Examining Changes in Future Self-guides

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abstract

This study forms part of a larger investigation examining the changes in Japanese university students' motivation regarding their English studies from a qualitative research orientation. By analysing interview data from six learners, two each from three different universities in Japan over the course of their first year and into the beginning of their second year of university, the author sought to uncover salient patterns of motivational fluctuation/maintenance of the learners relating to the concept of future self-guides, a key aspect of Dörnyei's Motivational Self System (2005). The findings of the preliminary study suggest that 1) in order to facilitate motivation for English during this period of time, learners need to possess and continue to fuel the development of their ideal English selves in tandem with the corollary ought-to self; and 2) the establishment of clearly defined goals greatly aids in the maintenance of English motivation. The results offer insight into learner behaviours most beneficial to building and maintaining second language (L2) motivation.

1. Introduction

Over the last 50 years, as the complexity of the second language (L2) learning process has begun to become better understood, research into L2 motivation has gradually evolved and adapted to account for the integration of motivational psychology into its philosophy (Ushioda & Dörnyei (2012); Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan (2015)). In short, greater recognition and emphasis has been given to the complexity of the L2 learning process as it merges and weaves organically through the complexities of the social and contextual influences surrounding the learner and their motivations for learning a language. One of the key developments in L2 motivation studies was the "L2 Motivational Self System" (Dörnyei, 2005). In revisiting the traditional definition of integrativeness, recognised as key to L2 motivation (Gardner, 2001), and drawing on Markus and Nurius' (1986) psychological theory of 'Possible selves', Dörnyei's system examined how "self images develop and evolve in interaction with the complex constellations of internal and contextual processes shaping engagement in learning" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012, p. 401). A fundamental part of that system (and still valid in the more recent studies into motivation, as seen in articles by Nitta & Baba (2014) and Dörnyei, Ibrahim, & Muir (2016)), seeks to look beyond an actual or metaphorical connection to the L2 community and instead to focus on a different concept of identification taking place within the L2 learner's psyche: the influence of future selves. According to this theory, an individual's motivation toward a goal lies in their imagining their future through the filters of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. This promotional/preventive distinction, first suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986), was later conveyed by Higgins in the form of the ideal self and the ought-to self (Higgins 1987, 1996). As with other components of Dörnyei's system, the future self-images, as constructed by the individual, rather than being static constructs, are instead under constant revision by the learner, adjusted as time goes on and existing in greater focus and intensity in some learners than others.

Several empirical studies from a variety of learning contexts have verified the intrinsic role that the ideal L2 self plays in learner motivation and behaviours (Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Kim, 2009). Ryan, in his study of Japanese learners of English, focused on a reinterpretation of L2 motivation through examination of the importance of the self perspective. Ryan concludes that for the respondents in his study, the ideal self, rather than integration, has a more direct relationship with motivated behaviour and learning effort and that the latter is subsumed under the former. Similarly,

Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) and Kim (2009) support the fundamental findings of Dörnyei et al.'s original Hungarian study and the validity of Dörnyei's Motivational self-system, reinforcing the notion that the L2 self is a better explainer of L2 motivation than integrativeness.

Following a ten-month longitudinal study of Korean English learners living in Toronto, Kim (2009) proposed that the setting of goals was paramount to guiding and promoting motivational trajectories and that demotivation was a result of both a distancing from those goals and the extent to which participation with the L2 community was taking place. His findings indicated that the specificity and the persistence of the learners in his study towards their goals, in addition to participation with the L2 community, were key in maintaining a positive motivational trajectory.

With these conclusions from previous studies into the changes in motivation among learners of English in mind, an investigation by the author was carried out into Japanese university English learners' emerging reflections on their L2 futures in combination with their current attitudes to their L2 studies. The distinction between the learners in Kim's study and those in this study is pertinent as a number of researchers examining L2 motivation in Japan have cited both the lack of chances for L2 integration in society (Ryan, 2009) and the "…tendency for the learners not to exert extra effort beyond what is required to pass the course, unless a force, such as a strong incentive or a vision of the future, encourages them to do otherwise" (Yashima & Arano, 2014 pp. 289-290) - (see also Nakata, 2006). The distinction suggests that the learners in this study, not afforded ready participation in an L2 community, would therefore need to address this absence. It is expected that the findings can help to shed light on these students' behavioral/mental pathways in this regard, offering insights into optimal learning avenues which might be followed or behaviors which might be nurtured, thereby enabling learners to construct/maintain or attain their ideal L2 selves.

Given these considerations, the following research question was created:

Can patterns be established during the 3 research phases which show development/maintenance or failure in learners' English motivational trajectories?

2.　Method

After piloting, a set of interview questions were developed to examine learners' English motivation patterns over their four years at university. The questions were based on sections from Ryan's 'Motivational Factors Questionnaire' (2009) which set out to test Dörnyei's concept of the ideal L2 self in the Japanese context. A number of these questions were reformulated and used to examine student motivation relating to future self guides. Specifically, they sought to uncover the existence or lack of the prerequisite conditions as identified by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) in their list for the optimum impact of future self-guides on L2 motivation. According to their outline, learners' connections with vivid visions of their future ideal selves through a recognition of the connections between what they are currently doing and their future objectives is recognized as a key condition for motivational capacity. In addition, a recognition of a feared possible self and the constraints of the individual's milieu, form the prescriptive components necessary for the most favourable conditions to kindle and preserve motivation. The following section details the questions asked to the students in this study and the rationale for their inclusion.

2.1 Interview questions

The first interview question, 'Why are you studying English now?' sought to uncover the learners' desired self-image and the existence, strength and acknowledgement of gaps existing between their current and ideal selves. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda, the future self-image should exist as a developed component in the learners' mind. Over time, the image may well change and/or be drawn into or out of focus but the existence of a goal to be reached is important. Effort made to attain the desired level will be generated through recognition of the gap that exists between the current self and the future self-image, thus creating a design for

attempts to bridge the gap. The question therefore sought to uncover responses in which learners might express the desire to reach a specified goal and in addition to underlining their current weaknesses, articulating measures they were taking to address the gap between their current and future selves.

The second interview question, 'Is your study at university sufficient for you to achieve your goals?' sought to uncover to what extent the learners could sense a present tangible connection to their goals, in other words, that their study at university played an authentic role in their desire to achieve their L2 goals. At the same time, the question sought to uncover a desire for the learners to recognize efforts required to achieve visions of their L2 future selves. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda, while the future self-image should be one which is both elaborate and vivid, it should also be realistic. The question therefore sought to uncover responses in which learners sought to define their future self states as plausible and within reach, in concurrence with appropriately expended effort, such as attempts to participate within the L2 community in their milieu.

The third interview question, 'To what extent do your friends have any influence on your English study?' sought to examine the influence of the learner's peer group on the learner's motivation. For motivation to be maintained, the expectations and behaviors of the individual's surrounding group and environment should concord with those of the learner. Discordance can create an imbalance between the individual's ideal and ought-to self. A desire to emulate one's motivated peers, for example, would stimulate the ideal self to continue to progress towards one's goals of mastering the L2 while also fostering the desire not to get left behind the group. In addition to placing importance on their own efforts in achieving the goals that they set, learners are expected to frame their aspirations in relation to the expectations and support of people within their environment. For learners in this study, the support of peers is one such support group. The question therefore sought to uncover responses in which learners reconciled their ambitions within the confines of their milieu.

The final 2 interview questions, 'Picture your future self. Are you speaking English? ' and 'Can you imagine a future you who isn't speaking English? What do you think about that?' sought to examine to what extent the ideal L2 self and the feared possible L2 self existed in the minds of the learners. Rather than the image of the future self being a one-shot destination to reach, attained through, for example, the passing of a single test, the learner is expected to have defined a number of steps they can take towards their goal. This procedural journey should generate opportunities for the learners to focus or re-focus their energies towards the goal. Allowing other influences to subjugate the original goal trajectory will weaken the image and behaviour patterns once aligned to achieving the learner's original aim. In addition, in order to sustain interest in the goal and to promote success in reaching their desired objective, the learner should have a concept of what deviation from the goal could mean. These questions therefore sought to uncover responses in which learners were able to demonstrate the understanding of a more cogent study protocol towards their goals and recognise the existence of the failure scenario: the feared future self and the negative consequence of failing to carry through their plan.

The learners were interviewed at the start and end of their freshman year and then again at the start of their sophomore year (totalling three interviews). The majority of interviews were face-to-face but on occasion, the interviews were carried out over Skype. The interviews were carried out in Japanese and translated into English by the author for the purpose of this article. The interviews were carried out in Japanese to allow learners of different English abilities to express themselves as fluently/fluidly as possible. The veracity of the translation was checked independently by proficient Japanese/English speakers at the author's institution. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed learners the opportunity to add any extra information that they wished to. The interviews were recorded on digital

audio recorders. At the end of the interview process, the audio recording was transcribed and the transcription sent to the interviewees for verification. The transcription was carried out by paid student help from the author's university. The transcription was verified by the author for accuracy. Upon verification, the transcription data was analysed using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo for coding.

2.2. Universities and participants.

The participants were two learners each from three universities in northeast Japan. The universities were chosen in an attempt to gauge a pattern among learners representing three tiers of educational attainment (achieved by examining standard deviation scores required to pass each university's entrance examinations). In this paper, these universities will be referred to as Tier 1, 2 and 3, with Tier 1 being the highest level. The learners from each university were selected for their desire/willingness to participate in the longitudinal study. The interviews were carried out in Japanese to allow learners of different English abilities to express themselves as fluently/fluidly as possible. For privacy purposes, the names of the participants have been changed for this article.

3. Findings

The following section will detail and provide analysis of the students' responses to each of the interview questions.

Question one: Why are you studying English now?

A clear division in the responses to this question was observed. Three of the four learners from the upper two Tiers responded with reference to a future job using English throughout the three interviews. In one-shot interviews, we might be wary of giving too much value to stated desires regarding future selves, as the ideals expressed could well be expressions of the ought-to self, rather than the ideal self. As Kim (2009) states, "L2 learners' self images are versatile and changeable depending on the learners' degree of internalizing their future images" (p.57). However, seeing the same wishes expressed over the period of the three interviews

gives evidence to the dedication to the goal for these three learners, expressed in these excerpts from learners from Tier 1 and 2, repeated during the research period:

Lisa (Tier 1): I want to be able to speak English and to enjoy international relations with foreigners. I also want to be a school teacher specializing in teaching English to children (interview 1).

Ai (Tier 2): I want to study English for the job I want to do in the future: working in the airline industry (interview 1).

Evidence of a wavering in the dedication to the goal comes from the other student, Rina, from the Tier 1 university. In the student's first interview, this student also spoke of a desire to be a teacher, but by the third interview, this had changed to simply "I would like to communicate with foreigners". Similarly vague responses came from the two Tier 3 learners:

Eiki (Tier 3): I like the teacher. I'm not sure about my future job, but I'd like to use it (interview 1).

Eiki (Tier 3): I just need it to graduate. I don't think I'll be writing or speaking in English, just passively taking it in (interview 3).

Takashi (Tier 3): For my future. I want to go abroad (interview 1).

Takashi (Tier 3): I want to be a cameraman in the future. I think I might need to talk to English people if I do that (interview 3).

The notion of goal specificity, firmly established and then maintained over a period of time is key to the maintenance of L2 motivation, as highlighted by Kim in his examination of Korean learners of English (2009). A wavering from the dedication to the goal can have effects on the learner's L2 learning effort and their proficiency. In addition, the lack of defined, procedural strategies towards attaining the L2 goal might highlight lack of focus toward the future-self-vision.

All four learners from Tiers 1 and 2 throughout the interview period were able to identify weaknesses in

their current abilities, expressing a desire to improve upon them and citing ways in which they can accomplish their goals in this regard:

Ai (Tier 1): My word power is low so I want to improve that. I want to communicate more with native speakers. I'll go to the speaking lab (interview 1).

Maki (Tier 2): I want to increase my listening. I can do that by speaking to more foreigners at my university (interview 3).

Neither of the 2 learners from Tier 3 was able to pinpoint specific weaknesses and throughout the 3 interviews was only able to give a general comment regarding areas of improvement:

Eiki (Tier 3): I want to learn new words (interviews 1 and 3).

Takashi (Tier 3): I want to be able to answer someone when asked a question in English (interview 2).

The detection of a 'gap' between the current and ideal self and the notion of what exists on the others side of that gap that as being a plausible and proximal goal combined with the acknowledgement of strategies which can act as waypoints towards the desired goal can help to serve as evidence that progress is indeed being made and allow the learner to make adjustments regarding efforts made to attain those goals. Without the acknowledgement of an existing gap, no effort or motivation will be engaged to attempt to reduce it, resulting in a plateau or decline in motivation, as hinted at by the two Tier 3 learners here.

Question two: Is your study at university sufficient for you to achieve your goals?

All of the Tier 1 and 2 learners throughout the period stated that although the university played a role in helping them to achieve their goal, their own input outside of university was important:

Lisa (Tier 1): I think the university is ok, but I think learners need to make an effort too (interview 1).

Lisa (Tier 1): Yes, but I also need to make an effort. It's up to me (interview 3).

Maki (Tier 2): No, it's not enough. I think it's up to my own direction that will give me more capabilities (interview 2).

The two Tier 2 students and one of the Tier 1 students spoke of making efforts outside of class to speak to members of the L2 community:

Ai & Maki (Tier 2): I spoke to some foreign students at my university (repeated throughout interviews 1-3).

Lisa (Tier 1) I made a foreign friend at a social event that I went to (interview 3).

The remaining Tier 1 learner, Rina throughout the interview period did not make any efforts to speak English outside of the L2 classroom.

Of the two Tier 3 learners, while Eiki echoed the sentiments of the Tier 1 and 2 learners, regarding the need to study outside of university, Takashi's responses indicate that for him, the university was all that he needed to achieve his L2 aims. For this student, there is no need for expended effort, as he views his goal (previously specified by Takashi in vague terms) as ultimately attainable by making simply the efforts required of him in his class time. Eiki did not make any effort to speak English outside of university, while Takashi spoke of occasionally taking orders in English from foreign customers at his restaurant part-time job.

Question three: To what extent do your friends have any influence on your English study?

The responses from all Tier 1 and 2 learners suggest a desire to emulate their peers in addition to voiced fears of becoming left behind in the development of their L2 skills:

Rina (Tier 1): Yes, when I see my friends speaking English in class, I think I have to make an effort too (interview 1).

Rina (Tier 1): Yes, we want to study and improve together (interview 3).

Ai (Tier 2): My friend lived in the US for years and is fluent. I need to study hard to get like that (interview 1).

Ai (Tier 2): Yes, if my friends are doing well, I know I have to do well. It's good pressure (interview 3).

The initially positive responses of the two Tier 3 learners, have begun to more uncertain by the end of the first year (the second interview period). Eiki began the first year full of confidence about his performance in the class and as can be observed from his comment, he felt himself to be of a higher level than the other learners:

Eiki (Tier 3): Yes, people around me ask me the meanings of words. I like that (interview 1).

In the third interview in his second year, his response again concerns his own performance:

Eiki (Tier 3): No. I think more about what I did in my first year and how I don't do it now. That influences me.

As has been shown in the patterns of the responses of the learners thus far, the dynamic of stability is crucial for the continued development and forward trajectory of the future self-image. In the comment of the third interview above, Eiki is clearly looking backwards and inwards instead of considering, as do the learners in Tiers one and two above, elements of the social environment that might aid in motivating him to pursue his future self.

Questions four and five: Picture your future self. Are you speaking English? Can you imagine a future you who isn't speaking English? What do you think about that?

In motivation literature, the existence of the feared L2 self, the consequences of going down a certain path with negative L2 consequences, is vital for motivational effectiveness. In these terms, a higher motivational tendency towards the L2 would be displayed by the first question being answered affirmatively. The second question, if answered negatively, should be then qualified by an objection to the notion of not using English in the future. If the second question is answered positively then the motivational outcome for this learner becomes much more unpredictable.

For one of the Tier 1 and all of the 2 learners, a positive and detailed response to the first question and negative and qualified responses to the second are indeed forthcoming:

Maki (Tier 2): Yes. I'll be speaking to the foreign assistant language teacher at the school where I'll be teaching. No, I can't imagine it at all (regarding not speaking English in the future - this sentiment was repeated over the 3 interviews).

Maki refused to comment further on how she would feel about not speaking English.

Lisa (Tier 2): Yes. I'll be speaking with people from different countries. In Japan and when I go abroad and at work. No, I can't imagine it at all. It sounds like a boring life (repeated through interviews 1-3).

Ai (Tier 2): Yes, especially with customers at my job. No. I can't imagine it. I feel sad just thinking about it. No way (interview 1).

Ai (Tier 2): Yes, with customers at my job. No. I can't imagine it. I'd feel like 'what on Earth are you doing?' (interview 3).

However, for Rina of the Tier 1 learners and the two Tier 3 learners, the image of their English speaking future selves are either rather hazy:

Rina (Tier 1): When I speak to learners, I'll try not to use Japanese (interview 1).

Rina (Tier 1): Maybe not outside of work (interview 3).

or altogether more resolute:

Takashi (Tier 3) "No, I won't be using it" (repeated through interviews 1-3)

What these learners also share is a vision of their future selves not using English and a lamenting of this:

Rina (Tier 1): Yes, I can imagine it. I'd think it was a waste. I think I should have made more effort in class (repeated through interviews 1-3)

Takashi (Tier 3): Yes, I can completely imagine it. It's pitiful and shameful" (interviews 1 and 3).

As has been previously stated, regular activation of both the future L2 self with the feared possible L2 self in the learners' self concept is key in maintaining positive motivational trajectory towards the learner goal. Comments by one of the L1 and both L2 learners clearly demonstrate their commitment to their goals throughout the interview period. Failure to create an image of the consequences of attaining or failing to achieve the goal suggest that the significance attached to the goal or to the failure state is fragile, as seen in the comments of Rina and the two Tier 3 learners, and likely to further weaken as time passes.

4. Discussion

A key component to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, is the symbiotic existence of the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self. The interviews in this study confirm Dörnyei's proposal and the work by Kim, that when future self guides, constructed through both internal and external pressures and influences are kept in check by the ideal and ought to L2 self, through constant reflection on their presence, a positive motivational trajectory can be established and maintained. A deviation from the dedication towards the goal or a lack of direction during the study period covered in this research can have implications down the line, as seen by the comments of the Tier 3 learners, whose desired outcomes are never clearly framed. This is also displayed to a lesser extent by the Tier 1 student, Rina, whose stated initial desire to be a teacher using English, is later reduced to a hope that she will use English in an unspecified line of work.

The findings also echo those from previous studies

that frame future-self guides as dynamic in nature, shifting in time as learners' relationship with both the L2 and a plethora of other factors can work to either enhance or diminish interest in focus on its learning. Future research in this area will seek to examine the impact of the third constituent of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, namely the L2 learning experience, which represents motives related to the learning environment and experience.

In addressing ways to avoid a deviation from future goals, activities and class environment, such as those suggested by Dörnyei & Kubanyiova (2014), Magid & Chan (2012), and Sampson (2012), which seek to help teachers and learners to create personal visions for L2 learners, can help to stimulate and maintain L2 learning objectives. The activities include offering 'priming stimuli' (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014, p 108) in which students are encouraged to revisit vision-related ideas and ideals, or listing future goals and developing action plans (Magid & Chan, 2012, p.116).

5. Further research

The future of this research will examine the effect on motivational trajectories from a variety of influences through examination of responses given to a larger number and range of questions posed to the learners. This will enable greater analysis of interconnecting variables through the implementation of a complex dynamic systems analysis, which seeks to give greater recognition and emphasis to the complexity of the L2 learning process (Ushioda & Dörnyei (2012). In his 2014 article, concerning the researching and implementing of complex dynamic systems Dörnyei suggests focussing on three areas of investigation:

1) identification of strong attractor-governed phenomena (showing the influence of pertinent attractors on the system);

2) identification of typical attractor conglomerates (in which the relationship of motivational, cognitive and affective factors can appear to work in unison, forming a construct which can be identified and measured);

3) identification and analysis of typical dynamic outcome patterns (in which methods of analysing changes in form can be measured and reported accurately from among the initial semblance of disarray) (pp.84-85).

It is predicted that more in-depth interviews with these learners, in which students will be encouraged to offer reasons for the changes in their feelings towards English, will uncover patterns of system behaviour which could be plotted over time allowing more in-depth comparison with other learners from both within and without each student's learning context. At the end of the research period, using the process of retrodictive qualitative modelling, the third of Dörnyei's suggestions will be employed to establish a retrospective model of the evolution of the motivational trajectory over the four years of the learners' university study.

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