

# Japanese High School Students, Motivation, and Future Goals Behind English Learning

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This article discusses the approach to and subsequent findings of the author's dissertation research, which explored via a mixed methods approach the language learning motivation and obligation orientations of Japanese high school seniors learning English. By examining pertinent portions of the dissertation's research results and conclusions, the present article aims to show how Japanese high school students could possess a "string of goals" behind their motivation that incorporates not only proximal goals in response to their university entrance examinations but also distal learning goals that represent how students wish to use English in the future. Based on this selective examination of the dissertation's results and conclusions, suggestions are offered for improvements to our current concept of motivation that incorporate a future motivation orientation element. Also discussed are the implications of students' long-term goals on English instruction.

本論文では、日本の高校3年生の英語学習への動機と義務感を、量的研究と質的研究で考察した著者の博士論文のアプローチとその後の発見を述べる。結論の一つとして、大学受験生がどのように、最短距離に描いている目標や長期的な目標目標を含め「一連の目標」を設定していることが解明された。研究対象の高校生は大学に合格しなければならないという短期目標にのみに集中するよう強いられているので、全体的に道具的動機があるが一方、受験やさらに将来の大学学習の後を踏まえた他の長期的な目標も持っている。本論文は、研究に関連する情報を述べ、現在の動機概念に、将来を見据えた動機づけの要素を組み入れるよう提案し、また学生の長期的目標への提唱を論議している。

Over the last few decades, much has been researched and written on the subject of language learning motivation (LLM). The literature is also replete with analyses and critiques of the "examination hell" (*shiken jigoku* 試験地獄) brought on by the Japanese university entrance examinations (UEE). However, few researchers have approached the study of LLM by incorporating the effects of the UEE into motivational models. As the most popularly accepted model of LLM was developed in second language learning (SLL) rather than foreign language learning (FLL) contexts, why this would be so is not particularly puzzling. In SLL contexts, entrance examinations tend to be of little or no consequence. What remains a mystery is why those who teach populations that have entrance examinations (e.g., many East Asian countries, including Japan) have not attempted to account for the effects of UEE study on motivation. After all, it is not difficult to imagine that students might develop motivation to study for and pass examinations that are used to judge and manipulate (Anderson, 1975) and that have life-long consequences.

For my dissertation research, I gained access to Japanese high school seniors and sought to uncover (a) several motivation orientations that I thought to be subsumed under the LLM construct, as well as (b) the goals behind those orientations, all against the backdrop of (c) the students' impending UEE. Added to this, I also investigated (d) the cultural norms of the Japanese as collectivists and the possible alterations to students' goals that could arise from the advent and pressures of the UEE, that is, the possible move from a collectivistic to a more individualistic stance, as many students must compete – sometimes against friends and classmates – for the relatively few available university slots.

Although my dissertation research question was aimed more at providing some understanding of the goals spurring students' LLM in relation to their collectivistic or individualistic obligation orientations, the first major conclusion drawn from the dissertation research showed what most English language educators in Japan likely already realize: that however much the UEE can be considered a “rite of passage” (Shimahara, 1979) and almost an end in themselves, they are just stepping stones in the lives of students and that the English students learn for these examinations does not necessarily evaporate away upon their completion. It may certainly be true that student goals in high school center almost solely on passing the UEE, yet passing those examinations will possibly lead to students doing and studying what they want at university and beyond, all so that they may obtain the future non-UEE-related goals that they had previously set for themselves.

It is the aim of this paper to (a) briefly outline the dissertation research that was conducted, (b) present some of

its pertinent results and conclusions, and (c) examine these results and conclusions, all as a means of emphasizing the following points:

1. Japanese high school students do not lack an understanding or awareness that English can be studied and used after taking the UEE because they possess a “string of goals” consisting of both proximal and distal goals. As a result,
2. the current “snapshot” view of LLM needs to be improved. No matter how hard students study for the UEE, and regardless of the fact that passing the examinations is their only real goal (and hence, only remaining motivation) while in high school, Japanese high school students are able to see past the UEE to their future ambitions, some of which may definitely be related to English study and English usage.

In other words, the present article means to present only select portions of results and conclusions generated from the dissertation research and view them against the theme of students' future English use.

## The Dissertation Research

My dissertation research (Rubrecht, 2004) was conducted at a university preparatory high school (*shingakkō* 進学校) located in central Japan. This dissertation research, which was piloted at the school in December 2002 and was officially conducted between May and July 2003, involved two *kumi* (組), or classes, of Japanese high school seniors ( $n = 66$ ) and employed a mixed methods approach. The students completed a questionnaire in order to ascertain their

overall motivation and obligation orientations and to allow for the selection of six students of varied orientations from the two *kumi* for interview participation. These six students agreed to a series of three interviews each to further probe their orientations. Two of the students' native Japanese English teachers were also interviewed.

The focus of the dissertation was to examine the motivation and obligation orientations of these students because it was thought that the highly competitive nature of the UEE would have a direct bearing on (a) the goals of senior-year students, hence potentially altering their motivation orientations, and (b) their obligation orientations, for it was suspected that the need to study for and pass the UEE would result in students abandoning the collectivistic morals valued by Japanese society and instilled in youth from elementary school as they adopted more individualistic leanings in the cutthroat world of examination competition. The impetus behind conducting this dissertation research was (a) the insufficient amount of motivation research in English as a foreign language (EFL) locales, (b) an identified need to expand the currently popular yet extremely restrictive set of motivation orientations, and (c) the curious lack of research that takes cultural norms (i.e., collectivism vs. individualism) into consideration when viewing motivation.

This dissertation research was therefore broad in scope and tackled both new and underexplored areas. For instance, LLM has, in my opinion, been hindered more than helped by the oversimplification and misunderstanding of the dichotomy that was long ago advanced and delineated by Gardner and associates (Clément, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner & Smythe, 1975)

that involves classifying motivation orientations as either *integrative* or *instrumental* in nature, where the former involves a language learner striving to learn a language to become closer to or part of the target culture while the latter describes a learner's drive to learn a language to reap practical or pragmatic rewards such as an improved economic condition or social status. Although Gardner eventually consented to there being other reasons for studying a language and by extension other orientations (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993), his obvious preference for these two orientations, coupled with his ignoring other possible orientations in his model of LLM "does suggest a certain prioritisation" (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 520).

As I believe that integrative and instrumental motivation can only be used to explain some reasons behind language learning and not others, I included the orientation of *personal motivation* into the LLM model. Personal motivation differs from integrative and instrumental motivation in that it "is directed at some specific activity or topic, would be beneficial in a private, individual sense (i.e., not beneficial in a utilitarian sense, such as for an individual's job, for society, etc.), and would not be considered to arise from simple curiosity" (Rubrecht, 2004, p. 73). Adding this type of orientation was advocated by Benson (1991) in his study of Japanese university freshman because he found that students may find pleasure in reading English or in absorbing English entertainment like Western music or movies, and that students may be interested in and motivated to learn English to better grasp such English input. To learn English for entertainment or pleasure purposes as defined in this way likely has very little to do with attempts

to integrate into foreign cultures, nor with self-improvement for utilitarian reasons.

Other researchers (Cooper & Fishman, 1977; Dörnyei, 1990; Kang, 1999; Shaw, 1983) have also raised doubts about the prominence placed on the integrative motivation orientation in LLM models, such as in Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (A/MTB), especially when attempting to explain the motivation of EFL, not ESL (English as a second language), students. Even in the case of Japanese learners of English, a quarter of a century ago, Chihara and Oller (1978) found that Japanese EFL adult learners gave high ratings for personally-oriented reasons (as well as integrative ones) for their learning of English.

Behind these three orientations, I assumed there to be student goals, not least of which was the goal of passing the UEE (an obviously instrumentally-inspired motivation). However, according to Hofstede's (1980) major comparative study on different cultures conducted across dozens of nations, Japanese culture was determined to be overall more collectivistic than individualistic. However, all the past research that I have encountered on LLM has implicitly assumed study participants to be individualists. Those participants' collectivistic or individualistic views of the world based on either background culture or individual preference were never accounted for nor controlled, probably because most previous research on LLM was conducted in SLL contexts in the West where individualism rather than collectivism is the norm. Only recently have researchers (McGroarty, 1996; Noels, 2001) begun to point out the importance and relevance of the group experience in terms of educational settings and the deciding and acting upon

drives and motives, thereby validating the need to account for what I simply term *obligation orientation*.

To my Western mind, it seemed counterintuitive that Japanese high school students could simultaneously remain collectivistic yet be individualistic in their studies for UEE preparation. In response, I incorporated constructs into my dissertation research that took into consideration students' drives to care equally or more for others (one facet found in the Japanese morality structure) or more for themselves (in order to gain ability and outperform their academic rivals) during this critical educational phase. These constructs were necessary to add because, as Wentzel (2000) keenly concluded, goals – the driving force behind LLM – can emanate from an individual or from a larger situational context. Studying learner goals, therefore, cannot begin unless one also studies and accounts for the conventions and rules of the culture or context at hand, which in this case corresponded to UEE competition and Japanese collectivistic culture, respectively.

### Selective Results and Conclusions from the Dissertation Research

As the questionnaire administered in the dissertation research was principally employed as a means of interviewee selection, the main phalanx of dissertation results and conclusions came from the interviews with the students and teachers. The interview contents were grouped according to emergent themes, which were then placed into categories. Three categories each were developed from the teacher and student interviews, all of which were used to generate the dissertation's conclusions.

Of interest to the present article are the themes that build up the first two categories generated from the dissertation's teacher and student interviews, respectively. These themes revolve around the goals behind the students' English studies. For the sake of brevity, only the categories and relevant emergent themes that are pertinent to the discussion of the present article will be relayed here.

The teacher interview categories and themes of interest are:

Category I: Student motivation and goals

- Both teachers perceived all students, regardless of grade level, to have as the main goal behind their learning of English the passing of the university entrance examinations.
- With passing the examinations as the students' main goal, both teachers remarked that the students must have instrumental motivation and use English "like a tool."

Category II: English language usage

- Practice in oral communication in the English classes is almost entirely disregarded in favor of practice and preparation for the university entrance examinations.

Not surprisingly, the student interviews generated categories and themes not altogether dissimilar from those uncovered in the teacher interviews:

Category I: The goals of the students

- English language learning in high school is considered a foundation for the future, starting with the university entrance examinations.
- The students pursue few, if any, other goals besides that of university entrance.

- *Apart from university entrance examinations studies, there is no urgent need to learn the language for daily life in Japan.*

Category II: A shift in students' goal approaches

- *A shift to the single goal of university entrance*

In order to produce the dissertation's conclusions, all generated categories were carefully examined and assessed. Of relevance to the present article is the first of the dissertation's three main conclusions:

Conclusion 1: *Third-year Japanese high school students, regardless of their perceived motivation orientations, will be instrumentally motivated to complete their single short-term goal of learning English to pass the examinations, but will likely be so motivated in order to complete later, more personally important goals.*

It is precisely here where the foundations of long-term learning for these high school students begin. Conclusion 1 came about because, for these students:

1. English was not viewed as essential for completing tasks in daily life in Japan, such as for shopping, understanding street signs, etc.,
2. their senior year English studies were grammar-based, not conversation-based,
3. almost all their classes were preparing them in a short-term manner for the UEE, and
4. it was stated by the students that while high school seniors, pursuit of multiple goals was an impossibility.

Upon inspection of the students' interview responses

concerning goal pursuit, the impact of this conclusion becomes clear. In one way or another, all six student interviewees mentioned that studying for the UEE was all they could manage to do while seniors, that giving up practice of communicative English was preferable if it meant advancing to university, and/or that the importance of the UEE overshadowed (and in some cases completely subdued) their pursuit of other goals. In short, if a goal happened to not coincide with the “direction” of UEE preparation, it was either forever abandoned or temporarily laid aside, possibly to be taken up again at a later date.

The idea of laying aside a goal and taking it up again in the future is what concerns the present article most. In their respective interviews, both English teachers stated that for high school students, studying for the UEE was a short-term goal and that later they would either resume their previously-held goals or develop new goals, which would likely happen upon their entering university. One teacher who participated in the dissertation research, Mr. Mizuno (a pseudonym), stated that, “in a manner of speaking, getting to university is a short-term goal. Going to university. Of course, afterwards, they might say they want to be a doctor, or a lawyer. I think the students have such goals, but at this level those goals often change, so right now, their goal is pretty much to get to university.”

The other teacher interviewed, Mr. Hamamatsu (also a pseudonym), echoed Mr. Mizuno’s sentiments when he said that, “in the short-term, it’s the scores on the university entrance examinations [that are most important for these students]. But in the long-term, once they get out into society, they will be the ones to have the objective of being

able to speak English, to come to be able to use English... So to be able to evaluate that, you would have to wait for a long time to pass.”

These quotes make sense when viewed against the distal (or at least, at the time, currently untenable) goals of the six student interviewees. For example, one student wished to become a disc jockey in Japan, an occupation that apparently requires knowledge and use of English. Another student wanted to become an exchange student and study abroad, something she thought could only be achieved after entering university. These students would have to wait to study the aspects of English most relevant to their own dreams and desires and would have to wait before they could fulfill what, at the time, were their long-term goals for learning English.

From these and other interviewee comments, the notion that students likely possessed a “string of goals” emerged. This notion developed because from the dissertation’s questionnaire and interview responses, the students in the two *kumi* appeared to possess a strong *short-term* instrumental motivation orientation that spurred them to pass the UEE, even if they had other future goals (i.e., other motivation orientations) that were still identifiable by the participants and in many cases were the source of the students’ *long-term* motivation orientations (integrative, personal, and even instrumental motivation).

Thus, at the time of the dissertation research, the students involved were “farsighted enough to understand the importance of the examinations and that passing the examinations will allow them to enter university and to pursue their future dreams, whatever they may be, but they also realize the importance of first entering university”

(Rubrecht, 2004, p. 328) if they ever hoped to have their long-term goals fulfilled, hence evincing that their proximal goals came first before all else while their distal goals were not in fact totally discarded. Indeed, it appeared that the distal goals of these students could have even channeled their effort and energy to allow them to pass the UEE, a necessary first step to distal goal attainment.

In a way, the proximal goal of passing the UEE acted as a subgoal – an indispensable foundational measure – that had to be fulfilled before the more personally relevant and important distal goals could even be approached. That distal goals serve a directive function while subgoals (i.e., proximal goals) determine activity choice and effort expenditure has been discussed elsewhere (see Bandura, 1988). It is not surprising that some students I interviewed even admitted to not being motivated to study English per se but were motivated to pass the UEE, meaning they were at least motivated to fulfill their more immediate and pressing goals in their pursuit of future ones.

### Implications for Motivation, Language Teaching, and Lifelong Learning

This article presented information and results taken directly from my doctoral dissertation. Because the dissertation research results discussed here revealed that students' LLM was linked to both their proximal and distal goals (namely, passing the UEE and then their future aspirations, respectively), the current method of LLM orientation classification was found insufficient to simultaneously capture the broader temporal perspective of the students' "string of goals" for English usage and for their lives in

general. "The static motivation orientation categories currently popular with researchers and practitioners fail to disambiguate language learning motivation inspired by current language learning concerns from those further in the learners' futures" (Rubrecht, 2004, p. 358).

As it stands now, the use of *integrative*, *instrumental*, or even *personal* motivation orientation classifications presents only a "snapshot" view of LLM and describes a learner's motivation – at base, their goals – at only a single point in time and for a single purpose. Many of the students who participated in the dissertation research had desires for future English use, some of which were not fully compatible with the apparent instrumental motivation orientation that would see them through the UEE. To account for this, I suggest that a more accurate description of motivation orientations be developed and utilized. Drawing partly upon the notion of future time perspective, or FTP (see Nuttin, 1985), it would be more precise to describe language learners' motivation orientations by utilizing a temporal description of the aims behind a language learner's mental representations for their possible future behavior to describe both their present and future goals.

I suggest a present/future depiction of motivation orientation, such as *instrumental/integrative*, where the former orientation describes the motivation behind a learner's proximal goals and the latter behind his or her distal goals. Such a description would make possible a depiction of "how motivation can change (or at least be realized) by the learners at various points in their educational and language learning experiences" (Rubrecht, 2004, p. 358). Naturally, such a modification in motivation orientation classification calls for a reexamination of LLM

assessment tools (the A/MTB, the questionnaires employed in my dissertation research, etc.) as well as an altering of our current perception of what it means to possess motivation to learn another language.

The results and conclusions of the dissertation research detailed in the present article should be considered deeply by English language instructors in Japan and elsewhere, especially high school instructors of English, even with the tremendous amount of washback from the UEE (Anderson, 1975; Beauchamp, 1998; Duke, 1986; Kay, 1995; Leonard, 1998; Shimahara, 1979) that influences student goals and pedagogical practices. All too often the English language instruction high school students receive becomes relevant only as far as university admission is concerned. Previously possessed or developing motivation orientations that are ultimately deemed incongruent with university admission are not fostered by instructional practices, nor do English instructors actively encourage them. That single goal of university entrance mentioned by the interviewees who participated in my dissertation research had suppressed other goals and hence other motivation orientations.

It therefore becomes imperative that more attention be placed on the varied goals and motivations of students studying in high school foreign language classrooms, that is, educators should teach to the end of proximal goal fulfillment yet must also recognize, categorize, encourage, and teach with students' future English language usage representations (i.e., their "string of goals") in mind. These future goals can provide direction and reason for students to fulfill their current goals. Should such future goals or aspirations be undetectable or found to be nonexistent, they

should be actively sought out or developed to provide added reinforcement to proximal goal fulfillment.

What can high school and even *juku* English instructors do in the face of students' overwhelming yet potentially fleeting instrumental motivation directed at passing the UEE? They should be aware that other motivation orientations may be masked, buried, or abandoned yet can still positively influence and direct students' studies if they are detected, protected, fostered, and maintained. The other motivation orientations can still be advantageous to students precisely because of the "string of goals" identified in my dissertation research. While the cultural and social significance of the UEE for the Japanese should not be ignored, neither should the examinations be allowed to wholly dictate the present and future motivation orientations of the students.

It is obvious that English teachers from the junior high school to the university level should employ every means available to encourage and sustain student learning. The students' learning situation can only be benefited if students can draw on a variety of motivation orientations across a present/future goal continuum so that they may (a) fulfill all goals, and (b) better grasp how the fulfillment of their proximal goals will lead to the fulfillment of their distal goals.

Johnson (1996), who conducted a study with Japanese university freshmen studying English, relates that students' learning orientations can be varied before and after university matriculation and advised that English language teachers should "be aware of the various reasons their students feel English may be important for them, and incorporate into their lessons material that would satisfy students with different orientations" (p. 56). I certainly



agree with his position. As most Japanese high school graduates will continually be exposed to or be expected to use English in the future, students should not be allowed to “resign themselves to view[ing] the examinations as their final interaction with English” (Rubrecht, 2004, p. 355). The learning of English for Japanese high school students does not begin nor end with entrance examinations to university. Everyone must realize that there is no time like the present to start students working toward fulfilling their future goals.

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