

# English as a Foreign Language in Japan: Motivation of University Student-Athletes

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan. Utilizing a descriptive design, an adapted survey questionnaire was administered for data collection. After the data analysis, it was revealed that the majority of university student-athletes have an integrative motivation to learn English. Type of motivation differs based on gender, where male university student-athletes having integrative motivation, while female university student-athletes have instrumental motivation. It was also found that games and movies help student-athletes be motivated to study the English language. Furthermore, the type of motivation varies depending on the self-assessed proficiency level. These findings offer new and important insights to English as a Foreign Language instructors and administrators in designing the English program for university student-athletes. Recommendations for future studies on university student-athletes and the phenomenon of motivating student of countries where English is a Foreign Language are suggested.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, Motivation, Student-Athletes, Higher Education, Language Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Motivation may be an easy word to utter, nonetheless, it still is difficult to describe. Even though motivation is a term used in academic and research surroundings, it is surprising to find any accord about its exact meaning (Dornyei, 1998). There is no consensus on the definition of motivation even though many investigators view motivation as to do with the trend and extent of people's manners, that is, the choice of some actions, the determination with it, and the energy prolonged upon it (Dornyei, 2001). Despite these claims, researchers struggled to define motivation as the direction a student has regarding the drive of learning a new language (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991). Motivation is also related to the determination to act. It is the energy that pushes people to act and do things (Tileston, 2010). It is also an inner force that prompts, directs, and prompt actions constantly (Thorikildsen & White-McNulty, 2002). Motivation was defined by Lokie (2011) as the yearning to get involved in an activity out of inquisitiveness, awareness, or fun. Ortega (2009) points out that motivation is the wanting to learn a new language and make the effort to endure it, and simply put, all of us understand it to be a substance of degree, as in the everyday reflection that some students are very motivated and others have slight or not at all motivation.

In the arena of English language learning, a very motivated individual will appreciate learning the language, will desire to learn the language, and will try to learn the language (Gardner, 1985). Regarding motivation in Japan, some scholars claim that Japanese students may not be so easily motivated to learn foreign languages such as English (Tan Seoh Koon, 2015; Todaka, 2017). They also proposed that reasons such as unease, earlier damaging experiences, or selecting teacher-dominated lectures prevent Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to learn the language (Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura, 2001).

The researcher observed that in general, the students in EFL classes seemed to have a negative view and interest in learning English which was not uncommon in many schools where the researcher had taught before. What was more radiant was the amount of hate towards EFL learning which showed a link towards motivation. This lack of motivation, the researcher noticed was from one direct notion that before the taking of the researcher's classes, the learners seemed to be experiencing rigorous training in reading, writing, and grammar and not in the active notion of learning the real purpose of learning a foreign language which is to communicate orally as athletes. So, the researcher wanted to uncover the motivation of learners to study the English language to accommodate their needs in the classroom. In particular, it is interesting for the researcher to investigate university student-athletes motivation in studying and learning EFL since they have to juggle their studies and athletic practice.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to identify the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following:

1. What type of motivation do the university student-athletes have to study English?
2. What are the differences in the motivation of male and female university student-athletes?
3. What activities will help university student-athletes to better learn and be motivated to speak in English inside and outside of class?
4. Is there a relationship between the university student-athletes' self- assessed proficiency level and their type of motivation?

#### Hypothesis

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between university student-athletes' self- assessed proficiency level and their type of motivation.

#### 1.2 Review of Literature

In the framework of language learning, motivation refers to the degree to which the student makes efforts or tries to learn the language because of a craving to do so and the gratification experienced in this motion (Gardner, 1985). In this study, the researcher will adapt Gardner's definitions (1985), Tileston (2010), and Lokie (2011). Consequently, motivation will be explained as the energy and the yearning to do something out of inquisitiveness and gratification from within.

There are two interrelated types of motivation in this study that are based on the model of Gardner and Lambert (1959); one is called integrative motivation where students personally want to study the English language so that they can better comprehend and get to know the persons who speak the language and associate in their culture (Rehman, Bilal, Sheikh, Bibi, & Nawaz, 2014). The other is called instrumental motivation where instrumentally motivated students demand to learn English because of a practical reason like having a better occupation prospect or entering universities or colleges (Nguyen & Habok, 2021).

In recent years, there have been some studies on student motivation in the subject of EFL have been conducted. Warden and Lin (Warden & Lin, 2000) for example, found that the majority of the Taiwanese students in their research have robust instrumental motivation, but lacked integrative motivation. An Indonesian study exposed that university students showed a high level of motivation because of practical reasons such as making more money or rewarding jobs (Bradford, 2007). Also, research has shown that Chinese university students in China were very motivated to learn English more instrumentally (Liu, 2007). In Yemen too, petroleum engineering students were found to be motivated instrumentally (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009). Two studies in Vietnam conveyed that Vietnamese students were intrinsically motivated to learn English (Phan, 2010); The students seem to be slightly more instrumentally motivated than integrative regardless of gender (Vu & Rochelle, 2015); and they were motivated to learn English and achieve a certain level of oral English competency in hopes of obtaining better careers in the future (Truong, 2016). The outcome indicated that it helped to have a practical level of responsibility, a higher level of professional progress, and a reasonable level of intrinsic motivation (Ngo, Spooner-Lane, & Mergler, 2017). Also, it was noticeable that Vietnamese students were highly motivated to learn English and demonstrated instrumental motivation (Nguyen C. , 2019). In Turkey, finding a well-paying job was found to be the moderate motivating factor in learning English for students both in the public and private university sectors (YeşimBektaş-Çetinkaya & Oruç, 2010) Rasol and Winkle (2019) study conveyed that Pakistani University students have advantageous attitudes towards learning English mainly due to their international attitude with a more detailed explanation, as the most important motivational factor for learning English in Pakistan. Female Japanese students were assessed in terms of endurance and motivation to learn the English language in Japan and the research showed promising results towards students' motivation (Chen, Lake, & Padilla, 2021).

#### 1.3 Significance of the Study

Prior studies on student motivation in English language studies involved university students in general. Some studies may have differentiated the students based on gender, year level, or major. However, it is notable to the researcher's knowledge that no studies have been found to investigate the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn the English language. Therefore, there is a need to study the motivation of students in learning English from different perspectives with an emphasis on student-athletes. This study attempts to show insight into what motivates student-athletes and how to make them motivated to study and learn English as a Foreign Language. This study is important because it exposes one of the factors claimed to affect learning English as a Foreign Language among athlete students. Detecting the instrumental and integrative motivations that inspire athlete students to benefit from required English language classes, and to attain higher levels of English proficiency is important for athletes who intend to progress in their field of sport. With this awareness, learners will succeed and teachers will be aware and can work on enhancing the kind of motivation that will increase athlete students' interest in learning English as a Foreign Language and stimulate them to accomplish higher English language proficiency.

## 2. Method

This section includes the research design, respondents, data collection, and data analysis of the study.

### 2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive design (Siedlecki, 2020). Based on the objectives of this study, the design is appropriate since it is used to describe the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan. The researcher will only study the university students' motivation to study English without manipulating the respondents, circumstances, or procedures (Mertler, 2014). This study was approved by the university ethics committee and follows the Helsinki Declaration of ethics.

### 2.2 Respondents

The respondents for this study are university student-athletes of a private university in, Kyushu, Japan. The respondents were selected using convenience sampling (Galloway, 2005). The purpose and the protocol of the study were clearly explained to the respondents and written informed consent was obtained for their voluntary participation in the study and ensured confidentiality. A total of 239 students agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. There are 172 (72%) male and 67 (28%) female university student-athletes who participated in the study.

### 2.3 Data Collection

In this study, the researcher utilized an online survey to collect the data. The researcher adapted the questionnaire from Clement, Domyei, & Noels (1994) and Purmama, Rahayu, & Yugafiati (2019) based on the purpose of the study. After the research protocol was approved by the ethics committee, the researcher approached English and Sports teachers for recruitment of study respondents. After this, the online survey questionnaire was administered and collected once all the respondents completed answering the survey.

There are four items for the demographic profile and seven items in the survey questionnaire. Each item was translated into Japanese alongside the English questions for the ease of understanding of the participants. Six questions are multiple-choice type and one is an open-ended type. The students were asked to select their answer from the given choices based on their feelings and opinions. For the current study, only four questions will be analyzed to address the objectives of this study; question 2 (What is your motivation for studying English? / 英語を勉強しようと思う動機は何ですか? select three / 3 つ選択してください), question 3 (Which of these class activities will help you better learn and be motivated to speak in English? / これらのクラブ活動のうち、英語で話すことをよりよく学び、やる気を起こさせるのに役立つものはどれですか? select three / 3 つ選択してください), question 4 (What do you do to study / learn English outside the class? / 授業以外で英語を学ぶために何をしますか? Select three / 3 つ選択してください), and question 7 (In your opinion, what is your English proficiency level? / あなたの意見では、あなたの英語能力レベルはどれくらいですか?) will be analyzed since this study is part of a bigger research project.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Once data collection was completed, the researcher analyzed the data for the first three items using basic statistics such as percentages using Microsoft Excel. For questions requiring to give three answers, the number of responses was divided by the total number of respondents. Moreover, we used the Chi-square test of association to analyze the university student-athletes' self-assessed proficiency level and their type of motivation. We used SPSS ver. 29.0 and .05 as alpha level.

## 3. Results

This section includes the results of the survey on the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan. This includes a descriptive section related to the university student-athletes' motivation to study English, the motivation between male and female athletes, the activities that will help university student-athletes to better learn and be motivated to speak in English, and the statistical analysis between the university student-athletes' self-assessed proficiency level and their type of motivation. These are presented in tabular form and graphs.

The type of motivation that Japanese university student-athletes have to study English is illustrated in Table 1. The respondents selected three answers from the choices. It shows that 46.9% (112) of the population are motivated to study English to help broaden their outlook. Another motivation for university student-athletes is studying English helps them know people from different parts of the world 38.9% (93). Finally, university student-athletes want to understand English films, TV programs, videos, songs, and radio 37.7% (90).

Table 1. Motivation of Japanese university student-athletes to study English

What is your motivation for studying English? / 英語を勉強しようと思う動機は何ですか? (select three / 3つ選択してください)	M	F	n	Percentage
1. I really like English / 英語がとても好きです	29	10	39	16.3%
2. Studying English helps me know people from different parts of the world / 英語を勉強することで、世界各地の人々と知り合うことができます。	74	19	93	*38.9%
3. I like to learn many foreign languages / 私は多くの外国語を学ぶのが好きです	15	5	20	8.4%
4. An educated person is supposed to be able to speak in English / 教育を受けた人は英語で話すことができるはずです	23	11	34	14.2%
5. Studying English can help me become more knowledgeable / 英語を勉強することは、私がいより知識を深めるのを助けることができます	26	*38	64	26.8%
6. Studying English will help me broaden my outlook / 英語を勉強することは、視野を広げる助けになります	*78	34	112	*46.9%
7. It is obligatory to learn English for my future (Job, studies, etc.) / 将来のために英語を学ぶことが義務付けられています(仕事、勉強など)	51	21	72	30.1%
8. I want to understand English films, TV programs, videos, songs, and radio / 英語の映画、テレビ番組、ビデオ、歌、ラジオを理解したい	65	25	90	*37.7%
9. It is needed so I can read English books, magazines, or newspapers. / 英語の本や雑誌、新聞が読めるようにするために必要です。	23	5	28	11.7%
10. I like to travel abroad. / 海外旅行が好きです。	28	7	35	14.6%
11. I will be popular if I study and learn English. / 英語を勉強して学べば人気者になります。	8	1	9	3.8%

The differences in the motivation of male and female athletes is also shown in Table 1. Male university student-athletes tend to be motivated to studying English to help broaden their outlook / 英語を勉強することは、視野を広げる助けになります (78), while female university student-athletes are more into studying English to help them become more knowledgeable / 英語を勉強することは、私がいより知識を深めるのを助けることができます (38).

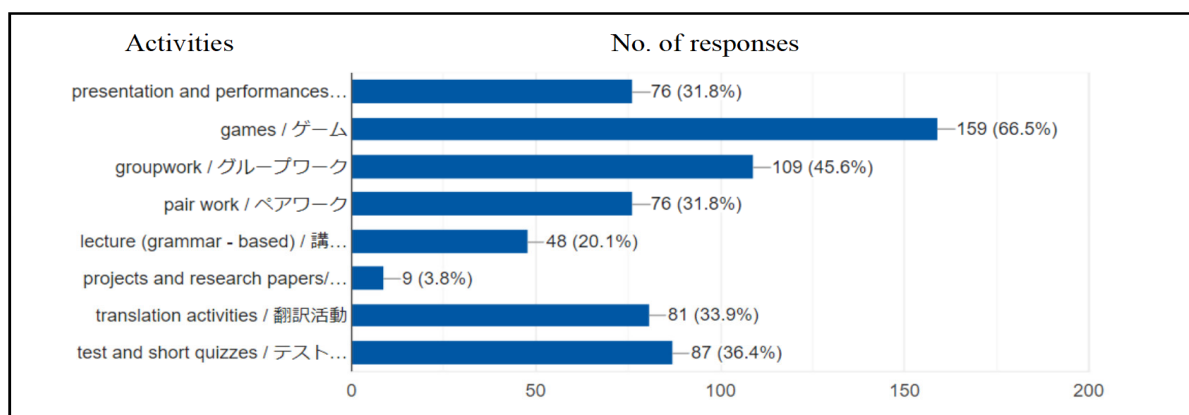


Figure 1. In-class activities to help student athletes to better learn and be motivated to speak in English  
 In terms of class activities that will help university student-athletes to better learn and be motivated to speak in English, the results show that games / ゲーム (66.5%), followed by groupwork / グループワーク (45.6%), and test and short quizzes / テストやクイズ (36.4%) are preferred by the university student-athletes (Fig. 1).

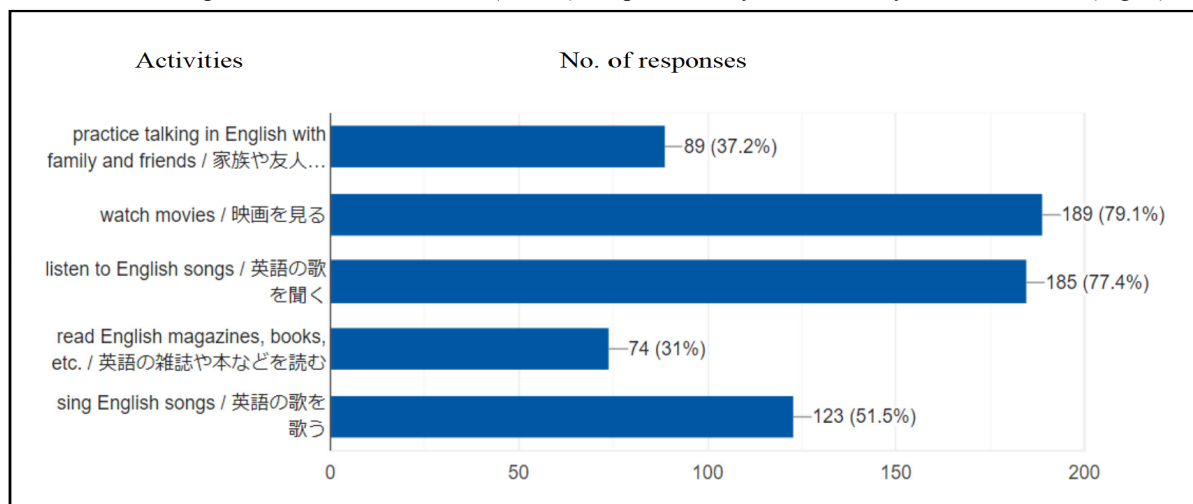


Figure 2. Outside class activities to learn English  
 We also asked the respondents to identify three activities outside of the class to learn English (Fig. 2). It seems that they like to watch movies / 映画を見る 189 (79.1%), listen to English songs / 英語の歌を聞く 185 (77.4%), and sing English songs / 英語の歌を歌う 123 (51.5%).

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	51.646 <sup>a</sup>	36	.044
Likelihood Ratio	43.291	36	.188
N of Valid Cases	239		

a. 39 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .07.

Figure 3. Chi-Square Analysis between Self-assessed proficiency level and motivation  
 A chi-square test of independence showed that there is a significant relationship between self-assessed proficiency level and motivation,  $X^2(36, N = 239) = 51.6, p = .044$ . The university student-athletes' motivation varies depending on their self-assessed proficiency level.

Table 2. Motivation and Self-assessed Proficiency Level Crosstabulation

Motivation	Self-assessed proficiency level									
	Super Beginner		Beginner		Intermediate		Advance		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I really like English / 英語がとても好きです。	8	3.35%	20	8.37%	9	3.77%	2	0.01	39	16.3%
Studying English helps me know people from different parts of the world / 英語を勉強することで、世界各地の人々と知り合うことができます。	16	6.69%	59	24.69%	16	*6.69%	2	0.01	93	38.9%
I like to learn many foreign languages / 私は多くの外国語を学ぶのが好きです。	6	2.51%	10	4.18%	3	1.26%	1	0.00	20	8.4%
An educated person is supposed to be able to speak in English / 教育を受けた人は英語で話すことができるはずです	8	3.35%	21	8.79%	3	1.26%	2	0.01	34	14.2%
Studying English can help me become more knowledgeable / 英語を勉強することは、私がより知識を深めるのを助けることができます	6	2.51%	43	17.99%	8	3.35%	7	0.03	64	26.8%
Studying English will help me broaden my outlook / 英語を勉強することは、視野を広げる助けになります	11	4.60%	78	*32.64%	15	6.28%	8	*0.03	112	46.9%
It is obligatory to learn English for my future (Job, studies, etc.) / 将来のために英語を学ぶことが義務付けられています(仕事、勉強など)	15	6.28%	44	18.41%	9	3.77%	4	0.02	72	30.1%
I want to understand English films, TV programs, videos, songs, and radio / 英語の映画、テレビ番組、ビデオ、歌、ラジオを理解したい	20	*8.37%	60	25.10%	6	2.51%	4	0.02	90	37.7%
It is needed so I can read English books, magazines, or newspapers. / 英語の本や雑誌、新聞が読めるようにするために必要です。	5	2.09%	18	7.53%	4	1.67%	1	0.00	28	11.7%
I like to travel abroad. / 海外旅行が好きです。	10	4.18%	19	7.95%	2	0.84%	4	0.02	35	14.6%
I will be popular if I study and learn English. / 英語を勉強して学べば人気者になります。	3	1.26%	5	2.09%	0	0.00%	1	0.00	9	3.8%
Total Respondents (N = 239)										

Based on the result of the chi-square test, we took the percentage of the motivation in each self-assessed proficiency level and it revealed that super beginner students are motivated to study English because they want to understand English films, TV programs, videos, songs, and radio / 英語の映画、テレビ番組、ビデオ、歌、ラジオを理解したい (8.37 %), beginner students believe that studying English will help them broaden their outlook / 英語を勉強することは、視野を広げる助けになります (32.64%), Intermediate level students' motivation is studying English helps them know people from different parts of the world / 英語を勉強することで、世界各地の人々と知り合うことができます (6.69%), and advance level students believe that studying English will help them broaden their outlook / 英語を勉強することは、視野を広げる助けになります (0.03%).

#### 4. Discussion

This study aimed to describe the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan. The findings brought substantial evidence that the university student-athletes in Japan are motivated to learn English. Specifically, the majority of the respondents have integrative motivation to learn English as a foreign language. It was reported that the respondents are motivated to study English to broaden their outlook and know people from different parts of the world. These are interesting because this motivation does not seem that obvious to the researcher when the students are in class. On a positive note, it is good to know that these students are motivated from within. The results of this study differ from the claims of previous researchers where university students in general have instrumental motivation to learn English (Bradford, 2007; Liu, 2007; Vu & Rochelle, 2015; Nguyen C. , 2019; Warden & Lin, 2000; YeşimBektaş-Çetinkaya & Oruç, 2010). This also refutes the notion that Japanese EFL learners are not so motivated to learn the English language (Tan Seoh Koon, 2015; Todaka, 2017). This may be due to the students' awareness of the value of English in this interconnected world and Japan's campaign on internationalization of education (MEXT, 2008; Oxford, Lee, Snow, & Scarcella, 1994). It is noteworthy that the university student-athletes are more motivated to study English to widen their horizons instead of practical reasons.

Gender also plays in the type of motivation that the respondents have. Based on the survey, male university student-athletes showed more integrative motivation than females who showed more instrumental motivation. Male respondents are motivated to broaden their outlook in a cultural and international level, compared to the female respondents who wanted to become more knowledgeable. Male university student-athletes are motivated to study English to expanding their horizons. Whereas female university student-athletes are more concerned of their career and future (Ozuturk, 2012). This contradicts prior findings which reported "no significant gender differences in overall motivation" (Obeidat, 2005) and females have more instrumental and integrative motivation than males (Daif-Allah & Aljumah, 2020). This finding is worth noticing because university student-athletes are distinct type of learners and their expectations have to be tailored with what they need.

Moreover, it was found that university student-athletes in Japan identified games, groupwork, and test and short quizzes as activities that would help them better learn and be motivated to speak in English during classes. The use of games in EFL classes has been observed to increase the motivation of learners (Ahmed & et. al, 2022; Almusharraf, 2021; Gamlo, 2019). The use of games in EFL classes motivated the students and improved their speaking skills (Pham Vu Phi Ho, 2020). Prior studies support the claim on the use of groupwork in improving motivation (Boukleb & Wahida, 2019; Elmechta, 2021). The third activity that the respondents identified which is tests and short quizzes is noteworthy because university student-athletes do not usually prioritize their academics over athletic responsibilities (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Cosh & Tully, 2015). Meanwhile, watching movies, listening, and singing English songs are the activities that university student-athletes claim to help them be motivated and learn English outside of the classrooms. It seems that the respondents are motivated to learn English when they use entertainment whenever they are not in class. This way, they are learning and enjoying at the same time. In this case, the results corroborate with past research on the use of films and songs to encourage motivation and develop the English language skills of the learners (Boufroua, Labreche, & Bounar, 2019; Islam, 2020; Afriyuninda & Oktaviani, 2021; Wahyuni, Qamariah, & MulyadiSyahputra, 2018; Boufroua, Labreche, & Bounar, 2019).

The statistical analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between the university student-athletes' self-assessed proficiency level and their type of motivation. This is similar to what (Zhang, Dai, & Wang, 2020) stated that both instrumental and integrative motivations have a positive influence on self-rated foreign language proficiency. Furthermore, the findings revealed that super beginner learners have instrumental motivation, whereas beginner, intermediate, and advance learners have integrative motivation. It was uncovered that students who claimed to be super beginner are motivated to study English because they want to understand English entertainment; the beginner and advance students professed that studying English will help them increase their understanding of the English language in a deeper context, while the intermediate level students' motivation in studying English helps them be more international. This seems logical in a way, because one has to

know the basics of the language before going to its deeper cultural context. To the knowledge of the author, this is the first study to shed information on the type of motivation in each self-assessed proficiency level of the learners.

## 5. Conclusion

This study described the motivation of university student-athletes to study and learn English as a Foreign Language in Japan. An attempt was made to identify which type of motivation do students have in studying and learning English as a Foreign Language. It was discovered that university student-athletes in Japan tend to have integrative motivation to learn English. On one hand, it was revealed that male university student-athletes showed more integrative motivation since they wanted to broaden their outlook and be part of the English-speaking community. On the other hand, female university student-athletes exhibited to be motivated in studying English to become more knowledgeable of the language which is the instrumental type of motivation. Female university student-athletes are motivated to study English for practical reason like having a better occupation prospect. It was also revealed that the three main class activities that university student-athletes seem to choose in order to be motivated were games, groupwork, and test and short quizzes. It is expected and obvious that university student-athletes would choose games and groupwork since they are athletic and many sports are team oriented. It is quite surprising that they chose test and short quizzes because not so many athletes seem to be into academics and studying. Moreover, the respondents use educational forms of entertainment to learn the English language outside the classroom. The students' self-assessed proficiency level is significantly related to the type of motivation. We can see that the motivation varies depending on the students' proficiency level and gender. Those at lower level seek for the basics in understanding the English language. As the proficiency level progresses, the motivation becomes more complex and cultural in nature. While the relationship between the motivation and self-assessed proficiency level seem to be promising, it should be noted that more research is needed to find the reason behind this phenomenon.

What is so significant in this study and its findings to EFL and teaching university athlete students is as follows: firstly, teachers should realize what motivates their students in order to not bore the living daylight out of their students by giving the athlete students long lectures or uninteresting activities that would make the students disinterested in learning English as a Foreign Language or at worse, fall asleep. Secondly, the study shows that even university student-athletes at any proficiency level would like to enjoy learning through games and entertainment which makes them not only active (playing games), but also be inspired (watching movies). So, the lessons for these types of learners have to be more fun, active, and engaging. Moreover, it is remarkable that students showed that they welcome challenges of assessment through tests and short quizzes. It should be noted that this last point should be taken with caution-based on the experiences of the researcher who has spent more than 25 years teaching EFL in Japan that by tests and quizzes, it does not mean that the students like being judged or evaluated by those exams. Prior to entering university, Japanese students go through a lot of exams, tests and homework. Most students would normally detest these three words: tests, exams, and homework. The proficiency level and type of motivation has to be considered in developing the EFL program for university student-athletes and the lessons have to fit to their interest and needs.

Although the survey was completed by 239 students, this study has its limitations. The gathered data are limited to one university and evidence showed significant and surprisingly different results than what the researcher had expected. There should be more studies made in this field. Also, further research has to be conducted on proficiency level and types of motivation.

## Conflict of Interest

This study is a part of a bigger research project on motivation. The publication of this study was supported by the university research fund.

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