



Attitudes of Iranian Japanese Learners towards Japanese Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes of Iranian learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) towards the influence of Japanese culture on learning the language. The study explores these attitudes from the perspectives of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture. Additionally, the study examines how learners' attitudes vary based on their years of Japanese language learning. Through a questionnaire adapted from previous research, data were collected from 50 JFL learners at an Iranian university. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that JFL learners hold positive attitudes towards the role of Japanese culture in their language learning. The study challenges the stereotype seen in prior research suggesting negative attitudes among Muslims by highlighting the influence of contextual factors. Participants emphasized the significance of culture in their language learning experience, albeit to varying degrees depending on the duration of Japanese language study. Moreover, personal factors proved to be a stronger motivational factor than social factors in Iranian students' learning of Japanese. The study provides insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking to understand learners' preferences and motivations in the context of culture-based language learning.

Keywords: Attitudes, Culture, Personal factors, Social factors, Importance of culture, Japanese language learning, Iranian learners, Foreign language education



Introduction

In some countries, the Japanese language is commonly taught not only in universities but also in high schools. The reason may be the presence of many Japanese companies in those locations (i.e., Alabama), which enables JFL learners to find jobs locally. In addition, many Japanese people live there in related activities, while other countries see a major influx of Japanese tourists (i.e., Guam, Australia) so that JFL learners have opportunities to communicate with Japanese native speakers. Taken together, all of these factors encourage learners to learn Japanese. However, when it comes to Iran, these reasons disappear. Yet many Iranians are interested in Japanese. Although only one university in Iran focuses on teaching Japanese formally, many Iranian students are interested in the subject, and their number is growing. One possible reason for this trend may be the influence of Japanese culture, since JFL learners often mention an interest in that culture. Given this context, we need to understand the role of Japanese culture in learning Japanese based on the perceptions of Iranian learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) and examine this issue based on personal, social, and cultural perspectives.

Literature Review

In a typical language learning context, five factors influence attitudes: the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents, and the speakers of the language (Spolsky, 1969). Building upon this framework, the current study focuses on personal and social factors within an Iranian context.

Attitudes from a Personal Perspective

According to McGroarty (2000), attitudes exert an unconscious influence on students, making it challenging to readily or definitively identify their impact. Students are easily influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of their peers, teachers, and parents in relation to language learning. Additionally, students are subject to the impact of social and institutional language policies as evidenced in required language courses, both primary and secondary, within educational institutions (Tseng, 2013).

Brown (2000) argues that the advantages of positive attitudes among students are readily apparent. Conversely, negative attitudes can result in reduced motivation and ultimately hinder students' ability to achieve proficiency. It is therefore essential for educators to recognize that negative attitudes are malleable and that they should provide students with an accurate understanding of diverse cultures distinct from their own.

Attitudes from a Social Perspective

Social factors play a pivotal role in shaping learners' attitudes and in influencing their learning outcomes. The social context is a crucial determinant in language learning, with learning occurring across two distinct settings: natural environments, and educational contexts. Different levels of second language proficiency are linked to each setting, leading to notable variability among learners within these domains (Ellis, 1999). Schuman (1978) highlights the varying degrees to which learners assimilate within the culture, with social factors dictating the extent of individual learners' interaction with the second language.

Chen (2001) uncovered a distinct and interconnected relationship between culture, family dynamics, and academic achievement. In Chen's investigation, it emerged that Chinese parents and students exhibited more favorable attitudes towards education, prioritizing self-improvement



and setting higher standards. Parents were more actively involved, dedicating time to work with their children, regularly supervising homework, purchasing relevant materials, and placing greater emphasis on home-based engagement.

In terms of students' attitudes viewed through the lenses of personal, social, family, and ethnic factors, Tseng (2013) delved into the interplay between these factors and the proficiency levels of Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The findings revealed a noteworthy link between attitudes toward culture and English proficiency, which was particularly prominent among high-proficiency learners. Significant correlations emerged between personal, family, and ethnic factors. Among these factors, personal factors exhibited the strongest association, whereas ethnicity held the least influence.

Importance of culture in L2 learning and teaching

Among studies on the role of culture in language learning and teaching, Rasooli and Heravi (2019) examined the perspectives of Iranian learners studying EFL concerning cultural familiarity. Employing a cultural attitude questionnaire, their study revealed that over half the participants recognized the significance of understanding and engaging with the target culture in EFL classes. However, a subset of participants did not perceive the target culture as being crucial to English language learning within the classroom context.

Dweik and Al-Sayyed (2015) explored the perspectives of Jordanian EFL students and teachers concerning the integration of culture into EFL education using questionnaire data. The findings highlighted that both EFL teachers and students displayed favorable outlooks regarding the inclusion of British culture in EFL classes, underlining a positive stance towards teaching and learning cultural aspects.

In a separate investigation, Jabeen and Shah (2011) also explored the impact of culture on learners' attitudes. Their study reported a notably adverse attitude among respondents towards the instruction of target language culture. They attributed this negativity to the participants' Muslim identity, which seemed to exert a detrimental influence. Furthermore, they suggested that there were discernible shifts in learners' attitudes towards target language culture teaching based on differences in educational and economic backgrounds. The authors highlighted the substantial role played by learning objectives in shaping learners' attitudes towards target language culture instruction within the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom.

Ho (1998) delved into the connection between students' interest in cultural studies and their orientations, attitudes, and motivations for learning English. Through a questionnaire, the study aimed to gauge students' enthusiasm for cultural studies within EFL classes. The findings revealed that students showed a keen interest in acquiring knowledge about English-speaking countries. Notably, cultural studies were found to be advantageous as they contributed to enhanced motivation for English language learning.

In the context of learners and teachers' attitudes, Kahraman (2016) conducted a study examining the attitudes of teachers and learners towards the significance of culture and culture learning in a Turkish setting. Kahraman notes that his research yielded varying outcomes. He suggests that learners tend to learn and teachers tend to teach what they perceive as important, and these perceptions guide their actions. Specifically, language teachers and students frequently acknowledge the importance of intercultural competence. Kahraman underscores that if both parties recognize this reality, it suggests progress towards the practical integration of cultural foundations into the classroom. Kahraman also argues that some learners fully recognize their



own significant need for new cultural insights and they are prepared to incorporate this knowledge as a complement to their communicative competence.

In a study of prospective English teachers, Atay (2005) showed that while participants acknowledged the importance of the cultural dimension in language learning, they were also conscious of their own deficiency in terms of knowledge regarding the culture(s) of the target language and the realization that teaching culture encompasses more than what they could accomplish. In another study, Sercu (2002) examined whether teachers supported intercultural objectives and were willing to enhance the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence through foreign language instruction. The data revealed that Flemish foreign language educators advocated for the integration of intercultural objectives in language learning and expressed readiness to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence in their students.

Past research shows that learners' attitudes rank among the most influential factors in language learning and indicate a connection between learners' attitudes from various perspectives, including personal and social factors. However, it remains uncertain whether students' perceptions change with the passage of years spent studying the target language as educational environments may impact students' attitudes (Jabeen & Shah, 2011). Consequently, this study focuses on Iranian students studying Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) with varying durations of study in order to explore these learners' attitudes towards the role of Japanese culture in learning Japanese.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the attitude of JFL learners regarding the role of Japanese culture in learning Japanese viewed through the lenses of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture?

RQ2. What is the attitude of JFL learners towards the influence of Japanese culture on learning Japanese language, taking into account years of Japanese language learning from the perspective of personal factors?

RQ3. What is the attitude of JFL learners towards the influence of Japanese culture on learning Japanese, taking into account years of Japanese language learning from the perspective of social factors?

RQ4. What is the attitude of JFL learners towards the influence of Japanese culture on learning Japanese, taking into account years of Japanese language learning from the perspective of the importance of culture?

Methodology

Participants

Fifty students studying JFL at a university in Iran enrolled in this study after providing written consent. Among these participants, 20 had one year of experience studying Japanese, another 20 had two years of Japanese language study, and the remaining 10 had three years of experience of studying Japanese. The cohort comprised 14 males and 36 females, with ages ranging from 19 to 41 years.



Instrument

The data regarding JFL learners' perceptions of the role of culture in learning Japanese were collected through a questionnaire. This questionnaire assessed learners' attitudes based on personal factors, social factors, and the significance of culture. Adapted from Han (2010), who developed it to measure attitude scales on a similar subject, and Tseng (2013), the questionnaire was slightly modified to ensure its congruence with the specific demands of the present study in Persian. Using a 6-point Likert scale, the questionnaire prompted participants to indicate their level of agreement (or disagreement) with each item using descriptors such as "very much" (6), "much" (5), "moderately" (4), "a little" (3), "very little" (2), and "not at all" (1). The reliability of the questionnaire demonstrated robustness ($\alpha = .90$), rendering it acceptable for use in this study.

Procedure

Prior to participants answering the questionnaire, the researcher provided an explanation of the questionnaire's content and the study's objectives. Additionally, participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would have no impact on their grades, and they were encouraged to freely inquire about any related matters.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages of responses, were employed to evaluate the data and uncover relationships between the variables as a whole and within each category.

Results and Discussion

In answer to RQ1, the attitudes of JFL learners regarding the impact of Japanese culture on learning Japanese were investigated from the perspectives of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture. As depicted in Figure 1, learners exhibited a robust belief in the importance of culture ($Mean = 89.75$, $SD = 32.40$) in acquiring proficiency in Japanese. A notable 55% of participants expressed the view that acquiring knowledge about Japanese culture was important. Moreover, they expressed the conviction that in contrast to the influence of social factors ($Mean = 67.11$, $SD = 32.46$), personal factors ($Mean = 72.06$, $SD = 35.74$) played a pivotal role in motivating their pursuit of Japanese language proficiency.

As indicated in Table 2, respondents accentuated the utility of knowing about Japanese culture (54%, personal factor) and acknowledged general expectations for them to know about Japanese culture when studying Japanese (51%, social factor).

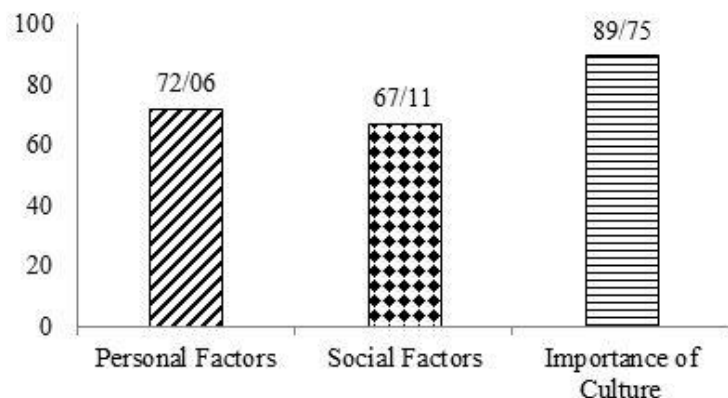
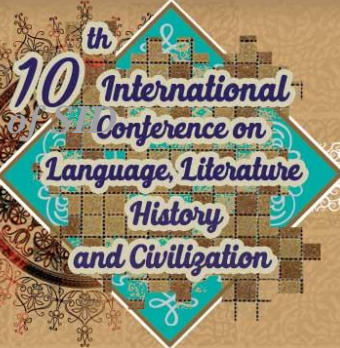


Figure (1) JFL learners' attitudes from the perspective of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture

Table 1-JFL learners' attitudes from the perspective of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture

	Statements	Agreement %
Personal Factors	1. I like to learn Japanese because I am interested in Japanese culture.	49
	2. I like listening to Japanese music.	42
	3. I like to watch Japanese movies and TV shows.	47
	4. I like to read Japanese stories or novels.	48
	5. I like the Japanese way of life (lifestyle).	44
	6. I would like to travel to Japan, that's why I like to study Japanese.	52
	7. I would like to live in Japan, that's why I like to study Japanese.	44
	8. Knowing about Japanese culture is useful for those who learn or want to learn Japanese.	54
Social Factors	9. My family agrees with my need to learn Japanese language and culture.	40
	10. I have had negative feedback from my family because of learning Japanese language and culture.	23
	11. I have had negative feedback from society because of learning Japanese language and culture.	20
	12. When I can speak Japanese, people see me differently.	47
	13. My family is proud of me when I can speak Japanese.	49
	14. When I study Japanese, people expect me to know about Japanese culture.	51
Importance of	15. It is important for me to learn Japanese culture.	53
	16. It is important to get information about Japanese culture.	55



culture	17. It is important to get information about the life and habits of the Japanese people.	54
	18. It is important to gain information about the shared cultural values and beliefs of the Japanese people.	53

RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 examine the attitude of JFL learners from the perspectives of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture considering years of learning Japanese. Means and standard deviations were calculated and are presented in Table 2. Regarding personal factors, Table 2 indicates that students with two-year learning experience strongly concur with the role of personal factors in learning Japanese (*Mean* = 94.47). In terms of social factors and the importance of culture, students with one to two years of Japanese learning exhibit a robust belief in the influence of social factors (*Mean* = 82.50 and 86.00) and the importance of culture (*Mean* = 111.00 and 116.75), respectively, on their inclination to acquire proficiency in Japanese.

As shown in Table 3, as regards the personal factor, travel to Japan emerges as the most influential factor encouraging one-year learners to study Japanese (32%). For those who have studied for two years, the perception that understanding Japanese culture is useful significantly influences their motivation to learn (24%), while this same belief becomes even more impactful for students with three years of learning experience (76%). As regards the social factor, students with one year of learning underscore the significance of family pride (21%), whereas two-year (23%) and three-year students (80%) believe that their acquaintance with Japanese culture is expected as part of their study of the language. Concerning the importance of culture, nearly all students concur with the items presented (15-18).

Table 2-Means and standard deviations for JFL learners' attitudes from the perspective of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture by years of learning Japanese

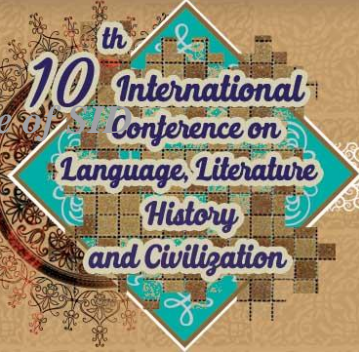
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)
RQ2			
Personal factors			
1 year	20	89.38	19.39
2 years	20	94.47	18.26
3 years	10	32.33	6.67
RQ3			
Social factors			
1 year	20	82.50	25.60
2 years	20	86.00	27.16
3 years	10	32.83	8.25
RQ4			
Importance of culture			
1 year	20	111.00	.81
2 years	20	116.75	1.70
3 years	10	41.50	1.91



Table 3-JFL learners' attitudes from the perspective of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture by years of learning Japanese

	Statements	Agreement %		
		1 year	2 years	3 years
Personal Factors	1. I like to learn Japanese because I am interested in Japanese culture.	20	22	68
	2. I like listening to Japanese music.	18	17	66
	3. I like to watch Japanese movies and TV shows.	20	20	74
	4. I like to read Japanese stories or novels.	19	22	70
	5. I like the Japanese way of life (lifestyle).	16	21	70
	6. I would like to travel to Japan, that's why I like to study Japanese.	23	23	52
	7. I would like to live in Japan, that's why I like to study Japanese.	18	21	46
	8. Knowing about Japanese culture is useful for those who learn or want to learn Japanese.	22	24	76
Social Factors	9. My family agrees with my need to learn Japanese language and culture.	17	15	76
	10. I have had negative feedback from my family because of learning Japanese language and culture.	10	11	50
	11. I have had negative feedback from society because of learning Japanese language and culture.	10	10	40
	12. When I can speak Japanese, people see me differently.	19	21	76
	13. My family is proud of me when I can speak Japanese.	21	21	72
	14. When I study Japanese, people expect me to know Japanese culture.	20	23	80
Importance of culture	15. It is important for me to learn Japanese culture.	22	23	80
	16. It is important to get information about Japanese culture.	22	23	88
	17. It is important to get information about the life and habits of the Japanese people.	22	23	84
	18. It is important to gain information about the shared cultural values and beliefs of the Japanese people.	22	23	80

To aid in obtaining a comprehensive understanding, Figures 2 and 3 depict the factors (personal factors, social factors, the importance of culture) in conjunction with the duration of Japanese language learning. Among students with one to two years of Japanese study, the first notable observation is their strong consensus on the pivotal role of culture in learning Japanese.



Subsequently, they exhibit agreement on personal factors, and finally, on social factors. Conversely, while the significance of culture slightly diminishes among students who have been learning Japanese for three years, it remains the most prominent factor (41.50) compared with the other two factors (Figure 2).

As presented in Figure 3, irrespective of the duration of Japanese language learning, language learners regard social factors as exerting the least influence on their motivation to learn Japanese, followed by personal factors.

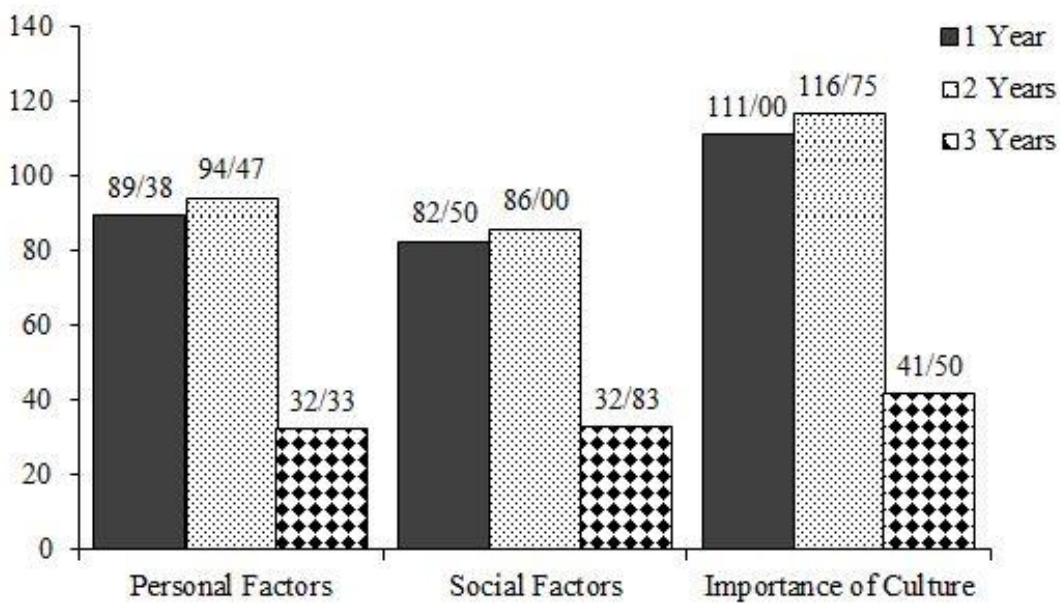


Figure (2) Learners' attitudes categorized by personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture

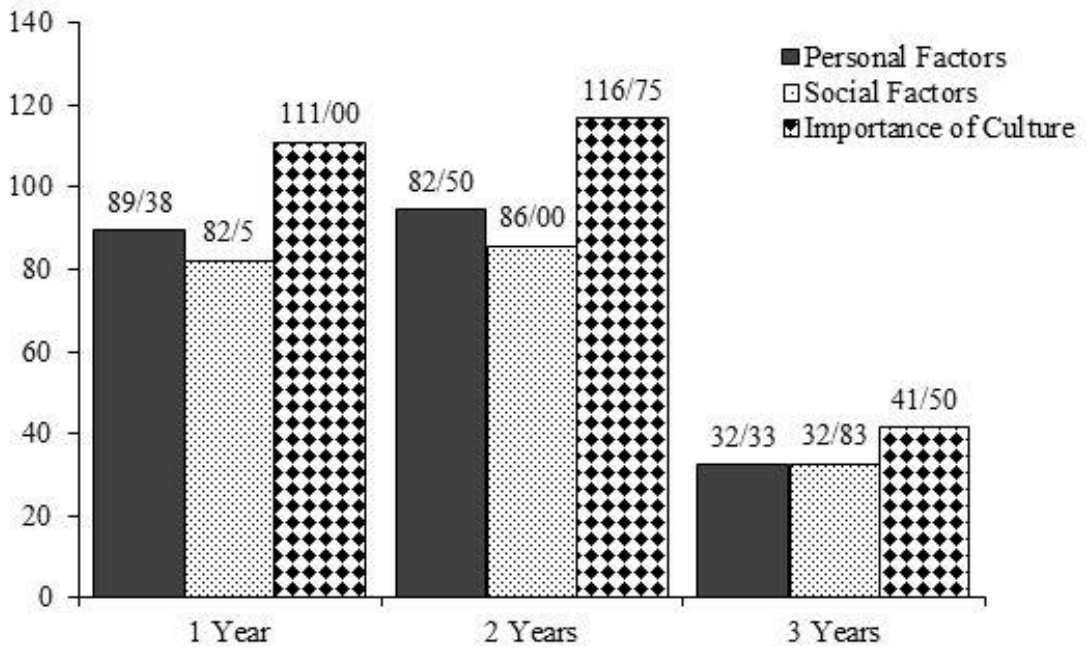


Figure (3) Learners' attitudes categorized by years of studying Japanese



Conclusion

This study investigated the attitudes of JFL learners towards Japanese culture in the context of learning Japanese from the perspectives of personal factors, social factors, and the importance of culture. Additionally, the study explored how learners' attitudes change based on the duration of their Japanese language learning experience. The findings indicate that Iranian students hold positive attitudes towards Japanese culture and its impact on learning Japanese. This aligns with previous research conducted by Dweik and Al-Sayyed (2015), Getie, (2020), Kahraman (2016), and Rasooli & Heravi (2019).

Furthermore, the findings challenge earlier research suggesting that Muslims tend to have a negative attitude towards teaching and learning the culture associated with a second language (Jabeen & Shah, 2011). However, since all participants in the present study are Muslims, it would be inappropriate to make blanket judgments about Muslims' attitudes. Rather, the evaluation of the role of the target culture must consider the context. This holds significant implications for educators and teachers, who should be mindful of these nuances.

The results also reveal that Iranian students place considerable importance on culture, although the strength of this belief varies according to the years of Japanese language learning. This is contrary to the findings of Tseng (2013) and Rasooli and Heravi (2019). Whereas Tseng (2013) identified personal factors as the foremost and most influential element among Taiwanese ESL students, Iranian students see the importance of the personal factor as secondary. Moreover, while Rasooli and Heravi (2019) showed that many students do not consider culture as an important factor in English learning classes, JFL learners emphasize the importance of culture. Additionally, the study underscores that social factors have the least influence in motivating Iranian students to learn Japanese. This discrepancy may arise from the limited use of Japanese in Iran, indicating that the social presence of Japanese is not substantial enough in the country to act as a significant motivator for learning. In Iran, the primary driving factor for learning Japanese appears to be individual interest in Japanese culture and language. Further research is warranted if we are to identify the specific Japanese cultural elements that intrigue and motivate Iranians.



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