【Research Note】

Four Learners, Four Paths:

An Ethnographic Study of English Learners in Japan

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Introduction

Many English instructors who teach in Japanese universities attest that students who begin their university education quite motivated to acquire English quickly lose interest in achieving this goal, often within the first semester. It is not surprising then that motivation and demotivation are some of the most researched areas of English as Foreign Language (EFL) phenomena in Japan. To date, research has identified a wide range of factors such as the university entrance exam system, instructional practices and materials, and teacher behaviors that impede successful language learning by diminishing positive attitudes and motivation toward learning English (Benson, 1991; Berwick & Ross, 1989; Falout, Elwood & Hood, 2009; Gorsuch, 2000; Kikuchi, 2009; McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005; Nakata, 2006; Taguchi, 2005). However, there exist few studies that have explained how these factors actually interact with L2 motivation and stymie language learning or how successful learners cope with the same de-motivating influences to achieve their language learning goals. In addition, although research (Dörnyei, Csizér & Németh, 2006; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant & Mihic, 2004; Ushioda, 1998, 2001) has indicated that L2 motivation changes over time, there is a paucity of studies that focus on how this change occurs among Japanese EFL learners.

This paper reports on the findings of a longitudinal study of four university EFL learners in Japan over an 18-month period. The study attempted to characterize each learner's motivation and how it changed over time. The study also endeavored to understand how the learner and context mediated this motivational change to influence the path of learning.

Overview of Motivational Research

Why do some learners acquire L2 with relative ease while others find the same task a formidable undertaking that yields little positive rewards? This question has led early L2

researchers to seek the source of such individual learner differences by examining aptitude and other cognitive factors. However, the pioneering work of Gardner and Lambert, which began in 1950's changed the direction of L2 research by examining the non-cognitive, social psychological factors such as attitude and motivation as a source of individual differences in L2 learning outcomes. Their studies, (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972) identified two key concepts, *integrative motivation* and *instrumental motivation* and indicated that integrative motivation is more facilitative for L2 learning. Yet, as Dörnyei (2007) pointed out, since Gardner's integrativeness was introduced to understand L2 learning in a unique Canadian context in which the English- and French-speaking ethnolinguistic communities coexist, it is doubtful whether this concept is applicable elsewhere, especially in this age of globalization where the *ownership* of English is not restricted to specific communities of native speakers.

According to Dörnyei and Csizér (2002), integrativeness involves a psychological dimension related to the learners' identification process. Hence, Dörnyei (2005; 2009) proposed the L2 Motivational Self System consisting of, *Ideal L2 Self*, *Ought-to L2 Self*, and *L2 Learning Experience*: Ideal L2 Self is an image of oneself as a competent speaker of L2 that serves as a powerful motivator and guides the learner through the language learning process. On the other hand, Ought-to L2 Self involves socially or others-imposed sense of obligation to learn the new language which may or may not support the learning process. The third dimension, L2 Learning Experience involves the influence of learning experience and environment including the impact of the teacher, curriculum and peers that also exert an influence on the learning process. Studies (Csizér and Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magrid, and Papi, 2009) conducted across a wide range of learning contexts including China, Japan, Iran, and Hungary supported the validity of the Ideal L2 Self as a construct that explains variability in L2 learning. Based in Japan, Yashima's study (2002) while supporting the works of Dörnyei and others identified *international posture* as a factor that affects L2 learning outcomes for Japanese learners and suggested that integrativeness can be reconceptualized as interest in international issues and communities, and a desire for intercultural communication. Other studies indicated that for many language learners, L2 communities are more imagined or *psychological* than real (Murphey et al., 2005) and that imagined L2 communities could be a powerful motivational force (Kramsch, 2006).

While the theoretical framework set by Gardner and his colleagues continues to influence L2 motivation research today, work by Crookes and Schmidt in the 1990's helped to redirect research to focus on contextual factors including the classroom and the teacher. Studies conducted by Noels and other researchers (Noels, 2001a; Noels, 2001b; Noels, Clément & Pelletier 1999; Noels, Pelletier, Clément & Vallerand, 2000) suggested the significant role of the

classroom context shaped by the teacher in altering the learners' motivational orientation, and underscored the need to develop a classroom-based concept of motivation. However, there are only a handful of studies (e.g. Berlin, 2005; Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008) that actually examined factors that appear to influence motivate learners in the classroom, and fewer still that actually showed how motivation is operationalized into learning-directed behavior although studies in learner autonomy (e.g. Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons 2004; Okada, Oxford & Abo 1996; Yamato, 2003) suggested a linkage between L2 motivation and the use of learning strategies.

More recently, using social theories of Lave & Wenger (1991) and Bourdieu (1991), Lamb (2008) showed that motivational differences between learners are related to how individual agency is either constrained or enabled by context. Accordingly, a learner embedded in a context with inherited cultural capital could imagine living abroad and speaking English and is therefore on a learning trajectory that is likely to result in successful EFL learning while a learner who does not possess this cultural capital could not do so and would be at a disadvantage. However, there has yet been any significant study in Japan that focuses on how L2 motivation might interact with this larger sociocultural context.

L2 researchers and practitioners recognize that L2 motivation changes over time. Research that highlighted temporal dimension of motivation include: a study of Irish learners of French by Ushioda (1998, 2001) that differentiated motivation deriving from experience and motivation directed toward future goals; a study of Hungarian learners of various foreign languages by Dörnyei, Csizér & Németh (2006) that showed a decline in motivation toward learning foreign languages but an increase in instrumental motivation to learn English over a time span of several years; a study of Canadian (Anglophone) learners of French by Gardner et al. (2004) that showed that attitudes toward the learning situation change over time and are associated with successful learning; and a study by Gao (2008), that demonstrated a motivational shift of Chinese university-level learners of English as they moved from China to Hong Kong.

Purpose of the Study

As the literature review indicates, the incorporation of a psychological perspective into L2 motivation and a renewed focus on the classroom and sociocultural contexts and temporal elements have led to a better understanding of L2 motivation. However, much of the research into L2 motivation has been quantitative ones. While recognizing the contribution of mainstream, quantitative research in understanding L2 motivation, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argued that such research does not take into account the complex multiplicity of learner-internal, situational,

and temporal factors that interact with individual motivation. Hence, the purpose of this study was to understand each language learner as *person-in-context* (Ushioda, 2009) and characterize the motivational forces—imagined or real—that are represented in the learner's self system and describe the interplay of these motivational forces with the learning context to shape language learning and other behaviors across a period of 18 months.

Methodology

Participants

This 18-month longitudinal study conducted in a university in metropolitan Japan drew four participants from a larger study of ten university EFL students (Tanaka, 2011). During the initial interview, I explained the study's purpose and what the participants were expected to do. I also explained that their anonymity and data will be kept confidential, protected, and used only for this study from which they could withdraw at any time.

All four participants were women and had spent a significant part of their high school classes studying for entrance exams and entered the university through *ippan nyushi*, regular university entrance exam system. Two participants had just started their first year at the university when this study began and were enrolled in the same class. The other two had just started their second year and were also classmates. All identified themselves as being highly motivated to learn English though they could not articulate exactly why they were motivated when the study began and all had a TOEFL ITP score between 440 and 460. The participants were all drawn from a department that focused on liberal studies. The department required all students to take a total of 6-hours per week of academic English classes focusing on four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) during the first year and 3-hours a week during the second year.

Data Collection Methods

To capture the dynamic nature of the relationship between L2 motivation, self and the context, it was necessary to become deeply familiar with the participants. Hence I used multiple data collection methods including interviews, follow-up email exchanges and face-to-face sessions, group discussions, informal conversations, and observations of participants in classroom and other contexts. The interviews with each participant were approximately 40-50 minutes and were conducted five times at roughly the same intervals. Feldman, Bell, and Berger

(2003) state the importance of gaining access to the research field. Also, since the participants knew me as an English instructor, I had to overcome the student-faculty barrier. Therefore, I made a special effort to observe and talk with the participants informally at lounges and in the cafeteria and immersed myself in the research setting. This made it easier for me to understand what their experiences and activities meant to them. However, my familiarity with the research setting assisted me in understanding the data.

I let the participants take the lead in discussing the topic of motivation and language learning. However, I occasionally asked questions which centered around: (a) language learning history and experience; (b) source of motivation for studying English; and (c) attitudes towards and ideas about English and learning English. These sessions were conducted primarily in Japanese though the participants and I often code-switched to English. Some English Language key concepts including motivation, identity, and self-esteem (e.g. モチベーション [=mochibeishon], アイデンティティ [=aidentetei] セルフエスチーム [=serufuesuchiimu] were used in the interviews though as *foreign borrowed words* since the participants were familiar with them.

The interviews were audio-recorded and relevant parts transcribed for analysis. Observations and informal conversation sessions were not audio-recorded. Instead, I took notes afterwards but within the same day. I translated parts of the interview transcriptions from Japanese to English preserving participant voices and an objective reviewer ensured accuracy. Additionally, with the participants' permission, I used their TOEFL scores, essays written in English, materials from other classes including their notes, went over their family album with them, and talked with a few of their teachers and friends. This enabled some degree of data triangulation.

Going over the participants' interview recordings together with my observational notes and other materials provided by the participants recursively allowed themes within the data to emerge inductively. Information and insights gained from this process informed and led to questions in later interviews as well as additional observations. In this way, an understanding of each learner was refined.

Results

The four participants—Mia, Ami, Eri, and Rie[1]— are discussed separately and I have divided the results into four time periods. I begin with a report on Mia and then Ami, both of whom began participating in the study as sophomores; then I report on Eri and Rie, both of whom began participating in the study as freshmen.

Sophomores: Mia and Ami

Mia During the Months 1~2

The first interview occurred a month after Mia began her sophomore year in a new class that she reported as being "totally different" from her freshmen year class and "exactly what I would expect from a good university English class." Mia recalled her freshmen English learning experience as *gakkari-shita*, "disappointing" and *mochibeishon ga sagatta* "de-motivating" and explained that the English class had low academic standards and expectations and ineffective instruction which had lowered her motivation and self-confidence:

> I was motivated to do well when I started the university but my English class was not meaningful. The teacher played tapes assuming that we could understand everything right away, and started us on boring discussion. Since I was not good at speaking and there was no actual teaching of listening or speaking skills, the class was de-motivating. By the end of the first term, I saw that my English level declined from when I was a high school student. Both my self-confidence in English and motivation to acquire English began to slip and I began to put more energy into other things—club activities and part-time work.

In fact, she saw her high school English class as having been more meaningful because she was a top student and was motivated to study:

> We practiced the university exam questions most of the time. The more my score improved, the more I studied…English was my favorite subject; everyone envied me because I was good at it.

Hence, contrary to the findings of other studies discussed in this chapter, Mia managed to make studying for the university entrance exam, something that most students find demotivating, into something meaningful. This may be because she was an instrumentally motivated but successful student who saw studying English for the university entrance exam as an activity separate from studying English for communication.

The difference between English classes in high school in which she was successful and first year university classes in which she was not successful correspond with the decline of her TOEFL score from 500 to 460 and with how she had lost her self-confidence through the university English class. It also explains the ambivalence toward learning English, which is indicated in her narrative. She often contradicted herself, even within the same interview session by saying she is highly motivated to acquire English only to turn around and question the value

of learning English several minutes later.

Mia During the Months 3~7

Mia continued to struggle with self-confidence: "I'm no longer good in English. I lost my self-esteem." Although positive about sophomore English, which she assessed as "academically rigorous and effective", she questioned her ability to keep up: "I wasted so much time last year when other people were moving ahead." Indeed, she did not stand out in class discussions and other activities and was not a top tier student in the class either. Toward the end of this period, however, she experienced a turn-around, which she attributed to a trip to Australia:

> My family is international—we lived overseas. So learning English has always been an important goal, and from when I was in middle school, I consciously began to develop my English on my own. …. Naturally, I was really motivated when I started university. But from about the end of Term 1 of my first year until the middle of Term 1 of my second year, I lost my motivation. But somehow, I remembered my dream of studying abroad and signed up for an internship in Australia during this summer. This trip raised my self-confidence and since my second year class is challenging and the teacher encourages me and raises my interest in becoming good at English, I am regaining my motivation to study hard toward my goal.

Mia indicated that the trip helped "recall all kinds of pleasant memories from my past, especially my family's travel experiences" and revived her motivation to "become a member of the international community." While for Mia, the trip to Australia marked a turn-around in L2 motivation, observation of her second year English class indicated a strong, positive contribution of the classroom where the teacher used interesting materials consisting of real world issues, and consciously used a wide range of approaches including setting of learning goals, teaching learning strategies, and promoting cooperative learning to enhance L2 motivation.

Mia During the Months 8~12

Pushed several times by her English teacher and advisor, Mia ended up applying for an exchange program with a university in the US. Needing a higher TOEFL ITP score, she became instrumentally motivated to study English. However, while this motivation grew, she also became anxious: "I'm a bit worried…my scores on the grammar section are low"; "I don't know if I want to make sacrifices to do this"; "I don't know if going to the US will help me achieve my career goal" Her study time increased from one to three hours a day in three months. She did minimum course work.

This was also a time when Mia struggled to believe in herself. She seemed to depend on her capacity to motivate herself while attempting take control of both her action and affect. Indeed she reported telling herself, "I am going to California, this is my destiny" often. Her career goal, which was vaguely described, as "working internationally" in the outset of this period became "working in an international trading company."

Mia During the Months 13~18

Mia's worries about the TOEFL abated after she received a score of 525. Although she continued to mention that she was "destined" to study abroad and join the international community, she was not an enthusiastic participant of a community of students with similar goals. She enjoyed reading, listening to music, and watching movies. In a sense, her community was more imagined: She did not have high communicative needs nor did she find it comfortable and convenient to use the community to learn the new language.

The idea of how she was "different" from other [Japanese] students became her "identity" that she enjoyed discussing. On one occasion, she stated, "I am really not a product of Japan." She concluded, "therefore, I have to perfect my English, it is a global lingua franca and in reality, it is de facto my own native language." Hence, generating, sustaining, and strengthening this vision of the Ideal L2-Self appears to have been an important aspect of Mia's L2 motivational development. However, she appeared to depend more on her motivation derived from her past family history than on integrativeness or the desire actually use English with others.

Ami During the Months 1~2

For Ami too, university English classes did not bring anticipated rewards. However, she reported that she overcame her disappointment and maintained motivation through activities outside the classroom:

> Of course, I became de-motivated. But I kept on reminding myself that I wanted to study abroad to keep some level of motivation. Becoming friends with English speakers kept me motivated. I just had to move forward.

She stated: "…we all knew high school English was to pass the entrance exam. No one expected to learn to communicate in English by studying English. But what could we do?" When asked whether she thought that studying English for the university entrance exam was a waste of time, she bluntly said, "sure, I find a lot of our activities in school not meaningful or enjoyable but since I can't avoid it, I just make the best out of it."

Ami's case points out that learners can neutralize the negative experience brought about by situational context through consciously containing the experience, emotionally disengaging from the context, and searching for an alternative. Ami is atypical, with advisors and faculty members agreeing she is one of the most active, goal-oriented, and responsible students in her cohort. Observational data from her new second year English class show that she always sat at the front, responded to teacher questions often, took initiative during group work, and completed the activities seriously and thoroughly. Outside class, she engaged in many activities such as befriending foreign students, attending study abroad workshops, and seeking opportunities to use English including with teachers. She also began to take TOEFL classes so that she could, "get a score of 520 and go abroad."

Ami During the Months 3~7

Ami's phrase, "my dream of working overseas…" often expressed, became a planned goal:

> I want to work in an aid agency for developing countries. Right now, I'm not certain if I can achieve this goal but I know that the first step is to study in the U.S. to broaden my horizons. The U.S. has ethnic diversity and high level education—both of these motivate me.

Asked how she decided on this goal, she spoke about a trip to a developing country that instilled a desire to "do something about poverty in the world …as an individual in the international community."

While Mia tended to direct her thoughts to existentialist thinking about her identity —who she is and what her place and purpose in life is—Ami appeared much more outward looking. The questions she asked had more to do with what she wanted to do in life and how to get there. Hence, she was more interested in asking me questions in order to get information than bearing her thoughts about herself.

Ami During the Months 8~12

Ami's L2 motivation was definitely future-directed. Studying in the US began to dominate her conversations during this period as she often talked about which campus to attend, which courses to take, and where to live. She also excelled at finding activities that kept her focused on acquiring English language skills: For example, she volunteered to help organize workshops that invited American professors to describe curriculum and instruction in US universities and she organized a Skype conference with Japanese students attending US universities. She was very aware of what she was doing. Hence, she reported, "becoming

involved with activities connected to my goal" and "being among friends with the same interest" motivated her. Indeed, during this period, she scheduled activities —a field trip with foreign students, parties, study sessions, workshops—as well as time devoted to raising her TOEFL score.

Ami During the Months 13~18

In contrast to Mia who tended to be reticent, Ami was communicating with American and international students at the US university that accepted her as an exchange student. She even began to network with Italian and French students accepted to the same university and created a virtual community of international students well before her trip to the US.

Much of Ami's conversations were in English with both international students and with a community of Japanese students who wanted to use English to communicate. Their English communication was not target-like and displayed code-switching:

Ami: Hey, what's up? Doshiteru (=how are you doing)?

Friend: I'm up to here, you know, with that kadai (=homework). Honto ni Ima taihen (=I'm really having a difficult time now).

Ami's body language and gestures also began to resemble that of international students' on campus. She commented, "Yeah, this is my new…identity…but I'm still me!" Her English essays showed that her world was no longer limited to Japan. It is interesting to note that unlike Mia, she did not dwell on issues of her own identity, which later became a nagging issue that took her "off-road" for some time. Nevertheless, during the duration of the study, individuality appeared to be at the core of her self-identity, which in turn motivated her to go abroad where she thought that being different was accepted more.

The Freshmen: Eri and Rie

Eri During the Months 1~2

Eri had been in university for a month at the first interview. Asking about English learning experience resulted in narratives about high school English which revealed that she had accepted the goal of studying English in high school to pass university entrance exams: "This need motivated me to do well and I put all other English learning goals aside." She thrived under exam-driven curricula because competition was motivating and recognition for success was satisfying:

To be number one in class was in itself motivating for me. I was a good student and the

teacher praised me often, even asked me to help the struggling students. I felt good about this.

Yet, Eri viewed studying English for the entrance exam as having little to do with learning English for communicative purposes, which she reported that she had "put aside or forgotten." Hence, to some extent, Eri's L2 motivation was similar to Mia's—instrumentally oriented—and sustained through her success as a student.

However, to Eri, freshmen English was refreshing. She reported, "getting into groups and discussing international issues…say an opinion in black and white" was "…maybe good for my development as a person." The theme that appeared repeatedly in Eri's discourse was the idea of the need to learn English in order to "become a productive member of the world" although in the classroom she tended to be quiet and sometimes lost. It appears then that during this early period of English learning in the university, Eri was driven largely by an *ought-to* voice derived from the community that surrounded her.

Eri During the Months 3~7

Eri was more forthcoming in the second interview. Freshmen English classes, she reported, were stressful because she had never had discussions in English. However, gradually, this experience "opened a new dimension of myself." She elaborated:

> I think English is an important tool that I can use to communicate who I am. Using English, I discovered the value of thinking independently and expressing my thoughts logically with supporting evidence or reasons. Hearing myself talk in this new style, I can't help but think that I have gone through a metamorphosis.

However, mediated by other influences, her motivation to learn English did not develop immediately and was uneven with periods of both growth and setbacks. For example, Eri reported that she anticipated university life as time to "enjoy campus life centered around non-academic activities" because she had "earned the right to recover from fatigue caused by the rigor of studying for the university entrance exams." Therefore, she characterized herself as academically passive during the first term saying, "I don't feel entirely comfortable and consistently motivated." Indeed, while Eri fastidiously did what was required in her English classes, she did not display any affective involvement in learning English. In addition, she repeatedly voiced that she did not possess the outgoing personality (as others) that would ensure her success in learning English.

Eri During the Months 8~12

During this time period, invited by her classmates, Eri attended study abroad orientation, on-line teleconference with Japanese students studying in the US, and events that involved foreign students on campus. Eri's narratives suggest her increased involvement in classroom and social contexts as an English user set off a reaction. She reported suddenly remembering her own "international experience" and coming to a conclusion about her goals:

> Now, I am becoming motivated to study abroad. I recently recalled the three home stay students from California we hosted at home when I was in middle school and my own home stay experience in Canada when I was in high school. I participated in a Skype conference with our sempai [upper-classmen] studying in California, and they impressed me. I wondered if I could be like them. I also attended a workshop for candidates of the exchange program given by a UC professor on how to select courses at the UC. I could almost picture myself becoming an exchange student.

However, her motivation was sensitive to context such as discourses. For example, when career advice staff warned that study abroad could delay a career and that proficiency in English was unlikely to be a career advantage her motivation was significantly dampened momentarily. Eri's response is typical of many university students in the current Japanese sociocultural context where finding a job takes priority over nearly everything else and looms large as a demotivating factor for language learning.

Eri During the Months 13~18

Eri's motivation increased when she encountered highly motivated and competent English speakers, and felt that her English classes were academically challenging. She appeared to transform her motivation into facilitative learning. She reaffirmed a *high school dream* of speaking English and joining "an international community," recognized the necessity of becoming an autonomous learner, and saw the importance of peer-group community in maintaining motivation and focus:

> During the summer of my freshmen year, I took the TOEFL course because I felt I needed to do much more on my own. Through the course, I got to know students who were motivated to study abroad and I came to realize that when I am with people who have the same goal, I become more motivated. Therefore, these days, I hang out with Saori and Sayuri. We motivate and support each other.

That her TOEFL score rose moderately from 450 to 480 during this time appeared to be a

motivator. She also made a realistic assessment of the gap between her ideal and real L2 self and took specific steps to narrow the gap:

> At the end of my freshmen year, I went to Europe and I was ashamed by my lack of communicative ability. That experience prompted me to study English even harder. It also made me recognize that English is an international language which I need to master if I expect to get closer to my ideal self-image of working in an international environment and having international friends. I go to a private school on Saturday to study for the TOEFL. I watch movies in English. At my part-time job, I actively seek to speak with English speakers.

Eri formed a support group with her friends where they studied together, encouraged one another, and participated in university activities for students to further English. They applied for the exchange program with a US university and joined the community of third-year students.

It is interesting to note that like-minded peers often gravitate to one another and in so doing, strengthen each other's motivation. With a number of key players, this community of L2 learners grew in size to include a few dozen students. Joined by English-speaker students from overseas, this community became a salient "international group" whose influence on the L2 motivation of the students including the participants of the study was significant.

Rie During the Months 1~2

Rie reported the exam-focused high school English de-motivated and lessened her self-esteem, and favored oral communication classes of an English teacher:

> The high school Year 1 oral communication class was motivating. The teacher had a positive character and I really enjoyed learning and using English to communicate in this class. I studied hard for this teacher's class. But, I hated studying English for the exam. The teacher didn't check our homework or give feedback on our progress. Our grades depended solely on tests and learning was mechanical. My juku[2] teacher, because of his character, motivated me somewhat to study for the exam though.

For Rie, competition was "painful", and high school classes were "inhumane" because students were "just numbers." Her L2 motivation was influenced by relationships: Her motivation to pass the entrance exam was driven by her teacher whom she liked. In university, she continued to enjoy communicating with her English teachers between classes, at lunch break, and during office hours.

In regards to her motivation to learn English, Rie reported that during a middle school

trip overseas her home stay mother "changed everything." She recalled how she at first struggled with her new environment:

> I told my [home stay] mother how I felt, crying... and trying to speak with my poor English, stringing simple words together…and my home stay mother understood me…she hugged me and we cried together…this was a special moment and from that moment, I decided to learn English…I wanted to communicate with her.

The idea that one learns English for communication was evident in Rie's action as well. During and after class, she was one of the most enthusiastic to communicate with not only her teacher—a native English speaker—but with bilingual students whose communicative skills in English matched that of a native speaker. She was also one of the best students in her English class by actively participating in class activities and never missing a single class or assignment. It is obvious that her L2 motivation was integrative, which was highly salient in a classroom dominated by students with different types of orientations.

Rie During the Months 3~7

Rie's enthusiasm for English-speaking friends led to online chats but unfortunately she began to have "troubling" interpersonal relations within that community, causing disillusion. For months, this negatively impacted her motivation to acquire English. She remarked, "I love to make friends with Americans and other foreigners, but sometimes they are really bad; sometimes, they are prejudice and want to use me." She began to skip her English classes, focusing attention instead on friendship circles that differed from when her motivation to learn English was high. Toward the latter part of this period, she also skipped interview appointments and when she did show up to speak, she openly questioned the value of investing in university education and talked about dropping out of the study because she was no longer a good participant of this study remarking, "I'm sorry to be a disappointment to you."

Rie During the Months 8~13

Unexpectedly, Rie attained an unexpectedly high TOEFL score of 490 during this period and resolved to resume studying English: "I was so worried because I'm not smart and I'm so emotional." However, she was not able to sustain her enthusiasm and often gave up working on her assignments which required her to read about topics that did not interest her and required her to produce analytical writing.

For Rie, who displayed high affiliative and communicative needs and who battled low self-esteem, freshmen year was a motivational roller coaster. However, she appeared to be aware

of her personality and personal qualities. She remarked on a number of occasions, "you know, I'm so emotional. I don't know why and I have a hard time controlling myself." She also felt that her emotions would prevent her from realizing her goals.

Rie During the Months 14~18

During this period Rie appeared to become more and more restricted by family and friendship issues despite her repeated declaration regarding the importance of acquiring English. She seemed unable to prioritize, gain learner autonomy, and formulate learning plans. Additionally, she stayed on the periphery of activities that Eri and her friends who wished to study abroad actively engaged in. She seemed to be involved merely to gain self-esteem and meet her affiliative needs. Rie could not resolve the conflicting discourses. She stated in English, "Maybe, I'm not like Eri-chan. Maybe, it's impossible…my mother, she can't understand why I want to learn English." Toward the end of the study, she decided to temporarily drop out of university.

It appeared that Rie had her own theory about how she was "different" from other students. She openly suggested that coming from a broken home where life was difficult, school—both high school and university—was the only place that gave her hope for the future by giving her opportunities to, "take a glimpse into my future possibilities." In short, Rie was unable to take charge of her emotional domain and control her action toward L2 learning and keeping up in the university despite being placed in a context that supported her L2 development along with other students.

Conclusion

This study shows that the L2 motivation of each participant shapes and is shaped by context across time in an ongoing dynamic interaction to influence the path of language learning but that this context is multi-layered and fluid and involves an imagined community. This interaction of the individual, L2 motivation, and context is idiosyncratic, hence not generalizable or predictable even when the learners have similar linguistic and educational backgrounds, L2 proficiency levels, and are subject to similar contextual factors.

Early international experience—during adolescence—featured in the narrated histories of all participants. The data reveal that from the participants' perspective, this experience—regardless of its quantity or quality—was an intense defining moment, recalled with clarity and poignant details. However, although participants state that this *early international experience* influenced the initial development of L2 motivation, they differed in the meaning

they attached to it and in how they used it. For Mia whose L2 motivation appeared to be derived more from the past, the early international experiences, together with family history of living abroad and early socialization contributed to individual agency that protected the *Ideal L2-Self* under siege by an unfavorable context, though apparently not enough to maintain L2 motivation. Mai's early international experience transformed into a more future-goal oriented *desire to be a member of the international community* that appeared to drive her L2 motivation while for Eri it became a target-specific goal to communicate with English-speakers in her future life—both personal and professional.

Although previous studies have pointed to the negative influence of the university entrance exam on L2 motivation, this study indicates more complexity regarding this issue. The data indicate that for some participants, early L2 motivation appears to have changed in high school where a *desire to pass the university entrance exam* became a dominant motivator. However, it should be noted that for one participant, this desire involved a *desire to satisfy interpersonal needs*. For some participants with strong achievement needs, success in their English classes may have enabled them to use this context to internalize their extrinsic, goal-directed motivation and developed their sense of self-efficacy accompanied by self-preservation strategies and behaviors.[3]

This study shows clearly that the English classroom context exerts a significant influence on the L2 motivation though in ways that are quite different among individuals. For example, two participants found themselves in the same class with the same teacher. However, while one let the class function as a change agent that clearly altered her future path by shaping her Ideal-L2-Self image, the other did not do the same but instead, turned her excitement of being in a class where she could communicate in English into a source of anxiety that she could not control. This in turn led to her lack of self-esteem. However, the study also shows learners selectively let themselves become influenced by other forces including advise of a career counselor, extracurricular activities, travels, and friendship groups.

Most importantly, this study highlights how individual learner agency can also shape context and be effective to help pursue goals. One participant who found herself in a demotivating classroom context became active in creating an alternative community of L2 learners. Joined by others in the same predicament, she helped organize activities that maintained L2 motivation, and by adopting an L2-speaking identity, she and her like-minded peers strengthened each other's motivational orientation. They also sought out and bonded with English speakers and boldly used English in front of others to *identify* themselves. I note that this community exerted a positive influence on the motivation of the larger student community toward learning English.

Implications

It is hoped that this study serves as a reminder that L2 learning is a highly personal endeavor and as such, it is unlikely we will ever be able to identify a set of factors that affect L2 motivation and devise clever interventions that will enhance the learning outcomes. Simply, there will not be any silver bullet that will make everyone brilliant language learners. However, this and other previous studies do indicate that a creative, multi-dimensional approach to nurture motivation all throughout the lengthy path of L2 learning is needed.

This study hints that social and cultural capital of the language learners may affect their formulation of future selves. High L2 motivation involved international experiences including overseas residency and travel, which are beyond the financial means of many learners. In addition this study also hints that some university students may have little choice but to focus on job-hunting in college rather than on language learning given the current Japanese sociocultural context. Therefore, English language education in Japan might have to be framed as a broader social issue.

Aftermath

What happened to Mia, Ami, Eri, and Rie? Though tracking participants after the end of the study period is not common, in the spirit of considering these participants as real people, I have, with their permission, included a short postscript about each.

Mia

Mia went to the US as an exchange student and while she struggled to adjust to her new university environment despite her "international background", she successfully completed her studies, returned to Japan and is now employed. Interestingly, she is reasserting her Japanese identity.

Ami

Ami too went to the US as an exchange student and reports that she loved it. She is now attending graduate school in Japan and is happy to tell us that she enjoys having a different identity, and not being anchored in one culture. She is gearing up for a career overseas.

Eri

Eri recently returned from the US as an exchange student with an outlook on life that is so

different from who she was. Much more out-going, Eri would like to return to the US. to get her advanced degree for career enhancement. Japan, she says is no longer her only home.

Rie

Rie has gotten far away from English. She reports that she has regained her self-confidence and has found a job that is enabling her to become independent from her family thanks to the help of her boyfriend.

Notes

1   The names of the participants are fictitious.
2   Juku is a Japanese term for prep schools outside the regular school system that prepare students to pass the entrance exams to elementary and high schools as well as to universities.
3   The discussion of the efficacy of the university entrance exam is beyond the scope of this study although preparation for it may have advantaged the participants who demonstrated persistence in achieving goals and strong study skills. I believe that a question that ought to be asked is one of opportunity costs: How much communicative skill in English could the participants have gained had they not had to focus on the university entrance exam?

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