

Two-Way Empowerment: A Critical Thinking Model for Japanese Language and Area Studies

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In alignment with China's national initiative to strengthen its education system, the present study addresses persistent challenges in Japanese language pedagogy—namely, the fragmentation of area-specific knowledge and the limited integration of language skills with higher-order analytical competencies. This paper proposes a bidirectional empowerment framework between foreign language education and country/area studies, operationalized through a three-phase pedagogical model grounded in the Production-Oriented Approach (POA). The model—"AI-Assisted Inquiry," "Critical Verification," and "Ideological-Strategic Sublimation"—is designed to foster synergistic development of linguistic proficiency, regional expertise, and strategic thinking. A semester-long implementation in a foundational Japanese course demonstrates its efficacy in enhancing students' interdisciplinary engagement and output quality. Empirical feedback also reveals challenges concerning AI tool reliability and perceived cognitive load, pointing to necessary refinements for scalable adaptation.

Keywords: Japanese Language Teaching, Country and Area Studies, Critical Thinking Teaching, Production-Oriented Approach (POA), Two-way Empowerment

Introduction

The Strategic Imperative for Integrated Foreign Language Education

The evolving global landscape, characterized by technological disruption and geopolitical shifts, has precipitated a re-evaluation of educational objectives worldwide. In China, the promulgation of the Education Power Construction Plan Outline (2024-2035) and complementary policy directives explicitly prioritize the cultivation of international talents equipped with sophisticated language skills, deep cross-cultural understanding, and robust critical-thinking capacities. Such talents are deemed essential for advancing the nation's strategic interests and global engagement.

Within this context, foreign language disciplines, including Japanese language studies, face a pressing mandate to transcend conventional pedagogies that often compartmentalize language acquisition and content knowledge. Traditional approaches tend to produce graduates with competent linguistic skills but insufficient contextual understanding or analytical frameworks to engage substantively with the socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the target region. This disconnect underscores a critical gap between educational output and strategic national needs.

The present study therefore investigates an integrative pedagogical model predicated on the concept of "two-way empowerment" between Japanese language teaching and country/area studies. It posits that language

learning and regional inquiry can and should be mutually reinforcing: area studies provide meaningful, complex content that motivates and contextualizes language use, while advanced language skills enable direct access to primary sources and nuanced cultural interpretation. The subsequent sections delineate the theoretical underpinnings of this model, detail its practical implementation, analyze learner feedback, and discuss implications for curriculum design and future research.

Theoretical Framework: Synthesizing POA with Two-Way Empowerment

The pedagogical innovation at the heart of this research synthesizes Wen Qiufang's Production-Oriented Approach (POA) with the dynamic construct of "two-way empowerment." POA, a prominent language teaching methodology developed within the Chinese context, is built upon three core hypotheses: the Output-Driven Hypothesis, the Input-Enabled Hypothesis, and the Selective Learning Hypothesis. Its teaching cycle typically comprises three phases: Motivating, Enabling, and Assessing. This framework aligns coherently with the goals of integrated learning, as it emphasizes learning through purposeful, output-oriented tasks, supported by tailored input and strategic skill application.

The concept of "two-way empowerment" is employed to articulate the synergistic relationship between language training and area studies. In this model, empowerment is not unidirectional. On one hand, country/area studies empower language education by infusing it with substantive, relevant, and complex content. This moves instruction beyond transactional communication drills toward engaging with authentic issues—such as Japan's digital economy, aging society policies, or regional security debates—thereby enhancing learner motivation and contextualizing linguistic structures. On the other hand, language proficiency empowers area studies by serving as the essential tool for rigorous research. It enables learners to critically engage with original texts, media, and data sources, conduct fieldwork interviews, and produce analyses that avoid the pitfalls of relying solely on translated or secondary materials.

To actualize this synergy, the standard POA cycle is reconfigured into a three-phase model:

Phase 1: AI-Assisted Inquiry (Drive Phase)

This initial stage leverages artificial intelligence tools to lower the barrier to interdisciplinary exploration. Students are given composite tasks that require both language processing and preliminary research. For instance, using AI-powered video transcription tools, cross-lingual search platforms, and translation assistants, learners gather and analyze Japanese-language materials on a specified topic. The output may include annotated vocabulary lists, comparative data summaries, or draft research questions. This phase embodies the Output-Driven Hypothesis, where the need to produce a tangible outcome stimulates immediate learning and inquiry.

Phase 2: Critical Verification (Enable Phase)

The enabling phase is conducted through blended online-offline activities focused on validating and refining the initial outputs. Guided by the instructor, students engage in a structured process of "fact-checking, logical deconstruction, and problematization." They are trained to verify information against authoritative sources like official Japanese government databases or academic repositories, critique the coherence of arguments in peer drafts, and identify gaps or biases in their own preliminary analyses. Continuous, formative feedback—from instructors, peers, and even AI writing assistants—is integrated throughout this phase, transforming assessment into a facilitative process. This stage deepens critical thinking and hones both linguistic accuracy and research acumen.

Phase 3: Ideological-Strategic Sublimation (Practice & Internalization Phase)

The final phase extends learning beyond the classroom into the realm of strategic relevance and value-based reflection. Students are guided to connect their specific findings to broader themes of national interest, such as Sino-Japanese technological cooperation, cultural soft power, or global governance. The objective is to sublimate discrete skills and knowledge into a cohesive understanding of how area expertise, communicated through advanced language competence, can serve strategic goals. This phase addresses the “why” of learning, fostering a sense of purpose and ethical responsibility aligned with educational mandates for cultivating civic and global awareness.

Practical Implementation: A Case Study from a Foundational Japanese Course

The proposed model was implemented over a semester in a second-year Basic Japanese course at Beijing International Studies University. A representative unit, titled “The Cashless Era,” serves as an illustrative case.

Phase 1 – AI-Assisted Inquiry: Prior to in-class meetings, students received a multi-part task via the “Rain Classroom” smart platform. They analyzed short Japanese video clips (e.g., street interviews on cash usage) using tools like “Doubao” for vocabulary extraction. They then conducted informal surveys among their peers in China regarding payment habits, using AI chatbots to help design survey questions. Initial outputs included bilingual glossaries and a comparative data report.

Phase 2 – Critical Verification: During seven to eight class hours, student outputs were the focus of active critique. For example, vocabulary lists were aggregated, corrected, and then used in improvised role-plays simulating payment disputes. Data from student reports were scrutinized for methodology and accuracy, with the instructor providing mini-lessons on how to phrase findings in academic Japanese. A structured debate on the merits of cash versus cashless societies forced students to articulate and defend positions, refining their logical reasoning and persuasive language use.

Phase 3 – Ideological-Strategic Sublimation: In final sessions, discussions pivoted to the implications of payment systems for financial sovereignty, data privacy in aging societies, and disaster preparedness—topics linking Japanese societal choices to universal challenges. Students were encouraged to propose concrete research projects, such as comparing the resilience of payment systems in disaster-prone regions of Japan and China. Those preparing for study abroad in Japan were tasked with planning fieldwork to explore these questions in situ, thereby connecting classroom learning to real-world investigation.

Learner Feedback, Challenges, and Refinements

Post-course surveys and interviews (n = 164) indicated overall positive reception. The integration of area studies content was well-regarded, with an average expectancy score of 4.15/5. The use of AI tools for tasks like grammar explanation and material gathering was widespread and appreciated.

However, significant challenges emerged:

AI Trust and Efficacy: Students expressed low confidence (scoring 2.39/5) in AI-generated explanations for culturally nuanced or complex socio-political topics, a phenomenon often termed “AI hallucination.”

Perceived Cognitive Load: Some learners felt the dual demand of improving language skills while grappling with new area studies concepts and methods increased their learning burden, especially if assessments heavily weighted the new research components.

Need for Personalization: A desire was expressed for more individualized learning pathways and support, moving away from a “one-size-fits-all” application of tasks.

These findings suggest several necessary refinements: instructors require professional development to better guide students in critically evaluating AI-generated content; task design must be carefully scaffolded and differentiated to manage cognitive load; and assessment rubrics should balance linguistic and analytical competencies transparently. Most crucially, the model’s final phase requires tangible outlets, such as supported fieldwork or community-engaged projects, to fully realize its “sublimation” objective.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study demonstrates the viability and value of a POA-based, two-way empowerment model for integrating Japanese language learning with country/area studies. It provides a structured pedagogical response to national calls for cultivating strategically minded, interdisciplinary language professionals. The model successfully bridges the often-separate domains of skills training and content mastery, fostering learners who are not only linguistically proficient but also critically engaged and strategically aware.

Limitations of this exploratory research include its single-institution scope and the relatively short implementation period, which precludes longitudinal tracking of skill retention and application. Future research should expand to diverse institutional contexts, track student outcomes into their study-abroad and postgraduate phases, and investigate more deeply the integration of advanced AI analytical tools directly into the research process (e.g., for corpus analysis or trend mapping within Japanese-language digital archives). The ongoing development of “2+2” international joint degree programs offers a particularly promising avenue for embedding and studying the extended, field-based component of this pedagogical model, ultimately contributing to the formation of a new generation of globally competent, strategically valuable graduates.

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