

# An Exploration of Student Motivation in Mandatory and Elective Japanese University Language Courses

日本人大学生を対象とした必修・選択外国語科目における動機づけに関する探求

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本稿の目的は、日本の大学における英語科目の必修化が学習者の動機づけに与える影響を明らかにすることである。必修科目である英語の授業と選択科目である LOTE の授業における学習者の動機づけを比較し、英語学習と LOTE の学習における相互作用を調査するとともに、履修科目の自己選択と言語学習の動機づけに関する調査を実施した。収集したデータは、必修科目の英語及び選択科目の LOTS の授業を履修している日本の大学生 (N = 151) を対象に *t*-test を用いて分析した。調査の結果、履修科目の自己選択が言語学習の動機づけ要因であることが示唆された。

キーワード：

英語、英語以外の言語 (LOTE)、自己選択、学習づけ

## 1. Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has promoted and expanded English study while simultaneously noting low levels of learner motivation with the subject. In 2002, MEXT planned a measure to “Boost motivation of learners” as a means of “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” (MEXT, 2002). However, a 2011 MEXT survey found that efforts to promote bilingualism resulted in low levels of student motivation. Furthermore, when given the choice between “like” and “dislike,” only 30 percent of middle school students chose “I like English” (Daily Yomiuri, 2012). These results indicate low levels of satisfaction might represent a no-win scenario in which the very act of requiring the study of English demotivates learners.

There is a well-documented, cross-cultural tendency for individuals to prefer making a choice over having a choice made for them by others (Iyengar, 2010). Current research into Japanese university student motivation in English courses fails to take the impact of choice into account due to learners lacking the option to choose their language of study. Could allowing students to choose their language of study improve learner motivation? If so, it is not certain what an educational policy reflecting greater learner choice would look like. While changing the status of English language courses to elective would lead to fewer numbers of Japanese English-speakers, it could also result in more motivated learners. The implications of a positive correlation between learner choice and learner motivation are worth considering, especially since MEXT has made further attempts to strengthen English education in preparation for the 2020 Olympics. (MEXT, 2014.)

In light of these issues, the purpose of the present study is to explore the role of choice in student motivation, as English language study is mandatory in Japan for two years from the tertiary level (MEXT, 2012). However, direct comparisons between learners who are required to study English and learners who choose to study English is made unfeasible by this policy. Instead, the present study seeks to highlight differences between student motivation reported from mandatory English classes and elective Languages other than English (LOTE) classes.

## 2. Literature review: Choice and the L2 Motivational Self System

Choice is a recognized factor in student motivation. Suzuki (2014) writes that motivation is, “defined as L2 learners’ choice, intensity, and persistency to gain proficiency in the target language” (Suzuki, 2014, p.46). This section will provide the framework of motivation research and the role of choice in the L2 Motivational System.

Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System has seen broad popularity since its inception and has been utilized and validated by researchers in countries such as Singapore, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, and Iran (Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Magid, 2014). Previous work often utilized Gardner’s (1985) integrative/instrumental dichotomy to discuss student motivation. Dörnyei builds on previous motivation theories by introducing three main concepts: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience, with the last concept representing the continuous process of language study. Motivation research utilizing the L2 Motivational Self System includes the categories of Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self in addition to earlier categories such as student attitudes towards English, integrativeness, and cultural interest. The concepts of Ideal L2 Self and the

Ought-to L2 Self are especially relevant when exploring student choice.

Dörnyei (2009) defines the Ideal L2 Self as “the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves” (p.29). That is, learners have an image of who they want to be and pursue language study as a way to achieve this. Survey items such as *Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English* (Dörnyei, 2010, p.140) focus on learner visions of themselves. As such, Ideal L2 Self motivation is driven by learners’ individual choices for the direction of their lives.

In contrast, the Ought-to L2 Self is motivation concerned with avoiding negative outcomes by following the rules. Dörnyei (2009) defines the Ought-to L2 Self as “the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes” (p.29). These “duties, obligations, or responsibilities” could also be seen in the mandatory nature of English classes. Suzuki (2014, p.47) explains, “For example, a Japanese university student could be highly motivated to study English in order to refrain from failing to earn a credit.” The Ideal L2 Self is concerned with the choices learners make for their futures, whereas the Ought-to L2 Self is concerned with the expectations society places upon them.

Researchers utilizing the L2 Motivational Self System often measure several other attitudinal/motivational dimensions, such as integrativeness, instrumentality, etc. and search for correlations. Instrumentality — or being rewarded for one’s work — is closely related to the concepts of Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self. Dörnyei (2005) divided instrumentality motivation further into two sub-categories. Promotion instrumentality refers to the desire to seek positive outcomes while prevention instrumentality is concerned with avoiding negative outcomes. Dörnyei (2005) believed in promotion instrumentality would correlate with the Ideal L2 Self. Hughes, Vye, and Ray (2020, p.8) write, “Conversely, the Ought-to L2 Self should correlate more with prevention instrumentality because it is concerned with what one is obligated to achieve to avoid negative consequences.”

## **2.1 Interactions between English and LOTEs: Definitions and the Japanese context**

This study compares the motivation of students in mandatory English classes and elective LOTE classes. Although both are language classes, English and LOTE have unique characteristics and may interact in ways that impact student motivation.

As noted by Fukui and Yashima (2021), the term LOTE seems to have risen in popularity, with even a special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* being dedicated to the topic (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). Previous research (Henry, 2010) often used the term “third

language” to compare second-language English with other languages. Cenoz (2013) discusses the topic by referring to second-language learning by monolinguals and third-language learning by bilinguals. However, LOTE has emerged as a more apt term, as it takes into account differences between English and other language learning. Research into LOTE learning motivation often utilizes the L2 Motivational Self System.

Comparisons of English and LOTE learning often leave LOTE courses at a disadvantage. English is a global language used in academia, entertainment, and trade, which results in LOTE operating “in the shadow of Global English” (Dörnyei et al., 2017, p.465). This imbalance can result in a motivation gap, as students can clearly see the applications of English study, whereas LOTE use might be limited to specific regions.

In addition, English is often a mandatory subject taught from an early age. Henry (2010) found that some secondary students measure LOTE progress against English, often resulting in demotivation. This scenario would certainly apply to Japanese learners, where English is a mandatory course from elementary school (MEXT, 2016).

However, interactions between English and LOTE learning are not necessarily negative, as the two can work together to form complementary roles. Cenoz (2013) reports numerous advantages that LOTE learners would have after earlier English study, such as better learner strategies and a larger linguistic database. While noting the prevalence of global English, Dörnyei (2017) also argues that LOTE learning has further advantages, such as closer connections to specific countries or communities and a deeper personal motivation to learn the language.

These interactions between English and LOTE learning reveal the complexity inherent in any comparisons of the two. Fukui and Yashima (2021) use Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Model to record the evolving motivations of two Japanese learners simultaneously studying English and Chinese during a study abroad program. They found that both learners experienced the “ebbs and flows of language learning motivation” (p.289) as they worked to maintain and strengthen their motivation. The study concludes with a call for more small-scale, qualitative studies to discern students’ true attitudes.

One of the key aims of Sugita et al.’s (2017) comprehensive study was to investigate how English impacts LOTE learning in the Japanese context. Specifically, they wished to discover if there was a connection between English and LOTE learning, or if the two are independent. They also employed a blend of the L2 Motivational Model and other motivation theories (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 1985) to survey 250 University of Tokyo students studying English and LOTEs. They found that “students who enjoy English learning and have a clear image of

themselves as English speakers in the future tend to lose their favorable attitude toward LOTE communities and cultures” (p.543).

Both studies by Fuki and Yashima (2021) and Sugita et al. (2017) note the current lack of research into LOTE motivation, especially when compared to the vast amount of English-language learning motivation research that already exists. The results of this paper, while focusing on the impact of choice, will add to this area of investigation by reporting learner motivation in LOTE university courses.

### **3. Research questions and Methodology**

In order to explore the role of choice in language learning motivation, the following research question and two sub-questions were posed:

RQ: Do Japanese university students report higher levels of motivation in mandatory language classes or elective language classes?

Sub-Q 1: How do Japanese university students report their motivation in mandatory language classes?

Sub-Q 2: How do Japanese university students report their motivation in elective language classes?

#### **3.1 Method: Participants**

A total of 121 (78 female, 43 male) native Japanese-speaking university students with a mean age of 18 years were surveyed at the end of their first year at university through convenience sampling in nine classes. All surveyed students received at least six years of prior English instruction and belonged to the International Relations faculty. They were required to study English and one LOTE course (both held twice a week), where they could choose from French, Spanish, German, Russian, Tagalog, Korean, or Mandarin. Of the 121 participants, 15 studied Chinese, 24 French, 15 German, 19 Korean, three Russian, 28 Spanish, 15 Tagalog, and two were not mentioned. As members of the International Relations faculty, these students were expected to have a TOEIC score of over 400, which is equivalent to CEFR A2 (Basic User). All participants provided written consent for their data to be included in the write-up.

### 3.2 Instrument

A paper-based survey utilizing Likert-scale type questions was administered. An idiosyncratic characteristic of this survey is that a low score represents a high motivation and satisfaction towards the language. This modification was made to avoid student confusion by conforming with end-of-semester surveys administered by the university.

I think so	Maybe it's true	Maybe it's not true	I don't think so
1	2	3	4

Survey items replicated the 2011 MEXT survey (MEXT, 2012) and were expanded to include the learners' LOTE. For example, the MEXT survey participants were asked, *Do you want a job that requires English language skills?* Participants of that survey were also be asked, *Do you want a job that requires your LOTE language skills?* Question 9, which referred to exams, was omitted as the participants had already completed their university entrance exams. The total list of sample questions is presented in Table 1. The researchers also sorted the survey questions into attitudinal/motivational dimensions frequently used in language motivation research (Dörnyei, 2010). (See Appendix A).

Table 1 Survey Items

Item	Survey question	Included/Omitted
1	Do you like English (LOTE)?	Included
2	Do you enjoy studying English (LOTE)?	Included
3	Do you enjoy to study listening to English (LOTE)?	Included
4	Do you like to express yourself though speaking English (LOTE)?	Included
5	Do you like to study the textbook?	Included
6	Do you like to express yourself through writing English (LOTE)?	Included
7	Do you like to learn about the lifestyle/culture?	Included
8	Learning English (LOTE) is important.	Included
9	English (LOTE) is helpful for exams.	Omitted
10	Learning English (LOTE) will help me get a job I like.	Included
11	Studying English (LOTE) will help me in society.	Included
12	I can express my feelings in English (LOTE).	Included
13	In the future, I will use English (LOTE) at work.	Included

### 3.3 Administration

The survey was administered by six different full-time lecturers, including the two authors, and collected the following week by the same respective lecturers. Completion time for the

survey was approximately 10 minutes.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Two preliminary scores were obtained from the survey, one from each language. Since all assumptions for a parametric test were met, a paired samples *t*-test was applied. Data were analyzed via the statistical software package, SPSS. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's *d* and interpreted using Cohen's (1988) standard benchmarks: .20 (small), .50 (medium), and .80 (large).

## 4. Results

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 *Descriptive statistics for mean percent satisfaction of learners of English and LOTE*

Item	Language	Lickert scale			
		1	2	3	4
1	English	69.0	27.0	3.0	0.0
	LOTE	46.0	41.0	11.0	2.0
2	English	51.0	44.0	4.0	1.0
	LOTE	38.0	36.0	21.0	4.0
3	English	45.5	35.5	17.4	1.7
	LOTE	23.1	38.8	30.6	7.4
4	English	45.5	33.1	20.7	0.8
	LOTE	31.4	42.1	24.0	2.5
5	English	31.4	47.9	19.0	1.7
	LOTE	28.9	46.3	19.8	5.0
6	English	38.0	51.2	9.9	0.8
	LOTE	30.6	40.5	24.8	4.1
7	English	74.4	24.0	1.7	0.0
	LOTE	71.1	26.4	1.7	0.8
8	English	86.8	11.6	0.8	0.0
	LOTE	43.8	42.1	12.4	1.7
10	English	66.9	27.3	5.8	0.0
	LOTE	21.5	36.4	33.1	9.1
11	English	63.6	28.9	6.6	0.0
	LOTE	19.8	38.8	33.9	7.4
12	English	66.9	27.3	5.0	0.8
	LOTE	38.0	43.8	16.5	1.7
13	English	56.2	34.7	8.3	0.8
	LOTE	21.5	35.5	37.2	5.8

The descriptive data show higher motivation scores for English in the majority of the items. Items 10, 11, and 13 are related to work and society, in which 30 or more percent of the participants scored higher in English (Likert scale 1 and 2 combined). As for enjoying studying the language, either through listening or expressing oneself through writing (Items 2, 3, and 6), approximately 20 percent of the participants scored higher (Likert scale 1 and 2 combined). Furthermore, approximately 10 percent of the participants scored higher in English, where they stated that studying the language is important, that they like the language, and that they can express their feelings in the language (Items 1, 8, and 12). Lastly, participants displayed subtle differences in being able to express themselves in speaking, liking the language, and learning the lifestyle/culture, which was merely five percent or less.

The results from the statistical analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 *Statistical analyses of the differences between English and LOTE*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	CI		<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
				Lower	Upper				
Item 1	-0.34	0.86	0.08	-0.49	-0.18	-4.33	120	0	0.396
Item 2	-0.37	0.88	0.08	-0.53	-0.21	-4.67	120	0	0.423
Item 3	-0.47	1.02	0.09	-0.65	-0.29	-5.09	120	0	0.462
Item 4	-0.21	0.93	0.08	-0.37	-0.04	-2.44	120	0.02	0.227
Item 5	-0.1	0.91	0.08	-0.26	0.06	-1.2	120	0.23	0.111
Item 6	-0.29	0.93	0.08	-0.46	-0.12	-3.4	120	0	0.299
Item 7	-0.05	0.51	0.05	-0.14	0.04	-1.06	120	0.29	0.097
Item 8	-0.58	0.75	0.07	-0.71	-0.44	-8.37	119	0	0.769
Item 10	-0.91	0.93	0.08	-1.08	-0.74	-10.74	120	0	0.975
Item 11	-0.86	0.84	0.08	-1.01	-0.71	-11.15	119	0	1.009
Item 12	-0.42	0.79	0.07	-0.56	-0.28	-5.84	120	0	0.529
Item 13	-0.74	0.91	0.08	-0.9	-0.57	-8.88	120	0	0.802

The statistical analyses revealed a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between English and the learners' LOTE in every item except Items 5 and 7. Notably, Items 10, 11, and 13 reported a large effect size ( $d > 0.8$ ), Items 8 and 12 reported a medium effect size ( $d > 0.5$ ), and Items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 reported a small effect size ( $d > 0.2$ ). On the contrary, no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ) and low effect size ( $d < 0.2$ ) was found in Items 5 and 7. Therefore, there were no significant differences in motivation levels between the English and LOTE courses for textbook study and learning about the culture or lifestyle. Both scores were high, showing a positive attitude towards textbooks and cultures in both language classes.

Although positive results were recorded in every answer, a significant difference was found



between the participants' LOTE and English. In sum, for all responses except those from Items 5 and 7, participants were more satisfied with English than their LOTE.

## 5. Discussion and limitations

In response to the sub-question 1, survey responses revealed a highly motivated group of mandatory English language learners. These results appear to contradict the general theory of choice research: that learners prefer courses which they select themselves rather than being required to take. In response to the sub-question 2, survey responses again revealed a highly motivated group of students as the majority gave positive responses. Taken together with the results of the first research question, this could imply a positive interaction between English and LOTE learning, such as those mentioned by Cenoz (2013) or Dörnyei (2017). Previous English-language study could have provided the participants with greater confidence and additional learner strategies as they tackled their LOTE coursework.

The answer to the central research question shows that students reported a higher level of motivation in mandatory language classes. A significant difference was found between mandatory English learning and elective LOTE learning motivation. Again, the results appear to contradict the general theory of choice research—that students would prefer situations and environments which are optional rather than mandatory. Instead, there seemed to be no benefit to allowing students to select their language of study. This could be the result of negative interactions between English and LOTE motivation. As the participants were expected to have TOEIC scores of over 400, this level of English proficiency could lead to feelings of inadequacy when starting study of a new language—a tendency noted by Henry (2010). The results of this analysis seem to echo Sugita et al.'s (2017) conclusion that students lose LOTE motivation as they increase their English motivation.

To further explore this result, the researchers examined the attitudinal/motivational dimensions of the survey questions which produced large effect sizes ( $d > 0.8$ ): Items 10, 11, and 13.

Item 10, *Learning the language will help me get a job I like*, falls under the category of “promotion instrumentality” (see Appendix). As mentioned previously, promotion instrumentality is closely related to the concept of the Ideal L2 Self. By focusing on learners' future goals of attaining a job they would like, Item 10 relates closely to learners' future visions of themselves. Likewise, Item 11 (*Studying the language will help me in society*) also falls under the category of promotion instrumentality. The phrasing of the statement talks of “help” rather than avoiding punishment or other undesirable outcomes shows a relation to the Ideal L2 Self. Item

13 (*In the future, I will use the language at work*) directly matches with the category of the Ideal L2 Self. Taken together, these answers reveal that the participants had clear goals of their future selves, and that these goals were informed by their own choice rather than by the societal or institutional obligations of the Ought-to L2 Self.

As first-year International Relations students, the participants might have viewed English language study as an extension of their chosen major choice. That is, by choosing to enter this department, they embraced the study of English and other foreign languages and cultures. It is possible that the participants did not view the study of English as something chosen for them, but rather as a study they selected. In addition, members of an International Relations faculty could be expected to be more highly motivated towards English study as it offers numerous benefits for their chosen field. This is suggested by the large effect sizes of Items 10, 11 and 13. Simply put, the learners already possessed a clear vision of themselves using English in the future, whereas they did not possess such a clear vision for a LOTE related future. This finding suggests that choice was a factor in student motivation, although not in the way that the researchers expected.

This result leads to the limitations of the study. First, the study was conducted amongst International Relations students at a Japanese public university. The results would likely be very different within another department such as law, where the students' chosen careers do not require English and, thus, the students lack mature Ideal L2 Selves. This limitation makes generalizations of the findings to other departments and universities not possible. Furthermore, students who responded to the survey represent a limited sample size, as unmotivated learners might have failed to answer and hand in the survey. In addition, English and LOTE learning have unique characteristics and interactions which make comparisons difficult. Finally, any study of motivation is an ongoing process. As noted by Fukui and Yashima (2021), student motivation changes over time. The results recorded here may change over the course of the participants' university careers.

## 6. Conclusion and future research directions

This study explored the impact of choice on student motivation in language learning courses. The results and analyses found that participants reported higher levels of motivation in mandatory English courses when compared to elective LOTE courses. Although positive results were recorded in every response, a significant difference was found between the participants' elective LOTE and mandatory English, with greater motivation being reported for English classes. Using

Dörnyei's L2 Motivation System, we were able to discern that the participants possessed a strong Ideal L2 Self. That is, they had already envisioned themselves as future English-using individuals. This suggested that the participants, as International Relations majors, viewed English not as an unnecessary requirement, but rather as a vital step towards achieving their chosen career goals.

Future research should expand the sampling to include learners from a variety of university departments. It may also be worthwhile to further explore the role of choice by looking at the process by which learners chose their elective LOTEs. After recording the results, we conducted follow-up discussions to enquire how participants of the present study selected a LOTE course. After an introductory lesson and an overview of these seven choices, students were given one week to make their selection. This process occurred at the beginning of the students' university careers, specifically in the first two weeks of classes. This time period was especially busy, as students were adjusting to university life, making new friends, and deciding which clubs to join. In essence, although they were allowed to choose their LOTE of study, the selection process was rushed during a stressful time, which could have led to feelings of regret. These factors, whether separately or in conjunction, might have contributed towards the students reporting lower levels of motivation in their elective language classes. Additional investigation is required to test the validity of this theory.

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### Appendix

#### Questions and corresponding L2 Self Motivational System category

Item	Question	Category
1	Do you like the language?	Integrativeness
2	Do you enjoy studying the language?	Attitudes Toward Learning English
3	Do you enjoy to study listening to the language?	Attitudes Toward Learning English Or Interest in the English Language
4	Do you like to express yourself though speaking the language?	Attitudes Toward Learning English
5	Do you like to study the textbook?	None
6	Do you like to express yourself through writing the language?	Attitudes Toward Learning English
7	Do you like to learn about the lifestyle/culture?	Cultural Interest
8	Learning the language is important.	Ought-to L2 Self
9	The language is helpful for exams.	Instrumentality – Promotion
10	Learning the language will help me get a job I like.	Instrumentality – Promotion
11	Studying the language will help me in society.	Instrumentality – Promotion
12	I can express my feelings in the language.	Linguistic Self-confidence
13	In the future, I will use the language at work.	Ideal L2 self