

## Article

# Exploring Perceived Speaking Skills, Motives, and Communication Needs of Undergraduate Students Studying Japanese Language

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the perceived speaking skills of undergraduate students who were majoring or minoring in Japanese Studies at two universities in Vietnam and Bulgaria. It also examined the factors associated with students' speaking skills, their motives for studying Japanese, and their needs for communication with native Japanese speakers while proposing a hypothetical model linking these constructs. A total of 108 students participated in the cross-sectional online survey questionnaire, which included questions on personal information, perceived Japanese language skills, motives for studying Japanese, needs for communication with native Japanese speakers, and self-esteem. The data were analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that the respondents perceived their Japanese speaking skills level as lower than the other three skills. Factors such as age, year of enrollment, years studying Japanese, English level, co-living status, study abroad experience, and self-esteem were found to be associated with the perceived speaking skills of the respondents. Family-related factors, such as parents' education and the family's study abroad experience, were also found to be associated with perceived speaking skills. The study also validated three constructs of motives for studying Japanese, including being interested in Japan, being interested in communication, and being interested in going to Japan and highlighting the respondents' needs for communication with native speakers. The proposed model suggests that motives for studying Japanese influence perceived speaking skills and the need for communication with native Japanese speakers. The findings of this study have implications for Japanese language education, particularly in the development of teaching strategies that enhance students' speaking skills and provide opportunities for communication with native speakers. It also underscores the importance of understanding students' motives for studying Japanese, as these motivations can influence their language proficiency and the effectiveness of language education programs.

**Keywords:** speaking skills; Japanese language; native Japanese speaker; communication

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## 1. Introduction

The study of the Japanese language is a popular pursuit around the world, driven by the allure of its rich cultural heritage, global economic influence, and the increasing demand for cross-cultural communication and understanding, as well as the allure of its unique linguistic features. According to the latest survey on Japanese language education abroad conducted by The Japan Foundation in 2021, the total number of Japanese learners in the world has reached 3,794,714 people, slightly decreasing from the peak number of the previous survey in 2018. Many universities, language schools, and cultural institutions offer Japanese language courses and programs for students of all levels, from beginners to advanced learners. However, there is a decrease in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) providing Japanese courses, as well as the number of Japanese teachers

at HEIs and the number of students enrolled in those courses. The motivations for studying Japanese at HEIs remain relatively consistent. The top motivations for studying Japanese at higher educational institutions are: (1) An interest in manga, anime, and other forms of Japanese popular culture; (2) The desire to increase one's competency for future work or career; and (3) Interest in Japan and Japanese culture, such as history, literature, and traditional arts. Other motivations include the desire to study abroad in Japan, to communicate with Japanese people, and a personal interest in the Japanese language itself [1].

Many studies have been devoted to investigating motivations for studying Japanese in different settings [2]. A study conducted among undergraduate students majoring in the Japanese language determined that Japanese learning in mainland China was associated with an interest in the culture of Japan, with the motives ranging from leisure and eating to journey and the benefits and practical outcomes of learning [3]. However, a study conducted in Indonesia demonstrated that an interest in the Japanese language, not pop culture, is the primary motive for many learners to major in Japanese in higher education [4]. Another study conducted among Thai students extracted six factors of motive orientation, namely cultural understanding, integrative, instrumental, profit enjoyment, international, and inducing, as these factors influence academic performance [5]. A study in Europe has revealed that the number of Japanese learners in Europe has increased, and that the plurilingualism beliefs have led to their confidence in learning the Japanese language [6]. Another study has shown that students majoring in Japanese in Ukraine have a high motivation to work for a Japanese company or study in Japan at the beginning of the study [7]. In the Middle East, a survey in Qatar has revealed that the starting point for learning was the two-dimensional world, such as animation. However, after that, the interest clearly changed to Japan itself [8].

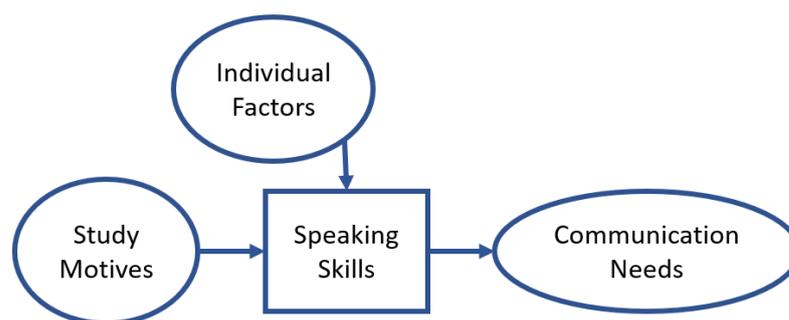
Some scholars realize that there is an internationalization process of Japanese language education, which refers to efforts aimed at promoting the teaching and learning of the Japanese language in a global context [9]. It involves making Japanese language education accessible and relevant to individuals outside of Japan, as well as integrating cultural and intercultural components into language instruction. The trend is prominent in Asia and, to a lesser extent, in other regions across the globe [10–12]. Japanese studies have long been popular in Southeast Asia [13]. Japanese language education at the university level in Southeast Asia has seen significant growth in recent years due to the increasing demand for Japanese language proficiency in the global job market. Many universities in Southeast Asia have established Japanese language programs, offering courses ranging from beginner to advanced levels. These programs not only focus on language proficiency but also cover Japanese culture, history, and business practices [14]. In Europe, Japanese language programs began to emerge in universities around the 1970s as interest in Japanese language and culture increased. Since then, the availability and scope of Japanese language education in higher education institutions across Europe have expanded [15]. Compared to Asia, Europe has less cultural and economic exchange with Japan. However, Japanese language study is somehow popular, with some universities offering degree programs in Japanese, which provide students with language skills and cultural knowledge that can be applied in a variety of fields, such as international business, education, translation, and diplomacy [16].

However, data have shown that despite this increase in popularity, the high attrition rate among students who take Japanese is due to the difficulty of the language, it not being linked to the career, and the appearance of language anxiety [17]. A study conducted in Australia revealed demotivators of studying Japanese, including the lack of exposure learning environment, learning contents, psychological factors, and teachers' attitudes [18]. From the learners' perspective, studying Japanese outside of Japan poses several challenges [19], such as limited exposure to authentic language and the lack of opportunities for authentic language use. Outside Japan, less exposure could limit students in achieving the ability to communicate with native Japanese speakers [4]. Without constant exposure to the authentic Japanese language, it can be challenging to develop proficiency in speaking,

listening, and comprehension [20]. The same could be said for limited access to cultural immersion such as cultural events and traditional Japanese practices when studying outside Japan. However, these challenges and factors that discourage learning are not confined solely to the study of Japanese but are also applicable to many other foreign languages, including Arabic [21] and Chinese [22].

In language learning, including skills such as reading, writing, and listening, speaking is the most difficult to master [23]. It seems to take more time to acquire, for speaking involves more than one person and requires various activities to enhance learners' speaking skills such as role play, presentations, and group discussions for practicing. Hence, speaking skills are emphasized among learners at a higher education level [24]. A self-perception of language speaking ability has been reported to be associated with Japanese learners' anxiety and fear of negative evaluation [25]. A study among university students in Spain has shown that a large percentage of the respondents said their Japanese conversational skills had not improved, and many of them said they would like to improve their conversational skills in the next semester [26].

While students who specialize in Japanese studies at a foreign university may choose to study in Japan at a later stage, it is not an obligatory outcome. Before engaging in this study, we investigated the concept of study in Japan and the circumstances leading to the decision to study in Japan. In previous papers, we had reported on the situation of Japanese language education in Vietnam [27] and Bulgaria [28], push–pull factors related to studying in Japan [29], challenges in attracting international students to Japan [30], and the vision and preference of international students enrolled in a Japanese language school post-pandemic [31]. In the current study, we took another step in looking further at the decision to study Japanese. Although we hypothesize that wanting to go to Japan should act as a motive for students to learn Japanese, as well as to enroll in Japanese language degree programs, actually going to Japan may not be the outcome of the process. On the other hand, we suppose that speaking skills, while influenced by some individual factors like age, living conditions, and experience, should be influenced by the motives to study a language. Taking the fact that the students study language without being able to submerge themselves in the targeted language medium, the perceived speaking skills should be connected to the communication needs of native speakers. Therefore, we propose a conceptual framework as in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework proposed by the authors.

This paper aims to explore (1) The perceived speaking skills in comparison to the other Japanese language skills of the respondents; (2) The factors that may be associated with the perceived speaking skills of the respondents; (3) The constructs of motives of students to study Japanese; (4) The need for more communication with native Japanese speakers of the respondents; and (5) Hypothetical models linking motives for studying Japanese, speaking skills, and the needs for communication with Japanese speakers.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The survey was conducted on a group of 108 undergraduate students who were majoring or minoring in Japanese language at Hanoi University, Vietnam (HANU), and Veliko Tarnovo University, Bulgaria (VTU). The age of the respondents was 19-to-34 years old. The general characteristics of the respondents were summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Respondents' characteristics.

Variable	Value	Total	
		<i>n</i>	%
Age	M = 22.01, SD = 3.01 Median = 21.00	108	100
University	HANU	92	85.2
	VTU	16	14.8
Gender	Female	92	85.2
	Male	16	14.8
Year of enrollment	First grade	4	3.7
	Second grade	5	4.6
	Third grade	74	68.5
	Fourth grade	25	23.1
Foreign student	Foreign student	9	8.3
	Local student	99	91.7
Marital status	Married	7	6.5
	Unmarried	101	93.5

### 2.2. Questionnaire

This study applied a quantitative research method. We used Microsoft Forms to create a cross-sectional online survey questionnaire. The survey was created based on the data collection forms utilized in authors' earlier studies [31] and other references [5,7], with adaptation to the current study's context. The question consisted of five parts: (1) Personal Information (socioeconomic, academic, and family background); (2) Self-evaluated Japanese language skills (four items for writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills in the Japanese language); (3) Self-reported motives to study Japanese (16 items using the five-level Likert-style questions format, as 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree); and (4) The needs for communication with native Japanese speakers (4 items), as well as Rosenberg self-esteem scale (10 items). It took about 10 min to complete the questionnaire.

### 2.3. Data Collection

We conducted a cross-sectional study from 15 December 2022 to 15 January 2023 at two selected sites. The weblink to the online survey questionnaire was created by using Microsoft Forms. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling techniques [32]. Initially, a research invitation was delivered to a core group of students in several classes majoring or minoring in Japanese studies. They were encouraged to access the survey link and share it with the other students from the same class. Before respondents chose to participate, the survey's goal was laid out on the questionnaire's first page. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Before taking part in the study, all participants were fully informed of the confidentiality policy. Since no personal information was recorded, all participation information was completely anonymous. No incentives were provided to participants, and they could withdraw from the survey at any time. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokushima University (Ref. 20008).

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

The data were exported to Excel format and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) as well as IBM SPSS AMOS (Version 29). Based on the associations among variables found within this dataset, we tested the proposed conceptual framework for the relationship between study motives, speaking skills, and the need for communication with native Japanese speakers. After grouping the variables that appeared to be closely associated, we performed Reliability Analysis to check the internal consistency among items in the proposed framework, before performing Confirmatory Factor Analysis to verify the models.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Characteristics of Respondents

According to Table 1, the majority (85.2%) of the respondents were female, and two-thirds are in their third grade. Only a few students were international students among the respondents in HANU. There is also a small proportion of respondents who were married, all from HANU.

#### 3.2. Self-Reported Japanese Proficiency

The speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills are self-evaluated by the respondents by a five-level Likert scale (1 for very poor, 2 for poor, 3 for moderate, 4 for good, and 5 for excellent). The results are shown in Table 2. The four-skill scale has acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.765). To represent how relatively proficient one's speaking skills are compared to the other skills of a student, regardless of the general proficiency level, we created a new variable, "relative speaking skills," which is the ratio of speaking skills to the average value of the four skills. We found that the average perceived speaking in this study (2.59) is less than the average for four skills (2.75) (Paired Samples T-Test,  $M = -0.16$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ;  $t(df) = -2.85(107)$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). This resulted in relative speaking skills of 93%, where 100% means speaking skill levels are equal to other skills.

**Table 2.** Perceived Japanese language skills.

Type of Skills	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
	n = 108				
Listening	2.72	3.00	3	0.936	0.765
Speaking (S)	2.59	3.00	3	0.907	
Reading	3.05	3.00	3	0.702	
Writing	2.65	3.00	3	0.801	
Average for four skills (A)	2.75	2.75	3	0.644	
Relative Speaking Skills (=S/A)	93%	96%		22.9%	

#### 3.3. Association between Perceived Speaking Skills and Individual Variables

The factors associated with perceived relative speaking skills are age, grade, years studying Japanese, and English proficiency. No family-related factors are found associated with perceived relative speaking skills. Factors associated with perceived speaking skills are local students, having a roommate, having experience studying in Japan, self-esteem, and parents' education level (Table 3).

#### 3.4. Self-Reported Motives to Study Japanese

We grouped the 16 items into six constructs based on content relevancy: Interest in Japan (5 items), Communication (3 items), Going to Japan (3 items), Career (3 items), Academic (2 items), and Social Influence (2 items). The self-reported items use the five-level Likert-style questions format, as 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for

neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree. We tested the reliability of each construct. The constructs of motives are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 3.** Association between perceived speaking skills and individual variables.

Variable	<i>n</i> = 108	Speaking (S)	All Four Skills (A)	Relative Speaking (S/A)
Age	Spearman's rho	0.172	−0.010	0.267 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.076	0.917	0.005
Sex (female, male)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	5.019 (4)	19.099 (14)	29.499 (21)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.285	0.161	0.103
Faculty (HANU, VTU)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	3.537 (4)	26.573 * (14)	59.004 (21)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.472	0.022	0.000
Grade (1, 2, 3, 4)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	12.671 (12)	57.353(42)	109.845 *** (63)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.393	0.057	0.000
Int'l student (yes, no)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	11.729 *(4)	29.107 ** (14)	23.127 (21)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.019	0.010	0.337
Marital (yes, no)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	7.220 (4)	12.09 9 (14)	17.387 (21)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.125	0.598	0.687
Living place (dormitory, rental place, home)	Kruskal-Wallis (df)	0.106 (2)	0.341 (2)	0.304 (2)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.948	0.843	0.859
Co-living (alone, with family, or roommates)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	18.796 * (8)	43.249 * (28)	54.962 (42)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.016	0.033	0.087
Study abroad experience (none, short, long, Japan)	Kruskal-Wallis (df)	13.341 ** (3)	15.733 *** (3)	3.664 (3)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.004	0.001	0.300
Years studied Japanese (1~>6)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	31.100 (20)	84.865 (70)	153.607 *** (105)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.054	0.109	0.001
English level (beginner, intermediate, advanced)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	7.845 (8)	37.232 (28)	70.597 ** (42)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.449	0.114	0.004
Plan after graduation (work, study abroad, not decided)	Kruskal-Wallis (df)	4.474 (2)	2.309 (2)	5.903 (2)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.107	0.315	0.052
Self-Esteem (Rosenberg scale)	Spearman's rho	0.329 ***	0.357 ***	0.153
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.000	0.114
Parents' education (high school, undergrad., grad.)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	15.962 * (8)	34.307 (28)	55.089 (42)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.043	0.191	0.085
Hometown (capital, provincial city, other)	Kruskal-Wallis (df)	0.282 (2)	3.513 (2)	5.360 (2)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.868	0.173	0.069
Family's study abroad experience (Japan, non-Japan, none)	Kruskal-Wallis (df)	5.181 (2)	11.732 (2)	7.035 * (2)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.075	0.421	0.030
Family income (high, average, low)	Pearson Chi-Square (df)	7.892 (8)	25.970 (28)	28.256 (42)
	Sig. (2-sided)	0.444	0.575	0.948

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

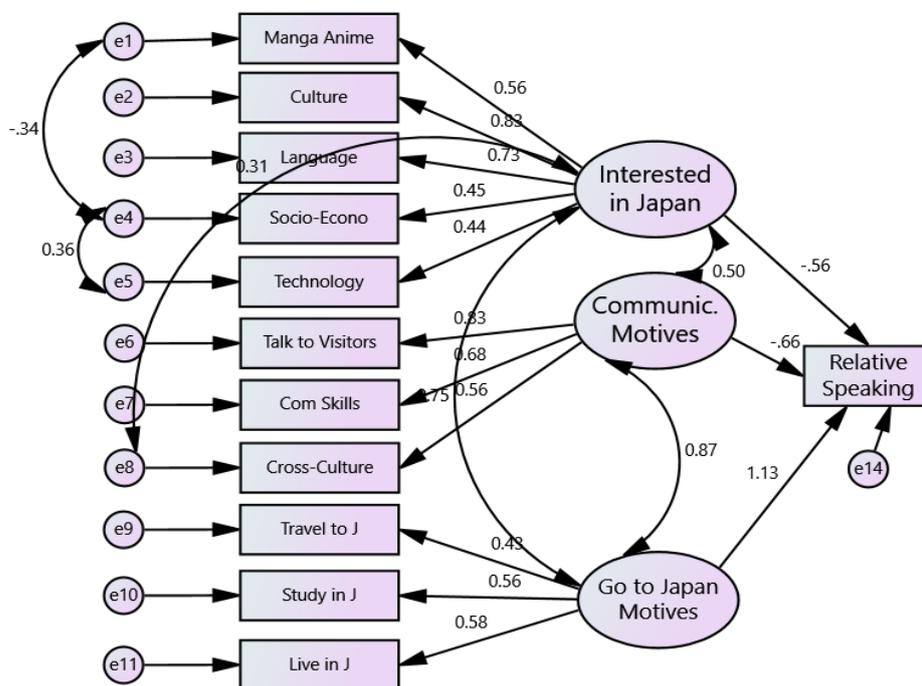
As reliability > 0.6 is viewed as acceptable [33], we subsequently selected three constructs of Interested in Japan, Communications, and Going-to-Japan for further analysis.

### 3.5. Association of Study Motives and Relative Speaking Skills

We used the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to verify the model to show the association between three constructs that show reliability in Table 4, namely Interested in Japan, Communications, and Going-to-Japan with the perceived relative speaking skills. The standardized estimates for the model are shown in Figure 2.

**Table 4.** Self-evaluated motives to learn Japanese.

Construct	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Cronbach's Alpha
		n = 108			
Interested in Japan	I am interested in manga, anime, J-Pop	3.41	1.119	3.00	0.718
	I am interested in Japan's culture, history, literature	3.65	0.857	4.00	
	I'm interested in the Japanese language itself	3.57	0.978	4.00	
	I'm interested in Japan's politics, economy, society	2.86	0.952	3.00	
	I'm interested in learning about Japan's technology	3.35	0.979	3.00	
Communication	To talk with Japanese visitors	4.00	0.843	4.00	0.716
	To be able to communicate in Japanese	4.45	0.675	5.00	
	To understand other cultures	3.94	0.830	4.00	
Go to Japan	I want to study in Japan	3.69	0.983	4.00	0.618
	I want to travel to Japan	4.44	0.646	5.00	
	I want to live in Japan	3.03	1.080	3.00	
Career	I want to pass a Japanese language exam	4.13	0.866	4.00	0.449
	I want to work for a Japanese company	3.81	0.901	4.00	
	I want to become a Japanese teacher	2.99	1.164	3.00	
Academic	I want to pass a Japanese language exam	4.13	0.866	4.00	0.378
	I want to study in Japan	3.69	0.983	4.00	
Social influence	My parents/relatives encouraged me	3.18	1.237	3.00	0.241
	My friends encouraged me	2.60	1.004	2.00	



**Figure 2.** Standardized estimates for the Model of Study Motives and Relative Speaking Skills.

The fit indices for this model are shown in Table 5. Overall, the model has most of the parameters acceptable according to the criteria of model fit [34], such as CMIN/df < 3, CFI > 0.9, GFI ~ 0.9, RMSEA = 0.08, and PCLOS > 0.05.

**Table 5.** Goodness-of-fit Indices for the model of Study Motives and Relative Speaking Skills.

Parameters	Score
Number of Parameters	31
Chi-square	79.002
Degree of freedom (df)	47
Relative Chi-square (CMIN/df)	1.681
Goodness of fit index (GFI)	0.891
Adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI)	0.819
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.910
TLI	0.873
Increment fit index (IFI)	0.914
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.080
PCLOSE	0.062

### 3.6. The Need for Communication with Native Japanese

We investigated the need for communication with native Japanese speakers. The self-reported items use the five-level Likert-style questions format, as 1 stands for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree. The four-item construct demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.782). The attitude towards online exchange and online classes as a two-item construct also showed acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.727). The results are shown in Table 6. Generally, the respondents showed the need to have more communication with native Japanese speakers, either in person or online.

**Table 6.** The need for communication with native Japanese.

Item	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Cronbach's Alpha	
				2-Item	4-Item
I need more communication with native Japanese	4.19	4.00	0.787	0.819	0.782
I want Japanese students to come to visit here	4.10	4.00	0.853		
I want to have exchange activities online with Japanese students	3.83	4.00	0.859	0.727	
Taking an online class from Japan is no problem for me	3.75	4.00	0.866		

We also found the need for in-person exchange (the first two items) is higher than the need for online communication (the last two items) by performing a paired-sample *t*-test to compare the mean of the first two items ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.755$ ) with the mean of the last two items ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.764$ );  $t(107) = 4.742$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.7. Association of Relative Speaking Skills and Communication Needs

We used SEM to verify the model to show the association between perceived relative speaking skills and communication needs with native Japanese speakers. The standardized estimates for the model are shown in Figure 3.

Overall, the model has most of the parameters acceptable according to the criteria of model fit [34], such as  $CMIN/df < 5$ ,  $CFI > 0.9$ ,  $GFI > 0.9$ , and  $PCLOSE > 0.01$ . (See Table 7).

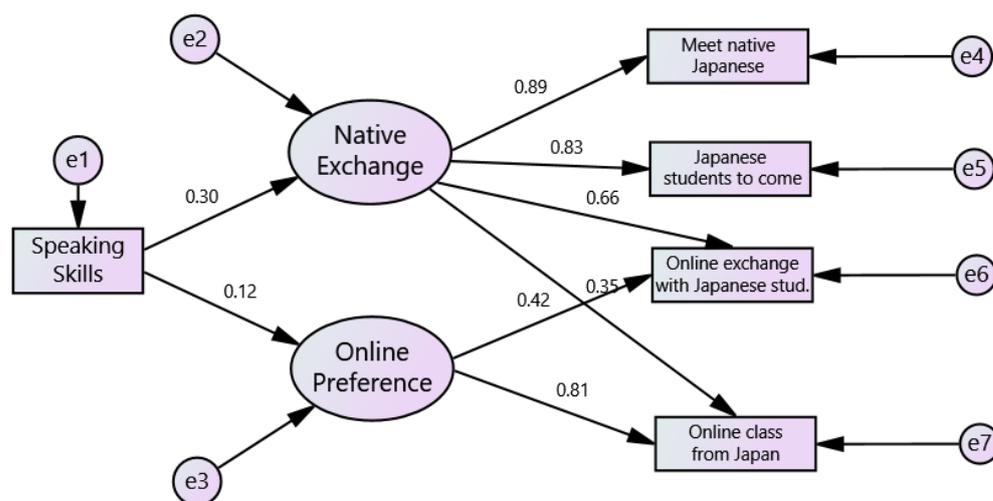


Figure 3. Standardized estimates for the model of Relative Speaking Skills and Communication Needs.

Table 7. Goodness-of-fit indices for the model of Relative Speaking Skills and Communication Needs.

Parameters	Score
Number of Parameters	12
Chi-square	10.569
Degree of freedom (df)	3
Relative Chi-square (CMIN/df)	3.523
Goodness of fit index (GFI)	0.964
Adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI)	0.820
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.949
TLI	0.831
Increment fit index (IFI)	0.952
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.154
PCLOSE	0.037

#### 4. Discussion

In the present study, we intended to use a quantitative method to explore the factors related to the perceived Japanese speaking skills of the respondents, including study motives, individual factors, and the need for communication with native speakers. The literature has shown that certain factors affect English language learners’ speaking abilities, such as age, aural medium, and sociocultural factors [35]. In this study, while investigating the Japanese learners’ speaking skills, there are some similarities in our results. We have found that factors associated with perceived relative speaking skills are age, grade, and years studying Japanese, which demonstrated that more years spent on Japanese study could bring more confidence in speaking skills in relation to writing, listening, and reading skills. English proficiency was also found to be associated with perceived relative speaking skills. This result is consistent with the common concept of synergism between languages in multilingualism and in students who study several foreign languages [36]. We also have found factors associated with perceived speaking skills are local students, having a roommate, having experience studying in Japan, self-esteem, and parents’ education level. While studying in Japan and parents’ education seem to be supportive factors, it may be inferred that international students, students who live alone, and students who have low self-esteem scores may perceive low confidence in speaking ability and, therefore, have a need of strengthening communication and speaking skills.

Regarding the question about the motives behind the fact that the respondents have chosen Japanese as a language to devote their time to, our results have shown some consistency with various studies in the past. We found that the respondents were strongly motivated by Japan’s multi-dimensional pull factors, such as culture, language, hi-tech,

it being the best environment for education, its status as a peaceful country, etc. In our study population, interest in Japan's culture ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.857$ ) was higher than interest in manga and anime ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $t = 2.566(107)$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As Japan's culture encompasses a wide range of traditions, customs, arts, and societal aspects that extend beyond the realm of manga and anime alone, it is likely that the respondents' interest was more oriented towards the broader spectrum of Japanese cultural elements. Interest in Japanese language ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.978$ ) itself is also higher than interest in manga and anime. Similar to some other studies [4], these results may imply that university students are more interested in Japanese culture and language; this is in contrast with general learners who may have a higher interest in pop culture products.

Parents are reported to have a role in orienting children's language learning [37]. Related to the social influence that may affect the respondent's decision to undertake anything, in this study, we posed two questions to ask about the influence of parents or relatives, and of friends. The results in Table 4 reveal the influence of parents or relatives as a neutral factor (Mode 3), while the influence of friends is not seen as a factor (Mode 2). Our findings demonstrate similar patterns of responses to a previous study, where the majority of respondents mentioned "myself" as the person who makes the decision to go to Japan, instead of families and relatives [31]. There is a belief that individuals tend to be more affected by their families in Asian countries, but this study did not provide evidence of such an influence.

In this study, we also found a strong motivation to go to Japan either for travel ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 0.646$ ) or study ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.983$ ) or to work in a Japanese company ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.901$ ). This finding aligns with a previous study that indicated students pursuing a major in Japanese in Ukraine initially display strong motivation to work for a Japanese company or study in Japan [7].

Foreign language anxiety has been a topic for extensive study, especially how different foreign language anxiety is among students studying different languages [38]. There are shreds of evidence about the association between the anxiety of Japanese learner students and academic performance, which somehow is linked to high attrition rates, which have been reported [39]. In this study, we found a significant association between self-esteem and perceived Japanese proficiency, including speaking skills. The findings support the linkage between mental health status and the students' Japanese language performance.

When trying to explore family-related factors that may influence Japanese speaking ability, we found that parents' education and study abroad experience is somehow associated with perceived speaking skills, while economic factors have no significant relations. However, there is very scarce evidence in Japanese learners about the associations between socioeconomic factors and foreign language speaking ability; there was some related evidence about associations in English learners, though [40].

In this study, we also look at the possibility of online communication being used to compensate for the shortage of authentic contact with native speakers. To this end, some researchers suggest that technology and online resources can provide effective solutions to the challenges. A pronunciation course using the MOOC platform was proven to be a promising approach to self-directed learning [41]. Applying multimedia tools in self-paced learning of the Japanese language has also proven to be effective among learners [42]. An online conversation Japanese class piloted in Vietnam received positive feedback from teachers and students [43]. This study supports the evidence by verifying the fact that online exchange or online classes could be acceptable to students.

Regarding outcome differences between institutions, we choose respondents from two different countries with different backgrounds in Japanese language education. At HANU, students majoring in Japanese studies study Japanese as a foreign language, plus a minor specialty such as business Japanese, interpretation and translation, or Japanese teaching [44]. At VTU, students are majoring in Japanese plus another language, often English, with a minor specialty in business administration, computer science, interpretation and translation, and language teaching [28]. While the Japanese language takes the

central focus in both universities, the actual curriculum and approaches are very different. In this study, the perceived Japanese skills of students at VTU are higher than HANU (Pearson Chi-Square ( $df = 26.573$  \*(14),  $p = 0.022$ ). Significant differences were also found in perceived self-esteem and perceived English proficiency. Some studies have shown that countries in Southeast Asia with the lowest English language proficiency have the highest Japanese language proficiency [13]. On the contrary, in this study, we found a correlation between perceived Japanese and perceived English proficiency (Pearson correlation = 0.291;  $p = 0.002$ ). Overall, realizing the fact that comparing the training program and outcome between the two institutions could be a complex task and out of the target of this paper, we leave it for future studies.

Researchers have found a correlation between a person's native language and the way they perceive the world [45]. The unique linguistic characteristics of languages can influence one's perception of language proficiency. In the current study, it is assumed that students at HANU have Vietnamese as their mother tongue, which is a tonal language that uses the Latin alphabet for writing. Vietnamese includes some kanji-based words, like Japanese. On the other hand, students at VTU are assumed to speak Bulgarian as their native language, which is a non-tonal language written in the Cyrillic alphabet. The substantial differences in sentence structure, pronunciation, and writing systems between Japanese and both Vietnamese and Bulgarian make learning to speak and write Japanese challenging. In the current study, the significant disparities in perceived L2 speaking skills between the two sites may be attributed, at least in part, to the linguistic background of the respondents. However, the absence of a standardized reference system, like FSI [46], makes it challenging to estimate the extent of this influence. This aspect could be a promising avenue for investigation in future studies.

The literature has demonstrated that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors interact and contribute to the development of speaking skills in language learning [47]. Furthermore, studies have found that the interaction of gender and motivation may affect L2 (English) speaking skills [48]. In the current study, we have not found a significant association of gender and perceived speaking skills. However, we have found both the intrinsic (interest in Japan) and extrinsic (communication, go to Japan) motives interact and affect speaking skills, which support the existing literature regardless the L2 language. Another study in Hawaii has demonstrated that learners of Japanese self-reported a high level of motivational strength, relatively low expectations of success compared to learners of other languages, and a high agreement with traditional non-communicative teaching methods [49], which seems to be consistent with the results of the current study, where learners reported relatively low speaking skills. The findings of this study have implications for Japanese language teaching. It suggests that speaking skills are more difficult to achieve for Japanese language learning outside of Japan, and more attention should be given to developing speaking skills. It is important to consider and address both types of factors to enhance speaking skills effectively. Students should interact more with native Japanese speakers, either through study-abroad programs or virtual exchange programs, to fulfill their communication needs and enhance their speaking skills and cultural understanding. The need of ensuring communication with natives confirmed this study is in line with the results of studies among students majoring in Japanese in other countries [5,7]. The findings also demonstrated the need for further investigation into the causal relationships among these factors and their impacts on Japanese language learners' outcomes, how to achieve the best impact with native speakers, and how to design an effective exchange of strategies to support the needs.

The hypothetical SEM model in path analysis explores the relationship between study motivation, speaking skill outcome, and the need for communication with native speakers. The model explains how study motivation influences speaking skill outcomes, and in turn, how speaking skill outcomes are affected by the need for communication with native speakers. The study motivation construct encompasses factors such as intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and task value. The model hypothesizes that higher levels of study

motivation will positively influence speaking skill outcomes. Additionally, it predicts that a stronger need for communication with native speakers will be associated with better speaking skill outcomes, as increased interaction with native speakers can provide valuable language practice and exposure. By linking these relationships, the model aims to shed light on the complex dynamics between study motivation, speaking skill outcome, and the importance of interacting with native speakers in language learning contexts.

Regarding limitations, the study was conducted only among undergraduate students majoring or minoring in Japanese studies at two universities, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The data were collected through self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias, leading to the overestimation or underestimation of some variables. The sample size of this study is relatively small, which may affect the statistical analysis. The SEM models seem to have an acceptable fit. However, the chi-square is sensitive to sample size and could be improved, which is also the case with the AGFI and RMSEA values. The study may need to consider other potential factors that may influence speaking skills, such as the amount and quality of language exposure, the types of language learning curriculum, self-study strategies, and language anxiety levels.

## 5. Conclusions

In the current study, the authors used the quantitative research approach to investigate the perceived speaking skills of undergraduate students majoring or minoring in Japanese studies at two universities in Vietnam and Bulgaria and proposed a hypothetical SEM model that links motives for studying Japanese, speaking skills, and the need for communication with Japanese speakers. The results showed that the perceived speaking skills were lower compared to the average of the four skills. Additionally, the study identified several factors associated with perceived speaking skills, including study motives, self-esteem, and the need for communication with native Japanese speakers. The motives for studying Japanese were found to be influenced by various factors, such as personal interest, career prospects, cultural curiosity, and educational requirements. Furthermore, the need for communication with native speakers was identified as a crucial factor that could enhance students' speaking skills and cultural understanding. Nevertheless, online tools seem to be acceptable for the communication need.

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