Persistence and Learning Japanese

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Reference Data:
Northwood, Barbara M. (2013). Persistence and learning Japanese. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Despite large numbers of learners of Japanese in Australia, disturbingly few learners reach an advanced level of the language. Motivation and attitudes have been found to play an important role in persistence in previous L2 motivational research (e.g., Ramage, 1990). A study of over 600 learners of Japanese in Australian universities and senior high schools sought to investigate this issue, focused upon motivation and learner autonomy. In this paper I discuss the predominant factors that influenced intention to continue among participants. An unexpected level of engagement in Japanese popular culture (or J-pop) was found, often providing the motivation not only to take up Japanese but also to continue. The findings link persistence with a developing sense of self-identity as a Japanese speaker among advanced learners, which ties in with Dörnyei's (2009) concept of language identity and the L2 Self.

オーストラリアの日本語学習者数は多いが、日本語上級レベルまで到達する学習者は少ない。先行研究では、学習の継続には動機付けと学習態度が大切な役割を果たすと言われている（例えば、Ramage, 1990)。本研究は、この問題を探究するため、オーストラリアの大学と高校で日本語を履修している学習者600人以上を対象に動機づけと学習者オートノミーに焦点をおいて調査を行った。本稿は、調査結果から浮かび上がった顕著な要因に関して議論する。J-pop文化への興味が非常に高いことが、日本語学習のきっかけともなり、且つ、学習継続の要因の一つであった。上級レベルの学習者の中には日本語話者としてのセルフ・アイデンティティの発展が見受けられた。これは、Dörnyeiが提唱している言語アイデンティティと第二言語話者としての自己の概念に結びつくと考えられる。

Persistence is the focus in this motivational study of learners of Japanese in Australia. Despite a large population of learners of Japanese, fourth largest in the world after South Korea, China, then Indonesia (The Japan Foundation, 2011), disturbingly few learners in Australia reach an advanced level of the language, such as being capable of professional negotiation and business communication. An Australian research project investigated this issue in both universities and senior high schools, seeking to uncover what keeps some learners going while so many others give up along the way. The overall project encompassed surveys of learner autonomy and autonomous learning skills as well as surveys focused on motivation and attitudes. Learner autonomy is considered to have a positive impact upon learning a foreign language, as motivated students tend to direct their own learning, and learner autonomy in turn boosts their motivation (e.g., Dickinson, 1995). Initial findings of the project have been reported previously, but individually, as the school study (Northwood & Thomson, 2010), and the university study (Northwood & Thomson, 2012).

The intention in this paper is two-fold: to build upon the earlier reports by bringing together results from *both* school and university studies and to report findings that relate to Japanese mass culture products such as manga, anime, and television drama, referred to here as J-pop. The J-pop phenomenon is possibly the first time in second language learning that students are *using* the language in this way, thereby formulating their own learning direction. Through the Internet and J-pop "communities," learning Japanese as a foreign language increasingly resembles learning in a second language learning context.

The Australia Research Council (ARC) and The Japan Foundation, Sydney, funded this study as part of an ARC Linkage Project led by C. K. Thomson, chief investigator. A pilot study for the overall project was carried out by the chief investigator, using a small group of learners of Japanese. This paper is based on the findings of one part of the project.

Background

Reasons for the popularity of J-pop appear to be diverse. J-pop's "obvious quality, stylistic and thematic complexity, insistent difference from Western pop conventions" is attractive to global consumers, according to Tsutsui (2010, p. 46). Also, a substantial part of the appeal of not only anime, but also manga and sci-fi cinema is "its subversive edge, its tenacious unwillingness to embrace the Hollywood happy ending" (p. 47). The *Japaneseness* of anime and manga is "an essential aspect of the media's appeal to many fans . . . the number of fans who study Japanese, read up on Japanese history, and travel to Japan (or wish they could) is surprisingly high" (Napier, 2007, p. 210). Napier added that although anime and manga contain "Japanese elements" they are separated from reality even more than traditional movies. For example, the characters are both "Japanese" and "nationless." "Thus, when a non-Japanese enjoys or identifies with a character, he is identifying within a highly distinctive fantasyscape that combines elements of 'real' Japan within a cartoon imaginary" (Napier, 2007, p. 210).

Swenson (2007) found J-pop was the reason for initial interest in Japanese culture among American college students, although that did not necessarily mean they were interested in learning the Japanese language. In Swenson's study, many of those interviewed apparently had extensive knowledge of anime, and once an initial interest had been established they were motivated to find out more about Japan.

Motivation

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates us, but in the field of L2 learning, the initial concept of motivation came from social psychology, specifically Gardner (1985) and associates, who referred to motivation as follows:

> To the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity. Effort alone does not signify motivation. . . . When the desire to achieve the goal and favourable attitudes toward the goal are linked with the effort or the drive, then we have a motivated organism. (pp. 10-11)

Gardner's (1985) comprehensive description aptly described the highly motivated learners whom every teacher has encountered in the classroom at one time or another. In carrying out a review of relevant literature, I have come to admire Gardner's scientific approach to motivation and the sophisticated level of statistical analyses he has used to back up his tests, outcomes, concepts and theories, a challenge particularly in times predating the personal computer. At the same time, I can understand Ushioda's (2001) stance against so much quantitative research, not least because in this current project some of the most il-

luminating material came from focus group interviews with participants. Being a learner of Japanese myself, I cannot help but support Dörnyei's (2009) latest concept of L2 motivation that proposes a learner develops a self-identity as a speaker of the target language. That it is possible to support more than one major L2 model indicates that perhaps the differences between them are principally a matter of focus, looking at L2 motivation from different angles.

Indeed, Dörnyei (2005) has proposed a possible synthesis of four influential L2 motivational models in the L2 Motivational Self System. According to Dörnyei, the L2 Motivational Self-System shares similarities with the Integrative Motive from Gardner's (2001) Socio-Educational model of SLA and is linked with the Orientations model of Noels (2003) and the Dimensions model of Ushioda (2001). The components of each of the four models fall into three main divisions (see Figure 1).

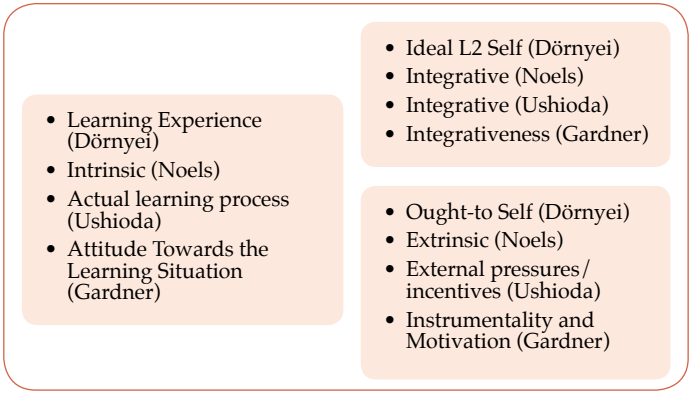

Figure 1. Linking the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005) with Orientations (Noels, 2003), Motivational Dimensions (Ushioda, 2001), and Integrative Motivation (Gardner, 2001). (Adapted from Dörnyei, 2005, p. 105)

The main components of Dörnyei's (2005) model, the *Ideal L2 Self*, the *Ought-to L2 Self*, and the *Learning Experience*, are found heading each of the three divisions. In the interest of brevity, the components are not elaborated upon here. It must be noted however, that the divisions are not mutually exclusive, and that a construct such as the Ideal L2 Self is not essentially the same as Integrativeness. Dörnyei incorporated the *possible selves* theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and the Self-Discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) into the L2 Motivational Self System. The basic concept is that a learner might develop a self-image as a speaker of the L2. This would appear to imply a certain level of persistence.

The Study

Participants attended four universities (n = 164) and 10 senior high schools (n = 464) in the Sydney area. Demographics are summarised in Tables A1, A2, and A3 in Appendix A. The school study consisted of Years 10, 11, and 12, the equivalent of senior high school (*kōtōgakkō*) in Japan. There was a second round of data collection in the university study (see Table A3). All participants were current or former learners of Japanese who volunteered to take part.

The Intention to Continue measure allowed the sample to be divided into two groups: those who intended to continue formal study of Japanese (the *stay-ins*), and those who intended to discontinue (the *drop-outs*). Participants were asked to indicate those factors that influenced their intention, using a checklist of options.

Questionnaires

In addition to the demographics questionnaire, the *Motivation and Attitudes* questionnaire consisted of 30 items selected from the Attitude/Motivational Test Battery (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997), which used a 7-point Likert format. A learner

autonomy questionnaire was divided into two parts: *Habits*, where participants specified how often they used 14 autonomous learning activities both *in* the classroom and *out* of the classroom; and *Activities*, where participants indicated frequency of engagement with a number of learning activities outside the classroom. SPSS 17 was used for analysis.

Interviews

Questionnaire data was augmented with focus group interviews involving another 43 university learners. Interview 1 provided information about autonomous study habits and activities among eight beginners. Interview 2 involved six students considered to be of advanced level: Three had proceeded to an Honours course requiring a 4th year of Japanese language study and research while all had completed 3rd year Japanese (Interviews 1 and 2 are discussed in some detail in Northwood & Thomson, 2012). Interview 3 involved 29 learners of various levels of Japanese proficiency.

Results

Intention to Continue

Hope to travel to Japan, both overall and within each Japanese course, was the reason given most frequently (by over 80% in every course) as influencing the choice to continue in both school and university studies. *Interest in Japanese culture* was the second most frequent factor (see Appendix B, Figures B1 and B2). The hope to travel to Japan appears to be related to the desire to speak the language. However, it may also arise from interest in J-pop, which often motivates fans to find out more about Japan (Napier, 2007; Swensen, 2007).

Interest in the L2 culture has been found to be important in other studies of motivation and persistence (e.g., Ramage, 1990), and among Australian learners of Japanese (e.g., Marriott, Neustupny, & Spence-Brown, 1994). As Japan's cultural influence since the 19th century (e.g., on art) has been extensive (see Napier, 2007), the interest in Japanese culture in the present study is presumably not related to J-pop culture alone. Perhaps some of the interest springs from the mix of modern and ancient that is characteristic of Japan, two extremes that were found in this study. For example, in Interview 3, one student expressed a "really huge interest" in learning to make traditional Japanese sweets [*wagashi*] and another considered an interest in Japanese to be relevant to his future in software engineering.

A strong interest in J-pop was found among participants and was particularly prominent among participants in university study where *enjoy reading manga, watching anime and TV drama* was the third most-frequent reason for continuing to study the language. In the school study this reason ranked fourth, together with *like reading in Japanese*. It is also likely that the reasons *like reading in Japanese* and *like listening to Japanese* (fourth and fifth in priority among university learners) are connected with J-pop. Among those studying Japanese in their 3rd year or later, the most advanced group, the top three options could all be said to involve J-pop (namely, *like listening to Japanese*, *interested in Japanese culture*¸ and *enjoy reading manga, etc*.). Among university learners who participated in the second round of data collection (Round II), *enjoy reading manga, watching anime and TV drama* headed the list as the main reason to continue (at 92%), whereas *useful for my career* ranked eighth in importance.

The *Activities* learner autonomy questionnaire revealed that activities in which high school and university participants most frequently engaged outside the classroom on their own initiative were those involving J-pop. *Watching Japanese TV programs, DVDs or movies*, and *listening to Japanese songs* were the most frequent, and registered midway between *weekly* and *monthly* in frequency. In support of the questionnaire findings, an inter-

est in J-pop was almost taken for granted among students in Interview 3, who also expressed a desire to travel around Japan where the language they had learnt would prove useful.

J-Pop and Learning Japanese

Michelle and Vanessa (both pseudonyms) in Interview 3 appeared to be highly motivated to learn Japanese in terms of motivational desire, intensity (effort), and positive attitudes toward learning, the three components that make up Motivation in Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational model and in the Attitude/Motivational Test Battery. Vanessa used J-pop both for enjoyment and as a tool for learning Japanese and commented, "You just want to be able to understand the drama and anime yourself; you don't want to wait for a week or two weeks for other peoples' translation" (Vanessa interview, 20 Sep 2010). Vanessa particularly enjoyed watching Japanese comedy shows and thought that consequently her listening ability was better than that of her classmates. Michelle expressed a very strong interest in J-pop. In fact, the reason driving Michelle to "speak and listen really fluently" she said, was to be able to watch Japanese drama and to read manga without having to continually rely on a dictionary. As she put it:

> Originally, I had no interest in Japanese culture, didn't even know it existed, in a sense, but then my friend introduced me to manga, anime, pop culture, drama, and because I started to watch that in the 1st year [of my studies], oh, I just loved it so much, that the 2nd year, I had to study Japanese. . . . I want to translate myself. I think you enjoy it more if you understand it just by listening. So I thought, I'll push myself and learn Japanese. . . . So it's just out of interest. . . . I just want to learn more. (Michelle interview, 20 Sep 2010)

Vanessa saw herself using Japanese in a future career, possibly banking, alongside her bilingual skills in Chinese and English. Michelle, on the other hand, thought that the only way she would use Japanese (with her science degree) was to travel to Japan, perhaps to follow her interest in making traditional Japanese sweets. Vanessa and Michelle, along with others in Interview 3, showed a real desire to speak the language, apparently connected with the desire to travel to Japan. Although not mentioned in interviews, perhaps more advanced learners were aware that J-pop activities provide few opportunities for output in Japanese.

Discussion

The latest survey by The Japan Foundation (2011) appears to be the first to empirically document the influence of J-pop products in relation to Japanese language education. Under the category of "knowledge-based tendencies," the newly added *learning about manga, anime, etc.* was rated the second most popular purpose for Japanese language study among 14,000 participants worldwide. When accounting for education level, it also ranked third globally among 3,000 learners in Higher Education (p. 9).

Questionnaires and interviews indicated that interest in J-pop motivated many participants to take up Japanese and to continue studying, particularly at the university level. The two learners in Interview 3, Vanessa and Michelle, illustrate the drive to learn Japanese that an interest in J-pop can evoke. However, it takes more than a love of manga and anime to continue to an advanced (e.g., 3rd-year university) level of Japanese; considerable effort is also necessary. The motivation of J-pop appears to be the activity itself, the inherent enjoyment. However, for some, perhaps, J-pop is more than this; it is possibly related to self-identity.

Lending support to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System and the concept of language identity, advanced learners such

as Vanessa (Interview 3) seemingly envisioned a future that included Japanese in their everyday lives. Similarly, among the most advanced learners in Interview 2 (all pseudonyms), Pam became interested in pursuing a career path in science research in Japan; while Abe envisaged a teaching career after changing his major from International Studies to Linguistics and Japanese. Jim, after completing a Commerce degree and thereby fulfilling his parents' wishes, wanted to go on to postgraduate study in either interpreting or teaching, which would enable him to use Japanese. Keith, on the other hand, planned to go to Japan on a working holiday.

Visualisation is widely used in the sporting world where, for example, Olympic athletes make use of a vision as a motive to enable them to envision their success, which might also have application in the classroom. Having students examine their futures and think about goals that are important to them might increase their motivation, according to Markus and Nurius (1986). "The more vivid and elaborate the possible self, the more motivationally effective it is expected to be" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 100). Dörnyei (2009) noted that, if being proficient in the language is truly part of one's *ideal* or *ought-to self*, it will act as a powerful motivator to learn the language in order to reduce the discrepancy between the current self and the possible self.

Concluding Remarks

In this study of learners of Japanese in Australian universities and senior high schools, the two main factors that influenced participants to continue formal study were *hope to travel to Japan* and *interest in Japanese culture*. It was proposed that the former is connected to a desire to speak Japanese while the latter relates to traditional Japanese culture and its more modern counterpart, J-pop.

It seems possible to view L2 motivation from different perspectives, as proposed through the synthesis of common components from major motivational models in Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. In this study, the most advanced learners in interviews appeared to envision their future as including Japanese, an indication that they were developing an identity as a speaker of Japanese. The advanced learners showed *intensity* (effort), a strong *desire* to learn Japanese, and positive *attitudes towards learning* the language, all of which are necessary elements in a truly motivated individual, according to Gardner (2010).

Engagement in J-pop activities by some learners in this study was indicative of students taking control of their own learning; they created and identified their own goals and activities that could help them to reach those goals. It seems that motivation is very hard to separate from the person, the activity, and the context. To be highly motivated or to develop a sense of identity as a speaker of the L2 is likely to take time and increasing proficiency. Motivation, proficiency, and a sense of identity appear to be manifestations of persistence.

Informed Consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express sincere thanks to Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson and Deryn Verity for their advice and on-going support. I am also grateful to the Australia Research Council and The Japan Foundation, Sydney, who funded the project.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic Details: Round 1, 2009, School Study

Demographics		Count	Percent %
Gender	Female	300	65
	Male	164	35
School Grade	Year 10	256	55
	Year 11	100	22
	Year 12	108	23
Other language spoken	Yes	332	72
	No	132	28
Visited Japan	Yes	182	40
	No	282	60

Table A2. Demographic Details: Round 1, 2009, University Study

Demographics		Count	Percent %
Gender	Female	111	67
	Male	52	32
Japanese level	1st Year	115	70
	2nd Year	33	20
	3rd Year and above	16	10
Major	Arts/Soc. Science	84	51
	Bus/Economics	29	18
	Science	24	15
	Other	27	16
Other language spoken	Yes	123	75
	No	41	25
Visited Japan	Yes	78	48
	No	85	52

Table A3. University Round II, 2010, Survey and Interview 3 Demographics

Demographics		Survey		Interview 3
		Count	Percent %	Count
Gender	Female	17	63	20
	Male	10	37	9
Year of Japanese	1st	2	7	11
	2nd	12	45	2
	3rd	9	34	5
	4th	2	7	5
	Missing	2	7	6
Major	Arts/Soc. Science	13	50	6
	Bus/Economics	5	19	5
	Science	3	12	1
	Internat. Studies	-	-	5
	Other	5	19	1
	Missing	-	-	11
Visited Japan	Yes	16	59	/
	No	11	41	/

Appendix B.

Reasons to Continue

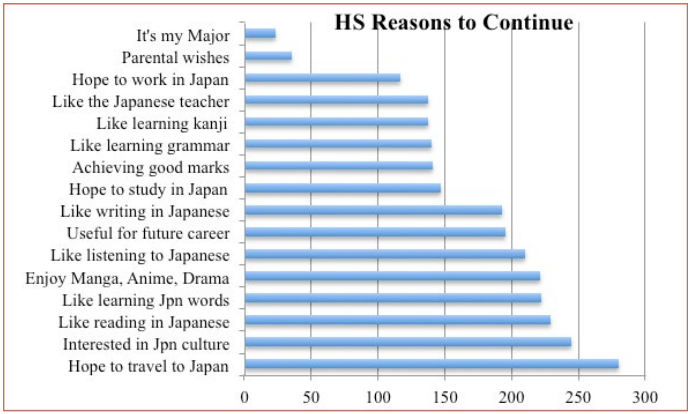

Figure B1. High Schools: Reasons to Continue Versus Frequency (n = 312, multiple answers)

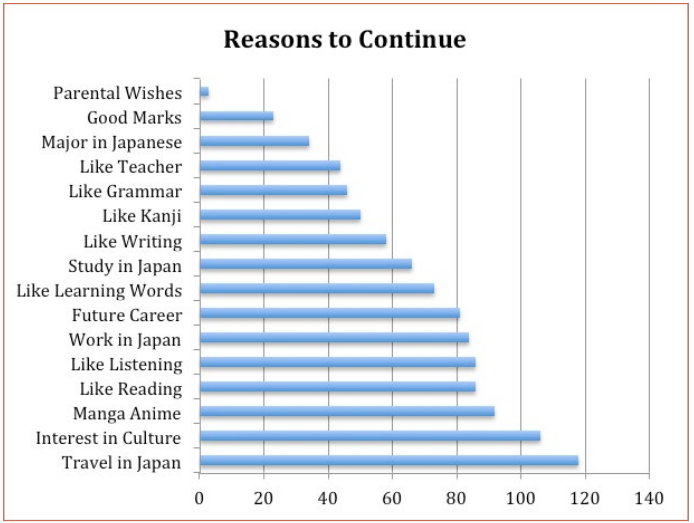

Figure B2. University: Reasons to Continue Versus Frequency (n = 136, multiple answers)