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## Article

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## **The Experiences of International Students in Japanese Bachelor Programs**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aimed to understand the experiences of international students in Japanese bachelor programs by exploring factors related to their Japanese language proficiency. A total of seventy-nine international undergraduate students responded to the online survey. In the analysis, descriptive and bivariate statistics were performed for all international undergraduate students, including the JEP (Japan-Expert Program) students who had been educated in the Japanese language. In the bivariate statistics, the relation between Japanese language proficiency against demographics, GPA (Grade Point Average), campus life and health status were examined. As a result, the following two points were revealed: i) among all international students, those with lower Japanese language proficiency faced more difficulty in understanding course contents, having part-time jobs, being in the upper grades, and had poorer perceived sleep quality; ii) in JEP students, those with low Japanese proficiency had a lower GPA. Thus, the Japanese language proficiency of international students in bachelor-degree programs is related to their grades, part-time jobs, and sleep quality, especially GPAs in JEP students. To support these students, it is necessary to provide continuous and comprehensive Japanese language education, including lifestyle and learning support, from the time of admission to graduation.*

**Keywords:** international student, bachelor programs, Japanese language proficiency, related factor, questionnaire survey

## 要旨

本研究では、日本の学士課程における日本語教育の方法に示唆を得るために、学士課程に所属する留学生の日本語能力の関連要因を探ることにより、日本語プログラムの留学生の経験を明らかにすることを研究目的とした。このオンライン調査では、79名の学士課程に在籍する留学生が回答した。分析では、学士課程に在籍する留学生全体と Japan-Expert プログラム (JEP) の日本語プログラムの留学生について、記述統計と 2 変量統計を行ない、日本語能力と属性、学業成績、学生生活、健康状態との関連を検討した。その結果、以下の 2 点が明らかとなった。

1. 留学生全体では、日本語能力が低い学生ほど、授業の理解に問題を感じており、高学年で、アルバイトをして、睡眠の質が悪いと認識していた。
2. JEP の日本語プログラムの学生は、日本語能力が低いほど学業成績は低かった。

このように、学士課程に所属する留学生の日本語能力は、学年、成績、アルバイトの有無、睡眠状態が関連しており、学士課程における留学生への支援には、入学から卒業まで継続した、生活指導を含めた日本語教育が必要である。

キーワード: 留学生、学士課程、日本語能力、関連要因、質問紙調査

## 1. Introduction

In 2008, the Japanese government announced the 300,000 Foreign Students Plan which aimed to accept 300,000 international students by 2020. The 300,000 Foreign Students Plan is a part of the Global Strategy to make Japan more open to the world and to expand the flow of people, goods, money, and information between Asia and the rest of the world. Relevant ministries and agencies have considered a wide range of measures, including: motivation and information to stimulate interest in studying in Japan; improvement of entrance examinations and admission and entry procedures; improvement of admission systems at universities, other educational institutions and in society; and, support for employment after graduation.

The University of Tsukuba has attempted to attract international students by conducting education and research with two keywords: ‘international’ and ‘interdisciplinary’. The university has the highest ratio of international students

among the national universities in Japan (JASSO 2020). Recently, the university has established several novel English programs, including the Bachelor's Program of Global Issues (BPGI) and Bachelor's Program of Interdisciplinary Engineering (BPIE) for international students. These English programs, which allow students to graduate and complete their studies fully in English, boosted the recruitment of international students.

The Japan-Expert Program (JEP) was launched in 2016 as a strategy within the Type A Top Global University Project by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Iriyama 2019). The JEP offers four courses (Agricultural Science, Healthcare, Japanese Art and Design, and Japanese Language Teacher Training). In this program, the Japanese language proficiency requirements for application have been relaxed to the N2 level of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) or higher for the Japanese Language Teacher Training Course and N3 level or higher for the other three courses, to provide more opportunities for students who were previously unable to take the exam due to their lack of Japanese language proficiency. For this purpose, intensive Japanese language classes are held during the first six months after enrollment to allow students to acquire comprehensive operational skills in academic Japanese, and from April of the following year they are able to take classes in the same academic groups as Japanese students.

The program aims to nurture international students who have advanced Japanese language skills; an understanding of Japanese culture and society; and specialized knowledge, skills, and thinking abilities in their respective fields. JEP students learn professional content in their specific fields through general undergraduate courses for three and a half years after intensive learning courses in the Japanese language during the first six months.

Learning specific fields with Japanese students using the Japanese language in the bachelor's program may lead to some difficult experiences for international students and influence their university life and health conditions. However, their experiences have rarely been reported in Japan. Kinjo (2003), Sonoda and Makihara (2018) surveyed international students about their satisfaction with university life and their needs for university support. Hayashi et al. (2019), Wang and Matsuda (2020) used the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Inventory to examine sleep quality. There is no study that statistically analyzes the relationship between international students'

satisfaction with university life and their sleep quality, Japanese language proficiency, GPA, etc., using SPSS 28, which is original in this respect. It will be beneficial to understand the experiences of international students in promoting globalization in higher education. This study aimed to understand the experiences of international students in Japanese bachelor programs by exploring factors related to their Japanese proficiency.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Study design**

This study was a cross-sectional descriptive study using an online questionnaire.

### **2.2 Study subjects and data collection**

Self-rated questionnaires were simultaneously sent to all international undergraduate students asking for their free responses via Google Forms on July 20, 2021, and then followed up for three weeks at the end of the spring semester until August 10, 2021.

### **2.3 Questionnaire**

The questionnaires were prepared in both Japanese and English using Google Forms. Before sending them to international students, the phrasing of the questions was tested and revised. The questionnaire consisted of five domains: demographics, reasons for enrollment and career plan, Japanese language proficiency and academic performance, college life, and health status. For health status, perceived physical and mental health status, and several items from the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Inventory (Buysse et al.: 1989) were included in the questionnaire.

### **2.4 Analysis**

Descriptive and correlational statistics were performed using data from international students and those from the JEP. Furthermore, the relationships between Japanese language proficiency and demographics, grade point average (GPA), psychosocial factors, and health status were examined using SPSS 28.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Demographics**

Seventy-nine international undergraduate students answered the questionnaire: forty-one students (51.9%) answered the English questionnaire, and thirty-eight students (48.1%) answered the Japanese one. The response rate was 28.0%.

Among all respondents, fourteen (17.7%) were government-sponsored, while seventy-five (82.3%) were privately funded. Twenty-six students (32.9%) were first year students, sixteen (20.3%) were second year, eighteen (22.8%) third year, and nineteen students were fourth year (24.1%). By country of origin, China (29.1%), South Korea and Vietnam (12.7%), Indonesia (7.6%), and the U.S. (5.1%) were the most common, in that order. Regarding academic programs, fourteen students (17.7%) were in the JEP, twelve (15.2%) were in the two new English programs (BPGI and BPIE), and forty-three (54.4%) in other undergraduate programs.

#### **3.2 Reasons for admission and career plan**

First, students answered the question, *Why did you decide to come to study in Japan?* Interest in Japanese society and culture and high-quality education in Japan were the most common reasons, in that order. Among JEP students, 42.9% chose interest in employment in Japan as a reason for studying abroad in Japan (Table 1). Also, students responded to the question, *Why did you choose to study at your university?* School reputation, academic programs, diverse courses, affordable tuition, and living expenses were the most common reasons (Table 2). Then, students replied to the question, *Where did you obtain the information about the academic program you are enrolled in?* The university website was chosen as the most useful source of information (Table 3). Regarding career plans, the largest number of students gave wanting to go for higher education in Japan (Table 4).

#### **3.3 Japanese language proficiency**

At the point of enrollment, 55.7% of all international students in the bachelor programs were at the N1 or N2 level on the JLPT, while 100% of JEP students were at the N1 or N2 levels. On the other hand, at the current point, 64.3% of all

international students were at the N1 level, while 71.4% of JEP students were at the N1 level (Table 5). In terms of language performance in academic life, substantial rates of all international students educated in Japanese felt difficulties understanding course content, especially in writing, while JEP students managed to keep up with the classes (Tables 6 and 7).

### **3.4 Academic performance**

In this study, a ten-order scale of the GPA was used to measure the academic performance of international students in bachelor programs. The GPA distribution of all international students was higher than that of the JEP students (Table 8).

### **3.5 School life**

Regarding school life, 48.1% of all international students had experienced club activities, while 42.9% of JEP students had experienced club activities. In addition, 46.8% of all international students had experienced part-time jobs to help pay for living expenses (43%) and tuition fees (13.5%), while 71.4% of JEP students had experienced part-time jobs to help pay for living expenses (71.4%) and tuition fees (28.6%). Regarding the acceptance for enrollment, 46.8% of all international students felt very good about their current academic programs at the university, while 64.3% of JEP students felt very good about their current programs at the university (Table 9). In terms of social activity, 43% of all international students interacted with other international students every day, while 48.1% of all international students interacted with Japanese friends every day. On the other hand, 14.3% of JEP students interacted with both international and Japanese students daily (Table 10).

### **3.6 Health status**

Regarding health status, 7.6% of all international students perceived their physical health status as 'bad', while no JEP students did so. In contrast, 17.7% of all international students perceived their mental health status as 'very bad' or 'bad', while 14.2% of JEP students did so (Table 11).

### 3.7 Factors related to current JLPT

In the bivariate statistics, Spearman correlations of Japanese language proficiency with demographics, GPA, campus life, and health status were examined. In all international students, JLPT at enrollment ( $\rho = .89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), all language performance (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), part-time job, grade, and sleep quality were significantly correlated with current Japanese language proficiency. In JEP students, however, only GPA was significantly correlated with current Japanese language proficiency (Table 12).

**Table 1: Reasons for Studying Abroad in Japan (Multiple Choices)**

Reason	All (N=79)		JEP (N=14)	
	n	%	n	%
Japanese society and culture	55	69.6	9	64.3
High-quality education in Japan	52	65.8	7	50.0
Recommended by family/friend	29	36.7	3	21.4
Japanese language study	24	30.4	3	21.4
Employment in Japan	22	27.8	6	42.9

**Table 2: Reasons for Choice of University (Multiple Choices)**

Reason	All (N=79)		JEP (N=14)	
	n	%	n	%
School reputation	50	63.3	9	64.3
Academic programs	44	55.7	7	50.0
Diverse courses	40	50.6	5	35.7
Tuition/Life-expense	39	49.4	5	35.7
Scholarship/Tuition waiver	34	43.0	5	35.7
Faculty	33	41.8	4	28.6
English program	25	31.6	0	0.0
Research	21	26.6	1	7.1
Many international students	15	19.0	2	14.3
Recommended by family/friend	14	17.7	4	28.6
Dormitory	10	12.7	1	7.1
Employment record	7	8.9	0	0.0



**Table 3: Information Sources for the Academic Program (Multiple Choices)**

Information source	All (N=79)		JEP (N=14)	
	n	%	n	%
University website	60	75.9	10	71.4
Family/Friend	27	34.2	3	21.4
Teacher at school	17	21.5	3	21.4
University information session	14	17.7	2	14.3
Japan Study Support's website	8	10.1	1	7.1

**Table 4: Career Plans After Graduation**

Career Plans After Graduation	All (N=79)		JEP (N=14)	
	N	%	N	%
Higher education in Japan	33	41.8	8	57.1
Employment in Japan	22	27.8	4	28.6
Higher education in a country other than Japan or home country	14	17.7	1	7.1
Employment in home country	6	7.6	1	7.1
Employment in a country other than Japan or home country	1	1.3	0	0.0
Other	3	3.8	0	0.0

**Table 5: Japanese Language Proficiency**

	Enrollment		Current	
	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)
JLPT N1 level	34 ( 43.0)	9 ( 64.3)	38 ( 48.1)	10 ( 71.4)
JLPT N2 level	10 ( 12.7)	5 ( 35.7)	10 ( 12.7)	3 ( 21.4)
JLPT N3 level	5 ( 06.3)	0 ( 00.0)	9 ( 11.4)	0 ( 00.0)
JLPT N4 level	6 ( 07.6)	0 ( 00.0)	9 ( 11.4)	0 ( 00.0)
Other	23 ( 29.1)	0 ( 00.0)	11 ( 13.9)	0 ( 00.0)
Missing	1 ( 01.3)	0 ( 00.0)	2 ( 02.6)	1 ( 07.1)
Total	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)

(JLPT = Japanese Language Proficiency Test)

**Table 6: Japanese language Performance (All: N=79)**

	Reading n (%)	Writing n (%)	Listening n (%)	Speaking n (%)
Can follow the class without any problem	29 (36.7)	23 (29.1)	32 (40.5)	26 (32.9)
Can manage to keep up with the class	26 (32.9)	21 (26.6)	18 (22.8)	24 (30.4)
Made some progress, but it is still difficult to keep up with the classes	8 (10.1)	15 (19.0)	12 (15.2)	11 (13.9)
No improvement at all compared to when I entered the school	1 (01.3)	5 (06.3)	2 (02.5)	4 (05.1)
I do not know my level of Japanese because I am not taking classes in Japanese	13 (16.5)	13 (16.5)	13 (16.5)	12 (15.2)
Missing	2 (02.5)	2 (02.5)	2 (02.5)	2 (02.5)

**Table 7: Japanese Language Performance (JEP: N=14)**

	Reading n (%)	Writing n (%)	Listening n (%)	Speaking n (%)
Can follow the class without any problems	3 (21.4)	3 (21.4)	5 (35.7)	3 (21.4)
Can manage to keep up with the classes	10 (71.4)	10 (71.4)	7 (50.0)	10 (71.4)
Made some progress, but it is still difficult to keep up with the classes	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)	1 (07.1)	0 (00.0)
No improvement at all compared to when I entered the school	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)
I do not know my level of Japanese because I am not taking classes in Japanese	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)
Missing	1 (07.1)	1 (07.1)	1 (07.1)	1 (07.1)

**Table 8: Academic Performance**

GPA	All (N=79)		JEP (N=14)	
	n	%	n	%
4.0 or more	10	12.7	0	0.0
3.75 or <4.0	20	25.3	1	7.1
3.5 or <3.75	14	17.7	3	21.4
3.25 or <3.5	9	11.4	3	21.4
3.0 or <3.25	8	10.1	2	14.3
2.75 or <3.0	4	5.1	1	7.1
2.5 or <2.75	3	3.8	1	7.1
2.25 or <2.5	1	1.3	1	7.1
2.0 or <2.25	1	1.3	0	0.0
Less than 2.0	2	2.5	1	7.1
Missing	7	8.9	1	7.1

**Table 9: Acceptance for Enrollment**

	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)
Very good	37 ( 46.8)	9 ( 64.3)
Good	27 ( 34.2)	3 ( 21.4)
Cannot say either	12 ( 15.2)	2 ( 14.3)
Bad	3 ( 03.8)	0 ( 00.0)
Very bad	0 ( 00.0)	0 ( 00.0)
Missing	0 ( 00.0)	0 ( 00.0)
Total	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)

**Table 10: Social Activity**

	With International friends		With Japanese friends	
	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)
Every day	34 ( 43.0)	2 ( 14.3)	38 ( 48.1)	2 ( 14.3)
Once 2-3days	10 ( 12.7)	6 ( 42.9)	10 ( 12.7)	1 ( 07.1)
Once a week	5 ( 06.3)	3 ( 21.4)	9 ( 11.4)	3 ( 21.4)
Once a month	6 ( 07.6)	2 ( 14.3)	9 ( 11.4)	4 ( 28.6)
Missing	24 ( 30.4)	1 ( 07.1)	13 ( 16.5)	4 ( 28.6)
Total	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)

**Table 11: Health Status**

	Physical health		Mental health	
	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)	All: n (%)	JEP: n (%)
Very bad	0 ( 00.0)	0 ( 00.0)	5 ( 06.3)	1 ( 07.1)
Bad	6 ( 07.6)	0 ( 00.0)	9 ( 11.4)	1 ( 07.1)
Cannot say either	17 ( 21.5)	6 ( 42.9)	26 ( 32.9)	2 ( 14.3)
Good	47 ( 60.8)	6 ( 42.9)	31 ( 39.2)	6 ( 42.9)
Very good	8 ( 10.1)	2 ( 14.3)	8 ( 10.1)	4 ( 28.6)
Total	78 (100.0)	14 (100.0)	79 (100.0)	14 (100.0)

**Table 12: Spearman Correlation with Current Japanese Language Proficiency**

	All (N=68)		JEP (N=13)	
	$\rho$	$p$	$\rho$	$p$
JLPT at enrollment	.89	<.001***	.32	.290
Reading performance	.58	<.001***	.33	.290
Writing performance	.43	<.001***	.33	.290
Listening performance	.55	<.001***	.19	.553
Speaking performance	.62	<.001***	.33	.290
Part-time job	-.37	.002**	-.43	.147
Grade	-.25	.042*	-.18	.560
Sleep quality	-.26	.032*	.00	1.000
GPA	-.17	.189	.66	.020*

GPA = Grade Point Average, JLPT= Japanese Language Proficiency Test  
 \* $p < 05$ , \*\* $p < 01$ , \*\*\* $p < 001$

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Characteristics of experiences among international students**

Since many students answered that their reasons for studying in Japan were their interest in Japanese society and culture, and the availability of quality education, we can see that they have a high level of interest in and concern for Japan. As the JEP is a Japanese language program, many students want to study in Japan to find a job in Japan using the Japanese they have learned.

A high percentage of students chose their school because of the university's reputation, desired educational programs, and the ability to study a wide range of knowledge and specialties. As undergraduates, they chose the university based on the availability of their desired educational programs rather than on the teaching and research capabilities of the faculty and their research achievements.

Websites accounted for the overwhelming majority of information sources in these educational programs. Especially, in the current situation, where it is difficult to go overseas for face-to-face recruiting activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, information via website is critical for international students to gain information of universities outside of their home countries (Fischer and Whatley: 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to create websites with a wealth of information that is easy to understand.

Nearly half of the respondents hoped to go on to graduate school after graduation. In addition, about 30% hoped to find jobs in Japan. To fulfill the career aspirations of students, there is a need for guidance on higher education and support for job hunting. Therefore, this year, JEP has introduced two subjects, Japan-Expert Career Support Japanese I and II, to support students in finding jobs in Japanese companies. The subjects will be offered in rotation over a two-year cycle as an intensive course during the spring break. In Japan-Expert Career Support Japanese I, students who wish to find a job in Japan will learn the communication skills necessary for job hunting. The course aims to help students clarify their reasons for wanting to work in Japan through self-analysis and company research and to acquire the necessary skills for e-mailing, telephoning, visiting, using entry sheets, and for interviews. Japan-Expert Career Support Japanese II, is for learning about Japanese social concepts, stereotypes, human relations in companies, employment issues, among

others, and to acquire the ability to read and discuss materials about the current situation and issues in Japan. It is hoped that by taking these classes, students will be able to find employment in Japanese companies of their choice.

In addition, since the first JEP graduates are expected in September 2020, the Freshman Seminar for first-year students to be held in the fall semester of 2021 will discuss their experiences of entering graduate school and job hunting for career planning. It is hoped that not only first-year students but also second- and fourth-year students will participate in the seminar and make use of it for their career planning.

#### **4.2 Factors related to the Japanese proficiency of international bachelor students**

Even if they passed the N1 or N2 level of the JLPT, students seem to have a hard time keeping up with classes conducted in Japanese. Many of the JEP students who took classes in Japanese said that they had no problem speaking and listening, but many of them said that they could only just manage to keep up with the classes in reading and writing, indicating that they had a hard time. At JEP, students were asked to take the TTBJ (Tsukuba Test - Battery of Japanese), which was used for the Japanese placement test: at the time of enrollment, at the end of the six-month intensive Japanese language class, in the second year, and at the time of graduation, to check their level of proficiency in Japanese. In June 2021, a writing support system was created for students with low Japanese language proficiency with graduate students checking the Japanese of their graduation theses. Since, during four years of university, it is difficult for international students to acquire the ability to write papers in Japanese to the same level as Japanese students, it is necessary to utilize such a system.

Since the JEP is a privately funded program, more than 70% of the students work part-time to pay for living expenses and tuition. Even for international students as a whole, low Japanese proficiency was found to result in poor sleep quality and mental health problems. Even in English programs, a certain level of Japanese language proficiency is necessary to live in Japan. It may be that many students experienced stress in their lives due to their low Japanese-language skills. In addition, since online classes have become mainstream since April 2020 due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the frequency of interaction with friends has decreased, which may have affected their mental health. Fischer and Whatley (2021) report that international students have experienced financial concerns leading to mental health problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is, therefore, necessary to monitor these changes in the future.

The University of Tsukuba has various counseling offices such as the General Counseling Desk, Student Counseling Room, Mental Health Counseling, and International Student Counseling Room. It is necessary to make them known to international students and find a way to solve mental health problems before they become serious.

For the first five years of the program, JEP had both a program coordinator, who coordinated the entire program, and a Japanese language education coordinator, who coordinated Japanese language education, but from April 2021, only the Japanese language education coordinator was assigned. The coordinator provides support for living and studying during intensive Japanese language classes in the first six months of the enrollment period. By providing support during the first six months, the coordinator can help students build a foundation for university life, integrate into the faculty, and attend classes together with Japanese students. Comprehensive and continuous support for international students would help avoid dropouts due to poor grades. Supporting international students takes more time and effort compared to teaching Japanese students. To support international students, a sufficient number of faculty members are required.

Although it was found that low Japanese language proficiency affects grades and sleep quality, 81% of all international students answered that they were ‘very happy’ or ‘happy’ to be enrolled at the University of Tsukuba, indicating that they are satisfied with their university life.

### **4.3 Limitations**

In this study, the data were insufficient to conduct inferential and correlational statistics. In the future, it will be necessary to analyze more data, particularly as the result of the JEP students survey only focused on the experiences of international bachelor students. Therefore, not only a qualitative study that listens to international

students and alumni but also multiple analyses comparing students who belong to English programs and other general bachelor programs taught in Japanese will be useful to deeply understand their experiences.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand the experiences of international students in Japanese bachelor programs by exploring factors related to their Japanese language proficiency. A total of seventy-nine international undergraduate students responded to the online survey.

In the analysis, descriptive and bivariate statistics were performed for all international undergraduate students, as well as JEP students who had been educated in the Japanese language. In the bivariate statistics, the relationships between Japanese language proficiency and demographics, GPA, campus life, and health status were examined. As a result, the following two points were revealed:

1. Among all international students, those with lower Japanese language proficiency faced more difficulty in understanding course content, having part-time jobs, being in the upper grades, and had poorer perceived sleep quality.
2. In JEP students, those with low Japanese proficiency had a lower GPA.

Thus, the Japanese language proficiency of international students in bachelor-degree programs is related to their grades, part-time jobs, and sleep quality, especially GPAs in JEP students. To support these students, it is necessary to provide continuous and comprehensive Japanese language education, including lifestyle and learning support, from the time of admission to graduation.

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