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An investigation into the motivation and attitudes of Japanese students toward learning English: A case of elementary and junior high school students

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Abstract

Given the importance of academic motivation, numerous inquiries have scrutinized the antecedents of this psycho-emotional variable in various educational environments. Nonetheless, the role of students' attitudes in their academic motivation has remained elusive. Put simply, it is unclear whether students' attitudes can make positive changes in their learning motivation. To bridge this gap, the present investigation explored Japanese students' attitudes towards learning English. The research also examined the interplay between attitudes and academic motivation from Japanese students' perspectives. In doing so, a closed-ended survey was given to 417 elementary and high school students. Following that, some interview sessions were conducted with a sample of elementary and high school teachers. The study outcomes disclosed that almost all participants had positive attitudes toward learning English. The results also demonstrated that Japanese students perceived personal attitudes to be highly influential in learning motivation. The outcomes of the present research may enrich the existing literature on the association between personal attitudes and learning motivation. The outcomes of this investigation may be beneficial and illuminating for school principals and language teachers. The findings would notably expand their knowledge about the predictors of academic motivation in language education environments.

Keywords: Academic motivation, Academic attitudes, Elementary students, High school students, Japan

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that students' motivation in educational environments can enormously influence their learning outcomes (Jiao et al., 2022; Kaya et al., 2022). Because of this, leading students to higher levels of motivation has long been a top priority for teachers, practitioners, and educational managers (Deci & Ryan, 2016). However, some language teachers, notably those instructing English as a foreign language (EFL), are not capable of enhancing student motivation as they have limited knowledge regarding the determinants of this construct in learning environments

(Nguyen, 2019; Peng, 2021). This made the predictors of student motivation an important line of inquiry in language studies (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Gao, 2021; Liu, 2022). Student motivation in learning contexts, which is called academic motivation, pertains to “students’ primary impetus for initiating learning as well as the reason for continuing the prolonged and tedious process of learning” (Ushioda, 2008, p. 21). In language education environments, academic motivation has to do with students’ desire to commence and continue the language acquisition mechanism (You et al., 2016). Academic motivation, as Papi and Hiver (2020) mentioned, empowers students to advance toward various stages of language acquisition despite educational obstacles that stand in their way. In the same vein, Dörnyei and Muir (2019) also noted that students’ motivation in classroom contexts directs their behaviors toward accomplishing their academic goals.

With the value of student academic motivation in mind (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Papi & Hiver, 2020), numerous investigations have been performed to uncover the potential predictors of this construct in learning contexts. Several scholars have taken into account the predicting role of teacher-related factors (e.g., Chiu et al., 2023; Guerrero, 2017; Law et al., 2019; Mendoza et al., 2023; Pishghadam et al., 2021; Wang & Bai, 2023, among others). Many researchers have also considered the determining function of student-related factors (e.g., Abdolrezapour et al., 2023; Chinyere & Afeez, 2022; Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2020; Ghelichli et al., 2020; Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020, among others). Nevertheless, few researchers have delved into the role of students’ attitudes toward their classes in their academic motivation. The term “attitude” generally refers to a range of beliefs and ideas that formed across time in a given community (Maze, 2011). In a language education community, students’ attitudes are related to their personal perceptions of their peers, teachers, and the language acquisition mechanism (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). More specifically, EFL students’ attitudes toward English classes pertain to their emotional and psychological reactions to acquiring a foreign language, which may be either negative or positive (Ditua, 2012). While negative attitudes toward English classes impede the language acquisition process, positive attitudes can notably facilitate this mechanism (Liu, 2014; Youssef, 2012). In this respect, Geddes (2016) articulated that students with positive attitudes toward English classes commonly outperform their classmates who hold negative viewpoints about English classes.

The pivotal role of student attitudes in the learning process has stimulated many researchers and practitioners worldwide to study the consequences of students’ positive and negative attitudes in different learning environments (e.g., Al-Emran et al., 2016; Chao et al., 2015; Hussein et al., 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020, to cite a few). However, a limited number of scholars have focused on the outcomes of student attitudes in language learning contexts (e.g., Abolfazli & Sadeghi, 2018; Alhamami, 2022; Fujii, 2023; Lee, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, few researchers have explored the role of language students’ attitudes in their academic motivation (Genc & Aydin, 2017; Mat & Yunus, 2014; Rasool & Winke, 2019; Sengkey & Galag, 2018). To address these gaps, the present research seeks to assess whether Japanese students’ attitudes toward English classes can make any changes in their academic motivation. Two questions will guide the current research:

- What are Japanese elementary and junior high school students' perceptions and attitudes towards learning English?
- How do Japanese students and teachers perceive the interaction between attitude and academic motivation?

Student attitude

In a general sense, attitude pertains to individuals' internal states that affect what they are likely to do (Droba, 1933). In an academic setting, this concept deals with how students perceive their teachers, classmates, and learning atmosphere (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In light of this definition, Ming et al. (2011) characterized English students' attitudes as their favorable or unfavorable perceptions of their English instructors, English courses, and the English learning process. As put by Feng and Hong (2022), language learners' positive attitudes prompt them to enthusiastically engage in the language acquisition process. Learners with positive attitudes are thus more successful in learning a new language (Prastiwi, 2018). Learners with negative attitudes, on the other hand, put less time and energy into the language acquisition process (Moghadam & Shamsi, 2021) and often fail to master the target language (Guo et al., 2022). Language learners' attitudes towards the learning process and classroom atmosphere have been found to be strongly connected to their academic motivation (Genc & Aydin, 2017; Rasool & Winke, 2019), language achievement (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2020; Prastiwi, 2018), and L2 success (Hashemian & Heidari, 2013; Paker & Erarslan, 2015).

Student academic motivation

The notion of motivation has been generally described as a driving force that triggers human activities and directs them toward certain goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extending this concept to academic environments, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) characterized student academic motivation as "one's motive to make certain academic decisions, participate in classroom activities, and persist in pursuing the demanding process of learning" (p. 4). Student motivation to learn, as Deci et al. (2001) mentioned, is of two major types: "*intrinsic motivation*" and "*extrinsic motivation*". The first type of student motivation, intrinsic motivation, pertains to academic tasks and activities students perform for their own sake or for their personal joy and interest (Deci & Ryan, 2016). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to classroom activities that students engage in for the sake of teachers' and parents' rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Accordingly, the academic tasks that students perform in a classroom environment may be due to their own contentment (intrinsic motivation) or the external rewards they may obtain (extrinsic motivation) (Cao, 2022). Students' motivation to learn has been discovered to be significantly related to their academic engagement (Wang, 2022; Yin & Wang, 2016), academic achievement (Datu & Yang, 2021; Joe et al., 2017), and academic success (Peng & Fu, 2021; Wu, 2019).

Previous research on the role of English students' attitudes in their academic motivation

Due to the central role of student attitudes in the language learning mechanism, several language researchers around the world have probed the consequences of this variable in language classes (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2021; Getie, 2020; Karatas et al.,

2016; Liu et al., 2023; Musa, 2023; Zulfikar et al., 2019). Among them, some scholars have investigated the effects of students' attitudes on their academic motivation (Genc & Aydin, 2017; Johnson, 2021; Mat & Yunus, 2014; Potemkina & Sharshavina, 2021; Rasool & Winke, 2019; Sengkey & Galag, 2018; Takahashi & Im, 2023). Mat and Yunus (2014), for instance, evaluated the impact of school students' attitudes toward learning English on their motivation. To this end, 40 students were invited to complete a survey questionnaire and engage in follow-up interviews. The results demonstrated that respondents' attitudes toward learning English had a great impact on their motivation. Furthermore, Genc and Aydin (2017) looked into the role of Turkish EFL students' attitudes toward English classes in their academic motivation. To accomplish this, a closed-ended questionnaire was given to 462 university students. The analysis of the collected questionnaires revealed that Turkish EFL students' motivation was dramatically affected by their attitudes. In addition, Sengkey and Galag (2018) delved into the influence of English learners' attitudes on their learning motivation. In doing this, two researcher-adapted scales were distributed among 118 college students. The outcomes represented that learners' positive attitudes toward acquiring English culminated in increased learning motivation. By the same token, Rasool and Winke (2019) examined the effect of undergraduate students' attitudes toward English on their motivation. A semi-structured interview and a multiple-choice item questionnaire were used to obtain the necessary data. Data analysis indicated that students' favorable attitudes toward English contributed to high levels of learning motivation. Despite these efforts, the extent to which EFL students' attitudes can influence their academic motivation is a source of debate among language teachers and practitioners. The current study attempts to settle this controversy by scrutinizing the impact of Japanese students' attitudes towards learning English on their academic motivation.

Method

Participants

A random sampling technique was adopted to choose 417 students from various elementary and junior high schools in Japan. As Dörnyei and Csizér (2012) mentioned, the random sampling technique is concerned with "the selection of members of the population to be included in the sample on a completely random basis" (p. 81). The sample involved 230 elementary students and 187 high school students. It consisted of 303 males (73%) and 114 females (27%) aged 6 to 13 years. Besides, using convenience sampling, a group of elementary teachers ($N=2$) and high school teachers ($N=2$) were recruited from four different schools (Akami middle school, Inubushi elementary school; Joudou middle school, Tanimura elementary school) in Sano city. They were all experienced teachers, ranging in their teaching experience from 10 to 25 years. In order to adhere to the ethical considerations of research, both teachers and students were assured that their names and personal data will remain secret. To comply with the ethical values, we also obtained the approval of the Sano City Board of Education for conducting the surveys and interviews.

Instrument

To delve into Japanese students' attitudes toward English classes and their motivation to learn the English language, a researcher-made survey was employed. The survey comprises five distinct items: Item (1) "*Do you like English classes?*", Item (2) "*Can you understand the content of English classes?*", Item (3) "*Do you think studying English is necessary?*", Item (4) "*What do you enjoy in English classes?*", and Item (5) "*What is difficult in English classes?*". The reliability index of this inventory for the present inquiry was 0.93. In addition, a semi-structured interview was run with a group of elementary and high school teachers. To conduct the interview sessions, researchers developed an interview guide containing two predefined and some follow-up questions (Appendix).

Procedure

Initially, a consent form was emailed to participants to assess their propensity to participate in the research process. Then, a closed ended scale was distributed among participants to evaluate their motivation and attitudes towards learning English. To obtain trustworthy information, students were all instructed on how to respond to the survey questions. Following that, some semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of elementary and high school teachers ($N=4$). The rationale for interviewing teachers on students' academic motivation lies in the fact that teachers, as the leader of education, are deeply aware of their pupils' motivation throughout the learning process. Each interview session took approximately 15 min of the participants' time. After collecting the dataset, participants' responses to the survey items and the interview questions were carefully analyzed. The analysis outcomes are presented in the following section.

Results

The survey outcomes

The analysis of students' answers to the first item of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of elementary and high school students liked English classes (Fig. 1). However, as represented in the following figure, elementary students demonstrated higher interest and passion for English classes.

The examination of students' responses to the second item of the survey indicated that most of the elementary and high school students understand English very well. Yet, as shown in the figure below, elementary students had a better grasp of English (Fig. 2).

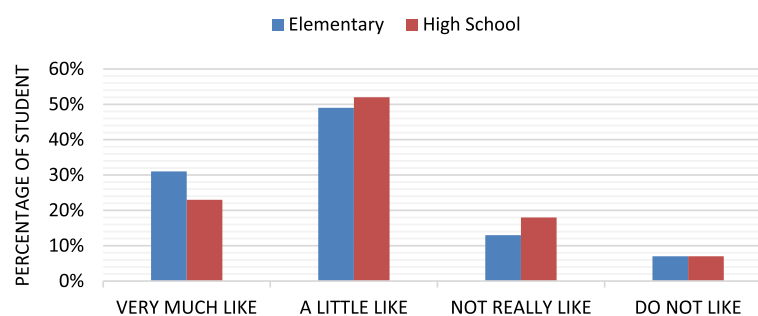


Fig. 1 Students' answers to the first item

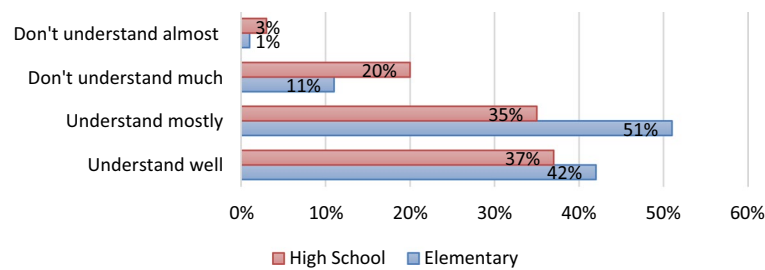


Fig. 2 Students' answers to the second item

As illustrated in Fig. 3, a huge number of elementary and high school students perceived that studying English is very necessary. Many of them also viewed studying English to be somewhat necessary.

Furthermore, the analysis of participants' answers to the fourth question showed that the majority of elementary and high school students viewed communicating in English, writing words and sentences, and reading words and sentences as the most enjoyable activities in English classes (Fig. 4).

In addition, most of the participants perceived writing words and sentences, reading words and sentences, and practicing pronunciation as the most difficult activities in English classes (Fig. 5).

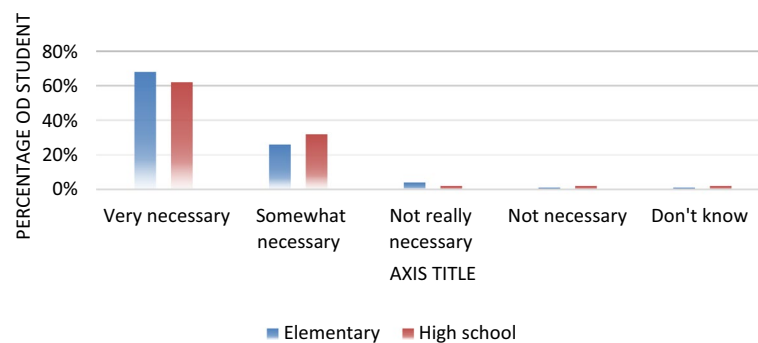


Fig. 3 Students' answers to the third item

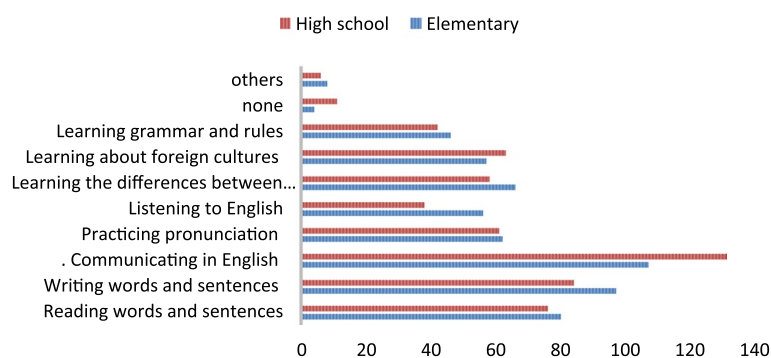


Fig. 4 Students' answers to the fourth item

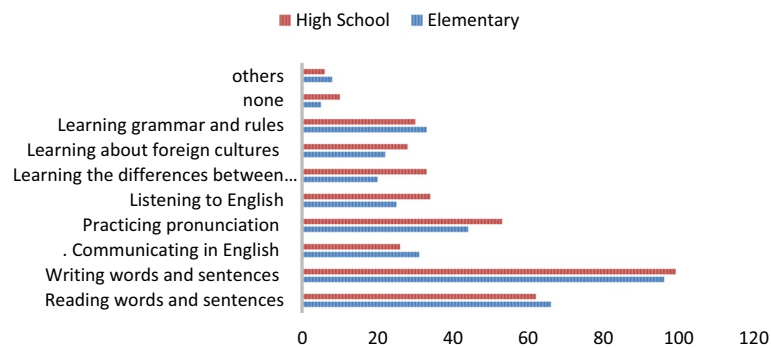


Fig. 5 Students' answers to the fifth item

Interviews with participants

First teacher

- ① Research Theme: Speaking
- ② Materials Used: We Can 2
- ③ Unit Name: Unit 5 My Summer Vacation (7/8 h)
- ④ Goal: To be able to clearly communicate our memories of summer vacation.
- ⑤ Actual Activities

Children's Activities Children's appearance—Teacher's speech and movement in English—Points to pay attention to in guidance—Points noticed after guidance—Time—Materials prepared.

Evaluation: I am (Happy). My thoughts: A-san and B-san had good pronunciation in English. It was fun to hear about the places and food that friends and classmates went to and ate during summer vacation, and their thoughts."

The Assistant Language teacher (ALT, usually a native English speaker, such as from the JET program) often conducts classes as main teacher (T1), so the homeroom teacher becomes T2 and the class proceeds with the ALT leading. However, during this time, the homeroom teacher became T1 and by organizing the class, various things were learned. It was difficult to think about how to give instructions in English. Also, I couldn't explain properly in English according to the children's reactions.

During this time, we aimed to clearly convey memories of summer vacation to others and organized the class. Children who had a sense of difficulty in speaking were able to talk a little more clearly to others by first speaking in pairs, then in rows or with friends in the same class, and finally in front of the whole class, and conducted small talk and shared memories of summer vacation. There, we gave them the purpose of speaking according to the individual, such as looking into the other person's eyes, speaking in a loud voice, speaking clearly, and reciting. Generally, children who seemed to lack confidence and spoke in a small voice were able to speak confidently and share with each other by listening to each other in pairs and with friends in the same row. Also, in front of the whole class, by reciting, children who were able to confidently speak in front of the class were seen.

Throughout the unit, we set a theme for each hour and wrote and shared memories of summer vacation in English one sentence at a time. And gradually, the English sentences of memories of summer vacation increased and became accustomed to writing. Also, by repeatedly sharing activities every hour in pairs, in rows, and in front of the whole class, children who had a sense of difficulty in speaking were able to speak to friends. And they felt happy because what they talked about was conveyed. The number of children who spoke confidently in front of the whole class also increased a little compared to before. However, they were able to ask and respond to questions in English about what they presented and create sentences according to a certain pattern, but they were not able to create sentences on their own from the beginning.

Second teacher

- ① Research Theme: Speaking
- ② Textbook Used: Let's Try 2
- ③ Unit Name: Unit 7 What do you want? (2/5 Time)
- ④ Goal: To try to communicate with friends and express the fruit that I want to eat.
- ⑤ Actual Activity: (Not provided).

Reflections of participants:

- I was able to tell my favorite fruit and a delicious parfait was made.
- I was filled with my favorite fruits.
- I was nervous when customers came, but it was fun.
- Even though English was difficult for me, I was able to do it well.
- I was able to make a parfait that my friend likes."

Throughout this unit, we set up opportunities for students to speak with a sense of necessity and aimed for them to take a more active role in speaking. In the first hour, by looking at the state of markets around the world, the students showed interest in various ingredients. We practiced asking questions with chants and checked the pronunciation of fruits with the ALT (Assistant Language Teacher). By playing games at the end, we were able to connect the desire to use the English they had learned in the next class. In the second hour, students were able to tell their partner what fruit they wanted and have fun making their own parfait.

We set up activities for the students to interact with each other and aimed to have them develop the ability to ask and answer what they felt was necessary. They felt that the English they spoke was understood by the partner and that they were able to do what they wanted. Even students who felt that English was difficult were able to feel a sense of accomplishment as they completed their parfait. In the third hour, we had an activity where the students introduced their parfait to the group and were able to review the names of the fruits they had learned while telling them to their partner.

In the fourth hour, in preparation for the final goal of the unit, "Introducing original pizzas", we practiced the names of vegetables and other toppings for the pizza. We then had them think about what kind of original pizza they wanted to make. In the second

hour, they put on what they liked, but in the fourth hour, we made them aware of selecting toppings according to their purpose, like on a menu at a store. The activity of making pizza was the same flow as the activity of making parfait, so the students were able to work on it with a sense of perspective and peace of mind. In the fifth hour, we had an activity where the students introduced their original pizza to the group and were able to review the names of the toppings they had learned while telling them to their partner.

Throughout this unit, by repeatedly conducting introduction activities, I felt that the students were able to speak with confidence in the fifth hour. In this class, we aimed to have the students become more active in speaking and to have them develop the ability to ask and answer what they felt was necessary in English. The introduction was well thought out. The use of English in communication was increased and the children were prompted to repeat themselves after one child gave a presentation. Additionally, there were settings where the use of English was necessary. While it is important to be conscious of speaking in English, there are also situations where it is necessary to use Japanese. The greetings were formal, so it would be good to improve this by allowing them to speak freely or by conducting a greeting relay.

Third teacher

- ① Research theme: Small talk
- ② Materials used: We can 1
- ③ Unit name: Unit 5—She can run fast. He can jump high. (7/8 h)
- ④ Goal: To communicate with others about what they can and cannot do, including their thoughts and feelings."

Evaluation Criteria: Being able to communicate about what one can and cannot do, including thoughts and feelings, about oneself and others. 【Habit】 <Observation of behavior and check-in card>

Participants' reflections •It was fun to listen to the introduction of various teachers in English. •The small talk questions from the first teacher were interesting. •I was able to introduce what the teachers can and cannot do. •It was fun to ask questions to friends based on the interviews I did with the teachers. •Giving a speech was difficult, but it was good that everyone listened well. •It was very difficult to include my own thoughts when speaking. •I was not able to include my own thoughts or feelings when speaking.

This unit aims to communicate effectively with oneself and others about what one can and cannot do, including one's thoughts and feelings. To achieve this goal, children were introduced to stories about familiar sports players and researchers and familiarized with the expression "I can ~." They also listened to the introduction of characters in activities, encountered the third person point of view, and deepened their understanding.

At the end of the unit, the children conducted an activity where they introduced their homeroom teacher based on an interview they conducted. To assist them, small talks introducing other teachers were held, and the children listened to the content with interest while reacting to the teacher's speech. Additionally, the teacher's content was posted for the children to reference when adding their thoughts and feelings to the expression. However, it seemed difficult for the children to think about and add content beyond

what they had written on their worksheets. It is thought that if they were shown a notebook that summarized familiar expressions, and allowed them to choose and write on the worksheet, they would have been able to give better speeches.

It is important to think of support that can effectively use familiar expressions according to the actual situation of the children and to guide them accordingly. This was felt again as an important lesson.

Fourth teacher

① Research theme: Writing (Literacy instruction) ② Materials used: Let's Try 2 ③ Unit name: Unit 6 Alphabet (1/4 h) ④ Purpose: To become aware of the many things represented by printed characters in daily life and to become familiar with lowercase letters and their pronunciation. ⑤ Actual activities.

⑥ Reflections:

- I enjoyed the missing letter game.
- I had fun singing the ABC song.
- I was able to tell the difference between "b" and "d" now.
- I started looking for lowercase letters while watching TV."

During this lesson, as it was the first hour of character instruction, we focused on the relationship between uppercase and lowercase letters. By revisiting English signs and labels that the children had seen before, we were able to confirm that lowercase letters are often used in everyday life. By teaching in relation to uppercase letters, it seemed to make it easier for children who are not confident in English to participate in the activities. By explaining the relationship between the letters in terms the children could understand, such as "if you take one circle off of 'B', it becomes 'b'", understanding deepened. During subsequent activities and games, we could see that the children remembered the content from the first hour.

After completing the unit, we felt that the goal of the unit, "getting familiar with the reading of lowercase letters," had been achieved, and that the number of children who were interested in the English around them had increased. We often saw children coming to report English they had found. We strongly felt the need to reflect the children's voices in the lesson, to communicate and cooperate with the ALT, and to proceed with the lesson while keeping the goal of the unit in mind.

Discussion

The current inquiry was set out with the aim of evaluating Japanese students' academic motivation and their attitudes towards learning English. This study also sought to look into the predictive role of Japanese students' personal attitudes in their academic motivation. According to survey and interview findings, the majority of elementary and junior high school students had positive attitudes towards learning English. Besides, the outcomes showed that almost all participants considered personal attitudes as important predictors of academic motivation.

The study outcome regarding the Japanese students' positive attitudes towards learning English is consistent with that of Karatas et al. (2016), who reported that university

students held desirable attitudes towards learning English. The study result is also in congruence with that of Getie (2020), who found that school students positively perceived English acquisition. The finding of the present research also lends support to Ahmed et al. (2021), which indicated that private university students had favorable perceptions towards learning English. Additionally, the outcome of the current research supports Musa's (2023) findings, which evinced that college students had positive perspective toward learning English as a foreign language. Furthermore, the study result concerning the important role of personal attitudes in students' academic motivation echoes that of Mat and Yunus (2014), who discovered that school students' attitudes toward learning English positively influenced their learning motivation. The result of this inquiry also backs up Genc and Aydin's (2017) findings, which illuminated that Turkish students' personal attitudes served an important role in predicting their motivation. In addition, this result is in line with that of Sengkey and Galag (2018), who observed a positive interaction between learners' attitudes and their motivation to learn. This outcome also seems to be consistent with Rasool and Winke's (2019) results, which uncovered a causal linkage between undergraduate students' attitudes and their academic motivation.

Finally, it is necessary to note that the outcomes of the present investigation are subject to four major limitations. First and foremost, this inquiry is entirely performed in an EFL country. Therefore, the obtained data may not be transferable to ESL (English as a second language) countries in which English is taught as a second language. Future scholars are thus required to probe the associations between students' attitudes and academic motivation in ESL contexts. Second, a relatively small sample of participants was recruited for this research. To promote the transferability of the outcomes, future researchers need to choose a larger sample of participants. Third, this study was not assessed the mediating role of situational variables. Further work needs to be performed to establish whether situational variables such as age, gender, and academic grade mediate the associations between students' attitudes and academic motivation. Fourth, only closed-ended scales and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the required information. Future studies should utilize more authentic instruments such as observation and diary writing.

Conclusion

As revealed by the survey and interview outcomes, almost all Japanese students had positive attitudes towards learning English and viewed personal attitude as an influential factor in learning motivation. This implies that students who hold positive attitudes towards learning English are more inclined to learn this language. Put another way, students' positive attitudes towards learning English prompt students to learn English language. The results of the present research would contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering new insights into the interaction between personal attitudes and academic motivation. Besides, the study outcomes may be informative and beneficial for all school principals and language instructors, particularly those working in EFL instructional environments. With respect to the present study's findings, learners' attitudes can considerably influence their academic motivation. Accordingly, English instructors should positively influence their learners' attitudes to improve their motivation in academic environments. To do so, they can employ positive communication behaviors such

as caring, confirmation, empathy, and immediacy while interacting with their pupils. It is also worth noting that creating a good learning atmosphere would be of great help to teachers to increase their English learners' motivation to learn. Therefore, English teachers are required to build strong relationships with their students and create a desirable learning environment. Additionally, the outcomes of this investigation may be illuminating for school administrators as well. Given the important role of students' attitudes and perceptions in their academic motivation, school principals are also expected to desirably influence students' beliefs and attitudes towards learning by preparing a comfortable learning atmosphere.

Appendix

Interview questions

1. From your perspective, to what extent does your students' attitude towards learning English can influence their motivation to learn?
2. Do you have any further comments regarding the interaction between students' attitudes and their learning motivation?

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the insightful comments suggested by the editor and the anonymous reviewers.

Author contributions

All authors have materially participated in the research and article preparation. Additionally, all authors have approved the final article. RK Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Roles/Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing. JK Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Roles/Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing. AD Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Roles/Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and consent to participate

All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in this study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 10 October 2023 Accepted: 22 December 2023

Published online: 19 January 2024

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