

# The Relationship Between Cultural Knowledge and Motivation for Studying Foreign Language : A Comparative Study of Japanese and American University Students

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## **Abstract**

When studying a foreign language, it is very important to have knowledge about the culture, because little nuances of words or various real world situations can be misunderstood, and it can be a good source of motivation. In this study, we look to see how foreign language classes in Japan and America incorporate culture and which cultural aspects students use. From our survey, students from both countries stated that culture is very important for studying foreign languages. Despite this, in Japanese high schools culture lessons are seldom or not incorporated at all in their classes, compared to American high schools which incorporates at least some culture lessons. Students also stated they want to be able to use the language in the future. However, American students said their main reason for wanting to start studying Japanese was because of anime. In contrast, Japanese students responded that they needed to fulfill their school requirement and wanted to listen to English music. For both American and Japanese students their motivation to study has changed. Currently, the majority want to use it in their future careers. Furthermore, Japanese students also want to make use of their English for making English-speaking friends.

## **Introduction**

When learning a foreign language, it is very important to learn the culture as well. By just knowing vocabulary and sentence structure, one cannot truly speak the language. This is because the subtle nuances of vocabulary are unique from country to country, which in turns means that understanding the correct meaning in a given situation can be very difficult. In this paper, we survey students from Japan and the United States to see how culture is taught in their language classes and explore how they were motivated to continue their foreign language studies.

## **1. Significant of the Study**

From a young age, we have been interested in Japanese culture, such music, anime and manga, which led us to want to start studying the language. We want to understand how learning about the culture of the target language can motivate students to study the language further and achieve their goals. This is why we decided on this topic to see how culture is being taught in the American and Japanese classroom and how students are using the target culture as a potential source of motivation to continue their studies.

## **2. Research Questions**

- 1) How is culture incorporated in foreign language classrooms in Japan and America?
- 2) How does culture play a role as a source of motivation for Japanese and American students to learn a foreign language?

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Trends in Foreign Language Education (America)**

The way in which foreign language has been taught in the United States have changed throughout the years. The first is Grammar Translation. This method focuses on the form of the language and not on culture. It then shifted to Audio Lingual, which focuses on the grammar structures and substituting vocabulary into predetermined situations (Larsen-Freeman, 2016). The next shift was into the ACTFL Guidelines' proficiency based communication in 1986, which focuses on having students be able to communicate in the real world in the target language. As of

now, the current method in teaching foreign language is according to the World Readiness Standards, which teaches through culture and emphasizes real world context (ACTFL, 2012).

To go into further details, the ACTFL Guidelines (1986, 1999, 2001, 2012) assess a person's language ability based on 4 skills; speaking, writing, reading and listening, from beginner levels of a foreign language class to superior levels (ACTFL, 2012). 2012's National Standards incorporated the 4 skills from ACTFL, but also their own 5 C's; communication, culture, comparison, connection, and communities, within foreign language classrooms (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2012). The National Standards' World Readiness Standards advocates incorporating culture into lessons through the concept of "the 3 P's of Culture," which are products, practices, perspectives (Cutshall, 2012).

While ACTFL bases Proficiency level on how well one can communicate in the target, the World Readiness Standards indications what should be taught at each level, both which are very important of have incorporated in foreign language education. Moreover, the World Readiness Standards divides communication into 3 skills, interpersonal, interpretive and presentational (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2012). In 2015, the World Readiness Standards were revised to emphasizes the ability to communicate in different situations and emphasizes a language education program that will foster student's ability to respond globally (Perugini, 2015).

In 2016, ACTFL announced the Core Practices, a 6 criterias of how to teach all areas of a foreign language class. With the 6 Core Practice; "Use Target Language for Learning," "Design Communicative Activities," "Teach Grammar as Concept and Use in Context," "Use Authentic Cultural Resources," "Plan with Backward Design Model" and "Provide Appropriate Feedback,"

upwards of 90% of the class is taught in the target language, it incorporates activities to encourage communication, it use authentic cultural resources, teaches grammar as a concept while using it in context, and appropriate feedback is always given (Swanson, 2015). From this we can see how culture is now emphasized in foreign language classes.

### 3.2 Trends in Foreign Language Education (Japan)

Next, a brief summarize the history of foreign language education in Japan. In Japan, foreign language class are required from the fifth grade once a week, it then becomes four times starting from junior high school (Løfsgaard, 2015). Presently, it is still important for students to memorize for entrance examination. Moreover, there are not many teachers who can teach lessons in English (Clark, 2009).

### 3.3 Japan's Plan for the Future of English Education

In preparation for the 2020 Olympics, Japan will start to reform their English education. According to Japan's plan, English lessons would begin from third grade, instead of fifth grade, and would be held one to two times a week by the homeroom teacher. However, in fifth grade English classes would be held three times a week (ICEF Monitor, 2015). Starting from Junior High, the goal is to have the classes taught in English using familiar topics (Masaaki, 2013). Lastly, during this reform, there will also be changes to university entrance examinations, such as having several exams instead of one and use the TOEFL test for the English portion. However, the concerns is that the focus is still on students' academic and does not prepare them to be able to think flexibly in a global workplace (ICEF Monitor, 2015).

### 3.4 Motivation Theories and Foreign Language Learning

Motivation is the driving force of human nature and it very important to learning a foreign language consistently and effectively (Liu, 2013). According to Gilbert and Lambert (1959), Instrumental motivation and Integrative motivation are the key motivation types for learning a foreign language. In addition to these, Mahadi also says that Intrinsic motivation and Extrinsic motivation are equally important for studies (Mahadi, 2012).

Those who have instrumental motivation, their goals are more practical, such are working for academic requirements or getting a better job or salary. With integrated motivation people have have better success at learning a foreign language, because their goals are to be able to understand native speakers and they are also very interested in the target culture. Similar to Instrumental motivation, Extrinsic motivation is working towards a goal or a reward, such as a passing an exam. The last type of motivation is Intrinsic motivation. With this type, people do an activity because they find it enjoyable to them (Mahadi, 2012). Depending on what type of motivation a person has, determines how and for what reason a person studies a foreign language for.

### 3.5 Culture as Motivation for Foreign Language Learning

Learning about the target country's culture in class can be a great potential source of motivation for students. Furthermore, learning culture goes hand in hand with learning a new language, it helps students with understanding how to use certain words or phrases in different

situations (Awad 2014). On top of this, a person who is willing to understand the target country and its culture and understand the thoughts and ideas from the natives are able to communicate more smoothly (Ogura, 2014).

As shown in Awad's (2014) survey and Tanaka's (2009) survey, it is very important to use culture-related teaching materials in the classroom. Awad, we advocate that studying culture is a good motivation for American university students to continue learning, which is why college students want to study foreign languages. Awad found that studying culture is a source of good motivation for students he surveyed to continue their studies. Learning the target culture is what the students said why they wanted to learn the language and others said they fell in love with target culture because of their foreign language class (Awad, 2014). Tanaka's survey found that using films and drama in the target language motivated class. Students said it was difficult for them to understand everything that was being said in the show, but it was fun and a good challenge for them. Thus using such items to teach are necessary in keeping students engaged and motivated during class times (Tanaka, 2009).

Lastly, according to the survey results from the Japan Foundation in 2012 and 2015, the reason that students are studying Japanese, is because they are interested in manga, anime, J-Pop etc. Between these years, culture-related reasons increased to the top two reasons (Japan Foundation, 2012). For example, fansub, unofficial subtitle of anime and dramas created by fans, provide notes on jokes, history, food, context and more within each episode. Manga, as well, can be used to learn vocabulary, grammar and syntax (Lunning 2006). Using similar items in the target language can be great tools to incorporate into class to teach students the language and culture.

## 4. The Study

### 4.1 Demographics

For our research, we had 30 Japanese students, 29 American students, in total we had 59 participants.

### 4.2 Research Method

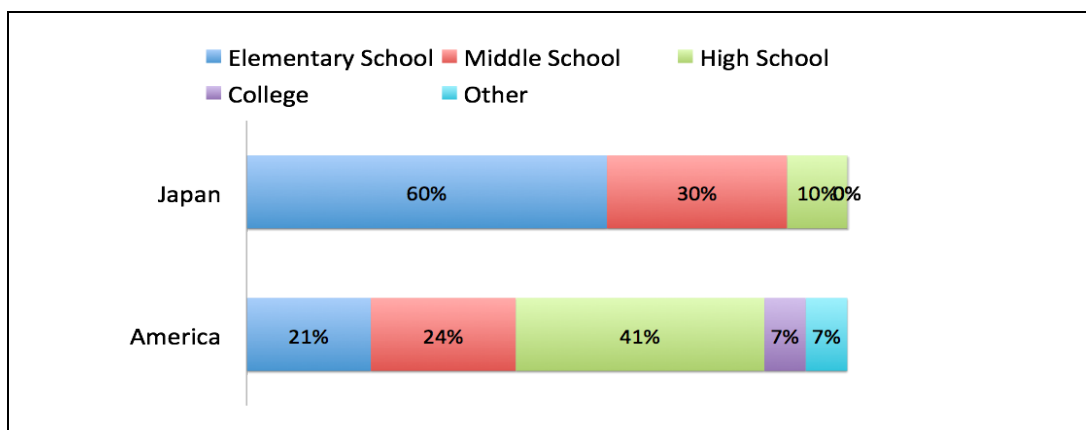
We collect our data through an online survey in both Japanese and English.

## 5. Research Results

### 5.1 Research question 1: How is culture incorporated in foreign language classrooms in Japan and America?

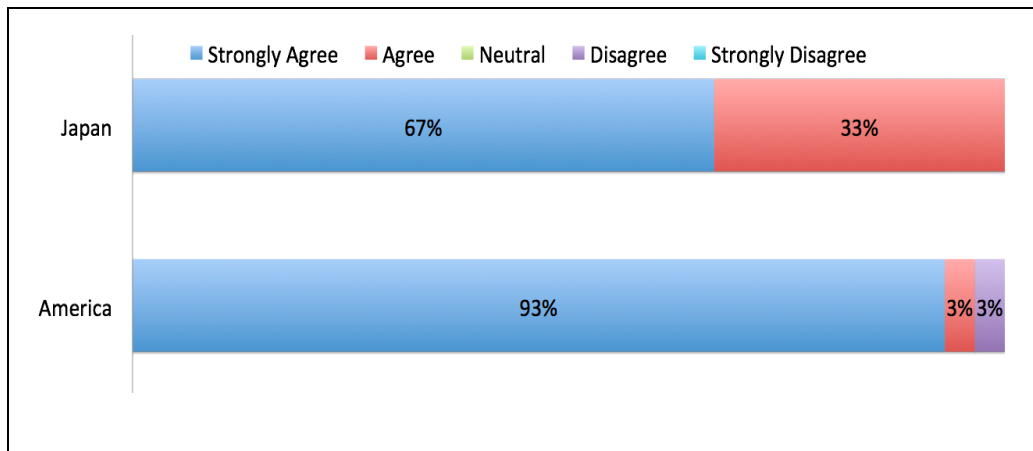
We have asked several questions on this research question. The first question we asked, “in what grade level did you start to learn a foreign language,” 60% of Japanese students stated that they had their first language class in Elementary school, while 41% of American students started it was in high school (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Education System



In response to the question, “is culture important to study when learning a foreign language,” both majority of Japanese and American students selected “strongly agreed” ( see Figure 2).

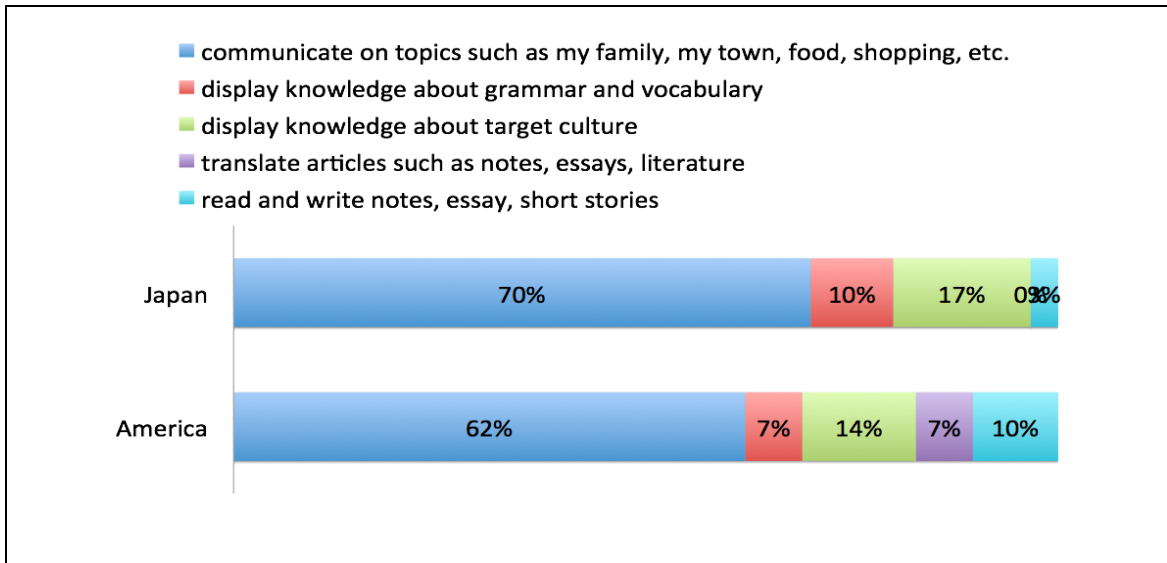
Figure 2: Is culture important when learning a foreign language?



According to figure 3, when asked the question, “How do you think foreign languages should be taught at school? ‘Students should be able to:\_\_\_\_\_.’” Both American and Japanese overwhelmingly agree that being able communicate on topics, such as “my family,” food etc. should the kind of topics that teachers need to focus on in class and what students should be table to talk about effectively (see Figure 3).

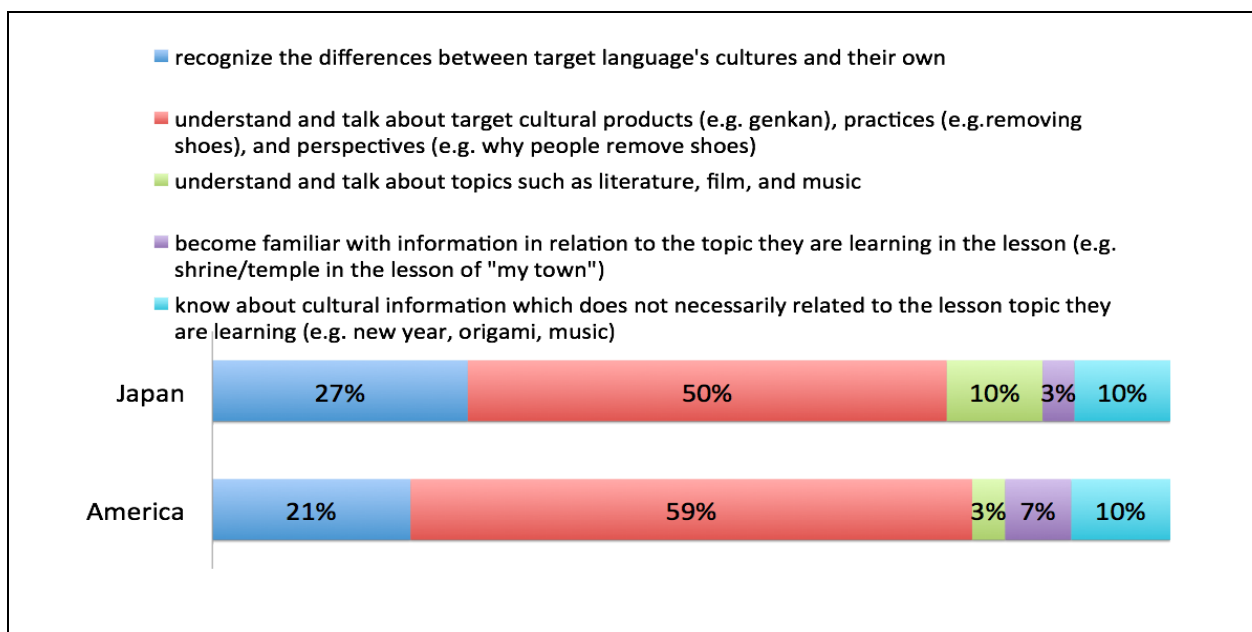


Figure 3: How do you think foreign languages should be taught at school?



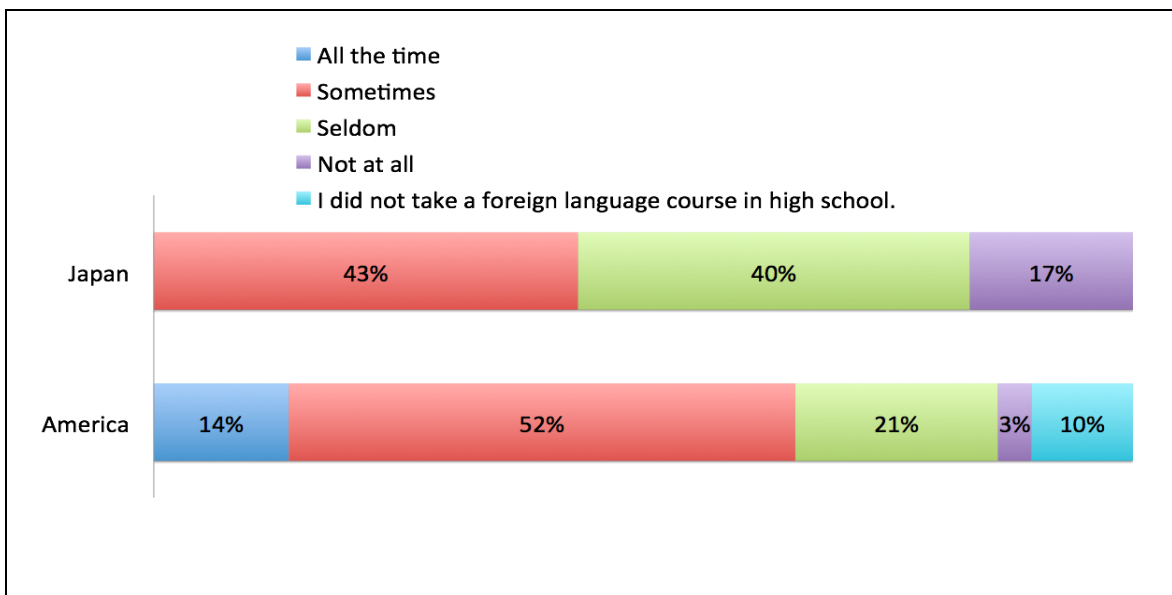
In response to the question “how should culture be taught in foreign language classes? ‘Students should be able to:\_\_\_\_\_.’” More than 50% for both Japanese and American students believe being able to talk about cultural products, practices and perspectives (The 3 P’s) should be the outcome for students taking a foreign language class (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: How should culture be taught in foreign language classes?



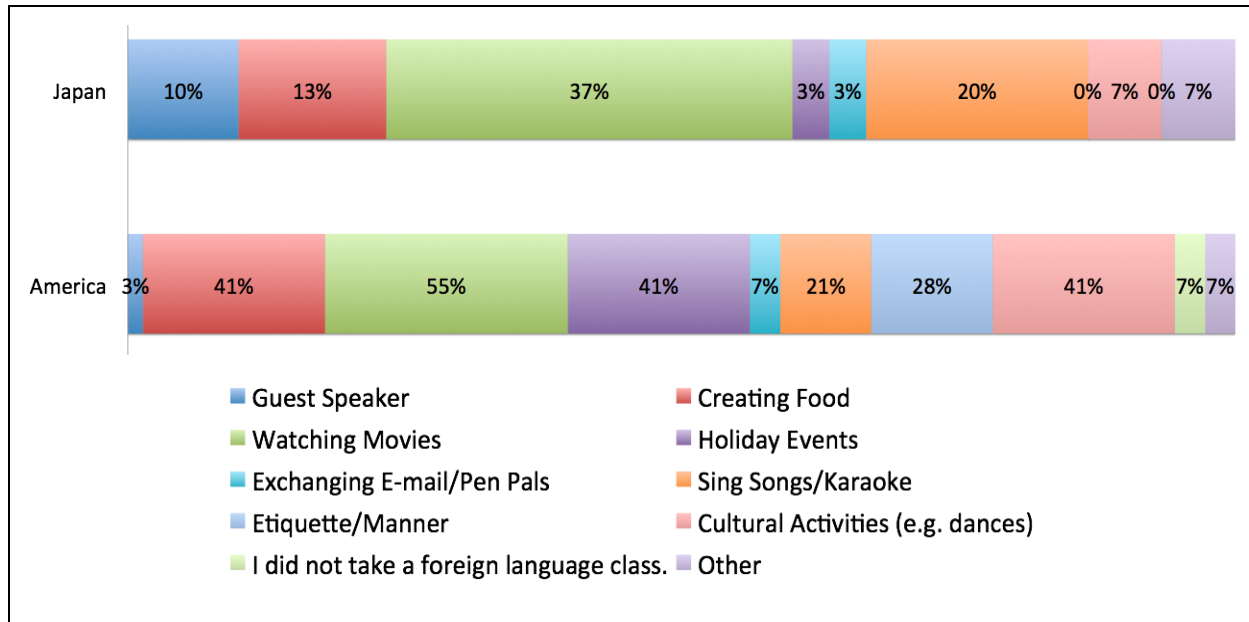
The next question we asked was “how well were the target cultures incorporated into your high school foreign language class,” and over 65% of American students said that their high school incorporated “some” or “alot” of culture lessons. Whereas, only 43% of Japanese students said that it had “some” lessons (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: How much should culture be implemented?



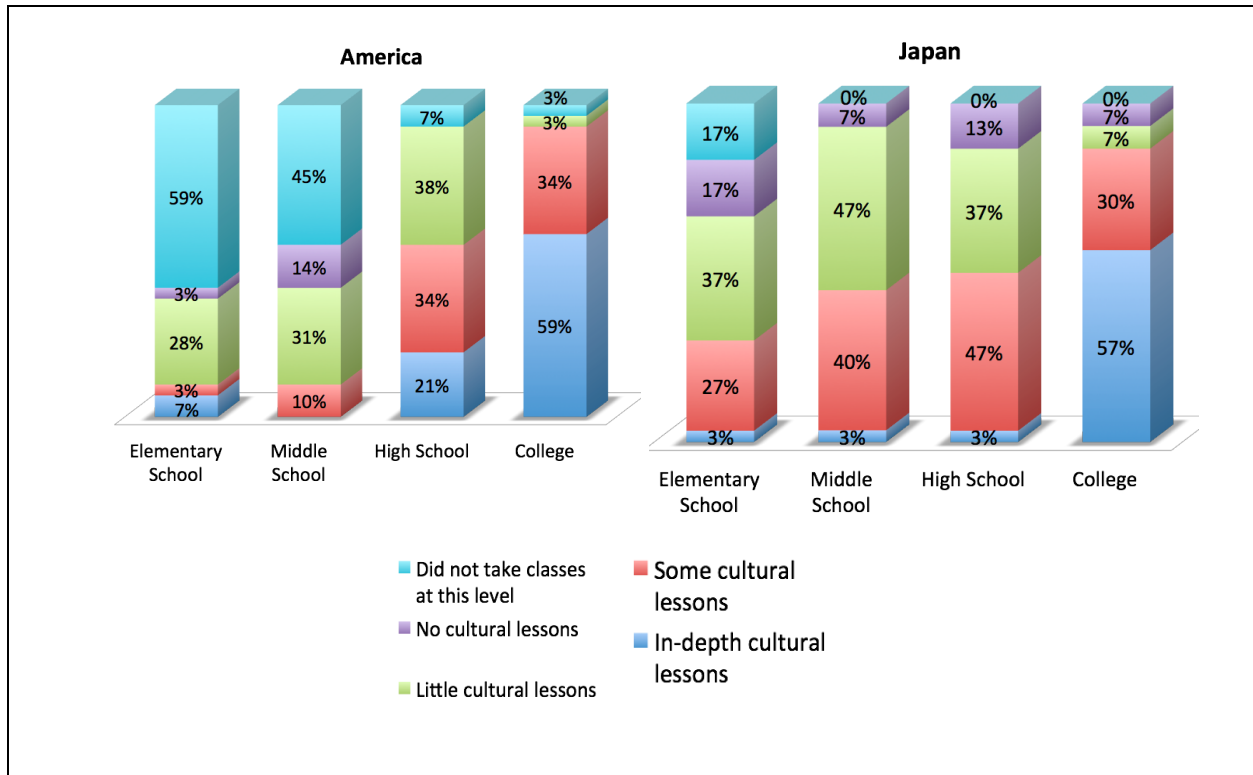
In figure 6, we asked the “in your high school foreign language classroom what cultural lessons was very memorable,” and from the results, we can see that in Japan, students thought “movies” and “karaoke” was the most memorable lessons from high school. However, from American students responses, it shows that they were more exposed a more variety of cultural lessons, such as movies, making food, and festivals events. (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: What was the most memorable culture lesson in high school?



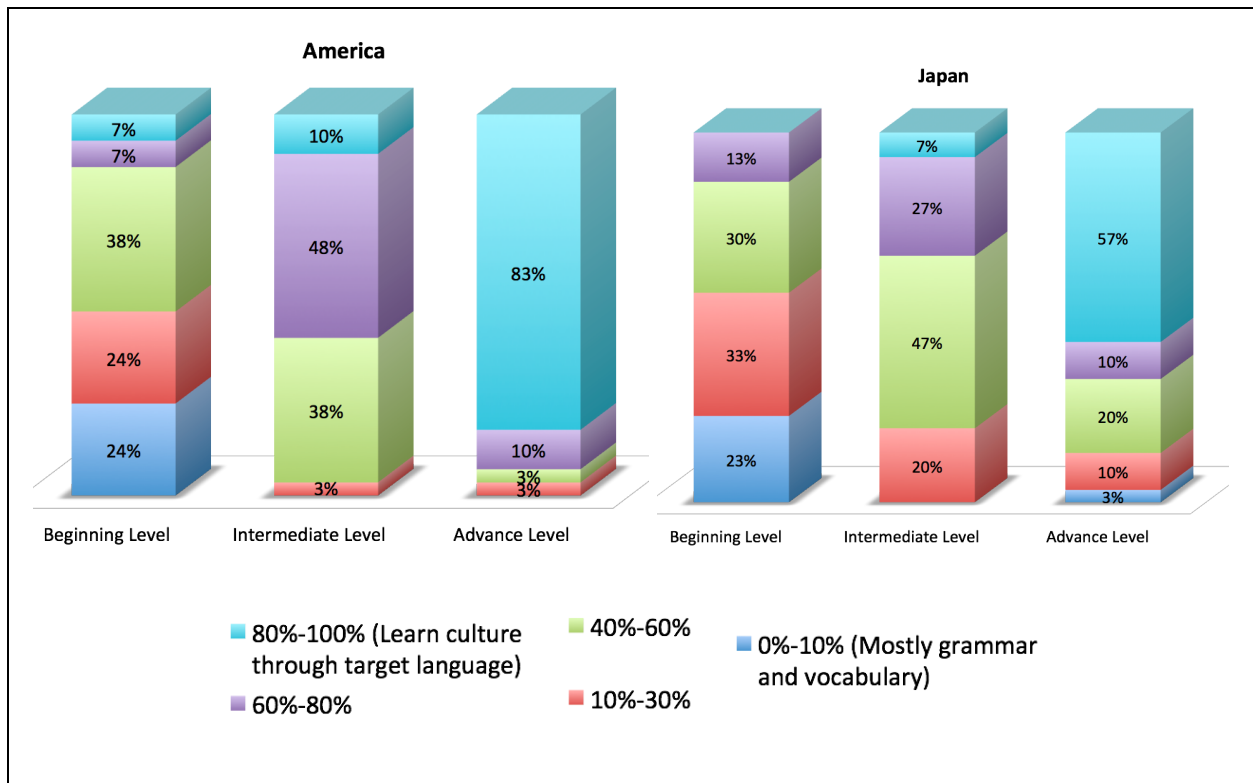
According to the question, “how much was cultural content included in your foreign language learning experience,” both Japanese and American students experience a gradual increase of cultural lessons throughout their K-12, but experienced the most in-depth lessons in college. When looking at the results of the graphs, Japan had more implemented cultural content in their classes from elementary to college, compared to American students (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: How much cultural content was included in your foreign language learning experience?



For the last question for research question one, we asked the participants how much they think cultural lessons should be incorporated into the following level of foreign language classroom? Both students agree that culture should be taught in all levels with the most in advanced level classes in response to how much should culture lessons be incorporated into the following level of foreign language classroom. However, 80% of Americans believe that in the advanced levels culture should be taught in target language, compared to only 57% of Japanese students (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: how much should cultural lessons be incorporated into the following level of foreign language classroom?



### 5.2 Summary Finding of Research Question 1:

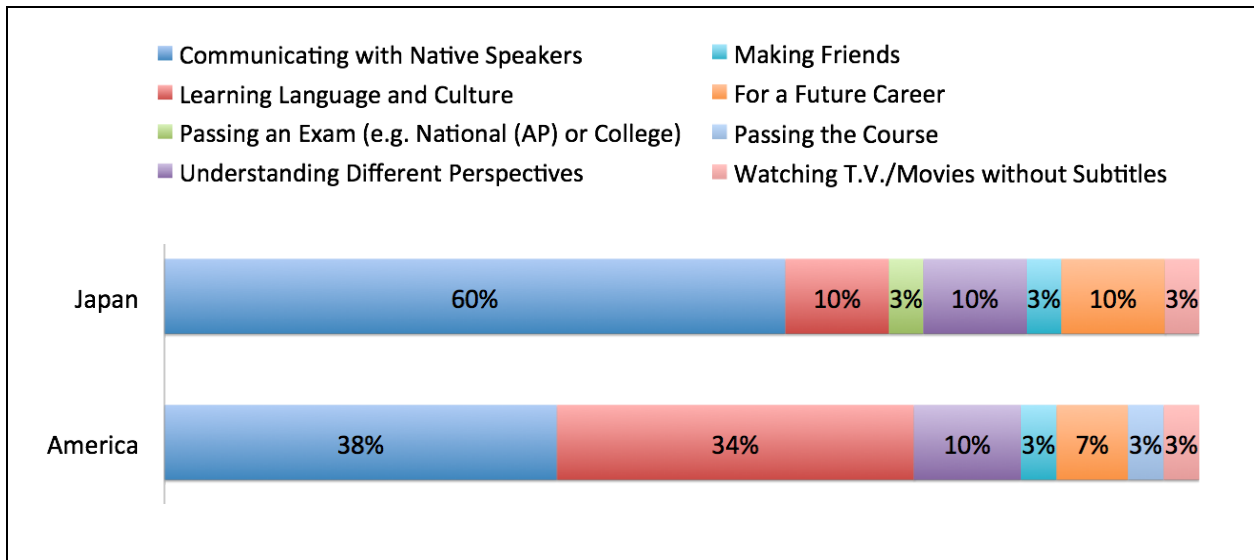
To summarize, many Japanese students had their first foreign language class in Elementary school, but only have some to little cultural lessons. On the other, 20% of American students stated that they started in Elementary, but 40% of them said they started in high school, where they said they had some to a lot of culture lessons incorporated in the class. In Japanese classes, students said that there was a tendency to introduce culture through the use of movies, but in the United States, culture was taught through various activities, such as food and festivals. In the end, students in both countries strongly believe that culture should be taught as they

progress from beginner to advanced, but 80% of American students think that culture should be taught in the target language in advanced levels.

5.3 Research question 2: “How does culture play a role as a source of motivation for Japanese and American students to learn a foreign language?”

We asked several of questions in order to collect data on this research question. The first one we asked in this set was “What kind of motivation do you think you have in learning a foreign language.” The responses that we received were that both American and Japanese students, said that their motivation type was “to be able speaking to native speakers.” For American students the second largest percentage was learning the language and culture for the joy of it (see Figure 9).

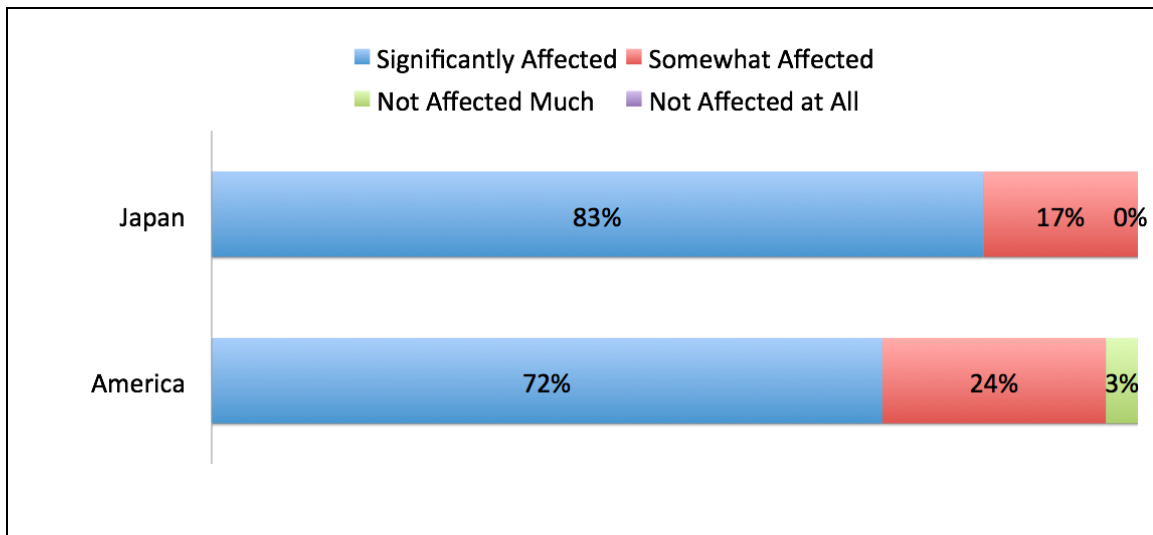
Figure 9: What kind of motivation do you think you have in learning a foreign language?



According to the question of “how has learning about the culture of your target language positively affected your motivation in your foreign language studies,”majority of University

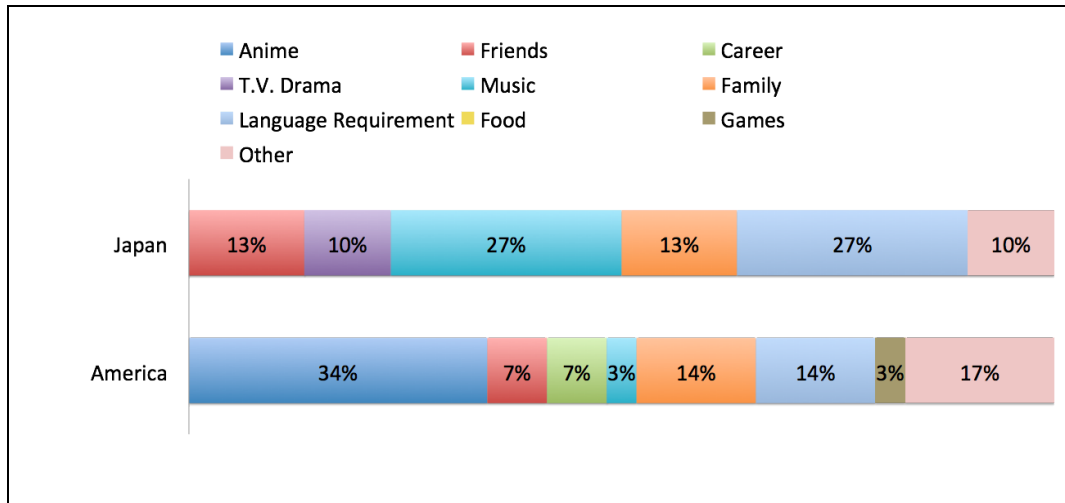
students from both countries stated that learning the culture of their desired language has positively affect their study habits ( see Figure 10).

Figure 10: How has learning about the culture of your target language positively affected your motivation in your foreign language studies?



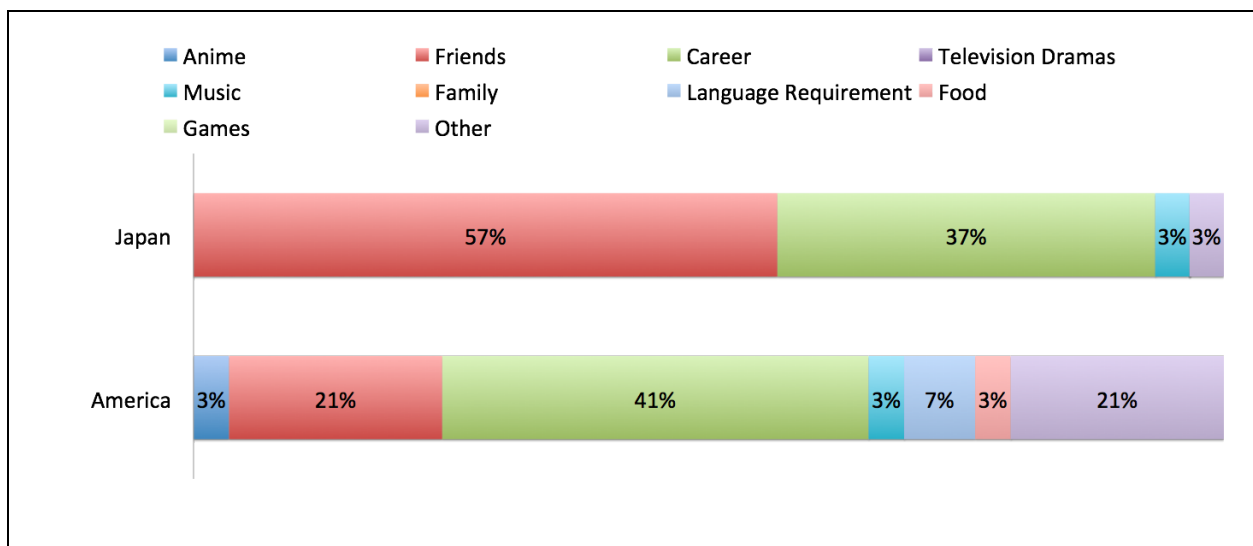
When asked what was their motivation when they first started to learning another language, many American university students, stated that is was “anime.” For Japanese university students, on the other hand, it was a tie for “music” and “language requirement” (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: What was your source of motivation when you FIRST started to learn a foreign language?



A follow-up question we asked was what their current motivation for studying a foreign language is? Many American university students motivation changed to using their foreign language in their “career.” Whereas, for many Japanese university students “being able to speak with their friend” and “career” became their new source of motivation ( see Figure 12).

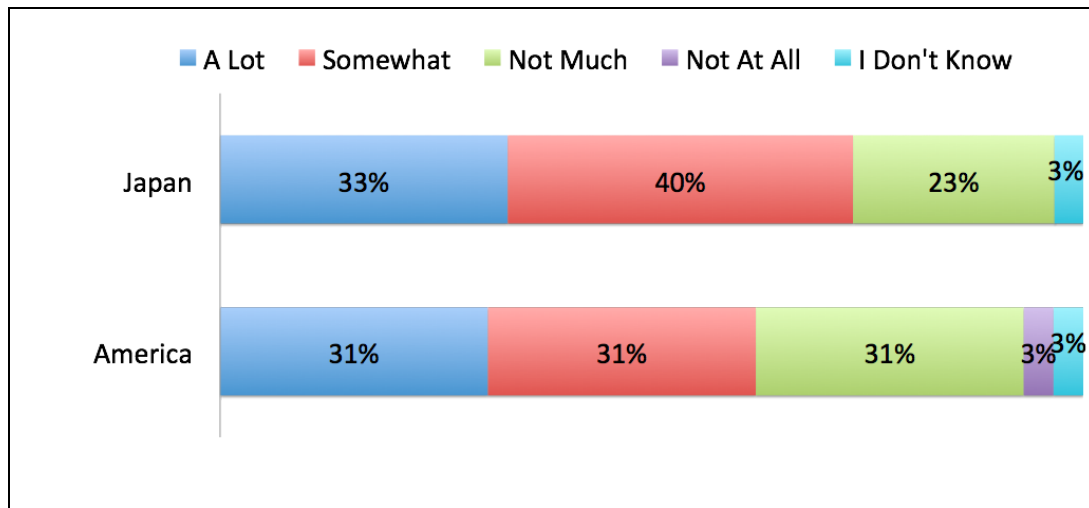
Figure 12: What is your CURRENT strongest motivation to take foreign language?





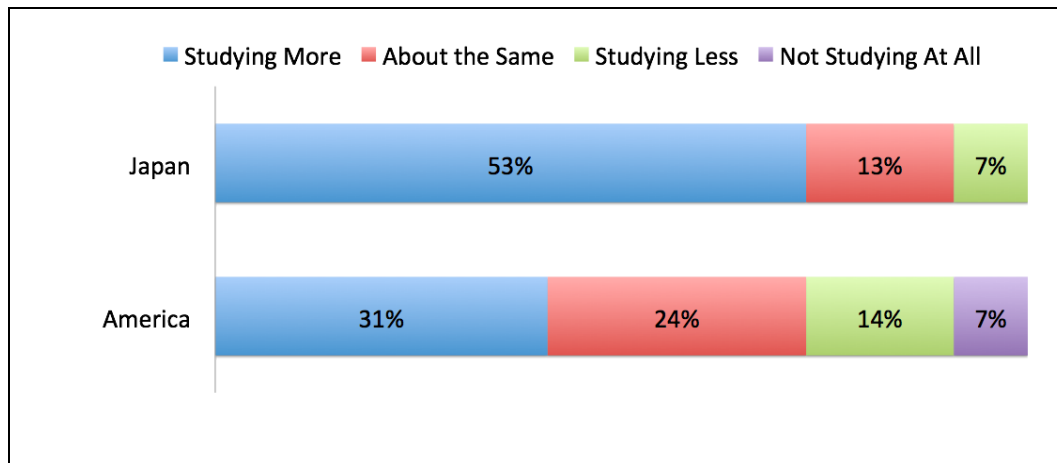
In response to the question of “did your motivation in learning a foreign language change from the INITIAL motivation,” both Japanese and American students stated that their source of motivation has at least “somewhat” changed since they began their studies (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Did your motivation in learning a foreign language change from the INITIAL motivation?



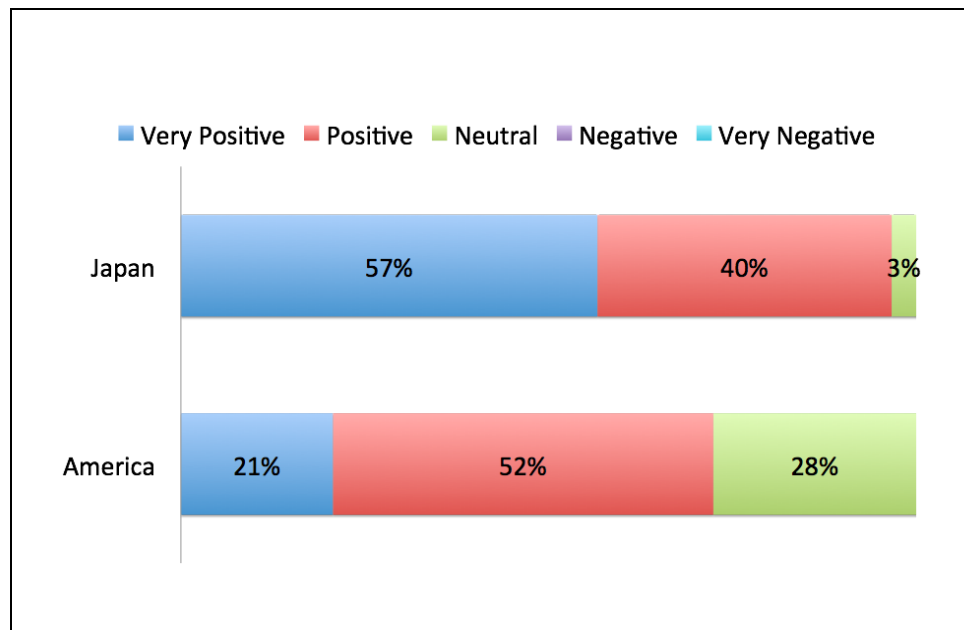
Then when students answered question of “if the change in the change in their motivation had any affect on their study habits,” about half of the Japanese students said that they started studying more because of the change, compared to only 31% of American students who stated that they started to study more because of the shift (Figure 14).

Figure 14: If you answered "A lot" or "Somewhat" then due to the change of your motivation, did your foreign language study habits change?



In response to the next question, “looking back at your foreign language experience, how do you rate your experience,” 97% of Japanese students said they had a positive experience in their foreign language studies. Whereas, 73% to Americans said their foreign language experience was positive (see Figure 15).

Figure 15: Looking back at your foreign language experience, how do you rate your experience?



The next two figure, figures 16 and 17, are related to the question of “what classroom topics have helped you cultivate your motivation in language learning throughout the years,” Many American students responded that they found “media,” "cultural habits" and "family/friends" as the most useful. Whereas, Japanese student stated that "family/friends", "future jobs" and "nonverbal communication" was the most useful to them (see Figure 16 and 17).

Figure 16: From the list below, what classroom topics have helped you cultivate your motivation in language learning throughout the years (America)?

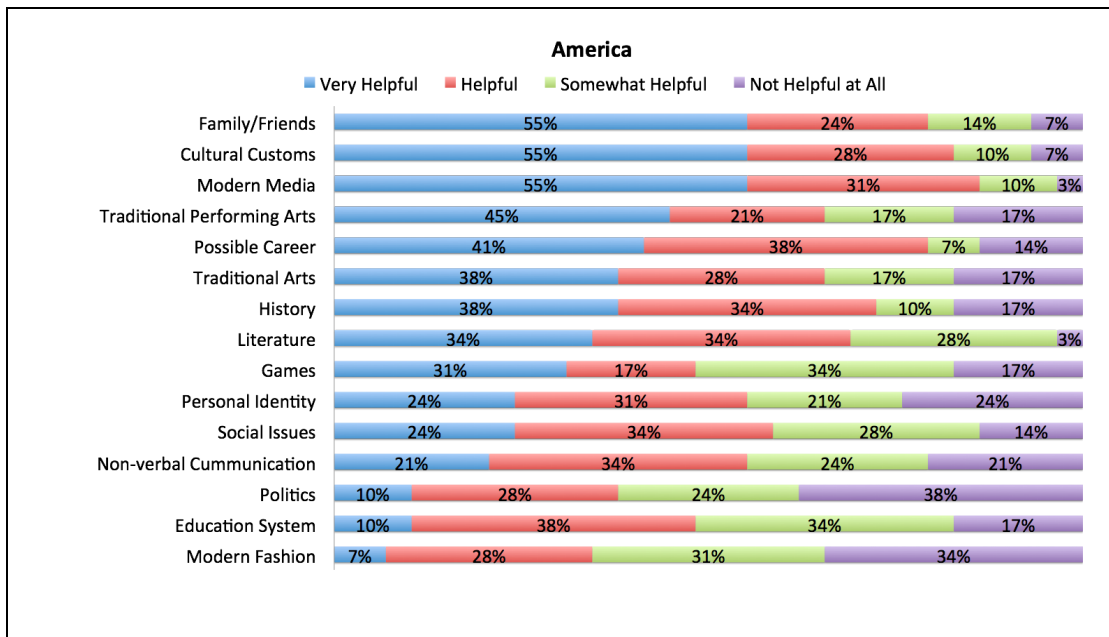
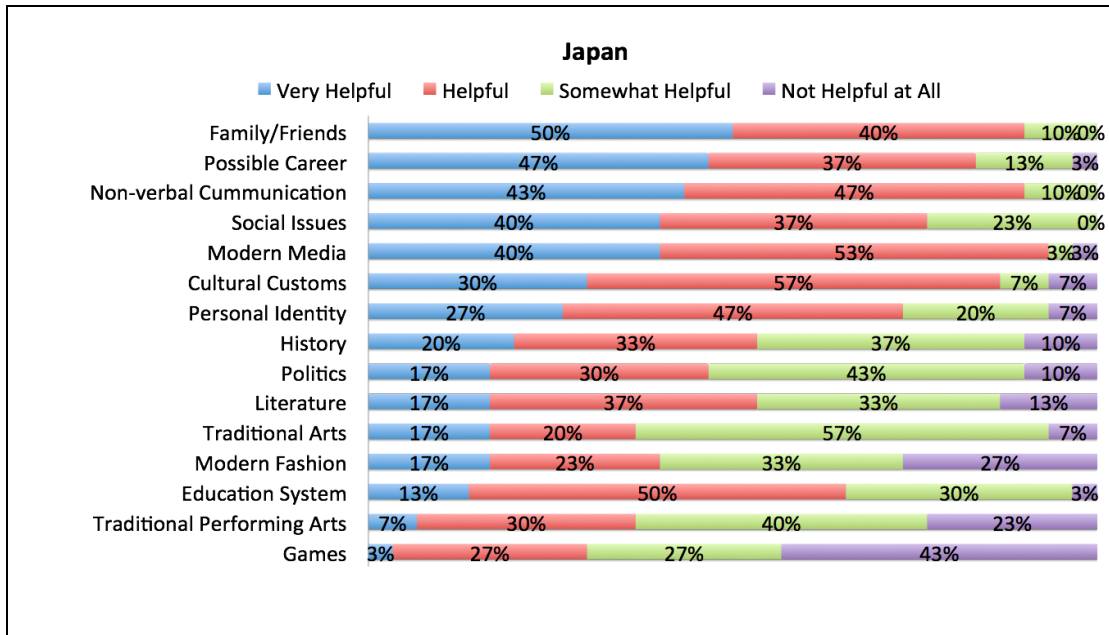
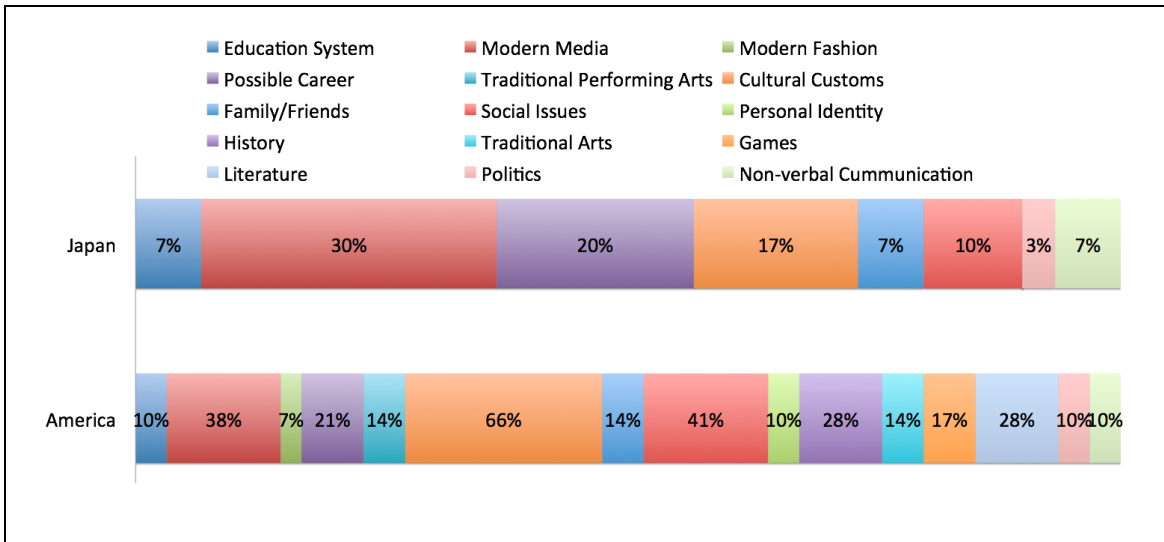


Figure 17: From the list below, what classroom topics have helped you cultivate your motivation in language learning throughout the years (Japan)?



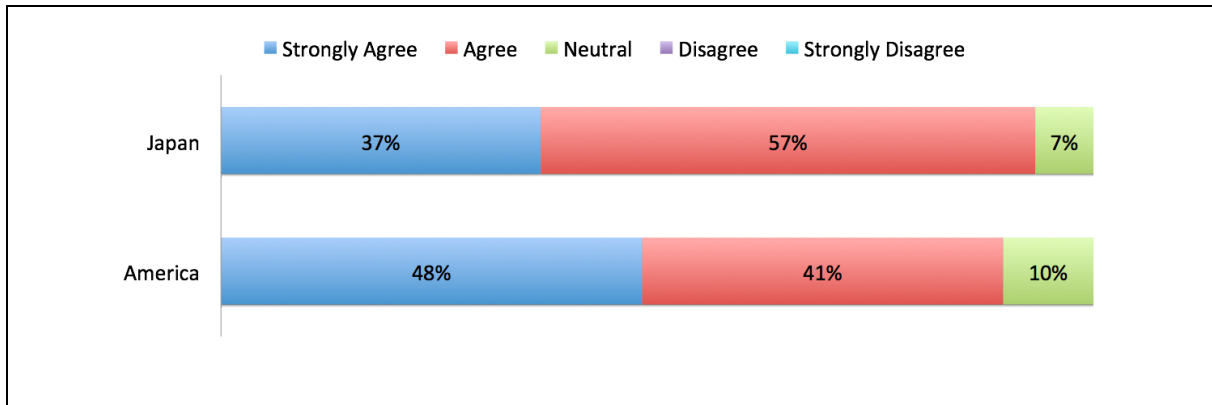
In response to the question of “What culture-related topics would you recommend teachers to incorporate more in a foreign language classroom to better learn the language,” Japanese students selected “media: and “future career” as what they recommend teacher to incorporate more of in their courses. On the other hand, American students answered “cultural customs,” followed by “social issues” and then “media” for their recommendation (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: What culture-related topics would you recommend teachers to incorporate more in a foreign language classroom to better learn the language?



For the last question in the second part of the survey, we asked the students opinion on if that thought that if there was more culture-related lesson integrated in foreign language classes that more people would want to continue to study that language and culture. As a result, about 90% of both American and Japanese university students “Strongly Agree” or “agree” that if more cultural lessons were incorporated people would indeed want to study another language (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: If foreign language class incorporated more cultural lessons, do you think more people would want to study another language?



#### 5.4 Summary Findings of Research Question 2:

American and Japanese students both believe that learning about culture has positively affected their studies and would attract more people to learning a foreign language. American students' motivation shifted from watching anime to wanting to use Japanese in their future career. Whereas, Japanese students' motivation shifted from music and wanting to complete their school's language requirement to wanting to make new friends. Americans, also, found that cultural customs taught in class had inspired their motivation compared to Japanese students who said media and possible career topics. In regards to what the types of cultural lesson should be implemented in foreign language classes both American and Japanese students recommend more cultural content and materials.

## 6. Conclusion

Both American and Japanese university students believe that culture is important an

aspect in regards to studying a foreign language. As the students progress over the school years their motivation and reasons for studying a foreign language also have changed. In their earlier years of studying a foreign language, both groups agree that learning the target country's media has been helpful in maintaining interest in the language and that learning culture should be through authentic cultural materials. The change in motivation for both groups shifted based on their personal motivation and goals on how they want to continue using foreign language in their future. Both groups are interested in learning linguistic abilities that can be used with friends and work and with media. Based on both groups foreign language experience they both agree that culture has motivated them to continue their studies as well as encourage others to learn foreign language.

## **7. Limitations of the Study and Future Study**

Since this study was a comparison between university students, we had a rather small sample size with many of the respondents being foreign language majors or exchange students. Thus, our findings does not represent the views of all Japanese and American people. As for our future study, We would like to survey people who are not language majors with no study abroad experience. In addition, we would like to survey people after Japan's 2020 English education reform.

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