

Overcoming Preconceptions of the Difficulties in Learning the Japanese Language for Science Majors

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Abstract

There is a widespread perception among international students that the Japanese language is difficult to master. This has created a challenge for universities in attracting international students. The Faculty of Agriculture of Kagawa University offers a Master of Science Program in food science for international students, which is taught in the Japanese language. A 33-day Short Stay Program on food safety internship for potential applicants to the master's program was held. Attracting international students to science programs taught in the Japanese language will continue to be a challenge. This study has shown that a Short Stay Program can work as a stepping-stone in assisting potential students overcome their initial perceptions about the difficulties of studying science in the Japanese language. We found that students had improved perceptions about both the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of the Japanese language. Most students also seemed to have overcome their apprehensions regarding the challenges of learning the Japanese language and believe that it is possible for them to do so. We believe that the key factor in developing this new perception of the Japanese language was taking part in a science program in Japan that incorporates intensive Japanese language training as a major part of the program.

Keywords: JSL/JFL, international students, perceptions of science majors, Short Stay Program

1. Introduction

Japan has actively promoted and supported the study of Japanese language and culture for international students through scholarships, student exchange programs, internships, and other international activities. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Sci-

ence and Technology (MEXT) views the international student body as playing an important role in internationalizing Japanese students. In 2008, the 300,000 International Student Plan, set 2020 as the target year for increasing the enrollment of international students to 300,000. One strategy was to expand the number of English-only degree programs, which would not only make studies more easily available to a variety of students, but also help to create a more international environment for Japanese students (MEXT, 2009). However, the number of international students in Japan has not increased.

Furthermore, international students in science and technology programs are under-represented. To successfully increase the international student body, more attractive programs, particularly career-oriented programs, must be available. However, career-oriented programs must also prepare international students for work in Japanese companies which necessitates that they learn Japanese. The perceived difficulty of learning the Japanese language is a significant obstacle to success.

The Faculty of Agriculture of Kagawa University offers a Master of Science program for international students, which is taught in the Japanese language. Students conduct graduate research in frozen food safety and also study Japanese business, culture, and the Japanese language. Graduates are prepared to find employment in the Japanese food industry. One important program goal is that international students will be able to have careers in Japanese international companies after gaining higher education in Japan. To date, all graduates have found employment with Japanese companies. However, potential applicants have expressed concerns about meeting the requirements of the Japanese language component of the program.

The Faculty of Agriculture instituted an internship of food safety, the Short Stay Program (SS Program) with support from Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO). International students were invited to study food safety at the Faculty of Agriculture. The program also included intensive Japanese language lessons. It was thought if students that come to Japan for a short term visit were able to understand the challenges and rewards of studying in Japan, then they would be likely to want to come again and the SS Program would act as a bridge for long-term programs. The 2013 SS Program was a 33-day food safety program (August 19 — September 20, 2013). The internship in food safety was conducted in English, and participants had 6 hours of Japanese language and culture classes, and 3 hours of interaction activities.

We conducted a preliminary study of the 2011 SS Program, which found that the SS Program had a positive effect on some of the perceptions regarding learning the Japanese language, but did not influence their preconceptions about Japanese people. Positive perceptions about the utility of the Japanese language increased while negative perceptions decreased. We also found that there was a shift in student belief in their ability to successfully learn the Japanese language based upon their participation in the internship (Lutes et al., 2012).

Since we believe that the perceptions of the language difficulties are a key factor in influencing potential students' decisions to study in Japan, it is important to foster and encourage positive perceptions of the utility of the language and perhaps more importantly to assist students in understanding that they will be able to successfully learn the Japanese language with effective training and attitudes. We further believe that students that have more positive beliefs about the Japanese language and their capability to successfully learn it, because of their experiences in the short stay program, may serve as conduits to spread this understanding among their peers when they return to their home countries at the conclusion of the SS Program. Furthermore, they may themselves be motivated to apply for advanced studies in Japan that have Japanese language ability as a requirement.

The students' general perceptions about the Japanese language, including the increased social status from Japanese language ability, were examined to determine their perceptions of the Japanese language. Positive perceptions of the target language, in this case Japanese, have been shown to increase intrinsic motivation (Keller, 1983; Crookes & Schmidt, 1989). The perceived utility of the Japanese language is a focal point because perception of the need to use the language is important for motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; McNamara, 1973). Motivation can be positively affected by socio-psychological aspects, and by learner interest in the foreign language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991, 1993).

Since the perception of the difficulty of mastering the target language is important for success, the student perception of the difficulty in learning the Japanese language was investigated (Ellis, 1994). For Japanese language learners, it was found that reading comprehension and kanji ability are directly associated with the students' perceived difficulty in reading the Japanese language (Kondo-Brown, 2006).

Therefore, gaining a better understanding of the perceptions of the difficulty in learning the Japanese language among science majors would provide useful insights into how the SS Program may be used to positively influence perceptions about studying the Japanese language, and provide insights into the issues that may discourage international students from joining science programs taught in the Japanese language.

2. Course design and investigation

In order to investigate if preconceptions of the difficulties in learning the Japanese language would be influenced by a short stay program, two methods were used. Firstly, students that had been chosen to participate in the SS Program were surveyed about their perceptions of the utility and ease of learning Japanese language at the end of the program. Secondly, we asked the students to submit a report about the Japanese language learning, which allowed us to investigate their perception, attitude and change qualitatively. This data can provide useful insights into how perceptions may be influenced by an SS Program. It may also further provide insights into the issues that should be addressed when recruiting international students for programs that are taught in the Japanese language.

All the participants took part in 10 hours of Japanese language training activities (4 classes and an interaction session). At the end of the course, they submitted a report and were invited to participate in a survey. Participants were informed that their participation for the survey was voluntary, on an opt-in basis, and that any identifying information would be removed.

In addition to describing the methodology, we also describe how the Japanese language classes were taught because that may also influence the results. Section 2.2. illustrates the design of the Japanese language component.

2.1. Participants

Twenty-two university students (Male 4: Female 18) participated in the SS Program. There were undergraduate (11), master's (10) and doctoral (1) students from various science faculties: agriculture, agro-industry, animal science, animal and agricultural sciences, food technology, fisheries, food engineering, and food science and engineering. They were from six countries, Brazil, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Turkey and the United States. They were native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Thai and Turkish. All of the SS Program students (hereafter students) sub-

mitted the final report, which was a course requirement. Ten of the students participated in the post program survey (hereafter participants).

Seven of the participants self-reported their Japanese language levels as "none" and "a little". Two participants reported short-term experiences studying the Japanese language in their home countries before participating in this program. One participant learned Japanese for two years during childhood.

2.2. Language learning

As part of the SS program, students took part in 6 hours (90 min x 4 classes) of Japanese language classes, and a 4 hour interaction activity. Initially, they studied *hiragana*, *katakana*, counting expressions, useful daily phrases, and survival Japanese language skills for 4.5 hours (3 classes). Then, they were asked to complete two functional tasks in the Japanese language at a shopping center for 4 hours (1 class). They were asked to: 1) buy something that they needed; and 2) report on the details of the purchase. They were encouraged to use Japanese language expressions that they had learned, and in fact were forced to use the Japanese language to be able to complete the final tasks of successfully buying item(s).

After these tasks had been completed, they had 1.5 additional hours (1 class) of Japanese language class to debrief, to address the problems that they had with the tasks, and to study more related vocabulary and grammar. Other international students, living in Japan and studying at the Faculty of Agriculture, joined the Japanese language class to assist the SS Program students.

2.3. Two aspects of the study

For the quantitative part of the study, the students were asked to answer the survey, which had 48 questions and statements: There were 9 demographic questions, followed by 39 statements to which participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement on a 5 point Likert scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The 39 statements were divided into four categories:

- (1) Perceptions of the Japanese language (3 statements)
- (2) Perceptions of difficulties studying the Japanese language (15 statements)
- (3) Perceptions of utility of Japanese language ability in career design (12 statements)

(4) Perceptions of utility of Japanese language ability in science (9 statements)

In each category, three statements were asked per topic. Two statements were similar to check for consistency in their responses.

For the qualitative part of the study, the final reports were examined. The students' comments that were related to their experiences in learning Japanese and their attitudes towards Japanese were examined.

3. Quantitative Findings

3.1. Perceptions of the Japanese language

60% of the participants indicated that they "want to go to Japan to study Japanese" (Statement 25; "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"). This response was consistent with the responses to Statements 12 and 46 which a positive attitude about going to Japan to study Japanese.

We had not expected such a positive attitude because they are science majors, not language or liberal arts majors. However, these findings are consistent with our previous findings (Lutes et al, 2012) ; we can conclude students that have participated in the SS program have positive attitudes about learning the Japanese language in Japan. On the other hand, we expected that language learning would not be the highest priority for the participants, which our data (below) supports.

3.2. Perceptions of difficulties in studying the Japanese language

Almost all (90%) the students agreed that they would "be able to understand spoken Japanese" if they studied Japanese for two years (Statements 15 and 31). When they were asked specifically about understanding Japanese television, the positive responses increased to 100% (Statement 39). Although we did not define understanding, but only used the term "understanding", which allowed the participants to determine what this meant, we believe that this indicates that the participants had confidence in their abilities to successfully learn the Japanese language.

It is noteworthy that even though the survey was conducted after the program and the participants had completed the intensive study, 30% were neutral about the ease of learning hiragana, the simplest phonetic syllabary of the Japanese language, (Statement

48). Some of them even disagreed that "*hiragana* [was] easy to learn." This is in stark contrast to their positive attitudes about listening and understanding the Japanese language.

They had slightly more negative perceptions about their abilities to learn katakana, another simple Japanese phonetic alphabet (Statement 14), but even so, they thought they would be able to read and write it (Statements 27 and 45). Although they indicated some misgivings about the ease of learning both hiragana and katakana, they did indicate that they thought they could learn them.

They did not learn kanji, Chinese characters, in the classes but they were exposed to kanji in daily life during their stay in Japan. When asked about their perceptions of the ease of learning kanji, their responses showed much less confidence in their ability to learn kanji (Statements 20, 32 and 37). This perception is understandable because they had no chance to study kanji, and they encountered kanji everyday as a mass of indecipherable characters on street signs, menus, buildings, etc. Furthermore, it is much more complicated than the other two phonetic syllabaries, which they did study. We believe that classroom exposure to kanji may also lead to a change in this perception.

3.3. Perceptions of utility of the Japanese language ability for career planning

For 60% of the participants, "Japanese is an important skill for a good job" (Statement 44; "Strongly Agree" or "Agree") and 80% disagreed with the negative statement that "Japanese is not important for getting a job in a Japanese company" (Statement 36). 90% believed that they will have more job opportunities even in their own country (Statement 29).

80% agreed or strongly agreed that speaking Japanese will improve their salary (Statement 35), which could be a potential motivating factor for learning Japanese. This response was consistent reflecting their belief in the potential economic benefits of learning Japanese (Statements 21 and 41).

Their strong belief in the potential advantages of learning Japanese for their careers was further supported in the positive responses about working in a Japanese company. 50% responded positively ("Strongly Agree" or "Agree") to the prospect of working in a Japanese company, 30% "Neutral," and 20% "Disagree". We think that high posi-

tive response to considering a career with a Japanese company is a reflection of their positive perceptions: a) of their capability to learn, and b) of the utility of the Japanese language.

80% agreed the ability of speaking the Japanese language would have a good effect on their self-image (Statement 10; "Strongly Agree" or "Agree") and 90% agreed they would be "more respected and admired" (Statement 17; "Agree") Nobody chose "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" in response to these statements. These data indirectly support their belief that the Japanese language would bring them practical benefits.

3.4. Perceptions of utility of the Japanese language ability for science

In many fields of science English is the dominant language, the de facto standard, while the Japanese language is not. Nevertheless 60% of the participants thought that it would help them to become more scientifically advanced (Statement 38). This perception may have been affected by their participation in the SS Program which included Japanese language classes. However, it should also be noted that except for the Japanese language classes, all parts of the SS Program were conducted in English. Furthermore, it should be noted that part of the utility of Japanese for learning science may be due to Japan's reputation for being a leader in science and technology.

Contrastively, from 30-50% of the participant were neutral about the general necessity of the Japanese language for science majors (Statements 16, 34 and 40).

Among the participants, the Japanese language was associated with educational opportunities. 90% strongly agreed or agreed that "Learning Japanese will help me get better educational opportunities" (Statement 43). Again, we must consider that this may have been influenced by the act that they were taking part in an educational activity in Japan and that our university has a highly regarded Masters of Science program conducted in Japanese.

4. Qualitative Findings

After finishing all the Japanese lessons, all the students were required to submit a report to get certification of joining in the Japanese language classes. They were asked to respond to the following:

- (1) What do you think about studying Japanese language?
- (2) Before you came to Japan, what aspects of studying the Japanese language appealed to or interested you?
- (3) Tell us about your experience of communication with Japanese people during your stay in Kagawa. Did you try to use Japanese words or phrases? How did feel at that time?
- (4) Tell us how you felt about your firsthand experiences with Japanese culture?
- (5) Please comment on other impressions or opinions about learning / using Japanese language or about Japanese culture.
(e.g. interest, utility in your field or in your country, study more or not, etc.)

We chose these questions to gain insight into students' perceptions about the Japanese language, studying the Japanese language and aspects related to Japanese language abilities and studies, such as Japanese culture and communication with Japanese people. It is useful for us to investigate their perceptions so that we can improve our SS program, Japanese classes, and recruiting of new international students to our university, especially science major students from countries where kanji is not used.

Responses :

- (1) What do you think about studying Japanese language?

Some students mentioned the difficulty of learning the Japanese language including the writing system and the lack of time. On the other hand, all students including those who wrote about the difficulties also mentioned positive aspects.

The reports showed that Thai students were interested in learning the Japanese language because there are many Japanese companies and restaurants in Thailand and they think mastering Japanese language as a third language would be an advantage for them to find a good job in Thailand. Three out of nine Thai students wrote that they had learned the Japanese language for some time in Thailand.

Thai people want to work in Japanese companies.

Thailand has many Japanese companies, learning Japanese language is precious

for me in my country. Thus, I will continuous[ly] study Japanese language study undoubtedly.

I want to study Japanese language more because I want to join in a Japanese company in Thailand.

All three Chinese students stated that Japanese language was not so difficult at least in several aspects. One student said that pronunciation and basic conversation are "quite straightforward."

For Chinese, learning Japanese is simpler than others. Not only some words are the same, but also pronunciation is similar.

Both of the students from the United States pointed out that they needed more time to learn. This is not a negative opinion but a positive one because it indicates that they were interested in the Japanese language itself and recognized learning it helps them to communicate with Japanese people and to understand the Japanese culture.

- (2) Before you came to Japan, what aspects of studying the Japanese language appealed to or interested you?

Only some students responded directly to the question, whereas the others explained some background information or went off-topic.

The students who responded to the topic directly had expected "survival Japanese," phrases to be practical and useful in their daily life. The Japanese classes for the SS Program were successful in the sense that we introduced phrases of this kind.

I have learned these 'must-known' Japanese sentences, which have helped [me] during my stay

- (3) Tell us about your experience of communication with Japanese people during your stay in Kagawa. Did you try to use Japanese words or phrases? How did feel at that time?

Because buying something in the shopping mall using Japanese phrases was one of the tasks of the fourth Japanese class, many students described the situation about this activity. Also the homestay with Japanese people from the local community was a big opportunity for the students to speak and listen to Japanese expressions. Many of the host families had no English language proficiency, and the students needed to communicate with them only in the Japanese language.

... when I was with host family, I tried to speak Japanese. Because I'm [was] very impress[ed] to[by] them, I want[ed] to be able good communication [to communicate] with them. And this is another powerful inspiration [motivation] which make [made] me want to study Japanese language more and more.

From Japanese lecture which I had in here, I learned just simple conversation phrases. This is not enough for long communication with Japanese people, of course. But I can say some words for shopping, apologize and appreciation.

These are the examples of successful communication in Japanese. A student used the word "proud" to express the feeling and another used the phrase "felt good."

(4) *Tell us how you felt about your firsthand experiences with Japanese culture?*

The students' evaluations of the Japanese culture were very high. They used many positive words like "very exciting," "could not explain," "interested," "really happy," and "very unique."

However they did not indicate about the influence on the perception of the Japanese language that the cultural event had.

(5) Please comment on other impressions or opinions about learning / using Japanese language or about Japanese culture.

(e.g. interest, utility in your field or in your country, study more or not, etc.)

Overall impressions seemed to be favorable according to students' comments. Some students wrote comments that would have been appropriate to the above question (4)

I hope I can learn Japanese well, so that I may know Japanese culture better.

I only study Japanese for a short time, [but] I have mastered the basic vocabulary commonly used in Japanese. When I return [to] my country, I will continue learning Japanese.

...especially when I lived with the Japanese for three days, I tried to understand what they say in the Japanese language.

The way of learning is also interesting because we did not just learn about word things but we actively guided by other students who have learnt this language before.

Given that these are citations from their final reports, we must consider that they may be affected by the fact that it was a report for the Japanese language learning class. However, since they connected their experience with a potential motivation for learning the Japanese language, we can conclude that they have demonstrated some increased interest in learning Japanese.

5. Concluding Remarks

This research examined the students' perspectives on the Japanese language. We found that after the program, most of the students believed that they could learn the Japanese language though some were less confident about their ability to learning the writing systems. We also found that both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation had increased.

Attracting international students to science programs taught in the Japanese language will continue to be a challenge. However, this study has shown that an SS Program can work as a stepping-stone in assisting potential students to overcome their initial perceptions about the difficulties of studying science in the Japanese language. It is important to note that we believe that the key factor in developing this new perception of Japanese language was taking part in intensive Japanese language training, which has become a major part of the SS Program.

The qualitative findings of this study have shown that using the language in real life situations, as opposed to classroom only exposure, to communicate with Japanese people living in Japan, can reinforce students' positive attitudes towards language learning. The data on students from various countries suggested that we can achieve this goal more effectively by introducing Japanese cultural aspects to the curriculum contents.

Since it is quite rare for science students to have the opportunity to study the Japanese language as part of a science program, this program should be considered to be a valuable tool in developing a new perception of the feasibility of studying science in the Japanese language for international students. We hope that the students who participated in this program will carry their new understanding of learning the Japanese language back to their home countries and share it with their peers. In conjunction with the successful alumni from our programs, the SS Program students can act as a first point of contact in creating a wider awareness that science students can successfully master the Japanese language to enable them to study in science programs taught in the Japanese language.

As a next step, we think it is important to conduct a broad investigation of the perceptions of international students majoring in science that have not had the opportunity to study in Japan.

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Appendix : Survey Results

Abbreviations :

SA = Strongly Agree Results are expressed as percentages (%)

A = Agree

N = Neutral

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

#	Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
10	Speaking Japanese will improve my image.	10.0%	70.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
11	I will not be able to read and write hiragana.	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%	50.0%	20.0%
12	I do not want to study Japanese in Japan.	0.0%	0.0%	30.0%	30.0%	40.0%
13	I do not want to work for a Japanese company.	0.0%	10.0%	50.0%	10.0%	30.0%
14	Katakana is easy to learn.	0.0%	30.0%	20.0%	50.0%	0.0%
15	I will be able to understand spoken Japanese if I study in Japan for two years.	20.0%	70.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
16	Learning Japanese is useful for university science students.	10.0%	40.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%
17	I will be more respected and admired if I can speak Japanese.	0.0%	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
18	Learning Japanese will not help me get better educational opportunities.	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%	70.0%	20.0%
19	Japanese skills will help me understand science studies more deeply.	10.0%	40.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%
20	Kanji (Japanese characters) is easy to learn if I study in Japan for two years.	0.0%	20.0%	50.0%	20.0%	10.0%
21	Speaking Japanese will not improve my salary.	0.0%	0.0%	30.0%	40.0%	30.0%
22	Working for a Japanese company means that I will have a good career.	10.0%	50.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%
23	I will not be able to speak Japanese even if I study in Japan for two years.	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	80.0%	10.0%
24	I want to work for a Japanese company.	20.0%	30.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%
25	I want to go to Japan to study Japanese.	20.0%	40.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%
26	I will be able to make a presentation in Japanese if I study in Japan for two years.	0.0%	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
27	I will not be able to read and write katakana.	0.0%	10.0%	30.0%	50.0%	10.0%

28	Japanese will not help me be more scientifically advanced.	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	60.0%	0.0%
29	If I speak Japanese, I will have more job opportunities in in my country.	30.0%	60.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
30	I will be able to read and write hiragana.	10.0%	50.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%
31	I will not be able to understand spoken Japanese even if I study in Japan for two years.	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	90.0%	0.0%
32	I will not be able to read and write kanji (Japanese characters) even if I study in Japan for two years.	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%	70.0%	0.0%
33	I will be able to speak Japanese if I study in Japan for two years.	10.0%	80.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
34	University science students do not need Japanese.	10.0%	0.0%	40.0%	50.0%	0.0%
35	Speaking Japanese will improve my salary.	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
36	Speaking Japanese is not important for getting a job in a Japanese company.	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	60.0%	20.0%
37	I will be able to read and write kanji (Japanese characters) if I study in Japan for two years.	0.0%	60.0%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%
38	Japanese will help me be more scientifically advanced.	0.0%	60.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%
39	I will be able to watch and understand Japanese television if I study in Japan for two years.	10.0%	90.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
40	It is important for university science students to know Japanese.	10.0%	30.0%	50.0%	10.0%	0.0%
41	If I can speak Japanese, I will have a higher salary.	10.0%	70.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
42	I will not be more respected and admired even if I can speak Japanese.	0.0%	0.0%	30.0%	70.0%	0.0%
43	Learning Japanese will help me get better educational opportunities.	20.0%	70.0%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
44	I believe that Japanese is an important skill for a good job.	10.0%	50.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%
45	I will be able to read and write katakana.	0.0%	60.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%
46	I would like to study Japanese in Japan.	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
47	There are many chances for me to study in Japan if I can speak Japanese.	30.0%	60.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
48	Hiragana is easy to learn.	10.0%	40.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%