

## **Motivation After Matriculation: Are Japanese Learners of English Still Alive After Exam Hell?**

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Most university language teachers in Japan lament the apparent lack of motivation and positive attitudes toward learning their students show shortly after matriculation to university. Research on motivation to learn a foreign language in Japan, moreover, has failed to demonstrate clearly links among motivation to learn the language, instructional or other experiences presumably related to learning and proficiency. This study suggests that the ambivalence of the findings in Japan may be due in part to a methodological problem, namely, the preference for cross-sectional over longitudinal studies on the relationship between motivation and proficiency. The present study assessed attitudes and motives for learning English at the beginning and end of the freshman year at a public university in Japan. Proficiency in English was assessed concurrently with an attitude survey in a pre-test, post-test format. Changes in learner attitudes and motivations were correlated with gain scores observed after 150 hours of instruction in the program. Regression analyses indicated limited development of an orientation towards personal growth and prospective experiences using English overseas. These were linked with increased proficiency as measured on one of the post-tests.

### 大学入学後の英語学習態度について

日本における大学語学教師のほとんどが直面している問題点は、学生が入学後、学習に対する姿勢が乏しく、また学習意欲もなくなっていることである。

日本においては外国語学習の動機づけに関してこれまで研究されているが、言語学習の目的、学習に関係あると考えられる教授経験等と習得の間の関係を明らかにしていない。また、こうした研究の結果が不安定になりがちな原因は、方法論的にいえば、動機と習得との間の長期的研究よりも、日本ではむしろ断片的な研究を優先してきたからだと言っ  
てよいだろう。

本研究は、日本における公立大学一回生の学年のはじめと終わりの授業における英語学習に対する意欲と動機を調べたものである。英語習得は、事前テスト、事後テスト形式の学習意欲調査により評価した。学習者の意欲および動機は、150時間にわたる授業の後の得点と相関があった。

回帰分析の結果では、個人的な伸びと海外で将来英語を使う経験があるかどうかの見込みについては限界がみられた。これらは事後テストに見られるように達成度と関連があった。

## 1. Introduction

Attitudes and motivation have remained a focus of attention for applied linguists for three decades, beginning with Gardner and Lambert's (1959) seminal study on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition (SLA). The wide variety of cultural contexts and instructional settings in which motivation-and-acquisition studies have been conducted suggests the importance applied linguists attribute to affective variables in helping to explain SLA.

Studies on the relationship of motivation to achievement conducted in fields other than SLA have shown motivation to be a culturally universal predictor of achievement and "effective behavior" (Peck, 1981). The universal impact of motivation on learning has also been shown to be influenced by specific, individual experiences. Chanddavarkar (1988), for instance, argues that prior knowledge and experience are better predictors of achievement in physical science than attitudes towards physical science education.

Motivation for learning a foreign language would thus seem to be a function not only of affective or instrumental factors (which have been examined in the SLA literature) but also of the effects of culture and experience, factors which have been brought to light by studies in other disciplines. However important the link between motivation and learning may appear to be in the acquisition of a second language, contradictory and inconclusive results have been reported over the years, particularly when different national and

ethnic groups have been compared. It is the purpose of this paper to re-examine the link within a relatively novel (for applied linguistics) explanatory framework based on learners' experience and cultural background.

## 2. Motivation and Language Learning

### *2.1 Motivation and ESL*

Integrative motivation has been proposed as the major affective factor in SLA in both classroom and non-classroom settings (Gardner, 1985). Longitudinal studies in the North American context (see, for example, Gardner and Lambert, 1972) have argued that the most successful learners aspire to become functioning members of the society in which they are learning their second language. Integrative motivation, however, is attenuated by psycho-social factors (Schumann, 1978) so that circumstances beyond the learner's control, including social distance between the learner's and the target culture, will influence the rate, quality, and level of language acquisition.

Diverse and occasionally contradictory results have been obtained for motivation-proficiency studies conducted in North America or employing subjects who were attempting to learn English in North America. Cowan's (1967) study showed that integratively motivated Japanese students tend to become better speakers than non-integratively motivated Japanese students regardless of the length of residence in the U.S. Okamura-Bichard (1985) partially supported Cowan's conclusions, but also contended that experience in using a target language, as well as attitudes towards the language, contributed to sixth-grade Japanese learners' acquisition of the second language and maintenance of the first language. In contrast, Oller et al. (1977) found that instrumental motivation was a far more powerful predictor of second language achievement by Mexican-American women than was integrative motivation. So, for example, women in this study were more interested in learning English to get and keep a job than to associate socially with Anglos.

Finally, in a study which bridges the distinction between second and foreign language learning, Prapphal et al. (1982) argued that

motivation, per se, was of secondary importance in the attainment of proficiency among Japanese college students, some of whom were returnees from English-speaking countries or had native English teachers in high school. In their cross-cultural study comparing Japanese, Thai, and Taiwanese learners, Prapphal et al. concluded that different factors impel learning in different cultural contexts. For the Japanese students, natural exposure to English was a more powerful predictor of proficiency than was motivation to learn an additional language.

### *2.2 Motivation and EFL in Japan*

The relationship between foreign language learning and motivation and attitudes is an even more complex issue in an EFL context than in an ESL context. Edamatsu (1978) and Miller (1986) argued that Japanese learners' attitudes towards learning English are influenced by psycho-social barriers which eventually limit the effectiveness of their acquisition of the target language. Nakayama (1982) has underscored this point, contending that the use of Anglo-American models of English fosters the development of psycho-social barriers to learning in that learners are presented with culturally invalid models.

The learner's affective response to social experience thus seems to be an important factor in the attainment of English language proficiency. Whether motivation to learn a language is significantly related to proficiency seems to depend in part on circumstances associated with the learning environment. Ratzlaff (1980) and Kamada (1987), for instance, concluded that the university entrance examination system distorts and channels Japanese learners' motivation into a narrow instrumental focus. Dillon and Dillon (1979), moreover, pointed out that, in spite of technological advantages and initially high motivation, Japanese students do not develop proficiency because of examination-oriented teaching methodology—an environmental factor which intensifies in relation to the approach of university entrance examinations. Chihara and Oller (1978) found that attitudes of Japanese students show, at best, weak correlations with attained proficiency. Keitges (1986) corroborated this finding, but also noted that although specific personality traits are related to motivation to learn, they are not consistently related to proficiency in English.

The few empirical studies concerning the attitudes and motivation of Japanese language learners have relied principally on cross-sectional analyses of the effect of affective variables on proficiency. What the Japan-based research has not shown, however, are the ways in which changes in attitudes and motivation are related to changes in learning from a longitudinal perspective. In other words, research on Japanese learners has generally taken a snapshot approach to problems which would be better studied over a longer period of time. Thus the present study examines, first, how changes in motivation are reflected in learning *over time* and, second, what *environmental factors* are likely to influence the Japanese learner's proficiency in English during the first year of university attendance.

### 3. Focus of the Study

The present study emphasizes the effect of motivational change over time on proficiency among Japanese university freshmen. The goal of the study is to examine how attitude and motivation changes develop concurrently with changes in proficiency during an instructional program at the college level.

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Research Design

Ninety first-year Japanese university students majoring in international commerce were given CELT Form A Listening and Structure subtests (Harris & Palmer, 1986), normed measures of English language proficiency, as well as a 50-item survey in Japanese of attitudes and motivation, before instruction commenced.

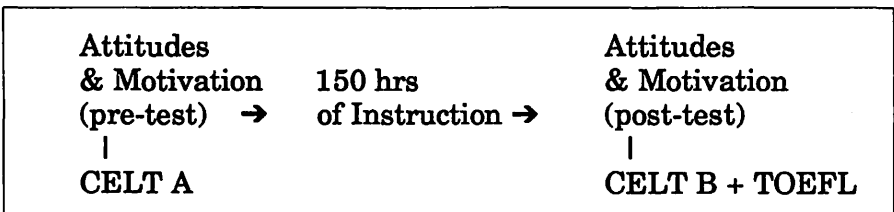
The survey was designed to provide a cross-sectional view of the learners' current attitudes towards learning English, their assessment of previous learning experiences in school, and the intensity of their motivation to use English in their future careers. Items on the survey were worded both positively and negatively so as to avoid a response set and provide a basis for checking the reliability of the items.

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The international commerce majors who were the subjects of the study were enrolled in five courses concurrently: reading, composition, English conversation, language seminar, and language laboratory. Total class time resulted in approximately 150 hours of contact with English (see Hansen, 1985, for a description of this language curriculum). The contact hours were primarily focused on the formal aspects of language, including grammar analysis, translation, and reading comprehension. The conversation class, however, was mainly task-based, requiring students to use their own knowledge of English to communicate in pairs. Figure 1 depicts the longitudinal character of the design. Since one object of the study was to assess changes in proficiency vis-à-vis changes in attitudes and motivation, an alternative form of the pre-test (CELT B) was administered at the end of the academic year (running from April to February). The same form of the attitude and motivation survey was used at the end of the academic year. An additional assessment of extracurricular activity was included with the post-test in order to check the possibility that language learning outside of the college courses (e.g., at conversation schools or during overseas travel) had influenced changes in proficiency recorded between administration of the pre- and post-tests.

The institutional TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 1988) was administered in order to provide a secondary measure of

**Figure 1**  
Design of the Study



proficiency on the post-test. This procedure allowed examination of the relative magnitude of correlations with the pre- and post-test measures of proficiency and permitted making inferences about the validity of gain scores (Gupta et al., 1988).

#### *4.2 Analysis*

The first phase of the analysis involved stepwise regression of the 50 attitude and motivation survey items on CELT A Structure independently to permit examination of those items which were most highly correlated with proficiency prior to instruction (Table 1). The stepwise regression selected survey items that were uniquely correlated with the language test scores. Items were selected in successive steps until no more items contributed a significant increase in the correlation with the language test. The total multiple regression provided a general index of the relation between the subset of survey items and variance, that is, differences among individual scores, on the CELT.

The second phase of the analysis also included stepwise regression of the 50 survey items on gain scores derived from the comparison of CELT A and CELT B structure and listening subtests. The effect of extra-curricular contact was also assessed in the second phase of the analysis.

The validity of the gain scores was examined by using the TOEFL Structure and Listening subsections as external criteria for judging the difference between the correlation coefficients on the pre- and post-tests. This strategy assumes that the correlation between the external criterion and the post-test score will be greater than that between the external criterion and the pre-test scores. The strategy also affords some assurance that the effect of instruction was sufficient to apply to all levels of ability in the sample.

### **5. Results**

#### *5.1 Pre-tests*

Stepwise regression of the CELT A Structure subtest (Table 1) showed that three items on the motivation survey accounted for 20 percent of all of the variance (differences) in student performance on the pre-test. In other words, these three items collectively represent the best combination of the original 50 items which relate students' attitudes to their current proficiency as measured by the CELT Structure subtest.

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### Table 1

Pre-test stepwise regression: CELT A Structure\*

Survey Item	Step	R-squared
19 (Learning English is not interesting.)	1	.143
39 (My English teachers explained the cultural differences between English and Japanese.)	2	.177
48 (I would like to study in a foreign country in the future.)	3	.199

\*CELT (Structure) pre-test reliability = .78

Results for the Listening Subtest are summarized in Table 2. Two items accounted for about 10 percent of the variance on CELT A Listening.

### Table 2

Pre-test stepwise regression: CELT A Listening\*

Survey Item	Step	R-squared
48 (I would like to study in a foreign country in the future.)	1	.068
25 (People from English speaking countries want Japanese to better understand their culture.)	2	.093

\*CELT (Listening) pre-test reliability = .77

These tables show little relationship between attitudes and motivation and proficiency on the pre-tests. In the case of structure, the strongest predictor was a general interest in English as a



the survey items, the desire to study overseas was the strongest predictor of listening proficiency.

Overall, students' attitudes toward English did not seem to be strongly related to their proficiency prior to instruction in college. It should be noted that students had recently finished the process of preparing for university entrance examinations, which, for most public universities, does not include a focus on comprehension of spoken English. Attitudes were more related to individual differences on the structure pre-tests (20%) than to differences on the listening pre-test (10%).

**Table 3**

Stepwise regression of CELT Structure gain score\*

Survey Item	Step	R-squared
48 (I would like to study in a foreign country in the future.)	1	.187
10 (I think studying English will widen my horizons.)	2	.271
17 (People from English-speaking countries who come to Japan are not interested in Japanese learners of English.)	3	.314
32 (My English teachers were not concerned with pronunciation.)	4	.353
30 (Even if I could use English, I don't think it would get me a good job.)	5	.385
2 (I would like all English films to be dubbed in Japanese.)	6	.432
*CELT (Structure) post-test reliability = .76		

### 5.2 Gain Scores

Stepwise regression of the post-test survey items against the gain scores from CELT A Structure to CELT B Structure showed that six items accounted for 43 percent of the variance (Table 3).

In contrast with the results for the pre-test survey, the post-test survey results suggest broadening of motivation: Items representing different aspects of motivation which did not contribute to proficiency on the pre-test emerged following a year of instruction. Since items reported in the table were worded both positively and

**Table 4**

Stepwise regression of CELT Listening gain scores\*

Survey Item	Step	R-squared
11 (I don't think I want to go to an English-speaking country as an exchange student.)	1	.086
45 (I would like to study a second foreign language because I like studying foreign languages.)	2	.130
29 (Our English teachers gave us a lot of listening practice.)	3	.172
44 (I don't want to have to read anything other than my English textbooks.)	4	.215
5 (My English teachers often corrected my pronunciation.)	5	.252
6 (I am not interested in foreign language study, so I don't want to study a second foreign language)	6	.284

\* CELT (Listening) post-test reliability = .75

negatively on the survey, they can be positively or negatively correlated with gain. In general, the negatively worded items (Item 30, for example: "Even if I could use English I don't think it would get me a good job.") were associated with losses ("negative gains") on the CELT.

A wider variety of survey items on the post-test (six vs. three) predicted more than twice the variance on the gain scores after instruction (43 percent vs. 20 percent). This may be related to the variety of instructional experiences (e.g., classes with English speaking faculty employing a variety of instructional techniques) and the fact the college had recently concluded an agreement to initiate a student exchange program with an American "sister" college, suggesting that students' perceptions of their possible uses for English had expanded.

Stepwise regression of post-test survey items with the listening gain scores indicated that six items accounted for 28 percent of the variance (Table 4).

In general, the larger number and variety of predictors of gain for both the structure and listening subtests emerging after 150 hours of instruction suggests that students' initial levels of motivation and attitudes were transitory. Certain attitudes were intensified while new sources of motivation may have started to emerge. The results must be qualified, however, by the fact that the observed gain scores were small and must be examined for reliability.

### *5.3 Reliability and Validity of the Gain Scores*

Following Williams et al. (1987) and Gupta et al. (1988), the reliability and validity of the gain scores were estimated (see Table 5). The institutional TOEFL structure and listening subtests were used as the external criteria for assessing the validity of the gain scores. The reliability (magnitude) of the structure gain was higher than that of listening. It may be useful to note that gain score reliability is an index of the magnitude of the change from pre- to post-test. It is not the same as test reliability which indicates the consistency with which tests measure some ability. Thus, the structure reliability coefficient of .57 should be interpreted as an index of moderate, non-random gain from pre-test to post-test.

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**Table 5**

Gain Score Intercorrelations, Reliability, and Validity

	Structure			Listening		
	TOEFL	CELT A	CELT B	TOEFL	CELT A	CELT B
TOEFL	—	—	—	—	—	—
CELT A	.512	—	—	.567	—	—
CELT B	.667	.466	—	.721	.638	—
	Reliability = .57			Reliability = .34		
	Validity = .70			Validity = .73		

Table 6 further indicates a very different level of gain between between the structure and listening subtests. The t-tests reported in the table show a significant difference from pre- to post-test on the structure, but not on the listening, subtest. In addition to the significant difference between pre- and post-test scores, the structure test gain moved from more to less variation among scores. As

**Table 6**

CELT-A and CELT-B Comparisons on the Structure and Listening Subtests

	Listening		Structure	
	CELT-A	CELT-B	CELT-A	CELT-B
Mean	47.7	49.9	24.8	25.2
SD	7.9	6.9	6.4	6.2
paired <i>t</i> -test	2.06		.68	
<i>p</i>	.042		.494	

Table 6 indicates, this was not the case with the listening gain scores, which showed about the same variation and no significant difference in mean scores (hence the reliability, i.e., magnitude, of the gain is too small to be related to attitude changes). Simply put, learners did not improve enough in listening skills to suggest a meaningful relationship with attitude changes.

A possible reason for no appreciable gains in listening may be related to the curriculum. Since few of the English courses taught during the freshman year provided listening input to the students, listening gains in general would not be expected on the post-test, unless an additional factor, such as motivation to attend to the available input were exceptionally strong. The results demonstrate little relationship between motivation and listening gain and lend credence to the observation made earlier that there is a dearth of listening input to the students during the 150-hour program. This being the case, the analysis hereafter will focus exclusively on structure gain scores.

**Table 7**

**Blockwise Regression of Support and Interest**

	R-squared
Support Variables	.099
Interest Variables	.155

The predictors of structure gain scores identified in the regression analyses can be further reduced to two latent motivational components. Blockwise regression analysis showed that the survey items "native speaker support," "a lack of job prospects related to use of English," and "no correction of pronunciation by teachers" indicate a latent motivational variable which can be labeled *Support* (see Genesee et al., 1983). An additional motivational component related to "overseas exchange," "widening horizons," and "interest in English language films" indicated orientation to an

additional motivational component labeled *Interest*. A comparison of *Support* and *Interest* as predictors of gain scores (Table 7) showed that *Interest* was a significantly better predictor than *Support*.

## 6. Discussion

The results obtained here concur with prior research in that the overall intensity of motivation of the college students was low, as indicated by the modest power of the survey items to explain change scores. Beyond these unexceptional results, however, lies a paradox of the Japanese educational system which is of potential explanatory value and which may point the way for teachers who wish to suggest motivating goals for learners during their university experience.

The intensity of motivation to "learn English" hits a peak in the last year of high school. Students are obliged to compete fiercely for a limited number of openings at universities. At the same time, the content focus of the English examination is on grammar and translation, that is, relatively narrow, easily testable aspects of English proficiency. Motivation to learn English is thus channeled into the sort of proficiency with the least communicative value. Once the university examinations are over, there is very little to sustain this kind of motivation, so the student appears in freshmen classrooms as a kind of timid, exam-worn survivor with no apparent academic purpose at university. With some justification, therefore, others (see Ratzlaff, 1980, for example) have noted the difficulty teachers have in bringing these examination veterans back from their boredom or breaking their extreme dependence on authority figures to tell them what to do. The immediate context of formal language learning, the curriculum (or what is cobbled together by academic individualists in the name of a curriculum), is not perceived by university entrants as supportive of their own needs and motives for language study, so it may not have been surprising to discover in the present study little relationship between motivation to learn English and performance on the proficiency measure.

The entrance examination system also forces applicants to sit for as many examinations as they can afford with the hope of gaining entrance to the most prestigious school on their list. Unfortunately, because most students do not matriculate to their first choice, they are typically deposited at an institution and in a departmental major for which they have no special interest. This contributes to their lack of motivation to learn virtually any new subject, including English, which is presented to them in college classrooms. The implication of this method of matriculation is that Japanese university students are left with a motivational vacuum that they are unable to fill.

The vacuum at the university entrance level, however, is belied by the extraordinary interest in voluntary English language education at the adult level. The motivational paradox lies in the ability of adults to find reasons for use of English which go far beyond the narrow focus of the university-bound learners. There are more private language schools in Japan, for example, than in any other country. Adult learners flock to foreign language classes for an extraordinary variety of reasons, including making and maintaining friendships, acquiring essential job skills, preparing for overseas travel, gearing up for qualifying examinations, and so on.

Adult motivation to learn a foreign language can be seen, then, as broadly based and representative of numerous personal goals, including development of communicative ability, as well as taking and passing examinations. It forms a clear contrast with the motivational wasteland among university entrants, but it also suggests the developmental character of motivation to learn. Time and experience apparently do affect learners' feelings and beliefs about the uses of a foreign language and, ultimately, have their effects on the proficiency of the language learner as an adult.

What remains for university entrants in Japan? With specific reference to the relationship of the survey employed in this study to the gain scores on the CELT Structure test, it appears that there is an experiential dimension to learners' motivation which develops during the year and begins to replace the entirely instrumental motivation which preceded it (see Table 7). The most powerful predictors of the structure gain scores included, for example, the

desire to study overseas and the belief that English will widen one's horizons. These predictors can be cast in terms of prospective, desired experiences outside of the immediate classroom environment which have nothing at all to do with taking and passing examinations. This is an interesting (if minor) result because it describes a kind of motivation that first year students would not be expected to have, based on an early-term assessment of their motivational intensity—or the lack of it. The few significant changes in motivation and learning reported here may comprise the beginnings of the developmental period noted above which leads eventually to the experiential focus of adult motivation to learn a foreign language.

Between high school graduation and the development of adult learning needs there is much that universities can do to channel the attention of their students in directions which motivate language learning. Although teachers were not important sources of motivation in the data reviewed here, they are clearly important in their roles as counselors and administrators of programs that can offer attainable short term goals. These might include, for example, exchange programs with foreign colleges, short-term "homestay" programs overseas, programs with foreign students in Japan, career counseling—in general, the kinds of experiences which did seem to motivate the learners in this study to improve their proficiency.

"May disease" (*go-gatsu byo*) is a popular Japanese description for the onset of a debilitating boredom among students who have just started their terms at university. This study suggests that motivation to learn a foreign language can expand over a relatively short time and that such development is related to learners' perceptions of their prospective uses for the language. Whether curricular reform or institutional support for access to experiences which can feed this developing motivation are remedies for the disease are questions very much open to further research.

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