

Attrition in Japanese language learning at Central Queensland University

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Abstract

Attrition rates in foreign language learning are particularly high in Category Four (script-based) languages such as Japanese. In terms of orthography, this is due to the difficulty of Japanese for learners whose native language is based on the English alphabet. These difficulties often result in high levels of anxiety experienced by learners, particularly in the first six months of beginning study of these languages. However, despite attrition rates as high as 80% experienced by learners of Japanese in many universities (Anderson & Ramsay, 1999), the recent history of Japanese language learning at Central Queensland University (CQU) does not reflect this pattern of high attrition. Since the commencement of the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) (Japanese) degree, the attrition rate for learners of Japanese has averaged approximately 13%. This attrition rate in the BLM (Japanese) also contrasts with the average 20% attrition rate for other BLM programs. This study investigates possible reasons for this relatively low attrition rate. A number of significant factors are identified, in particular the teaching strategies, the design of the program and the relationships between students and instructors. This study has significant pedagogical implications for all programs of study within faculties of CQU and outside CQU.

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Introduction

In recent years the number of students studying Japanese in Japan and outside Japan, has increased dramatically (Bourke, 1996; Kanaga & Futuba, 1994). However, despite this growing popularity in undertaking the study of Japanese, attrition rates in foreign language learning are particularly high in Category Four or script-based languages like Japanese and Korean (these categories are used by the United States Defense Force Institute to define the number of hours used to teach languages other than English to a certain proficiency level). In terms of orthography, this is due to the difficulty of Japanese for learners whose native language is based on the English alphabet. These difficulties often result in high levels of anxiety experienced by learners, particularly in the first six months of beginning study of these languages. Although attrition rates as high as 80% are experienced by learners of Japanese in many universities (Anderson & Ramsay, 1999), the recent history of Japanese language learning in the Bachelor of Learning

Management (BLM) (Japanese) at Central Queensland University (CQU) does not reflect this pattern of high attrition. Since the beginning of the BLM degree in 2001, the attrition rate for learners of Japanese as a specialisation within that program has averaged approximately 13%.

The authors acknowledge that ‘second language’ and ‘foreign language’ are sometimes used interchangeably in the research literature, but subscribe to the view that ‘foreign language’ is the more appropriate term to use when referring to the study of Japanese outside Japan.

This paper presents initially a summary of literature relating to attrition rates in the learning of Japanese as a foreign language and to the identified causes of such attrition. Following this is a description of the Japanese language components of the BLM (Japanese). The research process is described and findings from the research presented. Implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion.

Literature review

Second language researchers have focussed on such variables as aptitude, motivation and affect/anxiety in order to discover why some learners are more successful than others (Ellis, 1986). There is a significant amount of literature on the causes of attrition. Tinto (2005), for example, identifies academic preparation, commitment and involvement as factors impacting upon attrition. In foreign language learning contexts, attrition has been related to a number of interconnected constructs. Studies have revealed that language learners do experience anxiety when learning a foreign language and this anxiety has been linked to success or lack of success in attaining proficiency (Bailey, 1983; Schumann, 1980).

Affect has been described as being concerned with the learner’s attitude towards the target language and users of the target language and with emotional responses to these, and in terms of aspects of emotions, feelings, mood or attitude which condition behaviour. Schumann (1975) found a number of factors linking achievement in language learning to several constructs related to attitude towards language learning. The contributing factors were *language shock* resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and guilt; *culture shock* producing feelings of alienation or anxiety and consequent rejection of native speaker values; *language stress* leading to shame and loss of self-esteem caused by a perceived deficiency in language; and *anxiety* owing to the infantile persona necessarily projected by the learner. In their analysis of language learning diaries of learners of Japanese, Kanaga and Futuba (1994) found that anxiety or embarrassment affected the learner’s willingness to speak. The implication of this finding for teachers of foreign languages is the necessity for knowledge of these individual affective influences in order for intervention to occur so as to facilitate more effective learning.

Learning a scripted language such as Japanese is a particularly difficult task for learners whose first language is alphabet based (e.g., English). There is much evidence in research to suggest that the major differences in orthography are significant hurdles for students to overcome, resulting in high attrition rates (Samimy & Tabuse, 1992). The difficulty of learning Japanese is reflected in the number of hours taken to reach certain levels of proficiency. According to Jordan and Lambert (1991), it takes almost 1320 hours studying Japanese to reach the same level of proficiency as students studying French for 480 hours. The difficulty

of learning a script-based language such as Japanese is acknowledged widely (Cavalier, 1994; Everson, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1995; Nicholas, 1993).

One of the significant reasons for attrition is the high levels of anxiety experienced by learners of Japanese in tertiary institutions, particularly in the initial stages of language learning. It is reported that the attrition rate among students of Japanese is estimated to be as high as 80% (Mills, Samuels & Sherwood, 1987). One of the reasons cited in that study is the perceived difficulty of the Japanese language, and in particular the negative affective reactions from students whose first language is English. Anxiety in foreign language learning has been investigated at length, with mixed results regarding the influence of anxiety on foreign language learning and proficiency. Some studies have indicated a direct relationship between the two (e.g., Kleinmann, 1977). According to Aida (1994), language learning anxiety is one of the important variables that increase or decrease attrition rates and success in Japanese language learning, however, most of the research has been confined to Western languages like French, Spanish and German. A decade ago there had been little investigation of non-Western languages or Category Four languages like Japanese (Aida, 1994) and that situation has not altered significantly.

Significant foreign language anxiety is experienced by many students in response to some aspects of foreign language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). They reported that the ultimate protective measure taken by students was complete withdrawal from class and ultimately attrition. Foreign language anxiety can be alleviated by a supportive teacher who acknowledges feelings of isolation and helplessness, and who offers concrete suggestions for dealing with specific problems (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Anxiety does not manifest itself in the initial stages of language learning owing to the counter effect of motivation, but rather becomes evident if the subsequent language learning experiences are not positive (Gardiner & McIntyre, 1991). In order to improve foreign language teaching at all levels, we must recognise, cope with and overcome debilitating foreign language anxiety as a factor shaping students' experiences in foreign language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope).

Despite the high attrition rates revealed in the literature review, the BLM (Japanese) program at CQU has not suffered high attrition rates since its commencement in 2001. Data drawn from university records revealed an attrition rate of approximately 13% over the life of the program. It was decided to investigate the factors contributing to this low attrition rate, focusing on the concept of 'involvement' (Tinto, 2005) and how this is promoted through approaches to teaching and learning, program design and student/staff relationships.

Bachelor of Learning Management (Japanese)—Background

The BLM (Japanese) is a program of study for pre-service teachers of Japanese at both primary and secondary levels of schooling. It is a four-year program, though it may be accelerated to be completed in three years.

Of the 32 courses in the degree, eight are devoted to the development of students' proficiency in Japanese language. In all year levels except the second year of study, students devote seven hours/week to the study of Japanese. This is comprised of five hours of tutorials (including one hour focused on writing) and two one-hour conversation groups per week. In the second year of study, students undertake 11

hours per week of Japanese study (i.e., nine hours of tutorials and two hours of conversation). Timetables are arranged so that a Japanese class is scheduled every day of the academic week.

Tutors are native speakers of Japanese and only Japanese is used in tutorials. A task-supported, communicative approach is employed in tutorials. A strong emphasis is placed on the conversation groups which are facilitated by a native speaker of Japanese. The groups usually range from four to six students. The purpose of these groups is to provide students with an environment where they can use their Japanese for an authentic purpose: to discuss a wide range of issues and current events. This provides them with an opportunity to reinforce newly learned language, to recycle previously learned language and to develop fluency and automaticity.

To enhance language proficiency development, some tutorials for general learning management (education) courses are conducted in Japanese. As with the conversation groups, such tutorials provide an authentic purpose for the use of Japanese. Generally students participate in one two-hour tutorial in Japanese per week as well as the previously mentioned Japanese tutorials and conversation groups. However, only the Japanese tutorials and conversation groups are undertaken in the first term of the first year of study in the BLM (Japanese). There are no Japanese immersion tutorials in other courses in the first term of the first year.

In the second year of study, students have the opportunity to participate in an in-Japan experience of approximately 12 weeks. During this time, students homestay with families, undertake a teaching practicum, participate in study at a Japanese tertiary institution, carry out voluntary roles in elementary and high schools and participate in a wide range of community activities. During the second year of study, students also have the opportunity to apply for a number of student exchanges to Japanese universities. These exchanges take place later that year or the following year and are usually for the period of one academic year.

All aspects of the program described above are designed to facilitate and enhance the development of students' Japanese language proficiency.

Research design

The essential research question is “Why are attrition rates in the BLM (Japanese) program significantly lower than in other tertiary Japanese language learning programs?”.

The researchers surveyed past and current students of the BLM (Japanese) regarding the program of study that they had completed or were completing to identify their perceptions of key features of the program which might give insight into reasons for the low attrition rate. It was decided to focus on three major constructs: approaches to teaching and learning; program design; and relationships between students and tutors.

A questionnaire was chosen as the preferred data gathering instrument as potential respondents were in a variety of locations in Australia and Japan. The first part of the questionnaire comprised 10 statements, each requiring a Likert scale response. The second part of the questionnaire had four open-ended questions. The first question identified 10 aspects of the BLM (Japanese) which respondents could

check and/or they could respond with their own views. The responses to the following three questions were entirely respondent-generated.

A complete list of enrolments in the BLM (Japanese) for the years 2001–2005 inclusive was obtained from university records. Current contact details for 54 of the 77 students identified from records were obtained. Each of those 54 people was contacted and asked to participate in the questionnaire. All were aged between 18 and 40, with the majority being between 18 and 25, and were both male (seven) and female (47).

The questionnaires were distributed in person (33), by post (20) and by email (one). Of the 54 questionnaires distributed, 46 were returned, a response rate of 85%. The majority were returned in less than two weeks and all were returned in less than four weeks. Despite the small number of respondents, statistical significance can be applied to the results because of the high response rate.

Data analysis

The 54 people for whom current contact details were identified were representative of each year of intake of the BLM (Japanese) from 2001 to 2005 and also included current students, graduates and attritees. Completed questionnaires were categorised according to current year level of study—i.e., Year 1, Year 2, Year 3/4 and graduates.

Attritees were categorised according to where they would have been had they continued with their program of study and successfully completed all courses. There were attritee responses from all levels except Year 1 where no attrition has occurred.

Responses were collated for all 46 respondents, but responses were also collated according to the categories identified above. This was done because current first and second year students have not yet participated in two significant aspects of the program of study—i.e., in-Japan experience and exchange to Japan—and this could have a significant effect on responses relating to these aspects of the program of study. Open-ended responses were collated under each of the categories above to identify common themes. These collations were compared to ascertain if the common themes of all categories were similar.

Research findings

Table 1: Summary of survey statements. N = 46

<i>1. The Bachelor of Learning Management (Japanese) programme met my needs.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	1	4	28	13
<i>2. The BLM (Japanese) facilitated strong relationships between students and staff members.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	0	2	19	25
<i>3. The BLM (Japanese) facilitated strong relationships amongst students.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	0	8	19	19
<i>4. The BLM (Japanese) was taught in a “communicative” fashion.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	1	1	27	17
<i>5. The BLM (Japanese) helped me learn Japanese efficiently.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	1	6	27	12
<i>6. The BLM (Japanese) motivated me to continue my study.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1		9	24	12
<i>7. I felt valued during my study of Japanese at CQU.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	1	4	27	14
<i>8. Small classes facilitated one on one interaction with tutors.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	1	1	19	25
<i>9. The in-Japan experience in second year was extremely valuable to my language development.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
0	0	0	6	21
<i>10. The scholarships available to students were a motivating aspect of the program.</i>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	9	10	22

Note: There were 19 N/A responses to statement 9, and these came from first and second year students who have not yet undertaken the second year in-Japan experience component of the program. There were 2 N/A responses to statement 10, and these came from first year students who have not yet had the opportunity to apply for a student exchange.

Most of the Agree and Strongly Agree responses for statements 9 and 10 came from graduates or students in Years 3/4 who have undertaken an in-Japan practicum and/or exchange. The other responses to these statements came predominantly from Year 1 and 2 students who have not.

Open ended questions

Following the 10 response statements, participants were invited to respond to four open-ended questions. The first question listed some aspects (see Table 2) and respondents were also able to make individual comments. Representative samples of these are listed below in Table 2.

Question 1

Table 2: What are the best aspects of the BLM (Japanese) program at CQU?

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>N = 46</i>
In-Japan experience	46
Support from staff	44
Exchange opportunities to Japan	42
Small classes	40
Use of Japanese in contact times	37
Access to male and female native speakers	36
Career opportunity	33
Cultural interest	28
Use of communicative activities in contact time	27
Support from fellow students	25

Note: The list of aspects in Table 2 is not the same as the order in which they were presented to participants.

Individual comments

- *Tutors who care about individual students and are motivated to help*
- *Opportunities to do extra work, to work at own pace and push yourself along regardless of class pace*
- *Education subjects & assessment in second language (gave deeper understanding)*
- *Intensive program keeps language proficiency stable/increasing.*
- *Immersion classes (i.e., tutorials done in Japanese)*
- *Effective teaching from staff*
- *Countless opportunities to improve my Japanese language proficiency over a broad range of media, situations and circumstances*

It is interesting to note that, even though 19 respondents indicated that the in-Japan experience was not relevant to them at this stage (see Table 1 note), all respondents identified it as one of the best aspects of the BLM (Japanese). This could be an indication that, even though students have not yet experienced the impact of an in-

Japan experience on their language proficiency, they have a clear idea of its potential and value that.

Question 2: How could the program be improved?

There were a large number of responses to this question and a number of common themes were identified in the data. Representative responses from students are listed under each of the key themes.

Extra assistance to students

- *More support for students with very little Japanese coming into the program. Extra classes?*
- *One-on-one lesson once/week—to resolve any difficulties student may be having with language.*
- *I guess maybe small tutoring classes after/outside Japanese class*

Staff do allocate weekly consultation times for students seeking assistance beyond scheduled contact time. These comments may indicate a need to educate students about accessing this time appropriately.

Course design—content and structure of the Japanese language program

- *Ensure that the lower end of the class is supported and the more advanced students are not allowed to make the lower students feel undervalued.*
- *It could possibly be improved by having some of the Japanese exchange students join in the conversation classes—so that people with higher language abilities are also catered for (not saying they're not catered for, but just so they can get more exposure to natives and maintain their language more).*
- *Need a class specifically for kanji.*
- *Extra focus on different types of Japanese communication e.g., student-teacher, friend-friend etc.*

Education tutorials in Japanese

- *Have more education subjects done in Japanese.*
- *I think we need more of our education classes taught in Japanese. It will allow students to use the information they have learnt in class within a real situation/for a purpose.*

These comments appear to indicate that students value the opportunities provided for their Japanese language development by the use of immersion principles in tutorials for education, or learning management, courses.

Question 3: If you did not complete the program, what contributed to this?

Five issues were identified by students and are listed below.

1. Health
2. Geography
3. Lack of previous study in Japanese
4. The education section (*of the program of study*)
5. Personal factors

None related directly to the Japanese language program. In fact, some students noted this in their responses—e.g.:

“The actual course had no direct influence on my leaving university.”

“... am motivated to complete studies at a later date. I LOVE JAPANESE.”

Of the attritees, four transferred to the BLM (Primary) at CQU, two transferred to other universities where they continue to study Japanese (one because of a partner’s transfer and the other for health reasons), one became a full-time mother and details of three are unknown. Anecdotal records indicate that ‘personal factors’ include financial hardship and this was relevant to ‘geography’ also.

The identification of lack of previous study as a contributing factor to non-completion is congruent with Tinto’s (2005) identification of academic preparation as a factor impacting on attrition

Question 4: Any other comments?

As expected, and owing to the open-ended nature of this section of the survey, there were many comments from students. However, the most frequent responses related to the quality of the Japanese language program and in particular the staff. Additionally many students made reference to the numerous native speakers available and the in-Japan experiences. Typical comments from students included the following:

Supportive staff

- *Support from staff and fellow students—great! Staff very approachable.*
- *The program offered support and frequent feedback and encouragement, which was helpful. Staff and students were always willing to offer support when needed.*
- *The staff are great and really supportive. Teaching style is really effective. It can be very stressful especially in first year.*
- *Great program, staff are excellent, native speakers are great. Good contact with staff and learning experiences are positive.*
- *This is a fantastic program. The staff are wonderful. The scholarship programs/in-country prac were a great experience.*
- *The variety of teaching methods, strategies and classes I think cater for a variety of students and create a supportive environment where you feel comfortable to use your Japanese and learn from mistakes.*

Development of a close, personal relationship between tutors and students is a significant aspect of ‘involvement’ identified by Tinto (2005). Such a relationship underpins a supportive learning environment where students’ needs are a high priority. A supportive learning environment tends to reduce the anxiety often experienced by foreign language learners and identified in the literature review.

Tutors intentionally focus on developing such relationships from the beginning of the first year of study, and this is facilitated by class numbers of no more than 20.

Native speakers

- *With large numbers of Japanese exchange students at CQU, participants in the program have many opportunities to meet and develop friendships with native speakers—using the language in social situations outside the classroom.*
- *I think the Japanese component of the BLM (Japanese) is fantastic. Students have access to numerous native speakers, huge amounts of*

resources and the staff are the hardest working people I know. It is my opinion that if people are dropping out it is not because of the program, it is them personally. If they can't handle this program then perhaps Japanese just wasn't their thing.

- *Use of immersion within classes was very worthwhile. Large community of Japanese natives to interact with.*

The use of native speakers (fellow students, exchange students and staff) to provide feedback and models for language use also contributes to a higher level of 'involvement' by the broader learning community and to the development of a supportive learning environment for students.

In-Japan experience

- *The in-Japan experience was also a highlight – and it gives you a goal to work towards – a real-life reason why you have to learn this and get it right! Afterwards, there is more “meaning” to what you're learning.*
- *The 2nd year in Japan practicum although stressful was the most rewarding part of the program.*
- *Great structure with the in-country component; the scholarship chances, which possibly should be told to the students earlier on so that they can keep their grades in check.*

Student comments indicate that the in-Japan components of the program are motivating and valued for the contribution they can make to students' language learning.

Additional comments

- *Although I haven't gone on to do teaching, this course has been a big and important part of my life. The courses, study, interactions and experiences have shaped me as an individual and a learner. I learnt not only content about the Japanese language but also how I best learn and how I can continue to improve my proficiency throughout my life. THANK YOU!*
- *I love how much contact time we actually have (e.g. class everyday which makes us use our Japanese all the time.)*
- *I think this course is great. At times it may be hard but this only develops my language.*
- *It's a GREAT course!!*
- *The mode of delivery (tutes, conversation & writing) all helped to improve my language.*

Again program design incorporating almost daily use of Japanese and a focus on formal and complementary learning experiences has been identified by participants in the program of study as significant aspects of it.

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the reasons for very low attrition rates in the Japanese language program at CQU, and specifically to identify the defining characteristics of the BLM (Japanese) program at CQU which are responsible for low attrition rates. In order to provide some structure to the analysis, three major constructs—teaching methodology, course design and relationships between students and tutors—were identified as crucial to the rate of attrition. The quantitative and qualitative responses from students were collated and related to each of the constructs. The results confirmed the original hypothesis of the

researchers that the course had some very specific characteristics that could influence the rate of attrition. These characteristics related to the three constructs identified prior to the research and include the nature of the program (content, structure, methodology), small numbers, extensive contact time and supportive staff and peers.

Specifically the design of the course met student needs in terms of teaching and learning, the time spent in Japan and the close contact with staff as a result of small classes and the structure of individual courses. The teaching methodology was communicative in nature, again facilitating close contact with tutors and fellow students. The small numbers of students facilitated the development of relationships with staff who are available to answer questions and assist students in times of need.

Some variation on student responses was evident. These differences are probably a reflection of different experiences within the program up to a specific point (different year levels) and different levels of maturity, combined with the ability to reflect objectively as well as subjectively and the range of relevant experiences on which to reflect. For example, the students who have already participated in the in-Japan/exchange components tend to think differently about their value; the students who have completed a few courses with immersion tutorials respond differently from those who haven't. Additionally the students are typically intrinsically motivated and generally seem to feel a commitment to the program (and maybe also to people who staff the program) based on their experiences while studying in the program and the relationships that they develop during that time. There is a strong sense of shared commitment and involvement by staff and students and this is evident in student responses.

The implications for the design of university courses are significant. First and foremost is a need for staff and students to develop personalised working relationships. As well, programs need to cater for the individual needs of their student clientele and should incorporate reflection on delivery methods that facilitate the building of relationships which contribute to shared learning journeys.

Despite the positive findings of the study, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalise from these results. The most significant limitation is the fact that the program numbers are small, facilitating the development of personal relationships between tutors and students. It remains to be seen if programs with large numbers of students can duplicate this when time constraints and course delivery methods do not necessarily facilitate the development of close relationships between students and tutors.

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