

Are People in China Hungrier to Learn English than People in Japan?

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Are average Chinese university students more motivated to learn English than average university students in Japan? Is China's English education system doing a better job of motivating students than the Japanese system? This research aims to answer these questions by testing if non-English-major first- and second-year university students in China — i.e., “average college underclassmen”— listen to English-learning podcasts more than their counterparts in Japan. Two hundred twenty-four students in Japan and 184 students in China were given identical surveys in their native languages, asking about their podcast listening habits. The students were enrolled at similar-type universities, and had had similar English-learning backgrounds.

It was found that 21% of non-English major students in Japan had at some time listened to at least one English-learning podcast, but only 3% of their Chinese counterparts had done so. This implies that most English teachers in Chinese high schools and even colleges probably do not know much about English podcasts. Other interesting phenomena about the English education system in China are also noted.

BACKGROUND

In Japan, we often have the impression that people in China are very motivated to learn English, while people in Japan are not so hungry to learn English. This image is caused by both mass media reports, and by daily exposure to the high-quality students who come from China. But are average Chinese university students really hungrier to learn English than average university students in Japan? Is China's English education system doing a better job of motivating students than the Japanese system?

There are many ways to answer these questions. One way to measure motivation is to look at the number of private English schools in the two countries. There are about 30,000 organizations or companies offering private English lessons in China (Thornily, 2010), and about 8,000 in Japan (N.A., 2009). Since China's population is a little over 10 times greater than Japan's, it can be said that Japan's number of “Eikaiwa schools” is not inferior as measured on a per-person basis.

Another way to measure motivation for learning English is to analyze iTunes U statistics for English-learning podcasts downloaded from various countries, and here again the numbers for Japan appear to be strong (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013). About two times more downloads at iTunes U occur in China than in Japan. But again, since China's population is about 10 times

greater than Japan's, it can be said that podcast usage in Japan is not inferior, and is definitely higher as measured on a per-person basis. As of February 2013, about 1.5 million iTunes U downloads had come from China, whereas about 800,000 had come from Japan. (About one-fourth of total iTunes U downloads involve language-learning materials.)

English education in China has a lot of similarities to English education in Japan. Importantly, most college students in both countries have received six years of English education in secondary schools. And, like in Japan, there is now a strong movement in China to expand English education during elementary school. Also, the teaching styles in junior high and senior high are basically the same: a lot of teacher-centered and translation pedagogy, with few chances to speak English (Zeng and Murphy, 2007). At the college level, most faculties in China require English for one or two years — similar to Japan. One difference at the college level is that teachers in China must follow a prescribed syllabus which consists of two stages: first, English for General Purposes (EGP), and later English for Specific Purposes (Wang, 2009). In Japan, most college teachers have more freedom to teach in whatever way they want.

Scoring high on English tests is especially valued in China (Chen et al., 2005). Bookstores there are crowded with bestsellers explaining how to score high on the TOEFL and GMAT. For their children, many Chinese parents seek out cram schools which are noted for helping students achieve high test scores. One consequence is that rote-learning and memorization are strongly encouraged in schools.

A major reason why memorization is so valued in English education in China is that memorization has been found to be very successful in the teaching of the Chinese language (Chen et al., 2005). By the end of elementary school, students are expected to master 2,000 Chinese characters, and by ninth grade the number is 4,000 characters. (In comparison, Japanese are expected to master 1,006 kanji by the end of elementary school, and only 2,136 by the end of high school.) Students in China often learn their characters as parts of idioms (*cheng yu*) and proverbs. Thus, many English teachers in China might put too much emphasis on proverbs¹.

With respect to motivation itself, research in the West has long hypothesized that when people want to be a part of the foreign culture and truly like the foreign culture, it is more motivating than just learning the language “to get a good job” (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2000). In technical expressions, these researchers argue that integrative motivation is more powerful than instrumental motivation.

However, Chen et al. (2005) have found conflicting evidence in China, concluding that “required motivation” plays the largest role while “integrative motivation plays no significant role.” Similarly, Warden and Lin (2000) summarize evidence showing that students in China prefer language-learning approaches which emphasize “standardized requirements,” and de-emphasize the individual. In a related way, behavior with the goal of being part of a homogenous

¹ As an interesting aside, when the current researcher was in China doing this study, he was walking with a university Chinese instructor of English who constantly used proverbs such as “Once bitten, twice shy” and “While there's life, there's hope.” Many of the proverbs he used were even unknown to this researcher. Since proverbs are rarely used in daily conversation in the West, his language seemed quite odd.

group and helping one's family are very motivating factors in China (Guo, 2013). Of course, Japan has similar traditions, although achieving for the family may not be as strong as it used to be.

Reasons for learning English sometimes are the same, but sometimes differ between Japan and China (Brown, 2004; Wang, 2008). A key similarity is that a lot of students in both countries study English for practical reasons — i.e., to pass courses, and to get good jobs. At the same time, a lot of students in both countries study English for more idealistic reasons — i.e., to expand one's view, and to promote international understanding and peace.

Some studies in China and Japan have found that the most effective way to learn English is to have idealistic reasons. Also called “intrinsic motivation factors” (i.e., the motivation for knowledge in general, the motivation to challenge oneself, the desire for internal fulfillment), these factors have been found to be very effective for learning English in China (Wang, 2008; Tae-II, 2008; Yi-Guang et al., 2003). Extrinsic motivation (i.e., trying to learn English with the goals of “getting a good job”, or “scoring high on tests,” or trying to avoid punishment from the teacher or parents) has correlated negatively with achievement (Wang, 2008). In Japan, it has been found that students who have general intellectual satisfaction in their daily lives have lower levels of anxiety about learning English, and consequently, achieve more success (Matsuzaki Carreira, (2006).

A key difference between the two countries is that the desire to go to foreign countries has been found to be extremely motivating in Japan (Mori and Gobel, 2006), but at least one major study found that the desire to go abroad is not a significant motivating factor in China (Wang, 2008).

METHOD

This research aims to determine if average Chinese university students are hungrier to learn English than average university students in Japan, and to identify how English education in China compares with that in Japan. The main tool for measuring this was to use questionnaires to find out if non-English-major university students in China — i.e., “average college students” — listen to English-learning podcasts more than their counterparts in Japan.

Podcasts are an exciting tool for students to improve their English skills. (See Rosell-Aguilar, 2013, for a world-wide review of the literature.) For virtually no money, students can download English-learning programs into their computers or portable listening devices. The programs are designed to be both fun and educational, ranging from cross-culture discussions to grammar talks. Students can often study along with these programs by utilizing accompanying scripts, exercises, or video images, and they can listen to the programs wherever they want, whenever they want, and as often as they want. Podcasts have been widespread in English education in many countries for about 10 years.

If students in China are aggressively listening to English-learning podcasts — which are available free of charge to all people around the world who have access to a computer and the Internet — then there is an indication that Chinese citizens are very motivated to learn English.

Two hundred twenty-four students in Japan and 184 students in China were given identical surveys in their native languages, asking about their podcast listening habits. The students were enrolled at similar-type universities; the Japanese students were at Hiroshima University, while the Chinese students were at Guizhou University and Kaili University in China's southwest. These three universities, according to teachers at the schools, are thought to be regional leaders, so are generally recognized as being good schools.

Most of the students in Japan were at the start of the second semester of their freshman year, but 14% of the students were sophomores, and 5% were juniors. Sixty-one percent of these students were enrolled in science fields (biology, science, engineering, or medicine) while the others represented the humanities (literature, law, education or economics). The students in China were all sophomores, beginning their second year. Their majors were relatively equally distributed between Japanese, tourism, and primary school education.

The Japanese survey was administered in the autumn of 2012, and the Chinese survey was administered exactly one year later, in 2013. The details of the Japanese survey have already been published (Lauer, 2013). See the Appendix of the current paper for a copy of the Chinese survey.

Also, formal interviews were conducted with two English professors in the province of Guizhou, asking them about student motivational levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main finding was that 21% (N = 48) of non-English major students in Japan had at some time listened to at least one English-learning podcast, but only 3% (N = 6) of their Chinese counterparts had done so. In fact, most of the Chinese students said that they had no idea what podcasts were. Even though the Chinese students were sophomores, most of them had not used podcasts during their first year of college. This implies that most English teachers in Chinese high schools and even colleges probably also do not know much about English podcasts.

One reason why podcast usage in China might be much lower than that in Japan is that most students in China do not seem to have mobile devices which can accommodate podcasts, such as smart phones or i-touch devices. (A recent survey by Google (China Daily: USA, 2013) found that only 47% of Chinese urbanites have smart phones.) For many students, the only way to listen to podcasts is by using desk-top computers, which are, of course, prevalent at all universities.

The detailed survey of the six Chinese students who had listened to at least one podcast revealed some interesting information. BBC, Discovery, VOA, and SSS seemed to be popular podcasts. The students' podcast listening frequencies ranged from one time per month to two or three times per week. Some students used the podcast written scripts frequently, while others used them almost never. Almost all of the students preferred "short podcasts" over longer ones. Opinions were divided about how much Chinese support should be in the podcasts; some students wanted Chinese support, while others wanted little or none. Some wanted slow-speed audio input, while others only wanted natural speed. A few students used pro-active

study techniques, such as writing down key expressions they heard, and mimicking key expressions in an audible voice. One of the six students sometimes studied podcast contents with a friend. Five of the six students said the podcasts improved their English abilities (with the sixth student not answering the question). None of the six students had ever been abroad.

In addition to the surveys of students, two college English teachers in the province of Guizhou (one Chinese citizen and one American) were interviewed about the motivational levels of students. One teacher said that only about 10% of non-English-majors were “hungry” to learn English, and about 80% of the students strongly disliked English. One teacher said that a problem at the university was that there were too few elective English courses. Since Chinese universities are under stricter syllabus guidelines than most universities in Japan, individual college teachers in China might have less freedom to introduce revolutionary approaches and techniques, such as podcasts.

A final informal observation about the research at the two universities in Guizhou Province was that the average university students there seemed to have about the same English abilities as the average university students in Japan. Students in China seemed to be able to read, write, and listen to English better than they could speak it. And the average students’ English speaking ability seemed to be similar with respect to fluency and accuracy to the average Japanese university students’ English speaking ability.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found almost no evidence that the average non-English major university student in China is more motivated to learn English than the average non-English major university student in Japan. On the contrary, students in Japan seem to use English podcasts significantly more than students in China do. Also, as measured by the number of private English schools per capita in the two countries, the number of required years of English in secondary schools, and the number of voluntary downloads at iTunes U, Japan’s hunger for learning English seems to at least be on a par with China’s.

This study is limited because it mainly only looked at the percentages of university students who used English-learning podcasts; a truer measure of motivation might be something different. For example, how many hours per week do students study English “for fun” outside the classroom? Or, how often do older English learners listen to podcasts? Or, the simple question: Do students enjoy studying English? The answers await future studies.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire about Podcasts (Chinese version)

Note: For the Japanese version, see Lauer (2013). Also, the actual survey included more space between questions for student comments.

1. 你最近在经常收听什么样的播客？请举出你经常收听的播客节目的名字。
2. 目前为止，你收听过的播客节目中觉得最好的是哪一个，请写出它的名字。
3. 你收听播客的频率怎么样？比如说大概在几年时间的范围内，平均到一个星期的收听时间？
4. 在收听播客节目的同时，你必须要参考剧本来理解内容的次数：
A. 相当的多 B. 一定程度上 C. 基本上不看
5. 你是喜欢比较短的播客节目呢？还是喜欢相对来讲长一点的？
6. 在你利用播客节目来学习英语的时候，希望有中文解释来帮助你的理解吗？
A. 相当多 B. 一定程度上 C. 基本上不需要
7. 在你听播客节目的时候，
 - 把你想要记下来的词发声念出来吗？
 - 把你觉得重要的英文表达写在草稿上吗？
 - 重复多次地听吗？
8. 在你听播客节目之前，你会先读一遍剧本内容吗？
9. 你觉得是慢速的节目比较有帮助呢？还是只是想听自然语速下的对话。
10. 你曾经和朋友一起听播客节目来学习英语吗？
11. 在你收听播客节目的时候，你觉得对英语能力的提升有帮助吗？
12. 目前为止的托业考试成绩中最好的一次是多少分？
13. 在你所拥有的四个英语能力（听，说，读，写）之中，你自己觉得应该怎样从高到低排序？
14. 你曾经去过国外吗？如果有，请你具体地写出是哪个国家，呆了多长时间，怀着什么样的目的去的？
15. 为了提升英语的听力能力，你认为最好的方法是什么？

要 約

日本人よりも中国人の方が英語学習におけるハングリー精神は強いのか？

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一般の日本人大学生よりも、一般の中国人大学生の方が英語の学習動機が高いのだろうか。英語学習のハングリー精神を養うという点では、日本の英語教育制度よりも中国の英語教育制度の方が良いのだろうか。本論文はこの疑問に答えるべく両国の普通の大学生、すなわち英語専攻でない一般学部生を対象に調査を行った。動機の強さを測る方法にはいろいろあるが、今回は特にすべての大学生が無料でアクセスできる英語学習用ポッドキャストを聴いたことがあるかどうかという指標を調査した。両国の学生は類似点の多い大学に通っており、英語学習年数や学習経験も同程度である。

結果は、複数の視点から観て中国での英語学習におけるハングリー精神の方がむしろ低いかも知れないことが判明した。例えば、21% の非英語専攻の日本人学生は英語学習用ポッドキャストを聴いたことがあるが、本国在住の中国人学生のその使用率は3% に過ぎない。学生だけではなく中国の高校や大学の英語教員もポッドキャストのことをあまり知らないのが実状である。この論文の中では中国の英語教育システムに関するいくつかのほかの事実も指摘されている。