

What motivates Japanese language learners in Australia and beyond?

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Language is an interactive, social, and relational tool that is constantly evolving; reflecting the history, values, and socio-cultural context of the place in which it is spoken. Thus, each individual language provides learners with opportunities to interact with other users of the language and to access different perspectives.

We question the common promotional discourses of ‘employability’ and ‘international trade’ used to characterise the value given to Asian languages by policymakers and universities in Australia. We argue that such discourses do not reflect learners’ motivations, ultimately undermining the potential educational values of language learning.

What we already know about the motivation of Japanese language learners

According to the Japan Foundation’s ‘Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2018’, (its most recent) Japanese language learners are largely motivated by personal and cultural interests in Japanese anime and manga, fashion, music, history, literature and art. The instrumental motivation, which is assumed by ‘employability’ and ‘international trade’ discourses, is not a prominent characteristic of Japanese language learners in Australia and beyond.

The Japan Foundation's survey illustrates the top five reasons and objectives for learning Japanese language in higher education in 2018:

- Interest in Japanese popular culture (e.g., anime, manga, J-Pop, fashion): 76.7 percent
- Interest in the Japanese language: 75.4 percent
- To study in Japan: 69 percent
- To gain employment/to fulfill future work aspirations using Japanese language skills: 67.5 percent
- Interest in Japanese culture (e.g., history, literature, arts): 67.4 percent

The survey results, in fact, represent teachers' perceptions of their students' interests and objectives. Japanese popular culture, therefore, may be more influential than the survey results indicate as teachers may have underestimated the extent to which students consume Japanese popular culture outside the classroom context.

Our latest research

Large-scale surveys conducted by the Japan Foundation are important for understanding global and regional trends in Japanese language education, but they do not reach the voices of individual learners of Japanese.

Our study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on Japanese language learners' personal stories, which abound in various online discussion websites of the English language domain. The study seeks to learn to what extent their stories reflect our common understanding of Japanese learners' motivations for learning the language based on existing large-scale surveys.

We investigated the following two questions:

- To what extent do the online discussion forums reflect our common understanding of Japanese learners' initial motivations for learning Japanese

language?

- How is motivation maintained or lost? (i.e. why do learners move on to more advanced stages or stop learning the language?)

To address the first question, we conducted a keyword search on Google using multiple key phrases including ‘why Japanese’, ‘why do you study/learn Japanese?’, ‘what made you study/learn Japanese?’, and ‘why did you decide to study/learn Japanese?’.

This led us to some discussion threads where participants shared their reasons and objectives for learning Japanese in two major discussion websites, A and B. The users of A are required to sign up with real names, but the users of B are not. As participants can access and join in these sites from any part of the world, we do not know where they are located unless they disclose such information. Both discussion threads were active in 2018, the year that the Japan Foundation conducted the survey. The data set includes 226 comments amounting to 26,350 words.

To address the second question, ‘How is motivation maintained or lost?’, we qualitatively analyse participants’ rationale about their interests and motivations in their Japanese language learning through a Self Determination theoretic lens. Self Determination Theory (SDT) postulates that ‘people are prone toward psychological growth and integration, and thus toward learning, mastery and connection with others’, but such propensities are not always given, requiring certain conditions. These are ‘autonomy’, ‘competence’, and ‘relatedness’. ‘Autonomy’ relates to one’s initiative and agency supported by interest and value. ‘Competence’ relates to one’s sense of achievement, success, and personal growth. ‘Relatedness’ relates to one’s sense of being a part of a community and being connected. To put it in the context of Japanese language learning, if a student has genuine interest in learning the language, has a sense of achievement and growth with positive feedback, and has a group of people to connect and learn with, then it is likely that the student will make further progress. At the same time, if any one of these conditions is not met, progress may be hindered.

To what extent do the online discussion forums reflect our common understanding of Japanese learners' initial motivations for learning Japanese language?

Table 1 indicates frequently occurring content words and the number of appearances in the discussion threads. The frequency indicates the number of times the word is used as a reason for motivating participants (or other learners of Japanese) to learn Japanese. 'Culture', for example, appears 94 times, 72 of which refer to aspects of Japanese culture in relation to their motivation to learn the language.

Table 1. Frequently occurring content words

anime	98
culture	72
manga	45
games	45
kanji	41
history	19
write	15
read	12
speak	12
business	9
job	9
work	9

In the following, frequently occurring content words are analysed in context, referring to actual words of the participants. Anonymised online communities (A and B) where the data come from are also indicated.

‘Anime’, ‘manga’ and ‘games’

‘*Anime*’ (*animation*) is by far the most frequently occurring, and ‘*manga*’ (comics, graphic novels) and ‘*games*’ tend to be referred to in the same context. The comments include participants’ observation of other learners and their own experiences:

- ‘*I assume that many young people are learning the language because of **anime***’ (A)
- ‘*Most of the people I know learn Japanese either because they like **anime**, j-pop or they want a job*’ (A), and
- ‘*If it was related to **anime**, people usually learned up to 2nd year and then stopped*’ (B)
- ‘*number one [reason for learning Japanese] was that I wanted to play more video **games!***’ (A),
- ‘*I just wanted to read **manga** early lol. But it’s impossible to learn a language without learning culture, so now I learn it just cause I love the world it opens*’ (B), and
- ‘*I kinda started losing interest in **manga** and **anime***’ [after achieving N2] (B) (N2 is often considered as a minimum Japanese university entry level of Japanese language proficiency test after four years of self-study.)

Anime, in particular, is one of the most significant reasons for the participants of the online discussion forums to start learning the language. However, some of the comments suggest anime and other aspects of Japanese popular culture do not continue to be their ongoing motivation—some quit learning the language and some become motivated by other reasons. These two participants position themselves outside of popular culture fandom, with both claiming their genuine interest in the language itself.

‘People have mentioned manga, anime, work. For me, it was none of those. I had always been interested in Language. (...) Japan has much more to offer than comics

and cartoons, to my mind at least (A)

'Most people want to learn after watching anime in my country but im [sic] not one of them' (B)

'Culture' and 'history'

The Japan Foundation survey distinguishes popular culture '(e.g., anime, manga, J-POP, fashion)' from culture '(e.g., history, literature, arts)', as do some participants of the discussion forums:

- *'Japanese soft power is extremely impressive, and its cultural exports (from manga and J-pop to clothing brands and traditional teas)'* (A)
- *'I did [studied Japanese] cuz [sic] I just love Japanese culture, their food, anime, games'* (B).
- *culture that is many millennia-old, its ancient legacy is yet another thing I absolutely love about this place'* (A).

However, many do not distinguish between high and low culture. Some imagine what they believe to be Japanese 'culture' through consuming Japanese anime, manga and games—culture is variously imagined and used. Interestingly, 'history' often co-occurs with 'culture'. 'History' appears 23 times, 19 of which are used as one of the reasons participants are interested in learning Japanese. Examples include, *'Much of Japan's rich culture and **history** still remains in tangible forms'* (A), and *'Japan is truly a beautiful country with a fascinating **history** and modern culture'* (A).

'Work', 'businesses, and 'job'

Some participants have instrumental motivations to study Japanese. Examples are: *'A dream reason is I would like to **work** in Japan for as long as possible, hopefully live there too'* (B), and *'I want to **work** in Japan after I finish my master's degree'* (B).

Another comment suggests that working in Japan is, in fact, an instrument *'to learn Japanese to better understand their culture and history (...) This is also why I want to spend time living and working there'* (B). This example illustrates that a desire to work in Japan is not always considered to be an instrumental motivation as it may link to wanting to further Japanese language learning and understanding of Japanese culture. One participant observes that *'[t]here are a few that do it for **business** reasons, but those people are rare'* (B), and another who majored Japanese at a university in the US observed that those who studied Japanese for business occupied *'the lowest percentage'* (A).

'Kanji', 'write', and 'read'

'Kanji' appears 41 times and divides those who like it, and those who try to avoid it. The Japanese writing system has phonographic (syllabic) and logographic (phonetic, ideographic and pictographic) scripts. The former is *kana* and the latter is *kanji* (Chinese characters).

Participants refer to kanji in relation to 'writing' as well as 'reading'. One participant finds the Japanese writing system, in which Kanji plays a significant part, *'hard and annoying'* (A), another considers *'learning the **kanji** would be hell'* (B). But for some participants *kanji* is a motivating factor, commenting that *'the **writing** system attracted me'* (A) and that they were amazed by *'the apparent complexity of the **writing** system'* (A).

'Speak'

12 counts of the use of 'speak' are related to participants' motivation to learn Japanese. A participant consumed Japanese popular culture and had no desire to speak the language initially, however, *'grew more interested over time'* and wanted *'to **speak** the Japanese language fluently and live in Japan for some time'* (A). Another participant has been trying to learn the language as it is *'just fun to **speak**'* (B). Another says speaking the language is *'a way to get to know the culture better'*

(A).

Frequently occurring words and some examples above confirm that Japanese popular culture, such as anime, manga and games, are prominent reasons for participants to learn Japanese. One participant explained why Japanese popular culture is so significant, commenting: *'if there is a dominant pole of world culture in our increasingly centralised world, Japan presents an (often dissenting) alternative'*.

Anime consumers with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds are attracted to a space in which characters of ambiguous ethnic characteristics are common. According to a research team consisting of Chinese and Japanese scholars, led by Professor Anthony Fung, China is the biggest Japanese anime market and Chinese anime consumers are susceptible to themes embedded in anime which are closely related to values and world views which include, freedom, peaceful coexistence, justice, companionship, and humanity. Students from various cultural backgrounds create a sense of community through their common interest in anime, manga and games. The Japanese language classroom creates a unique space where international and domestic students can interact on equal terms using a common target language. This is an ideal space for intercultural learning, and we argue that:

'Intercultural learning can play an important role in teaching Japanese language and studies, and teachers can utilise the students' diverse cultural backgrounds to enhance learning. Japanese language and studies classrooms can create a space where learners of different backgrounds are temporarily emancipated from the power relations of native and non-native speakers of English in Anglophone universities.'

How is motivation is maintained or lost?

Anime and/or other forms of Japanese popular culture> Learning Japanese language> Diversification of interests

By far the most common pattern is that anime and manga trigger young people's interest in Japan and the Japanese language, and then their interests expand in a variety of ways. A participant in the discussion website B succinctly describes how their interest developed: *'Watching my first anime > becoming very interested in Japanese culture > learning a new language. That's how it went with me'*. A participant in discussion website A follows a similar path: *'I started watching anime (...), after a while I branched out. I began looking into Japan and its culture [..which..] greatly interested and intrigued me. I wanted to learn Japanese, (...). As of now I can speak basic Japanese and read and write hiragana'*.

Another from discussion website B stated that they were inspired to learn Japanese to be able *'to watch anime without subtitles.'* After passing the N2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, this participant lost interest in anime and manga and gravitated more to learning the language *'as it was so different from all the other languages I spoke'*.

As translations were not often available, another from discussion website B stated that they wanted to overcome the language barrier to access the content directly in Japanese:

'At first, I was interested in learning Japanese. There's a lot of media out there that lack translations (along with some questionable translations) that I wanted to experience at the source. This was the start, though I underestimated just how much time it would (and will continue to) take.'

They also stated that learning Japanese and the sense of achievement through learning became a source of motivation:

'I love learning the language for the sake of learning itself. I still love games/anime/manga, but I also look forward to reading/reviewing grammar guides or adding words to my Anki collection. I feel a sense of accomplishment when I can understand something I didn't previously or when I learn new ways to express my thoughts eloquently.'

Another participant from website B envisages his future relationship with the Japanese language as *'a natural evolution of language learning'*:

'Initially it was my interest in anime/manga that got me into it but nowadays I don't really indulge in anime or manga too much, (...) I also have taken a lot of interest in the culture/history of Japan lately, but I think that's just a natural evolution of language learning probably.'

Encountering Japanese writing scripts > Anime, J-pop and dramas > Japanese Language Proficiency Test

One male participant from discussion website A became fascinated by Japanese scripts, *'き, さ, も, [hiragana], コ, ロ, ラ, プ, ク[katakana]'* which he encountered in the instructions of electric toys when he was in primary school and he *'used to copy those characters, without even knowing what it reads or means'*. His later encounter with *anime* triggered his pursuit of language learning at secondary school. During his university years, he immersed himself in anime, J-pop and dramas and studied Japanese by himself. He states *'I was literally crazy about anything Japanese. I also found two more such Japanophile friends online'*. In 2020 he was aiming to pass N1 [the highest level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test] in 2020 to find a job in Japan. Interestingly, his account of Japanese language experience includes all three key elements of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of motivation—'autonomy', 'competence', and 'relatedness'.

Some Japanese language learners lost their interest rather than *'branching out'*. A

participant in discussion website B stated *'eventually[you] reach a point in which you start questioning why you are really learning it, and then you start slowly declining the study and losing motivation. You might even drop it out'*. Another participant in discussion website B stated: *'I grew up with anime which eventually led to an interest in Japanese culture, subcultures, and music. I quit studying ages ago, though'*.

Conclusion and future implications

Japanese language learners' initial motivations, as indicated by the participants in the online discussion forums and in the Japan Foundation survey, seem to stem not from the instrumentality that language learning brings, but rather from an interest in Japanese popular culture. Some lose motivation or a sense of purpose and stop learning the language, while others develop other motivations and continue. The participants' stories cover the essence of SDT's 'autonomy', 'competence' and 'relatedness', and the theory is found to be a useful tool to predict and help support students' learning.

However, Japanese language education at universities is not simply about learning Japanese. University level language learning should be situated in intercultural learning. We argued, in a chapter of a book titled 'New frontiers in Japanese Studies' edited by Professor Akihiro Ogawa and Professor Philip Seaton, that '[i]ntercultural learning takes place in a 'third place' [in-between space] where learners of different backgrounds and historicity bring in various viewpoints, expectations and repertoires of semiotic resources', and it helps them become aware of alternative realities and worldviews. Intercultural learning is a key to counter 'rising nationalism, xenophobia or nativism by promoting cosmopolitanism and developing a sense of responsibility by focusing on common issues that are to be solved'.

Japanese language has been one of the most popular languages other than English in Australian universities in the last three decades and many learners have been

introduced to Japanese popular culture, most notably, anime, they appreciate new ways of knowing about themselves and others. Making the most of the intercultural space where language learning takes place, and carefully designing 'relatedness' where learners feel a sense of community with cosmopolitan ideology, Japanese language education continues to play a very important role in Australian higher education.

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