

The Impact of Teaching Approaches on Motivation in Japanese Secondary Education and Strategies For Overcoming Demotivation in University Students

James R. Reed*

Abstract

This is a small-scale qualitative study that looks at the experiences of two Japanese adult learners of English and relates their experiences in the classroom to contemporary theories on motivation, namely Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. I argue that traditional Japanese teaching practices in secondary education may inhibit the development of motivation to study English and argue that instructors at universities can play a role in 'rescuing' student motivation by making a clear conceptual separation between student's prior experiences with English and a new approach or 'fresh start' in English oral communication classes.

Key words

Motivation, Self, L2, University, Oral Communication

The Impact of Teaching Approaches on Motivation in Japanese Secondary Education and Strategies For Overcoming Demotivation In University Students

I. Introduction

When I took my first class with university students at the Japanese university at which I am employed, I asked a simple question: "Do you like English?" In the class of 15 students, I received 14 replies of 'no' and a single 'so-so.' I repeated this with my other classes and the results were very similar. When I asked why, I received variations of two answers in Japanese, 'it's difficult/I'm bad at it'/I don't understand' or 'I hate English/I'm not interested/It's boring.' These kinds of attitudes, while by no means the case in every secondary or tertiary institution in Japan, are common and have been well documented (see Falout et al 2009, Kikuchi 2009, Ikeno 2002) So, what are the causes behind such

*James R. Reed : 大阪国際大学グローバルビジネス学部非常勤講師 〈2018.7.6受理〉

negative attitudes and poor motivation among certain students in Japanese schools?

Motivation to study an L2 is complex and can be affected by a whole plethora of internal and external factors (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). In this study I want to focus mainly on the impact of student's negative learning experiences on current motivation. Falout, Elwood and Hood's (2009) study of learners in a Japanese university found that the Japanese traditional grammar translation approach to teaching, *yakudoku*, had the greatest influence on student demotivation. Therefore in this essay, using Zoltan Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System as a framework for analysis, I would like to argue that an over reliance on *yakudoku*, hinders students ability to relate to English as a communicative practice and thus negatively affects L2 motivation.

I will expand my arguments by providing accounts of two students I have worked with who suffered from low motivation and proficiency in EFL as students in secondary education- 30-year-old care worker Rina and businessperson, Shin, in his mid-forties.

In the final section, I will make recommendations on how instructors in universities in Japan can have a positive influence on the demotivated students coming into university with low confidence and aptitude, namely by distancing communication oriented courses from student's negative past experiences with EFL and *yakudoku*. Such recommendations can be investigated empirically in future research.

II. Data Collection

The data in this study comes from two separate interviews held with two private adult students. The interviews were mainly in Japanese and were recorded using a laptop computer. I asked open questions about learning experiences in secondary education and then chose the most illuminating responses for inclusion in this study. Translations were done by myself and utterances were transcribed and edited into a coherent written form. The students were chosen for the study for their availability and willingness to participate as well as for the fact that I felt in my experience they both seemed to have very typical experiences regarding their English education. For reasons of privacy, pseudonyms have been used.

III. *Yakudoku*-An Overly Formal Education

Here is an example of an English lesson in Japanese secondary education as EFL instructor and author AJ Hoge recalls from his time as an ALT in Japan:

“The Japanese teacher was standing in front of a class of middle school students.... The teacher wrote an English sentence on the blackboard: “John is taller than Mary.” Then she began to talk in Japanese. As she talked, she circled different words of the sentence. She talked, and talked, and talked.... in Japanese.

The students opened their notebooks and began writing. The teacher also began writing more on the board-in Japanese. Long sentences in Japanese. Then she pointed to the word “John” again. ...This continued for the entire class. She eventually circled “taller” and “than” with green chalk, and talked for over 20 minutes about these two words....

In 50 minutes, they had heard only one sentence in English, repeated only one time. In that same time, they had heard the teacher speak Japanese for nearly 49 minutes.” (AJ Hoge 2011: 17)

This classroom practice with its focus on a grammar translation approach through transmission style teaching is still very common in Japan (Falout et al 2009). In such classrooms, English is seldom used, instead sentences and longer reading passages are analysed in Japanese and students are expected to take notes and memorise forms. Occasionally, students may be asked to read aloud from textbooks or answer grammar related questions, but this is generally the limit as far as verbal output is concerned.¹

I believe that this teaching method, known as *yakudoku* (lit. translation reading) is a big factor in the low motivation of students mainly for the following reasons, which I will relate to Dörnyei’s L2 Motivation Self System in the next section.

- (1) Firstly, *yakudoku* serves to remove the immediate relevance of English as a tool of communication and instead abstract it into something that is, as Ryan puts it, ‘presented in a form that often has more in common with convoluted mathematical formulae than a system of human communication’ (Ryan 2009: 135).
- (2) Furthermore, this abstraction and ‘focus on form’ and its myriad of technical jargon, is often considered ‘difficult’ by students and can quickly discourage them from the study of English, particularly those of low confidence generally in their academic abilities, as we will see in the case of RIna.
- (3) Finally, as I will demonstrate in the case of Shin, the transmission style of teaching means that students are unable to interact meaningfully in the classroom and are unable to bring their personalities into lessons, their *transportable identities* (Zimmerman 1998), meaning that motivation that could potentially arise from any kind

of personal interest in the English-speaking world is not properly nurtured.

IV. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System

Zoltan Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, offers insight into the failure of *yakudoku* teaching processes to generate motivation. In this system, based on the possible selves theory from social psychology (Markus & Nurius 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987), Dörnyei proposes that L2 motivation can be generated when students imagine themselves using the L2 in the future, and start to desire to narrow the distance in language ability between the current self and the imagined self (2009a). Dörnyei breaks his system down into a tri-partite structure:

(1) Firstly, the *ideal L2 self*, which is the student's idealised image of the L2 using future self that they would like to become. In order for the *ideal L2 self* to be realised, students would ordinarily possess a positive image of a future life events involving interaction in English and also must believe that such a life events are likely to happen for them as individuals. The *ideal L2 self* is heavily intertwined with what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) term 'lay' concepts such as interest and enjoyment and this is linked linked to positive emotion and is concerned with personal growth and 'promotion'. (Higgins 1998 in Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011)

(2) Secondly, the *ought-to self*, a self which represents feelings of what one ought to do, and which can correspond to external influences from institutions, family or society in general. The ought-to-self from a psychological viewpoint is linked to the avoidance of negative outcomes such as the fear of failing a course. Also, students may feel that they must study to achieve a high TOEIC score for career advancement or there may be other institutional or societal requirements for L2 study and use.

However, it is important to make clear that should a student wish to achieve a high test score from the *positive* desire for promotion and personal development as opposed to the *negative* fear of failure or criticism, that for Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) this would be considered under the *ideal L2 self* and not the *ought-to-self* despite the clear social pressures embedded within the desire itself. Therefore it seems to me to be most useful to think of the two selves along a pursuit of positive outcome and avoidance of negative outcome dichotomy.

(3) Finally, theoretically distinct from the psychologically-grounded possible selves theories above, the *L2 learning experience*, which refers to the self as experienced in the day-to-day situations in which the student is learning or interacts with the L2. This

responds to the classroom environment, the course and syllabi, teacher immediacy, peer support and so on. It has been found that even if a student does not possess motivation stimulated by a future self, that the more positive the learning experience, the more motivation the student will show (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011).

i. The L2 Motivational Self System In a Japanese Context

When Ryan (2009a) tested the L2 Motivational Self System quantitatively in a Japanese secondary educational context, he found high correlation particularly between the *ideal L2 self* and EFL motivation and proficiency. Dörnyei states that in order for students to be motivated by the *ideal L2 self* that, of course, '*it must actually exist*' (Dörnyei 2009a: 18). With the removal of the communicative aspect of English by the use of *yakudoku*, I would argue that students are unable to adequately relate the study of English as an academic subject with its real world application and thus are unable to create this sense of a future L2 using self.

Yashima (2009: 148) states:

“To imagine yourself communicating in English in the real world, it is natural that you also envision some kind of (often social) context in which you participate by using English.”

For me, rather than the two processes happening simultaneously, I believe that it is important for students to envision some kind of social context in which they may use English *before* they can imagine themselves communicating in English in the real world, before they can create the ideal L2 self. It is my belief that the widespread practise of *yakudoku*, as opposed to more personalised, communicative approaches to be discussed later, does not easily allow the world of the imagination to enter the classroom and therefore can prevent the conception of the future L2 self. To support this argument, let me now examine data from interviews with two Japanese adult students regarding their English language learning histories.

V. *Yakudoku*, Aptitude and *The Ideal L2 Self* In The Case Of Rina

Here is a description of her junior high school classes from my adult student, Rina, 30:

“The teacher wrote sentences on the board. He explained it in Japanese. He focused mainly on the smarter kids. I was still struggling with my ABCs when I started

junior high school so I was pretty much lost from the first term. We never had to say anything in English, but I remember a lot of gap filling which I couldn't really do so I'd copy from my friend if we had to submit it. I was always interested in English and foreigners but I guess I was left behind pretty quickly and couldn't get back. I still have my textbooks from those days because I've always secretly hoped that one day I'll be able to understand them!"

Rina is a 30-year-old woman who recently came back to English study as a means to make up for having difficulties with the subject in her youth. As detailed in the quotation, she found classes far too difficult and received very little support from her teachers in junior high school. However, she did have some interest in English and she did have visions of travelling abroad and communicating with non-Japanese. She is now motivated by the strong desire to move and work abroad in the next few years. Poignantly, Rina even kept her junior high school English textbooks in the hope that one day she would be able to understand them.

i. Attitudes Toward The Target Language: International Posture

Rina clearly displayed some signs of having a positive attitude towards the idea of using English and had interest in English speaking communities and western popular culture which corresponds to a high degree to of *International Posture*, Yashima's construct which she defines as:

'interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to study or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners ... and a nonethnocentric attitude toward different cultures' (2002: 57).

And, according to her research:

'international posture is conducive to generating English-using possible selves giving rise to communication behaviours' (2009: 148).

As an adult learner, Rina has made steady progress over the last year in private classes and is now able to express herself in simple sentences and use tenses, prepositions and conjunctions, which suggests that she has enough natural aptitude to make progress in learning an L2. Despite possessing these traits, why then was she unable to make any progress in secondary education?

I propose that teaching practises were the main cause of Rina's failure to transfer a positive attitude towards the L2 into the creation of the ideal L2 self. I believe that the *yakudoku* method to which Rina was subjected was too abstract, difficult and not suitable for her as a learner. The level of abstraction in grammar explanations and quick pace of the classes with little or no teacher support left Rina confused and isolated. Therefore, her ideal L2 self could not materialise due to her lack of self-confidence, she simply did not believe that a future L2 using self was a realistic outcome.

VI. The Case Of Shin

Shin recollects the following regarding his English education:

'The only English I ever heard was 'good morning class' 'stand up' 'sit down' and 'repeat after me'. The teacher would get the students to read through the textbooks then she would explain all the meanings in Japanese. Sometimes there were extra questions and stuff about culture but we didn't discuss this, the teacher would just talk about it briefly in Japanese.'

Shin is a businessman in his forties working in the advertising department of a large company in Osaka. He decided to take evening classes in order to reconnect with the study of English and make up for his lack of progress as a teenager. Interestingly, Shin's main passion in life is for British and American rock music. He is a fan of guitarists Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page among others and has been since he was in junior high school. Therefore, Shin, as Rina, possessed a high degree of international posture, however he claims he lacked any kind of motivation to try and communicate in English and did the bare minimum, only studying properly in the weeks before tests. As an impressionable young teenager with an interest in British and American rock music, why was it that his English school education failed to motivate him to try to become an English speaker?

Shin feels that his English classes were sterile and to him had absolutely no relation to his interest in music:

'I would read the Beatles lyrics sometimes and get really engrossed in thinking about the meanings so I guess I was interested in English but, English classes...it was different. We would just copy stuff and listen to our old teacher with terrible pronunciation.'

i. Transportable Identities In The Classroom

From talking to Shin, the separation between the English of the classroom and of the lyrics of the Beatles seems unfathomably vast. He shows a lack of trust in the teacher's English ability and perceived the teaching style to be 'boring'. Therefore Shin's L2 self could only be imagined outside of formal education through his interest in music, however, without any external support to help him capitalise on this vision, he was unable to progress as an English speaker through his hobby alone.

Dörnyei, Henry and Muir (2016: 114) proposed via the concept of transportable identities (Zimmerman 1998) that L2 motivation can be positively influenced by the ability to 'be yourself' in the classroom by bringing in your real personality, hobbies, likes and dislikes and so forth. When this is denied and instead the passive role of student is forced upon a learner through transmission-based pedagogical practice, it can have the affect of stemming any motivation that may otherwise have occurred. For Shin, English lessons were not connected to British and American music and pop culture. English was an abstract, academic subject and therefore the potentially highly motivating image of the *ideal L2 self* being able to understand English lyrics and perhaps even the fantasy of interacting with one's English-speaking musical heroes was unable to be utilised in the classroom.

VII. A Role for University Instructors

I believe it is imperative for English instructors in universities to find ways to give confidence to students such as Rina, inspiration to students such as Shin and generally effect a change in perspective away from English as an academic subject to a communicative one. In Japan, this may be easier than in some other contexts as there is a significant conceptual difference between the subjects of 英語 *eigo* (English) and 英会話 *eikaiwa* (English conversation), in an educational context. 英語 *eigo* generally indexes the idea of English as an academic subject and 英会話 *eikaiwa*, the use of English in real life communication. The former is generally taught by Japanese English teachers and the latter by foreigners. While I would argue this is something of a false dichotomy which is encouraged in part by certain economic interests in the *eikaiwa* industry as well perhaps as certain entrenched cultural ideological underpinnings in Japan, this conceptual split can actually be useful for instructors in universities. To combat the strong aversion to English classes due to negative experiences from students like Rina and Shin, who otherwise may possess attitudes conducive to learning an L2, the instructor can emphasize the different approach used in communicative oral classes and allow the

students a clean break from the negative feelings they hold towards 英語 *eigo*.

Furthermore, in the university context, instructors are able to escape some of the institutional limitations placed on classes by the government as well as the pressure to gear study towards entrance examinations. This means that there is more opportunity for instructors to set up courses containing communicative exercises with real world applications that may stimulate the creation of the *ideal L2 self*. This entails more opportunity for speaking in class and for classes to contain themes and content that can be easily imagined as useful for potential future interactions.

Furthermore, in the case of low proficiency students such as Rina, focus should not be on difficult grammatical terminology which conjures up memories of past failure but instead on simpler verbal interactions. In this way the instructor can avoid provoking the memory of traumatic experiences with 英語 *eigo* and instead start to build up a new conceptual schemata for students of what constitutes an English oral communication course.

Within the framework of oral communication with clear real world applications should also come the opportunity for students to bring in their own identities and interests into the classroom. This can be realized in the classroom through many different approaches and activities a detailed discussion of which is out of the remit for this paper. It is enough to say that I believe it is important that the instructor keep in mind the concept of the L2 motivational self system when designing and personalizing communicative activities such as pairwork, groupwork, interviews and presentations.

It is by building a new schemata of English oral communication and in using personalized communicative activities in the classroom that not only may there be pedagogical benefits, but also psychological ones as their use emphasizes a break from past negative experiences in English. The individual that was convinced that he or she was 'bad at' English can now separate the experiences of that past self and rebuild a new L2 self moving forward into the future.

VIII. Further Research

Due to constraints on time and resources, I have only been able to include qualitative data from two students in this study as foundations for my arguments. Therefore, while the conclusions drawn from the data are interpretative and may not in themselves be objectively generalizable, the case studies of Rina and Shin, I believe, will be recognisable to any experienced instructor of adult students in Japan.

A more wide-ranging qualitative study with a greater number of participants with more varied experiences remains an objective for further research. Also, admittedly, it cannot be said that every student in Japan has had negative experiences with English education at junior or high school level and indeed with grammar translation methods. I believe that teacher fronted teaching styles can have a place in the classroom and that a focus on forms and translation can also suit certain students' learning styles. Therefore, another possibility for future research could look at how these traditional forms can be adapted to include possibilities for the building of the L2 self as it seems clear that the *yakudoku* approach is unable to do so in the form that has been discussed in this study.

Finally, in terms of the action-based practical application of the arguments presented in this study, an ambition would be to empirically test the impact of the simple recommendations I have made. Namely, that the conceptual break from 英語 *eigo* to English oral communication and the use of communicative activities and a focus on interpersonal interaction can have a positive impact on student motivation and help to 'rescue' demotivated learners. Similar studies do exist (see Falout at al 2009) but I believe one which focuses particularly on action, and the notion of the possibility of 'remotivating' demotivated students of low proficiency at the university level in Japan is one that could be of great professional interest to English instructors struggling with poorly motivated students.

IX. Conclusion

The traditional teaching practise of *yakudoku* is not conducive to generating student motivation, as it does not allow the student's imagination to create the *ideal L2 self*. Even with students who have strong international posture, the difficulty and level of abstraction of grammar translation and the fact that it does not allow the student to bring their identities into the classroom alienates students from the communicative aspect of the L2 and hinders potential opportunities for motivation. Therefore, I believe a university instructor can play an important role in 'rescuing' some EFL motivation by emphasising a clear separation between their previous experience of 英語 *eigo* (English) classes and English oral communication classes by designing lessons and courses based on communicative language teaching techniques that allow students to make the leap from English as an abstract subject of study to a tool or resource for real world communication that will enrich their lives.

Note

1 This generalised assertion of classroom practice in English lessons in Japan is based on accounts

from students, witnessing lessons firsthand and extensive reading (in this essay, Falout et al (2009), Ryan (2009a).). However, some teachers do attempt to deviate from this standard *yakudoku* formula and there are lots of examples of very successful programs with highly motivated students (see Yashima 2009). I have chosen to focus on learners with low motivation in this essay as they present a formidable challenge to ALTs working in Japan.

References

- Dörnyei, Z. (2009a) The L2 Motivational Self System. In Dörnyei, Z. and Ushioda, E. (2009) *Motivation, Language Identity And The L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters: 9-42
- Dörnyei, Z, Henry, A and Muir, C (2016). *Motivational Currents In Language Learning*. New York: Routledge.
- Dörnyei, Z. and Ushioda, E. (2009) *Motivation, Language Identity And The L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E. (2011) *Teaching And Researching Motivation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Falout, J, Elwood, J and Hood, M. (2009): "Demotivation: Affective States And Learning Outcomes". *System* 37.3 403-417. Web.
- Gardner, R.C (1985) *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold
- Higgins, E.T. (1987) Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review* 94: 319-40
- Hoge, A.J. (2014) *Effortless English*. Tennessee: Lightning Source Inc
- Ikeno, O. (2002) Motivating and demotivating factors in foreign language learning: A preliminary investigation. *Ehime University Journal of English Education Research* 2: 1-19
- Kikuchi K. (2009) Listening to our learner's voices: What demotivates Japanese high school students? *Language Teaching Research* 13(4): 453-71
- Markus, H and Nurius, P (1986) Possible selves. *American Psychologist* 41: 954-69
- Ryan, S. (2009b) Self and identity in L2 motivation in Japan: The ideal L2 self and Japanese learners of English. In Dörnyei, Z. and Ushioda, E. (2009) *Motivation, Language Identity And The L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters: 120-43
- Yashima, T. (2002) Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language: The Japanese EFL Context *Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 86(1), pp.54-66
- Yashima, T (2009) International Posture and the Ideal L2 Self in the Japanese EFL Context. In Dörnyei, Z. and Ushioda, E. (2009) *Motivation, Language Identity And The L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters: 144-63
- Zimmerman, D. (1998). Identity, context, interaction. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* : 87-106. London: Sage.

