Self and motivation in compulsory English classes in Japan

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Recent moves to re-theorise L2 motivation in terms of the self-concept mark a significant development in the field. According to this new perspective, certain aspects of motivated learner behaviour arise from the desire to reduce discrepancy between the actual self and (imagined) ideal self. In this paper I present an exploratory study investigating the self-related motivation of 275 first-grade Japanese high school students. The results suggest there is a connection between students' L2-related visions of the future and their class performance. However, it is argued that a self-perspective is inadequate in explaining the motivation of many adolescent learners due to the under-developed nature of their ideal L2 selves. This issue can be seen in part as age-related, but also as a consequence of certain aspects of the Japanese educational and social context which limit the extent to which English ability can be cultivated en masse through compulsory English classes.

　第二言語での動機付けを自己概念という点から再理論化する近年の動きはこの領域における大きな展開を表している。この新しい視点によれば、動機付けが出来ている学習者の行動のうち特定の側面は現実的自己と（想像上の)理想自己との相違を軽減する欲求から起きるという。本稿で提示する予備的研究の中で、筆者は275人の日本の高校　1年生における自己と関連した動機付けを調査している。その結果の示唆するところでは、生徒の第二言語と関連した未来像と教室での活動との間には関連がある。しかし、自己視点というものは、学習者の第二言語における理想自己がまだ本質的に発達中であるがゆえに、多くの青年期にある学習者の動機付けを説明するには不適当との議論がある。この問題は部分的には年齢に関連しているとも見られるが、また日本の教育的・社会的文脈における一定の側面の結果としても見られ、筆者の信じるところでは、この側面ゆえに義務教育を受ける生徒の中で英語の能力が一斉に育まれる度合いが制限されている。

Literature review

Identity, self, and L2 motivation

The idea that issues of identity and self affect L2 motivation is by no means new. Gardner and Lambert's (1972) concept of *integrative motivation*, part of their *socio-educational model*, refers to "motivation to learn a language because of positive feelings towards the community that speaks the language" (Gardner, 1985, p. 82-3); in other words, a positive *identification* with the target language community. Subsequent mainstream research has tended to focus less on issues of self/identity, and more on concrete, short-term influences on motivation such as teacher behaviour and task-types (Dörnyei, 1994; Williams & Burden 1997). However, researchers favouring more qualitative approaches have long emphasised the complex relation-

ship between learning, identity, and context (Norton Pierce, 1995; Ushioda, 2009). In their view, language use and motivation can more helpfully be viewed as constructed socially, rather than cognitively. Norton (2000, cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), questions the notion of:

> [A] language learner who can be unproblematically characterised as instrumentally or integratively motivated, with a clear-cut target identity, since motivation and identity are socially constructed...changing over time and space, and possibly existing in contradictory ways in the individual. (p. 71)

Identity is thus seen as being in an ever-changing, fluid relationship with social context rather than the more stable, trait-like nature of the *self*, implicated in earlier work by Gardner and Lambert (1972). In this respect, Dörnyei's (2005) L2 motivational self-system, introduced in the following section, can be seen as a return to theorizing along the lines of Gardner and Lambert's (1972) socio-educational model, in that it purposes to explain complex phenomena through relatively simple cognitive constructs backed by statistical notions of validity.

Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system

According to Markus and Nurius (1986) *possible selves* are "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation." (p. 954). In closely related work, Higgins (1987), in his *discrepancy theory,* provides a mechanism by which motivated behaviour arises out of efforts to reconcile competing selves, in particular the actual self and the ideal self. Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) *L2 motivational self system* assimilates both earlier theories, suggesting that:

> [T]here are three primary sources of the motivation to learn a foreign/second language—the learner's vision of oneself as an effective L2 speaker, the social pressure coming from the learner's environment, and positive learning experiences. (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 86)

These three sources are formalised as: (1) The *ideal L2 self*, or the L2-related attributes a learner would ideally like to possess; (2) the *ought-to L2 self*, or the L2-related attributes a learner feels she ought to possess due to external influences such as friends, family, school, society etc.; and (3) the *L2 learning experience*, or here-and-now influences on language learning in the classroom or wherever learning happens to be occurring. The ideal L2 self has a promotion effect: Motivated behaviour occurs in order to achieve an outcome; the ought-to L2 self has a preventative effect: Motivated behaviour occurs in order to avoid an outcome. Motivated behaviour is viewed in part as a consequence of the psychological need to reduce the discrepancy between the ideal/ought-to self and the actual self.

Of direct relevance to the present study is the age by which individuals develop relatively stable self-guides. Zenter and Renaud (2007) doubt that stable ideal self representations emerge before adolescence, or that pre-adolescent children can be fully aware of, or sensitive to, socially mediated aspects of the ought-to self. Accordingly, Dörnyei (2009) concludes that the self approach may not be appropriate for students below high school-age.

The study

In order to learn more about self-related motivation in high school, I designed a small-scale questionnaire study to provide data to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do adolescents have stable ideal L2-self representations?

2. How do students conceptualise the L2 community?
3. What is the relationship between the ideal self and current achievement?

Method

Data were collected on opinions, attitudes, and achievement from 275 female first-grade high school students using a questionnaire administered electronically through the course management system *Moodle*. Informed consent was obtained from all students. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1), written in Japanese, consisted of 10 Likert-scale items and two open-ended items. Nine of the Likert items were used in the subsequent statistical analysis; item 10 was used for descriptive purposes. End-of-term grades were operationalised as a measure of performance. Three-item scales were used to measure the perceived strength of; i) the ideal self, ii) the ideal L2 self, and iii) the ought-to L2 self. Cronbach alpha scores for these scales were as follows: Ideal self, .7; ideal L2 self, .78; ought-to L2 self, .48. Because of the low score for the ought L2 self, inter-item correlations were also measured. They ranged from 2.2 to 2.7, within Briggs and Cheeks' (1986) recommendation of inter-item correlations of .2 to .4. Pearson-product correlation was used to measure the relationship between test scores and the strength of self-representations. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Open-ended responses were coded for content according to procedures laid out in Gillham (2005) and in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines on thematic analysis. These data were used both as a means of triangulation for the statistical measures and as a stand-alone data source.

Results

In this section I present the results of the statistical measures in full, and a representative sample of the open-ended item responses.

Descriptive statistics

Figure 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the self-scales on a scale of 3 to 12 (the sum of three Likert-scale item scores rated from 1 to 4). A score of 3 indicates a poorly developed self; a score of 12 represents a strongly developed self (for full descriptive statistics see Appendix 2). It can be seen that the ideal self generally, and the ideal L2 self in particular, appear to be less well-developed on average than the ought-to self.
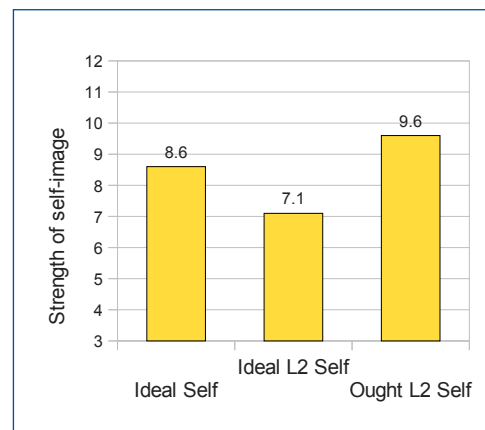

Figure 1. Mean scores for scale measures

Item 11 (the extent to which respondents agree that speaking English is cool) scored 3.73 on a scale of 1 to 4, indicating

students have a positive view of speaking English.

Correlation analysis

A statistically significant but small relationship [r=.29, n=275, p=.000] was revealed, with a stronger imagined L2 ideal self associated with better course performance. This suggests the existence of an L2 self may be related to motivated behaviour (for full correlation data, see Appendix 3).

Open-ended questions

Question 11. When you hear the phrase "English speakers" what kind of people come to mind?

Responses were coded according to the categories in Table 1, each of which is accompanied by a representative example (translated from Japanese):

Table 1. Categorisation of responses to question 11

Career	*Flight attendants or people who work in hotels. Guides or interpreters. People working at Expos ... English teachers ...*
International outlook	*I think there are a lot of (English speakers) who are people with an eye on the big picture and world affairs ...*
Location	*People who live in English-speaking countries.*
Skills/ability	*People with a high TOEIC score; people who can fluently answer questions posed in English at all times.*
Image	*People who cover the world, who probably have lots of friends. Cool! Great!*

Question 12. Have you thought clearly about what you want to do in the future? Does the future you use English? Please write about your future and the role that English plays (or doesn't play) in that future. (If you haven't thought clearly about the future there is no need to force yourself to come up with an answer just for this question). Responses were coded according to the categories in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorisation of responses to question 12

Developed ideal L2 self-representation	*I want to go to study psychology in the literature department of Housei university, I think ... the future me will acquire more English than now, and I hopefully will become a little good at it.*
Developed ideal self-representation but L2 not part of the vision.	*I would like to marry a rich person and be a rich housewife.*
Underdeveloped ideal self	*Nothing special*

Discussion

In this section I discuss some of the implications of the results before returning to the research questions and a consideration of the relevance of the L2 motivational self system to the Japanese high school context.

Ideal L2 selves

On average, students appear not to have particularly well-developed ideal selves, let alone ideal *L2* selves. The mean score on the ideal L2 self-scale is 7.1 on a scale of 3-12. If we assume there is a positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and motivated language learning behaviour, it appears that the motiva-

tional state of affairs among the respondents is mixed. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that this situation may in fact be compared favourably to that of many schools in Japan. First, the school in question is a reasonably prestigious institution known to attract academically able students. Second, in my colleagues' experience, students at this school are often more enthusiastic towards English than their counterparts at other high schools.

The ideal/ought L2 self gap

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2002) states that cultivating English ability en masse is of vital importance to the (presumably economic) development of Japan and the future of her children. Whether or not MEXT turns out to be correct, their assertion of the importance of English is undeniably at odds with the lived reality of contemporary students in Japan in which there is little or no need to communicate in English in daily life. A significant number (16%) of respondents in this study agreed somewhat or strongly that Japanese people don't really need to study English. This conflict between future-looking policy and present-day reality is perhaps most succinctly epitomised by a student who answered question 12 as follows: "English is important for the future, but I don't think I'll speak it much." Other responses are more in line with the MEXT policy: "Internationalisation continues, so to a certain extent I will have to be able to speak English..." and "In the future I think we will need English in various situations." However, words do not necessarily translate into action, and it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which the MEXT position is truly congruent with the deeply held personal goals and desires of Japanese youth. It is possible, for example, that the MEXT position is internalised only very weakly, through a process of *introjected regulation* (Deci & Ryan, cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), which describes "externally imposed rules that the student accepts as norms to be followed in order not to feel guilty" (p. 24).

One of the conditions that Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) list as necessary for the motivational conditions of the ideal/ought-to self is for them to be reasonably congruent. However 89% of respondents report a stronger ought L2 self than ideal L2 self, meaning that many may feel more motivated by the consequences of failure than the benefits of success. This being the case, we might expect many students to hold negative views of English, and to harbour resentment to the system seen as forcing English upon them, as predicted by Higgins (1987) in comparable circumstances. The question that requires an answer is, in essence, "To what extent do Japanese *really* want to learn English en masse?" The answer lies not in a (superficially, at least) common-sense government policy but in the hearts and minds of students.

What type of English?

Among those students who have more developed L2 self-representations, English is often viewed instrumentally:

I want to be a school teacher in the future so I will need English to get into university, etc., but after that I don't really care if I don't use it.

Elementary school teachers will also be required to teach English, so if I can speak English, the job I want to do in the future will be more fun! I think. So, I want to be able to speak English. To make my dream come true I work hard every day.

English is represented here primarily as a tool that can aid career prospects or enjoyment rather than as a means of communication or an important aspect of identity or self. These and other responses suggest that many students are motivated to learn English for what we might—tongue in cheek—call the *wrong reasons*. It follows that, even for such *motivated* students,

the communicative classroom may at times be a distraction from the *real*, exam-based learning at hand.

Simulated learning

On a related topic concerning Japanese higher education, McVeigh (2006) argues:

> An over-emphasis on examinations distorts an understanding of what education is really for, and schooling loses its *raison d'être*, allowing it to become simulated. Knowledge itself becomes simulated in what is called "examination knowledge"...we have "English for the entrance examination" and "mathematics for the entrance examination" (i.e., parareal knowledge). (p. 166)

Thus, the exam system not only diverts interest, time and energy from a focus on *real* English, but also perverting what it means to *learn* English in the first place. What it means to learn, and the purposes to which learning is put, cut deeply to the heart of issues of an individual's identity and self. If the education system as a whole is not attending to deep-seated needs of students for self-enriching learning experiences, it is not surprising that many students respond to it at best with a begrudging, ought-to self-motivation, driven chiefly by the relentless pressure to secure university entrance.

Research questions revisited

1. To what extent do adolescents have stable ideal L2-self representations?

The data suggest that students of this age do not have particularly stable ideal L2 self representations, scoring on average 7.1, where 3 represents a completely undeveloped ideal L2 self and 12 represents a fully developed ideal L2 self (in other words, 5 on a scale of 10).

2. How do students conceptualise the L2 community and their position within it?

Students appear to have a generally positive opinion of (Japanese) English speakers. They see them as having relatively high-status jobs. They are seen as being clever, cultured, and "international." In addition, 97% of students agree to some extent or strongly that speaking English is cool.

3. What is the relationship between the ideal self and current achievement?

The correlation between ideal L2 self strength and course performance is statistically significant but weak (8.7% of variance).

The L2 motivational self system re-visited

In certain respects, Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) Ideal L2 self system construct, although more statistically robust in terms of construct validity than Gardner and Lambert's (1972) socio-educational model (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) remains vulnerable to accusations levelled at its predecessor, namely that it is far from universally applicable (Yashima, 2009). Specifically, the construct is limited to explaining the motivation of older learners who have a clear vision of their futures. Furthermore, the L2 is conceptualised as a monolithic entity, limiting its applicability in a context, such as Japan, where "English" may mean different things to different people. Finally, L2 motivational self system—like much Western psychology—assumes the motivational importance sine qua non of individual choice and autonomy, as opposed to group harmony or a feeling of belonging, an assumption that may not always hold to the same degree in more collective contexts, such as in Asia (Nisbett, 2003; for a counter-argument see Ryan & Deci, 2005).

A second problematic issue lies not in the L2 motivational self system itself but the degree to which research attention

selectively focuses on particular aspects of it. It has been argued (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) that theoretical interest in Robert and Gardner's socio-educational model of language acquisition (Gardner, 1985) focussed on the instrumental/integrative distinction to the detriment of time and effort that might more profitably have been directed toward the whole model. In a similar way, the majority of commentary on the L2 motivational self system has focused on Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) construct of the ideal L2 self. Future research will hopefully add detail to the model, in particular the theoretical relationship between the ideal and ought-to selves (for an intriguing investigation that attempts to do this, see Kim, 2009). The L2 Learning Experience element, as it stands, appears to function as a one-size-fits-all category for contextual influences on motivation not covered by the two self-constructs. As Dörnyei (2009) comments, "this component is conceptualized at a different level from the two self-guides and future research will hopefully elaborate on the self-aspects of this bottom-up process" (p. 29). This section of the model presumably takes on a particular significance with the types of learner and context investigated in this study.

It also might be helpful if the model distinguished between issues of self and identity. For example, the uses that students have for English in the future very much depend on the identity roles they can see themselves playing in life, such as those related to work. Theorising in terms of identity rather than self would increase the scope for the incorporation of aspects of the social environment and context into the model.

Ultimately, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect a tripartite cognitive model to ever do justice to the complex psychological and sociological aspects of language motivation. Underlying such models is the assumption that the variables enjoy a relatively concrete, context-independent existence in individuals. However, scholars are increasingly arguing that individual difference factors should be conceptualized as entering into "interaction

with the situational parameters rather than cutting across tasks and environments" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009b, p. 354).

Pedagogical implications

Teachers who wish to strengthen L2 self-related motivation presumably need to incorporate some form of visualisation in class activities akin to the schema used by sports psychologists to prepare athletes for competition (Martens, 1987). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) outline a six-step programme designed to generate and sustain such a vision. It includes constructing the ideal self, enhancing the vision, making it plausible, developing an action plan, activating it, and considering failure. Referring to the ideal self in general (not Dörnyei's L2-specific version), Lee and Oyserman (2009, cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) claim that "Changing possible selves through intervention can lead to positive changes in academic behaviour, better academic performance, and lower risk of depression." (p. 133). It remains to be seen if focussing on the L2-specific aspect of self-representation can achieve such noble ends. For students with only vague notions of the future most efforts would presumably be spent on construction of the ideal self. However, there may be a risk that well-meaning efforts directed towards this end by teachers could be perceived by students as an unwelcome addition to an already overbearing ought-to self, at odds with every day experience.

In addition, teachers may wish to critically examine the extent to which they feel they have a legitimate right to try to manipulate specific aspects of a given student's ideal self in what they perceive as in the student's best interest. Sitting more comfortably with the humanistic approach favoured by this writer would be to give students the opportunity to visualise their futures freely, whether or not these futures have a place in them for English. Certainly, teachers have nothing to lose by experimenting with introducing non-prescriptive identity and self-relevant

activities into the classroom, for example by explaining the diverse and interesting cultural aspects related to English as an international language, or visualising futures in class.

Limitations of the research

The current research was opportunistic in nature, and the research instrument had to be developed in a short period of time. For more robust statistical validation of the L2 self construct see Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009a). Time and logistical constraints prevented full justice being done to some of the valuable emic insights contained in responses to the open-ended items. Finally, all the respondents were female, limiting the external validity of the findings.

Future research

The incongruence of the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self in Japanese students reported here warrants further attention from researchers. Of particular interest is the ought-to self and the extent to which it is only superficially incorporated into the self-concept as a whole. If the perceived need for English is begrudgingly accepted and seen as externally imposed, we can expect further pressure on young people to learn English—for example recent moves to introduce English in primary classes—to be counter-productive.

I would like to finish with a note on research methodology. Teachers are concerned with students as individuals and members of the classroom community. By contrast, much L2 motivation research, including the majority carried out in order to investigate the L2 motivational self system, focuses on the individual only insofar as he/she (or "it") is a representative average of a large sample. There is arguably a need for more qualitative research treating students as persons-in-context (Ushioda, 2009) to run alongside existing quantitative approaches. Such

approaches are likely to be part of a more socially grounded paradigm that directly addresses the relationship between the individual and society.

Conclusion

The current study suggests that what may be missing, motivationally speaking, for many high school students is the existence of a clearly envisioned ideal L2 self. This offers researchers a new way of thinking about situations in which students lack motivation to learn English. First, many young learners do not know what they want to do in the future (this situation is of course by no means limited to Japan). Second, they may know full well what they want to do but have no inclination to be an English speaker. Third, they may be motivated to learn English primarily as a test subject as opposed to a tool for communication. Unless classes are made relevant to the way in which students see themselves and envision their futures, motivation will be a valuable commodity in short supply.

In this paper I have taken a critical stance towards the situation in compulsory English education in Japan. However, despite the challenges they face, teachers can take heart in the fact that a large number of Japanese students—in this study up to 50%—want to make English a part of their lives, and a majority of them hold positive views of their English-speaking compatriots. While I have observed that English learning motivation is often perceived as being imposed rather than chosen, it may be of some consolation to English teachers to recognise that the same may be true of many school subjects, not just English. The problems outlined here can only truly be tackled in the context of whole-scale educational reform, for example by giving students more freedom to choose what subjects to study in high school, or by a radical reform of the university entrance system.

Bio data

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Appendix 1. The questionnaire

Please refer to appendix 2 for information on how the items were coded. Question 11 was used to measure participants' image of English, but was not used in the correlation measures. Question 8 was not used in the data, but I thought it appropriate to present the questionnaire as it was presented to the students. The questionnaire is translated from the original Japanese.

Section 1:

To what extent do you feel that the following statements apply to you? (1) Doesn't apply to me at all. (2) Doesn't really apply to me; (3) Applies to me a little ; (4) Applies to me very much. *[Key to bracketed figures: (a) Ideal self scale; (b) ideal L2 self scale; (c) ought-to self scale.]*

1. I know clearly what I want to do in my life. [a]
2. The "future me" can speak English. [b]
3. I know what kind of job I would like to do in the future. [a]
4. I would like to use English at work in the future. [b]
5. I need English for the things I want to do in the future. [b]
6. I don't really think about my future as an adult. [a - reverse coded]

Section 2:

To what extent do you agree with the following? (1) Completely disagree; (2) Don't agree; (3) Agree; (4) Completely agree;

7. Japanese people don't really need to study English. [c - reverse coded]
8. My classmates don't think it is important for me to become able to speak English. [c - reverse coded]
9. If I can speak English really well, other people will think that I have lost my "Japaneseness". [c - reverse coded]

10. Speaking English is cool.

Section 3 (open questions):

11. When you hear the phrase "English Speakers" what kind of people come to mind?
12. Have you thought clearly about what you want to do in the future? Does the "future you" use English? Please write about your future and the role that English plays (or doesn't play) in that future. (If you haven't thought clearly about the future there is no need to force yourself to come up with an answer just for this question).

Appendix 2. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ideal self 1, 3, 6	275	3	12	8.57	2.099
Ideal L2 self 2, 4, 5	275	3	12	7.10	2.215
Ought-to self 7, 8 ,9	275	4	12	9.62	1.357

Appendix 3. Correlation measures

		test	Ideal self	Ideal L2 self	Ought L2 self
test	Pearson Correlation	1	-.035	.286**	.063
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.565	.000	.295
	Covariance	187.016	-1.001	8.652	1.176
	N	275	275	275	275
Ideal self	Pearson Correlation	-.035	1	.185**	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.565		.002	.800
	Covariance	-1.001	4.407	.860	.044
	N	275	275	275	275
Ideal L2 self	Pearson Correlation	.286**	.185**	1	.167**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002		.006
	Covariance	8.652	.860	4.906	.501
	N	275	275	275	275
Ought L2 self	Pearson Correlation	.063	.015	.167**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.295	.800	.006	
	Covariance	1.176	.044	.501	1.842
	N	275	275	275	275

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).