

Does Gender Make a Difference in the Study of English at Japanese Universities?

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This paper represents an initial investigation into an issue that has often informally arisen in discussions with teachers of English at university level in Japan. A common belief is that at university level in Japan, female students tend to perform better than male students. Clearly any attempt to examine such a folk-belief would represent an exceptionally complex task. However, there have to date been several small-scale studies that have investigated gender differences amongst Japanese University students. This report will compare three such reports and look at similarities and differences. Following this initial analysis, this paper will see if the themes identified in the small-scale studies can be explained by exploring issues at the societal level in Japan.

“In Japan at the turn of the century, language learning is still generally associated with women rather than with men” (Morizumi, 2001). This association of language learning with women seems uncontroversial, to the extent that it is a widespread belief, but it becomes problematic when trying to provide evidence as to whether or not this folk-belief has any basis in fact. Is it simply the fact that Japanese women are better than Japanese men at learning English? Understanding what this question is really addressing represents the key issue that the authors are interested in. This paper represents an examination of three papers that have explicitly set out to explore the question and will conclude by trying to suggest that the question “Are Japanese women better than Japanese men at studying English?” would perhaps be better expressed as “What benefits do Japanese women get from English proficiency that are not needed by Japanese men?”

A first, and perhaps obvious, point to make is that this paper will not be overly concerned with the methods employed in the research of the original three papers reviewed here. Nor will this paper seek to reference the background reading in the literature review sections of the three papers in depth other than what will be needed to explore the conclusions. The authors are primarily interested in the conclusions reached in each of the three papers, and, given this,

any interest in the methodology or literature reviews will be best served by consulting the original papers discussed here.

ANALYSIS OF THREE RESEARCH PAPERS

Does gender matter in language learning?

The first paper is by Morizumi (2001), and is entitled “Does Gender Matter in Language Learning?” Despite being in a relatively unknown journal, the article is very thorough and provokes and answers many questions. This is doubtlessly because the article benefits from being based upon her PhD dissertation. Morizumi aims to explore the question by combining qualitative and quantitative data.

Morizumi begins with the assumption that gender differences in education are not based in differences in the neurological structures in the male and female brains. The literature she draws upon makes the point that the gender-based differences in the educational experience are more likely to be based in social norms. Further research cited bears out the fact that this is a well-researched phenomenon in other countries; therefore it should not be seen as a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, merely a uniquely Japanese manifestation of the phenomenon.

The actual research was based on a number of surveys and questionnaires conducted at International Christian University (ICU), Tokyo. There were 64 respondents/participants with a female male split of 42 female, 22 male. The following represents a summary of her findings:

1. Female students are more likely to feel that a second language is important than male students.
2. Female students are more likely than male students to see a second language as a necessity for their employment ambitions.
3. Female students tend to express integrative motivational factors for acquiring a second language.
4. Male students tend to express more instrumental motivational factors.
5. Both male and female respondents displayed a tendency to express traditional Japanese gender divisions.
6. Both male and female students believe that there is a gender division in terms of school subjects.
7. Both male and female students see math and science as predominantly male subjects whereas humanities and arts are predominantly female subjects.

Discussing these findings, Morizumi suggests that the difference in the ethnolinguistic identity of female and male Japanese students may be a key factor. Morizumi points out the fact that ethnolinguistic identities are often forged and enforced by group norms. The research of Spolsky (1989, as cited in

Morizumi, 2001) states that there is a difference in attitude to second language learning between those with a strong ethnolinguistic identity and those with a weak ethnolinguistic identity. Students with a strong ethnolinguistic identity favour a more formal learning style whereas those with a weak ethnolinguistic identity favour a more communicative learning style. Morizumi couples Spolsky's idea and the idea of ethnolinguistic group norms as a basis for analyzing the response of the Japanese students, both male and female, that participated in her research. Japanese male students have a strong ethnolinguistic identity and therefore are more interested in formal learning of second languages and this learning is primarily for test-taking purposes in order to secure work within Japan that will be unlikely to require (or is believed to be unlikely to require) any second language ability. Japanese female students have a weak ethnolinguistic identity and therefore are inclined towards communicative language learning with the hope of using this second language proficiency to gain employment in a field outside the predominantly male fields of employment. In short, the perceived benefits of second language proficiency are not appealing to the male students but are appealing to female students. This motivational disparity has a knock-on effect with regards to performance.

The role of gender in foreign language learning attitudes

The second paper discussed is "The Role of Gender in Foreign Language Learning Attitudes: Japanese female students' attitudes towards English learning" (Kobayashi, 2002). Kobayashi explores the more positive attitudes towards English study amongst female high school and university students through a large-scale questionnaire. We are not going to discuss the quantitative research here, but will rather attempt to summarize the conclusions (and again this must be a brief description that will lack certain details).

1. Male students prefer science, economics and mathematics.
2. Female students prefer foreign languages.
3. Mass media images of women portray a favorable intellectual and professional association with English for Japanese women.
4. Traditional female employment opportunities in Japan for women do not present opportunities for the use of English language skills. Indeed, a survey amongst female OLs (the name given to female office staff in a Japanese office, literally *office lady*) ranked English as the *most useless* skill.
5. There is a strong desire amongst female Japanese students to study abroad, especially in the USA.

Kobayashi makes the point that gender is a social construction (it is worth pointing out that *gender* equates with the masculine/feminine whereas *sex* equates with the male/female; the former are socially constructed values

whereas the later are biological categories). In a powerful conclusion based upon the data Kobayashi says:

These qualitative and quantitative data point to the possibility that young Japanese women's marginalized status in Japanese mainstream society and predictable readiness to look for a new, better life in a new community (temporarily or permanently) constitute one factor underlying their positive attitudes towards English language learning, English-language related professions, English speaking people and English speaking communities. (Kobayashi, 2002, pp.192)

Motivation and gender in the Japanese EFL classroom

The third paper "Motivation and gender in the Japanese EFL classroom" (Mori and Gobel 2006) looks primarily at gender differences in relation to motivation in Japanese EFL classes. The two motivational theories that underpin this research are Gardner's Socio-educational model and expectancy-value theory. The main findings are:

1. Japanese students desire (male and female) to study English is based more upon a desire to travel overseas as opposed to wishing to fully integrate into an English-speaking community (this probably means emigrating from Japan to an English-speaking country, but it is not explicitly stated that this was the meaning).
2. Female students have a higher degree of integrative motivation than male students.

This paper, although significantly more limited in its scope, interestingly differentiates between a desire to travel and a desire to emigrate. Unlike the previous two papers, Mori and Gobel suggest that student motivation goes as far as, and only as far as, travelling or studying overseas, but stops short of actually living abroad. This is different from at least one of the interview extracts of Hines (Hines, 1994, cited in Kobayashi, 2002), which suggested that many female students studying in the USA were actually interested in living there. It need not be seen as contradictory however. Hines was interviewing Japanese women who were completing either their MA or PhD degrees. Mori and Gobel were interviewing second-year university students. Therefore the age difference could account for this difference in goals, as well as the fact that students completing a graduate degree will already have invested a significant amount of time in their experience abroad and may have begun a more permanent integration than was their initial intention.

CONCLUSIONS

Obviously, the summaries of the articles discussed are so brief as to contain a number of errors of omission and therefore lack the sophisticated nuances contained in the original articles. However, it would be fair to say that a number of common themes can be found in the papers.

Firstly, gender differences in education are not the consequence of biology, have no basis in neuroscience, and are not the effect of educational standards enshrined in Japanese law. Gender differences in education, and specifically in attitudes towards English learning, are mainly social constructions. This is not to dismiss the power of such attitudes with a flippant call for “*everyone to just wake up.*” Social norms are powerful and very often the individuals are not consciously aware of them. If the social norm that currently exists states that foreign languages are for women and math and science are for men then this will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not a giant step from this starting point (whether rightly or wrongly) to believe that women study foreign languages because women are better at foreign languages. This is very much a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* logical fallacy, but on a broad scale. A similar event is well documented in Rosenthal and Jacobson’s undeservedly forgotten work *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968) that highlights an experiment in which teachers at the start of an academic year were told to watch certain students who were known to be exceptionally bright. Each one of those students gained very good grades at the end of the year. Unbeknownst to the teachers, however, the students had been chosen at random to see if teacher expectations could influence student performance in the classroom. The clear findings were that this was certainly possible. Nowadays, of course, such an experiment would not pass any ethical review committee.

Secondly, there may be a relationship between learning preferences and teaching trends. The suggestion was made that male students tended to have instrumental motivation, and favored traditional teaching styles unlike the female students who tended to have integrative motivation and favored more open, communicative learning styles. Since the 1980s a more communicative approach to teaching English as a foreign language has come to the fore. This approach to teaching is a far more student-centric approach than that which may be favored by male students with a strong ethnolinguistic identity. Therefore, the fact that female students may be perceived as doing better at English than their male counterparts may owe something to the fact that the prevailing trend in teaching is one that favors female students.

Thirdly, with regards to the students’ future lives, proficiency in English may not be viewed as particularly necessary on the part of male students but is far more important for female students. It has been argued that the female students believe their best chance for a fulfilling professional job will not lie in placing their trust in predominantly male economic spheres and therefore seek fulfilling work outside of these environments. The mass media

has created the image of the English-speaking world as welcoming for women, and therefore exclusionary towards men. The danger is of exaggerating how male-centric Japanese society is, and this is something that should be guarded against. Sadly, the accusation does appear to be supported by *The Global Gender Gap Report 2014* (Hausmann, Tyson, Bekouche, & Zahidi, 2014; see Appendix A for complete data). This report looks at the equality of treatment for men and women within the same country and not in comparison to other countries and rates the country on this scale. Therefore if a country treats men as badly as it treats women it will still receive a high 'equality' score. Out of 142 countries, Japan came 104th, 15 places behind China, and 9 places ahead of Kuwait. In terms of political empowerment Japan finished 129 out of 142. Inequality was practically non-existent in educational enrollment, or health but in terms of equality of average pay for similar work, leadership roles within business, and political leadership the score was very disappointing. This ranking and scoring has not changed very much since 2000, a fact not indicating any light at the end of the tunnel.

That said, the purpose of this paper was not to highlight the inequality Japanese women face in society. The purpose of this paper was to see if it was possible to answer the question "Are female Japanese university students better than male Japanese university students at English?" Our belief (based upon the three articles discussed) is that there is no actual difference in ability but there is a difference in motivation. Japanese female university students seem to feel that proficiency in a foreign language will go some way to providing employment possibilities that would be denied were they to pursue educational paths in the subjects traditionally associated with men, i.e., math, science and economics. The validity of this belief may be born out by the fact that the female-to-male ratio in legislators, senior officials, and managers is a 12/88 split, not encouraging for any female university students considering business or economics, and that women in ministerial positions has a 13/87 split.

Therefore, the conclusion of this paper is that the evidence suggests that university subjects are chosen with a strong influence from the social norms of the traditional gender division within academic subjects and that this can (a) influence teachers into perceiving that female students are more proficient and (b) have a motivational impact on the students.

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APPENDIX A: GGGR 2014 data relevant to Japan.

Japan

Gender Gap Index 2014

Rank
104
(out of 142 countries)

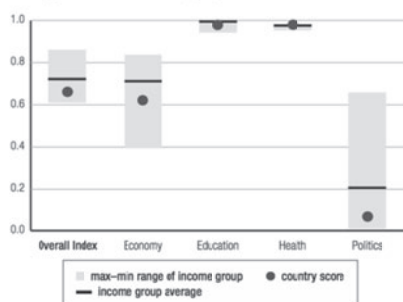
Score
0.658
(0.00 = inequality, 1.00 = equality)

Key Demographic and Economic Indicators

GDP (US\$ billions).....4,766.66
GDP (PPP) per capita (constant 2011, international \$).....34,882
Total population (millions).....127.34
Population growth (%).....-0.17
Overall population sex ratio (male/female).....0.95

	Rank	Score	Sample average	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio	
Country Score Card							
ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITY.....	102	0.618	0.596				
Labour force participation.....	83	0.75	0.67	64	84	0.75	
Wage equality for similar work (survey).....	53	0.68	0.61	—	—	0.68	
Estimated earned income (PPP US\$).....	74	0.60	0.53	23,949	40,000	0.60	
Legislators, senior officials and managers.....	112	0.12	0.27	11	89	0.12	
Professional and technical workers.....	78	0.87	0.65	47	53	0.87	
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT.....	93	0.978	0.935				
Literacy rate.....	1	1.00	0.87	99	99	1.00	
Enrolment in primary education.....	—	—	0.94	—	—	—	
Enrolment in secondary education.....	1	1.00	0.62	100	99	1.01	
Enrolment in tertiary education.....	105	0.90	0.88	58	65	0.90	
HEALTH AND SURVIVAL.....	37	0.979	0.960				
Sex ratio at birth (female/male).....	94	0.94	0.92	—	—	0.94	
Healthy life expectancy.....	1	1.06	1.04	77	72	1.07	
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT.....	129	0.058	0.214				
Women in parliament.....	126	0.09	0.25	8	92	0.09	
Women in ministerial positions.....	98	0.13	0.20	11	89	0.13	
Years with female head of state (last 50).....	64	0.00	0.20	0	50	0.00	

Country score within income group

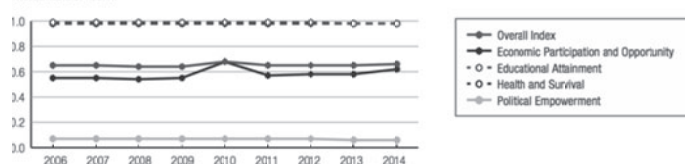


Country score vs sample average



	OVERALL		ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION		EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		HEALTH AND SURVIVAL		POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Gender Gap Index 2014 (out of 142 countries)	104	0.658	102	0.618	93	0.978	37	0.979	129	0.058
Gender Gap Index 2013 (out of 136 countries)	105	0.650	104	0.584	91	0.976	34	0.979	118	0.060
Gender Gap Index 2012 (out of 135 countries)	101	0.653	102	0.576	81	0.987	34	0.979	110	0.070
Gender Gap Index 2011 (out of 135 countries)	98	0.651	100	0.567	80	0.986	1	0.980	101	0.072
Gender Gap Index 2010 (out of 134 countries)	94	0.652	101	0.572	82	0.986	1	0.980	101	0.072
Gender Gap Index 2009 (out of 134 countries)	101	0.645	108	0.550	84	0.985	41	0.979	110	0.065
Gender Gap Index 2008 (out of 130 countries)	98	0.643	102	0.544	82	0.985	38	0.979	107	0.065
Gender Gap Index 2007 (out of 128 countries)	91	0.645	97	0.549	69	0.986	37	0.979	94	0.067
Gender Gap Index 2006 (out of 115 countries)	80	0.645	83	0.545	60	0.986	1	0.980	83	0.067

Trend 2006–2014



Selected contextual data

EMPLOYMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Female, male adult unemployment rate (as % of female, male labour force)	4.0, 4.6
Female, male part-time employment (as % of total female, male employment)	33.4, 10.1
Female, male workers in informal employment (as % of non-agricultural employment)	—, —
Share of women employed in the non-agricultural sector (% of total non-agricultural employment)	43
Average minutes spent per day on unpaid work (female, male)	326, 69
Percentage of women, men with an account at a formal financial institution	97, 96
Ability of women to rise to positions of enterprise leadership ¹	4.5
Firms with female top managers (% of firms)	—
Share of women on boards of listed companies (%)	4
Firms with female participation in ownership (% of firms)	—

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH

Percentage of Internet users (female, male)	74, 85
Women, men who used a mobile phone in the last 12 months (%)	72, 75
Percentage of tertiary-level STEM students (female, male)	14, 86
Percentage of tertiary-level STEM graduates (female, male)	14, 86
Percentage of PhD graduates (female, male)	30, 70
Percentage of total R&D personnel (FTE) (female, male)	—, —

HEALTH

Cardiovascular disease age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	58.9, 108.0
Cancer age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male), excl. non-melanoma skin cancer	73.2, 144.9
Diabetes age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	2.5, 5.4
Respiratory diseases age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	8.9, 26.2
HIV age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	0.0, 0.1
Malaria age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	0.0, 0.0
Tuberculosis age-standardized deaths per 100,000 (female, male)	0.5, 1.2
Malnutrition prev., weight for age (female, male) (% of children <5)	—, —

MARRIAGE AND CHILDREARING

Singulate mean age at marriage (years) (female, male)	30, 31
Early marriage (% of women aged 15–19)	—
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) ²	6 [5–7]
Total fertility rate (children per woman)	1.4
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19)	5.4
Mean age of women at the birth of the first child	29
Antenatal care coverage, at least one visit (%)	—
Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)	100
Contraceptive prevalence (% of married women or in-union)	54
Legislation permitting abortion to preserve a woman's physical health	Yes

CHILDCARE ECOSYSTEM

Length of maternity leave (calendar days)	98
Maternity leave benefits (% of wages paid in covered period)	66
Provider of maternity benefits	Government 100%
Length of paternity leave (calendar days)	—
Paternity leave benefits (% of wages paid in covered period)	—
Provider of paternity benefits	—

RIGHTS AND NORMS

Parental authority in marriage ³	—
Parental authority after divorce ³	—
Female genital mutilation (% of women aged 15–49)	—
Existence of legislation punishing acts of violence against women in case of domestic violence ³	—
Existence of legislation prohibiting gender-based discrimination	Yes
Inheritance rights of daughters ³	—
Women's access to land ownership ³	—
Women's access to credit ³	—
Women's access to property other than land ³	—
Year women received right to vote	1945, 1947
Quota type (single/lower house)	—
Voluntary political party quotas	—

¹ Survey data, responses on a 1-to-7 scale (1 = worst score, 7 = best score)

² Bracketed numbers show the range between the uncertainties, estimated to contain the true maternal mortality ratio with a 95% probability

³ Data on a 0-to-1 scale (1 = worst score, 0 = best score)

(Source: Hausmann, Tyson, Bekouche, & Zahidi, 2014)