

## Motivating Japanese University Students – Influences on English Learning Attitudes

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To investigate factors which have influenced Japanese university students' attitudes towards English learning a survey was conducted amongst students at a private university in western Japan. The results showed that the factors which most influenced the learners' attitudes could be categorised broadly into social, psychological and educational factors. Various factors were identified as favourably or unfavourably affecting how students came to regard their language studies. It was found that some of the respondents were intrinsically motivated to study English, some were motivated positively by an inspiring teacher and others by exposure to English in extra-curricular situations. Students expressing a low motivation towards English reported negative experiences with teachers at secondary level and poor examination results.

英語学習の日本の大学生の態度に影響を与える要素を調べるために、西日本の私立大学で学生を対象に調査を行った。ここでの結果は、学習者の姿勢に大きく影響を与える要素が、広く社会的かつ教育的なものに分類できることを示した。様々な要素が、肯定的にも否定的にも、いかに学習者が英語学習を考えるようになっているかを認識させるものであった。この調査で、学習者の中には、自らが英語を学習しようとする動機付けがあり、また、ある者は、外的刺激、または、課外の授業環境により動機付けを受けると解明された。英語に低い動機を表す学習者は、中学高校レベルでの教師との否定的な体験および低い試験の点数を示した。

**Keywords:** student attitude, motivation, high school education experience, extra-curricular activities, intrinsic motivation, exam results.

### *Research Method and Participants*

R. C. Gardner (1985), in his study of attitudes and motivation defined attitude in this way 'an individual's attitude is an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent.' Motivation on the other hand, "refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning" (Gardner, 10). Gardner contends that attitudes do not influence learning directly but they are instrumental in the development of motivation.

In order to understand what factors have contributed to attitudes towards English by students at the university, a survey of students from years 1-4 was conducted. Questions and answers were in the Japanese language. 187 students were surveyed in the academic years of 2015 and 2016. Students in these classes were of varying levels of proficiency and were graduates of many different high schools in different prefectures but had been taught essentially the same English curriculum which is taught nationally. The students who took part in the survey are majoring in a variety of subjects but all are required to take weekly 90-minute English classes in their freshmen and sophomore years. The survey was conducted amongst eight class groups. The replies can be divided into

those of A class, that is, high-level and motivated students and B class, lower level classes with less motivated members. One cohort of 14 higher level and highly-motivated students from years 1-4 took an elective English class.

Qualitative answers in relation to their attitudes to English related to their experiences of English learning in both secondary and third-level classes. They were invited to reply in narrative form, giving reasons for their answers and detailing whether any particular event or events during their English education had influenced their attitudes. The resulting data was analysed to identify categories of experience that resulted in a like or dislike of English and what factors, educational or social had influenced the process. By analysing the experiences of the students - both good and bad - it is hoped to arrive at conclusions as to how a positive attitude towards the study of English can be cultivated to maximise the benefit to present and future students of their time in the English classroom.

### *Procedure*

The students were asked to fill in a written survey which consisted of seven questions, both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

Question 1 was to establish what year the students were in at the college. Participants were from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4th years. Question 2 established their gender. Question 3 specifically related to the students' attitude towards English. They were invited to rate their feelings towards the language on an emotional basis. In response to the question: "Do you like English?" (あなたは英語が好きですか) they were given a choice of five answers that corresponded to their own disposition towards the subject:

- |                                  |              |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| A. I really like it              | (たいへん好き)     |
| B. I quite like it               | (まずまず好き)     |
| C. I don't have a strong opinion | (どちらともいえない)  |
| D. I don't like it very much     | (あまり好きではない)  |
| E. I really don't like it        | (まったく好きではない) |

Clearly, this question required an emotional response based on feelings rather than empirical evidence. Question 4 then sought to provide a more objective assessment of the level achieved to date, posing the question as to whether they are good at English or not (あなたは英語が得意ですか) based on examination results and current class level. The options offered followed a similar pattern to Question 3.

- |                                  |              |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| A. I'm really good               | (たいへん得意)     |
| B. I'm quite good                | (まずまず得意)     |
| C. I don't have a strong opinion | (どちらともいえない)  |
| D. I'm not very good             | (あまりではない)    |
| E. I'm not good at all           | (まったく得意ではない) |

The respondents were then asked to choose between Question 5 and Question 6 based on their answers to Question 3. If they chose "I really like it" or "I quite like it" they were directed to Question 5: "Do you have a reason for liking English or have you had a particular experience related to English?" They were invited to answer in the form of a paragraph detailing any event that had influenced their feelings in a positive way.

Similarly, those who answered Question 3 with "I don't like it very much" or "I really don't like it" were asked to write in detail about their reasons or experiences which had resulted in a negative feeling towards English. In total, 61 students answered Question 3 by choosing either "I really like it" or "I quite like it". Of this number 60 gave written replies to Question 5.

Seventy-eight students replied that they either “Don’t like it very much” or “Really don’t like it” and of this number 59 wrote answers to Question 6. Forty-eight students stated that they didn’t have a strong opinion on the topic.

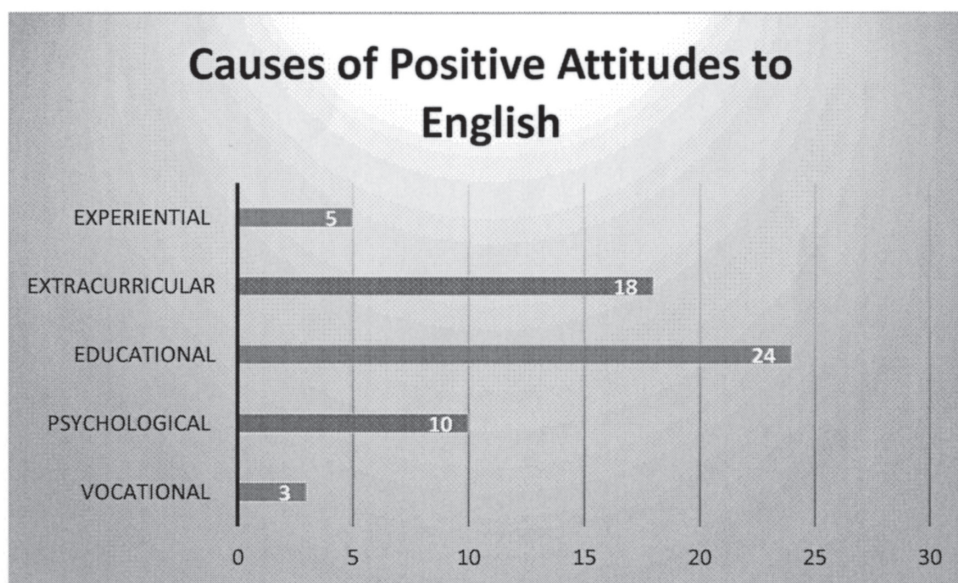
Finally, Question 7 allowed class members an opportunity to write freely on the topic of English education, their opinions, requests, experiences in elementary, junior high school, high school or university level.

*Student experience with English*

Of the total of 187 students surveyed, 119 gave narrative replies to Questions 5 or 6. Of these, 60 expressed a positive attitude to English and 59 a negative attitude. An analysis of these written responses shows a wide variety of influences. Positive answers could be separated into four categories, both extrinsic and intrinsic: extracurricular activities - that is the students enjoying English through watching movies, listening to music, playing video games etc. Educational: that is the students were influenced by positive experiences with their teachers and in their exam results. Vocational: that is, the successful use of English in their present working environment or a belief that it will be useful in their desired future employment. Psychological: that is, intrinsic positive attitudes not attributed to any specific influence.

The rate of response to the longer questions relating to the students’ reasons varied considerably according to which class group was surveyed. Amongst the highest level students, 9 out of 14, or 64.28% chose to answer Question 5, demonstrating an affinity for English. Only 2, or 14.28% chose to answer Question 6. Three students did not reply to either Question 5 or 6. This cohort was made up of 10 males and 4 females. Of the B level students, 43.24% chose Question 6 – manifesting a negative attitude to English.

*Positive Attitudes Towards English*



### *Experiential Factors*

Five of the total number of students surveyed reported that they had had an opportunity to travel outside of Japan and use English in a natural, rather than a classroom, setting and this was described by all these students as a positive influence. For example:

When I was in junior high school, I went to Singapore and Malaysia and I communicated with a lot of people there so I came to like English.

I was very happy that I could actually communicate with foreigners when I travelled abroad.

I went to Australia on a short course when I was a Freshman.

I liked English when I was in high school and I often went abroad to study English and also I had a good score.

When I was a child, I went abroad with my family and I also I had an experience to do homestay so that's why I like English.

### *Extracurricular Influences*

The second-highest category for positive replies was that of extracurricular activities with eighteen students citing such reasons for their enthusiasm for English. Several students singled out sports, others credited English music for their liking, still others English movies and/or TV dramas. Some of the comments were:

I love foreign soccer games so I want to be able to listen to and speak English.

I usually watch foreign sports programs on TV without subtitles.

My favorite artists tend to sing songs written in English.

I often read articles on SNS from foreign celebrities.

I started to listen to foreign music and then I got interested in English.

I love foreign dramas on TV so I am very interested in English. I actually don't like speaking in English but I love listening to it.

When I saw foreign dramas or someone who speaks English communicating in foreign countries I thought it was cool.

I often play foreign games.

Several students wrote that they felt happy to have understood a part of English movies or lyrics of popular songs indicating that entertainment, far from being a trivial aspect of English language learning, is a highly effective motivational tool.

### *Educational Influences*

Educational influences proved to be the largest category of positive influences in this survey with 24 students citing the influence of teachers and their earlier educational experiences at elementary and secondary levels and language schools as contributing to their affinity for English.

Amongst the positive comments were:

I had a lot of fun in the English conversation school where I went when I was in high school.

I really enjoyed Communication English class when I was in junior high school.

I liked my teacher when I was a senior in high school and I always got a high score on tests.

I can only enjoy myself in English classes as all the other subjects are so difficult.

When I was in junior high school I belonged to the English club and I liked the English teacher.

I beat my rival on English tests.

I was lucky because all my English teachers in every grade were wonderful. I am still not good at speaking English but I love writing it. I think that English is much clearer than Japanese.

Grammar is fantastically interesting.

I feel so satisfied when I can actually translate English into Japanese.

These responses emphasize the crucial importance of teacher input in relation to English language learning and will be further examined in the Conclusion below.

### *Psychological*

A total of ten students gave answers that could be grouped into the category of psychological responses, that is, that no event or individual was credited with influencing their positive attitude, rather that they were motivated by an intrinsic affinity with the language. Some of the comments made were:

I am not really good at English and can't even answer the questions well but I hope I can improve myself so I keep trying.

Studying English makes me have wider views. I don't feel any struggle in studying English and I enjoy practical English in the class.

I think it is important to know foreign languages.

English sounds cool!

### *Vocational*

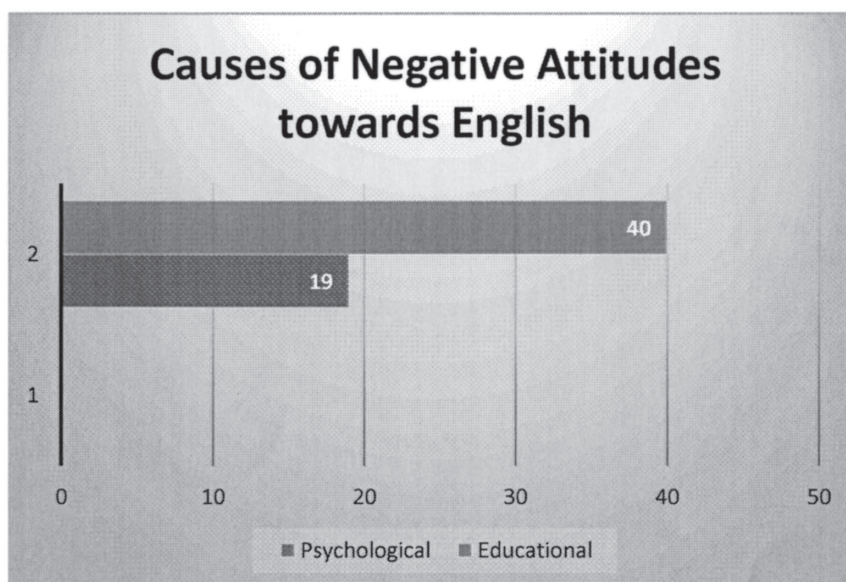
Three students gave answers indicating that they had come to value English by using it in practical situations, specifically at their part-time jobs or that they planned to use it in their future employment.

I'm so happy when I can communicate with foreign customers at my part-time job.

I love English! I think I am good at English. Now I speak English at my part-time job. I work at a duty free shop so I have come to enjoy speaking English with my customers.

I think we need English skills more for working in this global society. I want to survive so I study English little by little every day.

### *Negative attitudes to English*



Of the 187 students who took part in the survey seventy-eight replied that they either didn't like or really didn't like English. Fifty-nine of these wrote fuller answers to Question 6. The negative responses tended to be less varied than the positive and could be categorised into two basic categories: Psychological, that is, an intrinsic antipathy towards the language and a belief that they are lacking in linguistic skills; and Educational, that is, they came to dislike English based on their experiences at school and poor exam results.

### *Psychological*

Fifty-nine students gave written answers describing their negative feelings towards English and, in some cases, their reasons for those feelings. Some example responses are:

I have no idea what is being said. I believe that I am low even in my class.

I'm not good at memorising words and idioms.

I'm okay for writing English but I'm not good at speaking and listening to English.

It's completely different from Japanese.

Every time I memorise new words I am faced with unknown words again when reading some sentences so I feel depressed. I also can't catch what is being said because it is too fast. It is also annoying that when I translate both English to Japanese and Japanese to English because the grammar is totally different the culture is different. Japanese has only 50 sounds so it is so hard to pronounce English for Japanese people.

It's difficult and I can't increase my skill.

The negative impact of the grammar and translation method encountered by students at secondary level is apparent from these answers and reflects students' perceptions that English is a difficult and unrewarding challenge for them.

#### *Educational Influences*

Of the 59 negative responses, 15 students cited the influence of their teachers in producing a dislike of the language. Typical answers include:

My high school English teacher was scary. I don't have a lot of vocabulary in my brain so it's very difficult to translate into Japanese and sometimes there isn't only one answer so I have no idea which one is right or wrong.

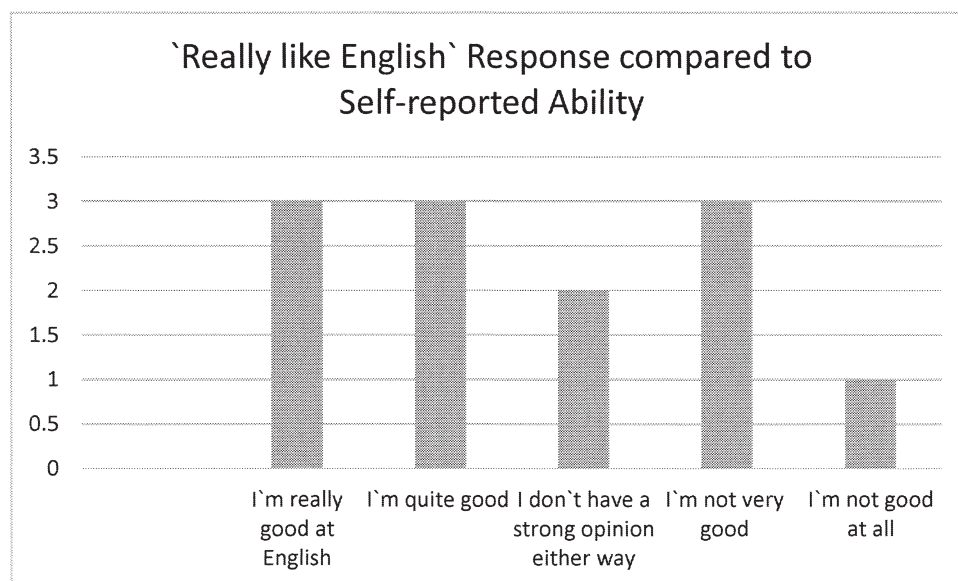
I got lost in grammar class in high school so that's why I don't like English.

I just hated my high school English teacher.

My junior high school teacher actually didn't teach us any basics in the class so I could never understand English.

#### *Research Purpose Statement*

The purpose of the research was to establish what factors in a student's life can be expected to affect a positive or negative attitude towards English language learning and through understanding the origins of these attitudes to make efforts to decrease their negative feelings and increase their positive attitudes. The survey sought to discover if there is an observable correlation between negative early experiences and poor learning outcomes as self-reported by the survey participants. The research sought to examine what factors in their early English education had formed the students' responses to the subject, both positive and negative. The study of language learners' characteristics or individual differences has a long tradition in second language studies and a substantial amount of research has been conducted into the study of motivation in English language learning.



### Discussion

The research sought to examine what factors in their early English education had formed the students' responses to the subject, both positive and negative. Tellingly, only 3 students (1.6%) stated that they both "Really like it" and are "Really good at it". This low figure supports Gardner's premise that "attitudes do not influence learning directly but they are instrumental in the development of motivation." Quantitative data did not reveal that a tangible relationship could be measured between a positive attitude to English and the students' reported actual grades and class levels. As can be seen in the graph above the students who described themselves as "really liking" or "quite liking" self-reported their exam results as "really good" or "quite good" and four more students rated their abilities as "not very good" or "not good at all." In contrast, twenty-four students (12.83%) both really didn't like English and considered themselves to be "not good at all".

Self-rating of language proficiency and exam results is an indication of students' perceptions but cannot be relied upon as empirical evidence as the tendency of students may be to downplay or overstate their exam results. It is indicative rather than prescriptive in this context.

However, the qualitative data illuminated aspects of the motivation that the quantitative data did not reveal, that is, it threw light upon the individual differences in second language learning, primarily individual differences in various attitude and motivational characteristics.

### Conclusions

Although this study was limited in its scope it did indicate that students shared some fundamentally similar ideas about English education, including their perceptions of their experiences in junior high school and high school as being, for many students, on the whole negative. In order to make the language learning process a more motivating experience teachers at university level need to put a great deal of thought into developing class programs which will provoke student interest and counteract these unfavourable earlier experiences.

At university level this may include, as suggested by Berwick *et al* (1989), exchange programs with other universities, overseas "homestay" programs, or any other activities which may help to motivate students to improve their target language proficiency. Among some of the most positive comments were those related to successful communicative experiences, that is, students' experience of having been able to communicate with non-Japanese people in English.

Teachers need to create stimulating and relevant lessons in which the students' attention can be engaged. This can sometimes be done by the use of teaching strategies which are not often called upon by teachers in



other subject areas. Encouraging students to become more active participants in a lesson can sometimes assist them to see a purpose for improving their communication skills in the target language. There may be a perception that using non-textbook activities such as role-playing, games, use of movies and music in English classes to some degree reduces the seriousness of the classes. The qualitative data from this survey proves that this is far from the case and that in fact the use of this “real” material is one of the most effective methods to improve positive attitudes both in the classroom and outside it.

In addition, the role of individual teachers is shown to be crucial, both for positive and negative influences as it would appear that many of the university students surveyed continued to be influenced by their experiences in secondary education. Teachers at third-level cannot control the experience of pupils before they commence university life but can with, sufficient commitment and passion, undo some of the damage caused by earlier damaging teacher behaviors. These findings open up some interesting pedagogical areas of discussion as to the nature of the current curriculum at secondary level, not to mention the effects of individual teachers on English-learning. It can be seen that by understanding how students came to feel enthusiastic about English it should be possible to tap into that in communicative English classes to increase their positive attitudes. Successful communication using the target language should result in students feeling some sense of accomplishment.

In conclusion, attitudes and motivation play a major role in second language learning and those with responsibility for teaching English will benefit from an awareness of the negative and a commitment to build upon the positive factors to contribute to positive learning outcomes for our students.

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