Evaluation and Validation of the Contextualized Methods and Techniques in Teaching Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive research was conducted to ascertain, evaluate the mechanics, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as validate the effectiveness of the different contextualized methods and techniques used in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary to students enrolled in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)– Nihongo in a public national high school in Aklan for school year 2022-2023. The participants of this study were the nine (9) SPFL teachers; three of them participated in Department of Education and Japan Foundation's intensive training course under Batch 1 and Batch 6. The identification of contextualized methods and techniques in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary as well as the determination of mechanics of each method or technique was the result of the first focus group discussion conducted. In the second focus group discussion with the same participants, the identification of the mechanics, strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of each contextualized method and technique was done. The study revealed that there were twenty-one (21) contextualized methods and techniques that SPFL teachers used in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary. Each contextualized method and technique possess various and unique sets of strengths and weaknesses. All the enumerated methods and techniques were found to be very effective when appropriately planned and applied in an SPFL class.
Keywords: *Teaching Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary, Contextualized Methods, Evaluation, Validation*

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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the importance of learning foreign languages has become increasingly evident. One such language that has gained significant recognition is Nihongo, the Japanese language. As educators strive to provide effective language instruction, the teaching of Nihongo Hiragana syllabary emerges as a vital component in laying a strong foundation for language learners. This paper aims to explore and analyze contextualized methods and intervention programs designed to optimize the teaching and learning experience of Nihongo Hiragana.

The significance of this topic lies in its potential to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding Nihongo education. By investigating and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of various contextualized teaching methods, educators can gain insights into best practices for enhancing students' language acquisition. Additionally, exploring proposed intervention programs can shed light on the continuous professional development required for educators to stay updated with effective teaching strategies.

The idea to investigate this topic was prompted by the growing need for Nihongo language skills, both academically and professionally. The researcher aimed the identification of contextualized methods, born out of the extensive classroom experiences of his SPFL teaching staff, that offer innovative approaches to teaching the Nihongo Hiragana syllabary. As a school principal of a public school, with strong Nihongo knowledge from being immersed in Japan for two years, he pioneered the implementation of Special Program for Foreign Language - Nihongo at his school station that still solely offers it up to the present time in the Division of Aklan. During its six-year implementation, he committed his time to further investigating how and what diverse intervention programs might become effective means for improvement in order to highlight the need for continual progress in the field of Nihongo education.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1) What are the contextualized methods and techniques in teaching Hiragana syllabary and basic Nihongo words?
2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of each identified contextualized methods and techniques in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary?

3) How effective are the contextualized methods and techniques for teaching Hiragana syllabary and basic Nihongo words?

4) What intervention should be proposed and designed to improve the teaching of Nihongo Hiragana?

This paper is structured as follows: The first section provides a comprehensive review of the contextualized methods and techniques for teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary, highlighting their purpose and application. The second section delves into the strengths and weaknesses associated with these methods, shedding light on areas for improvement. The third section explores proposed intervention programs, emphasizing their role in enhancing Nihongo education. Lastly, the paper concludes with recommendations for educators and stakeholders in the field, emphasizing the significance of ongoing professional development and the continuous use of identified contextualized methods.

By addressing these objectives and providing a holistic understanding of Nihongo education, this research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and empower educators to offer effective and engaging instruction in Nihongo Hiragana syllabary.

Methodology

This qualitative descriptive research was conducted to ascertain, evaluate the mechanics, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as validate the effectiveness of the different contextualized methods and techniques used in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary to students enrolled in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)– Nihongo in a Public National High School in Aklan for School Year 2022-2023.

The participants of this study are nine (9) SPFL teachers. Three of them participated in Department of Education and Japan Foundation's intensive training course under Batch 1 and Batch 6. All of which were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of their personal identities.

In gathering the necessary data, the researcher made use of guide questions for in-depth face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. To establish the validity of the research instrument, the researcher had it checked by curriculum, field, and research experts in the Division.

The identification of contextualized methods and techniques in teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary as well as the determination of mechanics of each method or technique was the result of the first focus group discussion conducted. In the second focus group discussion with the same participants, the identification of the mechanics, strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of each contextualized method and technique was done.

The entire FGD process was video recorded. All collected data were sorted, coded, arranged into themes, and interpreted through thematic qualitative analysis using the 7 steps of Collaizi's method of data analysis.

Findings

Based on the results of this study, the major findings of the study were:

1) Numerous contextualized methods and techniques were identified and utilized by SPFL teachers in their classes while teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary. To be specific, they have determined twenty-one (21) contextualized methods and techniques. To wit, these were: Teaching Hiragana Syllabary through Air-Strokes Writing, Kana Town Android or iOS Mobile App, Sand Writing Practice, Guessing Game and Writing Practice in Partner's Back, Use of Activity Sheets, Use of Videos for Teaching Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary Pronunciation, Use of Songs about Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary, Repetition and Mimicking, Outlining and Tracing for Teaching Hiragana Writing, Ladder Jump Game, List Memory Game, Nihongo Henyo, Flash Cards for Teaching Reading of Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary, Flip Cards for Teaching Nihongo Hiragana Syllabary, Hiragana Spell, Hiragana Practice Writing through Order of Strokes Teaching, 5-characters Memorization per Session, Balloon Pass Game, Board Memory Games, Challenge Round Game and Line Quiz.

2) Each identified contextualized method and technique for teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary has its own set of unique strengths, which are mostly centered on the process of application, mechanics of the method or technique, teaching skills, and effects on students' learning and knowledge acquisition. Meanwhile, each also has its own set of weaknesses and disadvantages. These are generally concerned with the process of application, the mechanics of the method or technique, teaching lapses on preparation and management, learners' behavior and their attitude toward the method or technique's utilization, and its downsides on students' learning and information acquisition.

3) Each determined contextualized method and techniques for teaching Hiragana syllabary and basic Nihongo words has its own level of effectiveness in terms of application in the SPFL classroom. All 21 contextualized methods and techniques were identified to be very effective when appropriately designed, crafted, explained, and applied during instructions for SPFL learners.

4) Several intervention programs and projects have been proposed to improve the teaching of Hiragana syllabary and advanced Nihongo classes. These include workshops, trainings, seminars, intensive courses, and specialized sessions. These approaches aim to enhance teaching techniques and capacities, ensuring effective and creative Nihongo lessons. It is important for SPFL-Nihongo teachers to maximize the application of the identified contextualized methods for effective lesson delivery and learning. Ongoing participation of qualified teachers in training programs offered by The Japan Foundation and the Department of Education is necessary, while the researcher, as a Nihongojin, should continuously update on these interventions. Budget allotment should prioritize voluntary upskilling among SPFL-Nihongo teachers. The projects should focus on standardized mechanics and applications of the identified methods, as well as adherence to lesson recommendations from The Japan Foundation. Lastly, encouraging new and other teachers to participate in the National Trainings by the Japan Foundation and DepEd is recommended.

Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1) The respondents' extensive classroom teaching experiences resulted in the identification of twenty-one (21) contextualized methods and techniques for teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary. Consequently, these products of their creative minds aim to optimize students' learning of the fundamentals of the foreign language Nihongo which are all aligned with the learning objectives of each lesson. They utilize available resources in the school or community and reflect the successful adaptation and application of techniques learned from workshops and trainings provided by The Japan Foundation. The School Principal and the respondents are dedicated to providing the best assistance for learners in step-by-step language acquisition.

1) Each contextualized method and technique for teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary has its own set of strengths. These are largely determined by the application process, the

well-thought-out mechanics of each approach or technique, their implications on students' learning and information acquisition, and students' response, involvement, and active engagement in the lesson proper when these are utilized. On the other hand, each of the identified contextualized methods and procedures for teaching Nihongo Hiragana syllabary has its own set of flaws. These are generally caused by flaws in the application and use of each approach, as well as its disadvantages in terms of student reactions, involvement, and attitude toward it. These drawbacks of all contextualized approaches and procedures are small and tolerable if SPFL-teachers pay close attention to them and rectify these concerns as much as possible prior to the class itself.

2) All 21 contextualized methods and techniques identified for teaching Hiragana syllabary and basic Nihongo words in an SPFL class were found to be very effective in terms of proper application and use. These findings demonstrate that specialized teaching approaches and strategies can yield excellent results when carefully planned and prepared in accordance with the needs and interests of the learners. It also indicates that teachers can use teaching resource materials found in the school or community to help them reach their aims of enhancing students' learning outcomes.

3) The intervention programs proposed are beneficial to SPFL teachers' teaching skills. As a result of these specialized LAC sessions, crafting and designing workshops, brush-up trainings, and intensive seminars and courses, teachers are given myriad of possibilities to expand their understanding and knowledge on instruction and the Nihongo as a foreign language to be mastered.

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