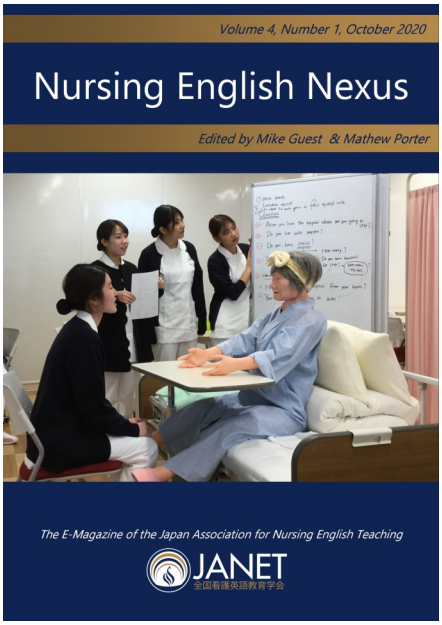
Nursing and Social Work Students' Effort Levels, Attitudes, Motivations, and Test Scores in Studying English

Donald Patterson
Seirei Christopher University



Article citation

Patterson, D. (2020). Nursing and Social Work Students' Effort Levels, Attitudes, Motivations, and Test Scores in Studying English. Nursing English Nexus, 4(1), 16-23.

Nursing English Nexus

http://www.janetorg.com/nexus

ISSN 2433-2305

Nursing and Social Work Students' Effort Levels, Attitudes, Motivations, and Test Scores in Studying English

Donald Patterson（patterson@seirei.ac.jp)
Seirei Christopher University

***Abstract**: The present study sought to learn how much effort nursing and social work students at a university in Japan were willing to expend on their English studies. It also examined whether there were significant correlations between their self-reported effort levels and their attitudes towards English and motivations for studying it; and whether there were significant correlations between their scores on a standardized English proficiency test and their effort levels, attitudes, and motivations. In this quantitative study (N = 16), data was collected from a standardized English proficiency test and a questionnaire adapted from Taguchi, Magid, & Papi (2009) on learner attitudes and motivations. On average, students reported a neutral attitude towards their effort levels in learning English and appeared to be more motivated by intrinsic personal goals than extrinsic pressures. Results showed a moderate correlation between standardized test scores and "the ideal L2 self", suggesting that the clearer an image students had of how they would use English in the future, the better their academic achievement level in English.*

Keywords: learner motivation, effort, ideal L2 self, language proficiency

How important is motivation in language learning? Dörnyei and Csizér (1998, p. 203) called motivation "one of the most important factors that determine the rate and success" of second language learning, and many other researchers have concurred (Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010). However, studying learner motivation is complicated because it contains a mix of several variables including the learners' attitudes toward the learning situation, their objectives in studying, their feelings about themselves, and a host of other pressures (Shea, 2017, p. 140).

Several studies have been conducted on foreign language learning motivation in Japan. Irie (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of studies on motivational factors for Japanese learners of English spanning the early 1990s to the 2000s. The studies suggested that Japanese students had some interest in using English to converse with native speakers, which is to say they had a degree of integrative motivation (i.e. desire to learn a language in order interact within a community of people using the target language). However, the majority of the studies suggested that instrumental motivation (i.e. having a specific, functional reason for studying) was more important (Irie, 2003). For most Japanese learners of English that means achieving success with standardized examinations. Indeed, Berwick and Ross (1989) found in a longitudinal study that Japanese learners' motivation to study English appears to peak in their final year of high school at the point of maximum utility for them as represented by university entrance examinations. The desire to achieve high examination scores and enter a good university can be a strong motivator, but it is largely an extrinsic and instrumental kind of motivation. Once the examinations are finished, the students' prime motivator is lost and interest declines (Berwick & Ross, 1989).

Many studies on language learning motivation cite Dörnyei's (1994) L2 (second language) motivational self-system, which analyzed motivation on three levels: the learner; the learning situation; and the language itself. At the level of the learner, Dörnyei (1994) asked whether the motivation is more intrinsic or extrinsic; at the level of the learning situation, he examined the effects of the teacher, the class, and the course on the learner's

desire to learn; and at the language level, he asked whether the learner's purpose is instrumental or integrative. Instrumental motivation refers to the desire to learn another language for a specific functional use, such as nursing, and integrative motivation refers to wanting to learn in order to live within a community of people using the target language or interact with people from that community in a general way. Dörnyei and Csizér's (2002) work on learner motivation in Hungary found that integrativeness was the most important component of the L2 motivation construct for determining L2 proficiency.

Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) replicated Dörnyei and Csizér's (2002) Hungarian study in Japan, China, and Iran with a total sample size of nearly 5000 people, and found a high correlation between integrativeness and the learners' *ideal* L2 self (i.e. concept of who they would like to be), and instrumentality highly correlated to their *ought-to* L2 self (i.e. the concept of who they *should* be). They also found Japanese learners were somewhat differently motivated than their Chinese and Iranian peers in that they had a harder time envisioning themselves using English professionally.

Research context

The university under focus in the present study, referred to here as University A, is located in central Japan, and specializes in healthcare with programs in nursing, social work, and rehabilitation. While English is not offered as a major, there is an English portion for the entrance examination and English as a foreign language is a compulsory course for all first-year students.

The impetus for the study was the researcher's desire to better understand how much effort the students at University A were willing to put into their English studies, what attitudes they held regarding English, what motivated them to learn English, and what relationship these factors had with a standardized English proficiency test. There is reason to believe that Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) findings mentioned above would largely be applicable to University A's context as the participants in both studies were university students with an average age around 19 years.

However, there is one major difference in that University A is primarily a healthcare-focused school whereas over a quarter of Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009, p. 72) sample was composed of English majors, with the rest coming from other disciplines. The researcher was interested to learn if the more career-focused healthcare majors would result in different effort levels, attitudes, and motivating factors toward language study.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions with regard to nursing and social welfare majors at University A:

1. How much effort are nursing and social welfare majors willing to expend on their English studies?

2. Are there significant correlations between nursing and social welfare students' effort levels and various attitudinal and motivational factors?

3. Are there significant correlations between nursing and social welfare students' English proficiency test scores and effort levels and their English test scores and various attitudinal and motivational areas?

Method

Participants / Setting

The participants were sixteen (N = 16) female university students (1st year = 8, 2nd year = 8). Fourteen of the students were enrolled in the School of Nursing and two were enrolled in the School of Social Work. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the study was conducted with

ethics approval from the university's institutional review board.

Procedure

The data was collected at the end of the 2017-18 academic year. Quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire developed by Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) for use in Hungary and subsequently adapted by Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) for use in Japan, and the ACE (Assessment of Communicative English) Test, a standardized test produced by the Association of English Language Proficiency Assessment (http://npo-elpa.org/ace/).

A time was arranged for participants to take the proficiency test. The test was comprised of three parts: listening; vocabulary and grammar; and reading. One hour was allotted for the test and students filled in their answers using a standardized mark sheet.

The questionnaire was given in Japanese as a Google Form and comprised a total of 67 statements related to English language learning and culture. Participants were presented with Likert scales with which to express their level of agreement or disagreement or strength of feeling for each statement. The scale ranged from 1 through 6 with no neutral option. The following designations were used for the statements/ questions: 1 = strongly disagree/not at all; 2 = disagree/not so much; 3 = slightly disagree/so-so; 4 = slightly agree/a little; 5 = agree/quite a lot; 6 = strongly agree/very much.

The questionnaire probed motivations in several categories as described below. The questionnaire items that correspond with each category are also listed.

- Effort level: Students' self-report on the level of effort they put into English. (5, 17, 28, 41)
- Ideal L2 self: How students imagine themselves using English in the future (8, 20, 33, 58, 66)
- Ought-to L2 self: Students' image of how they should be studying English related to duties, obligations, and responsibilities. (13, 25, 38, 62)
- Family influence: Students' perceptions of parental encouragement or pressure to learn English. (2, 14, 29, 40)
- Instrumentality (promotion): Students' motivation to learn English related to its functional use, in order to achieve personal goals. (6, 18, 31, 55, 64)
- Instrumentality (prevention): Students' motivation to learn English related to its functional use in relation to obligations so as to avoid failure. (10, 23, 36, 60, 67)
- Attitudes to learning English: How students feel about their English studies. (12, 24, 37, 61)
- Cultural interest: Students' interest in the music, books, films, TV and other media of English-speaking countries. (43, 46, 49, 52)
- Attitudes to L2 community: Students' feelings towards native speakers of English. (44, 47, 50, 53)
- Integrativeness: Students' interest in learning English in order to integrate into an English-speaking community. (45, 48, 51)

Results

Questionnaire Reliability

Prior to addressing the research questions, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the study's factors, using JASP statistical analysis software (https://jasp-stats.org/), in order to check their internal consistency. Table 1 presents a comparison of the alpha coefficients from the present study and the Japanese portion of Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) study.

Table 1

Comparison of Cronbach's alpha coefficients for attitudinal and motivational factors

Factor Name	Japan (Taguchi et al., 2009)	University A (Present study)
Effort Level	0.83	0.85
Ideal L2 Self	0.89	0.80
Ought-to Self	0.76	0.84
Family Influence	0.83	0.90
Instrumentality (Promotion)	0.82	0.87
Instrumentality (Prevention)	0.73	0.84
Attitudes to Learning English	0.90	0.90
Cultural Interest	0.77	0.65
Attitudes to L2 Community	0.86	0.81
Integrativeness	0.64	0.23

Note. Alpha coefficients greater than 0.9 = excellent, 0.89 – 0.8 = good, 0.79 – 0.7 = acceptable, 0.69 – 0.6 = questionable, 0.59 – 0.5 = poor, and less than 0.5 = unacceptable (George & Mallery, 2003).

Table 2

Student responses to effort level statements (N=16)

Statements	Mode	Mean	*SD*	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
5. If an English course was offered at university or somewhere else in the future, I would like to take it.	3	3.38 (4.26)	1.09	37.5	62.50
17. I am working hard at learning English.	3	2.94 (3.69)	1.39	31.25	68.75
28. I am prepared to expend a lot of effort in learning English.	3	3.38 (3.54)	1.09	37.5	62.50
41. I think I am doing my best to learn English.	3	3.13 (3.29)	1.09	31.25	68.75

Note. SD = standard deviation. Figures in brackets represent the results from Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009).

As can be seen in Table 1, the present study produced coefficients largely in line with those of Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009), with most areas within a 0.1 range of difference. University A's lowest coefficient, *integrativeness* at 0.23, was also the lowest for Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009), but was deemed unacceptable according to George and Mallery's (2003) guidelines for assessing alpha. As a result, *integrativeness* was discarded as a factor from the present study.

RQ1. How much effort are nursing and social majors willing to expend on their English studies?

To answer this question, students were presented with four statements related to the degree of effort they were willing to put into their English studies. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for these items together with the mean responses from Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) study for comparison purposes.

The mean for the four effort items was 3.20. This, together with the mode response of 3 for each of the effort level statements, suggests that students felt close to neutral about their own effort levels in learning English. Despite mean responses above 3.0 for three of the four items, when the number of participants expressing disagreement (with a response of 1-3 on the 6-point scale) and agreement (with responses of 4-6) were tallied, the majority of students were found to express disagreement with the effort statements, suggesting the majority did not feel they were putting a concerted effort into their English studies.

Notably, the mean responses from University A students was lower for all four statements than in Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) study. It should be noted that assessing whether these differences were statistically significant or not was beyond the scope of the present study, but the means hint at the possibility of lower English effort levels for participants at University A. The means for Statement 28, regarding the amount of effort students were willing to expend, and Statement 41, asking if they were doing their best to learn English, were similar for the two studies. However, there were large differences in students'

assessment of how hard they were working to study English (Statement 17) and their interest in taking future English courses (Statement 41), with the University A students appearing to express lower levels for both.

RQ2. Are there significant correlations between nursing and social welfare students' effort levels and various attitudinal and motivational factors?

Significant correlations were found between students' effort levels and all of the study's attitudinal and motivational factors.

Table 3

Correlations between effort level and attitudinal and motivational factors

Attitudinal/Motivational Factor	Pearson's *r*	Correlation Strength
Ideal L2 Self	. 66*	strong
Ought-to Self	. 53*	moderate
Family Influence	. 70*	strong
Instrumentality (Promotion)	. 74*	strong
Instrumentality (Prevention)	. 51*	moderate
Attitudes to Learning English	. 58*	moderate
Cultural Interest	. 58*	moderate
Attitudes to L2 Community	. 66*	strong

Note. **p* < .05. *P*-values of .05 and below were considered significant. Correlations (*r*) less than .20 = very weak, .20 - .39 = weak, .40 - .59 = moderate, .60 - .79 = strong, .80 or greater = very strong (Evans, 1996).

Table 3 shows the correlations between the composite scores for effort level and various attitudinal or motivational areas. Using Evans' (1996) guide to describing correlation strengths, all of the attitudinal and motivational factors demonstrated either a moderate positive correlation or a strong positive correlation to students' self-reported effort levels. The attitudinal and motivational factor most strongly correlated with effort levels was *instrumentality (promotion)*, and the most-weakly correlated factor was *instrumentality (prevention)*. This contrast suggests that University A students are more motivated by positive personal goals rather than pressure to avoid negative consequences.

RQ3. Are there significant correlations between nursing and social welfare students' English proficiency test scores and effort levels and their English test scores and various attitudinal and motivational areas?

Correlation analysis was conducted in order to determine whether there was a significant correlation between students' performance on the ACE proficiency test and their self-reported effort levels and motivations to learn English. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4

Correlations between English test scores and attitudinal/motivational factors

Attitudinal/Motivational Factors	Pearson's *r*	*p-value*
Effort Level	-. 052	. 848
Ideal L2 Self	. 501	. 048
Ought-to Self	. 027	. 922
Family Influence	. 031	. 909
Instrumentality (Promotion)	. 128	. 637
Instrumentality (Prevention)	. 092	. 733
Attitudes to Learning English	. 328	. 215
Cultural Interest	. 275	. 303
Attitudes to L2 Community	-. 023	. 933

Note. P-values of .05 and below were considered statistically significant.

There was no significant correlation between the students' scores on the ACE English proficiency test and their self-reported effort levels. There was also no significant correlation between the test scores and any of the attitudinal or motivational factors except for *ideal L2 self*, which, following Evan's (1996) guidelines for interpreting correlation strength, indicated a "moderate" correlation. While correlation does not necessarily confirm causality, these results suggest that the clearer an image University A students' have of how they will use English in the

future, the better their performance on a standardized English proficiency test.

Discussion

This study set out to answer three questions. The first question asked how much effort students were willing to expend on their English studies. The results indicated that University A students had a neutral feeling about their own effort levels to learn English and that most did not feel they were doing their best to learn English. Compared to the participants in Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) study, University A students' effort levels were lower. Further, the difference in University A students' interest in taking future English courses was notably lower. This is, perhaps, not surprising, as over a quarter of Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) samples were English majors who would likely have been more inclined and able to take additional courses related to their main area of interest. Furthermore, the more specialized nature of nursing and social work studies does not allow as much room for unrelated elective courses and, at the time of the study, few options existed for University A students to take English courses beyond their second year.

The second question examined correlations between University A students' effort levels and their attitudes towards and motivations for learning English. The correlations between effort and the various attitudinal and motivational factors were all found to be significant. University A students appear to be more motivated in their English studies by intrinsic personal goals, *instrumentality (promotion)*, than extrinsic ones related to avoiding failure, *instrumentality (prevention)*. This makes sense as, having completed their university entrance examinations, students do not face any similar high stakes English activities in order to graduate or find employment. Many students do elect to take the TOEIC-IP test, but as it is not a requirement and their motivation for doing so is more likely to be promotional in nature.

There was a surprisingly strong correlation between students' efforts and *family influence*. However, the responses to Item 2 ("My parents encourage me to study English"), with a mean of 3.69, and Item 25 ("I have to study English, because, if I do not study it, I think my parents will be disappointed with me"), with a mean of 2.56, would suggest that the influence was more in the form of encouragement than pressure.

The third question examined whether there were significant correlations between students' English test scores and their effort level in English and their test score and attitudinal/motivational factors. Whereas Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) found that *integrativeness* was the most important factor in determining L2 proficiency, the present study determined that the *integrativeness* scale did not have an acceptable level of reliability in the present context. Further, no significant correlations were found between any of the present study's factors and the students' scores on the ACE English proficiency test, except for *ideal L2 self*, which had a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that nursing and social work students may have a different motivational profile than other university students, particularly English majors.

Given that nursing and social work students have chosen majors associated with specific career paths usually within Japan, it may not come as a surprise that the idea of learning English in order to integrate into an English-speaking community is not a particularly relevant one to them. The correlation between the *ideal L2 self* and test scores suggest the importance of helping students to develop an understanding of how they may use English in the future, either for personal or professional reasons, and an image of themselves as successful users of the language.

Limitations and Areas of Further Research

Despite a general sense of agreement as

represented by relatively low standard of deviation figures for most statements, there are a number of limitations, which may impact the generalizability of the study's results. Most notably, with sixteen participants, the study's sample size was small and lacked any male perspectives. Also, because willing participants were required to contact the researcher about taking part in the study, the possibility of self-selection bias exists. Further studies with larger sample sizes and the inclusion of male participants would address these limitations.

While the comparison between the present study and Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) provided insights, nearly a decade separates the two studies. It is presumed that the major differences between the two studies could be attributed to the students' different majors, but it is also possible that general interest in English has changed in the intervening years. Moreover, determining whether the differences between the two studies were statistically significant was beyond the scope of the present study. Future studies using Taguchi et al's (2009) scales comparing nursing and social work students major with students in other majors could help educators to develop a better learner profile of their nursing and social work students.

As hinted above, the *integrativeness* scale from Taguchi et al's (2009) questionnaire was found not to have an acceptable level of internal consistency in the context of the present study. Further testing and development of the *integrativeness* scale, particularly with nursing and social work students, is recommended.

Conclusion

This study offers several interesting points to consider in addressing the English learning motivation of nursing and social welfare students. First, the neutral attitude of the participants indicates a need for greater encouragement. The likelihood of their different motivational profile suggests the need for a more tailored teaching approach. A needs analysis is recommended to ensure that the language skills and content being taught are in line with what the students understand they need. For example, there is no use in focusing on academic writing skills, if students perceive they will primarily use spoken English with patients in the future.

The finding of a significant correlation between the *ideal L2 self* and standardized test scores suggests a need for making connections to future applications of English more explicit. Rather than presenting students with a general English program, which may be vague in its application, it may be as Krashen (2004) has argued, more beneficial for English learners to specialize earlier than later.

English programs for nursing and social work students may be designed to included career-related content or courses (i.e. English for specific purposes [ESP] courses such as nursing English). Rather than waiting for upper year courses to teach ESP courses, educators may consider offering them earlier and continuing to offer them as students' content knowledge grows. Program learning outcomes with can-do statements could also give students a better sense of their achievement and tap into the high level of instrumental motivation that students expressed in the present study.

To conclude, I expect many readers can recall being students themselves and sitting in a class thinking, why am I learning this and how will I ever use this? The more an English teacher is able to address these questions, either by answering them directly or by facilitating students to make their own connections, the more clearly students' ideal L2 self may come into focus. This, in turn, may be one of the best ways of motivating nursing and social work students in their English study.

References

Berwick, R., & Ross, S. (1989). Motivation after matriculation: Are Japanese learners of English still alive after exam hell? *JALT Journal*, *11*(2), 193-210. https://jalt-publications.org/files/pdf-article/jj-11.2-art3.pdf

Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal, 78*(3), 273-284. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02042.x

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten Commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, *2* (3), 203-229. https://doi.org/10.1177/136216889800200303

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (2002). Some dynamics of language attitudes and motivation: Results of a longitudinal nationwide survey. *Applied Linguistics*, *23*(4), 421-462. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/23.4.421

Dörnyei, Z., & Taguchi, T. (2010). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Evans, J. D. (1996). Straightforward statistics for the behavioral sciences. Brooks/Cole Publishing.

George, D., & Mallery, P. (2003). *SPSS for Windows step by step: A simple guide and reference. 11.0 update* (4th ed). Allyn & Bacon.

Irie, K. (2003). What do we know about the language learning motivation of university students in Japan? Some patterns in survey studies. *JALT Journal, 25*(1), 86-100. http://jalt-publications.org/files/pdf/jalt_journal/2003a_jj.pdf#page=88

Krashen, S. (2004). The case for narrow reading. *Language Magazine*, *3*(5), 17-19. http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/articles/narrow.pdf

Masgoret, A. M., & Gardner, R. C. (2003). Attitudes, motivation, and second language learning: A meta–analysis of studies conducted by Gardner and associates. *Language Learning*, *53*(1), 123-163. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.00227

Shea, D. P. (2017). Oriented to English: Motivations and attitudes of advanced students in the university classroom. *JALT Journal, 39*(2), 139-164. http://jalt-publications.org/sites/default/files/pdf-article/jj2017b-art3.pdf

Sugita, M., & Takeuchi, O. (2010). What can teachers do to motivate their students? A classroom research on motivational strategy use in the Japanese EFL context. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *4*(1), 21-35. doi:10.1080/17501220802450470

Taguchi, T., Magid, M., & Papi, M. (2009). The L2 motivational self system among Japanese, Chinese and Iranian learners of English: A comparative study. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 66-97). Multilingual Matters.