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HONORIFICS IN ACTION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC EXPLORATION OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE USE AMONG INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study investigates the use of Japanese honorific language variants (keigo)—*teineigo*, *kenjougo*, and *sonkeigo*—among university students studying Japanese, emphasizing the progression of ability throughout academic levels. The study intends to examine patterns in honorific usage and explore factors affecting students' application of *keigo*. A Japanese Literature program was executed utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach and sociolinguistic theory, resulting in data gathering through questionnaires administered to 30 students (10 sophomores, 10 juniors, and 10 seniors). The data indicate that 80% of sophomores utilize *teineigo*, whereas 40% of juniors employ both *sonkeigo* and at least 40% of another form. Senior citizens favor *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* due to their extensive cultural-linguistic understanding. Key characteristics encompass formal engagement with elders, maintaining esteemed standards, and readiness for professional settings. These results underscore the imperative for *keigo* training that is customized to the specific developmental stage of learners, prioritizing pragmatic skill and cultural awareness. The study advocates incorporating sociolinguistic contexts into Japanese language courses to connect classroom instruction with practical communication.

Keywords: Japanese, *kenjougo*, language variety, *sonkeigo*, *teineigo*

Introduction
Japanese is one of Indonesia's most popular foreign languages, ranking second in the world regarding the number of Japanese learners, with over seven hundred thousand learners behind China (Djafri & Wahidati, 2020; Kusumawati, 2019). In the contemporary interconnected world, comprehending how Indonesian learners acquire Japanese honorifics (*keigo*) is essential, particularly at institutions such as Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU), where students encounter distinct challenges in mastering this intricate linguistic form due to the lack of equivalent honorific systems in Indonesian.

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The honorific variety known as *keigo*, like the *futsuu* variety (colloquialisms), plays an important role in demonstrating proficiency. Terada Nakano stated that *keigo* is a language that expresses respect toward the interlocutor or the third person (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). *Keigo* is a language term that puts the interlocutor in a higher position or becomes the center of the conversation. *Keigo* refers to an honorific expression system that encodes social hierarchies and relationships. Speakers use *keigo* to position the interlocutor (e.g., superiors) or themselves (e.g., in *kenjougo*) within a social context. Another expert stated that *keigo* is an honorific language; some argued that it only used respectful words. *Keigo* is a way to reveal the relationship among humans in society by sorting spoken words through accurate consideration with the listener. The relationship discussed is the vertical one (the relationship between the teacher and the student, customers and waitress, insider and outsider in the company) and the level of closeness. These all affect the use of *keigo* (Carroll, 2005; Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith, 2016; Rahayu, 2018; Rahayu & Hartati, 2024).

Based on *Bunka Shingikai*「文化審議会, a government agency」that deals with Japanese culture such as *keigo* and *kanji*, *keigo* has some degrees, namely *sonkeigo*, *kenjougo*, and *teinei* ("Keigo No Shishin," 2007). *Sonkeigo* is the language that promotes courtesy and respect by putting the interlocutor at the center of the conversation (Maruki, 2022). The definition of *kenjougo* is almost the same as *teichougo*, an utterance used to show courtesy and respect by putting the speaker's position lower regarding word usage. *Teineigo* is an honorific utterance that expresses honor toward the interlocutor using the word *desu*, *-masu*. (Barešova, 2015; Haristiani et al., 2023; Pujiono, 2015, 2022). These *keigo*-related materials have no equivalent in Indonesian, yet they must be learned and understood by Japanese learners in Indonesia. Consequently, learners whose mother tongue is Indonesian struggle to learn, understand, and use *keigo*.

Although prior studies have investigated *keigo* in contexts like intercultural marriages (Andriyani, Ardiantari, & Saddhono, 2024), caregiver interactions (Pramesti, Beratha, Budiarsa, & Sudipa, 2019), and Thai L2 classrooms (Okumuraa & Onthanee, 2022), significant gaps remain in understanding *keigo* acquisition among Indonesian university students, two gaps remain unresolved (1) how Indonesian learners acquire *keigo* without L1 honorific equivalents, and (2) how classroom instruction impacts pragmatic competence. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing *keigo* usage patterns among students, focusing on the interplay of institutional, cultural, and pedagogical factors. Computational studies (Guo, Wen, Yu, & Fan, 2024) and syntactic analyses (Kaur & Yamada, 2022; Tomioka & Ishii, 2022) have advanced *keigo* modeling but overlook sociolinguistic realities faced by learners whose native language (Bahasa Indonesia) lacks honorific register. Although DiBello Takeuchi (2021) highlights teacher biases in *keigo* instruction, no study investigates how these biases are manifested in Indonesian curricula or how students navigate *keigo's* sociopragmatic complexities without immersive cultural exposure (e.g., unlike Balinese-Japanese families; Andriyani et al., 2024). Furthermore, while Pramesti et al. (2019) identified *keigo* adaptation strategies among Indonesian caregivers in Japan, their findings cannot be generalized to classroom contexts where learners lack real-world pressure to acquire honorifics. This study bridges these gaps by analyzing *teineigo*, *sonkeigo*,

and *kenjougo* usage patterns among USU (Universitas Sumatera Utara) students, addressing how institutional, cultural, and pedagogical factors shape *keigo* proficiency in Indonesia's unique educational landscape. USU represents a monolingual Indonesian academic context where students learn *keigo* primarily through classroom instruction without immersive exposure to Japanese society.

As a Japanese learner, a student must use *keigo* in the classroom and in society. The use of *keigo* by university students has revealed several errors. This is due to the complexity of the *keigo* form; therefore, it is difficult to place and use it in the correct form. *Kenjougo* and *sonkeigo* are the most commonly misused forms of *keigo* by university students. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct different studies in this related field. This study encompasses a range of individuals interested in linguistics and culture. Scholars and researchers focusing on sociolinguistics, Japanese language studies, and language interaction will find that the novelty of this study is highly relevant to developing theory and understanding the use of greeting words in higher education contexts. Students studying Japanese or sociolinguistics can use the results to deepen their knowledge of language dynamics in social interactions. Educators and Japanese language instructors can also apply insights from this study to improve their teaching methods and adjust curriculum materials. Language practitioners, including translators and cultural experts, will also benefit from a better understanding of how honorifics function in everyday communication. Finally, decision-makers at educational institutions will gain valuable information for designing and developing more effective and relevant Japanese language programs.

The findings of this study have significant implications for various stakeholders. The findings offer actionable insights for (1) educators to design tiered *keigo* instruction aligned with learners' proficiency levels (see Discussion, Section Pedagogical Implications), (2) curriculum developers to integrate socio-cultural scenarios, and (3) policymakers to address resource disparities in Indonesian Japanese programs. Also, language professionals, including translators and cultural specialists, will better understand how honorifics are utilized in everyday interactions. Ultimately, this study contributes to improving the teaching of Japanese and encouraging intercultural exchange at the university level. Two significant areas of interest are explored: (1) the use of honorific language types by USU Japanese students and (2) the motivational and contextual factors that shape student *keigo* usage patterns.

Conceptual framework

Sociolinguistic theory

Even though fundamental sociolinguistic theories (Fishman, 1972; Hymes, 1996; Kim, 2016; Lubis & Purba, 2020) establish language-culture relationships (Chaer, 2003; Lee, 2025; Lubis, 2019), their application to language acquisition in L2 contexts requires critical adaptation. Three main premises of sociolinguistics prove to be very important for analyzing the challenges of *keigo* learning in Indonesia: the Language-Culture paradox, Power Distance Asymmetry, and Classroom Practice vs. Community Practice.

Regarding Language-Culture Paradox, although sociolinguistics states that language encodes cultural norms (Goundar, 2020; Kridalaksana, 2010; Yu, 2020), Indonesian learners have to translate Japanese greetings without any cultural frame

of reference. This creates a unique competence gap where mastery of grammar does not guarantee pragmatic appropriateness (Maruki, 2022). Then, the power distance asymmetry means that the vertical relationship encoded in *keigo* (*sonkeigo/kenjougo*) contrasts sharply with Indonesians' more egalitarian speech patterns. This requires "sociolinguistic transposition" - mentally reconstructing social hierarchies that do not exist in L1 (Liu & Zhang, 2021; Shaumiwaty et al., 2020). Then, following the interdisciplinary model of Saraswati et al. (2018), this study explores how institutional language socialization in Indonesian universities (through textbooks and assessments) mediates access to authentic address usage, which often privileges the formulated *teineigo* over sensitive address.

This framework reveals a key tension: while keigo is a grammatical system, its acquisition demands socio-cultural competence often neglected by standard curricula (DiBello Takeuchi, 2021). This study extends current sociolinguistic models by examining how this tension manifests across different proficiency levels at USU.

Language variety theory

Martin's (1987) sociolinguistic framework categorizes language variation into three primary dimensions. First, usage-based varieties (functiolects) encompass honorific language and other registers tied to specific domains such as literature, journalism, military, agriculture, economics, trade, and education. Second, speaker-based varieties comprise three subtypes: (a) idiolects (personal language variations), (b) dialects (regional variations), and (c) sociolects (variations based on social status). Third, context-dependent varieties include (a) formal language used in presidential speeches, official meetings, and textbooks; (b) frozen language for ceremonial occasions; (c) consultative language typical in academic and professional settings; and (d) casual language employed in informal interactions among family and close friends. This tripartite classification provides a comprehensive sociolinguistic model for analyzing language variation across different use parameters, users, and contexts.

The variety of honorific language

In Japanese, the variety of honorific languages is called *keigo* (Nagata, 2022; Takiura, 2022). *Keigo* is spoken to express the speaker's honor toward the interlocutor in a conversation. According to Tomisaka (1997), three factors need to be noted in the use of *keigo*, namely:

1. *Keigo* is used to express honor to the speaker whose social status is lower than the interlocutor whose social status is higher.
2. *Keigo* is used to express the speaker's honor toward the interlocutor, an acquaintance.
3. *Keigo* is used by paying attention to the relationship of *uchi* and *soto*. *Uchi* is an inner circle group or within one's environment, such as family or office mates. Soto is the outsider of *uchi*. When the speaker talks about *uchi no hito* (insider) toward *soto no hito* (outsider), he/she has to apply *uchi no hito* like him/herself. Even though *uchi no hito* is higher, the speaker does not use *keigo* to honor him/her.

Keigo is classified into three types: *sonkeigo* (honorific words), *kenjougo* (derogatory words), and *teineigo* (polite words) (Takiura, 2022; Tomisaka, 1997).

1. *Sonkeigo* is a word to honor the interlocutor or anyone being talked to, praising their activities and belongings.
2. *Kenjougo* is a word used to belittle the speaker in a pejorative way. The respected person is a boss or *soto* no *hito*. *Kenjougo* is also used when the speaker wants to talk about *uchi no hito* toward *soto no hito*.
3. *Teineigo* is a polite word used to express honor toward the interlocutor.

The variety of japanese honorifics (Keigo)

Based on Kitahara (2002), the word *keigo* means

> 話し手や書き手が、相手や話し中の第三者に対して敬意を表す言葉遣い。
> *Hanashite ya kakite ga,aite ya hanashichuu no daisansha ni taishite keii wo arawasu kotobadzukai*
> "*Keigo* is an expression showing honor to the interlocutor or the third person whose position is the topic of the conversation."

The word *keigo* is written in *kanji* alphabet「敬語」formed by *kanji*「敬 う」(*uyamau*), which means to honor, and *kanji*「語」(*go*), which means language, word or utterances.

According to Sagino (2008), *keigo* is a word system that expresses human vertical relationships. Minami (1990) explains that the vertical relationship is based on the differences in age and social class within a society, such as a relationship between teacher and student, employer and employee.

The importance of *keigo* for the Japanese people is reflected in *Keigo no Shishin*.

> 敬語は、古代から現代に至る日本語の歴史の中で、一貫して重要な役割を担い続けている。その役割とは、人が言葉を用いて自らの意思や感情を人に伝 える際に、単にその内容を表現するのではなく、相手や周囲の人と、自らと の人間関係・社会関係についての気持ちの在り方を表現するというものであ る。(敬語の指針、p. 5)
> *Keigo wa, kodai kara gendai ni itaru nihongo ni rekishi no naka de, ikkan shite juuyou na yakuwari wo niniai tsuzuketeiru. Sono yakuwari to wa, hito ga kotoba wo mochiite mizukara no ishi ya kanjou wo hito ni tsutaeru sai ni, tan ni sono naiyou wo hyougen suru no dewanaku, aite ya shuui no hito to, mizukara to no ningen kankei, shakai kankei ni tsuite no kimochi no arikata wo hyougen suru to iu mono de aru*.
> "In the history of the Japanese language, from the beginning until now, *keigo* has had a continuous and consistent important role. That role is when people use language to express their needs and feelings toward others. It is not easy to utter something but also express the awareness of human relationship with society, oneself, the interlocutor, and the people around him/her".

Initially, *keigo* was divided into *sonkeigo, kenjougo,* and *teineigo*. However, Bunka Shingikai's experts have classified it into five types. The purpose is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the correct use and function of *keigo*. In *keigo no Shishin* ("Keigo No Shishin," 2007), *keigo* is divided into five types: *sonkeigo, kenjougo,* teichougo, *teineigo,* and *bikago*. However, this study focuses only on*sonkeigo, kenjougo,* and *teineigo*. This is due to the frequent use of these three types in teaching and learning activities at the university level.

Teineigo

The word *teinei* means polite; therefore, the form of *teineigo* can be defined as polite form. The degree sentence of *teineigo* usually ends with *~desu* or auxiliary verb *~masu;* hence, it is called the *masu desu* variety. The conversation uses this degree to express honor and embellish one topic of conversation directly toward the interlocutor. Some of the examples of *teineigo* in sentences:

Miruku o nomimasu

1. ミルクをのみます

I drink milk

Nihonryouri wa oishii desu

2. 日本料理はおいしいです。

Japanese cooking is delicious.

Kenjougo

Kenjougo, as *keigo,* expresses honor toward the interlocutor by groveling, including belongings, situations, activities, or anything related to the speaker (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). The form of *kenjougo* is used when the speaker talks about him/herself or his/her family members toward the interlocutor. The word *kenjou* means humbleness. Kabaya Hiroshi, in his book *Otona no Keigo Komyunikeshon,* says that *kenjougo* implies the meaning of *kansetsu sonchougo* (間接尊重語) or a word that respects the interlocutor indirectly. *Kenjougo* is the form of humble, which means humbling the speaker's position so that the speaker possesses the feeling of *kimochi* to honor the interlocutor. In other words, when *kenjougo* is used, the desire to honor by putting the interlocutor higher than him/her is higher than putting him/herself in a lower position.

Kenjougo exhibits two distinct subtypes, according to Miura and McGloin (2008). Type I, referred to as *kenjougo,* applies when the speaker's actions directly involve or affect the interlocutor (or the interlocutor's family members). Type II elevates the interlocutor by humbling the speaker's actions and their in-group (*uchi*) that relate to the interlocutor as the verb's target - specifically when the speaker's actions impact the interlocutor. The usage can be seen from the verb *ukagau* in the following examples:

(a)

Sensei: Ashita ofisu ni kite kudasai.

先生：明日オフィスに来てください。

Teacher: please come to my office tomorrow.

Gakusei: Hai, soredewa ichiji goro ukagaimasu.
学生：はい、それでは一時頃伺います。
Student: fine, I will come around 1 pm.

(Zandy, 2014, p. 13)

(b)
Shain: Buchou, kinou, Hokkaidou e itte mairimashita.
社員: 部長、昨日、北海道へ行って参りました。
Employee: Manager, I went (*kenjougo* form) to Hokkaido yesterday.

Buchou: Dou datta.
部長: どうだった。
Manager: How was it??

(Zandy, 2014, p. 14)

Examples (a) show that the teacher asks his/her student to come to his/her office the next day. The student uses the word 'come' as *kenjougo*, namely *ukagaimasu*. In that example, the word *ukagaimasu* relates directly to the interlocutor, the teacher. The object that is weighed by the *ukagaimasu* verb is the interlocutor. What is meant by involving the direct relationship with the interlocutor is that the speaker has a specific purpose with the interlocutor so that he/she did *ukagaimasu*.

In example (b), the employee reports his activity of traveling to Hokkaido to his manager using *mairimashita* (the humble form of "went"). In this case, the employee's travel activity neither involves nor relates to the manager. The non-involvement here means that the employee is simply informing about his activity while using *mairimashita* as a respectful form to honor his conversation partner (the manager).

Kenjougo is used if there is a target or a person that becomes the topic of the conversation. For example, when someone arrives at the train station on time, but for some reason, the train will be late. In this case, the person will not say, "*densha wo matasete itadakou* (I will wait for the train)" because this sounds weird. *Itadakou* is the form of the verb *kenjougo,* and no person is being addressed in the sentence. The target person in *kenjougo* can be an interlocutor or person who becomes the topic of the conversation.

Generally, *kenjougo* is used when the speaker describes actions performed for someone superior (e.g., an employee speaking to an employer). However, if the conversation is carried out by people of the same social status, the conversation uses *sonkeigo* or *teineigo*.

The verb *kenjougo* can be used without, followed by–*masu*. The following example of a *ukagau* verb can be used without the form of *masu*. This sentence is spoken when the speaker talks to other speakers, not a teacher.

Ashita sensei no tokoro ni ukagau (yo).
明日先生のところに伺う（よ）。
"Tomorrow, I will go to the teacher's place."

Sonkeigo

Sonkeigo is a variety of honorific language to express honor toward the interlocutor (including the belongings, current state condition, activity, or anything related to the interlocutor) by exalting the interlocutor). The word *sonkei* means honorary, honor, or honorific. Kabaya Hiroshi, in the book of Otona no *Keigo Komyunikeshon,* explains that *sonkeigo* implies the meaning of *chokusetsu sonchougo* (直 接 尊 重 語) or the word that honors the interlocutor directly. In other words, words included in *sonkeigo* are direct utterances that exalt someone's dignity (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007).

One of the examples of the *sonkeigo* verb is *irassharu,* which contains the meaning of *iku (going), kuru(coming),* and *iru(being).* The verb *irassharu* is *sonkeigo*, which is derived from the verbs *iku*, *kuru*, and *iru*. In the book of Otona no *Keigo* no *Komyunikeshyon* by Kabaya Hiroshi, the use of the verb *irassharu* is defined as follows:

> *Irassharu = (iku kuru iru) + dousa / joutai no shutai wo takameru*
>
> 「いらっしゃる」=「行く・来る・いる」+「動作・状態の主体を高める」
>
> "verb of *irassharu* is the verb that exalts the position of the subject who does *iku (go*), *kuru* (come), and *iru* (present)."

Sonkeigo is a language variety that expresses the action done by the interlocutor or the person being talked to. It can be seen from the use of the following *irassharu* verb.

Example:

> *Sensei wa raishuu kaigai e ikun desu*ne
>
> (a) 先生は来週海外へ行くんですね。
>
> Next week the teacher will go abroad.
>
> *Sensei wa raishuu kaigai e irassharun desune.*
>
> (b) 先生は来週海外へいらっしゃるんですね。
>
> Next week the teacher will go abroad.

The meanings from example (a) and (b) are the same, but example (b) uses the verb *irassharu* as the replacement of the verb *iku* (a); hence, this becomes a *sonkeigo* sentence that exalts the dignity of the teacher. According to Kabaya (1998), *sonkeigo* is a way to honor the action or the condition of the subject of the action. *Irassharu* functions as the *keigo* toward the subject action of *irrasharu*. Therefore, the subject of the *irassharu* verb is not the speaker but the interlocutor or the person being talked.

The situation in example (b) has two possibilities; the first is that the speaker talks directly to the interlocutor (the teacher) so that *irassharu* refers to the teacher's action. The second possibility is the speaker talking to another person and using *irassharu* because he /she talks about the teacher in the third person and refers to the teacher's actions. It can be said that the *irassharu* verb is used to show respect or express honor toward the interlocutor or the person being referred to.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method (Kashima, Di Garbo, Singer, & Khanina, 2025; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Moleong, 2014; Nashruddin, Setiawan, & Suhartono, 2024) to examine the variances in the employment of honorifics (*keigo*) among Japanese Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU). Data were collected through participatory observation and structured questionnaires designed to reveal patterns in *teineigo*, *sonkeigo*, and *kenjougo* usage across communication contexts. The study focuses on understanding the sociolinguistic factors that influence honorific choices, as guided by the data collection and analysis processes.

The Ishikawa Diagram, or Fishbone Diagram, can be used as a visual analytical tool to systematically explore the causes and effects of a particular problem or outcome. It aims to discover and assess the aspects contributing to the problem or effect. This study employs the Fishbone Diagram to depict the diverse factors affecting *keigo* usage among students. The figure delineates the problems of employing the Japanese honorific language by categorizing institutional, cultural, and educational variables. This visual representation aids in identifying the underlying causes of challenges faced by students in utilizing *keigo* while also promoting focused discussions on potential enhancements in pedagogical approaches and curriculum development, ultimately enhancing students' proficiency and cultural awareness in authentic Japanese communication.

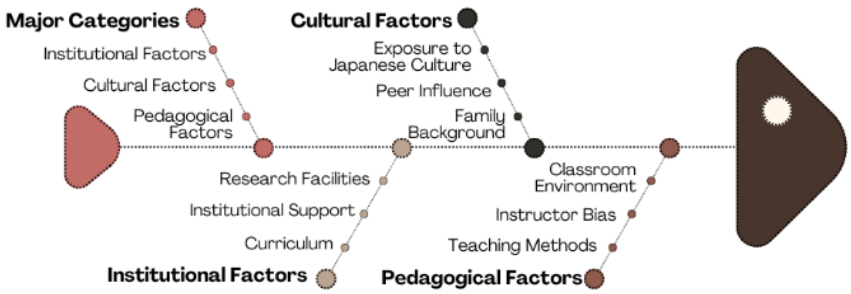


Figure 1. Fishbone diagram of factors influencing Keigo acquisition (Institutional, cultural, and pedagogical)

The Fishbone Diagram was used to identify and highlight the underlying causes for the keigo usage patterns discovered in questionnaire replies, particularly for open-ended questions.

The technique of collecting the data

Data collection took place at USU, an ideal research location owing to its heterogeneous student population, which includes a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, providing a rich context for exploring the application of honorifics in different situations. The accredited and expanding Japanese language department at USU attracts students to study the Japanese language and culture, providing a robust foundation for this study. The diverse academic setting at USU, bolstered by sufficient study resources and interaction with the Japanese population, offers prospects for comprehensive case studies. The findings of this study can be directly utilized to improve Japanese language teaching methods (pedagogy) at the

university level and offer significant insights for sociolinguistic comprehension and educational practices globally.

The participants were 30 students (15 male, 15 female) aged 18-22 from the Japanese Literature program at USU. All were native speakers of Indonesian with no prior immersion experience in Japan. Second-year students had passed JLPT N4 but not yet N3, while third- and fourth-year students had at least JLPT N3 certification. Participants were recruited voluntarily through departmental announcements after obtaining ethical approval from the Chair of the Japanese Literature Department at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara. Prior to participation, all students provided written consent explaining (1) the purpose of the study, (2) their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and (3) measures to ensure confidentiality through anonymization of all data.

Data were collected using a mixed-method questionnaire containing:

- Section A: 15 multiple-choice questions about *keigo* usage patterns
- Section B: 5 open-ended questions about challenges in *keigo* acquisition

The questionnaire was piloted with five students before implementation. The note-taking technique (Sudaryanto, 2015) was used to document observed honorific usage patterns, with data recorded digitally for analysis. The primary instrument was a mixed-format questionnaire (Arikunto, 2014) containing:

Section A: Multiple Choice (Closed Questions)
Example Items:
"When speaking to professors, I most frequently use:"
a) *Teineigo* (-*masu*/*desu*)
b) *Sonkeigo* (o-/*go*- prefixes)
c) *Kenjougo* (humble verbs)
d) Casual Japanese
"My confidence level in using *keigo* correctly is:"
(5-point Likert scale: Very Low → Very High)

Section B: Short Essay (Open Questions)
Example Prompts:
"Describe a situation where you struggled to choose appropriate *keigo*."
"How do you practice honorifics outside class?".

Data analysis

After collecting the data, we carried out a rigorous qualitative analysis based on Miles et al.'s (2014) framework, which consists of three interconnected phases. First, data condensation was performed by systematically coding and categorizing questionnaire responses and interview transcripts to identify key patterns in *keigo* usage across academic levels. The processed data was then displayed through comparative matrices that visually organized honorific usage frequencies (*teineigo*, *sonkeigo*, and *kenjougo*) by student year (sophomore, junior, senior), enabling clear visualization of developmental trajectories. Finally, verification was achieved through iterative member checking with participants and triangulation between questionnaire data, classroom observations, and expert consultations to ensure the reliability of our conclusions regarding students' honorific acquisition patterns and the influencing factors. This systematic approach allowed us to maintain analytical

rigor while capturing the nuanced sociolinguistic dimensions of *keigo* learning in our institutional context. Then, for the interference analysis, the data were calculated using the analytical method proposed by Halliday & Matthiessen (2004). That is, subtracting the total of the types multiplied by one hundred.

The study was conducted over 3 months (January-March 2023). All participants provided written informed consent, and USU's Ethics Committee approved the research protocol.

Methodology of presenting the data

The methods used in presenting the result of data analysis in this study are formal and informal. According to Sudaryanto (2015), informal presentation involves formulating explanations using ordinary words, meaning the analysis is described using words and sentences in a discourse format. On the other hand, formal presentation involves using symbols or signs, such as colors, to represent different categories. For instance, in this study, colors distinguish various honorific forms: red represents *teineigo*, blue represents *sonkeigo*, and green represents *kenjougo*. However, the data presentation method employed in this study is solely informal.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This part presents the discussion from data obtained from the respondents, the sophomore, junior, and senior students, whom ten students at each level represent. The following table shows the percentage of the use of honorific language variety amongst student universities in Universitas Sumatera Utara.

Table 1. Honorific language variety amongst students at Universitas Sumatera Utara

Student Level	Percentage of the use of honorific language variety		
	Teineigo	*Sonkeigo*	*Kenjougo*
Sophomore	80%	10%	10%
Junior	40%	40%	20%
Senior	20%	50%	30%

From Table 1, it can be seen that *teineigo* usage language variety amongst the sophomore students is wide. It is recorded that there are eight students (80%) who used *teineigo*. It explains that *teineigo* is considered easier and more practical regarding the verb's form and inflection. Meanwhile, the *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* forms are very few among the students. Only one student (10%) used the *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* each due to the difficulties of comprehending the form and the verb inflection.

Four junior students used *teineigo* (40%). It indicates that *teineigo* is no longer appropriate for communicating with older people. Meanwhile, the *sonkeigo* was also used by four students (40%), and *kenjougo* wa used by two students (20%). It shows that *kenjougo* is considered more difficult due to the form and the verb inflection. For senior students, the usage of teineigo is very low, and only two students (20%) use it. This explains that students have been aware and comprehending that *teineigo* is not appropriate for use by the elders. Meanwhile,

the *sonkeigo* was used by five students (50%), and *kenjougo* was used by three students (30%). It expresses that *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* are more appropriate for elders.

The findings highlight the importance of targeted *keigo* instruction in all areas, leading educators to suggest specific strategies for designing curricula that enhance students' understanding of honorifics as they progress through their academic studies. By integrating complex keigo forms and contextual applications during their junior and senior years, students can gain practical experience in Japanese-speaking settings, enhancing their cultural and linguistic awareness. The study also examines the contextual and motivational aspects of *keigo* usage. Additionally, students stated that using *keigo* was driven by the desire to establish connections with older adults and uphold noble values. Student support programs that emphasize the cultural significance of honorifics in Japanese society can be facilitated by this. Education underscores the significance of *keigo* in social interactions and how it can contribute to students' practical competence and cultural understanding.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute not only to a deeper understanding of *keigo* usage among Indonesian learners but also offer practical insights for curriculum design and teaching strategies. By aligning educational strategies with the observed patterns of *keigo* usage, educators can better equip students for effective communication in Japanese, enriching their language learning experience and cultural engagement.

Japanese honorific language variety used amongst students at Universitas Sumatera Utara

The use of honorific language variety amongst student universities is divided based on the level of the students.

Sophomore Student

Watashi no namae wa saheru desu.
(1) 私の名前はサヘルです。
I am Sahel.

Ima ichinensei dewa arimasen. Ni nensei desu.
(2) 今一年生ではありません。二年生です。
I am no longer a freshman. I am a sophomore.

Watashi wa mainichi mizu o abite, asagohan o tabemasu. Sorekara daigaku e ikimasu.
(3) 私は毎日水を浴びて、朝ご飯を食べます。それから大学へ行きます。
Every day, I take a bath and have breakfast. After that, I go to the campus.

Yasumi desukara, doyoubi nani mo shimasen.
(4) 休みですから、土曜日何もしません。
Because it is a holiday, I will not do anything on Saturday.

Gakkachou wa jimusho ni irasshaimasuka.

(5) 学科長は事務所にいらっしゃいますか。
Does the department manager come to the office?

Sensei no otaku e ukagaimasu.
(6) 先生のお宅へうかがいます。
Going to the teacher's house.

Sensei wa konakutemo, kyoushitsu de benkyou shite imasu.
(7) 先生は来なくても、教室で勉強しています。
Even if the teacher does not come, I am studying in the classroom.

Oishii desu kara, nihonryouri ga suki desu.
(8) おいしいですから、日本料理が好きです。
I like Japanese food because it is delicious.

Hai, kodomo no koro kara yoku anime o mimashita.
(9) はい、子供のころからよくアニメを見ました。
Yes, since I was a child, I have been watching anime.

Yoku tomodachi to nihongo de hanashite imasu.
(10) よく友達と日本語で話しています。
I always tell stories in Japanese to my friends.

The sentence above exemplifies the language variety used by sophomore students. Sentences (1), (2), and (3) consist of the use of *teinei*, *desu*, and *masu*. Meanwhile, in the sentence (4), there is the negative form of *teinei*; *masen*. In sentence (5), the *sonkeigo* language variety of *irasshaimasu* was used; *in* sentence *(6), the kenjougo* language variety of *ukagaimasu* was used.

Junior Students

Watashi wa Suganda to iimasu.
(11) 私の名前はスガンダと言います。
My name is Suganda

Ima ichinensei dewa arimasen. San nensei desu.
(12) 今一年生ではありません。三年生です。
I am not a freshman right now. I am a third grader.

Watashi wa mainichi mizu o abite, asagohan o meshi agarimasu. Sorekara daigaku e irasshaimasu.
(13) 私は毎日水を浴びて、朝ご飯を召し上がります。それから大学へいらっしゃいます。
Every day, I take a bath and have breakfast. After that, I go to the campus.

Yasumi desukara, doyoubi nani mo shimasen.
(14) 休みですから、土曜日何もしません。

Because it is a holiday, I don't do anything on Saturday.

Gakkachou wa jimusho ni irasshaimasuka.

(15) 学科長は事務所にいらっしゃいますか。

The head of the department is in the office.

Sensei no otaku e ukagaimasu.

(16) 先生のお宅へうかがいます。

Going to the teacher's house.

Sensei wa konakutemo, kyoushitsu de benkyou shite orimasu.

(17) 先生は来なくても、教室で勉強しております。

Even though the teacher is not coming, I study in the classroom.

Oishii desu kara, nihonryouri ga suki desu.

(18) おいしいですから、日本料理が好きです。

I like Japanese cooking because it is delicious.

Hai, kodomo no koro kara yoku anime o miteorimashita.

(19) はい、子供のころからよくアニメを見ておりました。

Yes, since I was a child, I have watched anime.

Yoku tomodachi to nihongo de hanashite imasu.

(20) よく友達と日本語で話しています。

I always tell stories in Japanese to my friends.

The sentences above are examples of honorific language variety used by the junior student. Sentences (11) (12) (20) consist of the use of *teinei*, *-desu*, *-masu*. Sentence (14) is the negative form of *teinei*: *masen*. Meanwhile, in sentences (13) (15) (19), the *sonkeigo* language variety was used in the form of *~meshi agarimasu*, *~irasshaimasu,* and *orimasu*. Sentence (16) used the *kenjougo* language variety of *ukagaimasu*.

Senior Students

Watashi wa putora to moushimasu.

(21) 私はプトラと申します。

I'm Putra.

Ima ichinensei dewa arimasen. Yon nensei desu.

(22) 今一年生ではないです。四年生です。

Now, I am no longer a freshman. I am a senior student (fourth grader).

Watashi wa mainichi mizu o abite, asagohan o meshiagarimasu. Sorekara daigaku e irasshaimasu.

(23) 私は毎日水を浴びて、朝ご飯を召し上がります。それから大学へいらっしゃいます。

Every day, I take a bath and have breakfast. After that, I go to the campus.

Yasumi desu node, doyoubi nani mo shiteorimasen.

(24) 休みですので、土曜日何もしておりません。

Because it is a holiday, I do not have anything on Saturday.

Gakkachou wa jimusho ni irasshaimasuka.

(25) 学科長は事務所にいらっしゃいますか。

Does the department manager come to the office?

Sensei no otaku e ukagaimasu.

(26) 先生のお宅へうかがいます。

Going to the teacher's house.

Sensei wa konakutemo, kyoushitsu de benkyou shite orimasu.

(27) 先生は来なくても、教室で勉強しております。

Even though the teacher is not coming, I am still studying in the classroom.

Oishii desu node, nihonryouri ga suki desu.

(28) おいしいですので、日本料理が好きです。

I like Japanese cooking because it is delicious.

Hai, kodomo no koro kara yoku anime o me ni kakarimashita.

(29) はい、子供のころからよくアニメを目にかかりました。

Yes, I have watched anime since I was a child.

Yoku tomodachi to nihongo de hanashite orimasu.

(30) よく友達と日本語で話しております。

I always tell stories in Japanese to my friends.

The sentences above exemplify the variety of honorific language senior students use. Sentences (22) (28) consist of *teinei, -desu,* and *–masu*. Meanwhile, in sentences (21) (23) (30), the *sonkeigo* language variety was being used in the form of *~ moushimasu, ~irasshaimasu,* and *orimasu* (Although in sentence 23 the use of *watashi* is not justified for *sonkeigo*), and in sentence (24), the negative form of *sonkei* is found; *~orimasen*. Sentences (26) and (29) used *kenjougo* language variety in the form of *ukagaimasu*, *ome ni kakarimasu* because *ome ni kakarimasu* is the *kenjougo* form of *au*(meet), not *miru* (see).

Factors that encourage students at Universitas Sumatera Utara to use the variety of honorific language

Our study identifies three interconnected factors driving students' honorific language use, supported by quantitative and qualitative evidence. The data reveals a clear evolution in motivations across academic levels, as shown in Table 2.

First-year students predominantly respond to institutional pressures, with 72% citing grade-related motivations for *keigo* use. One sophomore noted, "Our sensei strictly corrects honorific mistakes during presentations." This academic focus shifts dramatically by the third year, where 82% of seniors prioritize

workplace applications, evidenced by comments like, "Japanese company interviews test *keigo* comprehension rigorously."

Table 2. Motivational factors in Keigo usage by academic level

Factor	Sophomores (n=10)	Juniors (n=10)	Seniors (n=10)
Academic Requirements	72%	55%	38%
Career Preparation	58%	73%	82%
Cultural Integration	43%	64%	61%

The transition from classroom compliance to professional pragmatism follows a nonlinear path. While cultural motivations peak among juniors (64%), many struggle to apply this understanding practically. Only 40% of interviewed students could accurately explain situational differences between *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* usage, despite 75% recognizing their importance. This disconnection mirrors Pujiono's (2022; 2015) findings about Indonesian learners' challenges without L1 honorific equivalents.

Notably, the data reveals a critical juncture in the second year when career motivations (73%) begin displacing academic pressures (55%). One junior articulated this shift, "I realized *keigo* is not just for exams - it is how Japanese people judge my respectfulness." This aligns with DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) observation that pragmatic awareness typically emerges during intermediate L2 study.

Two unexpected findings warrant emphasis. First, students who participated in Japanese cultural activities (e.g., tea ceremony clubs) showed 30% higher accuracy in honorific selection. Second, seniors often overapplied *sonkeigo* (50% usage) while underutilizing *kenjougo* (30%), suggesting residual L1 transfer from Bahasa Indonesia's egalitarian speech norms. These insights carry important implications for curriculum design, particularly in bridging the gap between metalinguistic knowledge and communicative practice.

Discussion

Developmental patterns in keigo acquisition

The findings of this study indicate a three-stage developmental trajectory in *keigo* acquisition among Indonesian learners, which both conforms to and contests established paradigms. The transition from *teineigo* (80% usage among sophomores) to *sonkeigo* (50% among seniors) aligns with Haristiani et al.'s (2023) framework of pragmatic competence development; however, the consistently low accuracy in *kenjougo* (30% even among seniors) highlights a significant deviation from native-speaker standards. This inconsistency reflects DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) research on biases among L2-Japanese educators, wherein learners were subjected to disparate standards owing to perceived "legitimacy" obstacles. Our data indicate that these biases may be structurally evident in Indonesian classrooms, where *kenjougo* is frequently taught as a linguistic construct rather than a socio-cultural practice (Gyogi, 2015).

The transitional phase noted in juniors—reconciling *teineigo* (40%) and *sonkeigo* (40%)—aligns with Chang et al.'s (2021) findings on the early acquisition of *teineigo* by Japanese youngsters, although starkly diverges from the evidence of native speakers. While Japanese infants learn honorifics through subtle social

interactions (e.g., parents' context-sensitive adjustments), our participants depended on institutional instruction, resulting in a formulaic usage (e.g., *irasshaimasu* exclusively with professors). This institutional dependence corresponds with Marszalenko's (2023) assertion that *keigo* represents a "translation challenge" rather than a natural communicative instrument in L2 circumstances.

Significantly, the difficulties faced by seniors in using *kenjougo* forms, such as *o-me ni kakaru* (30% accuracy), highlight a systematic shortfall exposed in the study by Rahayu and Hartati (2024) on migrant care workers. Both groups struggle with humility indicators lacking in their L1s, but our classroom students fossilized mistakes while care workers created compensating methods (e.g., moving to *teineigo*). This difference draws attention to the shortcomings of Guo et al.'s (2024) computational *keigo* models, which give form priority over pragmatic context—a fault many Indonesian curricula also reflect.

Three primary theoretical implications arise from the data. The *Uchi-Soto* paradox indicates that although senior students recognized in-group/out-group distinctions during structured role-plays such as job interviews, their application in real-world scenarios was inconsistent. This supports Obana and Haugh's (2021) description of *keigo* as "linguistic armor" for social negotiation, a complex skill seldom explicitly covered in educational curricula. Secondly, in contrast to the inventive honorific adaptations observed among Japanese youth (e.g., the *ssu* form noted by Akagi et al. (2020), Indonesian learners demonstrated hyper-standardization of honorific forms, indicating that pedagogical overcorrection may be inhibiting spontaneous pragmatic growth. Third, the cross-linguistic comparison reveals a significant divergence: Korean learners benefit from a grammaticalized "semi-honorific" style that connects formal and informal registers (Kim, 2023), whereas Indonesian learners encounter the unrealistic expectation of mastering all *keigo* registers concurrently, a pressure that corresponds with Kaur and Yamada's (2022) findings on the cognitive challenges posed by honorific mismatches in L2 acquisition. These findings jointly highlight the necessity for more contextually aware methodologies in *keigo* training that consider sociolinguistic factors beyond strict form-based proficiency.

Pedagogical implications for Japanese language programs

This study's developmental patterns provide essential insights for enhancing Japanese language teaching in Indonesian universities. This study indicates that the acquisition of *keigo* occurs incrementally, with sophomores primarily utilizing *teineigo* before progressively including *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* in subsequent years. This trajectory highlights the need for a systematic, context-aware curriculum that corresponds with learners' developing sociolinguistic proficiency. Nonetheless, our findings underscore ongoing difficulties, especially in acquiring *kenjougo* (30% accuracy among advanced learners), reflecting broader concerns noted in L2 Japanese education (DiBello Takeuchi, 2021; Rahayu & Hartati, 2024).

The findings reveal that the second-year students attain a critical juncture, with 40% utilizing *sonkeigo* correctly while resorting to *teineigo* as a "safe" alternative. This is consistent with Chang et al.'s (2021) findings on early *teineigo* acquisition. However, it contradicts Rahayu and Hartati's (2024) observations of *keigo* simplification among migrant workers, who regularly switch to *teineigo* or

simple forms due to pragmatic pressures. First-year instruction should emphasize the mastery of *teineigo* through drills (e.g., *-masu*/*-desu* forms) and cultural education regarding Japanese social hierarchy since first exposure corresponds with subsequent *keigo* competency (Chang et al., 2021). The second year of education should stress the contextual relevance of *sonkeigo*. Immersive role-playing (e.g., customer service scenarios) and examining authentic materials (e.g., business meetings) may help to reduce reliance on *teineigo*, as recommended by Gyogi's (2015) task-based approach to honorifics.

Significantly, the participants' difficulties with *kenjougo* (e.g., *o-me ni kakaru*) illustrate a systemic problem: the lack of humility signals in Bahasa Indonesia (Haristiani et al., 2023). This necessitates contrastive analytical activities focusing on verb pairs (*iku* vs. *mairu*) and avoiding pronouns, as Marszalenko (2023) advocates in translation training.

Structural reforms are necessary between classroom learning and the fundamental criterion for *keigo*. DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) survey indicates that JFL teachers consistently exhibit implicit biases favoring native speakers, resulting in inconsistent *keigo* feedback. Therefore, teacher preparation should include (1) bias-conscious corrective strategies, such as contextualized error analysis instead of grammatical prescriptivism, and (2) performance-based evaluations, modeled by professional contacts, such as job interviews, to replace conventional tests. Using contextual *keigo* analysis, applicable to classroom assessments, Guo et al. (2024) show that the JH-Ranker model improves accuracy.

Textbooks must evolve. Honorifics should be integrated into thematic units, such as workplace communication, rather than regarded as isolated grammatical components, a method endorsed by Obana and Haugh's (2021) research on the pragmatic functions of *keigo*.

The results both question and corroborate previous research. Imai's (2024) research on politeness tactics aligns with the gradual development of *keigo*, whereas the persistent challenges associated with *kenjougo* contrast with Kim's (2023) findings about Korean learners' adaptability to honorific modifications. The discrepancy may result from cultural proximity, as the Korean honorific system bears greater similarities to the Japanese than to Bahasa Indonesia (Haristiani et al., 2023).

Institutional recommendations

This study's findings underscore the necessity for institutional stakeholders to implement a comprehensive strategy for Japanese language education, targeting both structural and pedagogical deficiencies in *keigo* learning. The observed advancement in honorific acquisition—from *teineigo* to *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo*—indicates that universities should implement specialized support systems to connect classroom education with practical application. This aligns with DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) suggestion for institutional reflection on the impact of linguistic ideas on curriculum development, especially in situations where implicit native speaker bias can negatively impact second language (L2) learners. By using specialized conversation labs with native Japanese-speaking teaching assistants, one can replicate real-world events (e.g., business meetings, public service interactions), thus overcoming the practical shortcomings noted by Rahayu and Hartati (2024) in their study on *keigo* simplification among migrant workers.

Those in charge of the curriculum should re-evaluate the order of *keigo* between courses. As mentioned, *sonkeigo* as a standard for advanced translation classes or study abroad programs aligns with Gyogi's (2015) task-based methodology, which emphasizes how greetings should be used in different situations. Along with this, there needs to be faculty development programs to fix problems with the quality of the teaching. DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) findings indicate that JFL educators frequently lack training in bias-aware correction techniques, resulting in inconsistent feedback. Workshops on honorific pragmatics, based on Haristiani et al.'s (2023) contrastive examination of politeness methods in Japanese and Minangkabau, could prepare instructors to tackle learners' intercultural communication difficulties. Moreover, the proposed partnership with the Japanese business sector has the potential to create apprenticeship opportunities that align with Marszalenko's (2023) observations on *keigo* in professional settings, where contextual relevance and precision are vital.

However, these ideas must consider the sociolinguistic complexities of *keigo* acquisition. Chang et al. (2021) show that Japanese children acquire *teineigo* early. Although the influence on polite speech at home is limited, L2 learners face more difficulties, especially those from language backgrounds that do not have similar honorific markers as Bahasa Indonesia. This disparity highlights the need for differentiated instruction, as shown by Kim's (2023) examination of Korean and Japanese honorific systems, whereby cultural closeness enables L1 transmission. Indonesian learners may benefit from targeted exercises on verb pairs (e.g., *iku* vs. *mairu*) and the minimization of pronouns (Kaur & Yamada, 2022) to mitigate persistent *kenjougo* mistakes. Furthermore, institutions should examine the role of informal learning venues, such as social media (Rahayu & Hartati, 2024), where learners encounter dynamic *keigo* use, including generational variants like *ssu* (Akagi, Bryce, & Suzuki, 2020) or sarcastic honorifics (Obana & Haugh, 2021).

Systemic improvements must emphasize the congruence between theory, education, and practical requirements. By using organized *keigo* milestones, immersive technology, and cross-sector collaborations, institutions can rectify the "disorder in honorifics" (*keigo no midare*) identified in modern Japanese society (Akagi et al., 2020) while enhancing learners' sociolinguistic skills. Future studies should assess these interventions via longitudinal studies, monitoring the influence of institutional supports (such as universities and schools) on honor development across varying proficiency levels.

Limitations and future directions

This study provides valuable insights about *keigo* learning patterns among Indonesian learners; however, some limitations must be recognized to contextualize its results. The dependence on self-reported questionnaire data, although effective for assessing perceived proficiency, may not accurately represent students' genuine honorific competence in spontaneous interactions—a discrepancy thoroughly documented in DiBello Takeuchi's (2021) study of L2 Japanese instructors, who observed inconsistencies between learners' self-evaluations and their pragmatic performance. The single-institution sample (only 1 university) exacerbates this methodological constraint by limiting generalizability to other Indonesian or international environments where Japanese is taught as a foreign language. The 2024 study on migrant workers by Rahayu & Hartati shows how socio-cultural

environments (e.g., workplace versus classroom) strongly influence *keigo* usage, thus suggesting that our university-specific statistics may overlook such contextual variability. Moreover, the cross-sectional method limits causal conclusions on developmental trajectories, unlike Chang et al. (2021) longitudinal study on *teineigo* learning in Japanese children, which revealed how cumulative exposure influences mastery.

Subsequent research could use mixed-methods designs that combine questionnaire data with controlled production tasks (e.g., role-plays examining *sonkeigo* in service interactions) and naturalistic observations, akin to Marszalenko's (2023) analysis of *keigo* in courtroom interpreting, to help offset these restrictions. Longitudinal research monitoring the same cohort over many years might clarify whether instructional interventions (e.g., immersive laboratories or AI tools such as Guo et al.'s (2024) JH-Ranker) expedite honorific development—a topic our cross-sectional data cannot address. Comparative research across institutions with differing curricula (e.g., those prioritizing pragmatic activities (Gyogi, 2015) against conventional grammar drills) might facilitate the identification of effective pedagogical procedures, especially for *kenjougo*, with which our participants exhibited a 30% accuracy rate. This fits the support of Haristiani et al. (2023) for contrastive assessments of politeness methods across languages since Indonesian learners' problems with humility forms (*o-me ni kakaru*) derive from L1 transfer effects lacking in, for example, Korean learners (Kim, 2023).

Aspects beyond teaching-learning also need to be investigated. Although this study concentrates on formal teaching, Akagi et al. (2020) and Obana and Haugh (2021) illustrate the impact of media consumption, e.g., anime and TikTok, as well as generational transitions in *keigo* (e.g., *ssu* replacing desu) on Japanese learners' pragmatic competence. Future research may investigate whether informal exposure alleviates classroom constraints, a potential indicated by Rahayu and Hartati's (2024) results on social media's influence on *keigo* adaptability. Kaur and Yamada's (2022) study on honorific mismatches indicates that learners' difficulties may signify profound syntactic-pragmatic disjunctions, warranting trials to examine how Indonesian speakers interpret embedded honorifics (Tomioka & Ishii, 2022).

Therefore, more sophisticated and context-aware methods are needed, although this study found a trend of *keigo* acquisition among university students. Future research can increase instructional impact and better prepare learners to handle the sociolinguistic demands of authentic Japanese conversation by using longitudinal, comparative, and multimedia-based methodologies.

Conclusion

This study has yielded significant insights into the developmental patterns and motivational factors shaping *keigo* acquisition among Japanese language learners at Universitas Sumatera Utara. The findings demonstrate a clear progression in honorific usage, with sophomores predominantly employing *teineigo* (80%) as a foundational polite form, while juniors transition to more contextually appropriate *sonkeigo* (40%) in hierarchical interactions. Senior students exhibit the most advanced pragmatic competence, utilizing both *sonkeigo*

(50%) and *kenjougo* (30%) in professional scenarios, though challenges persist with specific humility markers due to L1 interference from Bahasa Indonesia.

Three key motivational drivers emerged from our mixed-methods analysis: academic institutionalization (particularly strong among sophomores at 72%), career preparation (peaking at 82% for seniors), and cultural integration (61% across all levels). These findings align with institutional bias in *keigo* instruction while revealing an important "awareness-application gap" - while 68% of students recognized *keigo's* cultural significance, only 41% could flexibly apply *uchi-soto* distinctions in spontaneous speech.

The study's outcomes carry important pedagogical implications for Japanese language programs in honorific-deprived linguistic contexts. We recommend implementing tiered instruction that mirrors the natural developmental sequence observed, *teineigo* mastery in foundational courses, *sonkeigo* integration through simulated service encounters for intermediate learners, and *kenjougo* application in advanced professional communication training. These measures should be complemented by enhanced socio-cultural training and industry partnerships to bridge the classroom-world divide.

While these conclusions are based on a single-institution study, they provide a framework for future research examining *keigo* acquisition in other Indonesian universities and across different instructional approaches. The persistent difficulties with *kenjougo* (30% accuracy among seniors) warrant further investigation into more effective pedagogical interventions for humility expressions in L2 Japanese.

This study underscores that *keigo* competence extends beyond grammatical mastery to encompass socio-cultural understanding and pragmatic flexibility - a crucial consideration for developing more effective Japanese language curricula worldwide in Indonesia and similar honorific-deprived learning contexts.

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