Why stop studying Japanese? A case in Australia

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Why are there so few advanced learners of Japanese in Australia? A new longitudinal study of 500 high school learners acts as both a reflector to clarify continuation/discontinuation and a stimulus to further action, that is, to develop policy strategies for the improvement of the continuation rate. Data from the first round of analysis was examined from dual perspectives of study strategies and motivation, concerning learners' plans for continuation/discontinuation. The findings show that the continuing group has a higher level of both motivation and learner autonomy. The paper makes some suggestions and indicates the future direction of the study.

オーストラリアに上級日本語学習者が少ないのはなぜだろうか。500名の高校生学習者を対象とした本研究は、日本語学習の継続、中断の理由を探ると同時に、継続率を上げるための政策に提言を行うことを目的としている。本稿では、一年目の調査データをもとに学習習慣とモーティベーションが学習の継続、中断とどのように関わっているかを検討する。結果、継続組はモーティベーション、学習者オートノミーともにレベルが高いことが分かった。それに基づいた提言と本研究の今後の方針を示して稿を閉じる。

AUSTRALIA IS widely known to have a large number of learners of Japanese, third largest in the world after China and South Korea. Given the cultural, linguistic, and geographical distances between Australia and Japan, it is remarkable that 370,000 learners, roughly one in 57 Australians, are learning Japanese. However, the overwhelming majority is intermediate-level or lower and 96% attends primary or secondary school. Estimates show that only about 500 learners are studying at an advanced or professional level of proficiency (The Japan Foundation, 2006, 2004).

This scarcity of advanced learners prompts our main question: Why is the Australian Japanese learner population concentrated at the beginner level? This is an overreaching question, which triggers personal, institutional, and social questions such as those below and many more:

- Why do the beginners stop learning Japanese?
- Is it because they lack motivation?
- Is it because they lack adequate study skills?
- Are there infrastructure problems?

Of many subsets of questions, this paper discusses motivation and study habits of senior secondary school learners of Japanese in relation to their wish to continue or discontinue formal Japanese study in the following year.

The study

This is an ongoing, 3-year study involving both university students and senior secondary students. Questionnaires, focus group interviews, and a proficiency test are the main instruments. Proficiency is measured with a version of the Simplified Proficiency Oriented Test (SPOT) (Kobayashi, Ford-Niwa, & Yamamoto, 1997) relevant from beginner to intermediate level. This paper focuses on the questionnaire data collected from high school students from Years 10, 11, and 12, who took part in the first round of data collection in 2009.

Participants

Participants were 464 students from ten high schools in Sydney and surrounding areas, with 164 (35.3%) males, and 300(64.7%) females. Most (70.9%) had studied Japanese for 4 years or less, with 16.7% having studied for less than 3 years. Further participant information is listed below:

- Fifty-five percent are Year 10 students. Year 11 and 12 enrollments in any language are small nationally, as after Year 10 language study becomes elective, and enrollment in a language means that one would take the university qualifying examination in the language in Year 12.
- The participants have diverse language backgrounds, with English background speakers the minority (28.4%), whilst the remaining 71.6% are speakers of Cantonese (25.4%), Mandarin (16.2%), Korean (11.9%), and other languages (18.1%). Those studying another language in addition to

Japanese make up 21.3% of participants, with more than half (12.1%) studying Chinese.

- 6.7% knew over 1000 *kanji* characters, while 53.7% had no prior knowledge of kanji before studying Japanese. Migrant children of Chinese heritage in Australia often speak Chinese but do not develop kanji literacy.

Participants' Japanese proficiency level is widely distributed (see Figure 1), with 19 students scoring the minimum of zero, and two students achieving the maximum score of 60.
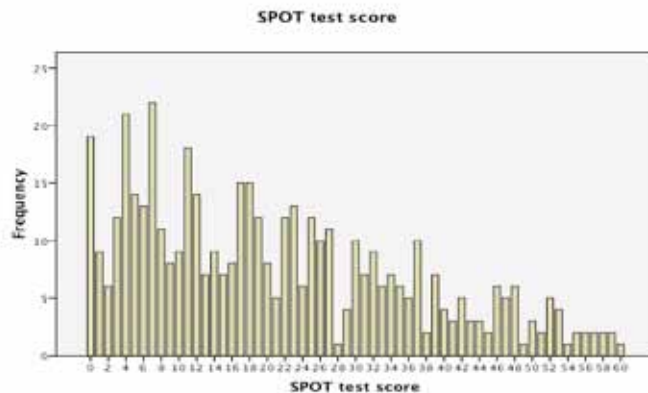

Figure 1. SPOT test scores
N=464; Mean=20.87; Min=0; Max=60

Motivation

Robert Gardner developed the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner, 1985; Gardner, 2001), which underlined the importance of the social aspect of language learning. Gardner could not see how anyone could learn a language to an advanced level if they did

not have a willingness to integrate with the target language community. This willingness he called Integrativeness. Integrative Motivation, central to Gardner's model, consists of three correlated components: Motivation, Attitudes towards the Learning Situation, and Integrativeness.

Each of these components consists of sub-components. The three *sub-components* of Motivation are all essential to learn a language to an advanced level, according to Gardner. Thus, a person needs *motivational intensity (effort), the desire to achieve the goal of learning the language*, as well as *positive attitudes towards learning the language*. Motivation, is supported by Attitudes towards the Learning Situation (*evaluation of the teacher and of the course*) and Integrativeness. Integrativeness consists of three sub-components, namely, *interest in foreign languages*, *attitudes towards the L2 community*, and *integrative orientation*.

Gardner developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery or AMTB (1985) and extensively tested the socio-educational model empirically. Two of the measures, namely, Integrative Orientation and Instrumental Orientation (originally the Orientation Index), resulted in criticism suggesting that Gardner's approach to motivation is dichotomous. However, he asserts that Orientations are merely reasons for learning a language, and that even Instrumental Orientation, such as learning a language to get a job, has a certain inherent element of Integrativeness. The operative variable is motivation, not orientation (Gardner, 2001).

Motivation has been often studied in relation to language learning achievement. However, in this study, motivation is viewed with regard to continuation/discontinuation.

Questionnaire 1

The first of the two questionnaires to be discussed in this paper asked participants to rate a number of statements from Gardner's AMTB (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997) on a seven-point Likert scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Taken from two main sections (Motivation and Integrativeness) of Gardner's Integrative Motive, the thirty AMTB items were adapted in wording where necessary to the context of learning Japanese in Australia (see Appendix 2). Questionnaire 1 was also used to collect the participants' demographic information.

Demographics and plans

Analysis showed a lack of relationship between Japanese proficiency and how many kanji were known by participants prior to studying Japanese. It may be that prior knowledge of kanji does not afford much of an advantage at beginner and intermediate levels where *katakana* and *hiragana* alphabets, rather than kanji, are the main focus. In addition, most participants in this study with prior knowledge of kanji knew only a limited number (less than 100), thus perhaps not providing much advantage in terms of their level of proficiency.

Females (N = 300, M = 23.2, SD = 15.7) showed a significantly higher level of language proficiency compared to males (N = 164, M = 16.5, SD = 13.3; $t(383) = 4.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$).

When asked in the questionnaire: *After you finish this course, do you plan to continue formal study of Japanese?* 68% of participants indicated that they plan to continue (stay-ins), while 32% were planning to discontinue (drop-outs). Analysis suggests that stay-ins have a significantly higher proficiency score than the drop-outs. In addition, stay-ins had visited Japan on average more than four weeks longer than the drop-outs, although this difference proved not significant ($p > .05$). No significant differences were found between these two groups on the basis of gender, or previous knowledge of kanji.

Participants were also asked to indicate in a checklist their reasons for continuing or discontinuing their study of Japanese.

The reason given most often for continuing is *hope to travel to Japan*, followed by *interested in Japanese culture*.

At senior high school, the university entrance score, and how much work the students think they will have to do to achieve a certain level, are often all-important considerations. Ramage (1990) found that the majority of discontinuers in her study indicated that they did not have enough room in their schedule. In the present study, reasons given most often for discontinuing were *takes too much study time* and *too difficult*, followed closely by *cannot expect good marks* and *is not useful for my future career*. There were no students who only ticked *timetable conflict* and/ or *no room in my program of study*. For example, one student's response indicated not only a timetable conflict, but also *is not useful for my future career*. In contrast to Ramage (1990), it cannot be said that timetable conflict is the main reason for discontinuing.

Motivation

Analysis of the two sections Motivation and Integrativeness, firstly, in relation to demographic variables, showed that females reported significantly higher motivation, although no gender differences were found for Integrativeness. Students who had visited Japan had significantly higher motivation as well as Integrativeness. Previous knowledge of kanji, or continuous Japanese study showed no significant effect on motivation or Integrativeness.

Next, levels of Motivation and Integrativeness of stay-ins and drop-outs were compared using t-tests and the differences proved significant (p<.001). Looking firstly at Motivation (Table 1 in Appendix 1), it can be seen that the magnitude of the differences is equally large for *attitudes to learning Japanese* and *desire to learn Japanese*, followed by *motivational intensity*. This result points to the important role of attitudes and motivation

in persistence. Stay-ins show a more positive attitude towards learning Japanese, stronger desire to master the language, and greater intensity when they are learning Japanese, than the drop-outs group. In regard to motivation, these findings agree with studies of persistence in second language learning by Clement, Smythe, and Gardner (1978), and Ramage (1990).

Differences in relation to Integrativeness and its three sub-components are also displayed in Table 1. Although the magnitude is more moderate, stay-ins show higher integrative orientation, higher instrumental orientation, as well as better attitude toward Japanese and the teacher, and stronger interest in foreign languages.

Therefore, the initial findings of this study indicate that in order to influence students to continue their Japanese studies, there is a need to focus particularly on those variables showing the largest effects, i.e. the motivational components: attitudes towards learning Japanese, desire to learn Japanese, and motivational intensity, together with integrative orientation and instrumental orientation.

Questionnaire 2: Learner autonomy and study strategies

Along with motivation, learner autonomy is considered to have a positive influence in successful foreign language learning. They go hand in hand, as motivated students tend to take charge of their own learning, and learner autonomy will in turn increase their motivation. The combination, that is the motivated learners who are equipped with autonomous learning skills and strategies, will be most likely to yield a favorable outcome (e.g. Dickinson, 1995; Lamb, 2001).

The second questionnaire asked participants to specify on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5), how often they use autonomous learning activities in two situations:

in the classroom and *out* of the classroom. These activities in the questionnaire are based on Knowles' (1980) seven stages of autonomous learning, with some modifications, and Oxford's (1990) classification of learning strategies. Autonomous learning stages are: Setting a favorable climate for one's own learning, Assessing one's own learning needs, Transforming needs to learning objectives, Selecting learning resources and activities, Conducting one's own learning, Assessing one's own learning, and Planning future learning. Learning strategies are: Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Affective strategies, and Social strategies.

Table 2 (see Appendix 1) lists the autonomous learning activities in order, from the activity that participants reported engaging in most frequently to least frequently. Most of the activities yielded group means between *often* (4) and *sometimes* (3). It appears that these senior school students are involved in autonomous learning activities rather frequently. They *engage themselves in learning activities* (Conducting one's own learning), *work with others well to learn effectively* (Social strategies) and *identify their own strengths and weaknesses in learning* (Assessing one's own learning needs) more often than sometimes.

In/out of the classroom

To examine activities in and out of the classroom, a paired samples t-test was conducted. Students showed significantly more engagement with autonomous learning activities in class (M = 3.4, SD = 0.6), compared to out of class (M = 3.2, SD = 0.6; t(427) = 11.0, p < .001, η^2 = .22). It is interesting to note that according to this result, students are less autonomous outside of the classroom, where they are free from teacher control. This might imply that in Australian senior school classrooms, teachers generally give students enough opportunity to be autonomous in their learning.

Previous research has found a correlation between level of learner autonomy and language achievement (e.g., Little, 2007). However, this study indicates only a very low correlation between SPOT proficiency test scores and engagement in autonomous learning activities outside the classroom (r = .15, p < .1). No relationship was found between proficiency test scores and the learning activities in class, or any of the learning activities (IN and OUT items). This suggests that the relationship between SPOT test scores and autonomous learning is weak or non-existent.

Stay-ins, drop-outs and autonomous learning

On the other hand, significant differences were found between stay-ins and drop-outs with regard to autonomous learning levels. Stay-ins (M=3.4, SD=0.5) were more likely to be engaged in autonomous learning activities both in and out of class, compared to drop-outs (M = 3.1, SD = .7; t(201) = 3.4, p < .001, η^2 = .03). This difference was reported for both autonomous learning activities in class (t(202) = 3.4, p < .001, η^2 = .03) and out of class (t(419) = 3.7, p < .001, η^2 = .03). This might suggest that those who engage in autonomous learning activities more frequently are more comfortable and confident in their learning, and likely, as a result of continuation, to ultimately reach a higher level of proficiency.

Learning activities outside the classroom

The questionnaire also asked participants to indicate frequency of engagement with a number of learning activities outside the classroom, using a 5-point Likert scale from *never* (1) to *very frequently or daily* (5). Activities ranged from *Reading Japanese grammar/reference books/engaging in Japanese exercises on your own* to *Watching Japanese TV programs, DVDs or movies*, and *Using the Internet in Japanese*. These questions were aimed at finding

what types of learning activities occur outside the classroom. As Krashen (2006) hypothesizes, "Those who get more comprehensible input outside the classroom acquire more language than those who get less" (p. 2).

Table 3 (in Appendix 1) lists in decreasing order, learning activities that students used outside the classroom. The most frequent activity was *Watch Japanese TV programs, DVDs or movies* with a mean score of 3.51, midway between *frequently - weekly* (4) and *occasionally - monthly* (3). This reflects the easy availability of Japanese material on video/DVD and on the Internet in Australia. The second most frequent activity was *Listen to Japanese songs* (M = 3.40). High rankings of these first two activities underline the current global popularity of Japanese popular culture (Aoki, 2004). It is notable that all writing-related activities ranked low in the list.

The level of learner autonomy and activities engaged in outside the classroom were tested for correlation. Students with higher levels of learner autonomy, measured by the frequency of autonomous learning activities in Table 2, were found to be spending more time on *outside* Japanese related activities in Table 3 (r = .39, p < .01). All outside learning activities were positively related to autonomous learning apart from listening to Japanese songs. This could be due to the nature of listening to Japanese songs, which is more casual than other activities, and perhaps one of the most passive activities. A large and positive correlation was found between autonomous learning and *Practicing Japanese with non-Japan*ese (r = .37, p < .01) and *Seeing the teacher about Japanese study* (r = .39, p < .01). As these two activities require more initiative, this finding indicates that participants who engage in these activities are highly autonomous learners.

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare stay-ins and drop-outs with regard to their involvement in out-of-class activities. Overall, stay-ins reported spending more time on all activities apart from *Send/read text messages in Japanese* on their own initiative, outside of regular classes. An average activity score for all 15 activities in Table 3 shows that, overall, stay-ins (M = 2.6, SD = .6) spent more time on Japanese-related activities outside of class than did drop-outs (M = 2.2, SD = .7; t(431) = 5.1, p < .001, η^2 = .06).

Correlational analyses found a medium and positive correlation (r = .24 - .37, p < .01) between SPOT scores and twelve of the fifteen activities in Table 3. A weak relationship was found for the two activities *Doing Japanese self-study* and *Playing games in Japanese* (r = .24 - .32, p < .01), whilst no relationship was found between SPOT scores and *Seeing the teacher about Japanese studies*. Overall, the total activity score (of all 15 activities) showed a fairly strong relationship with SPOT scores, such that more time spent on Japanese activities was related to higher SPOT scores (r = .46, p < .01).

Summing up

In summary, four characteristics of participants in relation to learner autonomy and study strategies were examined: Japanese language proficiency measured by SPOT; level of learner autonomy measured by the frequency of activities in Table 2; time spent on out-of-class Japanese-related activities measured by frequency of activities in Table 3; and lastly, participants' plans to continue or discontinue formal study of Japanese. Analysis revealed that autonomy level does not correlate with SPOT proficiency, but learners who spend more time on out-of-class learning activities do score higher in SPOT. Those who plan to continue spend more time doing out-of-class learning activities and have a higher level of autonomy. Furthermore, those with a higher level of autonomy spend more time with out-of-class learning activities.

Concluding remarks

This paper examined the motivation and the study skills and habits of Australian high school learners of Japanese in relation to the learners' plans to continue or discontinue Japanese study. It was found that those who plan to continue, the stay-ins, have a higher level of motivation and a higher level of autonomy than those who plan to discontinue, as expected. Students who had visited Japan had significantly higher levels of motivation as well as integrativeness. The findings reveal that previous kanji knowledge is not necessarily a major reason for continuing Japanese study, and also challenge the commonly held myth that those with prior kanji knowledge do better in Japanese.

Based on the findings, we can therefore recommend that teaching programs include incentives to raise learner motivation and levels of autonomy. More specifically, schools could provide more opportunities for students to participate in study tours of Japan, and teachers could include more activities in the classroom that encourage development of learner autonomy. However, we make these recommendations with the caution that the findings come from a specific group of learners and may not apply to other settings.

Two issues remain. Firstly, recent developments in motivation to learn a second language theorize that integrativeness might be better explained in terms of the learner's identity or self-concept as a second language speaker (Dörnyei, 2009). Accordingly, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System (2005) uses the concept of *possible selves* and L2 motivation. This Self-System, initially a theoretical concept lacking empirical testing, is gaining support from various researchers (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). In the present study, a recently published scale to measure *possible selves* in relation to motivation (MacIntyre, Mackinnon, & Clement, 2009) will be adopted in the second round of data collection.

Secondly, the findings of this paper only deal with personal factors of the high school learners. The moderate nature of the findings in terms of motivation and learner autonomy directs attention to institutional and social factors that perhaps have a stronger influence over the learners' decision to either continue or discontinue Japanese study. For example, as suggested by Hurley (2008), whether the students had timetable conflicts, or whether their school had a culture of promoting study of languages, could act as the key factor in their decision-making, no matter how motivated or skilled they are in studying Japanese. Our next step is to examine our interview data to analyse institutional and social factors in the learners' decision-making, in order to develop a fuller understanding of the current problem.

Informed consent

The authors hereby declare that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

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Bio data

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Appendix 1
Tables

Table 1. Differences for stay-ins and drop-outs

		Plan to continue studying Japanese	Plan to discontinue studying Japanese	t	df	Effect size*
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)			
Motivation:	Attitudes to learning Japanese	35.2 (4.6)	26.8 (7.5)	12.4**	192	0.26
	Motivational Desire	36.2 (5.2)	27.4 (7.5)	12.6**	203	0.26
	Motivational Intensity	15.4 (3.2)	12.2 (4.0)	8.3**	227	0.13
Integrativeness:	Integrative Orientation	16.6 (3.3)	13.4 (4.2)	7.8**	222	0.12
	Instrumental Orientation	14.8 (3.5)	11.7 (4.0)	7.8**	240	0.12
	Attitudes to Japanese and teacher	13.7 (2.0)	12.1 (2.6)	6.3**	223	0.08
	Interest in foreign languages	35.5 (4.6)	33.4 (5.2)	4.2**	447	0.04

**$p < .001$;

*Eta-squared values >0.14 imply a large effect size, values >0.06 imply a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988, pp. 284-7).

Table 2. Frequency of engagement with autonomous learning activities

Rank	Autonomous learning activities		Mean (SD)
1.	Engage myself in the task/activity to successfully finish it	IN	3.9 (.9)
		OUT	3.7 (1.1)
2.	Work with others well (ask questions, practice together, etc.) to learn effectively	IN	3.9 (1.0)
		OUT	3.5 (1.2)
3.	Identify my strength and weakness in learning the Japanese language	IN	3.6 (.9)
		OUT	3.1 (1.0)

Rank	Autonomous learning activities		Mean (SD)
4.	Manage my emotion (cope with anxiety, cheer up myself, etc.) to learn efficiently	IN	3.5 (1.1)
		OUT	3.4 (1.2)
5.	Evaluate how well I am doing in the task/topic/course/against my aim	IN	3.5 (1.1)
		OUT	3.2 (1.1)
6.	Choose who I should work with in the task/activity	IN	3.5 (1.1)
		OUT	3.0 (1.3)
7.	Plan and study to prepare for the future learning opportunities to come	IN	3.4 (1.1)
		OUT	3.4 (1.1)
8.	Choose what tasks/activities I should do to achieve my aim	IN	3.4 (1.0)
		OUT	3.2 (1.1)
8.	Use strategies to overcome shortcomings in reading, writing, communicating, and practicing (guessing, using body language, etc.)	IN	3.4 (1.0)
		OUT	3.2 (1.1)
9.	Decide what I aim to learn in a given situation	IN	3.4 (1.0)
		OUT	3.1 (1.1)
10.	Select what materials (books, web pages, advertisements, menus, worksheets, etc.) to use in the task/activity	IN	3.3 (1.1)
		OUT	3.2 (1.2)
11.	Use memory strategies to learn words and expressions (flash cards, word maps, etc.)	IN	3.2 (1.3)
		OUT	3.2 (1.3)
12.	Systematically practice Japanese to learn well (daily planner, your own grammar charts, etc.)	IN	2.8 (1.2)
		OUT	2.7 (1.2)
13.	Create materials (activity sheets, questions, dialogues, etc.) to use in the task/activity	IN	2.6 (1.1)
		OUT	2.5 (1.1)

Table 3. Frequency of learning activities outside the classroom

Rank	Activity	Mean (SD)
1.	Watched Japanese TV programs, DVDs or movies	3.51 (1.21)
2.	Listened to Japanese songs	3.40 (1.43)
3.	Read Japanese grammar/reference books/ Done Japanese exercises on your own	3.04 (.91)
4.	Practiced using Japanese with non-Japanese friends	2.98 (1.21)
5.	Read books/magazines/papers in Japanese	2.59 (1.17)
6.	Talked to/Practiced using Japanese with Japanese people	2.50 (1.15)
7.	Read manga in Japanese	2.48 (1.30)
8.	Gone to see your teacher about Japanese study	2.42 (1.06)
9.	Done Japanese self-study in a group	2.39 (1.03)
10.	Played games (computer games, board games, etc.) in Japanese	2.35 (1.31)
11.	Used the Internet in Japanese	2.12 (1.24)
12.	Sent/read e-mails in Japanese	2.08 (1.09)
13.	Written Japanese letters to friends	1.89 (1.05)
14.	Written a diary in Japanese	1.59 (.88)
15.	Sent/read text messages in Japanese	1.55 (.88)

Appendix 2

AMTB Items (based on Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997)

All 7-point Likert scales, presented in jumbled order in questionnaire.

MOTIVATION is measured by three scales:

1. DESIRE TO LEARN JAPANESE:
- I want to learn Japanese so well that it will become second nature to me.
- I would like to learn as much Japanese as possible.
- I wish I were fluent in Japanese.
- Knowing Japanese isn't really an important goal in my life.
- To be honest, I really have little desire to learn Japanese.
- I haven't any great wish to learn more than the basics of Japanese.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING JAPANESE:
- I really enjoy learning Japanese.
- I plan to learn as much Japanese as possible.
- Because Australia is in the Asian region, I think that all Australian schools should teach Japanese.
- I find the study of Japanese very boring.
- Learning Japanese is a waste of time.
- When I finish this course, I will give up the study of Japanese entirely because I am not interested in it.

3. MOTIVATIONAL INTENSITY:
- I keep up to date with Japanese by working on it almost every day.
- I don't bother checking my corrected assignments in my Japanese courses.
- I can't be bothered trying to understand the more complex aspects of Japanese.

INTEGRATIVENESS is measured by three scales:

1. INTEREST IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES:
- I often wish I could read newspapers and magazines in another language.
- If I planned to stay in another country, I would make a great effort to learn the language even though I could get along in English.
- I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.
- Seeing that Australia is relatively far from countries speaking other languages, it is not important for Australians to learn foreign languages.
- Most foreign languages sound crude and harsh.
- I would rather see a foreign film dubbed in English than see the film in its original language with English sub-titles.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARD THE JAPANESE:
- The more I get to know the Japanese, the more I want to be fluent in their language.
- The more I learn about the Japanese, the less I like them.
- I like my Japanese teacher

3. INTEGRATIVE ORIENTATION:

- Studying Japanese can be important for me because it will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people.
- Studying Japanese is important because it will allow me to gain good friends more easily among Japanese.
- Studying Japanese is important because it will enable me to better understand Asian ways of life and culture.

Other: INSTRUMENTAL ORIENTATION:

- Studying Japanese is important because it will make me appear more cultured.
- Studying Japanese is important because it will give me an edge in competing with others.
- Studying Japanese can be important to me because I think it will someday be useful in getting a good job.