

# Learner Motivation and Classroom Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hamish Barnetson

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a range of challenges for teachers in all education sectors. Students have had to adapt accordingly to such changes and adjust to new learning modes in online language teaching platforms or modified face-to-face classrooms. This paper explores the impact of the ongoing health crisis on students' motivation to study and use English in classes and reveals the nature of classroom engagement from their perspective. It also provides insight into the effectiveness of remote learning and how the pandemic changed the way learners communicate in class.

## Introduction

Motivation and classroom engagement have long been problematic issues with language teaching in Japan, in various teaching contexts, but arguably more so in secondary and tertiary educational institutions (Morrow, 1987; Berwick & Ross, 1989; Locastro, 1996; Widdows and Voller, 1991; Kobayashi, Redekop and Porter, 1992). Some students seem to possess a more natural, intrinsic motivation to study and use other languages. In contrast, others attend classes for more instrumental purposes and seem more apathetic towards the values of learning another language. Now, with the current pandemic, which is still a continuing threat to many people across the world, coupled with the climate crisis and subsequent conflict in Ukraine, the educational challenges seem greater than ever. Teachers strive to seek fairer methods to evaluate students' progress and feel compelled, even obligated at times, to engage their students in productive, stimulating activities. At times, a teacher may be seemingly blessed with a class or classes made up of students who are for the majority well motivated, enthusiastic and actively engaged in the learning environment and its objectives. However, experienced teachers are aware of the reality that this is often not the case, and need to adapt and create strategies for students who appear less motivated to participate. Currently, teachers have to

adapt their methods of teaching due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. With the presence of such a crisis, comes the challenge of keeping students focused, engaged and motivated to continue studying despite the risks and anxieties associated with such a large-scale health problem. Understanding how such a crisis has affected learners' motivation and study behaviours may reveal how teachers can manage classes more effectively during such challenging circumstances, and may shed light on students' attitudes towards studying languages amidst the pandemic and beyond.

## **Background**

This research project is based on the perspectives of university students in Japan, studying English as a compulsory part of their four-year college educational program. The participants are students of Keiwa College in Shibata City, Niigata. Keiwa College is a private tertiary institution which was founded in 1991. It is a small Christian university with a focus on Liberal Arts, and places emphasis on the core values of Christianity, internationalism and localism. Keiwa has a current student body of around 700 full-time students, averaging 200 enrollees per academic year. The majority of students are Japanese, although there are several international students within the student body. In contrast, larger national universities like Niigata University exceed 10 thousand in undergraduate student numbers.

Universities in Japan can be categorised as either private, national, or public institutions. The latter are funded primarily by the government, whereas the former are privately funded. Privately funded universities, of which there are many in Japan, are usually able to exercise more flexibility in regard to curriculum design compared with public or national universities; however, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) determines and controls the core aspects of the overall primary, secondary and tertiary education systems implemented in Japan. Most Japanese university students, regardless of their chosen major subject, are required in their first year to study at least one year of English, with the option of continuing in the subsequent years.

At Keiwa College, all language majors are required to study English in both the first and second years of their program. Third- and fourth-year students have

no obligation to continue their English language studies unless it is specifically related to their course program. Through an awareness of the institution's curriculum one can begin to understand how levels of motivation towards studying English may vary considerably. English is central to their study interests in the case of those who decide to major in the English and Communications program; however, for others, English classes are merely a supplementary component of an overall study program which may lean heavily towards a completely different field of study or practice. Keiwa College encourages its students to be actively involved in both global and local communities by researching important issues including SDGs and participating in volunteer projects. Therefore, learning languages, especially English, is highly valued in this regard.

## Review of Literature

Motivation in applied linguistics is a broad field concerning many associated factors that experts such as Gardner, Clément, Dörnyei and Ushioda have covered in great detail. For the purpose of this study, I merely provide an overview of some of the key elements that usually affect students' motivation to engage in the process of learning other languages. As Gardner (1985) explains, 'In short, motivation involves four aspects, a goal, effortful behaviour, a desire to attain the goal and favourable attitudes toward the activity in question.' Therefore, a sense of purpose and positive driving behaviour towards that purpose are fundamental.

### The usual factors that affect learners' motivation

The presence of *intrinsic* or *extrinsic motives* as part of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) can be applied to this particular learner context. The fact that students choose to major in the English and Communications program at the college would imply that they have some intrinsic motivation towards studying languages, and they intend to use English and/ or other languages in their future. However, that does not mean that motivation is of a solely intrinsic nature and may in fact be guided by more external factors such as the need to attain a language qualification or pass an official examination in order to achieve a specific goal, such as securing a desirable position of employment. Brown reveals that the most emphatically endorsed reason is simply "because it is necessary". It is not clear

what these students believe English is necessary for, but it may simply be that the school authorities say that it is (2004: 4). For example, in this context, Japanese students are often required to attain specific scores on the TOEIC test in order to be eligible for a company position, or they may wish to pass an EIKEN grade, again for professional purposes, or as a means to evaluate their English ability for their personal record and sense of accomplishment. Moreover, Japanese corporations usually have prerequisites for English language ability to gain employment, therefore, the need to achieve this target fuels the necessity to study English, regardless of any intrinsic interest in the L2 itself.

The rapport between teacher and students is essential for maintaining motivation. Dörnyei stresses, ‘The key figure in any learner’s educational life is the teacher.’ (2020: 51). However, despite this shared belief among teachers, the challenge lies in maintaining these relationships over an extended course of time, particularly when other factors are at play, such issues outside the classroom as well as the general mood created by the restrictions of the pandemic. A teacher may establish an effective rapport early on in the academic year, but the quality of the rapport may waver as the weeks pass and students become accustomed to the teacher’s routines. Inevitably, certain routines become predictable and lose their sense of freshness and innovation, despite being surprising and engaging when first implemented.

Also, with the weight of various assignments that seem to accumulate quickly during the middle to latter stages of the semester across the academic program, a student can feel overwhelmed and lose the sense of appreciation they initially had for the instructor’s charismatic approach. However, it is not only the teacher’s or parent’s job to motivate the students; they need to assume responsibility for their learning (Mantiri, 2015). In this respect, students should not place sole accountability on their teacher’s ability to instruct well but try to accept responsibility for their own learner outcomes in relation to the attitudes, willingness and commitment they invest in their studies.

Dörnyei also emphasises the importance of *group dynamics* in relation to

levels of motivation and classroom participation. In fact, every teacher knows that the atmosphere in a group can make or break the teaching and learning experience for all involved (Dörnyei and Mercer, 2020). Teachers will inevitably encounter groups that work well together and engage in tasks, and groups that do not work well together and are reluctant to participate and interact. Understanding the reasons for such dynamics is crucial for implementing effective strategies to alleviate tension between individuals, and increase interest and value towards the L2 and the specific objectives of the class.

Five key factors which promote acceptance in groups are: learning about each other, proximity, contact and interaction, cooperation toward common goals, extracurricular activities, and teacher's role modelling (Dörnyei and Muir, 2019). Therefore, if students do not feel tangible, meaningful connections with one another that affirm and reassure their sense of self-purpose, they are less likely to feel motivated.

The individual psychology of each learner in terms of the introspective 'self' is also critical, specifically personality traits and ingrained feelings that a learner may harbour, such as anxiety, self-confidence and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in oneself to produce desired outcomes, as Bandura (2001) describes, 'rooted in core belief that one has the power to produce effects by one's actions'. If a learner lacks belief in their ability and potential, this can be detrimental to their motivation.

Lastly, the 'culture' of an organisation - including a school and a language classroom - refers to a set of emerging norms, values, beliefs and expectations that govern social relations and community life (Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020). Students' level of comfort in their learning environment and surroundings, including academic expectations, social accessibility and the general atmosphere of an institution, poses a strong impact on student motivation.

## Engagement

Engagement, specifically ‘student engagement’ in this case, concerns *active participation* and *involvement* in certain behaviours in school-related activities and academic tasks (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Such behaviours are seen to be intrinsically manifested, like a kind of ‘natural enjoyment’ or ‘appreciation’ for the learning experience or activities in class. Dörnyei proposes that student involvement is arguably even more important for the purpose of effective communicative language teaching than for many other subject matters. Student engagement should be understood more to alleviate issues between teachers and students. Learner engagement in class is connected to attitudes and beliefs stemming from a host of contextual factors that affect both the learner and the school (2020: 27).

## The Japanese Context

According to Ushioda, motivation is not innate and fixed within learners, but situational and dynamic, and influenced through their social context (cited in Falout, 2011). This idea, originally popularised by Vygotsky (1934), is known as sociocultural theory (SCT). Prior to course initiation, teachers may assume that college students automatically possess the soft skills, namely interpersonal skills, to engage confidently, freely and eagerly with their peers; however, it is apparent that many students do not possess such skills, even with their L1. Therefore, the premise of a communicative-based classroom approach is a significant challenge for students who are often not rehearsed in such practice, and may perceive it as an awkward shift from the learning practices they are accustomed to. The principle of collaboration, i.e. group work and peer interaction, is generally not so prevalent in Japanese learning environments. In some institutions and circles in Japan, a more socio-cognitivist methodology is evident and gradually evolving, but most institutions still generally favour behaviourist classroom styles, and this is even reflected in the seating arrangements of front-facing desks and lecture-based classes.

The present data also suggests that Japanese EFL learners have inhibitory factors operating against learning English, such as anxiety, past negative

experiences, or preferring teacher-dominated lectures (Kimura et al, 2000). This illustrates the challenges that teachers face, particularly when trying to implement more student-centred approaches to language learning in Japan. Students find it difficult to differentiate between lecture style content-focused classes and language-based practice classes. The Transitioning between the two styles on any given day on a college campus may be challenging and tiring for students. Moreover, even lectures in Western universities tend to be more student-centred and interactional than a typical lecture in Japan, where students are accustomed to just sit passively and listen continuously, often for the duration of the class. Comparative studies on learning styles, such as Reid's (1987) have indicated Japanese learners' lack of predominant learning styles compared to learners of other nationalities. The present findings support the implication that Japanese learners may not be so easily motivated to learn foreign languages. In this sense, the natural drive to learn English in Japan is not as strong as learners from other nations, as arguably many students are adamant about remaining within a Japanese social context as opposed to a more international social context. Burgess (2013) describes the emergence of inward-looking (*uchimuki*) youngsters who are not interested in studying, working, or volunteer work abroad, later asserting that there remains a strong tendency to close in, reject global norms and standards, and retreat inwards.

### **The Impact of Crisis on Learners' Motivation**

Firstly, how is 'crisis' understood as a concept? Crisis, in general, is defined as a series of events that affect a particular country, such as: "economic or financial collapses, epidemics, genocides, mass terrorism, natural disasters, political or civil unrest, and wars" (McVay, 2015, p.19 cited in Assaf 2018). As Assaf asserts, 'Students' anxieties caused by crisis and war can greatly affect students' academic performance, their learning, and most importantly their motivation.' In this sense, a crisis is detrimental to learners' motivation and commitment to learning. Another notable effect of the "intense feelings of fear, horror, or helplessness" is stress (Schwitzer, 2003). And it often leads to adjustment disorders that make people find it difficult to function at work, school, and even home (Assaf, 2018).

However, there are ways to tackle the problem of crisis. Instead of ignoring its presence, it may in fact be beneficial to afford it a more central role in the classroom. In this sense, students' negative attitudes and feelings could be changed and turned into positive ones by addressing the difficult conditions experienced by them and make the crisis part of the classroom's fabric and discussion (Assaf, 2018). Therefore, students can actually benefit from discussing the crisis in class, rather than trying to avoid the issue to safeguard their anxieties and sensibilities.

### **Remote Learning**

In regard to the implementation of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study by Chung et al (2020) showed that the majority of the respondents did not want to continue their lessons using online learning methods. Some of the challenges these students faced included Internet connectivity and understanding of the content of their subjects (Chung et al. cited in Tan, 2020). Therefore, the various complications that occur during online classes may hinder and frustrate learners to the point that they reject such methods.

### **Dealing with motivational challenges**

We should also consider that motivation is not a fixed state but rather a dynamically evolving and changing entity linked with the ongoing process of learning in an authentic context (Mantiri, 2015). It is hard to understand a student's motivation and what affects it, but at the same time formulate ways which may encourage a student to be more involved in class. As Brown (2004) asserts,

Second and Foreign languages are acquired through study, practice, and use, not by motivation, beliefs, or attitudes. What teachers and administrators need to do therefore, is not to find out what student motivations are, but rather find out how to encourage them to study and use the target language.

In this sense, it is important that teachers find ways to make study seem less laborious and more enjoyable, relevant, practical and constructive.



## Methodology

Based on the literature and subsequent hypothesis, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How has the pandemic affected learners' motivation and engagement in language classes?
2. What impact have online classes had on student engagement?

Following a qualitative research design, a bilingual questionnaire (English and Japanese) was created and shared with students of Keiwa College. A sample of 48 participants' responses was collected for analysis. The questionnaire contained 25 items including multiple choice, Likert, matrix and open-ended questions, designed to gauge learners' perceptions on the designated topic. All participants shared their answers freely on the grounds of anonymity and confidentiality, following the university's academic code of ethics. The responses were collated, analysed and interpreted accordingly through a series of numerical data, graphs, and coding methods to identify particular trends that might warrant practical classroom-based implications.

## Results & Discussion

All students are studying English, some are also studying Korean and Chinese, and a few are studying Japanese, German and French. Over 50% of the students have been studying English for between 7 and 10 years, with several exceeding 15 years. The longest period is over 30 years. A majority of 66.7% of participants said they felt very positive about studying English. Only 1 participant showed negative feelings towards studying English. A third of the participants stated their primary purpose for studying English was to be able to communicate with people from other countries. Other popular reasons included having a strong interest in English, and also the desire to use English in their future work/ career. Only 1 participant stated it was an obligatory requirement at college. Some emphasis on examinations and study abroad is also apparent.

Over 80% stated they looked forward to their English Classes, with 48% stating they always look forward to their classes. Most students expressed that they feel happy or very happy in class and look forward to speaking to their classmates. The data suggests that many students lack confidence in speaking and often feel nervous. However, over 70% feel that they are improving, and many have specific goals relating to English classes. Most learners said they felt a sense of belonging in class and that their teacher(s) were supportive. The majority of participants believe they are more motivated about English than before. Generally, they indicate that they feel focused and engaged, enjoy the classroom activities and feel they are helpful and relevant. Although there is some uncertainty over the issue, the data suggests that social distancing rules have caused some difficulties in practising English.

Over a third of the participants claim that grammar is the most challenging aspect of studying English, followed by speaking and listening. The majority of students have been taught by between 5 - 10 different teachers. However, 85% suggest their teaching styles varied to quite an extent. In terms of teacher qualities, most students emphasise the importance of a friendly personality (73%), someone who is easy to understand (67%), as well as being knowledgeable and having a good sense of humour. Interestingly, being able to speak the students' native language does not rate that highly. Participants favoured the following three classroom activities the most in descending popularity: speaking and listening to classmates (72%), games and fun activities, and discussions. Doing class surveys is rated the lowest at 0%.

47.9% agreed that the pandemic has affected their motivation to study another language. However, a third of the respondents stated it has had no effect. Interestingly, several students stated the pandemic allowed them to gain more knowledge about other countries, due to its global prevalence and media coverage, and therefore, in turn, increase their motivation. Several responses indicated students' frustration at not being able to travel or study abroad and therefore

this had a negative impact on motivation. The general trend leans towards a negative impact on motivation: students expressed a loss of motivation, and a sense of disappointment at not being able to engage fully with activities due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. However, some responses indicate positive effects associated with the need or opportunity to seek more global information about the situation through English. Approximately 20% felt little to no effect on their motivation. 54.2% of students stated they feel more anxiety now than before the pandemic. The results indicate that most students now feel quite comfortable interacting with their peers. Most students stated they experienced active participation and fairly frequent interaction with their peers in English classes before college.

A minority of students (25%) stated the pandemic definitely affected their daily feelings and mood towards studying. There are some contradicting opinions about the effects. Some students claim the pandemic had a positive influence on their studies, allowing them to focus more by themselves during the online class periods, whereas others believe it affected their feelings negatively and made them feel isolated and consequently 'down' in mood. For example:

Student A:

“Before the pandemic, I could only study a little, such as taking 30 minutes of English conversation lessons early in the morning and listening to English news while driving. I'm really happy to have time to study.”

Student B:

“I didn't have much time to see my friends at school because some classes are online so sometimes I feel down and alone.”

The results indicate that online learning affected most students' motivation to some degree. Over 50% (52.1) of participants stated it strongly affected their motivation. However, a third of students stated they were reasonably comfortable participating in online lessons now. The majority of students appear to have

adjusted to online learning. A small minority are still struggling with the online platform. An overwhelming majority (89.6%) said they preferred face-to-face classes over online classes. The minority who prefer online classes emphasise the convenience of being able to avoid time-consuming commutes to and from school. Responses in favour of face-to-face show a common trend that communication is much easier and more direct in a face-to-face setting. Social presence creates “a sense of belonging, supports freedom of expression and sustains cohesiveness” (Law et al., 2019 cited in Tan 2020). Students prefer the physical presence of their classmates and their friends, as it provides a warmer, more intimate social atmosphere.

Poor internet connections, technical problems, time lags and issues of privacy are also key factors that hinder students’ participation online. It is clear that many students feel uncomfortable showing their faces online and feel it is a breach of their privacy, and creates an awkward situation for various reasons. This may be associated with the “spotlight effect,” which is the tendency of people to overestimate how much they are watched and evaluated by others (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999 cited in Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Ironically, even though students are engaged in distant remote learning, they are in many ways closer visually and audibly, thus more exposed, and more vulnerable to abuse by appearing on screen online. As Pitts (2020) explains, ‘having a window into students’ homes may expose/highlight inequities in living conditions that students may not want exposed, and that may result in students’ peers or professors viewing/treating them differently as a result.’ Therefore, in this respect, it is crucial to respect students’ concerns with privacy.

The results generally indicate the negative impact of the pandemic on students’ motivation and engagement; however, there are some conflicting views and positive outcomes apparent. The governmental restrictions enforced on the public’s actions in response to the pandemic certainly affected students’ scope of opportunities, and, consequently, their moods and sense of optimism. Alternative learning platforms such as Zoom classes, with the aid of classroom management

systems, in this case, Google Classroom, provided a temporary online infrastructure to continue administering college education programs. Nevertheless, it is evident in the students' responses that remote learning is not really a sufficient or reliable substitute for face-to-face classes as it does not provide an effective, comfortable and engaging learning environment for students to interact with each other. Despite such issues created by the pandemic, the majority of students (79.2%) maintain that they still feel relatively motivated to study at the moment. Indeed, the majority of the participants (81.3%) shared their intention to continue using English after graduation.

### **Limitations**

The most obvious limitation of this study is that the sample of participants was smaller than expected, and inevitably the students that took part by completing the questionnaire are perhaps the more motivated members of the research pool, therefore creating a bias towards more positive attitudes in regards to language studies. Therefore, unfortunately it was difficult to gauge the views of some of the less motivated students and find out the nature and reasons for this. Despite the questionnaire having a bilingual format, it is possible that some students found the questionnaire somewhat challenging or chose not to participate. Therefore, in the future it is vital to consider how to reach a greater range of participants and acquire more data through other feasible research methods.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from this study that the pandemic has affected many students' attitudes and feelings towards studying languages, and imposed a series of obstacles and complications that have hindered normal campus routines. Furthermore, it has created a lot of doubts and uncertainties in the minds of students. Although online methods for teaching were implemented as a necessary replacement for face-to-face interaction, and continue to be beneficial in certain situations even now, the return to face-to-face classes was clearly favoured by most students. The social presence and proximity of students on campus provides an invaluable interconnection between individual learners themselves and their

teachers, which in turn sustains motivation and classroom engagement to a sufficient, productive level.

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