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Motivational and perception changes in learning Japanese in Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

This study explores issues related to motivation and perception change towards learning Japanese among language students at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The aim of this study is to 1) explore students' motivational change during the semester, 2) identify the factors that influence these changes, and 3) ascertain any changes to students' perceptions regarding the difficulty in acquiring Japanese language skills. The questionnaire survey was conducted at the beginning and at the end of a 14–week semester. Findings show that the major motivating factor identified was the teacher and the major demotivating factor was difficulty of the language. It was also found that while students perceived writing skills were the most difficult at the beginning of the semester, their perception about difficulty has shifted to listening skills at the end of the semester.

Keywords: *Japanese; motivation; language learning; demotivation; perception; Brunei.*

Introduction

In Brunei, the majority of the population are native Malay speakers whereas English is widely used in education and for business. Educated people are generally bi- or tri-lingual for example in Bruneian Malay, English and sometimes a local language or a Chinese language (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013). Modern foreign languages such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese and French are taught at the Language Centre of the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD, thereafter). These languages are taught as selective subjects to all students across the campus regardless of their chosen major and academic year of study. The Japanese language courses consist of 6 levels[2] and are taught by Japanese native instructors. Students who complete all 6 levels usually have the opportunity to count Japanese as their minor subject. Since the establishment of the Language Centre within UBD in 2001, Japanese has been one of the most popular languages among students at the UBD along with Korean and Chinese. Keaney and Mundia

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[2] 6 levels in UBD do not comply with Japanese Language Proficiency Test levels.

(2014) focused on the motivation of students studying the Japanese language at UBD and identified five main motivational factors, namely: (1) Interest in Japanese pop culture and traditional culture; (2) Interest in Japanese language orientation; (3) Understanding Japanese people and society orientation; (4) Career use of Japanese language orientation; and (5) Self-satisfaction orientation. Students who have chosen to study Japanese bring high level of motivation to the classes in general. However, the enrolment figures for each level start to decrease as the levels go up. This phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that students graduate in between the levels, thus, they do not complete up to level 6. It could also be assumed that their motivation for learning Japanese decreases as time passes. This leads to the question: why some students complete the whole course and some do not?

Motivation is considered one of the key aspects which affects learners' individual achievement in second/foreign language learning (L2, thereafter). Dörnyei (1994) defines motivation as one of the main determinations of L2 learning achievement. While studies focused on specific types of motivation and possible learning outcomes, much research attention has focused on dynamic and temporal dimension of L2 motivation. A number of studies (Gardner et al., 2004; Hsieh, 2009; Waninge et al., 2014; Piniel & Csizér, 2015) have been carried out on the process of motivational development over time in variety of L2 learning context, i.e. different age groups, place of residence, and L2 languages. However, only a few studies (such as Moriya, 2002) have been conducted focusing on the intensity and fluctuating nature of motivation in the context of studying Japanese as a foreign language.

Hence the research questions investigated are as follows: Do levels of motivation of Brunei students at different proficiency levels change over an academic semester? What causes these changes in motivation? Within four skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) which skill was perceived as the most difficult at the beginning of the semester? Does this concept change over an academic semester? It is clear, however, that there has been so far extremely scanty research on motivational change in universities in Brunei. The current study, therefore, explores issues related to motivation and perception change towards learning the Japanese language among UBD students. The objectives of this study broadly are to:

- explore students' motivational change during the 14-weeks semester;
- identify the factors that influence these changes, and
- ascertain any changes to students' perceptions regarding the difficulty in acquiring Japanese language skills.

Dynamic changes in motivation

Motivation has traditionally been considered a relatively stable emotional or mental state (Dörnyei, 2000). A framework often referred to as the *Action Control Theory* was developed by Heckhansen and Kuhl (1985). They attempted to separate the motivated behavioural process into two phases: i) pre-decisional phase (intention-formation process) and ii) post-decisional phase (action implementation process). They contend that these two phases were strengthened by different motivational levels. Similarly, Williams and Burden (1997:121) separated the motivation process into three stages: 'Reasons for doing something', 'Deciding to do something' and 'Sustaining the effort or persisting. Following Heckhausen and Kuhl's *Action Control Theory*, Dörnyei and Otto (1998) further developed the *Process Oriented Framework* which consists of three phases; i) pre actional phase ii) actional phase and iii) post actional–phase. Dörnyei (2005 and 2006) demonstrates this model as 'how initial wishes and desires are first transformed into goals and then into operationalized intentions, and how these intentions are enacted, learning (hopefully) to the accomplishment of the goal and concluded by the final evaluation of the process'. Based on the *Process Oriented Framework*, many researchers focused on dynamic characteristic and changeable nature of motivations.

Waninge et al. (2014), for example, focused on motivational dynamics of 4 language learners during their language lessons and demonstrated motivation changes over time on an individual level. They suggest that motivation may change at different time scales over the course of a lesson and it is inseparable from the learner's individual learning context. Similarly, Pawlak (2012) investigated the changes in the motivation of 28 Polish senior high school students within both single and series of lessons and revealed that both the nature and magnitude of motivation are not stable and they are subject to change over time. Findings from these studies support the literature that motivation is dynamic in nature and can change in different learning settings.

In order to examine regular changes in learner motivation, a number of researchers studied possible factors that may enhance L2 motivation. Their studies suggest that factors influencing fluctuation in learner motivation may have important relationship with aspect of learning contexts, including teachers, teaching methods, teaching and learning environment (Matsumoto, 2012).

Methodology

Participants: This research is based on both qualitative and quantitative data collected by using questionnaires. The questionnaire survey was conducted in two phases: i) at the beginning of the semester and ii) at the end of the semester. In the first phase, there were 91 (39 male and 52 female) participants and in the second phase, there were 74 (33 male and 41 female) participants, who were all university students enrolled at the UBD studying Japanese as an elective module. Response rates in two phases were 70% and 57% respectively. All the other participants were in their 1st, 2nd or 4th years of study, except 1 international student who had enrolled in the university for only one semester. Due to the university's Discovery Year Programme[3] there were no participants from 3rd year students. The participants were from 6 different Japanese language proficiency groups (Level 1 the lowest and Level 6 the highest) and the age range was between 18 and 29. All students proceed to the next level after completing their current level. Each level is completed within one semester. Their faculty varies but participants were mainly from Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Faculty of Sciences which are the two largest faculties in terms of students' enrolment numbers. Table 1 summarizes the participants' profile.

Instrument, material and procedure: In order to conduct this research, data were collected by using Qualtrics, a web-based survey research software to create and administer online surveys and analyse the results. Reasons for using online survey were to ensure students' anonymity as well as to increase accessibility. Students were able to access via mobile devices, tablets, and laptops. Pilot study was conducted before emailing survey links to students. After some minor changes, such as re-wording and rephrasing questions to further clarify the meaning of the questions, the link to the questionnaire was sent to the target groups twice during 14-week semester at the UBD; the first two weeks of the semester and the last two weeks of the semester in order to find any motivational development during the semester. The questionnaire consisted of two sections; the first section provided information about respondents' demographic variables; such as gender, age, academic year. The second section consisted of items reflecting the research questions regarding i) Learner's current level of motivational intensity in five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all motivated) to 5 (extremely motivated), ii) Factors affecting learner's motivation (asked only once at the end of semester) iii) Leaner's perception on difficulty of Japanese language skills in seven-point Likert scale ranging

[3] Discovery Year Programme requires all the 3rd year students to study abroad or experience internship outside university

from 1 (extremely easy) to 7 (extremely difficult). Means were calculated to investigate i) and iii).

Table 1. Profiles of the participants

		Beginning of semester n=91		End of semester n=74	
		f	%	*f*	%
Gender	Male	39	42.9	33	44.6
	Female	52	57.1	41	55.4
Nationality	Bruneian	85	93.4	71	96
	Chinese	5	5.4	3	4.1
	Malaysian	1	1.2	0	0
Academic year of study	1st year	23	25.3	17	23
	2nd year	48	52.8	38	51.3
	4th year	18	19.8	18	24.3
	International student	2	2.2	1	1.4
Age	18-22	72	79.1	56	75.7
	23-27	18	19.8	17	23
	28-32	1	1	1	1.4
Japanese class Level	Level 1	29	31.9	16	21.6
	Level 2	30	33	32	43.2
	Level 3	18	20	11	14.9
	Level 4	7	7.7	7	9.5
	Level 5	4	4.4	5	6.8
	Level 6	3	3.3	3	4.1
Faculty	FASS[1]	36	39.56	29	39.2
	FOS[2]	37	40.66	33	44.6
	SBE[3]	16	17.6	9	12.2
	IHS[4]	0	0	1	1.35
	FIT[5]	1	1.1	1	1.35
	APB[6]	1	1.1	1	1.35

[1]Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; [2] Faculty of Science; [3]School of Business and Economics; [4]PAPRSB Institute of Health Sciences; [5]Faculty of Integrated Technologies; [6]Academy of Brunei Studies.

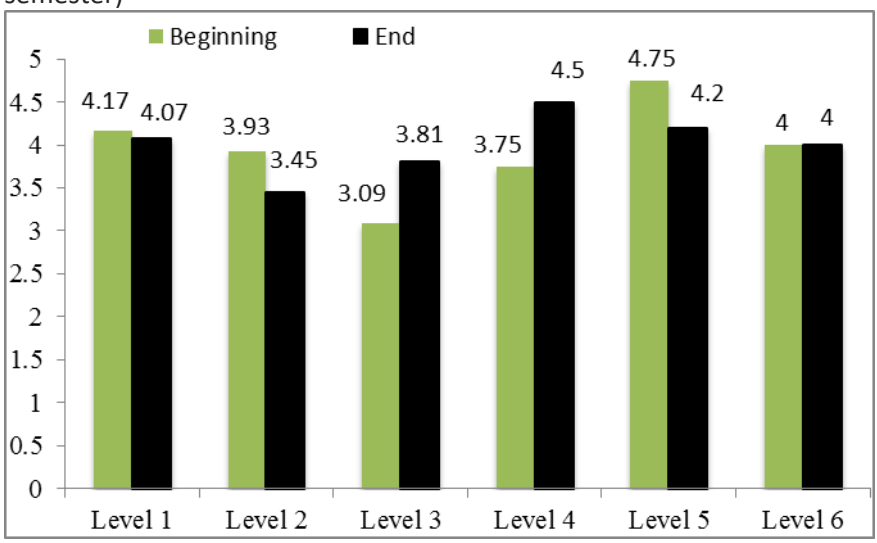
In addition, the questionnaire used at the end of the semester included one open-ended question that provided students with the opportunity to note anything that they have enjoyed during the class. The questionnaire was administered in English to ensure that the respondents understood the questions correctly. As final point, it should be noted that respondents were

informed that their responses would remain confidential, have no influence on their grade and the data collected would be used only for the purposes of this study.

Motivational change

The study focused motivational changes across 6 different Japanese language proficiency groups over one academic semester. Within a period of 14 weeks, some moderate decline in motivation was observed for the levels 1, 2 and 5, while no motivational change was seen for the Level 6. Although the drop in motivation in Level 1 was not sharp (drop by only 0.1 from 4.17 to 4.07), there was a substantial decline at the end of the semester in Level 2 by 0.48 and Level 5 by 0.55. However, even after the motivation dropped at the end of the semester in Level 5, the overall group motivation still exceeds all the other level groups with the exception of Level 4. Identical motivational progression was observed for Levels 3 and 4. Level 3 students started off the semester with the lowest motivation (3.09) among the Japanese class levels, but ended up with an increase by 3.81.

Figure 1. Motivational development (the beginning and the end of the semester)



Similarly, Level 4 displayed a sharp increase by 0.75 at the end of the semester. Interestingly, while Level 2 students' motivation reduced during the course, Level 3 students gained motivation, Level 4 students gained motivation over the course, again, Level 5 students became demotivated. It is interesting to note that, on the whole, students' motivation at the end

of the semester is higher in higher levels (Level 4 and 5) than lower levels (Level 1, 2 and 3). Figure 1 displays means of motivational intensity and change at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester in each Japanese class levels as well as motivational progression through Level 1 to Level 6.

Factors affecting motivation

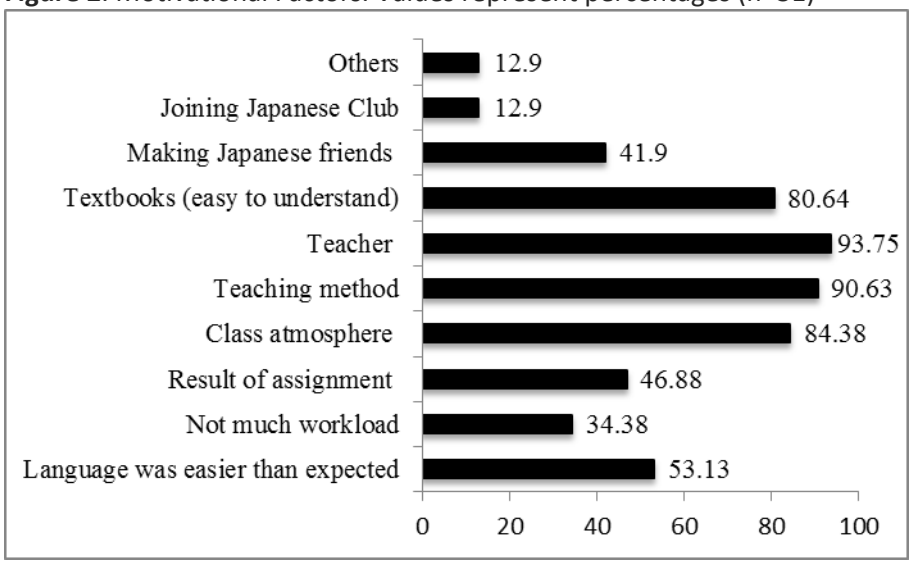
Motivation improves level of efficiency of employees. It is of paramount importance to student success too. Students work longer, harder and with more vigour and intensity when they are motivated. This section discusses the factors that influenced students' motivation. The following factors were measured for level of motivation: Teacher (i.e. instructor's overall attributes), Teaching method, Class/classroom atmosphere, Textbooks - easy to understand-, Language was easier than expected, Result of assignment, Making Japanese friends, Moderate workload, Joining the Japanese club, and Others (Figure 2). Among all the above factors indicated by students, the variable *Teacher* (94 per cent) was found to be the strongest factor influencing students' motivation followed by *teaching method* (90 per cent). This implies that teacher-related factors have a significant impact on students' motivation. A number of studies in the literature (see Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2005 and Ghenghesh, 2010) have also found *teacher* being the strongest factor in determining students' motivation. For example, Ghendhesh (2010) studied the factors affecting students' motivation in L2 language learning at an International School in Tripoli, Libya and found that among various factors, the role of *teacher* seemed to be particularly relevant for the attitude to the language and was widely considered a fundamental component of motivation. Kusunoki & Kudo's (2006) study on university students studying English in Japan also highlighted that the *teacher* factor was the determinant for motivational change. These findings support Dörnyei's (2011) argument that *teacher* is one of the most significant determinants of L2 language learners' motivation.

Among the respondents, 84 per cent mentioned *atmosphere of the class* as an important motivating factor. This means that the language learner and the environment of a language classroom influence each other rather than being independent of one another (Waninge et al. 2014). In 1994, Dörnyei categorized it as "Group-specific motivational components". He suggests that classroom learning takes place within groups which are powerful social entities and that group dynamics influence students' cognitive processes. Through a communicative approach applied in the

Japanese classes, students are constantly encouraged to interact with each other to develop their communicative abilities and competencies. The result seems to indicate that interaction between students created a climate of comfort. Positive group interdependence and supportive behaviours are critical factors for students in the classroom which help increase their academic performance as well as social competence (Furrer et al, 2014).

Interesting findings were obtained from the open-ended question asked 'what did you enjoy the most in the class?' For the Bruneian students, 'friends' was an additional keyword which contributed to the positive perception of the *atmosphere of the class*. For example, "able to learn the language with teacher and many friends in a good atmosphere so I don't feel stressed at all"; "Well, actually I like everything about Japanese class from the learning to the activities and most of all making friends and having a good bond with everyone"; "the fun of studying with friends who share the same interest as myself".

Figure 2. Motivational Factors. Values represent percentages (n=31)



The top three factors (*teacher*, *teaching method* and *atmosphere of the class*) which were supported by overwhelmingly high percentage of the respondents (84 per cent) turned out to be teacher and classroom related factors. This clearly indicates that positive attitude towards the teacher and ensuring maximum effectiveness in instruction in a positive classroom environment significantly affect learners' motivation. A similar argument was put forward by Clement et al. (1994) who claimed that the evaluations

of the environment, the teacher and the students' evaluation of their own learner group had a strong correlation. They argued that the task, the teacher and the learner group are perceived as interdependent aspects of classroom reality. Only about 42 per cent of the respondents considered *Making Japanese friends* an important factor for motivation. This might be due to the fact that only a few students had a chance to interact with Japanese in Brunei. This is primarily because the Japanese community in Brunei is small and the number of Japanese exchange students studying at the UBD is also small. *Others* (13 per cent, 4 respondents) reported the following as motivational factors: "strong passion towards Japanese language", "to reach my dream", "learning about Japanese culture and grammar" and "topics covered" (Figure 2).

Demotivation factors

A demotivated learner is someone who was once motivated but motivation decreased due to certain external factors (Dörnyei 2001). Demotivation has direct educational implications. By identifying and understanding the possible factors that negatively affect learners' ability to learn L2, teachers can help students facilitate and enhance language learning (Meshkat, M., & Hassani, M. 2012). As demotivation is contagious, one demotivated student can have a negative effect on the entire classroom. Thus, it is important to identify the factors affecting students' demotivation and to adopt relevant strategies to enhance their motivation.

It was evident that, at the end of the semester, the level of motivation demonstrated a change from the first phase. Inspired by Baldoni (2005) a few demotivating factors were developed (such as difficulty of the language; too much workload; result of assignment; class atmosphere; teacher, teaching methods; and textbooks -difficult to understand). Among the factors of demotivation, *Difficulty of the language* (58 per cent) was found to be the dominant source of demotivation. This means that as they journey through the semester they get to know the level of difficulty and this might be different from what they thought at the beginning of the semester. *Other* demotivating factors were reported by 6 students: "lots of assignment and test from other classes"; "active participation in the student council"; "stress and workload from other courses"; "too much workload and assignments from other modules"; "group work"; "separation of previous friends/classmates from previous level so felt lonely in the class". It is important to note that within the comments in *Others*, 4 out of 6 students referred to the factors derived from outside Japanese classes. This result implies that strong engagement in other

courses or activities could work as a potential source of demotivation for students learning Japanese language in UBD. The reason could be due to lack of time in studying the language outside the classroom. Since Japanese language modules require students to work outside classroom regularly; such as revising grammar, memorizing vocabulary and learning Japanese characters, it might be that the above respondents found it difficult to spare time revising on regular basis, and thus, their motivation declined. However, even though the respondents were able to select more than one demotivating factor from the list, none of these 4 respondents indicated *result of assignment* as a demotivating factor. This finding confirms that respondents becoming demotivated due to lack of time studying does not necessarily associate with an unsatisfactory performance in the assignment. Rather it might be speculated that the frustration they feel when not being able to fully commit themselves to study resulted in demotivation. This finding has been endorsed by Ushioda (2005) that steady increase in cognitive burden of language learning such as competing demands from other courses of study, may have negative consequences. It is noticeable that while it is commonly agreed that *Teacher* contributes to learners' motivation negatively as well as positively (Matsumoto, 2012; Dörnyei, 1998; Zhang, 2007; Jomairi, 2011; Arai, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004), it did not appear to be the factor for demotivation in this study, however (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Demotivation Factors. Values represent percentages (n=23)

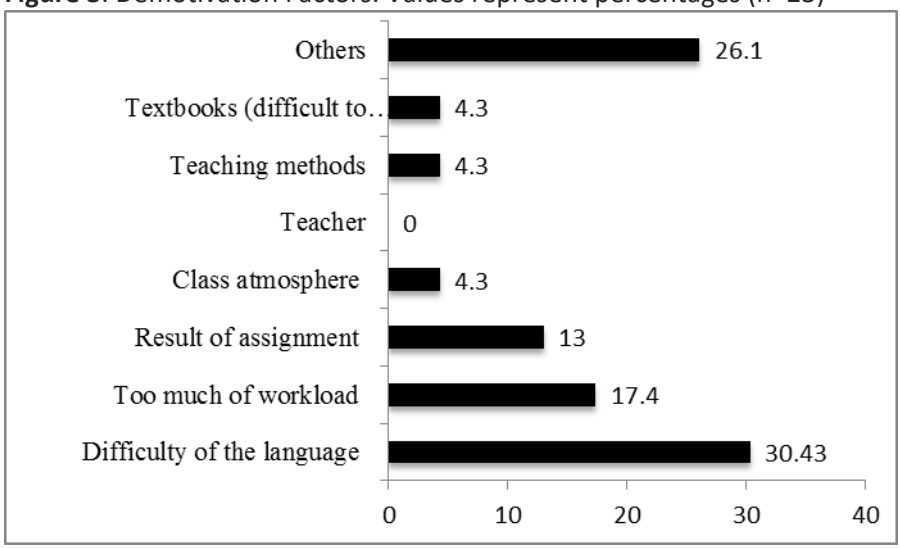
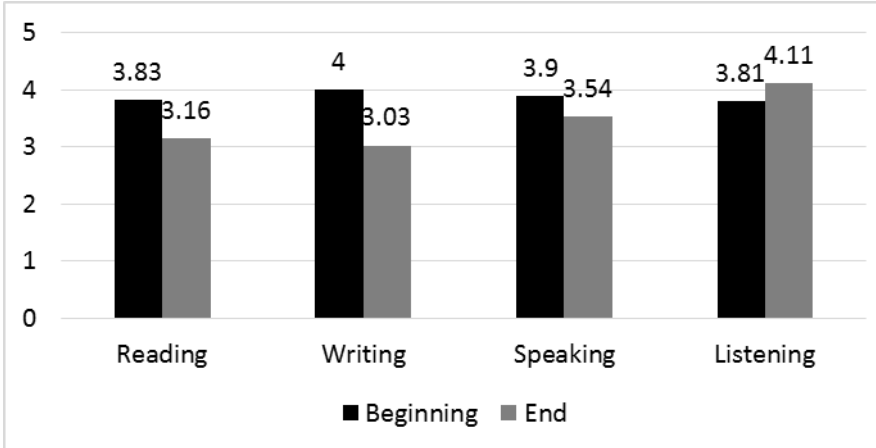


Figure 4 shows the mean difficulty of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) perceived by students at the beginning of the semester

and at the end of the semester. The result demonstrates that students' perceived difficulties in terms of the language skills have changed during the semester, with Reading, Writing and Speaking found to be less difficult, and Listening to be more difficult than predicted. At the beginning of the semester, students perceived all four skills fairly equal in terms of difficulty; Writing (4.0), Speaking (3.9), Reading (3.83) and Listening (3.81) in a difficulty ranking on the seven point Likert scale. Whilst Listening was perceived as the least difficult skill at the beginning of the semester, it was perceived as the most difficult skill after the semester with a mean value of 4.11.

Figure 4. Perception on difficulty of Japanese language skills at the beginning and end of semester



Furthermore, while Writing was perceived as the most difficult skill at the beginning of the semester, the least difficult skill for students after the actual study of Japanese turned out to be Writing (3.03). This reverse outcome might be because of the fact that students assumed Listening to be easier at the beginning of the semester simply as it is a receptive skill. In reality, however, the listening practices in the class are from CDs and videos spoken by native speakers, which means that the speed in spoken practice is faster than they expected. In native speakers' speech, the series of sound units are connected together rapidly, this makes it difficult for students' to distinguish with untrained ears. Exposure to substantial amounts of authentic speech in listening comprehension practice in the class might have overwhelmed students. With regard to Writing, it can be estimated from the results that students found Japanese writing system and scripts to be significantly difficult at the beginning of the semester. This might be due to complex writing system of Japanese i.e. mixture of three basic scripts

(Hiragana: 46 characters, Katakana: 46 characters and Kanji-Chinese characters: 2136 characters) and that students were well aware of the complexity at the beginning of the semester. The reasons why they found it less difficult at the end of the semester might be speculated that (i) only Hiragana was taught in Level 1, Katakana in Level 2 and Kanji was introduced from Level 3 onwards, thus reduced students' burden (ii) Kanji learners have developed their own strategies of learning the characters as levels go up which made them easier to learn new characters. In other words, they have acquired phonetic and semantic patters that enabled them to make associations with a similar character previously learned. Accumulation of knowledge and building up their strategies to learn might have contributed to positive outlook towards Kanji learning.

Conclusions

In this study, I have investigated students' changes of motivational intensity and identified the factors positively or negatively affecting their motivation. The study was also an attempt to uncover the change in students' perception of the difficulty of Japanese language skills. The findings demonstrate that students' motivation changes both within one single 14-week course and also a longer period of time; through Level 1 to Level 6. The major motivating factor identified was *teacher* whilst the major demotivating factor was *difficulty of the language*. The study also revealed that while students perceived Writing to be the most difficult at the beginning of the semester, their perception about difficulty has changed to Listening at the end of the semester. The findings confirm that it is essential for teachers to acknowledge that students' motivation is not stable but changes over time and that the factor significantly affecting their motivation is teachers themselves. While teachers have great impact on enhancing students' motivational levels and influence their quality of learning, teachers also gain motivation from students' success and their enthusiasm to learn. One of the main satisfiers for teachers is students' achievement (Day, 2004) and their achievement depends on their level of motivation. Clearly, teachers' and students' motivation are correlated. To support and find ways to maintain or uphold students' motivation could ultimately contribute to job satisfaction for teachers. In this study, *teacher* and *teaching method* were found to be significant in enhancing the motivation. This implies that further research may be conducted to explore teaching strategies that enable learners to remain motivated. Research in this area could employ qualitative data collection methods such as

interviews, diary studies and classroom observations for future improvement in Japanese language education in Brunei Darussalam.

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