

20 - “See you next semester!” Learner Motivations for Continuing a Foreign Language Course: A Comparison across Language Groups

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Abstract

Retention rates in university foreign language programs often decline sharply after beginner courses, creating challenges for sustaining higher-level modules and raising questions about the evolving role of foreign language education. To address these issues, this study explores the motivational factors influencing students at the Centre for Language Studies (CLS), National University of Singapore (NUS), to continue learning beyond beginner-level courses. Drawing on data from 325 beginner-level students across 13 languages collected over two semesters in 2023–2024, the study investigates whether motivations differ depending on the target language. Using a factor analysis approach, five motivational dimensions were identified: Knowledge & Integrative Orientation, Internal & Enjoyment Orientation, Instrumental Orientation (Job/Academic Future), Instrumental Orientation (Certification), and Social Influence. Results show that enjoyment of learning and interest in the language and its culture are the most significant motivators across all languages. However, differences emerged between language groups. Students learning East Asian languages (e.g., Chinese, Korean) were less driven by instrumental motivations, focusing more on personal interest and cultural engagement. In contrast, students of European languages (e.g., French, German, Spanish) and Japanese demonstrated significantly higher motivation to obtain certifications. The findings highlight the importance of tailoring curricula and pedagogical strategies to students' primary motivations. For instance, European and Japanese language programs might emphasize certification pathways, while East Asian language courses could incorporate informal learning elements such as social media and cultural content. Addressing language-specific motivations may enhance student engagement and retention in advanced modules. Future research should expand on these

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findings by examining larger, more diverse cohorts and exploring the dynamic nature of language learning motivation over time.

Keywords: language learning motivation, retention rates, instrumental vs integrative orientation. foreign language courses

1. Introduction

It is a truism that learning a foreign language is more of a marathon than a sprint. Learning a foreign language requires perseverance and patience. This makes it all the more worrying that foreign language learners often lose their motivation and drop out of their studies early on. As at many university language centres around the world (see for example Bartley, 1970; Cambridge Assessment, n.d.; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2014), the retention rates of students who learn a foreign language as an elective subject at the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) are for most languages considerably low after the beginners' courses.

Foreign language learning can only reach an advanced level through continuous learning. At least at NUS, the role of foreign language teaching is to give all learners interested in foreign language learning not only the opportunity to acquire advanced foreign language skills, but also to understand and appreciate the target language and culture in order to work harmoniously with people from different linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds in the international community, and to open up potential job opportunities to them.

The high drop-out rate and the resulting unfavourable ratio between language learners at beginner level and language learners at intermediate or advanced level should therefore be a cause for concern. The declining retention rates in higher-level language courses create challenges for foreign language centres and institutions in terms of financially sustaining low-demand courses. They also raise questions about the role of foreign language teaching in higher education, which is particularly true for foreign language teaching in the era of technological advancement, where learners are exposed to various online learning tools and generative artificial intelligence (AI) and can learn the basics of the foreign language without taking any university foreign language courses.

In order to better understand the reasons for the decrease in retention rates in foreign language courses at CLS, a large-scale study was conducted in 2023 and 2024 among students of all 13 languages who took a beginners' course. In the study, participants were – among other questions – asked which reasons motivated them to continue their language studies. The extensive results were analysed with regard to various questions which will be published separately.

The main focus here is on whether the reasons for continuing to learn a foreign language after the first course differ according to the target language. This means that we used the collected data to analyse whether students learning an East Asian language such as Korean or Japanese have a different motivation to continue their studies after the beginners' courses compared with students learning – for example – a European language such as French or German. In other words, we investigated whether – and to what extent – differences between students in their motivation to continue their language studies after the beginners' courses can be explained by the language learnt.

2. Review of relevant literature

The study of motivation in second and foreign language learning has garnered significant interest over the past few decades, largely due to its critical role in facilitating language acquisition (Lamb, 2017). Traditionally, many studies have revolved around key concepts such as instrumental and integrative motivations (Gardner & Lambert, 1959) or key frameworks such as the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the currently dominant L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2005). What all these theories have in common is their focus on the *motivational orientation* of learners, i.e. on the situational motives that prompt a person to pursue a goal. Most theories distinguish between *intrinsic motivation*, which results from the interest or pleasure in the subject or action itself, and *extrinsic motivation*, which is based on external factors such as the desire for prestige or success.

A substantial portion of these studies is dedicated to English language learning, reflecting its global importance (Boo et al., 2015). However, there is increasing awareness that Languages Other Than English (LOTE), which often stand “in the shadow of Global English” (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017, p. 457), tend to be neglected in second or foreign language motivation research. Accordingly, scholars have called for more attention to LOTE (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). This does not imply that motivations for learning English and those for learning LOTE are entirely divergent. However, given its global prominence, English is often seen as the ‘natural’ and ‘unquestioned’ language choice, whereas the motivations to learn LOTE may stem from different or language-specific factors (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). As Al-Hoorie (2017) noted, “paying more attention to LOTEs has the potential to deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in language learning motivation” (p. 7).

In the research on LOTE, a variety of factors have been identified that play a role in motivating learners in their language acquisition or sustaining their efforts. One of them is instrumental motivation, which refers to the desire to learn languages for utilitarian reasons (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). For example, the prospect of future benefits may help sustain language learning, as Matsumoto and Obana (2001) discovered in their investigation of Japanese language students’ motivations at an Australian university. In another study, González-Becerra (2019) focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students learning LOTE at a UK institution and found that they were primarily extrinsically motivated by factors such as employability or value of LOTE for STEM.

Apart from instrumental motivation, integrative motivation can be a crucial factor in the learning of LOTE, potentially more so than in learning English, as suggested by Al-Hoorie (2017). This motivation encompasses the desire to engage with the target language and members of the target community (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). When studies such as Matsumoto and Obana (2001), Davis (2022), and Wadas et al. (2024) compared students who indicated that they were continuing their language studies with those with no intention to do so, it was found that the ‘continuers’ tended to exhibit stronger elements of integrative motivation than those who did not wish to continue. These included an interest in communicating with the people associated with the languages, connecting with their cultures as well as having positive attitudes towards the people and the cultures.

Another motivational factor highlighted in LOTE research is enjoyment or a positive learning experience. Chen et al. (2020) interviewed students learning French or Spanish in a master’s programme at a Chinese university and discovered that these students viewed learning these languages more as a form of “leisure” and “consumption” rather than as an “investment” in their future careers. Davis (2022) found that when students felt supported, respected, and cared for, it had a positive impact on their decisions to enrol in a non-compulsory language course in the subsequent semester. Similarly, positive learning experiences have been recognised as motivating factors for learners of Japanese, especially at the elementary level (Matsumoto and Obana, 2001), and for German (Wadas et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that while positive experiences can motivate learners, they may not necessarily prevent them from discontinuing their language studies (Wadas et al., 2024).

Course-related factors can also play an important role in motivating LOTE learners. Bruen and López (2024) suggested that a curriculum that is student-centred and pedagogically innovative can encourage students to continue their language studies. For learners who do not intend to pursue language study further, meeting language requirements often serves as a primary motivator (Davis, 2022; Wadas et al., 2024).

Research also suggests that the motives to learn a foreign language can differ depending on the target language. For example, González-Becerra (2019), found that STEM students in the UK perceived the strategic value for employability of German, Mandarin, French and Spanish as higher than that of Arabic, Italian, Japanese, and Russian. Similar findings were reported by Gonzales (2011) and Humphreys and Spratt (2008), who investigated the influence of the target language on the motivational orientation of university students in the Philippines and Hong Kong respectively. The results of both studies indicate that, depending on the socio-cultural context, the ratings for the instrumental value can be significantly higher for some languages, while other languages are learnt more for integrative or self-efficacy-related reasons.

In summary, the literature has highlighted various factors that can motivate (or demotivate) LOTE learners. Yet, despite the progress made in understanding motivation for LOTE learning, some gaps remain. One notable gap is the limited geographical diversity of studies. Much of the existing LOTE research is concentrated in countries such as the US, Japan, and China (Boo et al., 2015), which may not fully capture the motivational dynamics present in other parts of the world. Expanding research to include underrepresented countries such as Singapore can offer a more nuanced understanding of LOTE motivation. Furthermore, there is a need for more research on introductory LOTE courses at the university level. As mentioned earlier, a significant part of language programme enrolments consists of beginner-level students, many of whom do not continue beyond initial courses. Gaining deeper insights into what motivates students to persist past the introductory level may help educators develop strategies to better support their learners. Our present study aims to address these gaps.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants of the survey were NUS students enrolled in beginner-level courses at CLS at the time of the study. CLS offers courses in 13 languages to students from all faculties, with levels ranging from beginner to lower or upper intermediate, depending on the language. The courses are primarily aimed at students in the Bachelor's programmes and are only taken by Master's students in exceptional cases. For the analysis of this study, the cohorts of two semesters in the academic year 2023/24 were analysed.

A total of 548 students participated in the study. However, after filtering all participants with missing answers from the dataset, 325 cases remained. Out of these, 184 were female and 139 male (two gave no answer regarding their gender). The average age of the participants was 21.7 (min: 18, max: 32, STD: 2). Of the 325 participants analysed, 189 students (58%) were in their first or second year of study and 120 students (37%) were in their third or fourth year. Only 14 participants (4%) were postgraduate students and 2 participants were already alumni.

The distribution of participants also differed significantly in terms of the target language (see Tables 1a&b). While almost 45% of the participants were distributed across only three (out of 13) languages, four languages were each represented by less than 5% of the participants. The low representation of some languages raises the question of the extent to which the results can be generalised with regard to these languages. For this reason, three languages with fewer than 20 participants were excluded from the analysis (i.e. Arabic, Hindi and Tamil). Vietnamese was subsumed under the Southeast Asian languages.

Table 1a&b - Number and percentage of participants per target language

	Japanese	Spanish	Korean	French	German	Thai	Bahasa
Number	61	43	42	31	31	23	23
Percentage	18.77	13.23	12.92	9.54	9.54	7.08	7.08

	Malay	Chinese	Arabic	Vietnamese	Hindi	Tamil
Number	21	20	12	9	8	1
Percentage	6.46	6.15	3.69	2.77	2.46	0.31

3.2 Materials

Participants were asked to answer an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two sections, one asking participants basic questions about their sociodemographic profile, their studies and their career plans. The other section asked participants about their experience and attitude towards foreign language learning as part of their academic education. Each section consisted of several blocks of predominantly closed questions.

In this report, we mainly focus on the questions about the participants' motivation to continue their foreign language studies. This block comprised 25 items to be answered on a 6-point Likert scale to assess the participants' agreement with the statement made in each item (1 = “Strongly Disagree”, 6 = “Strongly Agree”). The items were based on the dimensions of motivational orientation in foreign language learning identified in previous studies and included statements on intrinsic, integrative, instrumental, knowledge, travel, sociocultural and friendship orientation (a list of the items can be found in the Annex Table 1).

3.3 Procedure

Over 3,000 students enrolled in beginners' classes across the 13 languages offered at CLS were invited to participate in the study via email. Invitations were sent out at the end of each respective semester after teaching had been completed.

The questionnaire and the procedure for data collection, processing and storage were approved by the Department Ethics Review Committee (DERC) of CLS, NUS. To answer the questionnaire, participants had to give their consent to the conditions of the survey after reading an information sheet. The questionnaire was entirely anonymous. Participants were informed about the use of their data.

4. Results

The data analysis comprised two steps. First, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 25 items to identify latent variables. Subsequently, the average ratings of the resulting factors were compared between the target languages using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test with Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc analysis.

4.1 Factor Analysis

A factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify latent variables. Five factors were extracted in accordance with the Kaiser-Guttman criterion. Items were allocated to the factor with the highest loading. A minimum factor loading of 0.4 was set as threshold for an item to be excluded. Accordingly, five of the items could not be assigned to any of the factors (Appendix - Table 1). Together, the five factors explained 47% of the variance (between 7% and 12% per factor).

The values for the internal consistency of the five factors were between *acceptable* and *good* (Cronbach's Alpha >0.7 to >0.8). A thematic analysis of the items per factor also supported the assumption that the latent variables were meaningful constructs and not merely statistical artefacts. Based on the Clement model for describing motivational orientation (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983; Clément et al., 1994), the five factors were characterised as follows:

- **Factor 1: Knowledge & Integrative Orientation**
Six items asking participants about their interest in the target culture or people from the target culture, their desire to make friends with people who speak the target language, or their interest in the course or in travelling to a country where the target language is spoken.
- **Factor 2: Internal & Enjoyment Orientation**
Five items asking participants whether they are enjoying the course, the class is fun, the teacher is nice, and whether they like the language and enjoy their accomplishments in learning the language.
- **Factor 3: Instrumental Orientation A – Job and Academic Future**
Three items asking participants whether learning the language is beneficial for their current or future studies or for future job prospects.
- **Factor 4: Instrumental Orientation B – Certificate**
Three items asking participants whether they considered to continue their language studies because they want to get a Minor in Foreign Language Studies or because they intend to get an internal certificate from NUS or an external certificate.
- **Factor 5: Social Influence**

Three items asking participants whether they study a foreign language because someone (a friend or a family member) recommended them to do so or because they wanted to be together in the same class with a friend.

A comparison between the factors shows that the average rating of Factor 1 (Knowledge & Integrative) and especially that of Factor 2 (Internal & Enjoyment) were seen as significantly more important reasons for continuing to study a foreign language than was the case for the other factors (Figure 1).

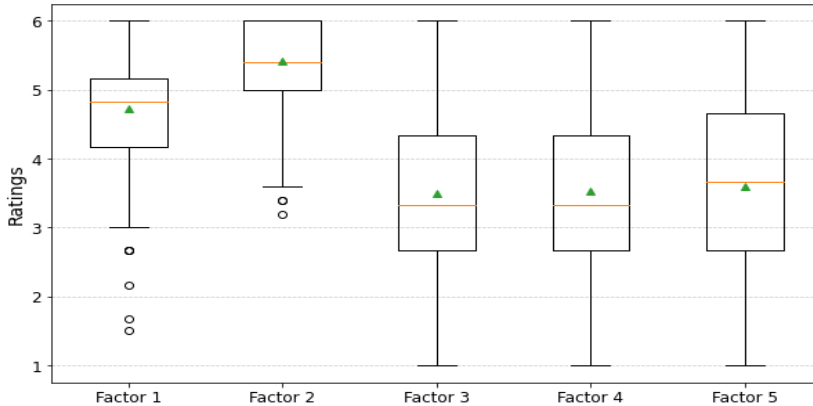


Figure 1: Median (orange), mean (green) and variance of ratings per factor

4.2 Comparison between language groups

The next step was to analyse whether there were differences in the rating of the items between the language groups. For this purpose, groups of foreign languages were formed according to cultural and geographical criteria. Four groups emerged:

1. East Asia (EA): Korean and Chinese 62 Participants
2. Europe (EU): German, French, Spanish 105 Participants
3. Japan (Jap): Japanese 61 Participants
4. South East Asia (SEA): Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Thai, Vietnamese 76 Participants

Japanese was treated as a separate group due to the high number of respondents studying Japanese and because the responses of those participants were significantly different from those studying other East Asian languages (i.e., Korean and Chinese).

When comparing the ratings per factor between the language groups, it can be seen that there are no differences regarding Factors 1, 2 and 5. In contrast, ratings of Factors 3 and 4 differ significantly between the language groups. For Factor 3, the values for East Asian languages are slightly lower than for European or Southeast Asian languages. By contrast, the values for Factor 4 are clearly higher for European languages and for Japanese than for East and Southeast Asian languages (Figure 2).

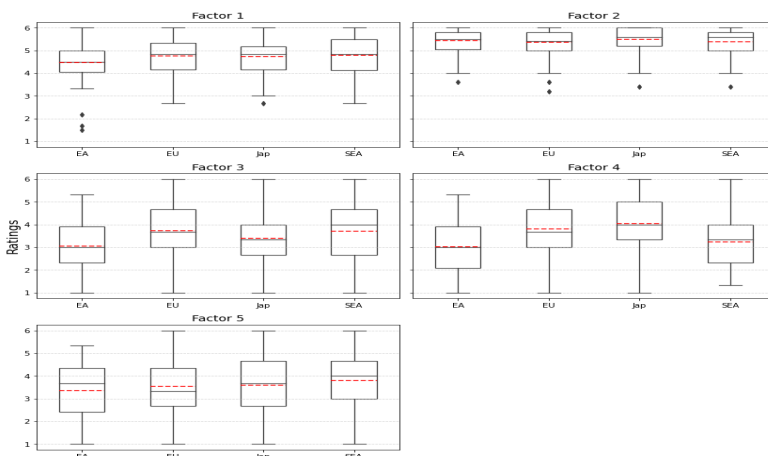


Figure 2: Median (solid line), mean (dotted line) and variance per factor divided by language group

A comparison of the ratings between the language groups using a rank-based analysis of variance (Kruskal-Wallis statistic with Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc test) shows that these differences are significant or highly significant (Appendix – Table 2). The results suggest two conclusions. First, participants learning an East Asian language see instrumental reasons such as improved career opportunities or benefits for their studies as less of an incentive to continue their language studies than learners of other languages. Second, for participants learning a European language or Japanese, the prospect of obtaining a certificate in that particular language is significantly more important than for learners of East or Southeast Asian languages.

5. Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate whether the motivational orientation of foreign language learners at a university in Singapore differs depending on the target language. The results of the study provide a twofold picture. On the one hand, for all students, regardless of the language they are learning, the enjoyment of learning a foreign language and interest in the language and its associated culture predominate as motivators to continue studying the language after the introductory course. On the other hand, there were also differences between the languages or language groups. For students learning East Asian languages (i.e. Chinese and Korean), the motivation to continue learning these languages is less instrumental or purpose-driven, and it was found that those who learn these languages do not do so primarily for professional or academic reasons.

The reasons for these differences were not analysed in detail in the study. Language-specific reasons, such as the perceived difficulty of a language, or the institutional conditions under which a language is taught, are therefore conceivable. One context-specific reason for the results of this study could be that the Korean programme and - even more so - the Chinese programme at NUS have a high proportion of exchange students, whose motivation might differ from that of local students. Specifically, for the Korean language, informal and independent learning may also play a role, driven by the significant influence of elements like Korean music and drama, which may lead to learning motivated by personal interest rather than academic purposes.

Another identified element is that students of the three European languages, French, German, and Spanish, behave similarly to Japanese learners concerning the instrumental orientation of their learning. Specifically, these four languages show significantly higher motivation to obtain a certificate when compared to East or Southeast Asian languages. In this regard, a future line of research could analyse which type of certification students value most, such as the Language Minor, the proficiency certificate from CLS, or internationally recognised diplomas (e.g., JLPT, Goethe-Zertifikat, DELF/DALF, DELE).

In conclusion, the results highlight that each programme could adapt its curriculum and pedagogy to better align with the main motivations of its students. A deeper understanding of students' motivations and goals may contribute to improved retention, enabling them to continue to enrol in higher-level modules. Therefore, it is important that each programme can take its own direction according to the needs and motivations of its students. For instance, the European language and Japanese programmes could focus on strengthening synergies and building closer relationships with prestigious institutions that offer internationally recognised certifications to more instrumentally motivated students. They could also establish connections with reputable universities in the countries where the target language is spoken to provide joint diplomas. However, all this should be done without neglecting the fact that the main motivation for the majority of students to study languages is to have fun.

For students with less instrumental motivation, a possible area of focus could be the inclusion of more day-to-day elements in the curriculum to engage these students, such as incorporating social media, music, or series into activities.

This study has certain limitations, as the sample size could have been larger to include more students' opinions. Additionally, motivation in language learning is a complex matter, as it is highly dynamic and quickly changing, often influenced by temporary trends. This study captures students' opinions at a specific moment in time, so future studies should continue monitoring the situation to identify any changes.

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Appendix

Table 1

Items with descriptive statistics, factor, and factor loadings

Text	N	Mean	STD	Factor	Loading
I plan to travel to places where the target language is spoken	513	5.28	0.88	1	0.42
It helps me understand my own culture better	500	4.09	1.44	1	0.46
I want to make friends in the language course	499	4.51	1.25	1	0.58
I want to be friends with the target language speakers	505	4.67	1.11	1	0.68
It helps me know better the people, society and culture of the target language	514	5.11	0.83	1	0.78
It can foster a better understanding of cultural similarities and differences.	514	4.99	0.93	1	0.79

The class is fun, interesting and engaging	525	5.46	0.71	2	0.53
I like the target language	522	5.37	0.68	2	0.56
The teacher is nice / helpful / engaging / inspiring	527	5.6	0.64	2	0.64

Text	N	Mean	STD	Factor	Loading
I enjoy the accomplishment and achievement in learning the language	526	5.46	0.67	2	0.72
The course is well planned, organized and taught	525	5.25	0.89	2	0.73
Knowing the target language can enhance my job prospects	498	4.49	1.23	3	0.47
The language is related to my study	469	2.61	1.43	3	0.66
Knowing the language will help my future study	488	3.55	1.53	3	0.77
I plan to get the CLS Certificate for the target language	467	4.41	1.46	4	0.53
I plan to get an external language certificate for the target language	448	3.38	1.52	4	0.62
I plan to get the NUS Language Minor for the target language.	439	3.13	1.62	4	0.83
My family members recommended me to continue learning it	437	3.24	1.59	5	0.56
I want to take the course together with my friends	478	3.97	1.58	5	0.57
My friends/seniors recommended me to continue learning it	446	3.6	1.53	5	0.64
I like the target language culture	517	5.26	0.78	x	---
It helps me communicate with the target language speakers	518	5.18	0.83	x	---
I think I may get a good grade for the Level 1 language course	511	4.42	1.19	x	---
I need a course to fulfil my graduation credits	462	3.0	1.52	x	---
Learning the language helps to develop independent learning skills	515	4.65	1.14	x	---

Table 2

Mean and STD per Factor by Language Group with Kruskal-Wallis statistic (H-value) and Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc level of significance (where applicable).

Factor	Lang Gr	Mean	STD	H-value	Jap	EA	Eu	SEA
Factor 1	Japanese	4.73	0.79	4.81 ^{ns}	---	.328	.192	.316
	East-Asia	4.46	0.9					
	European	4.75	0.77					
	SEA	4.79	0.78					
Factor 2	Japanese	5.5	0.55	4.35 ^{ns}	---	---	---	---
	East-Asia	5.43	0.52					
	European	5.35	0.55					
	SEA	5.38	0.58					
Factor 3	Japanese	3.39	1.13	15.43 ^{**}	---	---	.002	.01
	East-Asia	3.06	1.09					
	European	3.73	1.11					
	SEA	3.71	1.25					
Factor 4	Japanese	4.04	1.26	29.96 ^{***}	---	.001	.507	.001
	East-Asia	3.03	1.11					
	European	3.82	1.18					
	SEA	3.24	1.07					
Factor 5	Japanese	3.58	1.42	3.65 ^{ns}	---	---	---	---
	East-Asia	3.35	1.28					
	European	3.53	1.24					
	SEA	3.79	1.16					

(Inference statistical tests were double checked using Welch ANOVA and Tukey's HSD)