

THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY ANXIETY AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD JAPAN ON STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO CHOOSE JAPANESE LANGUAGE FOR THE GAOKAO IN SHANDONG PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Subject of the study: The increasing number of Chinese senior high school students choosing Japanese instead of English for the Gaokao has attracted growing attention, yet limited research has examined the psychological and sociocultural factors associated with this language choice.

Objective: This study examined the relationships between English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and students' motivation to choose Japanese for the Gaokao in Shandong Province, China.

Methods: Guided by Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, and Expectancy-Value Theory, the study adopted a quantitative correlational design. A total of 300 senior high school students who had selected Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language were recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, and the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis.

Results: English proficiency anxiety ($r = .490, p < .001$) and social attitudes toward Japan ($r = .559, p < .001$) were significantly and positively associated with motivation to learn Japanese. Multiple regression analysis indicated that both English proficiency anxiety ($\beta = .479, p < .001$) and social attitudes toward Japan ($\beta = .550, p < .001$) significantly contributed to the prediction of motivation, jointly accounting for 54.2% of the variance.

Conclusion: Students' motivation to choose Japanese was associated with both English-related anxiety and sociocultural perceptions of Japan.

Keywords: English proficiency anxiety; social attitudes toward Japan; motivation; Japanese language learning; Gaokao foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

The Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) plays a central role in China's educational system, serving as a high-stakes mechanism that determines students' access to higher education and future career opportunities. Due to its significant impact on academic advancement and social mobility, the Gaokao strongly influences students' learning behaviors and educational decisions (Cheng & Hamid, 2025; Jing & Liu, 2019). Traditionally, English has been the dominant foreign language subject within the Chinese education system and has long been regarded as an important indicator of academic competence and professional potential (Yao et al., 2019; Zhao, 2016). English learning has remained a source of considerable pressure, particularly in exam-oriented educational environments (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Recent reforms to the Gaokao have expanded students' foreign language options, allowing them to choose from several languages instead of English alone. As a result, an increasing number of senior high school students have selected Japanese as their foreign language subject, particularly in education-oriented provinces such as Shandong (Yuan, 2024). This trend has attracted growing attention among educators and researchers because it reflects changing patterns of language learning motivation and foreign language choice (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).

English proficiency anxiety has been widely identified as an important affective factor influencing students' foreign language learning experiences. Previous studies have shown that language anxiety is associated with communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test pressure, reduced self-confidence, and weaker classroom participation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In the Chinese context, English learning anxiety is often intensified by examination-oriented instruction and high academic expectations, which may reduce learners' motivation and willingness to persist in English learning (Jin et al., 2015; Liu & Jackson, 2008). More recent studies have also found that anxiety can negatively influence learners' communication willingness, motivation, and language-learning confidence, especially among Chinese students in competitive educational settings (Fan & Wang, 2025; Yang et al., 2024). Li and Xing (2024) reported that anxiety negatively affected Chinese learners' language performance and was closely associated with lower levels of enjoyment and classroom participation. This process may relate to learners' ideal L2 self and perceptions of attainable language-learning goals (Arslan & Çiftçi, 2021). Therefore, students who experience persistent anxiety in English learning may be more likely to consider Japanese as an alternative foreign language that appears more attainable and less stressful (Inada, 2022).

Social attitudes toward Japan represent another important variable influencing students' motivation to learn Japanese. Studies on Japanese language learning have shown that learners' attitudes toward the target language community, culture, and people are closely associated with their motivation and engagement (Lv et al., 2016; Yashima, 2009). Among Chinese youth, exposure to Japanese popular culture, including anime, games, music, and media, has contributed to greater cultural familiarity and interest in Japanese language learning (Liao, 2015; Luo, 2024). Recent studies further suggest that cultural interest, linguistic familiarity, and perceived accessibility can strengthen learners' motivation to engage with Japanese language learning (Cai et al., 2025; Huang & Feng, 2019). Deng (2023) further reported that Chinese learners often perceive Japanese as relatively approachable because of the similarities between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji, which reduce perceived learning difficulty and enhance confidence during the initial stages of language learning. In addition, learners' intercultural orientation has been found to play an important role in sustaining Japanese language learning motivation in mainland China (Lv et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, historical memory and political tensions may still influence public attitudes toward Japan, creating a complex sociocultural context in which favorable cultural interest and negative social sentiment may coexist (Nawata et al., 2016). Positive attitudes toward the target language community have also been found to contribute significantly to language learning motivation. Deldeniya et al. (2018) reported that favorable attitudes toward Japanese people and culture were closely associated with stronger motivation to learn Japanese as a foreign language.

Language choice is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional decision influenced by both psychological and sociocultural factors. Previous research has suggested that learners do not choose foreign languages solely based on academic utility but also according to their emotional experiences, perceived attainability, and cultural interests. Liu and Huang (2011) found that learners with more positive attitudes toward the target language community tended to experience lower anxiety and higher levels of motivation. Similarly, Peng and Woodrow (2010) reported that communication confidence mediated the relationship between attitudes and willingness to communicate, highlighting the interaction between affective and social variables. In multilingual educational contexts, positive social support and favorable cultural perceptions have also been shown to reduce anxiety and strengthen learners' motivation to engage in language learning (MacIntyre, Clément, & Baker, 2001). More recently, Yang et al. (2024) demonstrated that positive learning experiences and emotional enjoyment can buffer the negative effects of anxiety and contribute to stronger motivation. These findings suggest that students' decisions to choose Japanese for the Gaokao may reflect the combined influence of emotional pressures associated with English learning and positive perceptions of Japanese language and culture.

Although previous studies have examined English learning anxiety, Japanese language motivation, and attitudes toward Japan, these variables have often been investigated separately. Limited empirical attention was on how English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly relate to students' motivation to choose Japanese in the specific context of the Gaokao. This gap is important because the Gaokao is a high-stakes examination system in which language choice may directly affect students' academic opportunities and future educational pathways (Cheng & Hamid, 2025; Guo, 2022; Yuan, 2024). Therefore, this study examines the relationships between English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and senior high school students' motivation to choose Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language in Shandong Province, China.

The following research questions guided the study:

- RQ1: What are the levels of English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and motivation to learn Japanese among senior high school students in Shandong Province who selected Japanese for the Gaokao?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between English proficiency anxiety and students' motivation to learn Japanese for the Gaokao?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between social attitudes toward Japan and students' motivation to learn Japanese for the Gaokao?
- RQ4: To what extent do English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly account for variation in students' motivation to learn Japanese for the Gaokao?

The theoretical framework of this study draws on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, and Expectancy-Value Theory. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory explains English proficiency anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986). In this study, English proficiency anxiety is understood as a psychological factor associated with students' confidence, expectancy for success, and willingness to continue English learning in a high-stakes examination context.

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model provides the basis for understanding social attitudes toward Japan. This model emphasizes that learners' attitudes toward the target language community are closely related to both integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner, 1985). In the present study, students' attitudes toward Japan are considered a sociocultural factor that may shape the perceived value and attractiveness of Japanese language learning.

Expectancy-Value Theory further explains motivation in terms of learners' expectancy for success and the value they attach to a learning task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Within this conceptual framework, English proficiency anxiety is associated with students' expectancy beliefs, while social attitudes

toward Japan are associated with perceived task value. Together, these psychological and sociocultural factors are expected to help explain students' motivation to choose Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationships between English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and students' motivation to learn Japanese for the Gaokao. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to identify the strength and direction of associations among the variables and to determine the extent to which English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly accounted for variation in motivation.

Participants

300 senior high school students participated from Shandong Province, China, who had selected Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria. All participants were enrolled in Japanese language courses and were preparing for the Gaokao at the time of data collection. The participants included students from multiple senior high schools across different regions of Shandong Province, providing a representative overview of Japanese language learners within the province. The sample consisted of an equal proportion of male and female students. Most participants were 17 years old (75.3%), while 24.7% were 18 years old. The relatively balanced gender distribution and inclusion of students from multiple senior high schools helped reduce potential institutional bias and enhanced the representativeness of the sample.

Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of three established instruments. The questionnaire measured three main variables: English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and motivation to learn Japanese. Before data collection, the questionnaire items were reviewed for content relevance and clarity. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded according to the scoring rules of the respective scales.

English proficiency anxiety was measured using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The scale contains 33 items designed to assess communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Total scores ranged from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating greater levels of English proficiency anxiety. In the present study, the FLCAS demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .943.

Social attitudes toward Japan were measured using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (BSDS) (Bogardus, 1930; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005). The instrument consisted of seven items that evaluated participants' willingness to accept Japanese individuals in different social relationships and contexts. Participants responded to each item using a seven-point Likert scale. Items were coded so that higher total scores represented more favorable social attitudes toward Japan after reverse-coding where necessary. The BSDS showed strong reliability in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .895.

Motivation to learn Japanese was assessed using Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 1985). The instrument contained 20 items measuring motivational intensity, desire to learn Japanese, attitudes toward learning Japanese, and instrumental orientation. Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Total scores ranged from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger motivation to learn Japanese. The AMTB achieved excellent internal consistency in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .958.

Overall, the reliability coefficients of all three instruments exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70, indicating that the instruments were reliable for measuring the key variables in this study. The use of established instruments, content review, and reliability testing provided evidence for the appropriateness of the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the participating schools. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Students completed the questionnaires anonymously during regular school hours. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before data entry, and the responses were coded for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to examine participants' demographic characteristics and the levels of English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and motivation to learn Japanese. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships between English proficiency anxiety and motivation, and between social attitudes toward Japan and motivation. Multiple linear regression analysis was then performed to determine the extent to which English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly accounted for variation in motivation to learn Japanese. Statistical significance was established at the .05 level.

RESULTS

Reliability Analysis

Before the main analyses, the internal consistency of the three instruments was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed that all three instruments demonstrated strong reliability. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) achieved a Cronbach's alpha value of .943, the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (BSDS) achieved a value of .895, and the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) achieved a value of .958. These values exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70, confirming the instruments' reliability for measuring the key variables in this study.

Table 1

Reliability Statistics for the Research Instruments

Instrument	Variable measured	Number items	Cronbach's alpha
FLCAS	English proficiency anxiety	33	.943
BSDS	Social attitudes toward Japan	7	.895
AMTB	Motivation to Japanese	20	.958

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2. The sample consisted of 300 senior high school students from Shandong Province, China, who had selected Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language. Male and female students were equally represented in the sample. Most participants were 17 years old, while the remainder were 18 years old.

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	150	50.0
Gender	Female	150	50.0
Age	17	226	75.3
Age	18	74	24.7

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the levels of English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and motivation to learn Japanese among the participants. As shown in Table 3, students reported a moderate level of English proficiency anxiety ($M = 99.25$, $SD = 33.90$), indicating that English learning remained a source of considerable pressure for many respondents. Social attitudes toward Japan were generally neutral to positive ($M = 30.44$, $SD = 11.07$), suggesting that most students held relatively favorable perceptions of Japan and its people. In addition, participants demonstrated a moderate level of motivation to learn Japanese ($M = 59.26$, $SD = 21.73$).

Overall, the findings indicate that while English proficiency anxiety remains prevalent among senior high school students, positive social attitudes toward Japan and moderate motivation to learn Japanese are also evident within this group.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables*

Variable	Mean (M)	SD
English Proficiency Anxiety	99.25	33.90
Social Attitudes toward Japan	30.44	11.07
Motivation to Learn Japanese	59.26	21.73

Correlation Statistics

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and motivation to learn Japanese. Table 4 showcases the results.

The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between English proficiency anxiety and motivation to learn Japanese ($r = .490$, $p < .001$). This result suggests that students who reported higher levels of anxiety in English learning also tended to report stronger motivation to study Japanese. Social attitudes toward Japan were also significantly and positively associated with motivation to learn Japanese ($r = .559$, $p < .001$), indicating that students with more favorable attitudes toward Japan tended to demonstrate stronger motivation to learn Japanese.

Table 4*Pearson Correlation Analysis among the Main Variables*

Variables	r	p
English Proficiency Anxiety ↔ Motivation	.490	< .001
Social Attitudes toward Japan ↔ Motivation	.559	< .001

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly accounted for variation in students' motivation to learn Japanese. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 297) = 175.65$, $p < .001$, and explained 54.2% of the variance in motivation ($R^2 = .542$). Both English proficiency anxiety ($\beta = .479$,

$p < .001$) and social attitudes toward Japan ($\beta = .550$, $p < .001$) significantly contributed to the prediction of motivation. Social attitudes toward Japan showed a slightly stronger standardized coefficient than English proficiency anxiety.

These findings indicate that students' motivation to choose Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language was associated with both psychological and sociocultural factors.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Motivation to Learn Japanese

Predictor	β	p
English Proficiency Anxiety	.479	< .001
Social Attitudes toward Japan	.550	< .001

Note. Model Summary: $R^2 = .542$, $F(2,297) = 175.65$, $p < .001$

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the relationships between English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes toward Japan, and senior high school students' motivation to choose Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language in Shandong Province, China. The findings revealed that participants generally experienced moderate levels of English proficiency anxiety and motivation, while maintaining neutral to positive attitudes toward Japan. Positive attitudes toward Japan may strengthen learners' intercultural orientation and motivation to learn languages (Yashima, 2009).

The correlation analyses demonstrated that both English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan were significantly associated with motivation to learn Japanese. Students who experienced greater anxiety in English learning tended to show stronger motivation to study Japanese. This finding suggests that English proficiency anxiety may be related to students' consideration of Japanese as an alternative foreign language that is perceived as more attainable and less stressful. This result is consistent with earlier studies showing that foreign language anxiety can reduce learners' confidence, classroom participation, and willingness to continue learning the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). It also supports more recent findings that anxiety may negatively influence learners' motivation, willingness to communicate, and persistence in foreign language learning, particularly in examination-oriented contexts (Fan & Wang, 2025; Yang et al., 2024). These findings are also consistent with Li and Xing (2024), who reported that anxiety negatively affected learners' classroom engagement and language learning experiences among Chinese students. Similarly, Fan and Wang (2025) found that anxiety remained a significant factor influencing learners' willingness to communicate and motivational development. In the context of the Gaokao, English-related anxiety may therefore be associated with some students' stronger motivation toward Japanese.

The study also found that social attitudes toward Japan were positively related to motivation and emerged as the stronger predictor in the regression model. Students with more favorable perceptions of Japan demonstrated higher levels of motivation to learn Japanese. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that positive attitudes toward the target language community can strengthen learners' integrative motivation, intercultural orientation, and sustained engagement in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Lv et al., 2016; Yashima, 2009). In the Chinese context, Japanese popular culture, media exposure, and cultural familiarity have been found to contribute to students' interest in learning Japanese (Liao, 2015; Luo, 2024). Recent research also suggests that linguistic and cultural proximity between Chinese and Japanese may enhance learners' perceived accessibility and confidence in Japanese language learning (Cai et al., 2025). Similar findings were reported by Deng (2023), who argued that Chinese learners often regard Japanese as relatively approachable because of shared orthographic features and familiar linguistic structures. Therefore, social attitudes toward Japan may serve as a sociocultural factor associated with students' motivation to choose Japanese

for the Gaokao. Huang and Feng (2019) similarly found that Chinese learners often associated Japanese language learning with enjoyment, cultural curiosity, and positive personal interest. Deldeniya et al. (2018) also reported that favourable attitudes toward Japanese culture significantly contributed to learners' motivation to study Japanese as a foreign language.

The regression analysis further revealed that English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan jointly accounted for 54.2% of the variance in students' motivation to learn Japanese. These findings support a dual-mechanism interpretation in which students' motivation is associated with both English-related anxiety and positive sociocultural perceptions of Japan. Previous research support this interpretation, suggesting that language learning motivation is shaped by both learners' emotional experiences and their perceived value of the target language and culture (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Per theory, these findings suggest that students' motivation to choose Japanese can be understood through the interaction of affective, sociocultural, and cognitive factors. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory conceptualizes language anxiety as a situation-specific emotional response involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation; in the Gaokao context, such anxiety may be linked to students' lower confidence and expectancy for success in English (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Gardner's Socio-Educational Model emphasizes that learners' attitudes toward the target language community are closely connected to language learning motivation (Gardner, 1985). Applied to the present study, students' favorable attitudes toward Japan may increase the perceived social and cultural value of Japanese learning, thereby strengthening their motivation to choose Japanese. Expectancy-Value Theory further helps connect these findings by suggesting that motivation is shaped by both perceived likelihood of success and task value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Therefore, Japanese language choice in the Gaokao context may reflect not only anxiety about English but also students' evaluation of Japanese as a culturally meaningful and academically attainable alternative.

In this study, English anxiety may be linked to students' confidence in continuing English learning, while favorable attitudes toward Japan may increase the perceived attractiveness and value of Japanese. Together, these two factors help explain why Japanese has become a meaningful alternative foreign language choice for some senior high school students in Shandong Province. This interpretation is further supported by Huang and Feng (2019), who found that Chinese learners of Japanese often associated Japanese learning with enjoyment, leisure, and cultural curiosity. Similarly, Deldeniya et al. (2018) reported that positive attitudes toward Japanese people and culture were closely related to learners' motivation to study Japanese as a foreign language. Recent research further suggests that linguistic familiarity may play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of Japanese language learning. Deng (2023) argued that the similarities between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji may reduce perceived learning difficulty, while Cai et al. (2025) demonstrated that linguistic proximity contributes to greater confidence and accessibility among Chinese learners of Japanese.

The findings provide several implications for foreign language education. English teachers should adopt anxiety-reducing instructional strategies that enhance learners' confidence and willingness to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). At the same time, Japanese language programs may benefit from incorporating culturally relevant content that sustains students' interest and engagement. Educational policymakers may also consider expanding multilingual language opportunities within the Gaokao system to better accommodate students' diverse learning needs and motivations. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to senior high school students in Shandong Province who had already selected Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students in other provinces or to those choosing other foreign languages. Second, the study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among English proficiency anxiety, social attitudes, and motivation. Future studies may employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how students' language choice motivation develops over time and how emotional and sociocultural factors

interact during different stages of Gaokao preparation.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that both psychological and sociocultural factors are significantly associated with students' motivation to choose Japanese as their Gaokao foreign language. By highlighting the combined role of English proficiency anxiety and social attitudes toward Japan, the study contributes to a better understanding of foreign language choice within China's multilingual educational reform and provides useful insights for language educators and policymakers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors acknowledge the support of the 2nd International Transdisciplinary Research Conference (INTRAC) 2026, organized by Universiti Malaya.

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