

Motivation: The Japanese EFL Context

TAN, Seoh Koon^{*1}

CHIA, Su Aie^{*2}

Motivation: The Japanese EFL Context

TAN, Seoh Koon^{*1}

CHIA, Su Aie^{*2}

Abstract

Poor communicative ability is often highlighted as a significant problem in English Education in Japan. Researches (Lafaye & Tsuda, 2002; Benson, 1991; Matsuda, 2000) revealed that despite the fact that Japanese students are having positive attitude towards English speaking community and cross-cultural communication, students are not motivated in learning English. This paper aimed to address this issue and to give some suggestions to English teachers in Japan.

^{*1} 城西大学経営学部助教 Assistant Professor Josai University

^{*2} 城西大学経営学部助教 Assistant Professor Josai University

Introduction

Achievement in learning English as a second or foreign language (L2) demands a high level of motivation among learners. Researches in the past have proven that highly motivated learners are more likely to possess strong determination and self-regulation, positive learning attitude, as well as other contributing factors that drive learners to strive and sustain the long, mundane and often tedious L2 learning journey. It is particularly important if learners are from a mono-cultural or monolingual setting which limits the use and exposure of the target language in daily life due to the lack of regular interaction with the target language community. In such setting, even a learner with remarkable intelligence has no guarantee of L2 achievement without sufficient motivation. It is necessary to mention that people from countries with high demands of L2, such as Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, are able to achieve a reasonably high level of mastery in their L2 irrespective of their individual learning ability. Such phenomenon served as an evidence that although learning ability is a huge determining factors of L2 achievement, sufficient L2 motivation can outweigh L2 learning ability (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Researches also revealed L2 motivation is an important factor in L2 achievement, even in a multicultural and multilingual setting. To investigate the importance of environment and the use of L2 outside of formal classroom setting, a study was conducted by Lee, Browne and Kusumoto (2013) to investigate the amount of time students spent using English outside of the classroom in a Japanese international university with nearly half of the students are not Japanese, coming from over 90 different countries. The multicultural and multilingual setting and the availability of English-based courses are believed to have created an environment which supports the use of English outside of classroom. Results with a mean of 21.63 hours per week ($SD = 12.72$) revealed that environment plays a crucial role in encouraging the use of English in natural setting. However, the study also revealed that learners' initiative in taking advantage of their surroundings to use the target language is also equally important. L2 motivation is closely related to learners' initiative in learning. In other words, the learning setting alone does not guarantee the use of English outside of classroom. Setting appears as a strong support to learning only when learners possess strong L2 motivation to benefit from the learning environment.

What is Motivation?

Motivation is not merely referring to the emotional state of a person. It involves far more complicated goal oriented mental processes. Motivation, according to Pintrich

and Schunk (1996), involves numerous cognitive processes that resulted in the initiation and sustention of action. From this process-oriented view point, Dornyei (1998) has further defined motivation as process ascended out of 'instigation force', which initiates actions, remains until the targeted goal is achieved or persists as long as no other influencing forces occur to weaken it and thus lead to termination of actions.

In his socio-educational model, Gardner (1982) discussed motivation as a factor of L2 acquisition with three major elements: effort, desire and affect. Effort refers to the amount of time and energy learners spent in learning. Desire is illustrated as the determination and persistence in L2 mastery. Lastly, affect represents the emotional response of learners towards their L2 learning (Norris-Holt, 2001). Each elements interrelate with all the others in promoting motivation. For instance, learners' positive emotional reaction towards their L2 learning might result in increasing desire in L2 mastery, which will lead to greater effort in L2 learning.

Norris-Holt (2001) classified motivation into two distinctive categories: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to the motivation formed through the affection and admiration of L2 community and culture and desire to assimilate into the L2 community. On the other hand, instrumental motivation refers to the form of motivation stimulated through practical purposes, such as meeting graduation requirement or getting higher pay.

Issues of Motivation in the Japanese EFL Classroom

Poor communicative ability is often mentioned as one of the most significant problems in English education in Japan. Despite the fact that most universities students have studied English for at least 6 six in junior and senior high school, most of the university students are having difficulties in expressing ideas in English. University students are often unmotivated in learning English.

A study was conducted by Lafaye & Tsuda (2002) to investigate university students' attitudes towards their English language learning experience and most of the respondents were overwhelmingly unsatisfied with their English learning experience with 70% said they did not like learning English and as high as 85% of respondents were unhappy or very unhappy with their proficiency. Despite the fact that most of them have studied English for at least 6 years, 47% indicated their preference of learning another language as L2 in university. Conversely, these respondents were surprisingly positive on their responses regarding the usefulness of English and 75% indicated that they envied or admired people with good command of English, 65% showed interest in making friends with foreigners and 94 % selected "no" when they were asked if they find foreigners annoying. These responses indicated that most respondents have positive attitude towards foreigners and cross-cultural communication. The results showed

resemblances to other related studies (Benson, 1991; Matsuda, 2000). The results of these have somehow reflected the context of Japanese EFL classroom as a whole.

Supposedly, positive attitude towards L2 community and cross-cultural communication should have, in one way or another, promoted a certain level of integrative motivation among the learners. However, this is not seen in the context of Japanese EFL classroom. Such phenomenon suggested that the issue of motivation in L2 acquisition in Japan is more complex than it is expected. It has also showed evidence of the existence of other greater forces that weaken or revoke the instigation force. The question is "What are these forces?"

Undeniably, integrative motivation has always remained as one of the significant forces in sustaining L2 learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers, such as Dornyei & Csizer (1998), included "familiarize learners with the target language culture" as one of the ten commandments for motivating language learners. Foreign teaching materials, which include reading texts and audio materials, filled with target language cultural components are being extensively used in Japanese EFL classrooms since English was introduced into the Japanese school curriculum. However, have the Japanese students been motivated by the cultures of the target language society in these materials? It is true that using such materials are very likely to motivate learners who are attracted and interested to the target language society and culture. However, as language teachers, we must also be mindful of the possible pitfalls of using the foreign materials.

While students are already struggling in dealing with new vocabularies, complicated syntax which is very different from their first language, the presence of cultures of the target language society will only bring more burdens to their learning. Besides, the emphasis on native speakers and native culture in Japan might have caused the Japanese learners to set unrealistic learning goal (Lafaye & Tsuda, 2002), such as to be native-like, in which it is almost impossible to be achieved. The failure in achieving learning goal is an extremely strong interfering force which might eradicate the instigation force in L2 learning.

Furthermore, the excessive emphasis on native varieties of English might have caused the Japanese students to "devotedly" uphold the "nativeness principle" (Lewis, 2005, as cited in Kawakami & Kawakami, 2010) which resulted in lower tolerance in other non-native varieties of English (Kawakami & Kawakami, 2010), without taking into consideration that the nonnative speakers of English have overwhelmingly outnumbered the native speakers owing to the massive wave of globalization. As a result, Japanese students are disappointed with their nonnative-like variety of English and "refused to accept the fact that their variety of English is good enough for communication" (Honna, 1998). Such disappointment could be another strong deterrence to their L2 motivation.

Another factor which might have impaired L2 motivation is the exam-oriented approach, which is widely adopted in Japanese EFL classroom. As discussed earlier in this article, Japanese English learners are not motivated in learning English despite the fact that they are keen in making friends with people of other nationalities. Such contradicting findings seem illogical. However, taking a closer look at the actual teaching and learning activities in the Japanese EFL classroom, the cause of the contradiction is actually rather obvious. While the main source of motivation in L2 learning among the Japanese students seems to be communicating with English speakers of other nationalities, they are not taught the skills required to communicate with other nationalities in the formal setting. In the conventional Japanese ESL classroom, lessons are designed to train students to pass university entrance examination. Students spend most of the time picking up new vocabulary and learning grammatical rules during English lesson. (Norris-Holt, 2001; Ikegashira et al, 2009). There is limited or no emphasis on verbal communication.

Suggestions for Teachers

The introduction of the new course of study by MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) in 2013, which emphasized on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), has demanded for a major shift in pedagogical approach in Japanese English Education. Considering the abovementioned factors of demotivation among Japanese students of English, English teachers should adopt appropriate motivating strategies in line with TBTL to foster L2 motivation among students.

Firstly, English teachers should consider using local materials which are teemed with Japanese culture to lessen the learning burdens of students. In reading for instance, the presence of learners' cultures and identities in the reading texts might activate learners' prior knowledge and help learners to build schemata which make learning more meaningful to learners (Ahmad Al-Issa, 2006). This doesn't mean English teachers should totally eradicate materials teemed with American or British cultures. Materials with the cultures of target language society can still be gradually used in the Japanese ESL classroom when students have achieved a suitable level of proficient to deal with it or to appreciate it.

Besides, audio materials should not be only of the native-variety of English. Audio materials from other English-using countries, such as Singapore, the Philippines, India and Malaysia, can also be used to expose Japanese students to the nonnative variety of English. This helps to open up learners' mind to accept the fact that they do not need to be native like in order to communicate effectively in English.

Finally, a shift of teaching strategies in line with TBLT is vital in promoting communicative competence among learners. Lessons should be objective driven. Learning

objectives should be centered around the acquisition of language and skills which allow Japanese students to practically use what they have learned in English lessons to negotiate meaning and express thought in English. More learner-centered activities can be introduced to make lessons more interesting and meaningful to the students. The teaching of all four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing skills should be integrated in teaching and learning activities in English lessons.

Reference

- Ahmad Al-Issa. (2006). Schema theory and L2 reading comprehension: implications for teaching. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 3(7), 41-48.
- Benson, M.J. (1991). Attitudes and motivation towards English: A survey of Japanese Freshman. *RELC Journal*, 22, 34-48.
- Dornyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 31(3), 117-135.
- Dornyei, Z. & Csizer, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, 2(3), 203-229.
- Gardner, R. C. & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Gardner, R. C. (1982). Language attitudes and language learning. In E. B. Ryan & H. Giles (Eds.), *Attitudes towards Language Variation: Social and Applied Contexts*. (pp.132-147). London: Edward Arnold.
- Honna, N. & Yuko, T. (1998). On Japan's propensity for native speaker English: A change in sight. *Asian Englishes*, 1(1), 117-137.
- Ikegashira, A., Matsumoto, Y., & Morita, Y. (2009). English education in Japan – from kindergarten to university. In Reinelt, R. (Ed.), *Into the Next Decade with (2nd) FL Teaching*. (pp.16-40). Matsuyama: Rudolf Reinelt Research Laboratory.
- Lafaye, B. E. & Tsuda, S. (2002). Attitudes towards English language learning in higher education in Japan, and the place of English in Japanese society. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 11(3), 145-161.
- Lee, R. A., Browne, K. C. & Kusumoto, Y. (2011). Measuring EFL learners' environment; English contact and use outside the classroom at a Japanese international university. *Polyglossia*, 20, 15-25.
- Matsuda, A. (2000). Japanese attitudes toward English: A case study of high school students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.
- Norris-Holt, J. (2001). Motivation as a contributing factor in second language acquisition. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 7(6). Retrieved October 10, 2014, from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Norris-Motivation.html>
- Pintrich, P. L. & Schunk, D. H. (1996). *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.