

***Correlation of Factors Influencing Japanese Proficiency
Among Undergraduates at Two Sites in Vietnam***

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Abstract

The global popularity of the Japanese language has underscored the challenges associated with attaining proficiency in diverse contexts. This cross-sectional study, conducted in 2023, involved 142 undergraduate students across two sites in Vietnam. The investigation aimed to elucidate the factors influencing Japanese language skills, with a particular emphasis on perceived proficiency, study motives, demographic variables, academic factors, self-esteem, and family dynamics. Employing correlation analysis, key determinants linked to Japanese language proficiency were identified, including academic major, age, grade, duration of Japanese language study, English proficiency, and local student status. Notably, listening and speaking skills were reported as the least developed among the four language skills, followed by writing and reading. Motives significantly associated with perceived Japanese proficiency encompassed the aspiration to work using Japanese language and the intention to teach Japanese. Furthermore, motives correlated with perceived speaking and listening skills included interest in manga and anime, communication with people, travel experiences, and a fondness for the Japanese language. These findings provide insights into the factors influencing Japanese proficiency among the targeted students. The implications suggest a need for tailored educational approaches to optimize language learning outcomes, particularly regarding the enhancement of speaking and listening skills.

Keywords: Japanese Language, Skills, Proficiency, Study Abroad, Preference, Undergraduate, Vietnam, Work Abroad

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Introduction

In recent years, the global prominence of the Japanese language has surged, driven by factors such as cultural exports, economic ties, and academic pursuits (AJE, n.d.; MOFA, 2021). This trend has sparked a growing interest in Japanese language learning across diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts. Vietnam, with its historical and contemporary ties to Japan, stands as a significant locus for the study of Japanese language acquisition (Tran, 2019, 2023; Tran et al., 2023). Within this background, the challenges associated with attaining proficiency in Japanese become increasingly apparent (Kitano, 2001; Quintos, 2021). While numerous studies have explored language acquisition processes, there remains a need for comprehensive investigations that consider the intricate interplay of various factors shaping proficiency levels. Understanding these dynamics is pivotal for educators, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to optimize language learning outcomes and foster intercultural competence.

The literature offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of language acquisition. Studies have identified a myriad of factors influencing language proficiency, including individual characteristics, socio-cultural context, educational environment, and motivational factors (Atay & Kurt, 2010; Chirkov et al., 2007). For instance, research has shown that learners' age, gender, academic background, and prior language learning experiences can significantly impact language proficiency levels (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000). Motivation emerges as a central construct in the study of language acquisition, with intrinsic and extrinsic motives playing distinct roles in shaping learning outcomes. While intrinsic motivations, such as interest in the language and culture, tend to foster sustained engagement and proficiency development, extrinsic motivations, such as career prospects and social recognition, can also exert significant influence on learners' efforts and achievements (Gardner, 2001; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Hummel, 2012). Moreover, the educational context, including instructional methods, curriculum design, and institutional support, plays a crucial role in facilitating language learning. Effective pedagogical approaches that integrate communicative activities, authentic materials, and cultural immersion experiences have been shown to enhance proficiency levels and promote holistic language development (Hamada & Grafström, 2014).

Against this backdrop, this cross-sectional study seeks to elucidate the factors influencing Japanese language proficiency among undergraduate students in Vietnam. Drawing on a conceptual framework (Figure 1) informed by the existing literature, we aim to investigate the relationships between perceived proficiency levels, study motives, demographic variables, academic factors, self-esteem, and family dynamics.

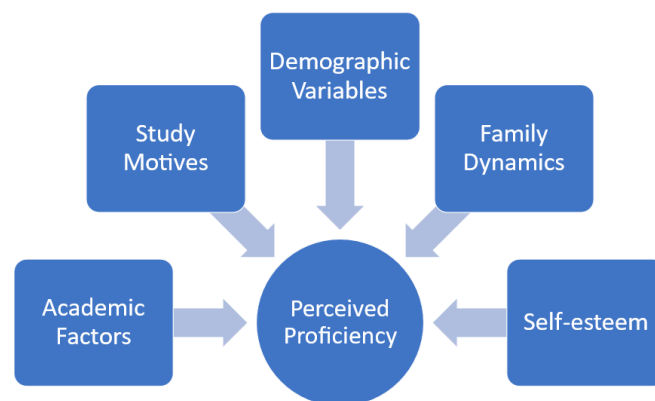


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework (by the authors)

By employing correlation analysis, we endeavor to identify key determinants linked to Japanese language proficiency and provide insights into the unique challenges and opportunities shaping language learning outcomes in this context. Ultimately, this study aims to inform tailored educational approaches that optimize language learning outcomes among students studying Japanese abroad.

Methodology

The target population consisted of undergraduates from two universities in Vietnam. Site A consists of a large-scale public university in northern Vietnam, which is specialized in the field of health sciences. Site B is a private university in Ho Chi Minh city, specializing in foreign languages studies and information technology. A foreign language is a mandatory subject in the curriculum. At site A, the participants were enrolled in a special Japanese program 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 language requirements. At site B, the participants were majoring in Japanese language within the sub-majors of business communication, language teaching or translation.

This study employed a cross-sectional design. Data was collected in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year through an online form. The questionnaire was structured to obtain information in several key areas: (a) Demographic information; (b) Academic factors; (c) Motives to choose studying Japanese language; (d) Family dynamics; (e) Self-esteem; (f) Self-reported Japanese language proficiency. The survey utilized a Likert-style format consisting of five levels, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents "strongly disagree," 2 denotes "disagree," 3 signifies "neutral," 4 indicates "agree," and 5 corresponds to "strongly agree." Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Prior to participation, participants were briefed on the study's objectives, voluntary nature of their involvement, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity ensured for their responses. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tokushima University (Ref. 20008).

Results

All participants were undergraduates in Vietnam, majoring in Japanese studies and nursing. For all the target students, a foreign language is a mandatory subject in the curriculum. The data about the characteristics of respondents were collected in the following categories: individual demographic characteristics (4 variables), lodging characteristics (2 variables), academic characteristics (4 variables), family characteristics (4 items), self-esteem (1 scale of 10 items). The distribution of participants' characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics (N=142)

Variable	Value	Total	
		<i>n</i>	%
Age	M = 20.7; SD = 1.6; Median=21.0		
Gender	Female	129	90.8
	Male	13	9.2
Marital status	Single	142	100.0
	Married		
Int'l student	Int'l Student	19	13.4
	Local Student	123	86.6
Lodging	Dormitory	24	16.9
	Rental	83	58.5
	Home	35	24.6
Co-living with	Alone	44	31.0
	Roommate	59	41.5
	Family	39	27.5
Major	Nursing	86	60.6
	Japanese	56	39.4
Grade	1st year	31	21.8
	2nd year	33	23.2
	3rd year	28	19.7
	4th year	50	35.2
English level	Basic	122	85.9
	Intermediate	18	12.7
	Advanced	2	1.4
Years studying Japanese	1 years and less	31	21.8
	2 years	33	23.2
	3 years	38	26.8
	4 years	36	25.4
	5 years	3	2.1
	6 years and more	1	.7
Parents' highest education level	High School	115	81.0
	College	26	18.3
	Graduate degree	1	.7
Study abroad experience of family members	None	119	83.8
	Other than Japan	8	5.6
	Japan	15	10.6
Hometown	Other	82	57.7
	Provincial city	52	36.6
Perceived family income	Metropolitan	8	5.6
	Low	43	30.3
	Average	98	69.0
Self-esteem	High	1	.7
	M = 26.9; SD = 3.7; Median=26.5		

Figure 2 shows the Japanese language study motives of the respondents. Travel in Japan (M=4.09) received the highest mean score, indicating that it is the most desired activity among the respondents. Traveling to Japan is likely seen as an exciting and enriching experience, offering opportunities to explore the country's culture, history, and landmarks.

Communication (M=4.06) serves as a significant motivator for engagement with Japanese language and culture. It suggests that many respondents are driven by the desire to communicate effectively with Japanese speakers, either for personal or professional reasons. Employment in Japan's company (M=3.91) indicates a strong interest among respondents in working for a Japanese company. This could be driven by various factors such as career opportunities, interest in Japanese business culture, or economic stability. Motives lowest scores includes peer influence (M=2.62), suggesting that respondents are less likely to be influenced by friends when it comes to activities related to Japan. Similarly, parental motivation received a relatively low score (M=3.11), indicating that parental influence is not a major factor driving engagement with Japan among respondents. Teaching Japanese language received one of the lowest scores (M=3.15), suggesting a lower interest in pursuing teaching as a career path or engaging in teaching Japanese as a volunteer activity.

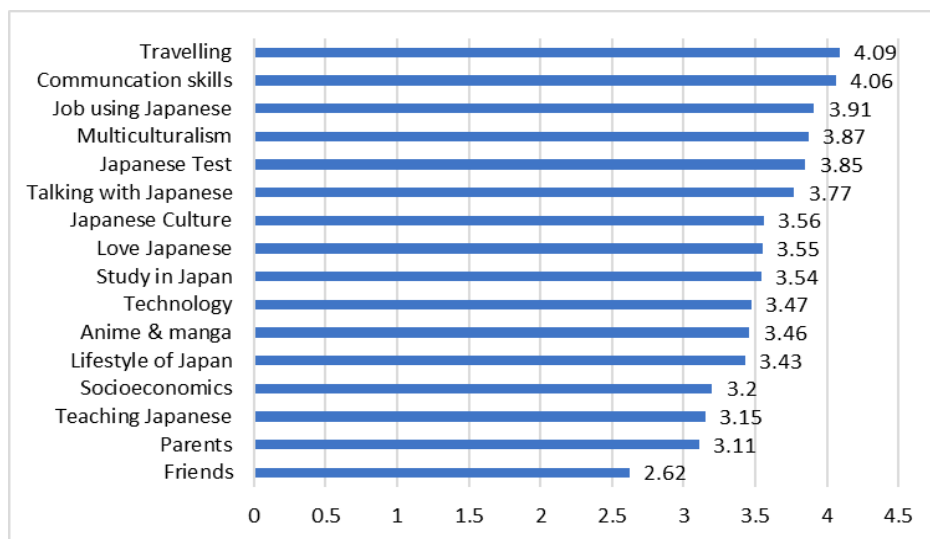


Figure 2. Japanese language study motives (N=142)

Figure 3 shows the proficiency scores that respondents perceive about four language skills. The data indicate that reading to be at the highest fluency, followed by writing, speaking, and listening.

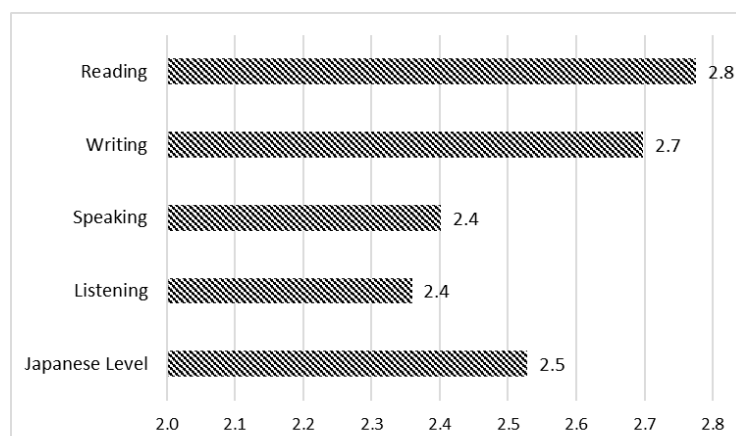


Figure 3. Japanese language proficiency (self-perceived) (N=142)

Table 2 presents the correlation between participants' self-evaluated Japanese proficiency levels and their study motives. Motives aligned with perceived Japanese proficiency include job-related factors and teaching Japanese. Speaking skills are associated with motives such as

anime, teaching Japanese, travel, communication, and a love for Japanese culture. Listening skills correlate with interests in anime, travel, communication, living in Japan, and a love for Japanese culture. Writing proficiency is linked to various motives, including job-related aspirations, academic pursuits, teaching, travel experiences, parental influence, test preparation, conversational abilities, communication, technology, lifestyle preferences, and a love for Japanese culture. Similarly, reading proficiency is influenced by motives related to job prospects, academic endeavors, teaching, travel experiences, parental guidance, test preparation, conversational abilities, communication, technology, lifestyle preferences, and a deep appreciation for Japanese culture.

Table 2. Correlation between Japanese level and study motives (N=142)

	Japanese Level	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading
Anime	.028	.194*	.289**	.076	.145
Culture	-.038	.049	.100	-.005	.099
Job using Japanese	.167*	.149	.107	.193*	.217**
Study in Japan	.131	.079	.150	.193*	.167*
Teach Japanese	.196*	.201*	.150	.206*	.260**
Travel to Japan	.138	.190*	.185*	.252**	.253**
Parents	.015	.131	.119	.214*	.059
Friends	-.084	.049	.075	.086	-.064
Taking Test	.077	.096	.143	.241**	.217**
Talking	-.099	.109	.025	.214*	.159
Communication	.053	.180*	.184*	.283**	.228**
Multiculture	-.110	.084	.053	.095	.114
Technology	-.027	.090	.076	.177*	.197*
Socioeconomy	-.087	.022	.076	.115	.071
Lifestyle	.120	.101	.170*	.176*	.200*
Love Japanese	.048	.262**	.221**	.258**	.315**

Spearman's correlation (2-tailed). * p< 0.05; **p<0.01.

Table 3 depicts the correlation between participants' self-evaluated Japanese proficiency levels and characteristic items. Factors associated with Japanese language proficiency include major, age, grade, years spent studying Japanese, English proficiency level, and whether the participant is a local student. Regarding Listening skills, correlations are observed with factors such as major, grade, years studying Japanese, and English proficiency level. Speaking is correlated with age, grade, years studying Japanese, and English proficiency level. Writing shows correlations with major, age, grade, years studying Japanese, English proficiency level, and self-esteem levels. Finally, reading is associated with major and self-esteem levels.

Table 3. Correlation between Japanese level and characteristics (N=142)

	Japanese Level	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading
Major	.270**	.126	.202*	.243**	.193*
Age	.632**	.309**	.133	.262**	.079
Sex	.098	.056	.107	.147	.109
Grade	.657**	.338**	.168*	.300**	.080
Foreigner	-.252**	-.015	.011	-.064	.093
Dormitory	.096	.025	.048	.070	-.100
Roommates	.036	-.067	.012	.028	.009
Parents' education	-.058	-.058	-.046	-.018	-.062
Hometown	.086	.019	.069	.052	.030
Family study abroad experience	-.096	.083	.129	.057	-.011
Family income	.008	-.035	.135	.040	-.074
Self-esteem	-.066	.017	.156	.234**	.232**
English level	.252**	.325**	.225**	.232**	.131
Years studied Japanese	.628**	.406**	.262**	.379**	.153

Spearman's correlation (2-tailed). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Japanese language study motives with the highest scores reflect a strong interest in experiential activities such as travel and communication, as well as professional aspirations related to employment opportunities. These results align with the previous study among undergraduates majoring in Japanese language in two countries (Tran et al., 2023), and partly align with worldwide survey data, which suggests that interest in anime, career aspirations, and fascination with Japan are among the primary motivations for learning Japanese. (Japan Foundation, 2021). On the other hand, motives with the lowest scores suggest that factors such as peer and parental influence, as well as teaching Japanese, are less influential in driving engagement with Japan among the respondents. This results also partly align with the previous study's findings (Tran et al., 2023).

Respondents' self-evaluated Japanese language skills reveal nuanced perceptions across various domains. Listening proficiency ($M=2.36$), emerges as the lowest among the listed skills, indicating a potential lack of confidence in understanding spoken Japanese, possibly stemming from challenges with diverse accents, dialects, or conversational pace. Similarly, speaking proficiency ($M=2.40$) reflects perceived difficulties in fluently expressing oneself verbally, potentially attributable to limitations in vocabulary, grammar, or conversational practice. Writing skills ($M=2.70$), rank higher than listening and speaking but fall below reading, suggesting room for improvement despite relative confidence in written expression. Challenges in writing may encompass mastery of kanji characters, grammatical structures, and overall composition skills. Conversely, respondents perceive reading proficiency ($M=2.77$) as the highest among the listed skills, indicating a greater comfort level with comprehending Japanese texts. This proficiency may stem from exposure to written materials such as books, manga, or online articles, coupled with dedicated study of kanji and vocabulary. In the current study, the respondents perceived their proficiency in reading to be the highest, followed by writing, speaking, and listening. These results are different from the previous study's findings, in which students perceived their skills in the following order: reading, listening, writing, speaking (Tran et al., 2023). The hierarchy of perceived proficiency levels may vary depending on individual learning experiences, exposure to

different language contexts, and the emphasis placed on each skill in their language learning journey. Improving proficiency in all language skills requires consistent practice, exposure to authentic language materials, and targeted learning strategies tailored to each skill.

The correlations in Table 3 provide insights into how various personal characteristics and educational factors may influence individuals' perceived proficiency levels in different aspects of the Japanese language. Our analysis indicates that majoring in Japanese studies, higher age, higher grade, higher English proficiency, and longer duration of Japanese language study tend to correspond with elevated levels of self-perceived language competency. Conversely, variables such as gender, lodging status (comprising two variables), and family characteristics (comprising four variables) exhibit no significant correlations with any of the assessed language skills. The results are similar to the previous study, except that in the current study, no correlating between co-living status and language skills were found (Tran et al., 2023). These findings provide valuable insights into the nuanced interplay between individual characteristics and language proficiency perceptions within the context of Japanese language acquisition. The synergism of multiple foreign languages (Rahmatian & Farshadjou, 2013) also has been found in the current study.

The study's findings closely align with the conceptual framework, revealing significant relationships between perceived proficiency levels and study motives, demographic variables, and academic factors as hypothesized. While family dynamics were included in the framework, the study did not find conclusive evidence to verify their association with perceived proficiency levels. Additionally, while self-esteem was considered, its influence on perceived proficiency levels was not fully supported by the findings.

One limitation of the methodology is the potential lack of generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context of the two universities in Vietnam. The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables, as data is collected at a single point in time. This design also precludes the examination of longitudinal changes in language proficiency or study motivations over time. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported measures for Japanese language proficiency and other key variables introduces the possibility of response bias or inaccuracies in participant self-assessment. Lastly, potential biases or limitations associated with online data collection methods should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this cross-sectional study sheds light on the multifaceted factors influencing Japanese language proficiency among undergraduate students in Vietnam. Through correlation analysis, significant determinants such as academic major, age, grade, duration of Japanese language study, English proficiency, and local student status were identified as influential contributors to perceived proficiency levels. Notably, listening and speaking skills emerged as the least developed among the four language skills assessed, followed by writing and reading. Motives strongly correlated with perceived Japanese proficiency included aspirations to work using the language and the intention to teach Japanese. Additionally, motivations related to manga and anime interests, communication experiences, travel engagements, and a love for the Japanese language were associated with perceived speaking and listening skills. These findings underscore the need for tailored educational strategies to optimize language learning outcomes, particularly focusing on the enhancement of speaking and listening skills. They provide valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and

policymakers seeking to facilitate effective Japanese language education in diverse cultural contexts.

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