

Unveiling the “Whys” of Japanese Third-age Learners’ English Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT. Japanese third-age English language learners, though growing, are still an under-researched demographic. Grounded on the quantitative results of Japanese third-age learners’ English language proficiency (ELP), which is B1 on average, this descriptive-qualitative study explored why the participants got certain levels of ELP. Using the maximum variation sampling, the researchers chose five third-aged Japanese participants from the five cities of Aichi, Japan. The findings reveal two significant themes: motivational factors (with three sub-themes: personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment) and factors affecting ELP (with four sub-themes: dynamics of sex and ELP, dynamics of age and ELP, dynamics of education and ELP, dynamics of time and ELP), encourage the examination of learning a language as a means to greater autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and an understanding of the global community. It provides valuable insights for teachers or curriculum designers to improve EFL programs for third-age learners, enhancing accessibility, interest, and effective language acquisition.

1.0. Introduction

Global interest in pursuing language learning in later life is growing, especially in light of the aging population (Kacatl & Klímová, 2021). Studies reveal that third-age learners—generally those sixty years of age and older—display distinct motivations and challenges when learning new languages (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Research carried out in a variety of cultural contexts has shown that learning a language can improve social interaction, improve cognitive function, and improve older persons’ general well-being (Geng & Yin, 2023; Owatnupat, 2021).

Though research on the subject is still scarce in comparison to Western contexts, the dynamics of language learning among older populations in Asian environments have started to be investigated, especially in the context of lifelong learning (Osborne & Sim, 2023). Globalization and the need to stay connected in a changing world have led to a rise in interest in English language education for senior citizens in Asian countries. In China, for instance, the English proficiency of third-age learners is connected to their general interest in English and desire to travel, keep their brains in shape, and connect with

the younger generation (Wei et al., 2024).

A growing focus on lifelong learning, including language acquisition among older people, has resulted from Japan’s demographic change towards an aging society. Japanese third-age English language learners, though growing, are still an under-researched demographic. Realizing the value of education in encouraging active and healthy aging, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has supported lifelong learning programs. However, the literature is still scant, and it is unclear whether it provides at least an overview of Japanese third-age learners of English in Japan. Although a study was conducted specifically in Japan (San Jose et al., 2024) to assess the English proficiency of Japanese third-age learners, there is still a need to provide a deeper understanding of why they have that certain level of English proficiency.

One of the researchers has been facilitating English workshops with Japanese senior citizens in Japan. He started in 2020 with only two groups in a private English conversation school. As of 2024, he had seven (7) groups of third-age learners of English, and each group had regular members between 10 and 15. The groups were organized by the members, and they chose their facilitator or teacher, including their venues, schedule, and membership fees. After four years, the researchers measured the participants’

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English language proficiency (ELP) level. However, given the results of the study, the researchers would like to further investigate why the third-age respondents got those specific ELP levels. Thus, this study is built on the mentioned previous quantitative study.

As far as the topic of this investigation is concerned, no study has yet investigated and examined the deeper reasons why Japanese third-age learners have a certain ELP level. The study of San Jose et al. (2024) assessed the ELP levels of Japanese third-age learners, which is B1 on average, but there was no investigation regarding the reasons behind their ELP levels. A separate study by San Jose and Madrigal (2023) explored the motivations, challenges, and learning strategies of Japanese third-age learners but not the reasons for their ELP level. Saito (2019) provided insight into the challenges encountered by older Japanese learners of English, including factors like a drive for cerebral stimulation, getting over obstacles in the past related to schooling, and social interaction. Given the limited study, the status quo of the literature presents a gap that requires a better and deeper understanding of why Japanese third-age learners have a certain level of ELP. This is the gap this study fills in.

Therefore, this descriptive qualitative study aims to provide deeper insights into the ELP levels of Japanese third-age learners. It explores insights, viewpoints, and experiences of Japanese third-age learners regarding their ELP level to generate in-depth perspectives on their ELP levels. The findings served as bases for designing and developing instructional materials for third-age EFL classrooms, particularly in the five cities of Aichi prefecture in Japan.

2.0. Methodology

A descriptive-qualitative research design is used in this study to explore the underlying reasons for Japanese third-age learners' English language proficiency. Rich and in-depth insights into phenomena can be obtained by descriptive-qualitative research, which is appropriate for understanding participants' perspectives, experiences, and contextual aspects without quantifying variables (Creswell & Poth, 2024). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), this approach is especially suitable for exploring the underlying reasons for the Japanese third-age learners' ELP since it enables an in-depth analysis of each participant's experiences.

The researchers selected five (5) participants – two males and three females participating in the EFL programs in five cities in Aichi, Japan, for the school year 2023-2024 – from the population with the highest and lowest scores on the English Proficiency test. There were two men and three women: a man

and a woman who got the lowest score, and a man and two women (both having the same score) who got the highest score on the English Proficiency test. Maximum Variation Sampling (MVS) (Gill, 2020) was employed to capture a wide range of reasons for English proficiency levels, providing a comprehensive view of third-age learners' language experiences. MVS is beneficial when sample sizes are small, as it allows for insights from participants with extreme proficiency levels.

The researchers used a semi-structured, in-depth interview. The questions were contingent on the results of the quantitative study (San Jose et al., 2024). The interview helped the researchers obtain rich and substantive descriptions of the Japanese third-age learners' experiences learning English, especially those related to their ELP levels. The interview was in English and Japanese since one of the researchers could speak conversational Japanese. The participants were encouraged to speak in Japanese, and the interpreter helped the researchers give justice to their answers by translating them into English.

Once granted permission, the researchers set the interview date, time, and place. They arranged the appointments in a cozy and quiet café or restaurant. During the interview, the researchers followed a protocol. They reintroduced themselves to the participants to lighten the mood and put them at ease. The study's objectives, particularly the objectives of the interview and the confidentiality of the data acquired, were reiterated. They kept comfortable eye contact with the participants, listened to their words, and observed bodily gestures and facial expressions when asking questions. Second, the probing technique encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses until the necessary information was saturated. Third, the researchers were courteous, pleasant, and patient during the interview. In dealing with the participants, they observed Japanese etiquette. Honorifics and polite Japanese language were used. They allowed enough time for participants to respond to questions. Finally, most of the interviews were conducted in the participant's native language with the help of an interpreter. Following the interview, the researchers thanked the participants for their time and presented a token of gratitude to each of them. The researchers had a debriefing session with the participants.

After the interviews, the data were transcribed using Jefferson's Transcriptions system (Park & Hepburn, 2022), coded, categorized, and followed by the conceptualization of textual data. Data-processing software was used to code and categorize the data. This helped finalize the themes and sub-themes from the interview data.

Thematic analysis followed Lichtman's (2013) three Cs paradigm of coding, categorizing, and

conceptualizing. Coding examines qualitative text data by disassembling it to see what it yields before putting it back together meaningfully. Categorizing entails collecting the aggregated codes with comparable ideas into a single concept. Conceptualizing entails collecting the created categories and determining a common topic. These are the steps involved in data coding, categorizing, and conceptualization.

In this study, the first step was initial coding. An initial code can be a word or phrase formed by thorough reading and study of the text line by line. The second step was going back over the initial codes. The generated codes were sorted, streamlined, and clustered. The third step was the initial listing of categories. After modifying the codes, they were sorted into categories. The codes were then grouped and became main themes, and the other related codes became subthemes of the main themes. The fourth step was to revise the basic category list. At this point, the researcher reviewed the initial category list and selected which could be combined. In the fifth step, the researcher determined key concepts. The final stage was identifying key concepts that reflected the significance attached to the data.

To demonstrate that the data analysis was valid and reliable, the researchers determined the trustworthiness using the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (Thomson & Crowther, 2022). Credibility was achieved when the participants' views and the researchers' representations were fit. The researchers used member-checking, which involved returning data or results to participants to ensure accuracy and resonance with their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Transferability differs from other research components in that readers evaluate how applicable the findings are to their conditions. The researchers sifted through the thick description for each theme that effectively contextualized the participants' experience. Dependability relates to data consistency over time and across study contexts. The researchers consistently adhered to the steps of the research process. Field notes and transcriptions were utilized to cross-check the information's consistency. Confirmability of findings indicates that the data accurately represented the information provided by the participants and that the researchers did not fabricate the interpretations of those data. The researchers subjected the data through an audit trail performed by an external auditor.

To guarantee the ethical soundness of the study, the researchers addressed the general principles of respect for persons, justice, and beneficence. They also secured informed consent, addressed language barriers, and ensured privacy and confidentiality.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Similar insights were organized into two (2) major themes: motivational factors (with three sub-themes: personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment) and factors affecting English Language Proficiency (ELP) (with four sub-themes: dynamics of sex and ELP, dynamics of age and ELP, dynamics of education and ELP, and dynamics of time and ELP).

Motivational Factors

Japanese learners shared their insights, thoughts, and perspectives on learning English as a foreign language. Similar ideas were organized into three (3) subthemes: personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment.

Personal Interest. Personal interest in English language learning was crucial to participants' test outcomes. Through their narratives, it was apparent that personal interest was a driving force, urging the participants to embark on the challenging language-learning journey. Participant 1's testimony, for example, demonstrated how a specific passion, such as understanding English lyrics in music, could inspire a decision to study the language later in life. This example underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation (Singleton & Záborská, 2020; Datzman, 2019; Hussain et al., 2020; Gabrys-Barker, 2017), which stems from personal hobbies or interests, as a powerful stimulant for language learning. According to Participant 1:

I like music. But I couldn't understand the lyrics. So, in my 50s, I started learning English. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2's statement underlines the importance of focus and support networks in developing personal interests (Eguz, 2019). Participant 2 demonstrated how external influences, such as private teachers and like-minded friends, could supplement individual passion, allowing for sustained engagement and improved English language acquisition. This emphasizes the interplay between intrinsic motivation and external resources (Kaceti & Klimova, 2021), implying that combining personal interest and supportive circumstances promotes efficient language learning. Participant 2 stated that:

When I started learning English, I focused on it that's why I learned it. It's difficult of course. But with the help of my private teachers and

my friends who were also interested in learning English, I was able to focus. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 3's narrative reveals the social and cultural aspects of personal interest in English language acquisition (Singleton & Záborská, 2020; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Her portrayal of English's popularity among women within a specific time reflects larger cultural trends and practices that influence language acquisition. Furthermore, Participant 3's use of diverse approaches, such as social engagement, media consumption, and travel, emphasized the changing nature of personal interests and the adaptability of language learning methods over time. She recounted:

At that time, it (English) was very very popular for women, for housewives. Many women went to Aeon to study English because our husbands went to work, and the kids were in school. But it was expensive. After that, I continued speaking in English with my friends.... (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

The narratives of Participants 4 and 5 indicated the different manners in which personal interest in language acquisition revealed itself. While Participant 4's forward-thinking motivation is inspired by anticipated travel experiences (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023), Participant 5's recent re-engagement with English learning indicates the continuing appeal of language acquisition as a personal interest or hobby (Lee, 2020). These narratives highlight the multifaceted nature of personal interest in English language learning, including intrinsic motivations, external influences, and individual goals, all of which play important roles in shaping participants' language proficiency levels and learning paths. Their answers are expressed below.

I'm interested in English. I joined our Saturday mate group because I want to improve my English, especially speaking.... I study English because it's my interest, my hobby. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

But I'm happy that I joined our English group. I started learning English again. ...I have more free time now. So, I joined our Saturday English group. I think it's interesting to learn English. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

Social Engagement. The participants demonstrated that their scores on the test were part of the indicators of their ability and desire for social engagement. Those with the highest scores shared stories that propelled them to learn English, while those with the lowest highlighted their desire to socialize. The theme of social engagement emerged as a major impact on participants' English language learning experiences and test results. Their narratives demonstrate the desire for social engagement, and connection catalyzes language development (Lee, 2020). Participant 1's experience demonstrates how the necessity for efficient communication in social situations motivated him to enroll in English classes. This emphasizes the practical side of language development, in which the capacity to converse becomes an important predictor of social integration and engagement (Eguz, 2019). He said:

I didn't have a chance to speak English in a conversation during that time. So, I enrolled in KIA. Maybe I was 53 years old. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2's account emphasizes the importance of language proficiency for facilitating social interactions, especially in multicultural settings (Hidasi, 2019; Morita, 2015). Her narrative about the misunderstanding with the server in the United States shows the real-life effects of language barriers, inspiring her to continue learning English after she returns to Japan. Furthermore, Participant 2's desire to enjoy the language with friends highlights the social aspect of language acquisition, in which shared experiences and conversations foster connection and friendship (Gabrys-Barker, 2017). She narrated:

When I traveled to the US in 1995, I can only say hi, thank you, goodbye. Very basic English. ... So, when I came back to Japan, I studied English very hard... and I wanted to enjoy the language with my friends. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

The stories of Participants 4 and 5 offer insights into the social benefits of engaging in English language learning communities. Both participants are interested in broadening their social circles while alleviating feelings of isolation by connecting with people who share their interests (Gabrys-Barker, 2017). Participant 4's insight on overcoming shyness and forging friendships with other students highlights language learning's transforming power in improving self-confidence and interpersonal skills (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018). Similarly, Participant 5's desire

to socialize with new friends and avoid weekend boredom reflects the social reinforcement provided by language learning communities (Gabrys-Barker, 2017). They said:

Recently, I realized that learning English is a good way for me to meet new friends with the same interests as me like interest in English. Second, I joined the Saturday mate because I feel like I have a group of friends who I can talk to every weekend. I can talk about my interests, and I can learn from their stories. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Usually, I'm alone in the house and I have nothing to do on weekends. So instead of staying at home, I want to go out and talk with my new friends using English. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

These stories highlight the fundamental connection between language skills and social engagement (Lee, 2020). Participants' test scores are not just measures of linguistic proficiency but also their preparedness and desire to communicate with others via English. Thus, social engagement emerges as a strong motivator for individuals to pursue English language acquisition, promoting linguistic proficiency, social integration, and community building.

Personal Enrichment. The theme of personal enrichment surfaces as a key reason for English language learners. Their stories reveal a strong desire for self-improvement and progress, both linguistically and personally (Vötter, 2021). Participant 1's narrative emphasizes the importance of fluency and proficiency in overcoming cognitive limitations and establishing more natural and spontaneous communication. This need for linguistic flexibility and mastery is exemplified by his desire to rise above past test scores, displaying a dedication to continuous progress and personal achievement (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). He said:

I have been studying English for more than 10 years. So, I want to reach some target.... I want to speak more fluently. And I want to take TOEIC again. ... My last TOEIC score was 735... my target is over 800. It's difficult but I'm enjoying it. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2's experience reveals the life-changing effect of language acquisition on one's

self-perception and interpersonal abilities. Participant 2 demonstrates the substantial impact of language acquisition on personal growth and social adaption by describing how English learning has changed her personality from introverted to outgoing. This story shows that language learning catalyzes self-discovery and cultural integration, allowing people to break free from cultural norms and express themselves more confidently (Irie, 2022). Participant 2 said:

English helped me change my character because before I'm very Japanese, very shy, and not active. But now, I'm very active and friendly. And my character has changed completely because of learning English. ... I can say yes and no clearly. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 3's reflection on the constraints of test-oriented language education emphasizes the gap between practical and academic motives for language learning. While passing tests may be the original goal, Participant 3 recognizes the value of overall language competency, including speaking abilities, for personal development and real-world communication. This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of a balanced language learning approach that includes academic achievement and practical communication skills (Saito, 2019; Marabe & Petalla, 2023). She stated:

We wanted to pass the Eiken test to improve. But it was very academic. We studied English just to pass the test. No speaking skills. Just writing and grammar and listening. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 4's account emphasizes the ever-changing nature of personal language learning goals. While initially skeptical about acquiring fluency at his age, Participant 4 desires continuous progress and personal development (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018). His unwillingness to rely only on exam results reflects a larger trend toward intrinsic motives and a desire for self-directed learning that leads to visible growth and fulfillment. He said:

It will be so cool if I can speak English fluently. But I think it's difficult at my age. Besides, I will only use it when I travel or when I join the Saturday mate. I plan to improve my English-speaking skills and increase my English-level proficiency. I just want to see my improvement in English. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Participant 5's story captures the excitement and fulfillment that comes from the process of learning itself (Kacetyl & Klimova, 2021). Her eagerness to learn new skills and knowledge demonstrates a deep appreciation for lifelong learning and personal development (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). By presenting English learning as a source of happiness and vitality, Participant 5 emphasizes the intrinsic worth of education to enrich one's life while preserving a sense of vigor and purpose (Singleton & Záborská, 2020). Participant 5 stated:

English is very popular, and I want to learn it because I feel good when I learn new things. I am happy when I accomplish something. I don't want to stop learning or else I will start feeling old. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

The theme of personal enrichment emphasizes the multi-layered nature of reasons driving English language learning, which include goals for linguistic competency, cultural adaptability, self-improvement, and intellectual fulfillment. The participants' stories reflect a very personal journey characterized by resilience, introspection, and an unwavering commitment to continuing learning.

The theme of motivational factors presented above highlights the wide-ranging nature of English language learning, emphasizing the critical roles of personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment. Personal interest emerges as an important predictor of participants' ELP, with internal drives propelling individuals to set off on the challenging language learning course. Social engagement is important in language development, with individuals desiring relationships and friendships to help them improve linguistically. Furthermore, personal enrichment emerges as a crucial motivator for students, showing their desire for self-improvement, cultural integration, and intellectual fulfillment. Together, these subthemes provide a comprehensive picture of the various motives and experiences that form individuals' language learning journeys, stressing the interconnectedness of personal, social, and intellectual aspects in pursuing English proficiency.

Factors Affecting English Language Proficiency (ELP)

Most participants' answers fall under factors affecting ELP as the general theme. They are then subcategorized under the following subthemes: dynamics of sex and ELP, dynamics of age and ELP, dynamics of education and ELP, and dynamics of time and ELP.

Dynamics of Sex and ELP. The theme of dynamics of sex and ELP in English language learning within the Japanese cultural environment reveals multiple points of view on the relationship between sex, language competence, and societal roles. The participants' diverse perspectives reflect a complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors that shape English language development patterns. Notably, some participants think women may have higher proficiency in language, particularly in speaking and communicating, highlighting cultural stereotypes about women being more talkative or expressive. Others, however, argue that men outperform women in written and auditory examinations, possibly due to differences in learning abilities.

The relationship between ELP and economic considerations is a recurring topic, with men's pursuit of higher ELP frequently viewed as a need associated with job requirements. The widely held belief is that men, frequently the primary breadwinners, learn English to boost their employment chances, promotions, and earnings. This position is grounded on traditional sex roles in Japanese society, in which males are expected to bear financial responsibility for their families (Nemoto, 2016; Holbrow, 2022; Brinton, 2023).

The participants also account for the changing scene, recognizing that women increasingly participate in business trips and work for multinational companies, challenging the long-held belief that ELP is exclusively a male problem. This trend points to changing sex dynamics in the professional realm (Papp & Umemura, 2021). Furthermore, the accounts provide a deeper view of the reasons for language learning. Men are portrayed as motivated by practical necessities such as employment requirements and financial responsibilities, whereas women's language study is sometimes viewed as a supplemental or hobby-oriented activity. This suggests broader cultural expectations and perceived roles for each sex (Brinton, 2023).

Interestingly, one participant predicted a future shift in dynamics, arguing that if women's earnings could rise due to improved English skills, it would encourage them to study English more carefully. This foresight demonstrates an understanding of women's changing positions in the workplace and the possible influence of language ability on economic empowerment. Finally, the dynamics of sex and ELP in Japanese third-age English language acquisition indicates a complex interplay of cultural expectations, economic factors, and changing societal roles (Nemoto, 2016; Holbrow, 2022; Brinton, 2023). The participants' perspectives include a hybrid of traditional ideas and changing reality, providing

insight into how sex dynamics influence language learning motivations and outcomes in a culturally unique context. They responded:

Recently, men who are working in big companies or international companies need English. If they pass Eiken or TOEIC, they can get a better job or promotion or higher salary. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

I think women study hard because they want to or maybe because they enjoy studying as their hobby. But men study hard because they must. Men have a bigger responsibility to make money for their families. Most wives take care of the home and the children. They don't have full-time jobs. They can't make more money without a full-time job. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

But recently many women have also gone on business trips. My daughter travels to Europe for business. She works in an international company, and she speaks English. We can say that men's LP can be a result of their roles and responsibilities. If women's salaries increase because of their English skills, I'm sure they will also study English harder. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

In addition to the issue of sex and ELP, the data presented highlights larger socioeconomic factors influencing language learning and professional success (Nemoto, 2016; Holbrow, 2022; Brinton, 2023). Participants' accounts illustrate the link between ELP and career chances, with examples of how individuals, particularly men, leverage language abilities to secure promotions, wage increases, and even overseas opportunities. Participant 2's statements demonstrate the direct relationship between higher TOEIC scores and career advancement, underlining the importance of ELP in professional success, as evidenced by the capacity to acquire a home. Participant 2 shared:

Do you remember ***-san, the guy in our class? ... He used to work with foreigners. He works in an international company, and he often travels. He has many business trips to the US and China. His English is very good. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

My second son entered a company. The company told him to try to get TOEIC. He doesn't like English, but he tried. He had to because the company wanted it. When he got the higher TOEIC test score, he was promoted and his salary increased too. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

In addition, the data demonstrates how language learning goals differ between individuals, ranging from employment requirements to personal interests, as evidenced by Participant 3's mention of TOEIC preparation as a passion for some. She said:

... ***-san (*one of the guys in their group*) also studied hard to get higher points in TOEIC. But in his case, it's his hobby not for a job. But the younger guys are studying harder for their job. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Furthermore, Participant 4's example underscores the sex-specific nature of professional experiences. Men often benefit from work-related language practice and exposure, which may contribute to their greater ELP levels (Nemoto, 2016; Holbrow, 2022; Brinton, 2023). Participant 4 said:

For example, my friend who works in an international company, he traveled with other guys. I can imagine that those men can speak English well. I'm sure they get more experience speaking English with foreigners or native speakers. So, the women in their company don't get the experience of interacting with foreigners and speaking English with native speakers. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

The statement from Participant 5 provides insights into the mobility and opportunities provided by language abilities, particularly in foreign situations, demonstrating the wider influence of ELP beyond career progress (Holbrow, 2022). Participant 5 shared:

My friend's husband was sent to America; I think in North Carolina with his family. My friend's husband is a machine engineer and can speak English. Because he can speak English, the company assigned him to America. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

Finally, Participant 4's opinion on sex roles in Japanese society offers a cultural perspective on workplace dynamics and the perceived division of labor between men and women (Nemoto, 2016), illuminating how these societal norms impact individuals' motives and opportunities for language learning. The findings may reveal an intricate interplay between ELP, professional advancement, sex dynamics, and cultural norms (Brinton, 2023) in the context of English language learning in Japan. Participant 4 said:

You know women have more important responsibilities in the house and with the children. If the company sends women, who will take care of the house and children? I think it's not discrimination. It's the way the Japanese do things. Not because we don't trust women but because men do things differently. We trust women. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Because of the different roles and responsibilities, men tend to earn more and work more. It's natural or normal for men to do that because it so happens that the role falls on their shoulders not on women. I think if the roles were opposite, maybe women would work harder than men. But that's not the case. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Dynamics of Age and ELP. The theme of dynamics of age and ELP illuminates the various perspectives on how age affects English language learning. The participants provide insights into why older learners frequently have higher levels of ELP than younger learners. The participants provide insights into why older learners frequently have higher levels of ELP than younger learners. Participant 1 stresses the competitive nature of older individuals, emphasizing their perseverance and pride in showcasing their abilities (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). He also proposes that older learners may have more time to devote to English study due to retirement, as opposed to younger people who may still be working or engaged in other activities. Participant 1 said:

It's like, our pride. In a competition, we want to show what we got. We want to show how good we are at what we do. We like the feeling of winning. We don't want to feel defeated. Maybe we have

enough time to study because we don't work anymore. And maybe young people don't need enough time because for them it's easy to memorize faster. Or maybe they are still busy with their work. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2 claims that older students are more focused on studying English than younger students, who may be more engaged in popular culture or other activities. She emphasizes the advantages of exposure to diverse cultures and experiences acquired through travel, which helps older students boost their enthusiasm and capacity to study English (Mitchell et al., 2019; Gass et al., 2020). Participant 2 narrated:

I think the older ones are very focused on studying English. But the young ones are focused on other things like kpop, kdrama, shopping, and so on. When I started learning English, I focused on it that's why I learned it. It's difficult of course. But with the help of my private teachers and my friends who were also interested in learning English, I was able to focus. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 3 points out the importance of life experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), notably travel, in developing older learners' language abilities. She claims that exposure to varying environments and circumstances outside of Japan improves English language skills because older people have more opportunities to use the language in real-world scenarios (Mitchell et al., 2019; Gass et al., 2020). Participant 3 said:

Older students have more experience. We already traveled to many places and countries and learned from those trips. Many things we learned on those trips are not available in Japan. I mean we would not learn in Japan if did not travel... we improve our English through experiences of using it. If we don't use it, we don't improve. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 4 emphasizes the importance of retirement in giving older learners more time to study English and engage in language-learning activities such as reading news, watching movies, and socializing. He also implies that older students can benefit from their prior knowledge and experience to formulate effective learning methods or employ language transfer (Mitchell et al., 2019). Participant 4 stated:

I think, since we already retired from our full-time jobs, we now have more time not only to study English, but more time to read more news, watch more movies. And somehow, this more free time helps us focus on our study of English. It also helps us understand more things, more English, and more information. We have more time to talk about our previous experiences. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Participant 5 thoroughly examines the aspects contributing to older learners' greater ELP, including cognitive characteristics, experiences, learning tactics, and exposure to English in real-life situations. She contends that older learners' cumulative experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020) and exposure to English-speaking situations allow them to grasp grammatical rules, vocabulary, and language patterns more intuitively (Mitchell et al., 2019). Participant 5 said:

Maybe the older students have more knowledge. If their brains are still very good, maybe they can remember words easily or maybe they can think fast. Older students have more experience or learning systems and strategies that they can use. They can check their progress in learning English. If they are not improving, they can change their techniques or materials. They can quickly understand grammar rules, sentence patterns, and the use of the vocabulary they memorize. They are also aware of the goals why they study English. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

The responses demonstrate the intricate interaction of age, motivation, experiences, and learning mechanisms that foster language competency. While older learners may face problems such as memory retention, correlating the age of acquisition of L2 and the functional and anatomical capacities of the brain (Nichols & Joannis, 2016), they frequently use their life experiences, determination, and available time to achieve better levels of English proficiency than younger learners.

Dynamics of Education and ELP. The theme of dynamics of education and ELP explores participants' perceptions on whether formal education is required to achieve better levels of ELP. Their replies offer different perspectives on the relationship between educational background and language ability. Participant 1 suggests that, while schooling is important, it is not the only factor influencing

language proficiency. He highlights the importance of enthusiasm and passion in learning English (Hussain et al., 2020), claiming that those who are truly interested and motivated may excel in language acquisition regardless of their educational background. This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and personal engagement in driving language acquisition success (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Participant 1 said:

Maybe people who are interested in English will be successful regardless of educational attainment. I don't need it (educational attainment) to be able to speak English as long as I have the interest and passion to speak it. So, the purpose of studying the language is more important, not just education or not just going to university. If they know the purpose of studying English, it is easy to learn and speak it. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2 refutes the idea that formal schooling is required for language competency by citing examples of people who achieved high levels of English proficiency via hard effort and determination, regardless of their educational background. She advocates a focus on individual interest, practical relevance, and desired outcomes transformation (Merriam, 2018), arguing that language instruction should align with students' professional goals and the demands of international commerce. Participant 2 said:

I think, education is not very important in English proficiency. Even if a person does not finish university or high school, they can become CEO of a company because of their hard work. They can also become very good in English because of their hard work and interest. So, education, I don't think so. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 3 agrees that educational attainment alone does not ensure language ability (Lardiere, 2017). She emphasizes the relevance of exposure to the language and real-world usage scenarios, implying that people who have not pursued higher education but have had the opportunity to interact with English in practical settings may outperform university graduates in language abilities. This perspective emphasizes the importance of experiential learning and contextual relevance in language acquisition (Merriam, 2018). Participant 3 answered:

It depends on the person. Language proficiency is not completely due to educational attainment. Many university graduates could not speak English very well even though they studied the English language for several years. First, because English is not necessary in their job. Second, maybe they are not interested in English at all. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 4 emphasizes the importance of passion and commitment in language learning (Merriam, 2018), arguing that these qualities can compensate for a lack of formal schooling. He claims that, while schooling can help with language learning, people who are passionate and dedicated can nonetheless attain high levels of proficiency, regardless of their educational background (Lardiere, 2017). This viewpoint emphasizes the significance of personal drive and a commitment to ongoing learning (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Participant 4 said:

I think what we need is our dedication to study and learn English. ... Passion... that's the word, passion. I think passion is very important. I think we need passion to have a higher level of English proficiency. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Participant 5 recognizes the possible influence of limited educational options on language proficiency, demonstrating a conviction in the link between formal education and language skills. Her comment indicates an appreciation for the benefits formal education may offer regarding language instruction and exposure, particularly in structured learning situations (Merriam, 2018). Participant 5 shared:

Yes, it's (education) important. I didn't go to university. I didn't have a lot of opportunities to learn and use English. That's why, my English is not very good. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

The responses highlight the intricate interplay of educational attainment, intrinsic desire, passion, and real-world experiences when developing language proficiency. While formal education might give useful resources and opportunities for language learning, it is not the only factor influencing success. Individual characteristics such as interest, commitment, and exposure to the language play critical roles in fostering language proficiency, emphasizing the complex aspect of language acquisition.

Dynamics of Time and ELP. The theme of dynamics of time and ELP explores participants' perceptions of the relationship between the amount of time spent studying English and the subsequent proficiency level. Their comments provide valuable details about the significance of time commitment in developing language proficiency and skills. Participant 1 highlights the value of quality time over quantity, emphasizing the need for concentrated and continuous study sessions. He argues that regular practice, even over short periods, is essential for optimal learning. This stance stresses that the frequency and intensity of study sessions are important in language competency development (Al Zoubi, 2018). Participant 1 said:

The quality time, the short time but focus on studying. If I study speaking for 1 hour, but only once a month, it's not good for me. I will not learn fast. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

Participant 2 underlines the importance of balancing urgency and enjoyment when learning a language. She argues that while spending a significant amount of time learning English may be vital for those with immediate learning demands, it is also critical to enjoy the learning process (Singleton & Záborská, 2020; Inada, 2022). This perspective emphasizes the need for drive and engagement to sustain long-term language learning endeavors (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Singleton & Záborská, 2020). Participant 2 stated:

If someone needs to learn English immediately, I think that person needs to spend a lot of time learning English. I want to enjoy it whether short time or a longer time studying. I want to enjoy the language with my friends. Consistent studying is very important to me. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 3 emphasizes the significance of establishing clear goals and being focused on learning a language. She believes explicit learning objectives allow people to prioritize their study time better. This point of view emphasizes the importance of goal-directed learning in making the most of the time spent studying a language (Schiller & Dorner, 2022; Ikoma, 2019). Participant 3 shared:

“Having a goal is very important. When I started studying English, I was just a housewife and my goal in studying English was just to improve

my speaking skills. Then, later, my goals or purposes in learning English changed. My other goals were to learn to use English in traveling, to pass Eiken or English test, and then just communicate with my international friends. Time is very important.” (Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Participant 4 recognizes a connection between time spent on language study and skill level but also emphasizes the difficulties of finding time for constant practice. He remarks that limited opportunities to use English outside formal study contexts can impede competence development, emphasizing the importance of immersion and practical application in language learning (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Merriam, 2018). Participant 4 said:

The more time we study, the more chances to learn it and being able to use it. But I don't have enough time. I only practice English or use English when I go to our English class on Saturday. I can watch English videos on YouTube, but I don't speak. I have no one to talk to in English. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

Participant 5 reflects on her experience with restricted language study time owing to other commitments. She acknowledges that her competence level is lower than desired due to insufficient time spent on language learning. This viewpoint emphasizes the trade-offs people may confront between language learning and other commitments, such as employment and family obligations (Merriam, 2018). Participant 5 stated:

The reason why my English is so basic despite my age is because I did not spend much time studying English, because I did not need it. I was busy working, and although I like English, I could not study it because I was busy at home and work. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

The participants' narratives highlight the complexities of the relationship between time and ELP. While regular study over time is often correlated with higher competence levels, other elements such as study intensity, goal orientation, enjoyment, and practical application play important roles in molding language learning results. This analysis emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to language acquisition that considers the amount, quality, and context of study time.

Synthesis

The study explores the complex nature of Japanese third-age English language learning, highlighting the interplay between personal interest, social engagement, personal enrichment, and socioeconomic factors. Personal interest drives language learning efforts, with individuals expressing intrinsic motivation derived from interests and passions. Social engagement is crucial for language learning, promoting communication, and community formation. Personal enrichment triggers language learning attempts, promoting cognitive flexibility, cultural integration, and intellectual fulfillment. The study also explores the variables influencing language ability within the Japanese cultural environment, including sex, age, education, and time. The study highlights the importance of formal education, innate drive, passion, and real-world experiences in building language competency. The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach emphasizing quality, goal-oriented study sessions alongside other life obligations.

4.0. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the multifaceted and complex reasons why Japanese third-age English learners have certain ELP levels. The motivating factors take participants on an ongoing journey of intellectual development, social connection, and self-discovery that goes beyond traditional academic goals. Although they serve as a foundation for learning, intrinsic motivations such as self-improvement, social interaction, and personal interests are not isolated. Rather, they are influenced and occasionally limited by societal expectations, cultural norms, and demographic characteristics like age, sex, and educational background.

How social and personal goals are intertwined highlights how learning a language can help people overcome cultural and personal constraints. Nonetheless, the sex-related aspects of learning motivations, which are impacted by social roles and expectations, reflect enduring cultural norms that influence language learning goals and access. A culturally contextual framework that influences both the “how” and “why” of learning is revealed by men, who are frequently driven by financial and professional incentives, and women, who are more attracted by personal interests.

The findings encourage the examination of learning a language to greater autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and an understanding of the global community. Understanding the holistic interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations empowers EFL facilitators to create learning environments in which mastery serves as a means to both individual

fulfillment and societal contribution rather than just an end in itself.

5.0. Limitations of the Findings

The results have several limitations that might affect how broadly and practically they can be applied. The study's dependency upon self-reported data raises the possibility of biases since individuals can give inaccurate accounts of their educational experiences or socially acceptable answers. Moreover, the sample is largely composed of older students with distinct life experiences, which might not accurately reflect the dynamics of ELP development across a range of age groups or backgrounds. The research's qualitative design restricts its potential for wide applicability outside the situations and unique features of the participants, even though it offers deep insights.

6.0. Practical Value of the Paper

Facilitators, teachers, local government units, and policymakers creating English language programs for third-age learners can greatly benefit from the information this study provides. By emphasizing the unique challenges and benefits of this group, the results can guide focused curriculum adjustments, increasing the accessibility and interest in language acquisition for third-age learners. Furthermore, the study guides developing teaching strategies that leverage older learners' unique experiences, promoting sustained engagement and more effective language acquisition.

7.0. Directions for Future Research

Future studies could examine various teaching strategies and technology designed for third-age language learners to ascertain how they affect retention and engagement. Research focusing on cross-cultural comparisons may show how older individuals' cultural backgrounds affect their motivations and approaches to language learning. Furthermore, longitudinal studies may monitor language learning results over an extended time, offering valuable information about how regular practice and changing teaching strategies impact older learners' language competency.

8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this study.

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