The concept of learning Japanese: explaining why successful students of Japanese discontinue Japanese studies at the transition to tertiary education

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Student attrition and falling tertiary education enrolments afflict languages education across the 'inner circle' English speaking world. In the southern hemisphere, in New Zealand and Australia, Japanese has become one of the most successful languages of education. However, numbers of students are now declining. This paper examines why successful secondary school students of Japanese as a foreign language (FL) in New Zealand who have not chosen Japanese as a major, do not continue their study of Japanese at university or another tertiary educational institution. It utilises a grounded theory approach to explain an area of language learning and attrition which is not currently well understood: the transition stage between secondary school and tertiary education. Analysis of interview data of former secondary students of Japanese revealed two core categories that explain why successful secondary students drop Japanese when they leave high school: the participants' 'concept of learning Japanese' and 'the incompatibility of Japanese and the major'. In this paper, we look at the first of these categories in depth in order to explore these mainly affective reasons for post secondary school students not continuing Japanese at tertiary level. It is hoped our paper will prove instructive for other jurisdictions which are witnessing a decline in their Japanese language students and language students more generally.

Introduction

Many traditionally English-speaking jurisdictions, including New Zealand, are recognising the social, cultural and economic advantages to be gained by having multilingual and inter-culturally competent young citizens who can engage productively in multicultural environments at home and abroad. Learning additional languages is seen as a key vehicle for developing these competencies. Therefore, examining why students discontinue with their languages learning at a tertiary level of education, having been successful learners at secondary school is an area of considerable importance in considering how national language capacities can be improved.

The issue of student retention in languages has provided challenges for those involved with language teaching and learning in a range of contexts for many years. In a very recent response to the problem of attrition in the UK, a key reform to the National Curriculum is the compulsory introduction of modern languages (among them, Japanese), from the age of 7. This follows the dramatic attrition in modern languages taken to General Certificate of

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Secondary Education (GCSE) level as a result of removing languages from the core curriculum at Key Stage Four (ages 14–16) in 2004 (Vasagar 2012).

Those who have learnt a foreign language (FL) know mastering it takes time. Whilst some of the benefits of foreign language learning (FLL) can be obtained through the process of language learning itself, such as improving first language literacy, intercultural competence and critical thinking (Gallagher-Brett 2004; Jansen 2001), more direct benefits of FLL generally come with higher levels of proficiency. Therefore, a long term commitment is required for FL learners to fully enjoy the benefits of FLL. This time commitment is even more important for first language speakers of English learning Japanese, compared, for example, with the time required for them to learn Roman-alphabet based languages like German or Spanish (Beal 1994). However, in many universities in anglophone countries such as the US, Australia and New Zealand, student attrition rates in tertiary level Japanese language courses have been quite high (Kinoshita Thomson 2008; Komiya Samimy 1994). Improving student retention is an important task for universities in order to maintain viable language courses as well as to produce a sufficient number of Japanese-proficient graduates.

In this paper, we look at the reasons erstwhile successful learners of Japanese at secondary school choose not to continue learning Japanese at university or other tertiary institutions. While this research is located in New Zealand, we believe there are lessons here for other anglophone countries considering how to maximise secondary students' achievement in language learning to reach more satisfactory and utilisable levels of proficiency at tertiary level. The issues and obstacles we identify will be recognisable to educators of languages other than Japanese (see, for example, Harnisch, Sargeant and Winter 2011). In this respect, we also hope our findings can be of value for all languages other than English, when considering their articulation between secondary school education and tertiary levels of education.

In New Zealand, Japanese language teaching in secondary schools goes back more than 50 years to the late 1960s (Harvey 1988). Japanese reached its peak in New Zealand in 1996 with 27,039 students studying the language at secondary school (Ministry of Education 2004). Despite decreases in numbers since that peak, Japanese continues to be the second most popular language in schools, French being the most popular (East, Shackleford and Spence 2007). The rise, and now gradual but steady decline, of Japanese in the New Zealand education system mirrors the path that Japanese has taken in Australia. As the Japanese economy boomed through the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, Japan's significance to both Australia and New Zealand's economies propelled a demand for Japanese language that subsequently waned as the Japanese economy flattened through the 2000s. Nevertheless, Japan remains an important country for New Zealand. From its position as New Zealand's number one bilateral trading partner in the 1980s (Harvey 1988), Japan now fluctuates between number three and number four. In terms of tourism, Japan is currently fourth highest for visitor arrivals. Significant also is the post-war history of people-to-people contacts between New Zealand and Japan that have served to fuel interest in Japanese language learning. From sister cities to martial arts, to rugby, to pottery, to friendship societies, cultural ties between New Zealand and Japan have relative historic depth (Harvey 1988) and remain important to both countries. Described by one commentator as 'distant, amicable and enduring' (Sullivan 2007: 60), the relationship with Japan remains vital for New Zealand. Consequently, a loss of capacity in the Japanese language, after its success in the 1990s and the amount of resource that has gone into building it as a significant additional language, is a backward step that a small country like New Zealand can ill afford.

Data available from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) (2011) and the Ministry of Education (2010), as well as data for 2010 supplied directly to the authors by the Ministry of Education in 2011, suggest that every year around 600 students continue Japanese to Year 13 (the final year of secondary school at an average age of 17) and achieve the expected level of standards[1] set by NZQA. 'Standards' in this context are: 'skills or knowledge that (students) are expected to achieve or know…' in a selected area of learning (NZQA 2012: 1). Usually, these Year 13 students of Japanese have learned the language for more than four years in secondary school. Thus, it can be presumed that they have the necessary determination to continue Japanese, such as a strong interest in the Japanese language, Japan and/or its culture, together with diligence and consistency, motivation and a desire to improve their proficiency. In addition, since they already have a strong foundation in Japanese, if they continue with Japanese at tertiary level, they are likely to reach a higher and more 'marketable' level of proficiency by the end of their tertiary education compared with those who start their Japanese learning at tertiary level without previous learning.

Unfortunately, a majority of these post-Year 13 students of Japanese do not continue Japanese at tertiary level, even though seven out of eight universities in New Zealand offer Japanese language courses (The Japan Foundation 2011). The study this paper draws from (Oshima 2012) examines the reasons secondary students who have been relatively successful learners of Japanese, decide not to continue with their Japanese studies when they embark on tertiary education. The study identified two core categories which are relevant to participants' decisions to discontinue Japanese at the transition stage when they have not taken Japanese as their major. These two categories are: (1) participants' 'concept of learning Japanese'; and (2) 'the incompatibility of Japanese and their major'. In this paper, we focus on the first core category which affected participants' intention to continue or discontinue Japanese once they had decided not to take Japanese as a major. This category is almost entirely concerned with participants' beliefs and assumptions about Japanese and how it relates to them as people.

Attrition in FLL

A number of studies have investigated reasons for learners' discontinuance of FLL. Academic difficulty and a greater workload in FLL compared with other subjects are the main reasons for premature attrition in FLL courses (Curnow and Kohler 2007; Fulton 1958; Holt et al. 2001; McLauchlan 2007). Some studies have also noted that the level of proficiency and skills gained through FL courses are unsatisfactory (Curnow and Kohler 2007; Trotter 1994; Tse 2000) and of little use for students' future careers (Curnow and Kohler 2007; Holt 2006). However, students who discontinued FLs in these studies were at an early stage of their FLL, i.e. mostly within one or two years after they started their FLL. Therefore, we felt that there might be significant differences between what students in these studies expected from FLL and what longer-term learners of FLs (with four to five years' learning) in the current study wanted from and thought about their FLL. The level of FL proficiency our longer-term learners of FLs were likely to reach was probably much higher than the level of proficiency shorter-term learners would reach. Thus, it was also possible that learners' level of proficiency would affect how they valued FLL.

In addition, some FL students may discontinue FLL when they transfer to a different secondary school or at the transition stage from secondary to tertiary education because they cannot find a suitable FL course at their level of proficiency (Schulz 1999; Tohsaku

2010). It is worth pointing out here that in New Zealand, secondary schooling begins at Year 9 in contrast to, for example, Year 7 in the UK. Japanese courses in New Zealand below Year 9 are relatively restricted in terms of learning time and languages offered.

Motivation in FLL

Student motivation and its variants (demotivation and amotivation) are an important area to consider when examining why students choose not to persist with Japanese study at tertiary level. The literature on motivation for both general and L2 learning provides good insight into students' behaviour and their ways of thinking as they learn a language. As Dörnyei (2000: 1) explains, motivation is an 'abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do'. It is responsible for 'the *choice* of a particular action' and 'the *effort* expended on it and the *persistence* with it' [emphasis in original] (Dörnyei 2001: 7). L2 learning in school is particularly identified in the motivation research as unique when compared to other school subjects. Gardner (1979, as cited in Dörnyei 2000) proposed that unlike other school subjects which were viewed as educational phenomena, L2 learning should be seen as a central social-psychological phenomenon. He argues that while other school subjects involve learning elements of the student's own cultural heritage, L2 learning involves bringing another culture into the student's own life-world. Therefore, the student's relationship with his/her own cultural community and his/her willingness or ability to identify with other cultural communities becomes an important consideration in the process of L2 acquisition. Research with Lambert (Gardner and Lambert 1959) also considered that the attitudes toward an L2 group would partly determine the student's success in learning the new language.

Important in considering motivation are the factors that may demotivate students (Holt et al. 2001; Nuibe, Kano and Ito 1995; Tse 2000). A cross-cultural investigation highlighting the significance of teacher behaviours in demotivating students (Zhang 2007) confirmed that teacher incompetence, including confusing and/or boring lectures, unfair testing and information overload, was 'the greatest source of demotivation within and across cultures' (Zhang 2007: 220). Gorham and Christophel (1992, as cited in Dörnyei 2000: 145) similarly noted that approximately two-thirds of the reported sources of demotivation were 'teacher-owned'. The negative motives most frequently mentioned by students were:

(1) Dissatisfaction with grading and assignments;
(2) The teacher being boring, bored, unorganised [*sic*] and unprepared;
(3) Dislike of the subject area;
(4) Inferior organisation of the teaching material;
(5) The teacher being unapproachable, self-centred, biased, condescending and insulting. (Gorham and Christophel 1992, as cited in Dörnyei 2000: 145)

Amotivation has been described by Deci and Ryan (1985, as cited in Dörnyei 2000) as 'the relative absence of motivation that is not caused by a lack of initial interest but rather by the individual's experiencing feelings of incompetence and helplessness when faced with the activity' (Dörnyei 2000: 144). People can be amotivated because they think they lack ability; their strategies are not effective enough; the effort to reach the outcome is too excessive; and their efforts are inconsequential considering the enormity of the task to be accomplished (Vallerand 1997, as cited in Dörnyei 2000). We can see then that amotivated students will be more likely to give up learning as they generally see there is no point in trying because they doubt their ability to achieve the expected outcome. Perhaps most

importantly, L2 motivation cannot be explained as a linear process, but rather a complex, multidimensional process (Dörnyei 2009; Ushioda 2009).

Finally, there is a concerning demotivation factor amongst L2 learners which is relevant to L2 learning in New Zealand. A number of studies suggest that the status of English as a global language and an international lingua franca might dissuade students in English speaking countries from learning a FL (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). In the UK context, Coleman (2009) has asserted that the monolingual, xenophobic messages promulgated in the British media and by politicians are at least partly responsible for the decline of FL learners in UK schools. Carr and Pauwel (2006, as cited in Coleman 2009) pointed to the impact of English monolingual leaders in major anglophone countries who constantly, though perhaps unconsciously, send messages to their societies that monolingualism is acceptable, often through their own unquestioned monolingualism.

While the above motivation factors may come into play for students at many points of their L2 learning journey, we did not specifically find literature discussing motivation at the transition stage. Thus, we believe our research is relevant in beginning to paint a picture of the various motivating and non-motivating factors at this stage.

The present study

The aim of the research reported in this paper (Oshima 2012) was to investigate the reasons for discontinuance of Japanese learning at tertiary level by New Zealand students who had studied Japanese to Year 13 and then decided not to take Japanese as their major in tertiary education. A grounded theory methodology was chosen to conduct inductive, in-depth qualitative research. Grounded theory is ideal for research on a topic such as this which is relatively unexplored, as it relies on theory that is generated by the data itself, rather than theories from other contexts and academic fields. Grounded theory research does not start with preconceived hypotheses which might compel the researcher to find the information presupposed by these hypotheses and thus limit the kinds of observations made and information and insights gained. In contrast, grounded theory aims to generate a theory derived from data without being biased by the researcher's preconceived theoretical ideas (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Participants

Participants were recruited who:

- were studying at the time of interview at a tertiary institution in New Zealand or had graduated from a tertiary institution in New Zealand after 2006;
- were not taking Japanese language courses (classes) at any tertiary level;
- had studied Japanese language to Year 13 (i.e. NCEA Level 3 Japanese or equivalent courses such as Cambridge International Examination [CIE] AS Level) at secondary school level;[2]
- had proven academic success in Japanese language from the course (e.g. gained more than 15 credits from NCEA Level 3 Japanese, A to C pass from CIE AS Japanese);
- had enrolled in a tertiary programme within a year after they completed Year 13;
- were not natives speaker of Japanese;
- had not studied in Japan for more than six months in their primary and secondary years;
- were New Zealand citizens or permanent residents.

A total of 16 participants, six males and 10 females, took part in this study. All participants lived in the greater Auckland region and were from six different secondary schools. The

school deciles[3] of these schools varied from four to 10 although the majority of participants came from high decile schools: two schools were decile nine and one each were deciles 10, eight, six and four. Thus, the schools represented took students from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, though the majority of schools were in relatively affluent areas. Four schools were state and co-educational, one was state, single-sex (boys) and one was state-integrated,[4] single-sex (girls).

Ten participants were of Asian ethnicity, including ethnic Chinese (from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries) and Korean. Five participants were Pakeha (New Zealand European) and one person was of Samoan ethnicity. This sample might be considered biased because Asian participants were in the majority; however, most participants commented that senior Japanese classes in their secondary schools were dominated by Asian students, especially Korean and Chinese. Subject statistics available from the NZQA website (NZQA 2011) also indicated that students of Asian ethnicity typically predominate in Japanese at NCEA Level 3, especially in the Auckland region where, since the introduction of NCEA in 2004, over 75% of students studying Japanese have been of Asian ethnicity. All participants were New Zealand citizens or permanent residents and came from non-Japanese families.[5] Participants were studying a variety of disciplines at university, such as science, arts, design, engineering, law, commerce, music, business, hospitality, education, aviation and computer science. Some of them had enrolled in a double major and/or a conjoint degree programme. The lengths of tertiary programmes they had enrolled in varied from two years to five years.

Data collection

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with the participants and these were audio-recorded after the participants gave their approval. Interviews were conducted between November 2008 and April 2009. The interviews took between 42 and 91 minutes. After each interview, expanded field notes were written based on the jotted, mental notes of the researcher and the audio-recorded interviews which were partially transcribed. Expanded field notes were analysed line by line, coded and examined to categorise the data thematically. The coded data were reviewed and re-categorised while conducting the data collection and frequently re-emerging codes were re-examined against previously collected data as potential core categories.

Findings

All participants in the study shared two conditions: they had learnt Japanese to Year 13 for four or five years; and they had chosen tertiary programmes which did not include Japanese. Once participants had chosen non-Japanese major programmes, they still had the option to study Japanese as a non-compulsory course. On selecting their major, some participants had the intention to study Japanese as an elective course, while others had no intention to continue Japanese. The study found that the participants' degree of intention to study Japanese or not at tertiary level reflected their individual views, feelings and attitudes with regards to learning Japanese at the transition stage. We have captured these contributing factors in a category we have called 'the concept of learning Japanese.'

The concept of learning Japanese

The first core category emerging from the data, 'the concept of learning Japanese', embraced individual participants' understanding of what learning Japanese meant to them both during and after learning Japanese. At the time participants started their Japanese

Table 1. Sub-categories and properties of 'the concept of learning Japanese.'

Core category	Sub-categories	Properties
The concept of learning Japanese	The value of learning Japanese further	• Expected incentives • Current proficiency • Relevance • Necessity • Perceived availability of options
	Perceptions of learning Japanese	• Sense of competence • Perceived level of difficulty • Perceived workload • Past learning experience

learning in secondary school, 'the concept of learning Japanese' was usually vague, almost non-existent or unrealistically optimistic as participants had little or no prior experience of learning Japanese, or possibly any other language. They were often uncertain as to what skills and knowledge they would gain through learning Japanese. Some participants may have gained ideas about learning Japanese from conversations with others. These ideas contributed to 'the concept of learning Japanese' that participants had at first.

However, once participants started learning Japanese at secondary school, 'the concept of learning Japanese' started to develop and change, from vague ideas to more concrete and individualised perceptions which reflected each participant's experience, situation and characteristics. For example, participants compared Japanese with other subjects and evaluated it as more or less difficult, fun, practical, useful, etc. They also evaluated their own aptitude for Japanese through their learning experiences. Since these introspective processes of understanding Japanese as a learner were constantly being constructed and reconstructed during their learning of Japanese, 'the concept of learning Japanese' was not fixed for students and was constantly changing. In Table 1, we show how the data were analysed into sub-categories and then the composite factors that we believe comprised the sub-categories.

We identified two sub-categories for the core category: 'the concept of learning Japanese.' These were: (1) 'the value of learning Japanese further'; and (2) 'perceptions of learning Japanese.' We explore these further below.

The value of learning Japanese further

The sub-category 'the value of learning Japanese further' referred to individual participants' understanding of what Japanese learning in the future would likely bring them and its worth within their value system. For example, a participant who had been studying journalism thought being able to communicate in other languages fluently would expand her opportunities in journalism, so she valued further learning of Japanese. On the other hand, a participant who was studying design thought Japanese would be useful for travelling to Japan but at the transition stage, her Japanese was already good enough to travel. Therefore, she did not think learning Japanese further in the future would be particularly beneficial. When this participant decided that 'the value of learning Japanese further' was insignificant, further learning was less likely to be considered. 'The value of learning Japanese further' was attributed to participants' individual circumstances, their awareness

of potential advantages given by improved Japanese skills and their own proficiency of Japanese. As these factors changed over time, so 'the value of learning Japanese further' also changed. Therefore, it is possible that an increased perception of 'the value of learning Japanese further' later in their life might encourage participants to resume the study of Japanese.

As noted in Table 1, the study found that five significant factors determined 'the value of learning Japanese further'. They were: (1) expected incentives to continue Japanese; (2) participant's current proficiency; (3) the perceived relevance of Japanese to participants; (4) the perceived necessity of learning Japanese further; and (5) the perceived availability of options. We explain these factors below.

Expected incentives. These refer to the rewards, benefits and advantages that individual participants believed they would gain by continuing to learn Japanese. If expected incentives were high, 'the value of learning Japanese further' increased and thus continuing with Japanese became more attractive. Most incentives expected by participants at the transition stage were associated with higher proficiency (#8, #10), better job prospects (#3, #5, #10, #12, #13), increased personal relationships with native speakers of Japanese (#7, #9) and study opportunities in Japan (#9). In contrast, many participants had expected and recognised other types of incentives at secondary school. These incentives included academic achievement (#8, #9, #12, #16), psychological incentives such as satisfaction (#3, #5, #8, #12), fun (#1, #4, #7, #16), and the joy of learning (#2, #5, #8, #11, #12), as well as social incentives such as meeting classmates (#4, #8) and enjoying solidarity in a particular subject area (#5, #10, #15):

> I think I really enjoyed going [to Japanese class], I enjoyed people in the class and teachers. It was not boring. It was just hard. (#4)
> You could go to the class everyday and wonder what's they gonna do today. I think it's the variability. In any other classes you go and you think okay let's take notes while in Japanese class the attitude was more out, we gonna play games, maybe activities we do differently. (#8)

It is possible that participants did not expect to find the same positive affective factors in tertiary study of Japanese, thus making it less attractive to them.

Current proficiency. 'Current proficiency' here refers to participants' level of Japanese proficiency at the transition stage. Some participants saw their 'current proficiency' as high enough for their needs (#11, #16) and felt that further learning of Japanese would not bring significant further benefits. This contrasted with those who did not consider that they had reached a sufficient level of proficiency (#9, #10). This was an interesting and perhaps even counterintuitive finding; the more proficient users of Japanese appeared to see fewer incentives in continuing with the language than those who had reached a lower level of proficiency. We found that if two participants reached the same level of proficiency at the transition stage, how their 'current proficiency' affected 'the value of learning Japanese further' depended on their perceived future uses and needs of Japanese.

It was also possible that achieving a reasonable 'current proficiency' by transition stage would lead participants to defer further learning of Japanese; indeed many participants assumed that they could resume learning Japanese later without repeating the material they had learnt at secondary school (#1, #6, #7, #8, #10, #15). These participants believed that they would retain their Japanese language skills and memorised work and did not consider the prospect of resuming Japanese at a later date as problematic. Thus, as continuing

Japanese after the transition stage was not seen as necessary for maintaining their skills, they chose to drop Japanese:

> I know my Japanese is rusted but [I] have the basics and would catch up once I resume, so knowing that I have the basics to start again. (#1)

Relevance. 'Relevance' signifies whether or not participants recognised that Japanese had relevance to them, to what extent and in what regard. When participants recognised that Japanese had 'relevance' to them, they tended to value Japanese highly. For example, participants who had personal relationships and connections with Japanese speakers, or were interested in particular areas for which Japan has a good reputation (e.g. civil and mechanical engineering, animation or the hospitality industry), considered Japanese language skills useful, important and advantageous:

> … by studying Japanese, I could work in Japan. Japan is very, very advanced. I should want to study masters or doctorate in Japan. I didn't plan to stop studying Japanese, I wanted to study, (#10)

Necessity. 'Necessity' refers to the perceived necessity of learning Japanese further from an individual participant's point of view. Since all participants had chosen programmes which did not require taking Japanese, there was no institutional necessity to learn Japanese further for them. Thus, participants perceived that any necessity to learn Japanese further at the transition stage was derived mainly from their desire to achieve particular goals, such as to work in Japan (#9, #10, #12) or to pass the Japanese language proficiency test at higher levels (#10). The necessity factor had several dimensions, such as intensity (great or small), urgency (immediate or delayed) and duration (long-term or short-term). There were participants who suggested their perceived necessity to learn Japanese further was linked to becoming 'multilingual' (#1, #5), to increasing their job prospects (#2, #3) or to working or studying in Japan (#9, #10). However, at interview, none of the participants indicated that improving their proficiency was an *urgent* necessity. Therefore, at the transition stage, it seems that participants felt it was reasonable to postpone further learning of Japanese.

Perceived availability of options. The factor 'perceived availability of options' refers to individual participants' views of the kinds of study options available to them for continuing Japanese, such as undertaking a course at their university, studying with a private Japanese tutor, self-study or attending a language school in Japan, either currently or in the future. At the transition stage, participants considered practicalities, costs and access for various study options. They saw Japanese courses offered at nearby tertiary institutions as almost always a possible option for them to pursue Japanese, while other choices like attending a language school in Tokyo might only be practical after completing their tertiary programmes. Participants compared various options and some participants saw alternatives as more convenient, cost-effective or user-friendly compared to a university course and chose not to take a Japanese course at their university:

> I have a feeling that [Japanese courses at] University Y would be better [than my university's courses] when it comes to languages. (#8)

> Japanese, you can learn anytime, you can go to night class outside or go tutor to teach you, but some other subjects you cannot … I thought if I want to study Japanese, improve Japanese, I can study later on. (#15)

Perceptions of learning Japanese

The sub-category 'perceptions of learning Japanese' represents participants' self-reflective ideas about learning Japanese. As a result of experiencing four or five years of Japanese study in secondary school, participants had developed their own ideas and opinions about the process of learning Japanese. Some appeared to consider learning Japanese time-consuming, although not too difficult, while others felt it was quite challenging and required constant revision. Participants also critically reflected on themselves as learners of Japanese. They assessed their own aptitude for Japanese based on how well they had achieved and how much time and effort they had put into learning the language. Participants' self-evaluation was also influenced by others' opinions about them, such as what their peers and teachers said in relation to their competency, memory and quality of work. Participants combined these experience-based perceptions of learning Japanese and their understanding of themselves as learners of Japanese to picture themselves continuing Japanese at tertiary level. Their reflective view of learning Japanese is what we have called 'perceptions of learning Japanese.'

If participants developed negative 'perceptions of learning Japanese' and predicted that they would struggle, fail to achieve, be frustrated or bored, they were less likely to consider taking Japanese in tertiary education:

> Well, it [Japanese] got really hard at seventh form [Yr 13] so I thought 'at tertiary level'd be too hard, actually I wouldn't be able to cope with that', now I know that is not true, I didn't know that then (#11)

On the other hand, when participants' 'perceptions of learning Japanese' were positive, our results showed that they were more likely to consider taking Japanese at tertiary level.

As noted in Table 1, the category 'perceptions of learning Japanese' comprised four factors: (1) sense of competence; (2) perceived level of difficulty; (3) perceived workload; and (4) past learning experience.

Sense of competence. 'Sense of competence' as a factor in 'perceptions of learning Japanese' refers to participants' own evaluation of their ability to learn the language. It is a subjective view deriving from participants' own learning experience. A participant could achieve good grades and be seen as competent in Japanese by teachers but still lack confidence in their ability to learn Japanese. Participants who had a low 'sense of competence' often compared themselves negatively with their peers and also compared Japanese with other subjects they had taken and discussed their lack of aptitude for Japanese:

> [Japanese] was my lowest subject in Yr 13 … with other subjects I can just write answers come up from my head, it sounds ok, but for Japanese I cannot do that. … For Japanese I have to actually put lots of work, make effort, not just sit and write. I am not naturally good at it. (#3)
> … [friend's name] can pick up easily, it comes naturally, but I needed to study and spend a lot of time on it to make me able to do it … Out of all subjects, I generally got good grades everything else, Japanese was the one I could not get my head round. (#4)

In contrast, participants whose 'sense of competence' was high, did not necessarily compare their own achievement with others. However, most of them indicated that Japanese

was their 'good' subject (#1, #5, #8, #9, #10, #12). Because of this they felt that learning Japanese was not difficult for them.

Perceived level of difficulty. The factor 'perceived level of difficulty' describes participants' perception of how difficult learning Japanese at tertiary level would be. This reflected their level of achievement in senior secondary years and their recognition of how much time and effort they would have to put in to achieve at a tertiary level. In the literature on both general student attrition and second language student attrition, perception of academic difficulty was cited as a reason for discontinuing study (Conklin 1997; Holt et al. 2001). Participants' 'perceived level of difficulty' was often affected by the information about Japanese courses they had received from university and other sources. There were two participants whose older siblings had studied Japanese at tertiary level. Interestingly, one of them thought the course was too easy (#12) while the other thought the course work her siblings had undertaken would be too much for her (#15).

Unfortunately, a lack of knowledge about tertiary level Japanese courses was common amongst participants at the transition stage leading them to perceive the level of difficulty as higher than it actually was (#3, #6, #7). This negatively affected participants' intentions to continue Japanese. Some participants did not have much information about Japanese courses, but somehow assumed that a Level 6 (200-Level, or stage two, second year) Japanese course might be 'little bit too difficult' (#2) for them.

Perceived workload. The factor 'perceived workload' refers to the amount of work which participants thought would be required for further study of Japanese at tertiary level. After learning Japanese at secondary school, participants had a certain knowledge of how much work was involved in learning Japanese over time. However, participants' learning experience was from the secondary school environment. Therefore, their assumption of workload at tertiary level was affected by their preconceived ideas of teaching and learning at tertiary level. Some participants thought language teaching and learning at tertiary level involved more self-directed study and less communication than they were used to having at secondary level. A couple of participants also considered that the Japanese curriculum at university would be 'crammed' (#2, #14) compared with the secondary curriculum.

Each participant's idea of 'perceived workload' was different depending on their understanding of their own capacity for study and the workload they had experienced at secondary level. Those who spent a large amount of time studying Japanese outside the classroom at secondary school saw Japanese as 'time-consuming' (#4). If participants were unhappy with their learning outcomes in Japanese at secondary level, their idea of 'perceived workload' to be successful at tertiary level was high. Participants who had worked hard at secondary school tended to think this increase of 'perceived workload' 'too much' (#15).

Past learning experience. Participants' 'past learning experience' of Japanese contributed significantly to developing and shaping their 'perceptions of learning Japanese' in all respects. In particular, individual participants' 'past learning experience' enabled them to form opinions about the status and learning of FLs in New Zealand. Participants saw an invisible boundary between 'us' (those who have learnt FLs) and 'other people,' and were frustrated by how FLL and learners were seen and treated by others:

> People think learning other languages is not that hard, but it is difficult to learn how to read and write from scratch. In secondary school, learning second languages is much harder than other subjects like English or maths, because you are used to learn these subjects, you are learning all

way through anyway. Languages are something you choose to take and it's quite different from other basic subjects. (#11)

… learning languages are not respected by peers who don't learn languages … Learning language somewhat becomes more academic. I feel people in secondary school are really short-sighted. (#13)

'Past learning experience' had also given participants a range of feelings towards Japanese and its learning. As their learning experiences were mixed, their feelings could be complex, for example negative or cynical, as well as positive, contented and pleased. These feelings seemed to 'linger' (#14) and at times affected participants' potential desire to continue learning Japanese. These sentiments from the past had clearly affected a couple of participants' decisions to continue learning Japanese at Year 13. Despite some having had a series of negative learning experiences in Year 12 (#3, #8, #12), participants had generally been optimistic that they would improve their proficiency, an optimism based on their previously positive experiences before Year 12.

'The concept of learning Japanese' and participants' intention to continue Japanese

The two categories 'perceptions of learning Japanese' and 'the value of learning Japanese' were co-productive in interesting ways. For example, participants who had a combination of high 'value of learning Japanese further' and positive 'perceptions of learning Japanese' tended to indicate that they had had strong intentions to continue Japanese when they were at school. To them, continuing Japanese was valuable and associated with positive feelings such as pleasure, joy, progress and success. On the other hand, participants who had a combination of low 'value of learning Japanese further' and negative 'perceptions of learning Japanese' had no intention to continue Japanese. To them, learning Japanese was associated with negative experiences such as difficulty, unease, failure and disappointment and they no longer felt they needed to improve their Japanese skills.

As shown in Table 2, within the core category 'the concept of learning Japanese,' four sub-groups emerged based on whether participants' views were 'high' (H)/'positive' (+) or 'low' (L)/negative (−) on the two sub-categories. For example, a participant with a 'high' value of learning Japanese further and 'positive' perceptions of learning Japanese was more likely to have a stronger intention to pursue Japanese than a participant with a 'high' value of learning Japanese further, but 'negative' perceptions of learning Japanese. Of course, each of these four combinations should not be seen as a single, flat value; rather they were internally nuanced and there were subtle differences in individual participants' intentions to continue Japanese even if they shared the same combination.

Table 3 shows variations in 'the concept of learning Japanese,' with four arrows and exemplars of participants' affective states given their choices to continue or discontinue Japanese. From participant reports we found that a higher 'value of learning Japanese further generally meant that participants had greater intentions to continue Japanese, while those with negative 'perceptions of learning Japanese' tended to undergo a mental conflict. Participants who had negative 'perceptions of learning Japanese' and a high 'value of learning Japanese further' often felt that if they discontinued they were giving up opportunities Japanese might bring in the future. However, these participants also felt that continuing Japanese would be difficult and they might not be successful. Whichever option they chose, participants knew they would have regrets at some stage and making the right decision seemed very difficult. Therefore, they tended to seek available options to continue Japanese rather reluctantly in order to convince themselves to discontinue or

Table 2. Combination patterns of 'the concept of learning Japanese' (Exemplary comments and likely actions were reconstructed by amalgamating data from interviews).

The concept of learning Japanese		Perceptions of learning Japanese	
		Positive (+)	Negative (−)
The value of learning Japanese further	High (H)	Concept: + H [I really enjoyed. I think it will be good for me.] Likely to consider continuing Japanese	Concept: − H [I think it is good for me, but I am afraid that …] May consider continuing, but reluctant due to fear of failure, difficulty, etc.
	Low (L)	Concept: + L [It has been good and enjoyable, but not for now.] Likely to discontinue unless taking it as a pastime activity (hobby)	Concept: − L [I have done it! No more.] Most likely to discontinue Japanese

Table 3. Variations in 'the concept of learning Japanese.'

The concept of learning Japanese		Perceptions of learning Japanese	
		← Positive (+)	Negative (−) →
The value of learning Japanese further	↑ High (H)	↑+ H: Increased intention Keen to continue	↑− H: Increased mental conflict Reluctant to continue
	Low (L) ↓	↑+ L: Increased sense of freedom Satisfied to discontinue (because they have achieved)	↑− L: Decreased intention Keen to discontinue (perceived themselves unsuccessful)

to find some excuses or justification for giving up Japanese. In contrast, participants whose 'perceptions of learning Japanese' were negative and for whom 'the value of learning Japanese further' was low tended not to seek any study options but rather convinced themselves to discontinue Japanese as a logical choice.

Participants who had positive 'perceptions of learning Japanese' but considered 'the value of learning Japanese further' low were generally happy with what they had learnt. These participants felt that the outcomes of their learning of Japanese met their needs, thus they saw themselves as free to discontinue Japanese without losing any potential benefit. While some of them chose to discontinue Japanese, others were still interested in continuing. Since these participants were free from learning Japanese for the sake of a foreseeable benefit, any residual interests in further learning the language seemed comparable to a sport or hobby which they might do for pleasure in the future.

Limitations

This study was limited by its sample size and the range of participants involved. Participants comprised students at two universities in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, who had attended secondary schools in Auckland. Students in other regions might have had different views on Japanese and more difficult situations at the transition stage, such as moving to a new city where they did not have family or close friends to support them. In addition, in terms of the variety of ethnicity, although the sample of this study was reflective of post-Year 13 students of Japanese in the Auckland region, compared with the rest of New Zealand, the sample was dominated by Asian students who might well have different values, beliefs and linguistic backgrounds from other ethnic groups. Moreover, the socio-economic level of schools where participants attended did not include schools in very low socio-economic areas. Although statistics of NCEA Level 3 Japanese candidates in 2010 showed that nationally only four per cent of students studying Japanese attended schools in low socio-economic areas (NZQA 2011), absence of these students in the sample is still considered a limitation.

Another limitation was the time constraints associated with participant interviews that sometimes prevented the researcher from following the proper steps of theoretical sampling. Ideally, in grounded theory, data collection and data analysis should be conducted simultaneously, thus determining the direction of subsequent data collection. However, in practice, availability of participants was prioritised and sometimes closely scheduled interviews suspended ongoing data analysis for theoretical sampling. This meant effective theoretical sampling was only conducted towards the end of data collection.

As grounded theory research, the data collected at interview comprise the findings of this research. These inevitably relate to the specific participants of this study and are not necessarily generalisable. The theory built through this study could therefore be considered a substantive theory (Glaser1978). To develop a formal theory (Glaser 1978) from this research, the substantive theory of the present study would need to be further tested and have its applicability proven through further research, e.g. with students in other region/ countries and learning other FLs.

Despite these limitations, we believe that grounded theory has proven an effective means of understanding the in-depth and nuanced reasons why this group of participants did not persist with the study of Japanese when they transitioned to tertiary study. An important feature of grounded theory is that the data should be allowed to speak and themes should emerge rather than having researchers impose preconceived ideas onto the data. We believe this has been achieved in this case. Furthermore, we believe that other language researchers in a variety of fields would benefit from employing the exacting and insightful approaches to data collection, analysis and theory building that grounded theory affords.

Discussion and conclusions

This research set out to investigate why successful students of Japanese language in New Zealand, i.e. those who had attained NCEA Level 3 or equivalent, chose not to continue with Japanese at a tertiary level of education. The 'crisis' of language learning and particularly Japanese language in New Zealand, as in other English speaking countries, has been well documented (East 2009; East, Shackleford and Spence 2007; Ministry of Education 2010; Trotter 1994). One way to stem this tide would be to make sure that students who have attained a good level of proficiency through secondary school find it straightforward (and even easy) to continue their language study at university.

By collecting and analysing the data from 16 participant interviews through grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), two core categories emerged to explain the reasons for the discontinuance of Japanese at the transition stage. These were: 'the concept of learning Japanese' and 'the incompatibility of Japanese and the major'. In this paper, we have focused on the first of these categories as it explains participants' affective reasons for discontinuing Japanese at the transition stage. Findings suggested that participants' satisfactory level of proficiency gained through four to five years of Japanese study at secondary school led in some cases to the judgement that they did not need to continue Japanese at the transition stage. This contradicts previous research (Holt et al. 2001; McLauchlan 2007) which identified a positive relationship between students' success in learning Japanese and their motivation to continue Japanese. Other studies in FL motivation also indicate that successful learning experiences generate learner motivation (Dörnyei 2009; Ushioda 1996). Conversely, our participants assumed that either their level of proficiency of Japanese was adequate for their future use, or a decision to suspend their learning of Japanese at the transition stage would not significantly hinder their further learning of Japanese at a later stage of their life.

For some participants, Japanese had not been an easy subject at school and they feared that taking Japanese alongside their major studies might cause them academic failure in the future. Some participants had an idea that the academic level of Japanese courses at tertiary level was higher than they could cope with. These participants thought that studying Japanese alongside their major could potentially hinder their achievement and overall grades and therefore decided to discontinue Japanese. Uncertainty about their workload as first year tertiary students also contributed to participants' negative views relating to academic manageability.

Since individual students, even in the same learning environment, perceived Japanese learning in different ways, it may not be easy to change students' motivation and wider views on Japanese through teaching alone. However, along with quality teaching and learning at secondary school *and* better input of relevant information, it may well be possible to increase the likelihood of Year 13 students' continuing Japanese along with their major studies at tertiary level. Relevant information might include, for example, an outline for prospective students as to how tertiary study of Japanese will build on prior learning, the number of hours study that will be involved, what levels of proficiency might be expected at different year levels and what this might enable students to do in terms of student exchange opportunities, career opportunities and future independent travel. In other words, potential students need to be helped to understand that tertiary courses can be supportive and manageable, as well as conferring definite advantage for their futures. Moreover, tertiary institutions could consider credit-bearing stand-alone courses in a range of languages that can easily be integrated into students' degree programmes, whatever the discipline.

Many countries have increasingly higher expectations of language education, including the inculcation of intercultural competency, education for multicultural citizenship and education for international business and other activity. These demands are arising at a time when the same countries are finding it difficult to encourage students to continue with their language study and universities are finding many language programmes (apart from English) hard to sustain because of dwindling numbers. Consequently, a robust understanding of the various factors involved in persistence and progression in language learning is more important than ever. We believe our research could usefully be extended in a number of areas, including similar research with different populations: i.e. those learning

different languages and those at different stages of the education continuum, including other transition stages.

An area that we have not really pursued in our research as it relates to persistence and progression, but one that is alluded to in the motivation literature, is that of attitudes to the host culture of the language being studied (Gardner and Lambert 1959), including the relative status of the host culture in global geopolitics. While this may have more of an effect on which languages are chosen in the first place, it may also have an effect on persistence and progression. We wonder, for example, what effect the unprecedented growth of the Chinese economy has had on attitudes towards studying Japanese rather than Chinese, particularly in southern hemisphere anglophone countries such as Australia and New Zealand who see themselves as part of the Asia Pacific region.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is New Zealand's senior secondary qualification system. To attain NCEA Level 3, the highest level of the qualification, students must gain 60 credits from Level 3 or above, plus 20 credits from Level 2 or above, by achieving a number of standards from their selected subjects. From NCEA Level 3 Japanese, a student can gain a maximum of 24 credits from six standards (five standards after 2013).
2. There is no A2 level in Japanese offered by CIE because of the small numbers of candidates worldwide.
3. School deciles are related to a school's socio-economic ranking. Decile one is the lowest decile and decile 10 is the highest.
4. State-integrated schools were originally founded as private schools, but have become established as part of the state system of education, but with a special character (e.g. religion) and modest fees.
5. Participants' family language backgrounds included English, Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia and Samoan.

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