



# First-year Japanese university students' attitudes toward L2 and L3 learning

Nancy Shzh-chen Lee

*Aichi University, Aichi, Japan*

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This research investigated first-year Japanese university students' attitudes toward the learning of their L2 and L3. In the case of Japanese students, L2 is, with rare exceptions, English, and L3 is a foreign language other than English. For this research, results were collected from first-year public university students by means of questionnaires ( $N=373$ ) and interviews ( $n=30$ ). From the results, students tend to have more positive attitudes toward learning an L2 than an L3. For both L2 and L3, students have most positive attitudes toward their long-term language learning. The most significant difference between students' L2 and L3 attitudes is in the areas of language learning difficulty, learning style, and long-term language learning. This research provides an innovative insight for studying university students' language attitudes by offering a comparative perspective toward examination.

本研究は日本人大学一年生のL2(第二言語)やL3(第三言語)学習に関する態度を調べた。日本人大学生の場合は、L2は英語であるがL3はその以降に学習される外国語となる。本研究のため、質問紙調査(373人)や面接調査(30人)を行った。その結果、大学一年生はL2に対するポジティブな学習態度の方が高い。一方、L2やL3学習を全般的に見ると、大学生は長期学習に対する態度が一番ポジティブである。L2とL3学習態度での一番大きな差は1)言語学習の難しさ、2)学習スタイルや3)長期的な学習である。本研究は比較的な立場から、言語学習態度を調査する新たな方法となると期待される。

**P**ast studies have reported Japanese university students to have positive attitudes toward English (Benson, 1991; Kobayashi, 2000 and Kyoto University Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies Foreign Language Education Reformation Committee (Ed.), 2003). However, despite these positive reports, Japanese students continue to experience problems with their English learning (Benson, 1991; Yamada, 2000). Research on language attitudes is significant for language education because attitudes are strongly related to the learning and teaching of languages (Baker, 1992, p. 9-10). It provides information for educators, curriculum developers, and researchers about how students

view the learning of their target languages. From this understanding, modifications and improvements can be made to the language classrooms and curriculums.

Attitudinal research is complex in nature due to a wide range of attitude interpretations (Baker, 1992). Moreover, it is multifaceted due to contradictory results about attitudes influences on language learning, achievement and motivation. Theorists such as Gardner have argued for a possible causal relationship between language attitudes, motivation and achievements (Gardner, 1972, p. 131-139); Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Morris, 2001). Conversely, it has been proven in contradicting studies that attitudes do not have the above-mentioned influences (Au, 1988; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; LoCastro, 2001; Oller, 1981).

This research investigated Japanese first-year university students' attitudes toward L2 and L3 learning. In this study, L2 is English and L3 refers to any foreign language besides English. By looking at students' attitudes toward the learning of two languages comparatively, it offers an innovative perspective for understanding students' language attitudes in Japan. It examined students' attitudes toward the following six elements for L2 and L3: 1) images associated with native speakers; 2) the learning of the target language in university; 3) the importance of long-term learning; 4) learning of the target language outside university; 5) difficulty with learning the target language; and 6) the style of language learning in university.

## Literature review

### Definition of L2 and L3

In most Japanese universities, students are being required to enroll in mandatory English classes, but depending on the faculty, the number of credits may vary. In the Japanese context, English has often been referred as the first foreign language (1FL). This research was conducted with respect to this argument but the term L2 (second language) was adopted due to students' order of learning. While the attention has been focused on English, the learning of L3 (third language) is becoming more prevalent in Japan due to globalization and an increased amount of interactions with other non-English speaking nations. Currently, L3 is taught predominately in universities. Japanese universities are not regulated, but often require their students to study a second foreign language besides English. The term L3 refers to the second foreign language. It does not indicate students' ranking of language proficiencies. Even though students selecting different L3s are likely to have different attitudes, differences in L3 are not considered in this study.

### Defining attitudes

Attitude is a complex concept that appears in a wide range of domains such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, history, human geography and language studies and has been defined different accordingly (Baker, 1992; Matsuda, 2000). Therefore, a review on attitudes is indispensable because much language attitude research in the past has lacked a thorough discussion of the general attitudes theory (Baker, 1992).

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, an attitude is: 1) “A position of the body or manner of carrying oneself, indicative of a mood or condition”; 2) “A state of mind or feeling with regard to some matter” (Morris (Ed.), 1969, p. 85). A social psychological definition of attitudes takes one step beyond the dictionary definition and defines an attitude as a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of an object (Bohner & Wänke, 2002, p. 4-6; Dörnyei, 2003a and Eiser, 1986, p. 23-33). An *attitude object* can be anything ranging from concrete to abstract things. Whereas a general definition of attitude focuses more on the individual (such that a person with a positive attitude likes most things, and a person with a negative attitude dislikes most things), a social psychological definition of attitude is more object-specific. Therefore, based on a social psychological perspective, a learner may have similar attitudes toward different objects or different attitudes toward the same object (Eiser, 1986). According to Allport (1935), an attitude has been described as “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individuals’ response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (p. 810). Learners are not born with their current attitudes. Attitudes are acquired subjectively through experiences both directly and indirectly. From this definition, attitudes can be viewed as a form of motivation where they are important for the organization of human behavior and are what kept the individuals consistent.

Similar to the concept of attitudes, the concept of language attitude is also surrounded by disagreements (Baker, 1992). Based on the preceding discussions, learners’ L2 and L3 attitudes can be defined as learners’ evaluative responses

toward L2 and L3 learning respectively. Dörnyei (2003b, p. 7) presents an alternative definition of language attitude. According to his definition, an attitude is a broad concept that concerns five interrelated elements: attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests and values. These five elements are not always distinguishable nor can they be defined clearly. The present study followed Dörnyei’s definition of language attitudes. Dörnyei suggested that learner attitudes and beliefs about language learning are immeasurably closely related and should be treated as one concept (2003b; Ministry of Maori Development, 2002).

### Three components of learner language attitudes

Besides controversies with its definition, there are also two opposing views toward the structure of language attitudes. The dominant view suggests that attitudes are derived from the following three components: affection, cognition and behavior (Baker, 1992).

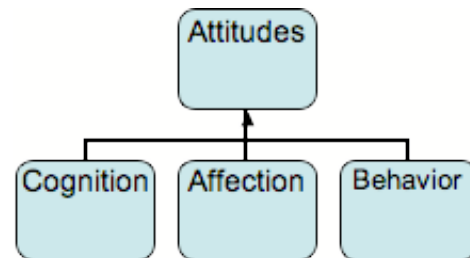


Figure 1. Three Components of Language Learner Attitudes

The Affective component refers to the evaluative feelings and preferences toward the target language (Dörnyei, 2003b). The cognitive component refers to the opinions, beliefs and values about the target language (Dörnyei, 2003b). Lastly, the behavioral component refers to overt actions and statement of intentions toward the target language. While all three components may interact with each other, they actually exist discreetly and may contradict each other (Eiser, 1986). An attitude may consist entirely of the cognitive component or it may consist predominantly of the cognitive component and only some affective component.

The second perspective supports an up-side-down image of the abovementioned model (Baker, 1992). According to this view, attitudes are not derived from the three components; rather, they generate three responses: affective, behavioral and cognitive responses (Bohner & Wänke, 2002, p. 5; Eiser, 1986, p. 53). The former perspective of the three attitude components is adopted in this research.

### Learner attitudes toward L2 learning – A review on Japanese studies

Research on Japanese learner attitudes initiated in the 1970s and has focused primarily on the relationship between attitudes, motivation and in some cases, attained language proficiency (Matsuda, 2000). Research of this nature includes studies by Benson (1991), Chiba, Matsuura & Yamamoto (1995), Chihara & Oller (1978) and Hughes & Yoshida (1994). Despite the controversial results of the attitudes, motivation and proficiency relationship, a consensus was later reached that Japanese learners' attitudes may not correlate significantly with their language

proficiency (Matsuura, Chiba and Yamamoto, 1994). Kobayashi (2000) has in her research identified gender differences toward Japanese students' L2 attitudes. In her work, she concluded the female students have more positive attitudes toward all aspects of L2 learning. Overall, it was found that Japanese university students have positive attitudes toward English (Kyoto University Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies Foreign Language Education Reformation Committee (Ed.), 2003). Regarding L3, there are limited relevant studies. Nevertheless, it was found in the abovementioned study that students have negative attitudes toward L3.

### Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was practiced. A questionnaire ( $N = 373$ ) was followed by individual and small-group interviews with selected students ( $n = 30$ ). Pilot studies were conducted before administrating the main study.

### Questionnaire method

A questionnaire was developed predominantly by referring to Horwitz's BILLI (1987) and Kobayashi's studies (2000 & 2002) (See Appendix). In addition, four other language attitude questionnaires: Benson (1991), Chihara and Oller (1978), Gardner (1985) and Matsuda (2000) were referenced. The questionnaire was distributed in Japanese. It consisted of 49 Likert items for L2 and L3 learning respectively. Participants responded by selecting a number from the 1-5 Likert scale where 1 is strongly agree, 3 is neutral, and 5

is strongly disagree. On this scale, a high score indicates a negative attitude. Items on the questionnaire were grouped into the following categories, each representing a dimension of language attitudes this study aims to investigate.

- 1) Images associated with native speakers.
- 2) Perceptions toward the studying of the target language in university.
- 3) Attitudes toward the importance of long-term learning the language.
- 4) Attitudes toward learning of the target language outside the university
- 5) Difficulty with learning the target language.
- 6) Attitudes toward the learning style of the target language in university

### Interview method

Even though the questionnaire method is effective, it is limited because it lacks in-depth responses (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 191-214; 2003b and Eiser, 1986). This results in a lower reliability and passive student output. Therefore, the use of interview method provides good supplementary data. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and the results were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher.

A set of items to be explored were outlined beforehand but the interviews remained flexible in terms of the ordering and actual working of questions. The student interviews were scheduled to be ten minutes in length and in an informal style. The short interviews were conducted for two purposes:

to examine the reliability of students' responses in the questionnaires and to gain a qualitative understanding of students' attitudes toward L2 and L3 learning. Two or more students from each class surveyed were randomly invited for the interviews.

### Research population

This research was based on 373 (287 male and 86 female) first-year students from a well known public Japanese university. However, because this research is based on the first-year students of one public university, it should not be perceived as a representative of the entire Japanese university student population. This research sample makes up approximately 13% of the whole first-year student population. Ten English Listening and Speaking classes from five faculties participated in this survey. English lecturers were randomly asked to volunteer in this research by writing. Classes used in this survey belong to teachers who have replied. Because more teachers with engineering classes have volunteered for this research, it resulted in a greater number of male students. In terms with students' academic achievement, it is presumed that all students involved in this research have relatively high level of academic achievements. A description of these classes is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of Students per Faculty and Participants**

Faculty	Registration No	No of Participant	Total
Engineering	976	158	16.2%
Letters	225	80	35.6%
Economics	225	30	13.3%
Science	312	32	10.3%
Agriculture	318	73	23.0%
Total	2939	373	12.7%

Note. Registration No = Number of students registered per faculty.

Participant No = Number of students participated from each faculty.

All participants have to study a L3 subject. From the 373 participants, the most popular L3 selection is Chinese, followed by German, French and Italian making up 50.7%, 26.8%, 9.9% and 7.2% respectively. Participants studying other languages make up 5.4% of the population. Table 2 provides a summary of participants' L3 selection and their percentages.

**Table 2: Participants' L3 Selection**

L3 Subject	Chinese	German	French	Italian	Others
No of Participants	189	100	37	27	20
%	50.7	26.8	9.9	7.2	5.3

## Results and discussion

After data collection, a factor analysis was conducted to refine the categorization of attitude factors. Items with .38 or lower factors loadings were deleted from further analysis. All factors have adequate factor loadings with some items ranging at .70 and .80. A description of the factors and their Alpha reading are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Factor Loadings and Alpha for Attitudinal Dimensions Toward L2**

Factors	Description of the Items	Factor Loading (Alpha)
1	Images associated with native speakers	.84
2	Perceptions toward the learning of this language in university	.86
3	Attitudes toward the long-term language learning	.75
4	Attitudes toward the learning of language outside the university	.80
5	Difficulties with language learning	
6	Attitudes toward the style of language learning in university	.475

Overall, students are showing a tendency of positive attitudes toward L2 learning. In particular, students are showing the most significant positive attitudes toward the importance of long-term English learning. A description of participants' attitudes toward the importance of long-term English learning is presented in Table 4. For item 6, 65.7% and 26.9% of participants have responded, "strongly agree"

and “agree” respectively whereas no students have disagreed with the importance of English learning. Moreover, 68.5% and 24.1% of participants responded “strongly agree” and “agree” toward item 15 respectively: the desire for wanting to speak English in the future.

**Table 4: Percentage of Results: Items for Importance of Long-term L2 Learning**

Item	5	4	3	2	1
6. It is important to speak this language	65.7	26.9	7.4	0.0	0.0
7. Outside class learning is important	57.4	33.3	7.4	1.9	0.0
12. It is important for future studies	50.9	28.7	11.1	7.4	1.9
13. It is important for traveling and etc	42	46.3	8.3	2.8	0.0
15. I want to become able to speak this language	68.5	24.1	4.6	1.9	0.9
19. It will help me get a good job	38.0	39.8	16.7	4.6	0.9
42. The lecture should be more career focused	22.2	24.1	23.1	22.2	8.3

A reason hypothesized for students' positive long-term English learning attitudes is because they perceive English ability to be crucial for their future career. As indicated by the interview, students perceive English to be related to all aspects of their future lives such as employment, graduate school studies and international opportunities.

On the other hand, students are showing least positive attitudes toward the learning of English in university. As indicated in Table 5, only a small percentage of participants have agreed strongly with these question items. Reasons

suggested for this trend is because that university students have negative attitudes toward learning in general especially after entering the university. Another reason suggested for students' negative attitudes is that students are not satisfied with their current English education. As indicated by items 45 and 46 in Table 5, 15.7% and 12.4% as well as 30.6% and 27.6% of participants have responded strongly disagree and disagree respectively.

**Table 5: Percentage of Results: Learning L2 at the University**

Item	5	4	3	2	1
21. To become good, this lecture is important	12.4	35.6	36.1	16.7	2.8
31. I like this lecture	3.7	18.5	32.4	27.8	17.6
36. This lecture is interesting	1.9	23.1	37.0	25.0	13.0
40. The lecture is highly practical	1.9	15.7	37.0	26.9	18.5
41. I am interested with this lecture	0.9	21.3	32.4	32.4	13.0
44. I am satisfied with this lecture	0.0	21.3	38.0	28.7	12.0
45. I don't want the content of the lecture to be changed	0.9	13.0	39.8	30.6	15.7
46. I don't want the style of the lecture to be changed	1.0	15.2	43.8	27.6	12.4

Note. Items 45 and 46 have been reversed.

Similar to L2 attitudes, participants' L3 attitudes were examined by the six latent attitudes. Despite a trend on L3 learning attitudes was difficult to detect, results have indicated that students also have positive attitudes toward most aspects of L3 learning. Students have the most positive

attitudes toward long-term learning and L3 native speakers. A description of these attitudes is presented in Tables 6. As indicated by item 6, approximately 50% of the participants have agreed that it is important to learn L3 long-term.

**Table 6: Percentage of Results: Importance of Long-term L3 Learning**

Item	5	4	3	2	1
6. It is important to speak this language	19.6	31.2	22.1	20.2	6.9
7. Outside class learning is important	25.1	37.5	20.7	11.8	5.0
12. It is important for future studies	14.3	20.9	19.6	28.7	16.5
13. It is important for traveling and etc	15.5	34.5	19.9	19.9	10.2
15. I want to become able to speak this language	31.1	29.9	15.0	14.1	9.7
19. It will help me get a good job	10.5	16.5	28.7	27.0	17.4
42. The lecture should be more career focused	9.9	18.2	32.8	25.1	14.0

Between items 6, 12 and 13, the greatest percentage of participants responded positively to item 13: L3 is important because of traveling. In the interview, 10 out of 30 participants responded that they have chosen their L3 because they want to visit that country someday. Thus, it can be considered that students' L3 attitudes are influenced by their instrumental orientations. On the other hand, for item 12: it is important for future studies, participants' responses are distributed across the five points. It is predicted that those that have strongly agreed to this item are probably the engineering major students who have the image that

the learning of German is necessary for their future studies. Therefore, students' L3 attitudes are likely to be influenced by their different L3 sections.

On the other hand, first-year students have the least positive attitudes toward learning L3 outside the university context. A description of students' attitudes is presented in Table 7. For example, 64.7% and 63.3% of participants have claimed strongly toward items 48 and 49 that they do not do things relating to L3 learning outside the classroom. These figures are supported by their interview results. A student commented that L3 is a "waste of time" that L3 learning is for "credits only." In contrast, although 22.3% of participants replied positively to item 47: studying L3 at home, it was clarified in the interviews that students only study before their tests.

**Table 7: Percentage of Results: Learning L3 Outside the University**

Item	5	4	3	2	1
2. I want to speak this language someday	5.0	15.2	20.9	33.1	25.9
3. I like learning it.	12.1	32.5	21.8	22.3	11.3
17. I want to continue learning it	11.3	19.3	24.3	20.7	24.3
47. I study at home	5.5	22.3	11.6	24.2	36.4
48. I do things relate to this language	3.3	4.4	8.0	19.6	64.7
49. I use things that help me learn this language	3.0	8.0	8.6	17.1	63.3

Second, the *t* test was conducted to investigate the differences between students' L2 and L3 attitudes and the



significance of their differences. Overall findings suggest that first-year students have higher positive attitudes toward L2 than L3 learning. The greatest difference was identified between students' attitudes toward the importance of long-term learning and the difficulty of language learning. Items with significant differences are listed in Table 9. Item 19 ( $t = 23.52$ ) was the most significant item. Whereas students have expressed a positive attitude toward the advantages of L2 for employment, they perceive L3 to have small relevance to their future.

**Table 8: T Test Between L2 and L3 Items: Importance of Long-term Language Learning**

Pair (Item No.)	L2 Mean	L3 Mean	Diff.	t	df	p
6. It is important to speak this language	4.59	3.35	1.24	18.71**	371	.00
7. Outside class learning is important	4.47	3.65	.82	14.32**	372	.00
12. It is important for future studies	4.46	2.86	1.61	20.90**	372	.00
13. It is important for traveling and etc	4.21	3.23	.98	13.71**	371	.00
15. I want to become able to speak this language	4.63	3.60	1.03	15.07**	370	.00
19. It will help me get a good job	4.33	2.73	1.61	23.52**	372	.00
42. The lecture should be more career focused	3.57	2.85	.72	10.20**	371	.00

Note. Diff = Difference in L2 and L3 mean.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 9 indicates that students' attitude toward language learning difficulty is significantly different between L2 and L3 learning. The most significant difference was identified in item 14: it is easier than the other language,  $t = 12.09$ ,  $p < .01$ . One reason suggested for this difference is that students have very limited L3 learning experience. As a consequence, they are unable to form distinctive attitudes toward L3 as they were able to in L2 learning.

**Table 9: T Test Between L2 and L3 Items: Difficulty with Language Learning**

Pair (Item No.)	L2 Mean	L3 Mean	Diff.	t	df	p
1. It is difficult	2.90	2.29	.60	7.14**	372	.00
14. It is easier than the other language	3.76	2.36	1.39	12.09**	371	.00
16. The grammar is easy	3.33	2.64	.689	7.51**	371	.00

Note. Diff = Difference in L2 and L3 mean.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Third, the Pearson correlation coefficient measurement was conducted to examine L2 L3 correlation. Overall, it was found that students' L2 attitudes correlate with their L3 attitudes, especially toward how they feel about the learning style of the language. From the analysis, 32 out of 40 pairs of items have expressed small to large level of significant relationships. Table 10 lists items with strong correlations. The highest correlation was discovered in item 43, "We should have the right to choose our own teacher" ( $r = .59$ ,

$p < .01$ ) and item 38, “We should have the right to choose topics we are interested in” ( $r = .89, p < .01$ ). It indicates that students who feel that it is their right to choose English teachers would have the same attitudes toward L3 teachers and vice versa. This suggests that students' attitudes toward their learning style preference are not language specific. In addition, for item 26, “I want to speak to the native speakers of the language,” a relatively strong correlation was identified ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ). It indicates that students who feel positively toward native speakers of L2 are likely to feel positively toward L3 native speakers.

**Table 10: Correlation Coefficient Between L2 and L3 Items**

Items	r	p
4. Best to learn this language at its native-speaking country.	.52**	.00
14. It is easier to learn L2 than L3	-.59**	.00
22. Listening to the music and watching movies is important	.44**	.00
26. I want to get to know more about the native speakers.	.46**	.00
27. The more I know, the more I want to learn about them	.45**	.00
30. I would like to talk to the native speakers of the language	.43**	.00
35. Having a happy atmosphere is the most important thing	.53**	.00
38. Students should have the right to choose topics	.58**	.00
43. Students should have the right to choose teacher.	.59**	.00

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Conclusion

This study provides new insights for the understanding of Japanese learners by investigating first year university students' attitudes toward the learning of L2 and L3. It employed a quantitative measure (in-class questionnaire) followed by a qualitative measure (interviews) on 373 students from one public Japanese university. Secondly, it presents a framework for examining Japanese students' L3 attitudes. Results from this investigation are significant because of the shortage on research of L3 attitudes in Japan. Thirdly, this overview on students' L2 and L3 attitudes contributes to the understanding of language learning in the Japanese university context. This research offers another perspective on future language curriculum developments incorporating student attitudes into future reforms. Japanese first-year students have positive attitudes toward both L2 and L3 learning but they have more positive attitudes toward the former. For L2, students have most positive attitudes toward long-term learning and least favorable attitudes toward L2 learning in university. For L3, students have most positive attitudes toward long-term learning, native speakers of the language and least positive attitudes toward L3 learning outside the university. Results of this study argue that students' L2 attitudes may correlate with their L3 attitudes, thus L2 attitudes can be used as an indicator of possible attitudes toward L3 attitudes. This suggest what happens in the English classroom also happens in other language classrooms. Thus, this study on students' L2 and L3 attitudes provides a comparative perspective for L2 language teachers to understand students' learning by reflecting students' L3 attitudes.

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