Motivational Factors Assisting Students to Learn Foreign Languages in North East India with Special Reference to Learning Japanese

Nozomi Tokuma & Gulab Jha

Abstract

This study aims to find the motivational factors that help university students of the North East region of India in learning foreign languages. The article attempts to determine the preference for foreign language learning and the reasons behind the preferences. Data collected from 395 students in the 18-25 age group showed that Japanese, French and Korean are the top three most preferred foreign languages. Most respondents stated that they want to learn Japanese as they are interested in the culture and travelling around the country. Respondents who chose French showed a similar tendency towards Japanese; culture and travelling are the primary reasons. For learning Korean, pop culture emerged as the most prominent reason. The participants also responded about their impressions of Japan, China, and Korea, and it was found that they considered East Asian countries to be rich in traditions and natural beauty. Apart from that, Japan and China evoked strong images of economic and technological advancement. While Japan is perceived as introducing new cultures such as animation, fashion, and cuisine, Korea is perceived as a country with a high standard of living.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, Japanese language, North East India, learner motivation

1. Introduction

The importance of motivation has been recognized in the fields of psychology and education for a long time (Anderman & Dawson, 2011).

It is not easy to predict whether a positive attitude produces successful language learning or not, though positive attitudes are related to willingness to continue learning a foreign language (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Learning regularly and continuously is essential in foreign language learning for higher proficiency; therefore, positive attitudes give more chances to acquire the target language better. Traditionally, Indian learners prefer learning languages such as French, German, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese. However, recently, Japanese language learning has become popular, making it the third most popular foreign language among university applicants, preceded by French and Chinese (George, 2017). This increase in interest is perpetuated by several Japanese companies, such as Suzuki, entering the Indian market after the 1980s. It is also said that India's increased economic and political interaction with East Asia as a result of the 'Act-East Policy' and 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' encouraged people to learn Japanese.

Japan Foundation, a premier organization dedicated to promoting the Japanese language and culture, conducts regular surveys to understand the motivations and expectations of Japanese learners worldwide. The participants of these surveys are the heads of the institutions where Japanese is taught, and each institute provides a set of response sheets based on direct and indirect input from the learners. In the latest study conducted in 2018, it is reported that the primary motivation for learning Japanese in South Asia is to study or work in Japan and also due to the respondents' interest in Japanese culture (Japan Foundation, 2020). A summary of the results of the Japan Foundation study is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: *Motivation for Learning Japanese in South Asia (Data Source: Japan Foundation, 2020).*

Reason	*South Asia*	*Worldwide Trend*
Study in Japan	84.6%	46.7%
Interest in the Japanese language	78.8%	61.4%
Future employment/work aspirations	68.7%	41.1%
Interest in Japanese culture	60.9%	52.4%
Interest in anime, manga, J-pop, fashion	50.8%	66.0%

Use Japanese to take an exam/earn a certificate	49.7%	31.3%
Interest in science and/or technology	46.4%	28.0%
Speaking Japanese at work/school in the community	43.0%	23.8%
Necessary for current work	39.2%	19.5%
Recommendation of family/relatives etc.	32.3%	16.6%
Understanding other cultures and cross-cultural communication	29.3%	25.4%
Sightseeing in Japan	28.3%	41.1%
Goodwill programmes and exchanges with Japan	24.0%	15.5%
Interest in politics, economy or society	15.1%	19.4%
Information gathering/communication in the Japanese language	14.2%	19.2%
Mother language/heritage language	4.6%	12.6%

While the data in the Japan Foundation report provides an excellent overview of the motivation of Japanese learners, it does not capture individual responses. Moreover, the responses are averaged, removing any state or country-level details. Considering this, in the current study, responses from 395 individuals from Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland of North East India using an online survey are reported. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the popular foreign languages among the individuals in North East India?

2. What are the motivations for learning a foreign language in North East India?

3. Is there a bias towards East Asian languages, viz. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (CJK)?

While trying to answer these questions, the following issues are also investigated:

a. The motivations behind choosing a particular foreign language,

b. North Eastern state-wise difference in preference for foreign languages.

The section following this details the methodology adopted in the survey. Following that, Section 3 reports the results of the survey. Section 4 discusses the findings and concludes the article.

2. Method

2.1. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on two previous studies on Japan and Japanese language learning abroad. The first study was the 'Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2018' published by the Japan Foundation in 2020. The second one is the 'Opinion Poll on Japan in India 2019' conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, published in 2019. In the current study, the questions in the questionnaire were modified to suit the linguistic and cultural diversity in North East India. The participants were asked to choose one foreign language that they would prefer to learn from the given list of nine languages. The nine languages were Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Apart from that, 'Others' was also added as an option if the participant would wish to learn a language apart from the nine languages. Following that, the participants were prompted to provide their motivation or reason for making a choice for a foreign language. Each participant was asked to provide their background details, such as their educational background, age, languages they spoke, etc. All such details were later used to see if they correlated with their choice of foreign languages. All the responses were anonymous, and consent was taken from the participants to participate in the survey. A sample form with the questions included in the current study is available online for viewing.[1]

2.2. Participants

We considered the following criteria in selecting the responses of participants in this study:

 (a) University students who are native to the North East region of India

 (b) Age group between 18 to 25 years old

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 1. Sample of the online survey form, available at https://sites.google.com/view/flsurvey/surveys, last retrieved on October 15, 2022.

(c) Studying in the urban area of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland

Data collection was carried out online using Google Forms, between December 2021 and April 2022. Google Forms were randomly distributed aimed at the students studying in educational institutions in North East India. In total, 395 responses were received from individuals. While the respondents were not taking any Chinese, Japanese, and/or Korean(CJK) courses in their educational institutes, 163 (41.2 per cent) respondents out of 395 have reported experience of learning CJK, including the self-taught mode. The 395 respondents included 208 male students (52.7 per cent), and 187 female students (47.3 per cent). Hence, gender can be considered well-balanced for this study. The age distribution is shown in Table 3. As seen from the table, the 21 to 25 years old form the largest group among the respondents. Many of the respondents are arts, major students, as seen in Table 4. The respondents were also asked to report their mother tongues, to which 44 mother tongues were reported. While all the mother tongue related statistics are reported on the survey website[1], the languages with more than 10 and more respondents are reported in Table 5.

Table 2: *Distribution of the Respondents by Age Group (n = 395)*

Age Group	
17 or less	6 (1.5%)
18-20	128 (32.4%)
21-25	217 (54.9%)
26-30	23 (5.8%)
31 or above	21 (5.3%)

Table 3: *Distribution of Majors Reported by Respondents (n = 395)*

Major	
Arts	290 (73.4%)
Science	46 (11.6%)
Business	27 (6.8%)
Law	3 (0.8%)
No Major	29 (7.3%)

Table 4: *Distribution of the Respondents by State (n = 395)*

State	
Assam	99 (25%)
Mizoram	79 (20%)
Nagaland	73 (18.4%)
Manipur	65 (16.5%)
Meghalaya	66 (16.7%)
Tripura	7 (1.8%)
Arunachal Pradesh	6 (1.5%)

Table 5: *Mother Tongues with More Than 10 Respondents in This Study*

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Assamese	95
Mizo	92
Garo	36
Meitheilon (Manipuri)	34
Nagamese	18
Khasi	14
Sumi	14
Tangkhul	12
Kuki	11

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Preferred Foreign Languages

From the 395 responses received in the survey, Japanese emerged as the most preferred language, with 120 respondents. French, Korean, Spanish and Chinese emerged as the top four most preferred foreign languages. The complete list of the nine languages along with their preference for them is provided in Table 6. Considering the low number of responses from Arunachal Pradesh (6) and Tripura (7), we have decided not to consider the data from these two states in the state-wise distribution of language preference in the analysis to follow.

Table 6: *Foreign Language Preference as Reported by Students in North East India*

Japanese	120 (30.4%)
French	72 (18.2%)
Korean	61 (15.4%)
Spanish	48 (12.1%)
Chinese	27 (6.8%)
German	22(5.6%)
Russian	15(3.4%)
Arabic	10(2.5%)
Portuguese	3(0.8%)
Others	17(4.3%)

Figure 1: *State-wise Preference for Foreign Languages*
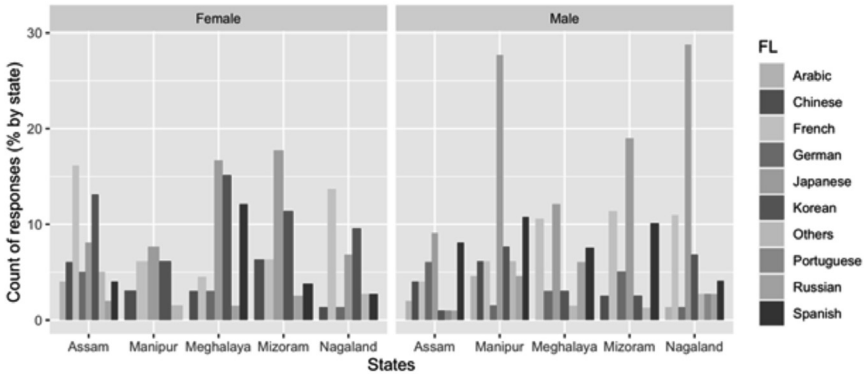
While the overall statistics show a preference for the Japanese language over others, when analysed state-wise, divided by gender, an interesting pattern of preference emerges. As seen in Figure 1, while for female respondents French emerges to be the most preferred foreign language to learn, for male respondents Japanese is the most preferred foreign language. In Assam, the second most preferred foreign language to learn for female respondents is Korean, closely followed by Japanese in the third place. In the case of the male respondents from Assam, the second most preferred language for male respondents is Spanish, followed by German in the third place. In the case of Manipur, the female respondents reported Japanese, French, and Korean as the first, second and third

most preferred languages for foreign language learning. The male respondents from Manipur overwhelmingly preferred Japanese as their most preferred language, while Spanish and Korean are their second and third most preferred languages. In the case of Meghalaya, both male and female respondents have opted for Japanese as their most preferred foreign language for learning. Among the male respondents from Meghalaya, French and Spanish are the second and third most preferred languages, respectively. Among the female respondents from Meghalaya, Korean and Spanish are the second and third most preferred languages. Among the Mizo male and female respondents, Japanese is the most preferred language for learning. The second and third most preferred languages for male respondents are French and Spanish respectively. For the female respondents from Mizoram, Korean is the second most preferred foreign language while Chinese and French—both are third—most preferred. Finally for the respondents from Nagaland, while the females consider French as their most preferred foreign language to learn, an overwhelming majority of male respondents consider Japanese as their choice. Female respondents from Nagaland report Korean and Japanese as their second and third most preferred languages. For males, French and Korean are the second and third preferred languages.

The responses obtained from the survey show that among the states, the preference for foreign languages differs. However, it can be noticed that East Asian languages, such as Japanese, Korean and Chinese are popular as a preferred foreign language to learn with 52.6 per cent of the respondents opting for one of the three. Secondly, the preference for the languages differed gender-wise. Japanese as a foreign language is more popular among male respondents and Korean as a potential foreign language to learn is more preferred by female respondents. Two patterns are noticed among the female speakers, in Assam and Nagaland the first, second, and third choices for foreign language are French, Korean and Japanese. On the other hand, in Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, the top two languages among the female respondents are Japanese followed by Korean. For all male respondents from the five states reported in this section, Japanese is the most preferred language. French and Spanish are highly preferred by the male respondents, however, Korean is not as preferred by the female respondents.

3.2. Motivations for Learning a Foreign Language

In order to determine the motivations behind choosing foreign languages, we analysed the reasons respondents have for learning a foreign language. However, in order to make a robust comparison, we considered only the responses that listed the top five foreign languages, namely, Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Chinese. The reasons for choosing each language, as reported by the respondents, are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** *Reason for Choosing a Foreign Language*
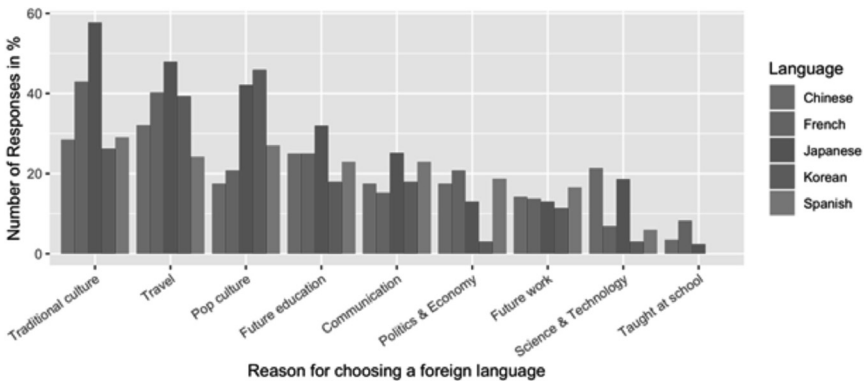
As seen in Figure 2, 57.7 per cent of the respondents who chose Japanese, mentioned interest in 'Traditional culture' such as history, literature, and arts as the reason for selecting the language. 'Travel' (47.9 per cent), and 'Pop culture' such as drama and fashion, etc. (42.2 per cent) were the second and third most common reasons given for learning Japanese. Respondents also reported interest in learning Japanese for 'Future education', i.e. aiming for future enrolment in an educational programme in Japan (32 per cent) and 'Communication' in Japanese with friends (25.2 per cent) as reasons. Those who selected French also showed similar patterns. Interest in French traditional culture was the most common reason (43 per cent) followed by 'Travel' (40.2 per cent) purpose. More than 45 per cent of the respondents who chose Korean reported their interest in Korean pop culture as their reason for choosing the language (45.9 per cent). The second most common reason for learning Korean was also for travelling (39.3 per cent). Interest in traditional culture was also the top reason for choosing Spanish while interest in traditional culture was the main reason for choosing Chinese. Overall

it was observed that interest in travelling, culture, and communicating were some of the motivating forces behind choosing a foreign language for the students in North East India.

3.3. Impression of CJK Countries

In order to determine the respondents' biases towards learning East Asian languages, the participants were asked about their impressions of China, Japan, and Korea (CJK). The participants were given a number of choices and they had to select each of the three CJK countries. The responses are summarized in Figure 3. The summary of the responses in Figure 3 shows that overall the respondents have positive impressions of the East Asian countries. All three countries are perceived to consist of rich traditions and cultures. Attributes such as natural beauty are associated with all three countries. Both China and Japan are perceived to be strong economies and to be technologically advanced (64 per cent and 66 per cent for China and Japan, respectively). However, China is also perceived as unreliable, incomprehensible, and a militant or combative country. Apart from that Japan is also perceived as a country that introduced new cultures such as animation, fashion, and cuisine. Korea evokes a strong perception of having a high standard of living. In judging the CJK countries, the respondents base their perceptions on culture and economy but not much on political attributes.

Figure 3: *Impression of China, Japan, and Korea*
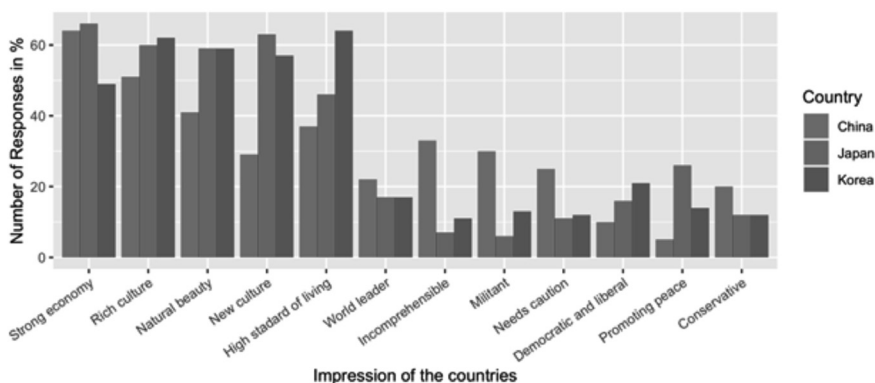
4. Conclusion

This study tried to ascertain the motivations of North East Indian students to learn foreign languages. Data showed that the top five foreign

languages that 395 students in the North East region are interested in are Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Chinese. Despite the absence of formal foreign language training facilities, 41.2 per cent of respondents have reported having experience in learning Japanese, Korean, and/or Chinese, either through interactions or by means of self-teaching. Of the 395 respondents in this study, 52.6 per cent have reported their interest in learning Japanese, Korean or Chinese.

In Table 1 it is seen that the students who are learning Japanese in South Asia, report studying in Japan, interest in Japanese culture, and future employment prospects as reasons for learning the language. While the respondents of this study are not current learners of Japanese, they do not report education or future employment prospects as the main motivations for choosing a foreign language for study. Rather, interest in traditional culture and travel were the primary reasons for choosing a foreign language for study. For choosing Korea, interest in Korean pop culture was a primary motivator. The impressions of China, Japan, and Korea were correlated with the respondents' reason for interest in Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages. Hence, their prior impressions of the countries have possibly influenced their motivation for choosing East Asian languages. Overall it can be considered that the respondents from North East India have positive impressions of the East Asian countries which may facilitate and motivate their learning of East Asian languages. Nevertheless, their motivation for learning a foreign language may be very different from the students in other parts of the country. It is noticed that the students who are learning Japanese in other parts of South Asia, are learning the language for pragmatic purposes, while the students from North East India want to learn foreign languages for entirely different reasons.

In the future, this study will expand to see the role of mother tongue, age, and educational qualifications in choosing a foreign language. Knowing these factors in detail will be helpful in designing curricula that suit different regions and demographics in India, as we have already noticed in the current study that the preference for foreign languages differs state-wise and also gender-wise.

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Nozomi Tokuma *teaches Japanese as a second language. She is a teacher mentor of a Japanese language and culture course at Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati. She is pursuing her PhD in "Linguistic Challenges in Japanese-Language Learning with Special Reference to the North East Region of India" from the Department of Foreign Languages, Gauhati University.*

n.tokuma@gmail.com

Appendix

Questionnaires Form

Q1. *If foreign language courses open at your university, which language will you choose? Choose only one language.*

- Arabic
- Chinese
- French
- German
- Japanese
- Korean
- Portuguese
- Russian
- Spanish
- None of the above
- My language is not listed (tell us about the language of your choice).

Q2. *Why are you interested in learning the language you chose above? Select all that apply.*

- Culture (e.g. history, literature, arts)
- Popular culture (e.g. Drama, fashion)
- Politics, economy, and/or society
- Science and/or technology
- For future enrolment in an educational programme in that county
- For work
- For travel
- For communicating with friends
- I have learnt in school before