

A Comparison of Awareness: The Need for Foreign Language in Japan and the United States

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Abstract

In today's globalizing world, the ability to speak a foreign language is held in high regard, and demand for it is being reevaluated. For instance, according to Japan's Globalization policies, the teaching of English from Kindergarten onward is being promoted, but the system is not yet ready for it. Meanwhile, America already has a communication focused foreign language education. In order to raise foreign language ability, students' "Goal Setting" (Locke & Latham, 2006) is important. How do university students studying foreign languages in Japan and America assess the need for foreign languages? Also, what kinds of specific goals they have that fulfill foreign language need were focused on and investigated. 20 American and 25 Japanese University students participated in this investigative survey. As a result, students from both countries' belief in the importance of foreign language ability in work, education, and politics, as well as their desire to contribute to their countries' needs was identified. Furthermore, the relationship between what kind of goals foreign language students set for studying and their motivation to improve in ability was examined. It was also understood that students from both countries feel that by all means they want to use their foreign language skills in the future for their countries' needs.

Introduction

In today's globalizing world, the ability to speak a foreign language is held in high regard, and demand for it is being reevaluated. In Japan, according to their Globalization policies, English education is the focus of their efforts. In America there are foreign language education standards in place focused on communication. There are already a large number of researches done on how to improve communication skills in students. However, how do foreign language learners think about their countries' foreign language needs? In addition, I explore what kinds of goals and motivations do the students have relating to fulfilling foreign language need.

1. Significance of the Study

During my time abroad, I met students studying English and I wondered what they wanted to use their foreign language skills for, and where. I wanted to further explore how Japan's and America's foreign language needs were different, and what kinds of goals their students have to meet those needs.

2. Research Questions

1. What are the perceived foreign language needs according to foreign language learners at Japanese and American Universities about their respective countries?
2. To what extent do these students have challenging goals that meet foreign language needs?

3. Research Background

3.1. Foreign Language Education in Japan & the USA

3.1.1 Japan's English Language Education

In Japan, the “Core Subject” requisite foreign language taught in schools overall is English (English Education Reform, n.d.). Currently, new legislation requires English education be taken from 5th to 12th grade, a 8 year time period. English education is an important component in the Japanese government's Globalization initiatives. Foreign language is also essential for entering college. In the “National Center Test for University Admissions,” foreign language is again a major subject (独立, n.d.). The main subjects of the “Center Test” are Japanese (the national language), Geography, History, Civics, Mathematics, Science, and Foreign Language. The majority of the students choose English for the foreign language portion, but other options include German, French, Chinese, and Korean.

3.1.2. The USA's Foreign Language Education (Spanish, French, German)

According to America's Federal government, foreign language is considered a “core subject” (Title IX, n.d.). However in California it is not (States, 2008). In order to graduate in Californian high schools, a student needs only to complete 1 year of foreign language or one of the arts. However, in order to enter one of the California State Universities or Universities of California, a minimum of 2 years of foreign language in high school are needed (HIGH SCHOOL, n.d.). The top 3 foreign languages taught in the United States are Spanish, French, and German (Furman, Goldberg & Lusin, 2010).

3.2. What is “Foreign Language Need?”

In what ways is foreign language needed in a country? An effectively communicating pool of people is necessary. For example, connecting with immigrants or heritage speakers within the country, working abroad, or even in the political sphere, foreign language is needed. However, currently there is no scale or test to measure foreign language need (Maurer, 2010).

3.3. Teaching Theory: “Goal Setting Theory”

According to Locke and Latham (2006) the most important aspect of the theory is setting specific, challenging goals, which in turn will increase one’s feeling of success and satisfaction on completion. There are two types of motivation associated with this theory: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation mainly focuses on learning skills, while extrinsic motivation focuses on achievement or performance with skills. An example of intrinsic motivation is drawing for oneself. Extrinsic motivation is like working to earn money. These two motivations often overlap (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008), much like enjoying gardening, but also gaining the benefit of the produce it grows.

4. The Study

4.1. Demographics

45 university students participated in this survey. There were 25 Japanese and 20 American participants.

4.2. Research Method

Data was collected online through English and Japanese surveys.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Question 1: What are the perceived foreign language needs according to foreign language learners at Japanese and American Universities about their respective countries?

In order to answer this first research question, participants evaluated how they felt about foreign language need within various different aspects of their own society. First,

on a 5 point scale ranging from “A Great Deal Needed” to “Never Needed,” the survey investigated to what degree participants felt foreign language speakers were needed in the following areas of society: work and economics, the general public, religious settings, schools and education, politics, and local communities.

As Graph 1 shows, the top 3 areas needing foreign language were in work, education, and politics, with more than 80% of Japanese and Americans thinking “A Great Deal” and “A Lot” were needed.

Using the same areas of society – work, education, and politics – the survey asked if they thought their country was fulfilling the need for foreign language speakers. Looking at Graph 2, about 80% of Japanese and Americans felt that foreign language needs at work and in politics were being fulfilled, however, their answers indicated that there was still a present need. On the other hand, less than 50% of participants from both countries thought that foreign language education needs being met (Graph 2).

Graph 3 illustrates participants’ thoughts on to what degree it is necessary to work towards meeting foreign language needs within society. The results show that “a great deal” to “a lot” of work is necessary to meet the needs specifically within education, politics, and work.

Overall, 50% of Americans felt that their country was “somewhat” fulfilling foreign language needs (Graph 4), while 58% of Japanese participants thought their country was fulfilling only a “little” of it’s foreign language needs.

Foreign language learners from both countries answered that contributing to their countries’ foreign language need is important, with 56% of Americans saying it is “Very Important,” and 42% of Japanese replying it was “Important” (Graph 5).

5.2. Research Question 1 Summary

In both countries foreign language is needed in work, education, and politics. Americans and Japanese both agree that these needs are being met in the workplace, but still desire more. Also, even though Japan has early foreign language education, participants indicated a desire for more substance and quality in the education. In addition, both countries’ foreign language learners are very interested in contributing to fulfilling their countries’ foreign language needs.

5.3. Research Question 2: To what extent do these students have challenging goals that meet foreign language needs?

In order to answer the second research question, Graph 6 shows the top 3 goals participants gave for wanting to learn a foreign language. Americans stated they wanted to understand the language, use it for work opportunities, and for translation or interpretation. Japanese students also responded with the desire for increased work opportunities, wanting to work abroad, and to be able to speak like a native.

In order to accomplish these goals, the survey investigated to what degree the participants felt their goals were difficult. The majority of participants from both countries stated that accomplishing their goal would be difficult (Graph 7).

Next, participants were surveyed about their learning motivations. Each participant rated his or her opinion on a series of situations relating to the subsets of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Within intrinsic motivation there is the motivation to learn and the need for achievement. Within extrinsic motivation there are the expectations of authority, the need for peer acceptance, the motivation for power, and the fear of failure. Positive answers show a tendency towards a motivation, while the opposite is true of negative answers.

Graph 8 illustrates the cumulative scores of students' motivations, divided by country. The dark color shows positive responses, or tendencies towards certain motivations. Among Americans the greatest and least motivating factors were the need for achievement and the need for peer acceptance, respectively. In comparison, Japanese participants' greatest motivator was also the need for achievement; however the least motivating factor was authority expectations. The results for this graph show that university students from both countries show high intrinsic motivation with the desire for achievement. The need for peer acceptance doesn't appear to influence American students very much. On the other hand, Japanese students are least influenced by the expectations of authority. Overall, Japanese students chose more neutral replies.

In addition, participants' personal motivations for learning a foreign language for both countries were about the same. For Japanese and American, students enjoying the culture and the thought of achieving their goal consciously motivated them (Graph 9).

5.4. Research Question 2 Summary

Students' goals were different, but there were similarities in the desire for greater job opportunities and a greater understanding of the foreign language. Accomplishing these goals will be difficult, according to participants. Also, intrinsic motivation from students in both countries is high. In other words, the desire to learn and enjoy the culture instead of a focus on performance. This contributes to improving one's language ability.

6. Conclusion

Through this research, I understood that foreign language learners in both countries think there is a strong need for foreign language speakers in work, education, and politics. Also, these students have a strong desire to contribute to their countries' foreign language needs. In the future, this desire to contribute will likely positively influence fulfilling foreign language need.

7. Limitations of the Study and Future Study

Lastly, since the targets of this survey were university students learning a foreign language, this conclusion does not reflect the opinions of either country as a whole. In future research, I would like to investigate the thoughts of students not learning a foreign language, in addition to the opinions of the general public, and how they see foreign language need.

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