

Determinants of Motivation in Learning Japanese as a Foreign Language: A Romanian Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores the motivation of Romanian university students learning Japanese, a less commonly taught language in Eastern Europe. Survey data from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies reveal that cultural and pop-cultural interests – especially anime, manga, and music – serve as primary entry points. Learners also report intrinsic fascination with the language system and, to a lesser extent, instrumental goals such as study abroad or professional advancement. Students adopt hybrid strategies, combining formal courses with self-study, digital tools, and media immersion, while contact with Japanese speakers emerges as a strong motivator. Framed by Gardner’s socio-educational model, Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory, and Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self system, the findings highlight Japanese in Romania as a “boutique language” pursued mainly for identity and cultural affiliation.

Keywords: second language acquisition, Japanese language learning, learner motivation, learner autonomy, Eastern European language education

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Introduction

The role of motivation in education has long been recognized as a decisive factor in shaping learning behaviors, academic persistence and achievement. In the context of foreign language learning, motivation has an even greater importance, as the acquisition of a new language is often a long-term and complex process requiring sustained effort, resilience, and engagement beyond the classroom. Unlike subjects with immediate practical applications, language learning frequently involves abstract skills, cultural knowledge, and communicative competence that may take years to fully develop, making the learner’s motivational orientation a key determinant of success.

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Research in applied linguistics and educational psychology consistently highlights that motivated learners demonstrate greater willingness to participate in language learning activities, invest more effort and achieve higher levels of proficiency compared to their less motivated peers. At the same time, motivation is not a static trait but a dynamic construct shaped by individual differences, contextual factors and pedagogical practices. This complexity has led to the development of multiple theoretical frameworks that seek to explain how and why learners are motivated to acquire a second or foreign language. Among the most influential are Gardner's socio-educational model, with its distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation, and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining high-quality motivation.

While much research has focused on widely taught languages such as English, the increasing globalization of cultural industries, academic exchange, and economic ties has brought renewed attention to the study of languages perceived as "distant" from learners' native tongues, both linguistically and culturally.

In recent years, studies have increasingly explored Japanese language learning in diverse regional contexts, highlighting the influence of local educational traditions, societal attitudes, and access to resources. However, the majority of empirical research on Japanese learning motivation has been conducted in East Asia, North America, and Western Europe, with comparatively little attention given to Eastern European learners. Where Eastern Europe is discussed, the focus is often on more widely taught languages, particularly English, French and German. When Japanese is considered, findings are typically based on small, localized samples or anecdotal accounts, leaving broader patterns in learner motivation underexplored.

Furthermore, cultural and educational factors specific to Eastern Europe – such as post-socialist shifts in foreign language policy, limited institutional infrastructure for less commonly taught languages, and the role of informal learning channels like online communities – remain insufficiently integrated into existing motivational frameworks. A notable feature in this region in recent years, particularly in Romania, is the presence of autodidact learners. More and more students begin studying Japanese independently, often years before entering university, using online resources, fan communities, language exchange platforms and imported

media. This self-directed learning not only reflects strong intrinsic motivation but also shapes their expectations, learning strategies, and interaction with formal academic instruction.

Romania, with its expanding network of Japanese language programs – institutional and non-institutional – and growing student interest, thus presents an especially compelling case. Despite the geographical and linguistic distance from Japan, Romanian learners often display high levels of personal engagement, frequently driven more by cultural affinity than by formal academic or professional requirements. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to provide a nuanced account of the motivational drivers, challenges, and sustaining factors among Romanian university students – both formally enrolled and self-taught – engaged in Japanese language learning. In doing so, it seeks to contribute both to the understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) motivation in underrepresented regions and to practical strategies for supporting learners of linguistically and culturally distant languages.

This study aims to explore the reasons and methods that Romanian students at Bucharest University of Economic Studies employ in learning Japanese. Based on survey data collected from a group of learners, the analysis identifies major motivational categories, examines self-reported learning strategies, and contextualizes the findings within the broader field of second language acquisition research. By investigating both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, as well as formal and informal learning practices, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Japanese language learning in a European context.

1. Literature review

Gardner's socio-educational model of second language acquisition (SLA) has been highly influential in conceptualizing the role of motivation in language learning. His framework draws on social psychological perspectives, positing that motivational factors are not purely individual but deeply rooted in the social and cultural context of learning (Gardner, 1985). Within this model, Gardner distinguishes between two central motivational orientations: integrative and instrumental motivation.

Integrative motivation refers to a learner's desire to learn a language out of interest in, and positive attitudes toward, the target language community. It involves an openness to other cultural groups and, ideally,

the intention to integrate into the community of the language speakers (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Learners with a strong integrative orientation are more likely to engage in sustained and effortful language learning, as their goals extend beyond immediate utility to identity and cultural affiliation (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). By contrast, instrumental motivation arises from more pragmatic and utilitarian reasons, such as securing employment, passing examinations, or gaining social mobility. While instrumental motives can drive effective learning in specific contexts, they are often linked to more short-term or extrinsically defined goals (Gardner, 2001).

Gardner argued that integrative motivation is particularly powerful in sustaining long-term commitment to language study, as it entails both affective (positive attitudes) and cognitive (goal-setting) components (Gardner, 1985). However, empirical research suggests that the relative importance of integrative and instrumental orientations may vary across sociolinguistic contexts. For instance, in multilingual or globalized settings, instrumental goals (e.g., learning English as a lingua franca for academic or professional purposes) often dominate, while integrative motivation may be less salient due to the absence of direct contact with a target speech community (Dörnyei, 1990; Ushioda, 2011).

Despite such critiques, Gardner's conceptualization has remained foundational. His Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), developed to empirically assess learners' motivational orientations, has been widely applied and validated in SLA research, further solidifying the centrality of integrative versus instrumental distinctions (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). More recent motivational frameworks, such as Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, have sought to reconceptualize Gardner's integrative construct in terms of learners' self-concepts and future identity goals, but they continue to acknowledge Gardner's model as the theoretical basis upon which later developments were built (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2011).

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding human motivation, including its application to second language acquisition (SLA). At its core, SDT differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, conceptualizing them along a continuum of self-determination that ranges from amotivation to fully autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent interest, enjoyment, or satisfaction, whereas extrinsic motivation involves

performing an activity to achieve separable outcomes, such as rewards, grades, or social recognition. Importantly, SDT refines this dichotomy by elaborating different types of extrinsic motivation, depending on the degree to which external regulation is internalized by the learner (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The theory identifies three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – as essential for fostering self-determined forms of motivation. When these needs are supported in the learning environment, learners are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation or well-internalized extrinsic motivation, leading to deeper learning and higher achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Noels, 2001). Conversely, environments that obstruct these needs may result in controlled motivation or amotivation, with negative implications for learning outcomes.

In the SLA context, Noels (2001, 2003) has applied SDT to examine motivational orientations in language learning, demonstrating that students who perceive their learning environment as autonomy-supportive show greater engagement and intrinsic interest. Her research also highlighted that extrinsic motives, such as learning a language for career purposes, can be positively motivating if they are self-endorsed rather than externally imposed, reflecting SDT's emphasis on internalization. This nuanced view challenges earlier dichotomous models of motivation, such as Gardner's integrative-instrumental distinction, by recognizing the dynamic interplay between external goals and internal psychological needs.

SDT's application in language education has thus provided valuable insights into how classroom practices, teacher behaviors, and social contexts can either enhance or undermine learner motivation. More recent studies within SLA continue to draw on SDT to design interventions that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to foster sustained and high-quality motivation (Noels et al., 2019).

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

The dataset analyzed originates from a structured questionnaire distributed to Romanian university students studying Japanese as an elective course at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The survey included both closed-ended questions (multiple choice, Likert-scale ratings)

and open-ended prompts (self-descriptions of motivation and learning experiences). Participants provided information about:

- Age category
- Length of Japanese language study
- Context of learning (school, university, self-study, private courses)
- Learning materials and methods (apps, textbooks, online resources, immersion)
- Motivations for learning (cultural, linguistic, professional, personal)
- Goals (communication, study abroad, research, personal enrichment)
- Engagement with Japanese media and speakers
- Reflections on moments of strong motivation

2.2 Participants

Although anonymized, the 23 respondents largely represent young adults, particularly those in the 19–25 age group. Most participants reported between 6 months and 5 years of Japanese study, reflecting both novice and intermediate learners. Learning contexts varied: many studied within institutional frameworks (universities, language courses), while others reported independent, self-guided study.

2.3 Analytical Approach

The data were analyzed through mixed methods:

- Quantitative trends: Frequencies of reported motivations, goals, and study methods.
- Qualitative insights: Content analysis of open-ended responses, identifying recurring themes and unique cases.
- Interpretive framing: Positioning findings within theoretical perspectives such as Gardner’s socio-educational model of motivation, Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory, and Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self system.

3. Findings

3.1 Motivations for learning Japanese

The respondents' answers to the questions related to their motivation for learning Japanese highlight the following four main ideas:

1. Linguistic fascination

Several students explicitly expressed interest in the Japanese language itself, including its structure, writing system, and distinctiveness compared to their native language. This reflects intrinsic motivation grounded in intellectual curiosity.

2. Cultural motivations

Respondents cited both traditional Japanese culture (literature, philosophy, history) and popular culture (anime, manga, J-pop, films). Pop culture, in particular, was a primary entry point for many younger learners.

3. Professional and academic goals

A smaller but significant subset indicated that their aim was to study in Japan or access Japanese-language research materials. Some explicitly mentioned the intention to engage with historical documents or pursue careers involving Japanese.

4. Social connections

A few participants reported influences from friends who shared an interest in Japanese, or the desire to interact directly with Japanese speakers.

When asked to select the most important reason, responses revealed a dominance of cultural and pop-cultural influences, although some learners highlighted pure linguistic interest.

3.2 Learning methods and contexts

Students reported a variety of study contexts and strategies, pertaining to formal learning, self-study and hybrid approaches. When it comes to formal learning, many respondents stated that they studied Japanese at school, university, or specialized courses, indicating the institutional presence of Japanese language programs in Romania. As for self-study, independent learners reported using a range of materials: mobile applications (language learning apps for vocabulary and grammar), textbooks/manuals (both online PDFs and printed copies), websites and online resources dedicated to Japanese learning, immersion methods, such

as watching Japanese media or communicating with speakers. References to hybrid approaches included combined classroom instruction with self-study, leveraging digital resources to supplement formal learning.

Interestingly, several respondents mentioned interactions with non-native speakers as part of their practice, suggesting the formation of local or online learning communities.

3.3 Engagement with Japanese media

Responses to Likert-scale items showed frequent exposure to Japanese media:

- Watching anime or films in Japanese (often with subtitles, but some reported attempts without).
- Reading Japanese websites, sometimes with the aid of translation tools.
- Listening to Japanese podcasts or music.
- Engaging with product labels, indicating practical encounters with Japanese script.

These practices suggest that informal learning through media consumption plays a significant role in maintaining motivation and providing authentic language input.

3.4 Interaction with Japanese speakers

A subset of learners reported direct interaction with native Japanese speakers, whether through personal connections, exchange programs, or online communication. These interactions were strongly associated with higher motivation, as learners recognized the practical value of their skills in real-time communication.

3.5 Reflections on key motivational moments

In open-ended responses, participants described moments when the desire to learn Japanese was particularly strong. Examples included: discovering anime or manga at a formative age, beginning university and encountering Japanese language courses, personal interactions with Japanese individuals, which created a desire to communicate authentically, developing an academic interest in Japanese history and documents. These

reflections illustrate that motivation is not static but reinforced at critical motivational junctures, often tied to meaningful cultural or interpersonal experiences.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm several established insights from SLA research while highlighting some specificities of the Romanian context.

4.1 Motivational Frameworks

The findings reflect multiple dimensions of learner motivation. The dominance of cultural and pop-cultural reasons resonates with integrative motivation as defined by Gardner (1985), since learners are not merely acquiring a skill but expressing interest in the cultural world associated with Japanese. At the same time, learners who plan to study in Japan or use Japanese professionally reflect instrumental goals, underscoring that both orientations often coexist (Noels, 2001).

From the perspective of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the learners demonstrated a spectrum of motivation types. Intrinsic motivations included enjoyment of the language system and pleasure in consuming Japanese media. Extrinsic motivations included aspirations for academic advancement and career opportunities. The interplay of these suggests a continuum rather than a binary division.

Furthermore, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009) provides a strong explanatory framework. Many students described an ideal L2 self, involving direct communication with Japanese speakers, studying in Japan, or reading Japanese texts without translation. The ought-to L2 self, representing external pressures or expectations, was less salient in this dataset, suggesting that learning Japanese in Romania is largely self-driven. The learning experience, reflected in classroom settings, apps, and anime, plays a key role in sustaining engagement.

4.2 Methods and Effectiveness

The learning methods reported by students reflect both formal instruction and informal digital immersion. Benson's (2011) concept of autonomy in language learning is highly relevant here: students actively

shape their own learning environments through apps, websites, and cultural media. The consumption of Japanese media aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), as exposure to comprehensible input through anime, music, and websites provides naturalistic reinforcement. However, comprehension challenges without subtitles highlight the limits of input alone and the need for structured scaffolding. Direct interaction with native speakers corresponds to Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which emphasizes negotiation of meaning as a critical driver of acquisition. The fact that learners engaging with speakers reported higher motivation supports this framework.

4.3 The Romanian Context

In the Romanian context, Japanese occupies a peripheral status compared to global lingua francas, yet the findings show strong motivation and creativity among learners. The reliance on pop culture as an entry point parallels findings in other European countries (Furman et al., 2010), but the subsequent engagement with formal courses reflects a hybrid model of initial affective motivation reinforced by institutional structures. This suggests that Japanese in Romania may function as a "boutique language" (Lo Bianco, 2017), chosen not for necessity but for identity expression and cultural affiliation.

5. Conclusion

This study, analyzed through the lens of SLA theories, reveals that Romanian learners of Japanese are motivated by a blend of intrinsic fascination, cultural engagement, and instrumental aspirations.

Learners are driven by a mix of intrinsic (linguistic interest, enjoyment) and extrinsic (study abroad, career) factors, with pop culture as a dominant entry point. Motivational diversity confirms Gardner's integrative/instrumental dichotomy but also aligns with Dörnyei's L2 motivational self framework, where learners sustain effort through personal visions of themselves as Japanese users.

As far as learning methods are concerned, students employ a hybrid approach, combining formal courses with self-study through digital tools and immersion in Japanese media. Learning autonomy is central. Students rely heavily on apps, online tools, and cultural immersion, illustrating

Benson's model of autonomous learning. Media engagement includes anime, music, and online platforms, which are crucial in maintaining daily contact with Japanese, though comprehension barriers remain. Contact with Japanese speakers is a powerful motivator and may significantly enhance learning outcomes, confirming the important role of social interaction. Romanian specificity suggests Japanese is pursued less for utility and more for cultural capital and self-identity, echoing Lo Bianco's notion of boutique languages.

By situating the data within SLA theory, the study underscores that Japanese learning in Romania exemplifies global-local dynamics: global Japanese cultural flows meet local learner identities and institutional opportunities.

Limitations and future research

Future research might expand the sample, track learners longitudinally, and investigate the relationship between motivational patterns and actual proficiency outcomes.

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