Culture and affect in vaulting the rubicon: Stories of highly proficient English language learners

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This interview study investigated highly proficient EFL students in Japan who had successfully acquired a high level of proficiency in English. The minimally structured interviews looked at three areas: cultural influences and perceptions, affective variables, and oral narratives. For the nine informants, small culture (Holliday, 1999) elements such as peer groups and support systems were repeatedly mentioned. Motivation and international posture were prominent, and anxiety was, as expected, a very minor player. Furthermore, the interaction of culture and affect was evident as highly motivated learners took advantage of and sought myriad opportunities to use English, which resulted in a number of epiphanies.

このインタビュー的な研究は日本人で英語が堪能なEFL学生が英語を習得する際に如何に有効に習得をはかっているのかを検証するものである。必要最小限に計画されたインタビューは三つの領域に及んでいる: (1)文化的な影響、(2)知覚・感情的な変数、(3)話述。九人のインタビューを受けた学生に関しては、小文化(Holliday, 1999)の要素として、例えばピア(仲間)グループやサポート・システム(応援システム)が繰り返して言及されていた。動機や国際的な姿勢は非常に際立っているものの、予想したとおり、不安は重要な要素ではないことが判明した。さらに、文化と感情の相互作用が明らかとなるのは、動機づけを十分に持っている学習者が英語を使う機会を大いに活用する時であり、その場合には、直観的なひらめきも観察されることがある。

This project was an interview study of highly proficient learners of English. The underlying fabric of this project was the oral narratives of these learners—their stories of how they came to be good at English. Drawn from that fabric was the intersection of culture—in whatever fashion students perceived it—and such affective variables as motivation, anxiety, and willingness-to-communicate (WTC). Ultimately, my hope was to further illuminate how successful learners perceived their journey to such high levels of English proficiency.

Among the affective variables influencing second and foreign language acquisition is international posture, which addresses the situation among EFL learners who have minimal regular contact with native speakers of English. In spite of the paucity of daily contact, attitudes emerge toward the English inner circle, "surely created through education and exposure to media" (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004, p. 124). In a similar way, proficiency can also emerge. Although the literature is rich in quantitative support for these affective variables, qualitative support has been minimal, leading Yashima (2002) to call for further qualitative study of the nature of the relationships among such affective variables as international posture, motivation, anxiety, and WTC. Following that admonition, the present study investigates these through informant narratives.

An important purpose was to examine the narrative itself, in addition to learning about the participant's perception of learning English, affective variables, discourse communities, and identity. In narrative, the storyteller offers a version of events to make meaning of his or her life, what Polkinghorne (1988) referred to as *emplotment*, by which "the narrative form constitutes human reality into wholes, manifests human values, and bestows meaning on life" (p. 159). Furthermore, the audience will also interpret the once-emplotted narrative. Newkirk (1992) maintained that in doing so we draw on a finite set of cultural beliefs, repeatedly used to reenact and order events into acceptable, meaningful narratives. Moreover, the narratives so reconstructed may derive their *truth* from the audience "seeing cultural myths being reenacted" (p. 136). The extent to which participants did so was another important question in this project.

Culture

Under the patina of classroom methodologies and linguistic components dwell cultural aspects: as the title of Kanno's (2003) book suggests, expatriate students can be caught "betwixt two worlds," in the blurred space in which cultural identities are formed (Rosaldo, 1993). That zone of interaction is often turbulent as different cultures come into contact, react, negotiate, and otherwise seek a position of equilibrium (Pratt, 1991). For university students in Japan, cultural elements are an important part of English education (e.g., whether a teacher is a native or a non-native speaker of English; Elwood, 2005). Bell (1995) traced the differing expectations of learner and teacher from different cultures, and difficulties may appear with the introduction of communicative teaching into curricula with different cultural norms and expectations (Li, 1998). Such studies point toward the pivotal role of culture in second and foreign language contexts.

Affective variables

Among the various affective variables that influence second language acquisition, research has focused on low achievers or those troubled by such factors. For example, in the realm of anxiety, Price's (1991) qualitative study dealt with highly anxious learners, and Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) article that introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Survey emerged in the context of learners experiencing high (even debilitating) levels of anxiety. For other affective variables, too, research has tended to address problematic areas (e.g., Dörnyei, 1994, concerning motivation). To partially address this unbalance, the present

study looks at highly proficient learners, for whom anxiety, motivation, and their cohorts may have played different roles than they did for less proficient learners.

Method

Participants

The participants included nine students at a large, public university in the Kanto area of Japan. Six were from the International Studies Department and the remaining three were from other departments. All are very proficient in English. Having chosen international studies as their major, these six were obviously interested in language and culture, and as do many of the students in this department, several had had extensive experience overseas, whether traveling, doing home stays, or residing abroad. Of the three remaining participants, only one had spent extensive time abroad, yet all three indicated strong interest in international affairs.

Such experience abroad is certainly one, and perhaps even the most, important reason for achieving a high level of proficiency, but it is not an absolute necessity: In spite of lacking such overseas experience, three of the participants had become quite proficient, suggesting that the overall picture is quite complex.

Table 1. Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Major	Residence Abroad (Age)	Travel
Toko	20	female	International Relations	9.5 years (0.5-10), Georgia, US	3-4 weeks
Atsuko	19	female	International Relations	5 years (6-11), Ohio, US	
Yuri	20	female	International Relations	None	4 weeks
Mari	20	female	International Relations	Born in Germany (0-0.5) 1 year (16), Michigan, US	2.5 weeks
Nanae	21	female	International Relations	1 year (17), Idaho; 1 month, Colorado, US	
Chise	19	female	International Relations	6.5 years (6-13), Detroit, Kentucky, US	
Akira	21	male	Material Science	6 years (12-18), San Diego, California, US	5 weeks
Satoshi	21	male	Disability Studies	None	2 weeks
Shota	21	male	Engineering	None	6 weeks

Note. Participants were given the choice of using their real names or pseudonyms; three chose to use their own names, two wanted names similar yet slightly different, and the remaining four wished to remain anonymous. As such, the names in this study represent a mix.

Interview preparation

After having volunteered for this project, each participant met with the researcher to receive a more detailed explanation of the project and provide written consent to participate. Anonymity and opting out of the study were options, and participants were asked to provide feedback and make themselves available for additional interviews as necessary. In addition, each received a small cash honorarium.

At the consultation, the interview format was carefully explained so participants would not be expecting a question-and-answer session in which each query is "a stimulus provoking a … response" (Mishler, cited in Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 177). The hope was that informants, given the freedom to speak at length, would do so, thus supporting Mishler's (1986) assertion regarding narrative study that "soliciting stories from respondents is not a problem" (p. 42). Interviews were conducted in a small office with the researcher and the participant seated facing each other across the corner of a desk, on which a small MD recorder was in plain sight. All interviews were conducted in late afternoons after classes had finished to allow time to talk at length.

Interviews

The interview began with a quick perusal of the participant's demographic questionnaire. Information included age, gender, major, and school year**,** in addition to English experience both in Japan and abroad.

Following Ushioda (2001), the interview was minimally structured with participants asked to simply talk about experiences leading to their high levels of English proficiency. This unstructured style was important so that the participants would "not be initially primed with … concepts and ideas" (Ushioda, 2001, p. 98). As Ushioda then notes, this carries the risk of variable quality, but in the interest of hearing students' own voices, it is necessary. Narratives may not be clean or neatly organized, but such is the nature of life as both lived and storied: "Perhaps our lives resemble novels, but bad ones, cluttered and undisciplined ones" (Carr, 1985, p. 115).

A point to consider is that the students' narratives were constructed conversationally in conjunction with the researcher. The students had by far the larger share of the conversation, but I did interact and question as seemed prudent (for example, the exchange with Toko below). Moreover, most students included affect variables such as motivation and anxiety, but I did inquire in the two cases in which those were not overtly mentioned.

With this group the interview was done in English; their proficiency was certainly sufficient to do so, and our teacher-student relationship had been completely in English (meaning that instead of beginning to develop a new linguistic teacher-student relationship, a laissez faire policy likely facilitated successful elicitation of data).

A caveat is in order about the data in this study. The primary source were the interviews in which the students' narratives were orally presented to me, but a secondary source preceded that: I knew eight of the nine participants reasonably well, so past knowledge should be acknowledged as a source. One cannot know the extent or influence of this source, but it certainly played a role, if for no other reason

than that these eight represented some of my most able (and undeniably favorite) students.

Results[1]

The various factors that emerged in the course of the interviews correspond well with factors posited and investigated in the past. I did expect certain factors to emerge (e.g., motivation and small culture elements), but I tried to minimize my preconceptions and allow factors to simply emerge from the narratives.

Cultural aspects

1. Culture, large and small

In Holliday's (1999) work, small culture plays an important role in second language acquisition. Small culture includes multiple groups in varying proximity to learners, and a prominent group in these narratives was parents. Four participants had lived overseas from when quite young, which was a parental choice. In addition, parents were naturally involved during the participants' educational journeys in a large number of choices, some of which met with mixed reactions.

Although aware that her parents had provided her the opportunity to live abroad, Chise criticized her parents rather sharply for failing to provide her with some information that might have further enhanced her experience abroad.

> One thing I wanted to mention was the good things [my parents] thought they had done for me, and the bad things. … One thing I realized was if you're there for five years you can get citizenship. And I didn't know that. I mean, how would I know that—I'm like a kid … and they wouldn't tell me probably … OK, they must have thought they shouldn't tell me but because I would have wanted it … and I really blame them for it because things might have changed.

A more restrained response expressing both muted criticism and appreciation came from Atsuko, whose parents never informed her that they once had the option of relocating from the US to Britain: "Yeah, I wish they had let me know they had a chance to go [to Britain]. My parents gave me a great experience…it gave me a really big chance to know America and to learn English." Finally, deference to parents is a common theme among my Japanese students, and about the financial burden on her parents, Yuri commented, "Yeah, [conversation school] was very interesting and fun, but yeah, I think my parents paid for this money. I'm very sorry for that." Such comments point to the important roles—either positive or negative—played by parents in these learners' narratives.

2. Cultural views of education

As expected, narratives included examples of differences in education between the two countries. Chise's succinct comments show little patience with the conformity that often plays a major role in Japanese schools:

> Yeah, but me adjusting to the Japanese school wasn't that hard friends-wise but um the school rule-wise—it was hard for me to understand why I had to follow all these rules. Yes, it was very much

> [a shock wearing a Japanese school uniform]. They're strict and they waste their energy on such trivial things, really ridiculous."

Atsuko, perhaps as a result of having begun at a younger age, reflected on happy memories and the freedom of her experience in Ohio:

> Thinking about American schools, it was really fun and um whenever some had a birthday there was always a cookie or a muffin or something like that. That was really fun, and I liked art activities, kind of different to Japan. In America we used to use, well, we used paint and we used clay and this kind of stuff—we do that in Japan, too—but, um, we used kind of scraps of like cloth and beads and stuff and all kinds of stuff and we made, well, the teacher let us make whatever we wanted and that was really fun.

Pointing to how individual differences certainly play important roles, Mari noted her dislike of the emphasis on oral presentations and teamwork ("I hated the teamwork!") in her year of American high school. Being quite shy at that point, she found it rather difficult and disliked it very much. Moreover, a common thread running throughout these narratives was that US students were more talkative and forthcoming with opinions.

3. Readjustment difficulties

For several, the return to Japan was difficult. Chise's comments above show her displeasure with her educational environment in Japan. In addition to the institution itself, *group culture* plays a large role as young people strive to find a place. In Toko's words,

> When I ended the fourth grade in America I came back in June (or was it in July?), so it was totally in the middle of the school year, and three months had already passed and Japanese students…had already made groups. Well, when I was in America I wasn't that scared, but I don't… [when I got back to Japan] I suddenly got scared of talking to friends around. [In the company housing in Japan where we lived] there were a lot of students that had come back from foreign countries … and two or three that had been abroad, they talked to me and explained the situation.

4. Views of Japanese education

The students indicated rather mixed views of English education in Japan, but among the positive points raised was the value of ingesting large amounts of information, which Satoshi found to be "useful." Atsuko noted one positive aspect of the much-maligned rote learning:

> It was vocabulary tests every week and I didn't really like that, but thinking afterwards I thought kind of … it forced me to learn some vocabularies and actually I am using those vocabularies in university so you know … looking back, maybe it was good for me.

On the other hand, several noted that Japanese education was poorly prepared to address the needs of returnees, with Toko recalling how her high school English teacher, apparently uncomfortable with her native-like pronunciation, "would not point to me to pronounce words." In addition,

Toko noted, junior high English "was kind of boring and I remember myself kind of sleeping in those classes." Mari commented that the basic mismatch of learning much information versus actually using it to communicate did not serve her well in high school; this desire to "learn to speak well" was the most important reason in her decision to go abroad. These shortcomings highlight institutional and curricular failings for at least some of the returnees.

5. Usefulness of extracurricular schools

Reviews of the extra schools in Japan (*yobiko*, *juku*, and *eikaiwa gakko*) were also mixed. These schools are widely viewed as necessary to supplement the regular education for already harried students, yet attendance is far from universal (Elwood, 2005) and is dependent on socio-economic level. Yuri noted how, "when I talked to my parents for the first time [about attending a conversation school] they refused because it cost so much," and Mari commented that, "they gave us a lots of materials, lots of *expensive* materials" (emphasis in the original). Interestingly, in this group there was little correlation between attendance in such schools and the high degree of proficiency.

Affective factors

1. Anxiety

Anxiety played a very minor role for these highly proficient students. In particular, the two that lived overseas when quite small expressed little anxiety about English. Toko, with 9.5 years abroad, noted,

> I wasn't afraid of making mistakes. Everyone would be kind to teach me because they know I can't, I'm not a native so they would yeah, they were trying to teach me a lot of things, not only language but the culture, the differences and so it was very comfortable.

Interestingly, her return to Japan at age 10 was not as smooth as she became self-conscious about talking (noted above).

Of those with shorter tenures abroad, several stated that anxiety played only a minor role. Nanae, with just one year abroad, observed she felt "not nervous but kind of frustrated because I can't say the things I want to say."

2. Identity

In Kanno's (2003) study, all four participants indicated some degree of difficulty in finding a suitable identity after extensive experience abroad. In the present study, however, identity didn't appear to play as important a role. The following exchange indicates the longest-tenured participant, Toko, generally didn't perceive problems with identity:

> Toko: I can look at things in the Japanese way and the American way and I can balance it.
>
> Author: Are these two parts happy?
>
> Toko: Um, I sometimes…yeah, I struggle, but mainly I'm fine with that kind of situation.

In addition, and not unexpectedly, the length of time abroad correlated with identity emerging as part of the narrative. Both Atsuko (five years abroad) and Toko (9.5 years in the US) expressed awareness of differences in identity, but neither seemed troubled with that situation. Indeed, Toko laughingly expressed her feelings regarding identity in the following exchange:

> Author: Would you go back and live abroad again?
>
> Toko: Yes, actually I went back last March [after an eight-year interval], yes, it was like I'm going back to my hometown.
>
> Author: Do I hear that you're part Japanese and part American? Or are you all Japanese? Or what are you?
>
> Toko: Uh, well, actually when I just came back I was totally American. I didn't want to come back and I didn't like Japanese culture, I didn't like the Japanese schools and I really wanted to go back [to the US]. Once I got used to Japanese systems yeah, I got comfortable in it and so I think I'm half-and-half.

3. Motivation

This was a very important area for the participants. Throughout the narratives were anecdotes about not only wanting to do something related to English, but actually doing so. Even the longer-tenured participants, whose experiences were related to family relocation rather then any personal decision, recounted how the drive to make friends was crucially important.

Of those with limited experience abroad, conscious decisions were paramount. Yuri, for example, decided to participate in activities of the local chapter of the United Nations Center of Regional Development; this supplemented the limited English available in her public high school. Moreover, she decided to attend conversation school and then had to persuade her parents to foot the bill. In an example of perhaps the strongest motivation possible, Shota offered this: "Yeah, I got interested in English because I really wanted to meet this wonderful girl that spoke English!"

Mari, with one year abroad, talked about her early interest in English: "One of the important thing was I was so into movies. I really liked Hollywood movies." Secondary education, however, did not serve her needs as well, as she came to understand: "After I entered high school [I realized] … maybe I'm doing the wrong stuff. So that is why I decided to go to America, abroad. I just wanted to learn how to speak."

4. International posture

This very useful element appeared repeatedly in the narratives. This was not unexpected as six participants were members of the International Relations Department, so their interests were obviously in things international. Atsuko, for example, actively sought out foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) in her high school to practice her English. Both Toko and Akira expressed the desire to return to the US to live, while one goal for Mari and Nanae was to keep in touch with their respective host families. For two with no experience living abroad prior to this study, the situation has changed: Yuri is currently studying at UCLA, and Satoshi is now volunteering in Toronto at a facility for disabled people. Overall, this group exhibited very pronounced international posture.

5. Support systems

Groups are, of course, composed of members. Another factor, which emerged, was norms, the extent to which

important people support the L2 learner (e.g., Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003). Likely candidates of important people were family, classmates, and favorite teachers, and in Nanae's case,

> I didn't study much when I was a junior high school student, but two of [the ALTs] encouraged me to go to apply for the homestay program and then I started studying English and then I went to the US for about one month. I realized that the world is big!

6. Clubs and circles

The six that had lived abroad repeatedly noted the central role played by extracurricular activities, similar to the ubiquitous clubs and circles in Japanese schools. Mari, for example, participated in orchestra and art during her year in Michigan, and her knowledge of Japanese *anime* made her an authority in the art club. For Nanae both swimming and choir were avenues to making many friends, even though the early morning indoor swimming practices (in Idaho, a rather chilly place in winter!) were difficult. Akira, a long-time violinist, was in the orchestra throughout his years in school in San Diego, and he noted the numerous friends from that experience.

7. Epiphany

An unexpected theme that emerged was how a singular moment, an *epiphany*, could spur sharply increased and seemingly permanent interest in language. For example, Mari, a talkative, friendly young lady who claimed to have been very shy during her year in Michigan (indeed, some American friends characterized her as "Poor, shy Mari, shy Japanese Mari"), came out of her shell after the following:

> When I arrived at Narita Airport…I met my parents, of course, and the Japanese came out … I feel like, oh my gosh, I can make myself fully understood …that relief, I just felt so great. So I think I figured out, oh my gosh, talking is fun!"

Interaction of cultural and affective factors

1. Personality

Personality certainly plays a large role in communication (e.g., Brown, 1980). The informants were all personable young people that obviously enjoyed using English. Furthermore, they showed a large degree of flexibility and tolerance: mistakes were of no consequence during the interview, and no one indicated any anxiety about being recorded and becoming a participant in this project (of course, all had volunteered, so this was not unexpected).

2. Importance of support systems in both cultures

Adequate support systems facilitate L2 acquisition, and such support was obvious throughout the narratives. Furthermore, this support was evident both in Japan and in the US, especially in the form of peer groups such as after-school clubs and circles. Family and in particular parents also were sources of support, but the students found peers to be much more important.

3. Epiphany important

This bears repeating as a cross-product of culture and affect, inasmuch as a receptive mind coupled with the availability of cultural experiences produced those *eureka* moments.

Had either element been lacking, the moment might not have happened, but that those moments did happen is a result of that interplay.

4. Availability of C2 cultural experience

Even for those without extensive experience abroad, one factor that certainly played a role in the participants' L2 development was access to different activities (akin to the *large culture* scheme). Given the fertile ground of interest and motivation, availability of C2 was crucial in these informants' respective paths to English proficiency. In Yuri's case, for example, the relative lack of English in her secondary education simply meant she sought and found English elsewhere, specifically in UN-related activities and conversation schools that were available. For those who spent several years abroad, the immersion in L2 and C2 provided myriad opportunities, from Halloween to birthday celebrations to immersion in English-language schools.

5. Realistic self-assessment

For all these informants, their self-assessment of their own English proficiency seemed to be accurate, which may be a juxtaposition of cultural factors. A very common aspect of the Japanese language and culture is the tendency to minimize one's own ability or accomplishments, yet these nine assented that their English was good. Of course, as the informants were using English and thus English personae, such responses were not entirely unexpected. As Pintrich (2003) and Bandura (1997) noted, accurate self-assessment allows appropriate strategy use, motivation, and so forth, so its correlation with high levels of proficiency is a logical finding.

Narrative factor: Reenactment of cultural narratives

Nearly lacking in this set of narratives, reenactment of cultural narratives might emerge in longer narratives. Nonetheless, faint traces did emerge, as in the notion of surviving or overcoming adversity. Just one person mentioned *survival*, but there was an undercurrent of overcoming adversity in several spots. The most obvious was Nanae's laughing account of first entrusting her destination to the exchange program company and then being trundled off to a second homestay family when the company mistakenly sent her to the wrong place and family. For her, however, this was nothing more than an extra stop, just another opportunity, during her year in the US—in other words, she survived and indeed flourished.

Conclusion

This project provided an opportunity to discover more about a group (highly proficient EFL students) that has received little attention in EFL in Japan. In the oral narratives of the nine informants, cultural influences and specifically such small culture elements as peer groups and support systems were repeatedly mentioned. Among the pantheon of affective variables, motivation and international posture were prominent, and anxiety was, as expected, a minor player. Furthermore, the interaction of culture and affect was evident as highly motivated learners took advantage and sought myriad opportunities to use English, which resulted in a number of epiphanies.

In spite of lamentations to the contrary, there are success stories among EFL students here in Japan, and their stories

deserve to be told, too. Among the narratives of these nine informants are the experiences, both positive and negative, that marked their journeys to high levels of English proficiency. In both the ESL and EFL spheres, an inordinate amount of effort has been spent addressing perceived shortcomings, but the distribution of learners has two tails. Moreover, the stories that emerge from the students' own voices will hopefully buttress and expand the areas explored with quantitative measures, thus heeding Yashima's prescient call.

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(Endnotes)

[1] Quoted speech is, for the most part, retained as originally spoken and thus includes some grammatical mistakes, hesitations, and so forth. In only two cases was grammar edited slightly to make the participant's meaning clear; in these cases the change is indicated in brackets.