

The Connection between Interculturality and Foreign Language Education:

A Comparison between Japan and the United States

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Abstract

Over the past years, both Japanese and American foreign language education has been moving from the traditional grammar and memorization based approaches to a more communication focused approach, to varying degrees of success. The purpose of the communicative approach is to build interculturality, which is the ability to use your foreign language skills in appropriate cultural contexts. This ability is indispensable in today's globalized society. We administered a survey to American and Japanese University students in order to answer the following questions: What are students' experiences with their foreign language education? To what extent are students gaining interculturality from their foreign language education? And what role does foreign language education play in creating connections between students and multicultural/multilingual communities? We found that American students typically had a more positive experience with their foreign language classes, in which more attention was paid to the development of interculturality than was typical in Japanese classes. This seems to be linked with the inclusion of activities in American classes which connected students to their target language communities. American students were also more confident in their ability to use their foreign language skills in a culturally appropriate manner.

Introduction

Interculturality, the ability to use foreign language skills in appropriate cultural contexts, is indispensable in today's globalized society. Therefore, effective foreign language education is becoming increasingly important. According to our research, one of the most effective methods for building interculturality through foreign languages classes is the communicative approach, which focuses on developing communication abilities through speaking and listening. Though both Japanese and American foreign language education have been moving from the traditional grammar and memorization based approaches to a more communication focused approach, there have varying degrees of success.

In this capstone, we examined: 1) student experiences with foreign language education, 2) to what extent students are gaining interculturality from foreign language education, 3) what role foreign language education plays in creating connections between students and multicultural/multilingual communities.

1. Significance of the Study

While studying in our Service Learning class, we learned how language can help connect you to other cultures, which in turn helps to promote equality and fairness. Also, we realized the importance of interculturality when we studied abroad, and we wanted to know more about what type of education students receive in America and Japan. Furthermore, we would like to apply what we learn from our research to teaching.

2. Research Questions

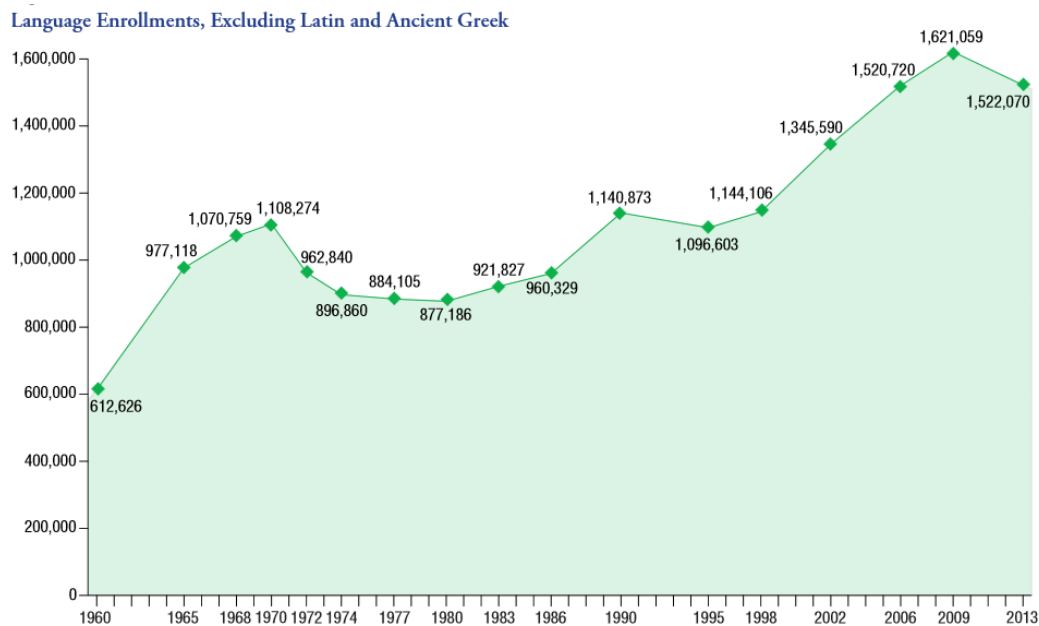
1. What are students' experiences with foreign language education?
2. To what extent are students gaining interculturality from foreign language education?
3. What role does foreign language education play in creating connections between students and multicultural/multilingual communities?

3. Research Background

3.1. Foreign Language Enrollment Trends

It varies state by state how long students must be enrolled in foreign language education. However, to enter a four-year university, it is generally necessary for students to take two or more years of foreign language education in high school. At the university level, foreign language is often required for a few semesters. However, enrollment in foreign language classes was on the rise until 2009, at which point it began to fall (Goldberg, D., Looney, D., & Lusin, N., 2015) (See Graph 1).

Graph 1: Foreign Language Enrollment Trends in American Universities



(Goldberg, D., Looney, D., & Lusin, N., 2015)

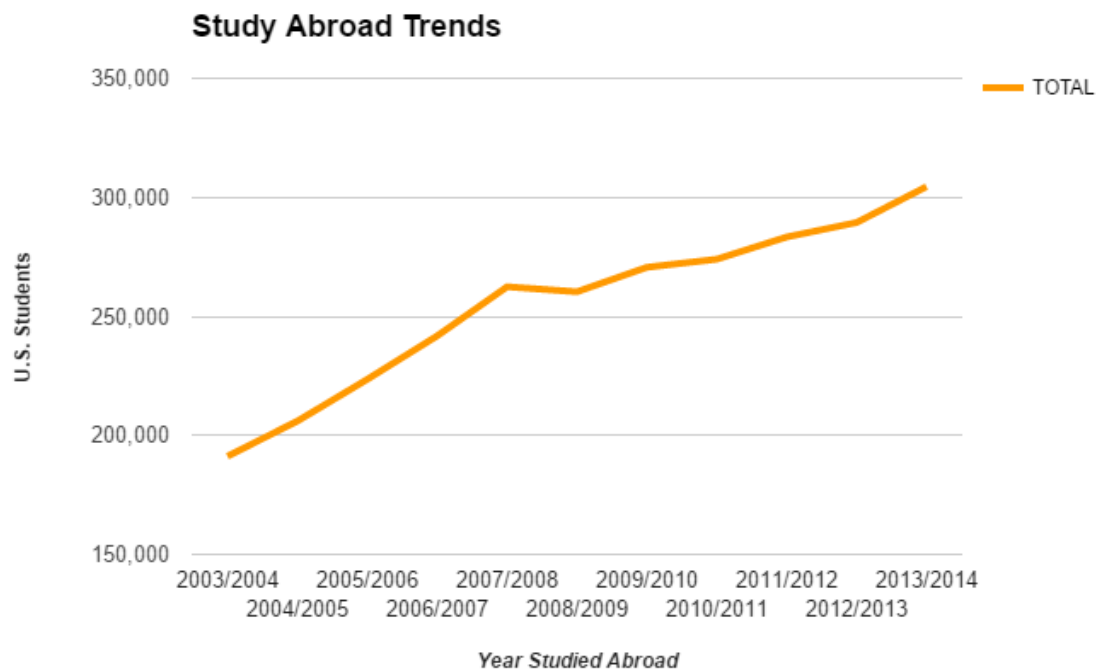
Previously in Japan, students began compulsory English education in junior high school (seventh grade) and continued this education through to the end of high school (twelfth grade). Upon entering university, the amount of English and other foreign language education required depends on the students' majors; one to two more years of English is typical. Therefore, six to eight years of English education was the norm for students in Japan. However, recently, English was introduced at elementary schools in order to create more globalized citizens for the future. Though it depends on the school district, third grade is the earliest that English is taught at

elementary schools. Despite these new measures, it is important to note that the main reason English is taught before university is still so that students can pass English portions of college entrance exams, which makes it difficult to focus on speaking and other communication abilities needed in today's globalized society (Tokyo International Communication Committee, 2016).

3.2. Study Abroad Trends

The number of students that studied abroad for academic credit in the U.S. grew 5.2%, 289,408 students to 304,467 students, from the 2012/2013 academic year to the 2013/2014 academic year (See Graph 2). The goal is to increase those numbers to 600,000 by the year 2018. In addition, another goal in the U.S. is to expand diversity among U.S. students studying abroad. In the 2013/2014 academic year, 74% of the students that studied abroad were Caucasian. Although minority students make up 40% of all U.S. higher education enrollments, less than 25% took part in study abroad programs. To encourage more study abroad participants, 185 million dollars has been pledged in scholarships and support (Institute of International Education, 2014).

Graph 2: Number of American Students Studying Overseas

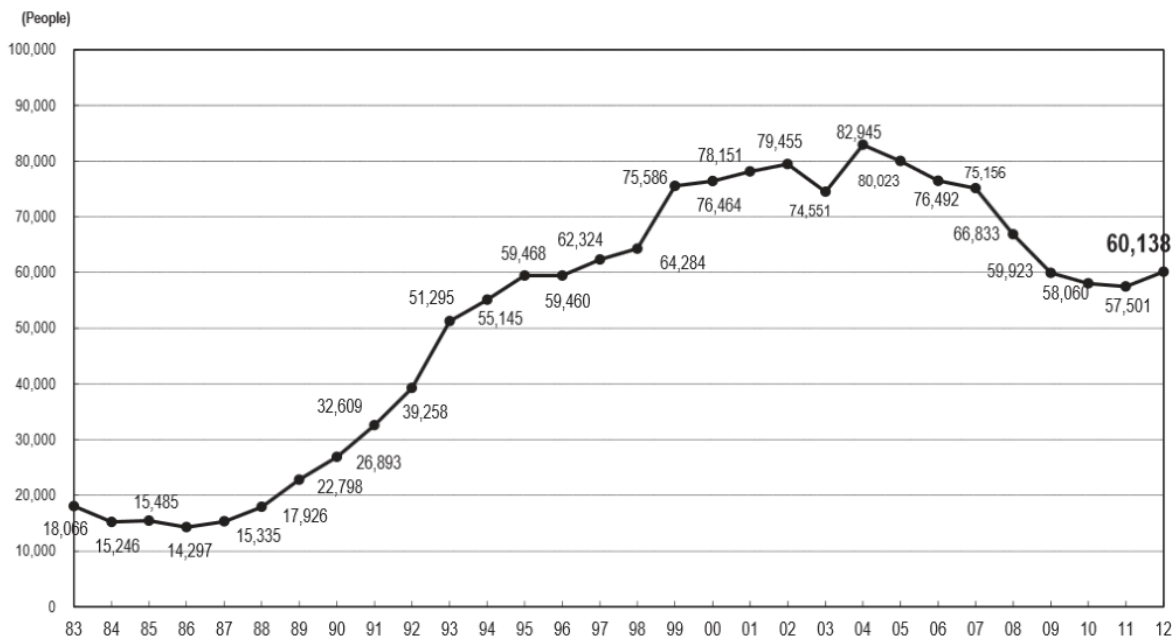


(Institute of International Education, 2014)

In Japan, from 2004 to 2011 the amount of Japanese students studying abroad dropped 31% due to economic stagnation and the high costs of studying abroad (See Graph 3). In order to increase the amount of globalized citizens in Japan, the Japanese government plans to increase study abroad numbers to 120,000 students by the year 2020 (MEXT, 2015).

Graph 3: Number of Japanese Students Studying Overseas

○ Trends in the Number of Japanese Nationals Studying Overseas



(MEXT, 2015)

3.3. Foreign Language Education Awareness

How is foreign language education regarded in the United States? Attitudes towards foreign language can be classified into several periods; the two most recent periods are the Opportunist and the Dismissive Period. The Opportunist Period lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s; during this time, foreign language was seen as a useful tool for economic gain. The Dismissive Period began in the 1980s with the Reagan administration and continues through the present day. During this current period, the education system places little value on foreign languages and cultures, partly due to nationalist pride (Ovando, 2003). Recently, however, the importance of foreign language education has been revisited. This is due to findings that indicate foreign language education improves interculturality, promotes tolerance and intercultural

awareness, enhances global economic competitiveness, maintains national security interests, and increases cognitive, academic, and problem solving abilities in students (The Benefits of Second Language Study, 2007).

In Japan, the 1960s saw an emphasis on grammar rules and language structure. However, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics made it apparent that foreign language education in Japan was not working, as Japanese people lacked the English and intercultural communication abilities to deal with such a large influx of foreigners. Because of this, the 1970s saw an attempt to return to the communicative approach (Fast, 2014). In 1989, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, otherwise known as the JET Program, was established. The purpose of this program was the improvement of Japanese English education at the high school level and below through the promotion of international exchange between Japan and English speaking countries. This is accomplished by bringing native English speakers to Japanese classrooms in an attempt to develop the communicative competence of Japanese students (JET, 2015). Though it is difficult to retrain teachers and work out the necessary steps for implementation, in 2009 the Japanese government decreed that English classes should be taught in English as much as possible, rather than in Japanese. In addition, in 2014, English education was added to elementary schools (Fast, 2014).

3.4. Grammar towards Communication

Over the years in America, we moved from education that was focused on grammar, memorization and repetition to a more communicative based educational system. This system is meant to appeal to all learning styles and includes the completion of real-world tasks in the target language to facilitate learning. To further stress the importance of learning real-world communication skills in the target language with applications beyond the classroom, the National Standards were established in 1996. These standards were refreshed in 2015 to include an emphasis on developing 21st Century Skills that would assist learners in the modern world (Wells et al., 2013). The Advanced Placement test became the basic foundation for the national standards, heavily encouraging using natural, lively, and immersive teaching materials in America's foreign language classrooms.

Similar to America, Japan has created various plans to move towards a communicative approach in the classroom. However, it is difficult to focus on communication, as the classroom

environment is mainly focused on helping students pass the university entrance examinations. In the past, the exams only tested students' reading and writing ability, but did not include speaking and listening.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced its proposal, titled “*Eigo ga Tsukaeru Nihonjin no Ikusei notameno Senryaku Koso.*” The goal of this action plan is to move foreign language teaching styles in Japan towards creating communicative competence in English. This includes teaching English in English, improvement of teachers' skills, and supporting English education at elementary schools (Shimizu, 2010).

3.5. Foreign Language Education Standards

In America, the goal of current foreign language programs is not just to develop students' proficiency, like the goal was in the past, but to also develop skills that will help them succeed in today's world outside the classroom. The World Readiness Standards also focuses on the Common Core Literacy Skills, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 21st Century Skills, and Interculturality, aiming to develop the three modes of communication—interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

The National Standards are supported by five goals which are known as “The 5 C's”: Communication--communicating in the target language using the 3 modes of communication, Cultures--gaining cultural competency, Connections--expanding knowledge of other disciplines using the target language, Comparisons--developing greater understanding of your own language by learning another, and Communities--which is where interculturality has huge importance, because in order to participate effectively in a multilingual community, it is important to communicate and interact with both intercultural and language competency (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015).

Although Japan has been slower at moving towards a communicative teaching approach, they are continuing to make steps to move in that direction with the action plan that was initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2002. The action plan focuses on teaching English through communicative activities and games which are taught by the primary teacher, increasing the number of classroom hours, focusing on reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and conducting classes in an immersion environment (Tahira, 2012)

3.6. Student Experiences

Motivation is very important in learning a language. There are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation occurs when people act without any obvious external rewards; they simply enjoy an activity or see it as an opportunity to explore, learn, and actualize their potentials (Coon & Mitterer, 2010). Extrinsic motivation refers to people's tendency to perform activities for known external rewards, whether they be tangible (e.g., money) or psychological (e.g., praise) in nature (Brown, 2007).

Beyond motivation, anxiety can also have profound effects on many aspects of foreign language learning. There are three related performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative apprehension. Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people. Test anxiety refers to a type of performance stemming from a fear of failure. Lastly, fear of negative evaluation is defined as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Horwitz, E. K., Young, D. J., & Gardner, R. C. 1991).

3.7. Interculturality

Interculturality is a new area of study in language acquisition that is attracting attention. According to Rollings-Carter, "interculturality is the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds using authentic language appropriately in a way that demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the cultures" (2010). As communication ability in the language grows, interculturality is the skill which allows people to understand language usage in the context of culture, as a native speaker does. As a non-native speaker reaches more advanced levels in both language ability and cultural understanding, the ability to use language in a culturally appropriate manner increases (Van Houten, 2016).

Teaching interculturality in the classroom environment is important. However, studying abroad and living in a foreign country, as well as interaction with multicultural/multilingual communities are some of the best ways to increase interculturality. Integrating activities, such as writing to a pen pal, volunteering, and visiting festivals, into the curriculum creates a strong connection between classroom learning and building interculturality (Van Houten, 2016).

4. Research Method

1. Study Participants

1 other, 16 male, and 17 female Japanese university students, for a total of 34 Japanese university students, and 1 other, 13 male, and 16 female American university students, for a total of 30 American university students, participated in our online survey, making for a total of 64 study participants.

2. Research Instrument

To collect data, we used Google Forms to create and administer an online survey in both Japanese and English. With consideration for the time allowed to administer the survey, survey questions were created by shortening and modifying the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) and Proficiency and Interculturality Can-do Statements (NCSSFL, 2015).

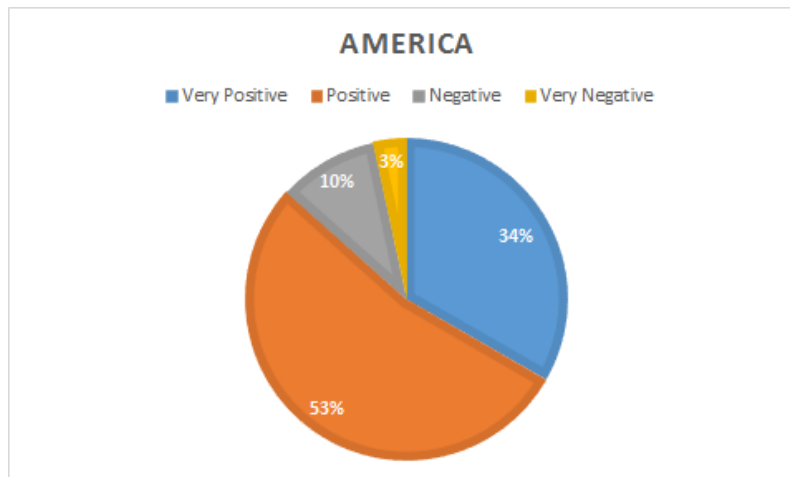
5. Data Analysis

5.1. Research Question 1: What are students' experiences with foreign language education?

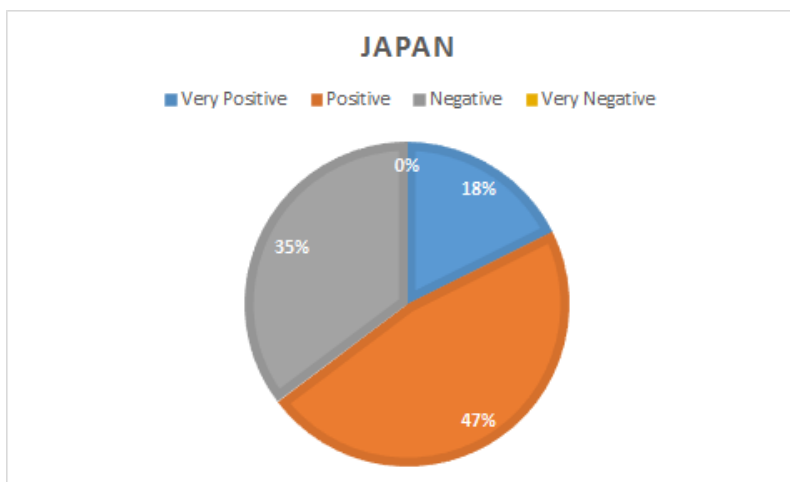
5.2. Experiences with Foreign Language Education

Regarding the foreign language taken, 90% of American students and 65% of Japanese students have had a positive experience with foreign language education (See Graph 4 and 5). However, 35% of Japanese respondents have stated they had a negative experience with foreign language education, much more than Americans.

Graph 4: American Students' Experience with Foreign Language Education



Graph 5: Japanese Students' Experience with Foreign Language Education



The following statements reflect standard positive and negative responses from our American and Japanese respondents.

America, average positive response: "My teachers have all been genuinely happy to teach the language, and as a result I felt less pressure in learning. Instead of language being just another class, I actually enjoy learning" (Female 20-22 years old).

America, average negative response: "The first two years I spent learning Spanish it was taught by people who didn't understand it any better than I did" (Male 20-22 years old).

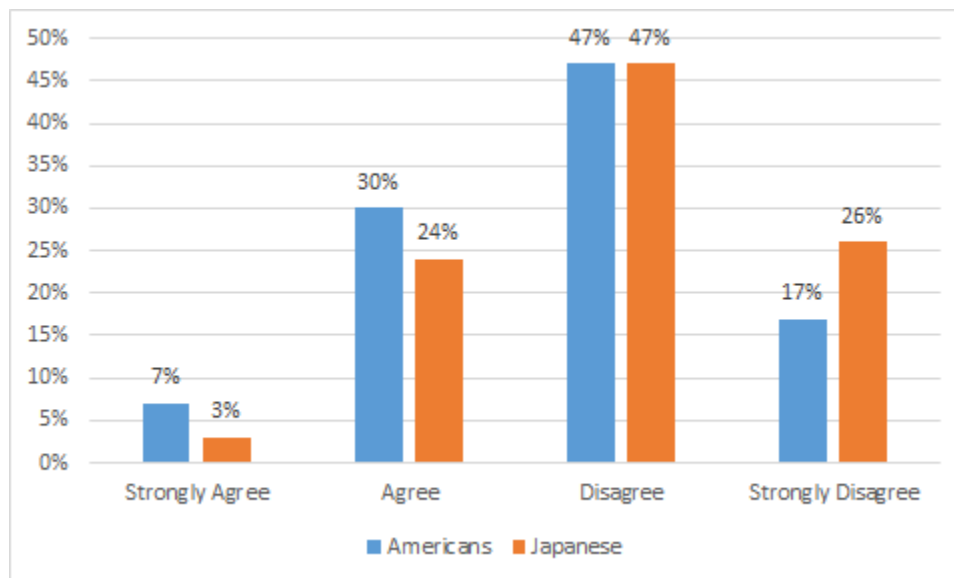
Japan, average positive response: "In middle and high school, English class was mostly grammar and reading, it wasn't fun, but University English class we do conversation, so it is fun and interesting" (Female 20-22 years old).

Japan, average negative response: "Because of one-way teacher lectures and due to the fact that we only focused on grammar, class was boring" (Female 20-22 years old).

5.3. Fear of Negative Evaluation from Teachers

In general, American and Japanese students were not afraid of teachers correcting their mistakes (See Graph 6).

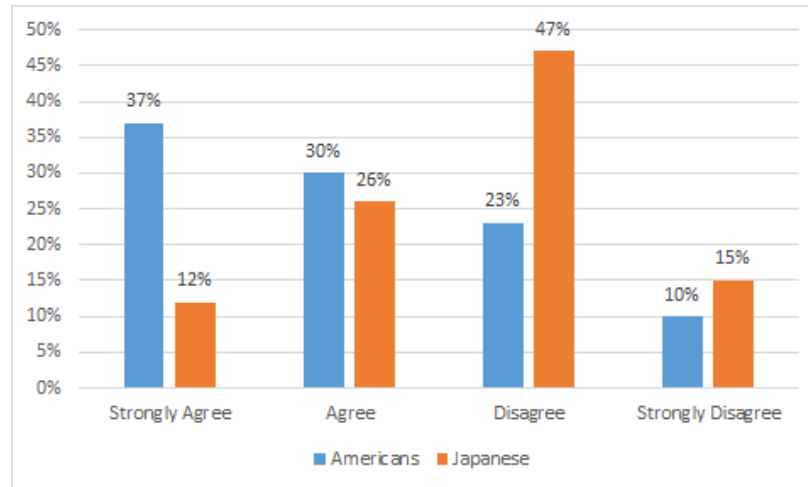
Graph 6: "I am afraid my language teacher will correct my mistakes."



5.4. Fear of Negative Evaluation from Peers

A total of 67% of Americans agree that they feel other students are always better than them, compared with a total of 62% of Japanese students who disagree (See Graph 7).

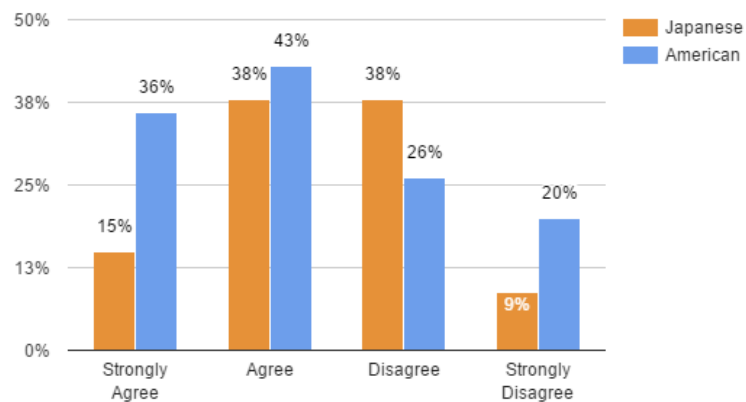
Graph 7: "I feel other students are always better than me."



5.5. Test Anxiety

80% of American students feel under a lot of pressure to get good grades on tests, in comparison with 53% of Japanese students (See Graph 8).

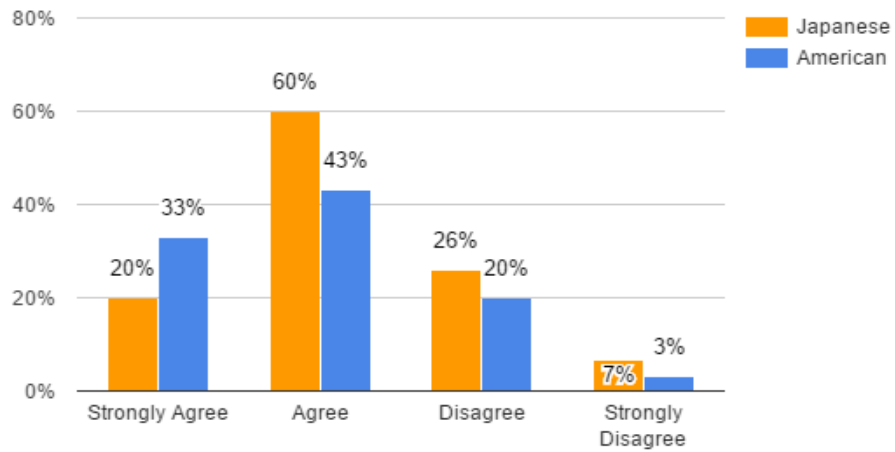
Graph 8: "I feel under a lot of pressure to get good grades on tests."



5.6. Communication Apprehension

80% of Japanese students and 76% of American students stated they panic when they have to speak without preparation in class (See Graph 9).

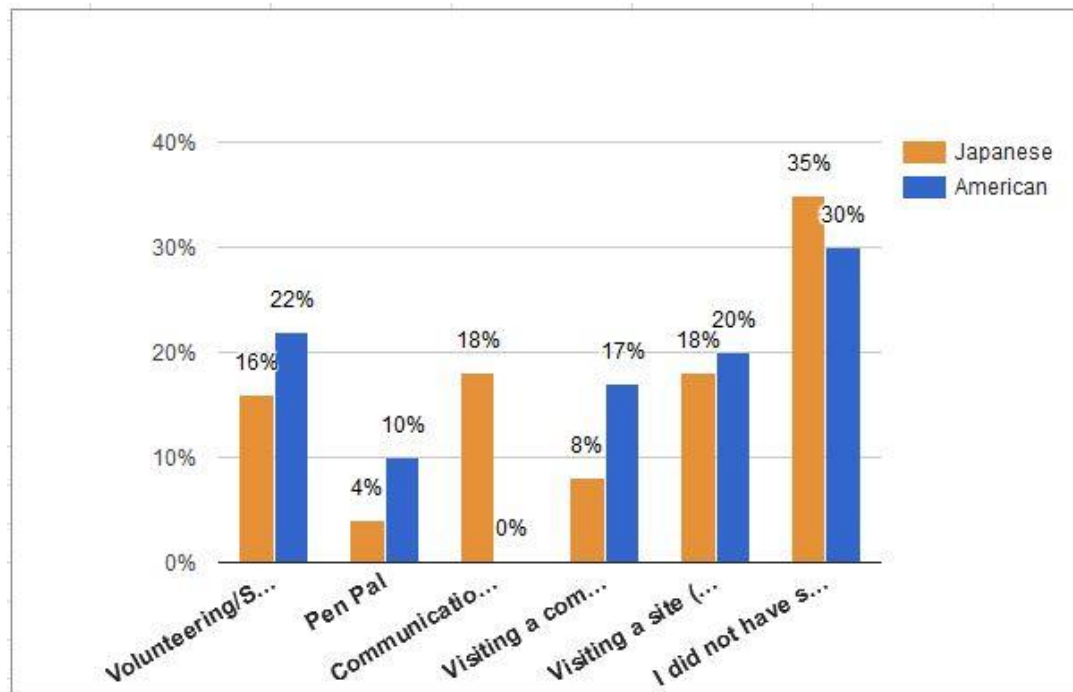
Graph 9: “I panic when I have to speak without preparation in class.”



5.7. Projects Connected to Multicultural Communities

Based on research by ACTFL President, Van Houten, participating in such things as volunteering or service learning, exchanging letters with a pen-pal, communication with an international sister school, visiting a community event (e.g. a festival), and visiting a community site (e.g. a restaurant) as part of a language class improve interculturality. We asked whether students had had a project or experience in their foreign language classes that connected them to a multicultural community; 70% of American students and 65% of Japanese students had participated in one or more such projects or experiences (See Graph 10).

Graph 10: In your language classes did you have some sort of project/experience that connected you to a multicultural community?



5.8. Summary of Findings: Research Question 1

Compared with Japanese students, American students had a more positive experience with learning a foreign language. The most common reasons for American students' positive

experience was good teachers. The most common reasons for Japanese students' positive experience were that teachers were native speakers of the target language and that they were able to participate in conversation activities in class. Japanese students' most common reason for a negative experience was that classroom curriculum was focused on writing, reading and listening, but put little emphasis on speaking and other real-world skills.

In general, American students experienced more anxiety regarding their foreign language education than Japanese students, except in the case of speaking without preparation in class, when it was about the same.

It is notable, and surprising, that Japanese and American students reported projects and experiences in their foreign language classes that connected them to multicultural communities in near equal numbers.

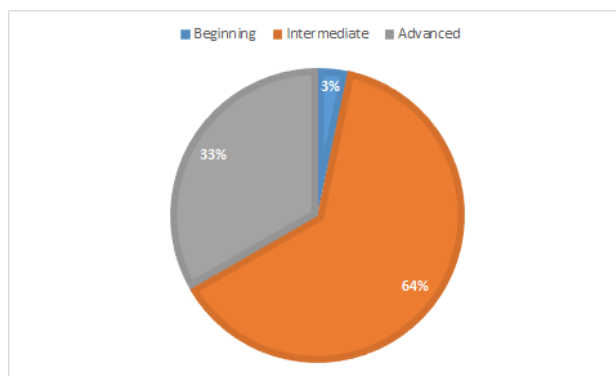
5.9. Research Question 2: To what extent are students gaining interculturality from foreign language education?

6.0. Foreign Language Class Levels

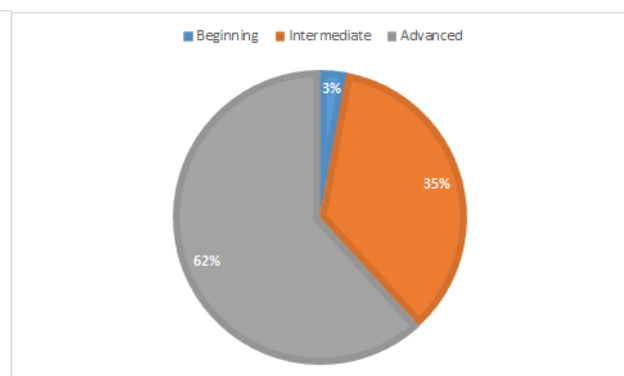
The majority of American students had taken up through intermediate level classes (See Graph 11), while the majority of Japanese students had taken up through advanced level classes (See Graph 12).

Highest Level of Foreign Language Class Taken

Graph 11: America



Graph 12: Japan



(Blue = Beginning, Orange = Intermediate, Grey = Advanced)

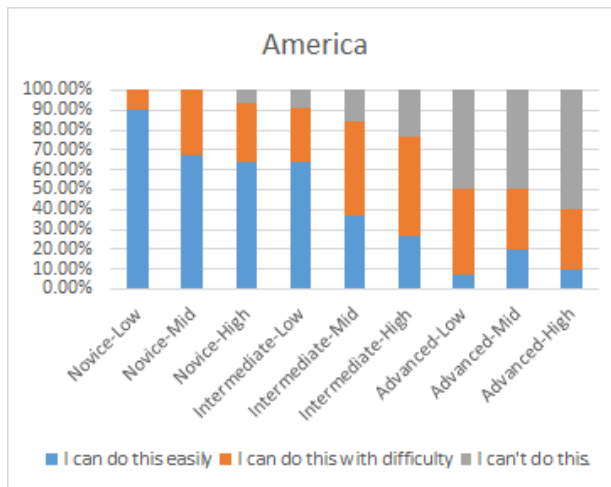
6.1. Language Proficiency

In our survey we only asked about interpersonal communication proficiency. The question included scenarios that increased in difficulty from novice to advanced level. These scenarios were based on ACTFL Can-do Statements used for self evaluation. In Japan and America, Can-do Statements are used as self-evaluation tools for students and for teachers as a checklist of skills to build upon each term.

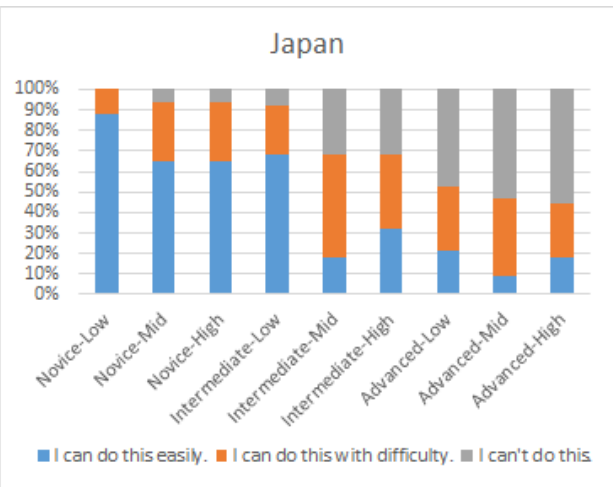
We found that American and Japanese students showed a similar interpersonal language proficiency (See Graph 13 and 14).

Language Proficiency Levels

Graph 13: America



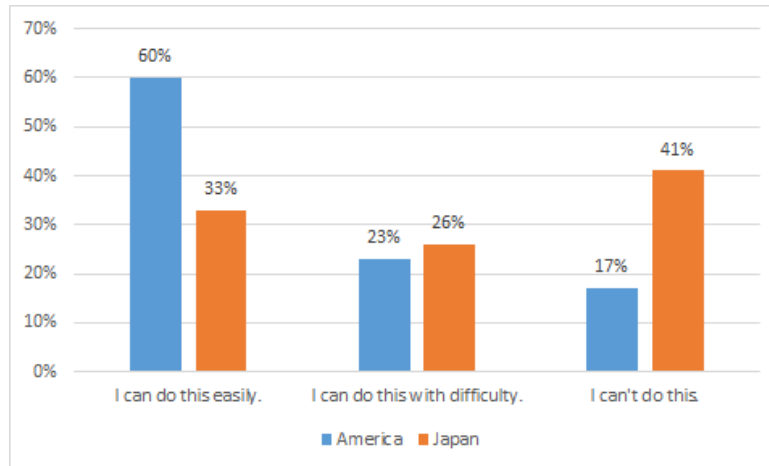
Graph 14: Japanese



6.2. Interculturality: Giving and Receiving Gifts

Americans were much more confident in their ability to offer and receive gifts using their foreign language abilities while interacting with other cultures (See Graph 15).

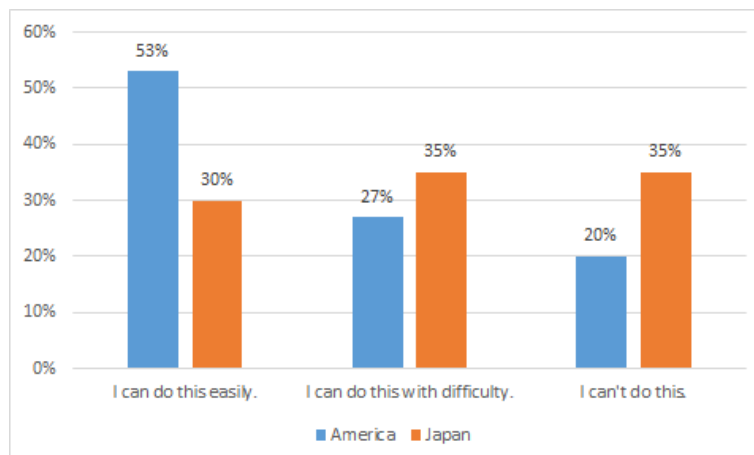
Graph 15: "I can usually offer and receive gifts in a culturally accepted way."



6.3. Interculturality: Appropriate Cultural Conventions

Americans were much more confident in their ability to interact with other cultures using their language abilities regarding body language, turn-taking, interrupting, agreeing, etc (See Graph 16).

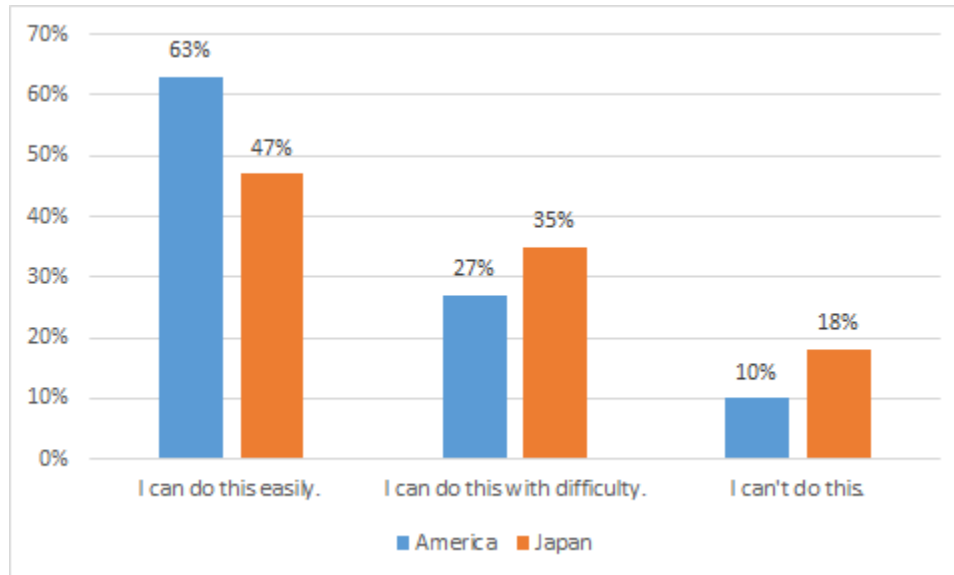
Graph 16: "I can use some appropriate cultural conventions such as body language, turn-taking, interrupting, agreeing, etc. when talking with others."



6.4. Interculturality: Other Behaviors

Americans were much more confident in their ability to interact with other cultures using their language abilities regarding responding to sneezes, toasts, and compliments (See Graph 17).

Graph 17: "I can respond in a culturally accepted way when someone sneezes, toasts, or pays me a compliment."



6.5. Summary of Findings: Research Question 2

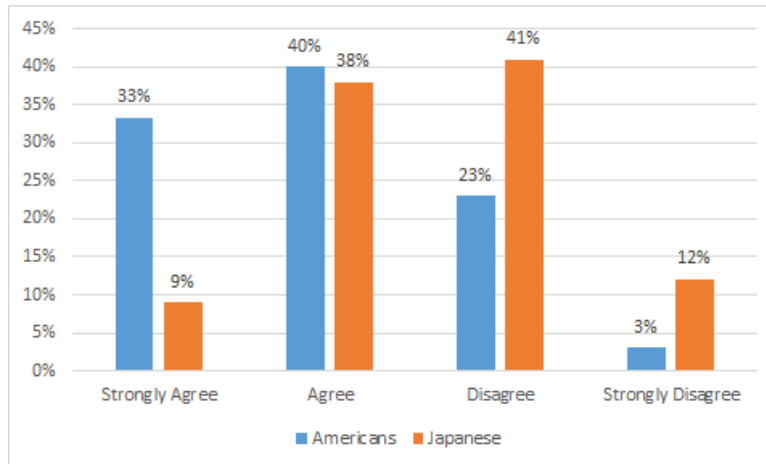
Though the American and Japanese students showed similar interpersonal language proficiency, the majority of Japanese students had taken up to advanced level classes, while the majority of American students had only taken up through intermediate level classes. This backs up our literature review showing that foreign language classes in Japan still do not emphasize interpersonal communication ability. As we saw that Japanese students are less confident in their interculturality, this lack of emphasis likely harms students' abilities to use their language in appropriate ways in real world settings.

6.6. Research Question 3: What role does foreign language education play in creating connections between students and multicultural/multilingual communities?

6.7. Connection to Multicultural Communities

73% of Americans agree that their foreign language education has connected them to a multicultural community, while only 47% of Japanese students agree (See Graph 18).

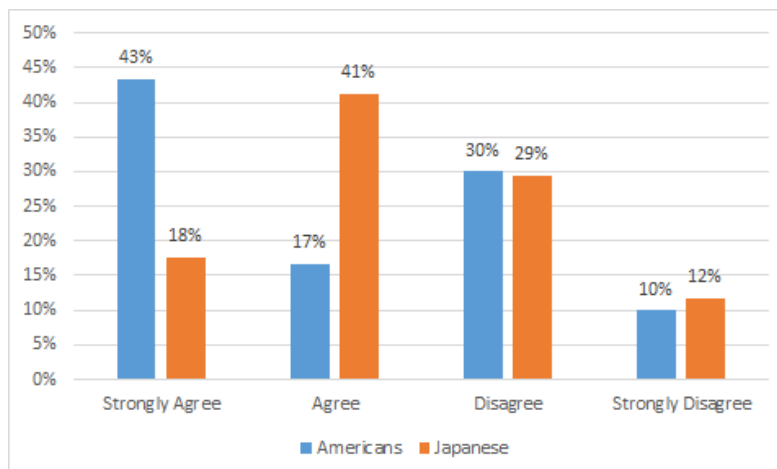
Graph 18: "Foreign language education has connected you to a multicultural community."



6.8. Creating Relationships with Native Speakers

A total of 60% of American students and 59% of Japanese students agree that foreign language education has helped them create relationships with native speakers of the language, though American students more strongly agreed (See Graph 19).

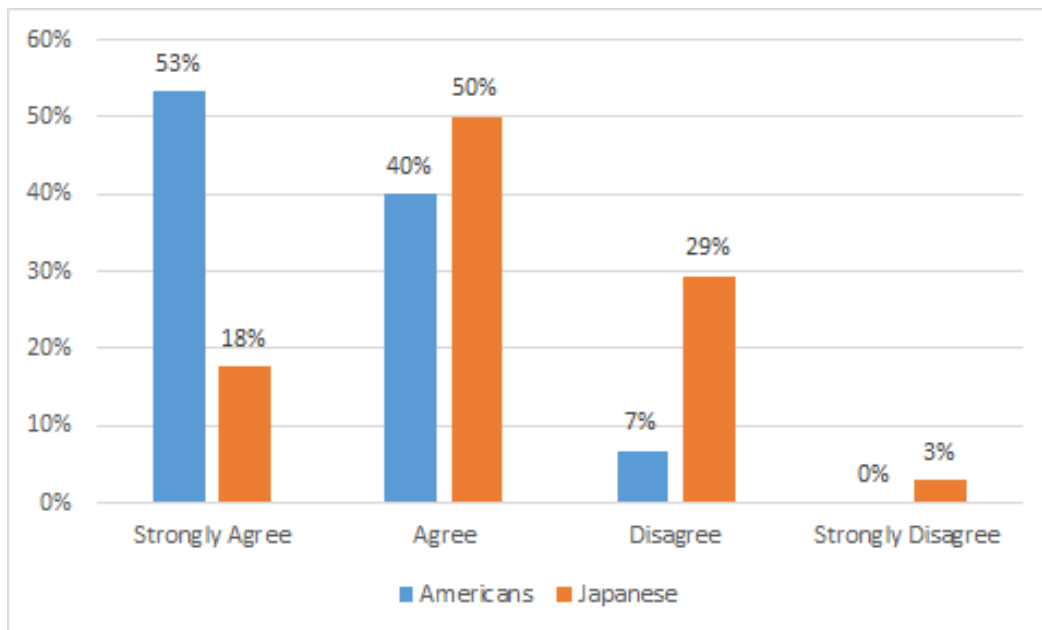
Graph 19: "Foreign language education has helped you create relationships with native speakers of the language."



6.9. Understanding and Accepting Other Cultures

93% of Americans agree that foreign language education had made them more understanding and accepting of other peoples and cultures, as opposed to the 68% of Japanese who agree (See Graph 20).

Graph 20: "Foreign language education has made you more understanding and accepting of other people and cultures."



7.0. Summary of Findings: Research Question 3

Most Americans agreed that they had been connected to a multicultural community through foreign language education, while only half of the Japanese students agreed. Also, both American and Japanese students felt they had been able to create relationships with native speakers in equal numbers, though Americans felt more strongly connected. This is possibly because foreign language does open up the door for communication, and the students we surveyed typically attended universities with strong study abroad programs. However, while 93% of Americans agreed that foreign language education has made them more accepting and understanding of other cultures, only 68% of Japanese agreed. The lower level of agreement among Japanese is possibly because, as indicated in our literature review, Japanese foreign

language classes are typically more rigidly structured and grammar focused, often not emphasizing culture and communication.

7.1. Conclusion

It seems that American students have higher confidence in their interculturality than Japanese students due more to enthusiastic teachers, a greater emphasis on teaching culture and interpersonal communication, and stronger connections with multicultural communities and native speakers of their target languages. We also found that language anxiety does not necessarily impact students' overall positive or negative experience with their foreign language education. Rather, teachers and course content are typically the deciding factors. Furthermore, though Japanese and Americans reported near equal numbers of projects and experiences that connected them to multicultural communities through their classes, Americans still feel more connected to multicultural communities. This is possibly because America, as a more heterogeneous country, has more opportunities for immersive experiences. Therefore, class experiences and interculturality can be improved by: 1) creating many immersive opportunities inside and outside classes to connect with multicultural and multilingual communities and 2) offering many opportunities to practice real world interpersonal applications of the target language.

7.2. Limitations of the Study

Most Americans who took the survey were from California, and many were language majors, which may not give an accurate picture of foreign language education in the United States as a whole. Similarly, most Japanese who took the survey were our foreign exchange student friends or students we had been friends with in Japan, which may have skewed the Japanese results as well. Furthermore, we only tested for an intermediate level of interculturality in our survey.

7.3. Future Research

In this study, we did not differentiate between foreign language courses taken in University and courses taken in high school and under. In future research, it could yield more detailed and clear results if experiences and interculturality gained from university courses and

from high school courses were surveyed separately, as it was clear, especially in the case of Japanese students, that university and high school courses offered vastly different experiences.

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