

“They Were Women and I Had a Cool Image About Them”: Female Role Models and Female English Language Majors

Avril Haye-Matsui
Aichi Prefectural University

Based on a qualitative research project on the influence of gender in Japanese female students' English language development, this paper examines the roles that women have played in developing the English language ability of first-year female English language majors at a university in central Japan. Analyses of students' language learning histories revealed that the people who had the largest influence on participants' decisions to study English at the university level were primarily female. Female learners also tended to have mostly female role models. This paper explores how female agency serves to first provide opportunities for female English language development, and then how female involvement in the research participants' lives has motivated and encouraged their continued language development.

本論は、日本の女子学生が英語力を発達させる過程において、女性がどのような影響を及ぼしているかに関する質的研究プロジェクトである。中部地方の大学で英語を専攻する1年生の女子学生たちを調査する。これまでの英語学習歴を分析することにより、大学で英語を専攻する彼女たちに最も影響を及ぼした人物、および、ロールモデルとなった人物は、主として女性であるということが明らかとなった。本論では、女子学生がその英語能力を発達させるにあたり、いかに女性が重要な役割を果たしてきたかを考察する。

This study examines English language learning and the ways in which women act as language role models for female students. In particular, it examines the ways in which Japanese women have motivated, mentored, and supported female university students to arrive at their decision to major in English. Research has shown that young people are more likely to relate to same-gender role models (Bandura, 1997) and that, in the area of education, female role models have a big effect on young women's lives and career trajectories (Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012; Zirkel, 2002). This study investigated whether or not female role models have such an effect on Japanese female students' English language learning and, if so, how this influence is manifested.

The Popularity of English Among Female Students

English has been a compulsory subject for all students in secondary schools in Japan since the end of World War II. It is an important subject because of its role in entrance exams. However, once students enter university, there is a gender divide concerning the types of subjects studied. Male students tend to focus on career-oriented subjects that will enable them to gain high-status positions in reputable companies. Female students, on the other hand, tend to choose subjects in the humanities and foreign languages that will enhance their social capital and their chances to marry into a well-off family (Nagatomo, 2012). English seems to be one of the most popular majors for women in two- and four-year colleges (Nagatomo, 2016), and there are several explanations as to why this is so. English has been considered an appropriate area of study, not only because of the social capital it provides, but also because it is believed to open career doors for women and is a means for them to obtain supplementary income if they decide to become housewives (e.g. Kobayashi, 2007; Nagatomo, 2012). Furthermore, female students are often attracted to English because of *akogare*, which is an unattainable longing or desire for all things Western, including romantic liaisons with idealized white males (Kelsky, 2001). There is also a belief that a Western lifestyle offers social mobility, greater career prospects, and an opportunity to create an alternative identity (Takahashi, 2013).

One area that has not been explored when considering the motivations of female English language learners in Japan is the influence of female role models. Female role models in this study refers to the women that students have formed personal or professional relationships with. This study considers this gap and investigates the following question: What impact do female role models have on the language development of Japanese female university English majors?

Methodology

Participants for this study were nine female first-year students from the Department of British and American Studies at a private university in central Japan. They were highly motivated students, enrolled in two required communication classes which met three times a week. Students were accustomed to expressing opinions and focusing on social issues in English because of the university's no-Japanese policy in oral communication classes. The average TOEIC score for the cohort was 650. The study was conducted in the second semester of the 2012 academic year. Participation in the research was completely voluntary and had no impact on the students' grades. Therefore, students were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Data Collection

Data was taken from students' individual language learning histories (LLHs), focus group discussions, and follow-up questions sent by email. First, students were asked to describe and write their English language learning experiences from birth to the present in a LLH. LLHs are effective in promoting self-awareness, as an examination of past experiences helps learners understand their development and what they need to do to become more effective learners (Cummings, 2005).

Second, the students were split into two focus groups and asked to attend one of two ninety-minute discussions, held on campus. I gave discussion topics and several questions to students before the focus group sessions began (see Appendices). The topics and questions were based on a preliminary analysis of the students' LLH's. Students were also asked to bring questions of their own for discussion. This gave them time to prepare vocabulary and expressions which they wanted to use while speaking in their focus group. I selected the most confident student to moderate the sessions in order to reduce researcher/participant, or in this case, the student/teacher hierarchy (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). She helped the students maintain focus on the topics and encouraged everyone to participate equally, while I acted only as an observer. After the focus group sessions, the students' discussion questions were emailed to all participants, and students responded. This provided them with an opportunity to respond to questions which had not come up during their group discussions.

Data Analysis

The discussions, which had been recorded, were transcribed and the data was analyzed using the-

matic analysis, a process of placing data into identifiable themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Following Boyatzis's data-driven (inductive) approach to classification, the data was collated, and key quotes were identified, highlighted, and coded manually. The data was then placed into the following themes: preschool education, school experiences, overseas experiences, university English, the future, and people.

Discussion

Examination of the participants' language learning histories, interviews, and the follow-up questions indicated that the participants' desire to study English in university had been shaped in large part by various female role models. A small number of participants also said that male teachers and relatives had had some impact on their English language learning at certain points in their education. However, the data showed that male influence was negligible when compared with that of females.

Friends

Many of the participants talked about the ways they had been influenced by their friends. They described their high school experiences with friends who also liked studying English and with whom they could share the experience of English study. They noted that this created friendly rivalry between them. This was mentioned by one student, Emiko, who said, "I wanted to get a higher score on the tests than my friend. She loved English, too."

Students also mentioned that friendships with female overseas students studying at their school were also important. These friendships gave them a chance to use English in authentic and natural ways. For example, one student, Natsuki, pointed out that she "... fraternized with a Mexican friend and usually we spoke in English." Such experiences enabled the participants to develop confidence and the desire to speak English more.

Interestingly, the majority of foreign students were from non-English speaking countries, and their English-speaking skills impressed the participants. As another participant, Kayoko, said, "When I was 18, an overseas student came from Switzerland. She could speak English and Japanese well. I was surprised." This made her see that the foreign students were also English language learners and this perhaps made her believe that she too could become a competent English speaker like them.

Friendships with overseas students also motivated some of the participants to participate in their school's study abroad programs. This enabled them

to reconnect with the friends they had met in Japan, to meet new people, and as Natsuki described, “have more experiences in English.” Meeting foreign people, whether abroad or in Japan, made the participants want to speak English more and at a higher level. For several, this experience inspired them to major in English.

Mothers

The participants also discussed the tremendous impact that their mothers had on their English language learning. This impact seemed to occur in three ways. First, mothers exposed them to English from an early age through movies, music, or English language materials such as toys and games. For example, Satoko remembers music that her mother played to her as a young child, and said, “My mother likes to listen to the music of Queen. She said that I grew up listening to those songs.”

Second, the mothers provided opportunities for their daughters to learn at local language schools. Those lessons were remembered as being fun and the participants not only learned English, but also about different cultures. As Hanae stated, “I experienced foreign culture for the first time. My mother’s friend was an English teacher and I joined trick or treating at her house for the first time. I think I started to like English then.”

Third, mothers themselves were also language role models for their daughters. Children are often influenced by what they see their parents do and will emulate the behavior or attributes they deem positive (Ellis, 2008), and this seems to extend to language learning as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that participants wanted to emulate their mothers. This is illustrated by Natsuki’s statement: “When we went abroad I watched my mother communicate with many foreigners in English and I envied her and I thought I wanted to be like my mother.” Participants seeing their mothers interact with people in English fostered the desire in them to do the same. In fact, for some, these experiences significantly influenced their choice of major and university. Natsuki, for example, said, “My mother graduated from this university and I want to be like my mother, so I decided to enter the high school from which it was easy to enter this university.”

Clearly, the mothers’ actions and attitudes towards their daughters’ English language development created a motivational base for their English language studies. Fostering a positive desire at such an early age is important because once positive opinions of a subject are formed, they will dictate learners’ future approaches to that subject (Wlod-

kowski, 1997). In the case of these students, the role their mothers had in actively encouraging their English language learning is clear.

Japanese Female English Teachers

Whereas friends and family were important in shaping the participants’ motivation for studying English, the third and most influential female mentors were the participants’ secondary or cram school teachers. For many participants, these women were the first successful English speakers they encountered, and their impact on the participants’ language development, their attitudes toward English, and their decisions to major in English was tremendously important.

The participants said they respected their female teachers and wanted to emulate them. This is evident in Emiko’s comment: “I respect them and at the same time, I feel that I want to be like them. Therefore, I am motivated by them.”

Teachers were also admired for their knowledge and interactions with foreign countries and cultures. This is encapsulated in Satoko’s comment: “They were women and I had a cool image about them. They have a lot of experience of going abroad and their talk was interesting.” Furthermore, several participants credited a female English teacher as being influential in their decision to major in English and/or to major in English at their current university. Yoriko says, “My English teacher graduated from this university. She told me about her college life and going to study abroad. Thanks to her I decided to come here.”

The teachers’ influence on the participants did not end upon graduation from high school. The connection to their teachers was so strong that the participants still turned to them for advice afterward. This closeness is perhaps understandable as Japanese high school and cram school teachers spend a great deal of time with their students and, because they share the same cultural background, students can easily identify with them (Murphey, 1998). Students can, therefore, see a similarity between themselves and their teachers, which contributes to the belief that they, too, can attain the same or even greater levels of success (Bandura, 1997). That female teachers were such important role models for the participants is significant as research has shown that people who regard their teachers as role models are more likely to excel in their studies and to cite their teachers as being influential in their career choices (Nagatomo, 2012).

Implications and Conclusion

Even though this study is small and the results might not be representative of all female students in Japan, female role models were found to profoundly shape these young women's English language experiences.

First, these women were raised by mothers who made sure that they studied English in enjoyable and memorable ways. Japanese media has often highlighted the negative side of maternal involvement in children's education. Mothers have sometimes been described as overbearing, competitive *kyoiku mamas* (education mothers), who will push their children to succeed at all costs. However, the participants' narratives tell a very different story. The support of caring mothers made it possible for the participants to get early exposure to English, and mothers who could speak English well were significant role models for the participants. This is important information for educators who can co-operate with parents to motivate students. This could greatly benefit students, especially those who may lack motivation.

Second, meeting other young women in Japan who were serious about their English study meant that they could benefit from the motivating effect of being with others who shared the same goals. Additionally, the friendships formed with overseas students gave them confidence and a chance to communicate in English. The language became more meaningful because it was used to create relationships. Schools and universities could take advantage of this by providing more opportunities for students to create communities of learners, perhaps through English or dramatic clubs. Institutions could also provide more chances for students to interact with overseas students through social events or by providing more classes in which the students could study together.

Third, the students greatly respected and admired their female English teachers. The fact that these teachers were skilled English speakers seemed to prove to the students that working and studying hard can result in English fluency. Additionally, since participants were able to relate to their teachers, it made it possible for them to clearly envision themselves as successful English speakers in the future. Making teachers aware of the great influence which they have on same-gender students is one way to use this information. Teachers might understand that how they relate their experiences to their students can be just as important as what they teach in class. Furthermore, examining these relationships, how they develop, and their impact on students can give teachers and researchers great-

er insight into the role teachers play in students' language development and how students' future goals might be inspired by them.

This study has shown that, prior to entering university, female role models have had a huge impact on one particular group of women's desires to major in English. This implies that female role models at universities could perhaps have a similar effect. Therefore, one could argue that the presence of more female professors might encourage female students to excel in many areas besides English. More research in other subject areas is needed to determine if this is the case.

Despite being such a small sample of students, this study draws attention to the role that women have on the English language learning of younger women. It also provides insight into how female role models have influenced female students to major in English.

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Avril Haye-Matsui has worked in English language education in Japan for over two decades. She currently works at Aichi Prefectural University and is the co-founder of the support and friendship group Black Women in Japan. Her research areas are gender, student identity, and teacher identity.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Please think about your answers to the questions below, before coming to the focus group.

1. Who or what motivated you to learn to speak English? Who and or what motivates you now?
2. Why was English important to you in the past? Why is it important now? Do you think it will still be important to you in the future? Why?
3. Why do you think so many young Japanese female university students choose to major in English, (especially at this university)?
4. Imagine your future English-speaking self. What kind of person will you be?
5. Imagine your future as a non-English speaker; how different is this person from the person in question 5?
6. Do you think your decision to major in English would have been different if you were a boy?
7. Imagine yourself as a man; how would your English-speaking future be different?
8. When you see a Japanese woman (older or younger), speaking fluent English, how do you feel or what do you think?
9. What will an average day be like in your English language future, (or in your future bilingual life)?



Appendix B

Focus group questions created by the students.

1. What was your best and most impressive English-speaking experience?
2. Have you ever felt inferior to your friends who can speak English better than you?
3. Have you ever studied English at an English language school? Do you think schools like that help us to improve our English speaking?
4. When and why did you decide to join the British and American studies department?
5. When did you start to learn English? Not just learning but speaking?
6. What is your goal of learning English?
7. What do you think about the English education system in Japan? Is it effective?
8. Do you want to teach English in the future?

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