

## **Sense of Belonging: Students' Voices on Dynamic Learning Communities**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined students' perceived Sense of Belonging (SOB) in Japanese language courses at community colleges and four-year universities across North America, addressing a critical yet underexplored factor in students' academic success in Japanese language learning. Survey data were collected using an adapted version of Walton and Cohen's (2007), Sense of Social Fit Scale. Data from 153 participants were analyzed across five categories: Belonging, Affinity, Self-Efficacy, Educational Alienation, and Belonging-Uncertainty. Results showed that (1) third-semester students reported the lowest Belonging, Affinity, and Self-Efficacy; (2) students at community colleges felt less able to seek academic support from peers or instructors; (3) those with prior high school

Japanese experience reported stronger SOB across categories; and (4) ethnic backgrounds were significantly associated with Belonging and Educational Alienation. These findings emphasize the pivotal role of SOB in sustaining motivation, enhancing retention, and fostering inclusive learning communities in higher education.

**Keywords:** Japanese language learning; learning communities; higher education, inclusion; belonging; affinity; self-efficacy; educational alienation; belonging-uncertainty

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought about significant changes in society. In the post-pandemic period, values, lifestyles, and ways of communication have continued to evolve. Human connections, in particular, have diversified as technology and artificial intelligence reshape how people interact across physical and digital spaces.

These societal changes have also affected Japanese language education. The Japan Foundation, Los Angeles (JFLA, 2025) reported that the number of Japanese language learners in the United States declined from 161,402 in 2021 to 134,096 in 2024, a 16.9% decrease over three years. A joint study by the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) and JFLA found that 65% of K–12 and 40–45% of college instructors observed declines in students' speaking and writing proficiency (Saito-Abbott et al., 2022a). Moreover, 95% of Advanced Placement Japanese teachers

and 77% of college instructors involved in Japanese AP reported learning loss or widening achievement gaps resulting from the pandemic (Chinen et al., 2023). Beyond linguistic skills, the pandemic also affected learners' mental well-being. AATJ-JFLA's 2022 survey (Saito-Abbott et al., 2022b) reported that 69% of K-12 and 62% of college instructors noted increased mental health concerns among their students.

Separate from questions of enrollment, they suggest the importance of fostering a sense of belonging (SOB) within learning environments to support learner engagement and academic success. Psychological research identifies SOB as a fundamental human need and a key motivational factor. Numerous studies have provided robust evidence of the connection between students' SOB and various aspects of their success, including engagement, wellbeing, and retention (Gilani & Thomas, 2025). Yet in educational contexts, particularly within additional language learning, its influence on academic outcomes remains underexplored (Finley, 2018). This study examines the role of SOB in Japanese language

learning and provides pedagogical insights for developing inclusive learning communities that promote student success.

## **1.2. Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Walton and Cohen's (2007) work on SOB as its theoretical framework. In their discussion, SOB is framed in relation to students' perceptions of social fit and acceptance in academic settings, with particular attention to how students interpret experiences of difficulty, whether such experiences are seen as temporary and common, or as signals that they do not belong (pp. 82–84). One of the concepts in this framework is *belonging uncertainty*, which refers to the degree to which individuals question their place in an academic environment and make sense of ambiguous academic and social experiences. This perspective is well suited to the present study because it foregrounds the role of students' interpretations of everyday academic experiences in shaping their engagement and motivation.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

The present study examines students' SOB in Japanese language courses in higher education. Specifically, it addresses four research questions: (1) How does students' sense of belonging vary across Japanese course levels (e.g., 101, 102, 201, and 202)? (2) How does students' sense of belonging in Japanese classes differ between those at community colleges and those at four-year universities? (3) How does students' sense of belonging differ between college students studying Japanese who have prior experience learning Japanese in high school and those who do not?, and (4) How does students' sense of belonging in Japanese language classes vary by ethnicity? By addressing these questions, this study investigates how SOB shapes engagement and success in Japanese language education, emphasizing its role as a foundation for cultivating inclusive learning communities in the post-pandemic era.

## **2. Literature Review**

Human beings possess a pervasive need to establish and maintain enduring, positive, and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which reflects their conceptualization of belongingness as a basic human motivation. Allen et al. (2021) define SOB as “the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences” (p. 87) and argue that it is a fundamental human need that has been shown to predict a wide range of mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes.

The definition of SOB varies across disciplines. According to Goodenow (1993), SOB in educational settings is defined as the extent to which students perceive themselves to be personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.

Regarding differences in SOB between two-year and four-year colleges, Gopalan and Brady (2019) found that first-year U.S. college students generally “somewhat agree”

that they feel SOB at their institutions. However, belonging levels vary across institutional types and student groups: ethnic minority and first-generation students report lower belonging than their peers at four-year colleges but higher belonging at two-year colleges. At four-year institutions, higher SOB is also associated with greater persistence, engagement, and better mental health outcomes. Martinez and Munsch (2019) argue that fostering a strong SOB is vital for community college students' success. They note that the structural characteristics of community colleges, such as commuter status, part-time enrollment, and diverse student responsibilities, can make cultivating belonging more challenging. The authors emphasize that belonging should be viewed as a strategic factor in promoting persistence and reducing attrition, recommending that institutions embed belonging-building efforts throughout all aspects of campus life.

Norton and Toohey (2001) argue that language learning develops through participation in social practices

within communities of speakers. They highlight that learners who gain legitimate participation in these communities experience SOB that supports the development of both linguistic and social competence.

Although research on SOB among college students who previously studied the same foreign language in high school is limited, two studies provide relevant insights. Koshiyama and Shibata (2005) surveyed both high school and college learners of Japanese and found that high school students generally enjoyed Japanese classes that emphasized cultural knowledge and hands-on learning experiences. In contrast, approximately one third of college students reported that the transition to college-level Japanese was not smooth, suggesting that high school instruction did not always adequately prepare students for university coursework. The authors therefore called for greater curricular and instructional alignment across secondary and postsecondary levels. Such curricular gaps, if unaddressed, may influence

students' SOB, as difficulties in adapting to differing instructional approaches can foster feelings of disconnection or uncertainty.

In Chinen's (2016) study, students who had completed Advanced Placement (AP) Japanese courses and transitioned into university-level Japanese courses reported minimal academic confusion, viewed review-based content positively, and demonstrated strong motivation to learn. Chinen suggests that effective articulation between high school and university programs enhances students' confidence and supports sustained engagement in Japanese language learning. Even when course content is primarily review-based, a well-aligned curriculum allows students to perceive their prior learning experiences as being legitimately positioned within the university context, reducing anxiety, encouraging active participation, and fostering a SOB in the university Japanese learning community.

Pittman and Richmond (2008) examined links between students' SOB and academic and psychological

adjustment during the transition to college. Using data from 266 first-year students at a U.S. regional university, they found that both retrospective high school belonging and current university belonging were independently associated with positive academic and psychological outcomes. The weak association between high school and university belonging suggests that these constructs, while related, are distinct, with high school belonging exerting an independent influence during early college adjustment.

Regarding ethnic group differences, Johnson et al. (2007) conducted a study involving 2,967 first-year undergraduates to examine variations in students' SOB across racial and ethnic groups. Their findings indicated that African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Pacific American students reported a weaker SOB than their White peers. Additionally, the social dimensions of the college transition, residence hall climate, and perceptions of the campus racial climate were strongly and significantly associated with

students' SOB. Also, Brown and Papp (2025) conducted a longitudinal study of 355 college students and found that students' SOB to the campus community generally declined over the college years. The authors suggest that this downward trend may be influenced by the focus of their measurement, which assessed belonging at the campus level. They note that as students progress through college, their SOB may shift toward more localized disciplinary or departmental communities rather than the campus as a whole. Moreover, race and ethnicity moderated this pattern, with students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups experiencing steeper declines in belonging compared to their peers.

Collectively, SOB is recognized as both a fundamental psychological need and an important educational resource that fosters students' motivation and persistence. However, its influence on academic success, particularly in the context of world language learning, remains underexplored. The present study addresses the lack of research on the role of SOB in

world language learning by examining college students studying Japanese.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Participants in this study were college students enrolled in first- or second-year Japanese language courses at public community colleges and four-year universities across the United States. The study encompassed a wide geographical range, from the East Coast to the West Coast. Participation was voluntary, and students were recruited from five community colleges and five four-year universities. In total, 153 students participated in the study, including 43 from community colleges and 110 from four-year universities. Among the participants in this study, 79% were enrolled in community colleges and universities that operate on a semester system, while 21% attended institutions using a quarter system (Table 1). When the data were examined by

course in the quarter system, four of the six courses accounted for less than 6% of the total participants, and two of these courses had no enrollment. For the purposes of analysis, the first through fourth semesters were labeled as 101, 102, 201, and 202, respectively. Similarly, the first through sixth quarters were labeled as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, respectively.

Semester System					Quarter System							
101	102	201	202	Sub-total	1	2	3	4	5	6	Sub-total	Total
49	49	13	10	121	2	1	20	0	0	9	32	153
32%	32%	8.5%	6.5%	79%	1.3%	0.7%	13.1%	0%	0%	5.9%	21%	100%

*Table 1. Distribution of participants by academic system and course*

Table 2 shows the distribution of students across academic years within each type of institution: community colleges and four-year universities. At community colleges, 30.2% of students were freshmen (first year), 23.3% were

sophomores (second year), 20.9% were juniors (third year), and 25.6% identified themselves as “other.” At four-year universities, 32.7% were freshmen, 23.6% were sophomores, 22.7% were juniors, 16.4% were seniors, and 4.5% identified themselves as “other.”

*Table 2. Distribution of students across academic year for community colleges and four-year universities*

	<b>freshmen</b>	<b>sophomores</b>	<b>juniors</b>	<b>seniors</b>	<b>other</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Community Colleges</b>	13 (30.2%)	10 (23.3%)	9 (20.9%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (25.6%)	43 (100%)
<b>Universities</b>	36 (32.7%)	26 (23.6%)	25 (22.7%)	18 (16.4%)	5 (4.5%)	110 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	49 (32.0%)	36 (23.5%)	34 (22.2%)	18 (11.8%)	16 (10.5%)	153 (100%)

### **3.2. Instruments**

The instrument used in this study was an anonymous online survey administered via Google Forms. Conducted in English, the survey was adapted from the *Sense of Social Fit Scale* (Walton & Cohen, 2007), a validated 17-item self-report

measure designed to assess individuals' perceived SOB within academic settings. One item requiring brief clarification is *belonging uncertainty*, which Walton and Cohen (2007) describe as a psychological state characterized by uncertainty about the quality of one's social ties in a given academic environment. In their study, belonging uncertainty was measured using items that captured fluctuations in perceived belonging (e.g., "Sometimes I feel that I belong..., and sometimes I don't."). For the purposes of the present study, the original scale was modified and expanded to create a 19-item version appropriate to the research context. The revised instrument measured five categories related to belonging: Belonging, Affinity, Self-Efficacy, Educational Alienation, and Belonging-Uncertainty. Specifically, seven items measured Belonging, four measured Affinity, four measured Self-Efficacy, three measured Educational Alienation, and one measured Belonging-Uncertainty. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to

5(*strongly agree*). The instrument was piloted with a small group to ensure clarity of the items.

### **3.3. Procedure**

Institutions were selected to represent a variety of geographic regions and institutional types (i.e., community colleges and universities). During the spring semester/quarter of 2025, a Google Forms survey link was distributed through research team members' professional networks to instructors teaching first- and second-year Japanese language courses at ten institutions. The instructors then shared the link with their students. To ensure that participants were sufficiently familiar with their learning environment, the survey measuring students' SOB was administered no earlier than six weeks after the start of the term, regardless of whether the institution operated on a semester or quarter system. Students who read the consent form on the Google Forms and agreed to participate completed the survey anonymously. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was

obtained prior to participation. The survey required approximately five to ten minutes to complete, and all responses were recorded through Google Forms. No incentive was provided. Regarding ethical considerations, this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of California State University, Long Beach.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The responses recorded in Google Forms were statistically analyzed using SPSS (Version 29.0.2.0) through descriptive statistics, independent samples *t*-tests, and one-way ANOVA. Beyond the 19 individual survey items, three subscale composites and three higher-order composite constructs were created for analytical purposes (Table 3). The development and labeling of these constructs were partly informed by prior work on belonging and related affective dimensions in educational contexts (Gaete et al., 2024). Specifically, the subscales (i.e., Overall Belonging, Overall Affinity, and Overall Self-Efficacy) were computed by averaging their respective items and were subsequently combined to form the

higher-order Sense of Belonging (SOB) construct. In addition, Educational Alienation and Belonging-Uncertainty were treated as distinct higher-order constructs. All composite variables were included in the analyses, resulting in a total of 24 variables. A reliability analysis confirmed that internal consistency levels were acceptable for constructing these composite variables ( $\alpha \geq .70$  for all measures).

Building on prior work on belonging and belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007), the present study distinguishes between social acceptance and comfort in the Japanese classroom (belonging) and perceived connectedness with peers and enjoyment of working with them (affinity) to capture the multidimensional nature of students' classroom experiences. Distinguishing these dimensions highlights the complexity of belonging in language learning contexts.

- (1) **Sense of Belonging (SOB)** (broader category), computed as the mean of the Overall Belonging, Overall Affinity, and Overall Self-Efficacy scores;
- (2) **Overall Belonging** (subcategory of SOB), calculated as the mean of the seven Belonging items;
- (3) **Overall Affinity** (subcategory of SOB); , calculated as the mean of the four Affinity items;
- (4) **Overall Self-Efficacy** (subcategory of SOB);, calculated as the mean of the four Self-Efficacy items;
- (5) **Educational Alienation** (broader category), calculated as the mean of the three Educational Alienation items; and
- (6) **Belonging-Uncertainty** (broader category), consisting of a single item: “Sometimes I feel that I belong in Japanese class, and sometimes I feel that I do not belong in Japanese class.”

The following table (Table3) presents all 24 variables and their corresponding constructs.

Table 3. Variables and corresponding constructs

<b>Variab les</b>	<b>STATEMENT ITEMS</b>	
<b>1</b>	<b>Sense of Belonging (SOB) *</b>	
<b>2</b>	<b>Overall Belonging *</b>	
<b>3</b>	1	People in my Japanese class accept me.
<b>4</b>	2	I fit in well in my Japanese class.
<b>5</b>	3	I get along well with people in my Japanese class.
<b>6</b>	4	I belong to my Japanese class.
<b>7</b>	5	I feel comfortable in my Japanese class.
<b>8</b>	6	People in my Japanese class like me.
<b>9</b>	7	People in my Japanese class are a lot like me.
<b>10</b>	<b>Overall Affinity*</b>	
<b>11</b>	1	I think the same way as people who do well in my Japanese class.
<b>12</b>	2	I am similar to the kind of people who succeed in my Japanese class.
<b>13</b>	3	I feel connected to my classmates and enjoy working with them, regardless of how well I am doing in my Japanese class.
<b>14</b>	4	I enjoy working with my classmates on group activities and discussions.

<b>15</b>	<b>Overall Self-Efficacy *</b>	
<b>16</b>	1	When I struggle with the material, I can find support from classmates, tutorial sessions on campus, or instructor.
<b>17</b>	2	Even when the material is difficult, I believe I can improve with practice.
<b>18</b>	3	I know how to do well in my Japanese class.
<b>19</b>	4	If I wanted to, I could potentially do well in my Japanese class.
<b>20</b>	<b>Educational Alienation *</b>	
<b>21</b>	1	I feel like an outsider in my Japanese class.
<b>22</b>	2	I feel alienated from my Japanese class.
<b>23</b>	3	Other people understand more than I do about what is going on in my Japanese class.
<b>24</b>	<b>Belonging-Uncertainty</b>	
	1	Sometimes I feel that I belong in Japanese class, and sometimes I feel that I do not belong in Japanese class.

*Note. Variables marked with an asterisk (\*) represent composite variables, calculated as the mean of the items associated with each construct and were included in the analysis as single variables.*

All 24 variables (Table 3) assessing students' Sense of Belonging, Educational Alienation, and Belonging Uncertainty demonstrated high internal consistency for both

the community college and university samples (community college:  $\alpha = .861$ ; university:  $\alpha = .771$ ), indicating that the scales were reliable across institutional types. Therefore, data from both samples were combined for subsequent analyses examining differences across course levels, prior high school learning experience, and ethnicity.

As for the comparison between the SOB for community colleges students and four-year university students, measurement invariance was not formally tested in this study. However, it was considered acceptable for several reasons. First, both samples were drawn from college students in the same national and cultural context. Second, the SOB scale used in this study has been previously validated (Maghsoodi et al., 2023), and only minor modifications were made for clarity and contextual relevance. Third, given the relatively small sample sizes (43 community college students and 110 university students), conducting a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis was not feasible. Finally, the

purpose of the present study was exploratory, to identify general patterns rather than to test specific hypotheses. Therefore, mean comparisons were deemed appropriate for the current analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Research Question 1: How does students' sense of belonging vary across Japanese course levels (e.g., 101, 102, 201, and 202)?

The analysis focused on four courses (i.e., Japanese 101, 102, 201, and 202); due to the limited number of students in each course under the quarter system, the analysis for Research Question 1 included only institutions operating on the semester system. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether students' SOB differed across four course levels (101, 102, 201, and 202). The analysis revealed no significant differences across all 24 variables (all  $p > .05$ ). However, a notable pattern emerged: (1) Among the four categories, Belonging, Affinity, Self-Efficacy, and the composite Sense of Belonging (SOB) score, which represents the average of these three subcategories, the scores for the

201 course were consistently lower than those of the other course levels. (Table 4)

*Table 4. Scores by course across sense of belonging (SOB) category*

<b>Courses</b>		<b>Belonging</b>	<b>Affinity</b>	<b>Self-Efficacy</b>	<b>SOB (composite)</b>
<b>101 (n=49)</b>	<i>M</i>	3.94	3.67	4.42	4.00
	<i>SD</i>	.54	.63	.50	.51
<b>102 (n=49)</b>	<i>M</i>	4.01	3.84	4.40	4.07
	<i>SD</i>	.50	.64	.59	.50
<b>201 (n=13)</b>	<i>M</i>	3.73	3.35	4.27	3.77
	<i>SD</i>	.66	.92	.60	.61
<b>202 (n=10)</b>	<i>M</i>	4.0	3.80	4.38	4.03
	<i>SD</i>	.61	.69	.62	.54
<b>Total (n=121)</b>	<i>M</i>	3.95	3.72	4.39	4.00
	<i>SD</i>	.54	.68	.55	.52

#### 4.2. Research Question 2: How does students' sense of belonging in Japanese classes differ between students at community colleges and those at four-year universities?

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare all 24 variables between community colleges and four-year universities. A significant difference was found only for *FindSupport*, with community college students reporting a lower ability to find support than those at four-year universities (Table 5). No other variables showed significant differences.

*Table 5. Independent-samples t-test results comparing community college students and four-year university students (only significant results shown)* Note.  $p < .05$  is considered statistically significant.

Variable	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (df)	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	95% CI of Difference
Self-Efficacy							
FindSupport	CC	4.12	0.85	<i>t</i> (151) =-2.45	.015	-0.35	[-0.63, -0.07]
	Univ	4.46	0.76				

**4.3. Research Question 3: How does students' sense of belonging differ between college students studying Japanese who have prior experience learning Japanese in high school and those who do not?**

This analysis was limited to students from semester-system universities and community colleges, as four of the six courses in quarter-system schools each accounted for less than 6% of the total participants, and two of these courses had no enrollment (Table 1), resulting in insufficient sample sizes for course-level statistical analysis. Table 6 presents the number of students who studied Japanese in high school. In 101, six of 49 students (12.2%) had prior experience studying Japanese. In 102, nine of 49 students (18.4%) had such experience. In 201 and 202, the numbers were six of 13 (46.2%) and five of 10 (50.0%), respectively. Overall, 26 of 121 students (21.5%) had studied Japanese in high school.

*Table 6. Distribution of students with prior experience across courses*

	<b>Prior Experience</b>	<b>No Prior Experience</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>101</b>	6 (12.2%)	43 (87.8%)	49 (100%)
<b>102</b>	9 (18.4%)	40 (81.6%)	49 (100%)
<b>201</b>	6 (46.2%)	7 (53.8%)	13 (100%)
<b>202</b>	5 (50.0%)	5 (50.0%)	10 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	26 (21.5%)	95 (78.5%)	121 (100%)

#### **4.3.1. Results by Course: 101**

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted for the 101 and 102 courses (each with 49 students) to compare students with and without prior experience studying Japanese in high school. The assumptions for *t*-tests were considered in all analyses. Independence of observations was ensured by the study design. Homogeneity of variance was examined, and when group variances differed, Welch's *t*-test was used. Because one group was very small ( $n = 6$ ), it was not possible to formally evaluate whether the data followed a normal distribution; however, *t*-tests are commonly used in such situations and are generally considered robust to violations of

normality. Overall, the analyses were conducted using procedures appropriate to the characteristics of the data. Only statistically significant results are reported below.

In the Educational Alienation category, students in Japanese 101 with prior Japanese learning experience reported significantly lower scores across two variables compared to those without such experience (Table 7). These included lower feelings of being an outsider and lower Overall Educational Alienation scores ( $p < .001$  and  $p = .023$ ).

*Table 7. Independent-samples t-test results comparing students with and without prior Japanese learning experience in high school (101 course; only significant results shown)*

Variable	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	95% CI of Difference
Educational Alienation							
Feel Outsider	Prior experience	1.00	0.00	<i>t</i> (42.00) = -5.94	<.001	-0.84	[-1.12, -0.55]
	No experience	1.84	0.92				
Overall Ed. Alienation	Prior experience	1.83	0.35	<i>t</i> (13.61) = -2.56	.023	-0.48	[-0.88, -0.08]
	No experience	2.31	0.78				

Note.  $p < .05$  is considered statistically significant.

For FeelOutsider, all six participants selected the same response option; therefore, the mean score reached the scale endpoint ( $M = 1.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ), indicating a ceiling effect. Although the mean accurately reflects the responses, the lack of variability and small sample size limit further interpretation. Larger samples are needed to capture potential variation.

#### **4.3.2. Results by Course: 102**

In the Belonging category, students in Japanese 102 who had prior Japanese learning experience reported significantly higher scores on four variables compared to those without such experience (Table 8). These included a stronger sense of fitting in with their class, a greater sense of belonging, a greater sense of comfort in class, and higher overall Belonging scores. All differences were statistically significant ( $p = .003-.046$ ).

In the Affinity category, students with prior Japanese learning experience reported significantly higher scores on four variables compared to those without such experience (Table 8). These included a stronger sense of similarity to classmates, a greater connection with peers, higher enjoyment when working with classmates, and higher overall Affinity scores. All differences were statistically significant ( $p = .005-.043$ ).

In the Self-Efficacy category, students with prior Japanese learning experience reported significantly higher

scores on three variables compared to those without such experience (Table 8). These included a stronger belief in their ability to improve with practice, a greater understanding of how to succeed in class, and higher confidence in their ability to do well ( $p = .006-.042$ ).

From an overall perspective of the SOB categories, students with prior Japanese learning experience reported higher score than those without such experience ( $p = .029$ ).

*Table 8. Independent-samples t-test results comparing students with and without prior Japanese learning experience in high school (course 102; only significant results shown)*Note.  $p < .05$  is considered statistically significant.

Variable	Group	M	SD	t(df)	p	Mean Difference	95% CI Difference
<b>Belonging</b>							
FitInWell	Prior experience	4.56	0.53	$t(17.25) = 3.50$	.003	0.76	[0.30, 1.21]
	No experience	3.80	0.79				
IBelong	Prior experience	4.56	0.53	$t(13.85) = 2.99$	.010	0.61	[0.17, 1.04]
	No experience	3.95	0.64				
Feel Comfortable	Prior experience	4.67	0.50	$t(18.89) = 2.70$	.014	0.57	[0.13, 1.01]
	No experience	4.10	0.81				
Overall Belonging	Prior experience	4.44	0.67	$t(9.32) = 2.31$	.046	0.53	[0.01, 1.05]

	No experience	3.91	0.40				
Affinity							
IAmSimilar	Prior experience	4.33	0.71	$t(12.37) = 3.45$	.005	0.91	[0.34, 1.48]
	No experience	3.43	0.75				
FeelConnected	Prior experience	4.56	0.53	$t(19.03) = 2.16$	.043	0.48	[0.02, 0.95]
	No experience	4.08	0.86				
EnjoyWorking	Prior experience	4.56	0.53	$t(17.24) = 3.16$	.006	0.68	[0.23, 1.14]
	No experience	3.88	0.79				
Overall Affinity	Prior experience	4.39	0.64	$t(11.17) = 2.89$	.014	0.67	[0.16, 1.18]
	No experience	3.72	0.58				
Self-Efficacy							
CanImprove	Prior experience	4.89	0.33	$t(27.13) = 2.14$	.042	0.34	[0.01, 0.66]
	No experience	4.55	0.71				
HowToDoWell	Prior experience	4.67	0.50	$t(20.86) = 3.08$	.006	0.67	[0.22, 1.12]
	No experience	4.00	0.88				
DoWellInClass	Prior experience	4.89	0.33	$t(27.13) = 2.14$	.042	0.34	[0.01, 0.66]
	No experience	4.55	0.71				
Sense of Belonging (SOB)							
	Prior experience	4.50	0.58	$t(10.09) = 2.54$	.029	0.52	[0.06, 0.98]
	No experience	3.97	0.43				[0.06, 0.98]

#### **4.4. Research Question 4: How does students' sense of belonging in Japanese language classes vary by ethnicity?**

The survey included an ethnicity question with seven response options. Participants' selections represent their self-identified classifications. Responses of "Other" (1.3%) and "Do not wish to answer" (2.0%) were excluded from the analysis. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine group differences in students' Sense of Belonging (SOB), Educational Alienation, and Belonging-Uncertainty. Only statistically significant results are reported here, and descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations for each group) are presented in Table 9.

*Table 9. Descriptive statistics for FitInWell, FeelComfortable, and OtherPeopleUnderstandMore scores by ethnicity* Note 1. 1.3% answered “Other,” and 2.0% answered “Do not wish to answer.” These responses were excluded from the analysis. Note 2. Ethnic categories are based on participants’ self-identification.

		Belonging				Educational Alienation	
		FitInWell		FeelComfortable		OtherPeopleUnderstandMore	
Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Asian	53	4.11	0.85	4.45	0.54	3.04	0.88
Black or African American	4	2.75	0.96	3.75	0.96	4.00	0.82
Hispanic	36	4.08	0.77	4.31	0.75	3.67	1.24
White	32	4.00	0.67	3.97	1.06	3.28	0.85
Multi-ethnic	23	3.78	0.60	4.17	0.58	3.35	1.07

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among racial groups in students’ sense of fit in well, feel comfortable, and other people understand the class more (Table 10). Tukey HSD post hoc tests indicated that for fit in

well, Black or African American students scored significantly lower than Asian, Hispanic, and White students. For feel comfortable, White students scored significantly lower than Asian students. For other people understand the class more, Hispanic students scored significantly higher than Asian students. No other significant pairwise differences were observed (Table 11).

Table 10. One-way ANOVA summary for *FitInWell*, *FeelComfortable*, and *OtherPeopleUnderstandMore* scores by ethnicity (only significant results shown) Note.  $p < .05$  indicates statistical significance.

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Belonging							
<b>FitInWell</b>	<b>Between Groups</b>	8.26	4	2.07	3.57	.008	.09
	<b>Within Groups</b>	82.73	143	0.58			
	<b>Total</b>	90.99	147				
<b>FeelComfortable</b>	<b>Between Groups</b>	5.96	4	1.49	2.67	.035	.07
	<b>Within Groups</b>	79.79	143	0.56			
	<b>Total</b>	85.75	147				
Educational Alienation							
<b>OtherPeopleUnderstandMore</b>	<b>Between Groups</b>	10.46	4	2.6	2.61	.038	.07

	<b>Within Groups</b>	143.61	143	1.00			
	<b>Total</b>	154.07	147				

*Table 11. Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons for FitInWell, FeelComfortable, and OtherPeopleUnderstandMore scores by ethnicity (only significant results shown) Note 1.  $p < .05$  indicates statistical significance.*

Variable	Group Comparison (I-J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	<i>p</i>	95% CI Difference
<b>Belonging</b>				
<b>FitInWell</b>	Asian-Black or African American	1.36	.006	[0.27, 2.45]
	Black or African American-Hispanic	-1.33	.010	[-2.44, -0.23]
	Black or African American – White	-1.25	.020	[-2.36, -0.14]
<b>Feel Comfortable</b>	Asian – White	0.48	.035	[0.02, 0.95]
<b>Educational Alienation</b>				
<b>OtherPeople UnderstandMore</b>	Asian – Hispanic	-0.63	.034	[-1.23, -0.03]

*Note 2. Ethnic categories are based on participants' self-identification.*

Overall, these findings indicate that students' ethnic backgrounds were associated with meaningful differences in their experiences of belonging and alienation in Japanese language courses. Asian students generally reported feeling more comfortable and included, while Black or African American and Hispanic students showed lower levels of belonging or higher levels of alienation in certain aspects of classroom experience.

### **5. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications**

This section discusses the findings of the present study, which explored students' SOB in Japanese language courses in higher education. The analysis focuses on how students' SOB varies across different course levels (i.e., 101, 102, 201, and 202). It also examines differences between students attending community colleges and those studying at four-year universities, as well as between students who have prior experience learning Japanese in high school and those who do not. The discussion further considers how students' SOB in

Japanese language classes varies by ethnicity, followed by pedagogical implications drawn from these findings.

### **5.1. Providing SOB Support in the Transition to the Second Year**

Across course levels (101, 102, 201, and 202), students in 201 (second year) reported the lowest SOB, perhaps reflecting the transitional nature of this course between the elementary and intermediate stages. Prior research conceptualizes students' SOB as a dynamic, context-dependent construct shaped through interactions with academic environments rather than as a fixed personal trait (Strayhorn, 2012). From this perspective, the 201 course represents a transitional context marking the shift from introductory to intermediate-level language study and is typically accompanied by increased academic demands. Compared to introductory courses, 201 generally entails greater linguistic and cognitive complexity and requires higher levels of autonomy and linguistic competence. In contrast, students in 202, who reported higher SOB than those in 201, may reflect greater adaptation to these demands.

Qualitative research in other disciplinary contexts, particularly in STEM fields, suggests that academically demanding and competitive course environments can prompt students to question their fit within a field or their alignment with dominant norms of success (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997). Although situated in different disciplinary contexts and not explicitly framed in terms of SOB, these findings illustrate how heightened academic demands may shape students' perceptions of membership and fit. In this light, the increased demands of the 201 course offer a plausible contextual explanation for the observed decline in students' SOB and point to the need for targeted academic support during transitional stages.

The pedagogical implication is that transitional stages, such as the shift from elementary to intermediate language study, are critical for learner retention and for developing the confidence needed to succeed in subsequent advanced-level courses. Courses at this transition point, such as 201, should

therefore be intentionally designed to help students adjust to increased academic demands and evolving peer dynamics. Effective strategies include scaffolded tasks that connect prior learning to new challenges, explicit instruction in autonomous learning skills, and reflective activities that promote self-awareness. In addition, purposeful community-building plays a key role in integrating students from diverse backgrounds and fostering a SOB that can alleviate the uncertainty typical of transitional stages. Collaborative task based activities that reflect real world language use can support this process by promoting shared goals, engagement, and interpersonal connection. Through authentic tasks such as planning a trip or creating a social media video, students work toward common outcomes, fostering a cohesive classroom community. This approach aligns with Task Based Language Teaching, which emphasizes collaborative communicative tasks that mirror real-world language use and support belonging through problem solving, negotiation of

meaning, and shared decision making (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015).

## **5.2. Needs of SOB for Community College Learners**

Institutional context also influenced students' SOB.

Community college students reported lower confidence in their ability to obtain support from classmates, tutorial sessions on campus, or instructor than university students, a difference likely tied to disparities in campus engagement opportunities. In terms of lifestyle, community college students generally have higher employment rates and work longer hours than their counterparts at four-year universities (University of Pennsylvania, 2021), and many face competing work and family responsibilities that limit their involvement on campus (Columbia University, 2023).

Furthermore, institutional challenges must also be taken into account when discussing students' lower confidence in finding support. Although many community college students require academic advising and learning assistance, the availability and accessibility of such support are

often constrained by limited institutional resources and the heavy workloads of advisors and counselors (Columbia University, 2021). In many community colleges, the student-to-advisor ratio is extremely high (i.e., 1:1,200), resulting in students being able to meet with their advisors only once or twice a year (Columbia University, 2021). Ultimately, addressing these systemic barriers is essential for fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment across diverse institutional contexts.

The pedagogical implication is that instruction at community colleges must account for the distinctive characteristics of their learners, who often balance work, family, and academic responsibilities within institutions that have limited support resources. To promote equitable learning, courses should combine flexibility, such as hybrid formats, adaptable deadlines, and accessible materials, with structured guidance that provides clear expectations, consistent feedback, and a strong instructor presence to sustain motivation.

While a SOB is important for all learners, it is particularly critical for community college students. SOB can be fostered by creating opportunities for peer connection, such as through social networking platforms like Discord or WhatsApp, which help students feel part of a learning community. In addition, engaging and relevant tasks play a key role in strengthening belonging. When learners perceive tasks as valuable, they demonstrate higher levels of engagement, and in L2 contexts, task value beliefs and engagement influence each other over time (Vo et al., 2025). Because engagement is multidimensional and includes a social dimension characterized by interaction and collaboration (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), tasks that promote meaningful language use in real-life contexts can enhance students' motivation, sense of connection, and belonging in the classroom.

As community college students may have fewer opportunities for campus engagement, the classroom should

serve as a primary site of support and belonging. Instructors can cultivate this by fostering collaborative learning communities and proactively connecting students to academic and peer resources. Such approaches accommodate students' diverse circumstances while enhancing persistence and success in language learning.

### **5.3. Leveraging Students' Previous High School Language Experience**

Prior experience with Japanese study was associated with students' SOB in 102 courses. Students who had studied Japanese in high school reported higher levels of belonging, comfort, and confidence, including stronger perceived connection and similarity with classmates, greater enjoyment of collaborative activities, and higher self-efficacy for improvement and success. These patterns align with prior descriptions of high school Japanese instruction as emphasizing engaging, hands-on learning experiences (Koshiyama & Shibata, 2005), as well as research showing that sense of belonging at both the high school and university

levels is independently associated with positive academic and psychological outcomes (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Taken together, the results suggest an association between prior Japanese learning experiences and more positive affective and social adjustment in lower-level university courses.

Building on these findings, the pedagogical implication is that learners' prior experience with Japanese study, particularly from high school, plays an important role in shaping their affective and social adjustment in early college-level courses. Recognizing and building upon students' prior knowledge, while offering scaffolding and emotional support for beginners, may help all learners feel capable and valued. It is also possible that students who had positive high school experiences and chose to continue studying Japanese at the university level already possessed favorable attitudes toward the language and culture, further contributing to these outcomes.

#### **5.4. Culturally and Ethnically Inclusive Approaches to Language Teaching**

Differences also emerged by ethnic background. While previous studies have shown that students from minority backgrounds often report lower levels of belonging or face unique barriers to developing SOB (Johnson et al., 2007; Vaccaro et al., 2019), in this study, Asian students generally reported greater comfort and perceived fit than White or Black or African American students (noting that only four respondents identified as Black or African American). These differences may reflect varying degrees of cultural familiarity with Japanese language and norms rather than differences in ability or motivation. Because Japanese culture is situated within a broader Asian cultural context, some Asian students may experience a sense of cultural proximity that enhances comfort and engagement.

Another significant difference emerged by ethnic background, with Hispanic students more frequently reporting that others in their classes understood what was going on better than they did. This pattern may be

interpreted in light of Laguna Borrego's (2022) study, which examined survey data from 1,871 college students and identified a significant correlation between cultural familiarity and Hispanic students' SOB. Similar to findings for White and Black or African American students, varying levels of cultural familiarity may have influenced Hispanic students' perceptions of belonging and academic confidence in this study.

The pedagogical implication is that language instructors should recognize how students' ethnic backgrounds, and their degree of cultural familiarity, affect their SOB and engagement. To promote equity, instructors should make cultural knowledge accessible to all learners by avoiding assumptions of prior familiarity and by incorporating inclusive, contextualized explanations and diverse perspectives through topics, materials, and classroom interactions. Creating such culturally responsive environments

fosters belonging and supports all students' confidence and participation.

### **5.5. Fostering Inclusive Learning Communities through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

All these pedagogical implications can be interpreted within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), defined as “a combination of knowledge, practices, and dispositions that center racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students' cultural traditions, experiences, and perspectives to facilitate meaningful and transformative learning opportunities” (Gist et al., 2019).

To address the interconnected challenges identified in this study, particularly students' transitional experiences, time constraints in community college contexts, varied prior learning experiences, and sense of belonging, CRP can be enacted through a set of cross-cutting instructional practices that support diverse learners across educational contexts (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

First, asset-based instructional design with differentiated learning pathways enables students at different stages and with varying prior experiences to participate meaningfully while working toward shared goals. Second, transparent scaffolding of expectations, such as clearly stated learning objectives, assessment criteria, and guided practice, helps reduce uncertainty, supports effective time management, and minimizes inequities related to implicit academic norms. Third, community-building practices, including structured peer collaboration and reflective activities, strengthen students' SOB by positioning the classroom as a supportive learning community, particularly for students managing multiple responsibilities. Finally, inclusive and culturally representative curricular design affirms students' ethnic and cultural identities and promotes engagement by connecting language learning to diverse lived experiences.

Together, these CRP-informed practices respond directly to the findings of the present study by addressing the

factors that shape students' sense of belonging, engagement, and academic success across varied educational and cultural contexts.

## **6. Conclusion**

Results of the present study indicate that students' sense of belonging (SOB) in Japanese language courses is shaped by a dynamic interplay of academic, social, and institutional factors, with notable variation across course level, institutional type, prior language-learning experience, and ethnic background. These findings suggest that belonging in language learning is a multifaceted construct influenced not only by instructional design and proficiency level but also by students' lived experiences and the broader educational context. Taken together, the results highlight the importance of instructional approaches that intentionally acknowledge and respond to learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Because students' SOB differed across institutional contexts, course levels, prior language-learning experiences, and student characteristics, pedagogical practices

that are sensitive to such variation are particularly important. In this regard, culturally responsive pedagogy offers a useful framework for creating learning environments in which students are more likely to feel recognized, respected, and connected to their peers and instructors.

Although this study focuses on Japanese language classrooms, the findings may extend to other Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), which often share characteristics such as small class sizes, limited resources, and diverse learner motivations. The analytical approach and survey instrument may also be adapted to examine sense of belonging in other LCTL contexts, including heritage language learning.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, particularly for the community college group, and measurement invariance testing was not conducted due to the exploratory design and sample constraints. In addition, the cross-sectional design precludes examination of changes in

students' sense of belonging over time. Future research employing larger, longitudinal, and multi-institutional designs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sense of belonging develops across language learning contexts.

Fostering learners' sense of belonging remains a critical concern in language education, particularly amid rapid technological and social change. While instructional technologies continue to evolve, they cannot replace learners' fundamental need for connection and recognition, underscoring the enduring importance of sense of belonging in inclusive learning environments.

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