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LEARNING JAPANESE IN EUROPE

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Some choose the language for practical reasons, but many remain attracted by the richness of Japan's culture and heritage.

During the recent two to three decades, policy and practice in foreign-language education have undergone important transformations (paradigm shifts) in Europe. These changes have affected several domains, such as the study area, disciplinary status of foreign languages, target groups of education, levels of education, motivational attitudes, and access opportunities in the study of foreign languages. The philosophy behind the study and the practical requirements of East Asian languages has greatly influenced education policy related to Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), which aims at satisfying the changing motivations of the learners and the needs of the job market.

The status of Japanese as a foreign language in Europe

According to the latest survey carried out by the Japan Foundation in 2015 (JF, 2017), the number of Japanese-language learners (not

including “self-study” learners) around the world is estimated at 3.7 million—an 8.3% decline compared with results from a survey conducted in 2012. The report points out that the number of learners dropped sharply in three countries: the Republic of Korea, Indonesia and China, which are the top three countries in the world by number of learners. Those three accounted for nearly 70% of all learners in the previous survey (JF, 2017, p. 9). The number of learners in Europe is 100,713 (83,559 in Western Europe and 27,154 in Eastern Europe), which is 3% of all learners worldwide. Modest as it looks, this percentage reflects only numerical quantities. Whereas in many countries the vast majority of Japanese learners is composed of students of primary or secondary education, educational-stage ratios on a learner basis stand in Western Europe at 6.6% of primary education, 20.4% of secondary education, 44.5% of higher education, and 28.5% of other educational settings. These percentages

Opposite page: The Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology in Warsaw offers courses in Japanese language and culture as part of its programs in information technology, engineering, and business administration. The shift from Japanese philology to practical application of Japanese studies is gaining momentum in European institutions and universities. 2017. Polsko-Japońska Akademia Technik Komputerowych.

are roughly the same in Eastern Europe: 7.0% or primary education, 17.6% for secondary education, 45.3% for higher education, and 30.1% for other educational settings (JF, 2017, p. 36-39). This shows that in Europe the ratio of Japanese learners is proportionally highest in tertiary education. This is a qualitative fact—with all its academic and methodological implications—that has to be taken into careful consideration when thinking of budgets, conducting research, and assessing expected academic achievements.

In Europe, foreign language teaching and learning have long traditions. Language policy, however, has gained new dimensions and frameworks with the formation of the European Union. The EU has made the improvement of language teaching and learning a priority. The "Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference" (RELANG) initiative focuses on helping educational authorities relate language examinations to the proficiency levels defined in the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (CEFR). The European Commission is working with national governments to meet an ambitious goal—for all citizens to learn at least two foreign languages. This is the "plurilingual and pluricultural citizen" concept (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, et al 2009, p.11). This vision was confirmed by the EU Heads of State as part of the proposal to create a European Education Area.

During the past two to three decades, Japanese as a foreign language has been offered on the curricula of several schools (primary or secondary) in Europe (Hidasi, 2004), but whereas "working languages"

within the EU context (English, German and French) are understandably given priority as first or second FL in schools, Japanese—along with other non-European languages—usually comes only as a third or optional language choice. This explains two aspects of the aforementioned statistics: the relatively lower proportion of Japanese learners at primary and secondary levels, and the relatively greater ratio of Japanese-language learners in higher education and in "other settings." People who had no access to learning Japanese during their years in public education tend to postpone pursuing that interest to a higher educational stage or to "other settings," or to later phases of their study.

Paradigm-shifts in foreign-language education

Europe, with its long academic history of learning foreign languages, has undergone an important transformation during the recent two to three decades that could be labeled paradigm-changes in education focused on foreign languages and cultures.

1. Whereas in earlier times the instruction of foreign languages and related research efforts on the tertiary level of education was in the domain of philological studies, we witness nowadays a shift from a philologically oriented approach to a more practical one, viz., acquisition of the spoken language that primarily supports the teaching of *communication competences*. Students of our time tend to choose foreign languages (and for that matter Japanese) to learn, not for pure linguistic ambitions, but to acquire a tool to better understand and appreciate a

- certain foreign culture, a particular foreign society, or the economic or societal processes of a particular country, or to comprehend and acquire competence in international business practices. The shift of focus from “Japanese philology” to “Japanese studies” (including social sciences, media and business studies, area studies, etc.) is gaining momentum in many institutions and universities of Europe.
2. While several languages (particularly “exotic” ones such as Japanese) previously used to be taught solely in higher education, they are now being offered in the curriculum of some selected secondary schools as a second or third foreign language. Moreover, they even are taught as optional subjects in certain elementary schools. In other words, *the target age-group of Japanese-language learners* has greatly widened. That in itself is a most welcome development, but at the same time creates a number of new methodological challenges.
 3. It wasn’t rare, previously, for entire generations to grow up with little hope or opportunity to ever travel abroad (never mind Japan). And for many, it was improbable even to ever have the chance to see a Japanese person face to face. Now, however, thanks to growing mobility and travel opportunities, *foreign countries, and for that matter Japan, are within reach* for many. Also, the chance to interact with Japanese people has significantly increased due to the phenomenon of international communities living in our neighborhood. As an example, more Japanese companies are now operating in Europe. In Hungary alone, the number of Japanese companies had grown to 160 by 2018.
 4. Most important, huge improvements in information technology have brought both the culture and the language of faraway countries into virtual proximity: linguistic and cultural information from Japan is within easy reach for anyone interested. That is to say, *interface possibilities* related to foreign language and culture have greatly changed, ultimately bringing about both quantitative and qualitative improvements.
 5. Accordingly, the *role of language teachers* who are the professional transmitters of the Japanese language and culture also has changed. By now foreign-language teachers have ceased to be the only source and transmitter of information; instead, they are becoming the guides and moderators of available information. That constitutes a great responsibility for the 21st Century professionals in Japanese language and culture education.
 6. All this change has prompted a mistaken belief and expectation that *online learning* is sufficient and can stand in for contact-class learning. But there are several counter-arguments against this view: online teaching is not suitable for developing all communication skills (particularly in the case of productive skills such as conversation, speaking interaction and so on); a great number of language learners are strongly relationship-oriented and require immediate feedback; and a great number of language learners do not possess enough self-control or discipline to learn via self-study.
 7. Japanese-language study at the higher-education level is further complicated by the need to acquire *language for specific purposes*—be it business, engineering, the medical sphere or law-related studies.

Some mistakenly believe that general language knowledge is sufficient and can replace or substitute for professional language skills. In reality, and as any language expert would argue, lexical and terminological contents are specific. Furthermore, the pragmatic applications are different from general language use.

Diversity in learners' motivations: changes and trends

Since the formulation of motivation theory (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), research in the field mostly has focused on the correlation between motivation and the rate and success of foreign-language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001). The Japanese saying: *suki koso mono no jōzu nare* 好きこそ物の上手なれ (“what you like you will do well in”) tells us that motivation is the driving force in achieving one’s goals. The truth of this is reinforced by the experience of educational experts the world over. In the present study, though, we step back and try to establish the motivational background of students when choosing to study Japanese. Doing so, we realize that among Europeans, motivations for learning Japanese have changed greatly.

The reasons students opt to learn a specific foreign language can be studied from different perspectives—linguistics, socio-linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and educational environment. The findings of these studies, however, point out that motivation to learn a foreign language seems to be interrelated with other variables, such as aptitudes, attitudes, and several external factors including the local educational environment.

The dichotomous paradigm of integrative and instrumental motivation can be applied in

studying the changes in learners’ motivations. A learner with *integrative motivation* wishes to identify with the ethnic group, with the culture, whereas a learner with *instrumental motivation* learns a language for practical purposes, such as getting a job, meeting an educational requirement, taking an exam, and so on. In other words, instrumentally oriented language learners need the language for a practical purpose, whereas integratively oriented learners want to learn the language to become acculturated to the target language community. It was found that these two types of motivation are less influential in language achievement than other aspects of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Their role in choosing a target language, however, *is* a determinant: integrativeness being the most influential factor in the choice of a foreign language.

The reasons one chooses to learn Japanese as a foreign language differ from person to person, but apart from external influencing factors (is Japanese an option at all as a FL in a particular school? in the neighborhood? in a given town?), the socio-economic attractiveness of Japan as an important player in the world economy used to be a “pulling factor” for many years, until the early part of the 21st Century. Young people expected to benefit from job opportunities at Japanese companies and were ready to make extra efforts to acquire Japanese in order to have better employment chances. With these promises fading, the number of learners in Russia, to take an example (that country accounts for the largest percentage of learners in Eastern Europe), shows a drastic decrease of 24,1% in the 2015 survey compared with the number in the 2012 survey (JF, 2017, p. 38-39). It is evident that motivation has been instrumental here, and so, as pragmatic attractiveness declines, so does motivation.

One also can see a kind of reprogramming in the case of language choice in Europe. Those students who opt for studying an East Asian language—whether out of curiosity, or from seeking exotic experiences—either linguistically or culturally, or both—often are distracted from the Japanese-language track in favor of Chinese or Korean. In addition, attractive scholarship schemes and generous study grants provided by China and South Korea create hard-to-resist temptations.

Even so, in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Ukraine, where Japanese-language education in Eastern Europe is strongest, after Russia, the number of institutions, teachers, and learners all have steadily increased, according to surveys. In these countries, integrative motivations seems to exceed instrumental motivational factors, and learners choose Japanese not so much for pragmatic gains, but for emotional reasons (Székács, 2017).

The pull of martial arts, manga and haiku

The integrative motivation of young learners of Japanese undeniably was enhanced—probably world-wide but in varying degrees—by the overwhelming popularity of Japanese pop culture, manga and anime, which young generations find easy to identify with. A previous wave of “Japaneseness” preceding J-pop in Europe, swept through the continent, thanks to the popularity of martial arts, beginning from the 1980s (Sato, 2004).

Interest in and appreciation for Japanese traditional (fine and performing) arts and literature has been high in Europe since the 19th Century, and in fact never ceased to be a significant motivation for consecutive generations pursuing studies in the humanities. The long lists of translations into

European languages are proof of this longstanding commitment to the Japanese spirit and the country’s rich intellectual heritage.

Mention also should be made of a new wave of interest in *haiku* all over Europe, notably Hungary. After the World Haiku Festival in 2000, the Hungarian Haiku Club was established in the framework of the Hungarian-Japanese Friendship Society, which organizes meetings every season in the most beautiful places around the country. The age of club members varies from 7 to 76. *Ezer magyar haiku* (“One Thousand Hungarian Haiku”, Vihar, 2010) features 264 haiku poets. In August 6-8, 2010, 41 haiku poets from 11 countries gathered in the Hungarian city of Pécs to celebrate an international haiku festival. For many young fans of Japanese culture, haiku has become a beautiful and indispensable genre of self-expression.

Learners’ motivations in choosing Japanese study, then, vary from country to country (Moritoki, 2018) and from time to time. Learners often are influenced by pragmatic considerations, but in a number of European countries those people still are outnumbered by Japan enthusiasts attracted by the richness of Japanese language and culture, be it classical literature or modern, traditional or contemporary arts, and various forms of Japanese pop culture, not to mention martial arts. All these factors keep learners devoted to the challenge of becoming authentic transmitters of Japanese values and heritage.



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End note

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