers, and self-study. School-level learners may face difficulty sustaining vocabulary learning over time. They may rely heavily on word lists or translation-based learning but still struggle to remember meanings, recognize kanji forms, identify correct readings, and use words appropriately in context (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007).

Existing research conceptualizes vocabulary knowledge as a multidimensional construct involving form, meaning, and use, rather than a simple association between a word and its translation (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007, 2010). These dimensions are interconnected: difficulty recognizing a written form may restrict access to pronunciation and meaning, while incomplete semantic knowledge may prevent appropriate contextual use. Learners need to understand a word's form, meaning, use, associations, grammatical behavior, collocations, and contextual restrictions (Nation, 2013). Vocabulary learning strategies such as repetition, dictionary use, note-taking, contextual learning, and review can support acquisition, but their effectiveness depends on how learners use them and whether instructional materials provide meaningful exposure and practice (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). From this perspective, frequent vocabulary study may not necessarily produce deeper lexical knowledge if learners rely mainly on isolated word lists, direct translation, or irregular review. Organized vocabulary management, repeated retrieval, and contextual practice may be necessary to strengthen connections among form, sound, meaning, and use. In Japanese, kanji creates an additional layer of difficulty because learners must process logographic information and connect it to

pronunciation and meaning (Chujo et al., 2006; Hunt, 2009). Furthermore, many Japanese words have multiple meanings, similar forms, similar sounds, or subtle contextual differences, which may create confusion for learners (Lee & Liu, 2009; Nation, 2013). Recent research on Japanese lexical complexity also indicates that non-native readers may differ in how they perceive word difficulty, partly according to their linguistic backgrounds (Ide et al., 2023). These studies indicate that Japanese vocabulary difficulty does not arise from a single source. Rather, learners must coordinate orthographic form, phonological representation, semantic knowledge, and context-sensitive use. Weakness in one dimension may therefore constrain development in the others, creating an interconnected form–sound–meaning–use burden. In short, previous studies explain both the multidimensional nature of vocabulary knowledge and the particular challenges created by Japanese orthography, readings, polysemy, and context-sensitive usage (Chujo et al., 2006; Hunt, 2009; Lee & Liu, 2009; Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007, 2010). Research conducted in Vietnam, however, has primarily examined the development of Japanese-language education, communication needs, speaking skills, learning motives, and overseas orientation (Nghiem & Tran, 2024; Tran, 2019; Tran et al., 2023). These two strands of research have not been sufficiently connected. It remains unclear how Vietnamese school students experience and prioritize difficulties involving meaning retention, kanji form, pronunciation, and contextual use, or whether these difficulties are associated with their study and vocabulary-management practices.

The present study addresses this gap by examining vocabulary learning as an interconnected form–sound–meaning–use process among Vietnamese junior and senior high school students. Its novelty lies in integrating perceived vocabulary difficulties, their greatest perceived obstacle when learning a new word, selected study and vocabulary-management characteristics, and their desired instructional support within a single exploratory investigation. In doing so, the study extends previous Vietnamese-context research beyond motivation and communication needs (Nghiem & Tran, 2024; Tran et al., 2023) and provides evidence that can inform both multidimensional vocabulary theory and the design of vocabulary instruction and learning resources.

This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main vocabulary-learning difficulties reported by Vietnamese school students studying Japanese?

RQ2. Which aspect of learning a new Japanese word is perceived as the greatest obstacle: form, pronunciation, meaning, or contextual use?

RQ3. What types of vocabulary lesson content and exercises do students expect from a vocabulary-support tool or learning resource?

2. Methods

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Participants were 37 junior and senior high school students studying Japanese as a foreign language. They were recruited through convenience sampling with the assistance of Japanese-language teachers and coordinators at several schools and language centers in Hanoi, Vietnam. Eligible participants were students enrolled in grades 6–12 who were actively studying Japanese at the time of data

collection. Teachers and coordinators distributed the questionnaire link through their class communication channels, and students decided voluntarily whether to participate. All respondents who met the eligibility and completed the questionnaire were included in the analysis. The findings are interpreted as exploratory and context-specific.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire newly developed by the authors for a broader study. Its vocabulary-related items were informed by established conceptualizations of vocabulary knowledge as involving form, meaning, and use, as well as previous literature on vocabulary-learning strategies, kanji-related difficulty, contextual usage, review practices, and technology-supported learning. The items were adapted linguistically and contextually to ensure their relevance. Content validity was assessed through expert review. Two reviewers with expertise in Japanese-language education, educational research, or questionnaire design evaluated the relevance, clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of the items and response options. The revised questionnaire was subsequently piloted with five Japanese-language learners who were not included in the final analysis. Feedback from the pilot was used to improve the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha was not calculated because most variables were single-choice items or multi-select checklists designed to capture distinct learning behaviors, perceived difficulties, and support needs rather than multiple interchangeable indicators of a single latent construct. The total vocabulary-difficulty score was an exploratory count of the number of difficulties selected and was not treated as a validated psychometric scale.

The data were analyzed using exploratory descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. For multi-selected items, each response option was coded as a binary variable indicating whether it had been selected, and the options were ranked by frequency. A total vocabulary-difficulty score was calculated by summing the number of difficulties selected by each participant. Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine exploratory associations between the total vocabulary-difficulty score and selected learner characteristics. This non-parametric statistic was chosen because several independent variables were ordinal or binary, the difficulty score had a restricted range, the sample size was small, and the assumptions required for Pearson's correlation, particularly normally distributed continuous variables and linear relationships, could not be reliably established. Spearman's correlation assesses the direction and strength of monotonic relationships without requiring normality and was therefore considered appropriate for the present data. Correlation coefficients and p-values were reported. Given the exploratory design, small sample, and multiple comparisons, the findings were interpreted cautiously and were not considered evidence of causal relationships. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Hanoi University (No. 04-B2026/HD) on 30 December 2025. Before completing the questionnaire, participants received information about the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and their right to discontinue participation without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. No personally identifying information was included in the dataset.

3. Results

3.1. Participant characteristics and Japanese-learning background

The sample included 37 school students studying Japanese. All respondents were coded as school students in the dataset. General demographic variables such as age, sex, and grade were not available for this subgroup in the cleaned dataset; therefore, the participant profile was described mainly through Japanese-learning background variables. Most respondents were studying Japanese in a school-based setting. Table 1 summarizes the participant characteristics and Japanese-learning background of the sample.

Table 1. Participant characteristics and Japanese-learning background (n = 37)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Learner status	School student	37	100.0
Study setting	Lower-secondary/upper-secondary school or Japanese club	27	73.0
	Japanese-language center	6	16.2
	University-related setting	2	5.4
	Online class with teacher	1	2.7
	Self-study	1	2.7
Current Japanese level	Beginner	3	8.1
	N5	6	16.2
	N4	12	32.4
	N3	10	27.0
	N2	5	13.5
	N1	1	2.7
Years studying Japanese	Under 3 months	2	5.4
	3–6 months	3	8.1
	6 months–1 year	1	2.7
	1–2 years	2	5.4
	2–3 years	5	13.5
	3–5 years	14	37.8
	Over 5 years	10	27.0
Weekly Japanese study time	Under 2 hours	7	18.9
	2–4 hours	12	32.4
	5–7 hours	7	18.9
	8–12 hours	4	10.8
	13–15 hours	2	5.4
	Over 15 hours	5	13.5
	Irregular / only when available	8	21.6
Overall Japanese study frequency	1–2 sessions/week	8	21.6
	3–4 sessions/week	8	21.6
	5 or more sessions/week	6	16.2
	Almost every day	7	18.9
	No fixed schedule	6	16.2
Vocabulary study frequency	1–2 times/week	8	21.6
	3–4 times/week	6	16.2
	Almost every day	17	45.9
	No	20	54.1
Personal vocabulary notebook/system	Yes	17	45.9
Vocabulary review habit	Almost never reviews	1	2.7
	Reviews only before tests/exams	10	27.0
	Reviews when having time, without fixed schedule	23	62.2
	Reviews according to a specific schedule	3	8.1

The participant profile indicates a relatively experienced but heterogeneous group of Japanese learners. Most respondents were studying at N3–N4 levels, and nearly two-thirds had studied Japanese for at least three years. However, sustained study experience did not consistently translate into systematic vocabulary-management practices. Although almost half reported studying vocabulary nearly every day, more than half did not use a personal vocabulary notebook or management system, and only a small proportion reviewed vocabulary according to a fixed schedule. This contrast suggests that the main issue may not be lack of engagement, but rather the absence of structured organization and review within otherwise frequent study practices.

3.2. Reported vocabulary-learning difficulties

The reported difficulties were concentrated across three interconnected dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: semantic retention, orthographic processing, and contextual use. Difficulty remembering meanings was the most frequently selected problem, while distinguishing similar kanji, using words appropriately in context, and differentiating near-synonyms were also prominent. This distribution suggests that students did not experience vocabulary learning merely as the memorization of translations. Instead, they appeared to face difficulty coordinating what a word looks like, what it means, and how it should be used (Table 2).

The predominance of meaning-retention difficulty may reflect insufficient repeated retrieval, limited contextual exposure, or reliance on translation-based learning, although these explanations were not directly tested. Kanji-related difficulties may arise because learners must connect visually similar character forms with different readings and meanings. Similarly, problems with contextual use and near-synonym distinction may occur when several Japanese words share a similar Vietnamese translation but differ in nuance, collocation, register, or communicative situation. These interpretations remain tentative because the questionnaire measured perceived difficulties rather than the cognitive or instructional causes underlying them.

Table 2. Reported vocabulary-learning difficulties among students

Vocabulary-learning difficulty	n	%
Difficulty remembering word meanings	21	56.8
Difficulty remembering or distinguishing similar kanji forms	18	48.6
Not knowing when to use the word in context	14	37.8
Difficulty distinguishing near-synonyms	14	37.8
Difficulty hearing pronunciation clearly in materials/audio	12	32.4
Not knowing the correct reading, especially kanji	11	29.7
Confusion due to multiple meanings or multiple uses	11	29.7
Lack of clear examples or context	10	27.0
Lack of confidence applying words in speaking or writing	9	24.3
Lack of feedback or correction when using words incorrectly	8	21.6
Not knowing what topic/system to learn vocabulary by	7	18.9
Difficulty with accurate pronunciation	6	16.2
Lack of suitable vocabulary tools/materials	5	13.5
Confusing word order when speaking	4	10.8

3.3. Greatest perceived obstacle when learning a new word

When participants were required to identify only one principal obstacle, semantic processing remained the most salient dimension. Understanding and remembering meaning was selected most frequently, followed by contextual use and written form. This ranking indicates that learners may evaluate vocabulary mastery primarily through their ability to retain meaning, but a substantial proportion also recognize that knowing a word requires more than semantic recall (Table 3).

Although pronunciation was rarely selected as the single greatest obstacle, this does not imply that pronunciation was unproblematic. Rather, when participants prioritized one difficulty, meaning retention, contextual use, and written form appeared more immediate or consequential. One possible explanation is that learners have relatively easy access to audio models through teachers and digital resources, whereas appropriate contextual use and kanji-based form–meaning connections may require more explicit explanation and practice. However, because the survey did not ask participants to explain their selections, this interpretation should be treated as provisional.

Table 3. Greatest perceived obstacle when learning a new word

Greatest obstacle	n	%
Understanding and remembering meaning	16	43.2
Using the word in a specific context	10	27.0
Reading and writing form, including kanji/kana	9	24.3
Pronunciation	2	5.4

Table 4. Exploratory correlations with total vocabulary-difficulty score

Possible associated factor	n	Spearman	p-value	Interpretation
Years studying Japanese	37	-0.016	0.923	No clear association
Weekly Japanese study time	37	-0.343	0.037*	More weekly study time was associated with fewer reported difficulties
Overall Japanese study frequency	37	-0.314	0.059	More frequent study tended to be associated with fewer difficulties
Vocabulary study frequency	37	-0.243	0.146	Weak negative tendency, not statistically clear
Vocabulary session duration	20	-0.301	0.198	Weak negative tendency, limited by missing data
Number of words studied per session	37	-0.009	0.959	No clear association
Personal vocabulary notebook/system	37	-0.330	0.046*	Having a vocabulary system was associated with fewer difficulties
Vocabulary review habit	37	-0.299	0.072	More systematic review tended to be associated with fewer difficulties
ICT use frequency	37	-0.078	0.644	No clear association
Online tool use frequency	37	-0.071	0.676	No clear association
Perceived ICT effectiveness	37	-0.029	0.866	No clear association

Note. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. (*) indicates $p < 0.05$ (statistically significant).

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3.4. Desired vocabulary support: lesson content, exercise types, and learning tools

Students' support preferences were broadly consistent with the difficulties identified in the preceding analyses. Rather than requesting isolated vocabulary lists, participants emphasized clear Vietnamese explanations, contextual meanings, example sentences, distinctions between similar words, and support for kanji and pronunciation. This alignment suggests that learners were able to identify instructional features that corresponded closely to their perceived problems. The preferred exercise types also indicate a need to move beyond recognition-based practice. Activities involving contextual word selection, near-synonym comparison, dialogue completion, sentence production, and realistic situations may help learners connect receptive knowledge with productive use. In addition, 28 of the 37 students reported wanting a vocabulary-support tool. Within this exploratory sample, this finding suggests substantial perceived demand for structured support. A useful tool would therefore need to integrate form, sound, meaning, contextual use, review, and feedback rather than functioning only as a dictionary or static word list.

3.5. Exploratory associations between learner characteristics and vocabulary difficulties

To explore possible factors associated with vocabulary-learning difficulties, an exploratory correlation analysis was conducted using a total vocabulary-difficulty score. This score was calculated by summing the number of vocabulary difficulties selected by each student from the list of 14 possible difficulties. As the total difficulty score ranged from 1 to 5, the mean score was 4.08, suggesting that most students selected several vocabulary difficulties rather than only one isolated problem. Spearman's rank correlation was used for exploratory analysis (Table 4).

The observed associations were small to moderate rather than strong. Weekly Japanese study time showed the largest negative correlation with the total vocabulary-difficulty score (Spearman's $\rho = -0.343$), followed by having a personal vocabulary-management system ($\rho = -0.330$) and overall study frequency ($\rho = -0.314$). In practical terms, these findings suggest that greater sustained exposure and more organized vocabulary management may be associated with somewhat fewer perceived difficulties. However, the coefficients indicate that these factors accounted for only a limited proportion of variation in the difficulty score and should not be regarded as dominant explanatory factors. The associations with weekly study time and use of a vocabulary-management system reached the conventional significance threshold, whereas the relationships with overall study frequency and review habit showed only non-significant tendencies. Given the small sample, restricted score range, exploratory analysis, and multiple statistical comparisons, these results may be sensitive to individual responses and should be interpreted cautiously. They identify potential relationships for further investigation rather than establishing that increased study time or vocabulary organization directly reduces learning difficulties.

4. Discussion

4.1. Vocabulary difficulty is multidimensional

The results suggest that perceived vocabulary difficulties are not simply a matter of insufficient memorization. Although meaning retention was the most frequently reported difficulty, the wider pattern of responses points to a more complex lexical burden involving kanji recognition, word reading, contextual appropriateness, near-synonym distinction, and polysemy. This finding is consistent with the view that vocabulary knowledge consists of interconnected dimensions of form, meaning, and use, rather than a single form–translation relationship (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). In the context of Japanese, this burden may be particularly salient because learners must often coordinate orthographic form, pronunciation, semantic meaning, and pragmatic use within the same lexical item. Therefore, the findings indicate that vocabulary support should move beyond bilingual word lists and help learners build integrated lexical knowledge through form–sound–meaning connections, contextualized examples, and contrastive explanation of similar words (Lee & Liu, 2009; Nation, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, the findings support a multidimensional view of lexical knowledge in which orthographic form, phonological form, semantic representation, and contextual use develop through interaction rather than independently. Difficulty distinguishing kanji forms may obstruct access to a word’s reading and meaning, while weak semantic representation may reduce learners’ ability to distinguish near-synonyms or select words appropriately in context. Conversely, limited contextual exposure may weaken both retention and understanding of lexical nuance. The difficulties reported in this study should therefore be interpreted as manifestations of incomplete integration among form, sound, meaning, and use rather than as separate learning problems. This interpretation extends multidimensional models of vocabulary knowledge by illustrating how these dimensions may be experienced as an interconnected burden among Vietnamese school-level learners of Japanese.

4.2. Meaning retention is the most visible difficulty

The most frequently selected difficulty was remembering word meanings. This is unsurprising because meaning is often the first thing learners associate with vocabulary learning. If students cannot remember what a word means, they may feel that they have not learned the word at all. Although the present data do not directly identify the causes of this difficulty, the issue may involve more than memory alone. Meaning retention can be affected by lack of repeated exposure, lack of meaningful examples, weak associations, insufficient review, and limited use in context. For Japanese vocabulary, meaning retention may also be complicated by kanji (Chujo et al., 2006; Hunt, 2009). Some kanji compounds may appear abstract, and learners may struggle to connect character form, reading, and meaning. If vocabulary is learned only through word lists, students may remember a word briefly but fail to retain it over time. Therefore, meaning-focused instruction should include repetition, examples, association, context, and active recall (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). This finding is consistent with previous vocabulary research emphasizing repeated exposure, retrieval, and meaningful use as conditions for durable lexical learning (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). The present study adds a contextual distinction: meaning retention was reported alongside kanji recognition and context difficulties rather than as an isolated memory problem. This suggests that forgetting may partly reflect weak connections between semantic meaning, written form, pronunciation, and use, rather than insufficient repetition alone. Learners may recognize a translation temporarily but fail to establish a sufficiently integrated lexical representation for long-term retrieval and application.

4.3. Kanji creates a form–sound–meaning burden

The findings confirm that kanji remains a central challenge in Japanese vocabulary learning. Kanji-form recognition and correct word reading were prominent difficulties in the exploratory sample. This indicates that learners are not only memorizing lexical meanings but also managing the simultaneous connection between visual form, pronunciation, and meaning (Chujo et al., 2006; Hunt, 2009). For Vietnamese learners, Sino-Vietnamese knowledge refers to familiarity with Vietnamese words historically derived from Chinese characters. This knowledge may help learners recognize partial semantic similarities between some Vietnamese words and Japanese kanji compounds and, in some cases, notice phonological resemblance to *on-yomi* readings. However, such similarities are not systematic and do not reliably indicate the correct Japanese reading, contextual meaning, or appropriate usage. This advantage is limited because it does not necessarily support *kun-yomi*, context-dependent readings, or the appropriate use of kanji-based words in actual communication. Therefore, kanji-related vocabulary support should explicitly integrate character form, component structure, reading, meaning, and example use. Direct comparison of visually similar kanji and kanji compounds may also help reduce confusion and strengthen learners' form–sound–meaning mapping. Recent evidence similarly indicates that perceptions of Japanese lexical complexity may differ according to learners' first-language backgrounds and their familiarity with Sino-Japanese vocabulary (Ide et al., 2023; Nohejl et al., 2024). The findings therefore both align with and qualify previous discussions of learners from Chinese-character cultural backgrounds. Familiarity with Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary may facilitate initial semantic recognition of some kanji compounds, but it may also create misleading expectations when Japanese readings, meanings, or usage differ from Vietnamese equivalents. Consequently, prior lexical familiarity may function as both a resource and a source of interference. This may help explain why learners can sometimes recognize the general meaning of a kanji-based word while still struggling with its pronunciation, contextual restriction, or productive use.

4.4. Contextual use and near-synonym distinction require usage-based support

A key finding is that vocabulary difficulties extend beyond remembering meanings to using words appropriately in context. Contextual use and near-synonym distinction were among the most prominent usage-related difficulties. These difficulties are closely related, as learners may know a Vietnamese translation but still be uncertain about register, collocation, nuance, formality, or communicative situation. This is especially important in Japanese, where words with similar dictionary meanings may differ in politeness, written or spoken use, collocational patterns, and pragmatic appropriateness. Vocabulary knowledge therefore needs to include not only form and meaning but also use, contextual constraints, and lexical associations (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). The findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should include usage-based and contrastive support, such as situational examples, short dialogues, register notes, collocation patterns, comparison of near-synonyms, and exercises requiring students to choose the most appropriate word for a given context (Lee & Liu, 2009; Nation, 2013). The reported difficulties are better understood as a sequence of interacting constraints. Uncertainty about kanji form may delay recognition and access to pronunciation; incomplete pronunciation or reading may weaken retrieval; weak semantic representation may make near synonyms appear interchangeable; and limited contextual experience may prevent learners from identifying appropriate collocations, register, and communicative situations.

These relationships suggest that vocabulary development is cumulative and interconnected: weakness at one stage may constrain later receptive and productive use. Accordingly, contextual-use difficulty should not be treated merely as a problem that occurs after memorization, but as part of the process through which word meaning is initially learned and stabilized.

4.5. Lack of examples and feedback affects usable vocabulary

Although lack of examples and lack of feedback were not the top two difficulties, they are still pedagogically meaningful. Ten students reported lack of clear examples or context, and eight reported lack of correction or feedback when using words incorrectly. These difficulties may partly explain why students struggle with contextual use and near-synonym distinction. Without examples, learners may remember definitions but not understand how words function in actual use, as vocabulary knowledge includes not only form and meaning but also use, collocation, register, and contextual constraints (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). Without feedback, learners may continue using words incorrectly without noticing the gap between intended and appropriate use. Corrective feedback has been shown to play an important role in second-language learning and can support learners in identifying and revising errors (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kamiya & Nakata, 2021). This is especially relevant in self-study or technology-supported learning, where learners may rely on apps, dictionaries, or videos without teacher correction. Vocabulary-support tools should therefore include not only input but also contextualized examples and feedback-based practice. Compared with studies emphasizing the quantity of vocabulary exposure, the present findings suggest that the quality of exposure may be equally important. Examples and feedback provide information about how lexical items behave in sentences, how they differ from similar words, and whether learners' interpretations are accurate. Their absence may therefore contribute not only to productive errors but also to weak semantic differentiation and unstable retention. This may explain why learners who have encountered a word repeatedly can still remain uncertain about its appropriate use.

4.6. Possible factors associated with vocabulary difficulties

The exploratory association analysis suggests that study quantity and learning organization may be relevant, but neither should be interpreted as a sufficient explanation of vocabulary difficulty. Greater weekly study time showed a small-to-moderate association with fewer reported difficulties, which is broadly consistent with research emphasizing repeated encounters and sustained engagement (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). However, the modest coefficient indicates that study time alone explained only a limited part of the observed variation. Learners may spend substantial time studying without developing deeper lexical knowledge if their activities rely mainly on passive review, direct translation, or short-term memorization. The association between having a personal vocabulary-management system and fewer reported difficulties may therefore be theoretically important. A notebook or management system may help learners organize lexical information, schedule review, record examples, and connect form, meaning, and use. More broadly, recent Japanese-language education research has emphasized the importance of designing digital learning environments that facilitate autonomous and self-directed learning rather than merely providing learners with access to technology (Shinohara, 2025). This interpretation is consistent with previous work

emphasizing strategy use and self-regulated vocabulary learning (Mizumoto, 2010; Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design does not establish directionality. Organized learners may experience fewer difficulties because their systems are effective, but students who already perceive vocabulary learning as manageable may also be more likely to maintain such systems.

The absence of a clear association between general technology use and vocabulary difficulty contrasts with the assumption that frequent digital engagement necessarily improves vocabulary learning. Previous studies have shown benefits from specific technology-supported approaches, including structured vocabulary practice and mobile-assisted learning, and interactive digital platforms for Japanese vocabulary instruction (Bytheway, 2015; Dizon, 2016; Wuisang & Komarudin, 2026; Yoshida & Matsubara, 2018). The present findings do not contradict those studies; rather, they suggest that frequency of technology use is too broad an indicator to capture instructional quality. Digital tools may be beneficial when they provide retrieval practice, contextual examples, audio, spaced review, comparison of similar words, and corrective feedback, but less useful when they function mainly as dictionaries or passive word lists.

Future studies with larger samples should examine whether vocabulary difficulties are associated with study intensity, review habits, vocabulary-management systems, proficiency level, and the quality of technology-supported learning. Such research could help clarify how learners' exposure, strategy use, and proficiency development shape their awareness of lexical gaps and vocabulary complexity (Alderson, 2005; Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007). The present findings also extend Vietnamese-context research on Japanese-language learners by shifting attention from speaking skills, motives, and communication needs to vocabulary difficulties among school students (Tran et al., 2023).

4.7. Implications and limitations

Theoretically, the findings reinforce multidimensional models of second-language vocabulary knowledge in which knowing a word involves interconnected knowledge of form, meaning, and use rather than simple recall of a translation equivalent (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2007, 2010). The study adds to these models by showing how Japanese orthography creates an additional coordination burden involving kanji form, reading, semantic interpretation, and context-sensitive use. It also suggests that perceived vocabulary difficulty may emerge from weak integration among these dimensions rather than from deficiency in any single component. In this respect, the study contributes exploratory evidence that lexical development among Vietnamese school-level learners of Japanese may be better understood as the strengthening of connections among orthographic, phonological, semantic, and contextual representations.

Teachers should avoid presenting vocabulary only as word lists. Although word lists may be useful for initial exposure, students need further support to develop deeper and more usable vocabulary knowledge. Each vocabulary item should ideally be introduced with its pronunciation, written form, meaning, example sentence, and usage context. For school-level Vietnamese learners, Japanese vocabulary instruction may benefit from clear Vietnamese explanations, particularly when introducing abstract meanings, context-dependent usage, and near-synonyms that cannot be fully understood through direct translation alone. For kanji-based vocabulary, instruction should explicitly connect form, sound, and meaning by

highlighting kanji components, similar-looking characters, common readings, and example compounds. Vocabulary should also be taught in context through short dialogues, mini-situations, images, and role-play tasks so that students can move from recognition to actual use (Yang et al., 2025). In addition, near-synonyms should be taught contrastively. When students encounter several words with similar Vietnamese meanings, teachers should explain differences in nuance, register, collocation, and usage, using comparison tables and contextual examples where appropriate. Moreover, review should be systematic. Students who struggle to remember meanings may benefit from spaced review, retrieval practice, flashcards, and cumulative quizzes; however, review activities should go beyond meaning recall and include reading, kanji recognition, sentence completion, and contextual word choice.

The findings have implications for vocabulary-support resources, including digital tools. Since students reported difficulties with meaning retention, kanji recognition, contextual use, and near-synonym distinction, learning resources should provide clear Vietnamese explanations, pronunciation support, contextual examples, contrastive explanations, structured review, and feedback-based practice. However, the present study does not evaluate any specific digital tool; therefore, future research could examine how technology-supported vocabulary learning can address these difficulties.

This study has several limitations. The sample size was small and recruited through convenience sampling from a limited number of educational settings. The participants may therefore differ from school-level Japanese learners in other regions, institutions, socioeconomic contexts, or learning environments, and the findings should not be generalized to all students. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions rather than objective measures of vocabulary knowledge. Reported difficulties may be influenced by self-awareness, recall bias, confidence, proficiency, or recent learning experiences and may not correspond directly to their actual performance. Future studies should combine questionnaires with assessments. Third, the total vocabulary-difficulty score was an exploratory count of selected problems rather than a validated psychometric scale. Because participants could select only a limited number of difficulties, the score may not fully reflect the severity or complexity of their experiences. Fourth, cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretation of the correlations. Fifth, the small sample did not permit robust comparison by age, grade, proficiency level, years of study, or instructional setting. Finally, the findings are context-specific to Japanese vocabulary learning and may not transfer directly to other languages with different writing systems or lexical structures.

5. Conclusion

This study provides exploratory evidence that Japanese vocabulary-learning difficulties among Vietnamese school students are multidimensional and interconnected rather than limited to memorization. The findings indicate that learners must coordinate orthographic form, pronunciation, semantic meaning, and contextual use, with difficulty in one dimension potentially constraining development in the others. This supports a multidimensional view of second-language vocabulary knowledge and extends it to the specific demands of Japanese, particularly kanji recognition, word reading, near-synonym distinction, and context-sensitive usage. The study also suggests that sustained study and organized vocabulary management may be associated with fewer perceived difficulties. Pedagogically, vocabulary instruction

should integrate form, sound, meaning, contextualized practice, systematic review, and feedback rather than rely mainly on isolated word lists or direct translation. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal or intervention-based designs, and validated measures of vocabulary difficulty. Combining self-report data with vocabulary tests, kanji-recognition tasks, pronunciation assessment, contextual word-choice tasks, and qualitative interviews would help clarify how perceived difficulties relate to actual performance and how targeted instructional or technology-supported approaches influence vocabulary development over time.

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