

Foreign Language Learning and Career Aspirations Among Nursing Undergraduates Enrolled in JLSP

JLSP に在籍する看護学部学生の外国語学習現状とキャリア意向

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Abstract. The current study examines the comparison of the attitudes towards foreign language learning and career aspirations among Vietnamese undergraduate nursing students in the Japanese Language Special Program (JLSP) and the regular program (RP). Data were collected via an online questionnaire administered to students in Vietnam during spring 2023. Results reveal that JLSP students invest more time and effort into in-class language study and self-study compared to RP students, leading to higher perceived proficiency levels. Notably, JLSP students show an inclination towards pursuing job opportunities in Japan, particularly in the caregiving and nursing sectors, while RP students tend to prefer staying in Vietnam. It has become clear that learning attitudes and career aspirations vary greatly depending on the language chosen.

要旨：本稿は、ベトナムでの看護学部生の日本語特別プログラム（JLSP）と通常プログラム（RP）における外国語学習への態度とキャリア志向比較調査した。データは、2023年春にオンラインで収集された。結果として、JLSP学生はRP学生よりも、語学授業や自己学習により多くの時間と努力を費やし、より高い能力レベル向上に対する認識が示された。特に、JLSP学生は、介護や看護分野での日本での就職に対する意向がある一方、RP学生はベトナムでの就職に対する意向があった。つまり、選択する言語によって、学習態度やキャリア志向が大きく異なることが明らかとなった。

Keywords: attitude, language study, nursing undergraduate, work abroad.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the field of nursing international mobility, driven by demographic shifts and evolving healthcare needs (Drennan & Ross, 2019; Einhellig et al., 2020). In the case of Japan, the demand for motivated nursing professionals from abroad has become more pronounced. Japan is grappling with a significant shortage of nurses, a challenge exacerbated by aging population and increasing demand for healthcare services, particularly in the field of elderly care. The demographic shift towards an older population has intensified the need for skilled healthcare professionals, including nurses who specialize in geriatric care. Japan has been exploring avenues to address the shortfall, and one notable trend involves the recruitment of foreign nurses (Asato, 2012). The country has been increasingly welcoming and encouraging the entry of foreign healthcare workers, especially those with expertise in elderly care (Hirano & Komazawa, 2022), including from Vietnam (在ベトナム日本大使館,

2017). This trend not only helps alleviate the immediate staffing needs but also brings diverse perspectives and skills to the Japanese healthcare system. However, the integration of foreign nurses poses its own set of challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and ensuring that their qualifications align with Japanese standards (Abuliezi et al., 2021; Lan, 2018). Despite these challenges, the trend of foreign nurses in Japan, particularly in the context of elderly care, reflects a proactive approach to addressing the pressing issue of nurse shortages in the country.

Studies have shown that students who have the intention to work abroad, especially those from developing countries, usually choose study abroad as a mediating step to finding work abroad (Baruch et al., 2007). However, in some cases, undergraduates enrolled in specific programs may go for work abroad directly, such as in the field of nursing and caregiving (Ohno, 2012; Ortiga, 2014). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework proposed by the authors based

on literature and previous research.

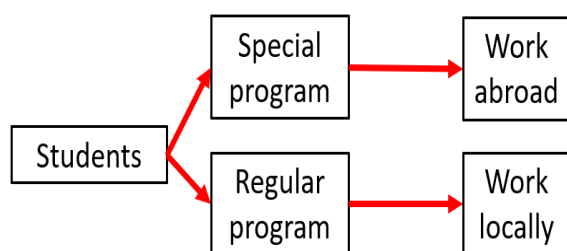


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (by the authors).

As the demand continues to grow, understanding the factors that influence nursing workforce dynamics and mobility becomes increasingly important. In this context, our study aims to investigate various aspects related to foreign language education, career plans and attitude towards working conditions of individuals pursuing nursing careers abroad. This study is conducted in the context of a university in Vietnam specializing in healthcare (TBUMP, 2023).

A foreign language is a mandatory subject in the nursing education curriculum. The Japanese language special program (JLSP) was established for students who were willing to learn Japanese with the possibility of working in Japan after graduation if they could pass the Japanese proficiency requirements. Regular students are required to study English if they are not enrolled in a special program.

The current study examines data collected from two groups: JLSP students, who are actively engaged in studying Japanese language with perspective to work in Japan, and regular program (RP) students, representing a control group. Through data analysis, we aim to shed light on the situation of foreign language learning and attitudes of Vietnamese undergraduate students towards language learning including the time spent on studying foreign languages, years of study, self-evaluated proficiency in foreign languages, and future career plans in relation to their prospect to work abroad.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional research design. The target population consisted of undergraduate students from a university in Vietnam. Data was collected in spring 2023 through a web-based form. The questionnaire was structured to obtain information in several key areas: (a) Demographic information: age, gender, academic year, etc.; (b) Foreign language study

profile and perceived proficiency; (c) Future plan as a nursing professional. The questionnaire used five-level Likert-style questions from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree. The data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics. Participants were explained about the study's purpose, voluntarily, confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The study was approved by the IRB of the Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokushima University (No. 20008).

Results

All participants were undergraduate students at a university in Vietnam, majoring in nursing, and all were unmarried. A foreign language is a mandatory subject in the curriculum. While some of the participants were enrolled in the JLSP (n=86), the other students were enrolled in a regular program (n=60) with English as the foreign language subject. The mean age of the participants is 20.1 years, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.43 years. Among the participants, 91.2% are female, and 8.8% are male. The participants are distributed across different academic years as follows: 1st year 37.4%; 2nd year 26.5%; 3rd year 21.8% of the total; and 4th year 14.3% of the total.

Table 1 provides information on the duration of time spent studying foreign language (Japanese for JLSP group and English for RP group). The JLSP students spend significantly more time studying Japanese at school compared to the time spent by RP on studying English. Most JLSP students (69.8%) spend from 10 to 20 hours per week studying Japanese, whereas many RP students (65.0%) spend less than 5 hours per week. There is a significant difference in the perception of whether the time spent on language study at school is enough. JLSP students tend to perceive the time as more sufficient compared to the RP group. A significant proportion of RP group (45.0%) have studied English for over 6 years, while JLSP students have studied Japanese for a maximum 4 years. JLSP students tend to engage in more self-study. A significant majority of JLSP students spend around 2 to 3 hours on self-study, while most RP students (55.0%) spend only 30 minutes to 1 hour. Overall, the results suggest that JLSP students invest more time and effort into both formal study and self-study of the language compared to RP group. Additionally, JLSP students tend to perceive the time spent on language study at school as more adequate compared to RP group.

Table 1. Duration of time spent studying foreign language.

Variable	Value	JLSP (N=86)		RP (N=60)		p-value
		n	%	n	%	
Time for language study at school (hours per week)	<5h/week	6	7.0	39	65.0	0.000***
	<10h/week	7	8.1	11	18.3	
	<20h/week	60	69.8	9	15.0	
	>20h/week	13	15.1	1	1.7	
I think time spent for language study at school is enough		M = 3.31	SD = 0.71	M = 2.53	SD = 0.72	0.000***
Years studying Japanese (or English)	<1 year	27	31.4	8	13.3	0.000***
	2 years	24	27.9	12	20.0	
	3 years	22	25.6	9	15.0	
	4 years	13	15.1	4	6.7	
	5 years	0	0	0	0	
	>6 years	0	0	27	45.0	
Time for language self-study	No	2	2.3	23	38.3	0.000***
	30 min~1 h	13	15.1	33	55.0	
	~2h	42	48.8	4	6.7	
	~3h	29	33.7			

*** p<0.001. Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test. M: mean; SD: standard deviation.

Table 2 shows that JLSP students generally self-evaluate at higher proficiency levels compared to RP students. A high number of JLSP students rate themselves at levels N3 and above for Japanese

proficiency. Most of both groups perceived their English level as beginner, regardless of the long years of studying English among the RP group.

Table 2. Foreign Language Proficiency (self-evaluated)

Variable	Value	JLSP (N=86)		RP (N=60)		p-value
		n	%	n	%	
Japanese	N1	2	2.3			0.000***
	N2	14	16.3			
	N3	26	30.2	1	1.7	
	N4	17	19.8			
	N5	14	16.3	1	1.7	
	0	13	15.1			
English	Beginner	83	96.5	57	95.0	0.664
	Intermediate	2	2.3	3	5.0	
	Advanced	1	1.2			

*** p<0.001. Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test.

As demonstrated by Table 3, there are significant differences in self-evaluated proficiency across various skills between the two groups, with JLSP students rating themselves higher in all four language skills. Regarding perceived ease of learning, JLSP students generally perceive Japanese as easier to learn foreign language compared to RP students to learn English. They rate various aspects of learning Japanese, such as

vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, writing, and conversation, as easier compared to RP students. These data suggests that JLSP students dedicate more time and effort to studying the foreign language both in school and through self-study, resulting in higher perceived proficiency and ease of learning compared to RP students.

Table 3. Foreign Language Skills and Easiness (self-evaluated)

Variable	Value	JLSP (N=86)		RP (N=60)		p-value
		M	SD	M	SD	
Perceived skills	Reading	2.62	0.8	1.93	1.09	0.000***
	Writing	2.55	0.849	1.87	1.03	0.000***
	Listening	2.28	0.746	1.63	0.74	0.000***
	Speaking	2.26	0.754	1.73	0.84	0.000***
Foreign language easiness	Vocabulary	2.53	0.747	1.90	0.88	0.000***
	Pronunciation	2.51	0.837	1.83	0.81	0.000***
	Grammar	2.47	0.747	1.92	0.83	0.000***
	Writing	2.34	0.82	1.90	0.84	0.002**
	Conversation	2.13	0.70	1.80	0.76	0.008**
	Onomatopoeia	2.13	0.78	1.73	0.76	0.003**
	Polite (Keigo)	2.12	0.83			
	Reading	2.06	0.73	1.90	0.82	0.221
	Kanji	1.95	0.83			
	Listening	1.85	0.62	1.73	0.71	0.300
Dialect (Hogen)	1.63	0.65	1.78	0.80	0.200	

p<0.01, * p<0.001. Independent-Samples T Test (2-tailed).

M: mean; SD: standard deviation.

In Table 4, among JLSP students, the majority (68.6%) plan to pursue a job in Japan as nurse or caregivers, while only a small number of JLSP students plan to seek jobs in Japan in fields other than nursing. Only 11.6% of JLSP students plan to pursue jobs locally. None of the JLSP students are planning to pursue graduate study abroad. In the control group, RP students have a different future plan. A significantly higher percentage (46.7%) of RP students plan to seek jobs locally, as well as a higher percentage (11.7%)

planning for graduate study locally. In contrast to the JLSP students, who tend to have clearer future plan, almost half of RP students (41.7%) have not yet decided on their future plans. The data suggests that JLSP students are inclined towards pursuing job opportunities in Japan, particularly as caregivers or nurses. In contrast, RP students tend to stay inside the country for jobs or for pursuing graduate study. This difference in future plans between the two groups is statistically significant.

Table 4. Future plans

Category	JLSP (N=86)		RP (N=60)		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
Job in Japan (caregiver)	59	68.6			0.000***
Job in Japan (other)	4	4.7			
Job local	10	11.6	28	46.7	
Graduate study local	2	2.3	7	11.7	
Graduate study abroad	0	0			
Not decided	11	12.8	25	41.7	

*** p<0.001. Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test

Table 5 shows the perceived importance of working conditions for the nursing profession. Overall, while there are slight differences in the perceived importance of certain working conditions between the two groups,

these differences are not statistically significant. Both groups generally consider factors such as remuneration, enabling quality of care, career promotion, as important aspects of the nursing profession.

Table 5. Perceived importance of working conditions for nursing profession.

Category	JLSP (N=86)		RP (N=60)		p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Remuneration	4.38	0.754	4.17	0.920	0.134
Enabling quality of care	4.28	0.777	4.14	0.981	0.338
Career promotion	4.20	0.779	4.09	0.942	0.441
Teamwork relation	4.10	0.783	4.00	0.937	0.469
Working environment	4.03	0.789	4.00	0.991	0.815

Independent-Samples T Test.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the situation of foreign language learning and attitudes of Vietnamese undergraduate students towards language learning including the time spent on studying foreign languages, years of study, self-evaluated proficiency in foreign languages, and future career plans in relation to their prospect to work abroad among these groups. Furthermore, we investigate the perceived importance of various working conditions for the nursing profession among JLSP students.

Regarding language learning attitudes and perceived proficiency, the observed disparity in language learning attitudes and proficiency levels between JLSP and RP students highlights the influence of program enrollment on students' dedication to language study. The findings suggest that JLSP students allocate more time and effort to formal language learning and self-study, potentially due to their specific career aspirations in Japan. Overall, the results suggest that JLSP students invest more time and effort into both formal study and self-study of the language compared to RP group. Additionally, JLSP students tend to perceive the time spent on language study at school as more adequate compared to RP group. This fact demonstrated that the program was effectively designed so that its students perceive longer language study hours as adequately allocated. Literature has shown that students spent an average of 2 to 3 hours a week in the foreign language class, and the 15–25 hours range could be considered as a concentrated format (Collins & Muñoz, 2016), which is comparable to the JLSP format in the current study. Self-study plays an important role in language acquisition (Teng & Zhang, 2021). In the current study, over two-thirds of the students report spending over two hours per day on language self-study. This duration is significantly higher than the results of a previous study on EPA students (Dinh et al., 2019).

Regarding career aspirations, the significant difference in future career plans between JLSP and RP students underscores the impact of language exposure on career aspirations. While JLSP students express a stronger inclination towards seeking job opportunities in Japan, RP students tend to prioritize domestic employment or further education. This divergence reflects the varying degrees of international exposure and cultural immersion experienced by students in different programs. Regarding perceived importance of working conditions, although slight differences exist in the perceived importance of working conditions for the nursing profession between JLSP and RP students, these distinctions are not statistically significant. Both groups generally prioritize factors such as remuneration, quality of care, career advancement opportunities, teamwork dynamics, and working environment. This convergence suggests a common

understanding of the core aspects contributing to a fulfilling nursing career, irrespective of language program enrollment. These results indicate that the special language training within the program does influence career choices and mobility, but it does not affect the participants' professional perspectives. A previous study has demonstrated that returnees from abroad may face some challenges, but eventually they can bring new values into the domestic professional workforce (Kurniati et al., 2017).

The findings of this study have implications for language education and career development initiatives targeting nursing undergraduates in Vietnam. Educators and policymakers can leverage insights from this research to design tailored language programs that align with students' career aspirations and international opportunities.

While this study sheds light on the attitudes and preferences of Vietnamese undergraduate students, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations. The research was conducted at a specific university in Vietnam, limiting its generalizability. Future studies could include a more diverse sample from various universities. It could also employ longitudinal or qualitative methodologies to explore the longitudinal impact of language programs on students' career trajectories. Moreover, expanding the scope of investigation to include factors such as cultural competency, language proficiency assessments, and experiential learning opportunities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing language education and career development among undergraduate nursing students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the foreign language learning attitudes and career aspirations among Vietnamese undergraduate nursing students, with a specific focus on the Japanese Language and Japanese Studies Program (JLSP). Our findings demonstrate that JLSP students exhibit a higher level of dedication to language study, resulting in greater perceived proficiency and a preference for pursuing job opportunities in Japan, particularly in the caregiving and nursing fields. These insights underscore the importance of program enrollment in shaping language learning behaviors and career trajectories among undergraduate nursing students in Vietnam.

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