It's For Your Own (Country's) Good: The Struggle to be a Motivated English Learner in Japan

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A Japanese child entering elementary school in the year 2012 and continuing to university faces at least nine years of compulsory English classes. In this paper I argue that Japan's English education policy is based on a mistaken belief in English as a panacea. The resulting ideological push for "Japanese with English abilities" is at odds with a daily reality in which students fulfill their communicative needs perfectly happily in Japanese. This gap between what students are told (and compelled to do) and what they experience may cause English study to become a source of resentment rather than inspiration. I theorize the motivational aspects of this situation through Dörnyei's (2005) L2 motivational self-system and discuss how English language teaching theory and practice collaborates in a bureaucratic process to sustain the status quo. Since wholesale reform is unlikely in the current political and professional climate, I encourage teachers to explore more humanistic, longer-term conceptions of learning in their own classes.

2012年に小学校へ入学し、やがて大学へと進学する日本の子供は、必須である英語の授業を少なくとも9年間受けることになる。本稿に於ける筆者の主張は、日本の英語教育政策が英語を万能薬とする誤った信条に基づいているというものである。その結果として起きる「英語運用能力を持った日本人」へのイデオロギー活動は日常の現実と食い違っている。何故なら、生徒達はコミュニケーション上のニーズを何の不満もなく日本語で満たしているからである。この、生徒達が言われる　(あるいは強制される)　ものと生徒達が経験するものとのギャップ故に、英語の学習は刺激ではなく怒りの源となりかねない。筆者はDörnyei (2005) の L2 motivational self-system を通して、この状況の動機付けに関する諸相を理論化し、英語指導理論と実践が役所特有の過程の中で合わさり、体制をうまく維持しているかを論じる。大規模な改革は現在の政治的職業的環境ではありそうもない故、筆者は教師達に人間中心の、長期的に立った教室内学習の観念を追求するよう促す。

The Ideal/Ought-To Self Gap

In previous research (Pigott, 2011), I used Dörnyei's (2005) L2 motivational self system construct to investigate the motivation of Japanese high school students. The L2 motivational self system consists principally of two self-related constructs derived from work in general psychology (Watson, 2009): The *ideal L2 self* is an individual's L2-related image of who he or she would like to become. The *ought-to L2 self* is the L2-related image deriving from others, such as peers, parents, society, and culture. Drawing on Higgins's (2003) self-discrepancy theory and the contention that motivated behavior arises from the desire to reconcile disparity between self-guides, Dörnyei conceptualizes L2 motivation as emergent from discrepancy-reduction between the actual L2 self and the ideal/ought L2 selves. The interplay between these factors is shown in figure 1.

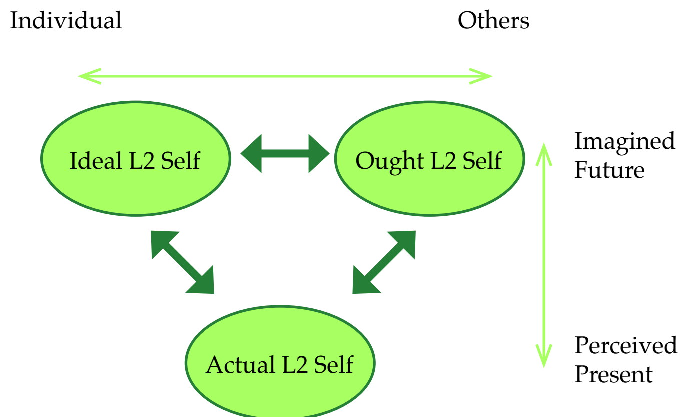

Figure 1. Actual, Ideal, and Ought-To L2 Selves

My research supported Dörnyei's (2009b) contention that conceptualizing motivation in terms of the self-construct may not be appropriate for adolescent learners, as many of them have yet to develop a robust future image of who they would like to become. However, the fact that this aspect of self-imagery appears to be missing can perhaps serve to explain, in part, the mixed motivational picture in many English classrooms in Japan. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) suggest that to be optimally motivated, the ideal and ought aspects of self should be roughly in balance. However, the results of my own (2011) study suggested that, for many students, the pressure they feel to study English is out of proportion with their personal desire to do so: 89% of participants scored more highly on the scale of the L2 ought self than on the ideal L2 self measure—on average, significantly (28%) higher.

While I do not wish to make any exaggerated claims for this particular empirical measurement, the general idea—which I call the ideal/ought-to L2 self *gap*—appears to be supported anecdotally by the everyday experience of teachers: despite its supposed importance, many students lack intrinsic motivation to learn English. This gap may be one factor among others—the *washback* effect (Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011) and widespread use of grammar translation (Adams & Van Manen, 2008)—which can be held responsible for relatively poor English proficiency among the general Japanese population, especially considering the length of time they spend in the English language classroom. In essence, it can be thought of as a theoretical formulation of the everyday experience of (in simplistic terms) *studying something for no reason*: the phenomenon Dewey (1997) alludes to when he writes: "Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling" (1997, p. 47). The idea of a gap between individual and social expectations provides an interesting starting point for a critical appraisal of aspects of English education in Japan.

A Critical Perspective on *Motivating*

A standard response to this gap is to attempt to bolster the ideal L2 self. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), for example, suggest measures similar to those used by Olympic athletes in visualizing themselves atop the winners' podium. More generally, a significant proportion of the motivation literature is not geared towards understanding motivation, but towards how to motivate in the transitive sense (e.g., Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Dörnyei, 2001). However, these practical guides tend to ignore the ought-to aspect of motivation, in particular a consideration of its ethical dimensions. Questions overlooked by those who unquestioningly wish to motivate students to learn English

include: *Is it ethical to motivate someone to spend thousands of hours of their life studying something they may not need?*, *What is the difference between motivating and manipulating?*, and *What are teachers' own motivations for motivating students?*

In short, when motivation theory is put into practice, ethics and values enter (or *should* enter) the picture. Motivation per se is neither good nor bad: it is the ends to which it is put which are of consequence. From this perspective, *motivating* is therefore a context-dependent, political, and moral act. It is the Japanese context, and the commonly accepted idea that it is the job of English teachers to motivate students into learning English, to which I now turn.

Manufactured Demand?

As a starting point, let us consider a white paper from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT), "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (in Hisashi, 2007), which states:

> For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world's understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation.
>
> At present, though, due to the lack of sufficient ability, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners and their ideas or opinions are not evaluated appropriately. It is also necessary for Japanese to develop their ability to clearly express their own opinions in Japanese first in order to learn English…
>
> …Cultivating "Japanese with English Abilities" is an extremely important issue for the future of our children and for the further development of our country…(p. 138).

In a recent paper (Pigott, 2012) I argue that the MEXT position rests on several questionable assumptions. The contention that a goal of education in general and English education should be to contribute to national prosperity and prestige may be commonly held, but it is by no means axiomatic. The humanistic idea that learning should serve to help the individual along a path of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1961), or the holistic conception of education as a way of attaining "the depth of our existence and thereby recover the wholeness of reality" (Nakagawa, 2000, pp. 34-35) offer alternative guides to educational policy, as does the pursuit of national happiness rather than economic development (Richardson, 2000). Economic growth as the *sine qua non* of national priorities is increasingly seen as an untenable notion for a planet of limited natural resources and skyrocketing population (Harding, 1991; Latour, 1979). If its prioritization were to be deemphasized in favor of more humanistic aims, the current argument for *en masse* English education would presumably be substantially weakened.

Second, the assumption that English ability and economic prosperity are strongly correlated is not supported by any consensus in the research literature (Clandinin, 2007; Phillipson, 2007, 2008). Japan's post-war economic boom, its position as the second largest economy in the world, and its relatively high average standard of living, all have been achieved without widespread English ability. Any straightforward relationship between English proficiency and wealth is likely to be further undermined by a consideration of the current shifting statuses of non-English Eastern creditor nations and English-speaking Western debtor nations (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), and the anti-globalization movements presently gaining political ground (Creswell, 2007). If English language acquisi-

tion is to be considered in economic terms, it must at least be acknowledged that it has, to borrow an economic term, a huge *opportunity cost*—it requires many thousands of hours of hard work which could be spent doing something else of value to the individual and/or society: even if there is a positive correlation between English proficiency and economic prosperity, this does not automatically make it worth it.

Third, the idea that English is essential for *all* Japanese children is highly contentious. The majority of Japanese of all ages, let alone children, quite plainly accomplish the bulk of their communicative needs in Japanese. Yamaguchi and Tollefson (2012) argue that "learning English in Japan offers only limited economic value for a relatively small elite," and the efforts to sell English as a panacea can therefore be seen as misleading at best. It is no surprise that motivation to learn English may be lacking in the majority in such an environment (Ellis, 1997).

Finally, the idea that English education is for the future, begs the question—without wishing to be facetious—of why it is being studied in the present. Dewey (1997) states that: "The idea of using the present *simply* to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future." We live, he contends, in the present, and it is "only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future" (p. 49). Education surely must enable students to deal with the future creatively, rather than (inevitably unsuccessfully) trying to second-guess it. If there comes a time in the future when all Japanese truly need English they will no doubt learn it, and infrastructure will arise to facilitate this need.

To conclude, the general idea that all Japanese can and should be taught English is the product of a particular, contestable, worldview and educational philosophy. The consequences of such a position may be observable across all school subjects if measured by means other than test results (what does it really mean to have an understanding of history, for example?) but with English, its failure is rather embarrassingly obvious.

Research, Practice, and the Prevailing Ideology

According to the arguments laid out above—the lack of real need for English, the dubious economic and philosophical justifications for compulsory classes over an extended period—English proficiency among the general Japanese population is as impossible as it is unnecessary. It follows that policies offering more of the same, such as the introduction of compulsory English lessons into elementary school, are more likely to exacerbate than alleviate the problem, accomplishing little more than turning young people off English and perhaps language learning in general at an earlier age. Why is such an opinion likely seen as extreme?

One way of answering this question is to view the education system as consisting of a bureaucracy. It is in the best interests of bureaucrats to perpetuate the status quo in order to guarantee their positions. As Fromm (1976) writes: "there is not even a conflict between conscience and duty:…[bureaucrats'] conscience is doing their duty" (1976, p. 151). Effectively, teacher-researchers are components of a bureaucratic mechanism providing them, and other stakeholders such as textbook suppliers, with gainful employment. In fact, for everyone except perhaps the students, the system can be considered a great success. Resistance to the system, such as this paper, is likely to remain within comfortable limits: few of us are likely to give up our jobs out of *principle*. The issue of bureaucracy in English education is deserving of a more comprehensive treatment. Here, I would like to draw attention to two aspects of research/practice which can be seen as complicit in oiling the wheels of the bureaucratic machinery: *short-termism* (Donmoyer, 1990) and *methodological reductionism* (Chase, 2005).

Short-Termism

The most obvious manifestation of short-termism in Japan (and elsewhere) is the national obsession with testing as a measure of academic ability and (indirectly) determinant of social status. While most people would agree that the long-term effects of education—in the sense of experience which has a positive, formative effect on mind and character—are profound and, to an extent, unknowable, these long-term effects tend to be ignored in favor of more easily measured short-term effects. By doing so, the long-term, heart-felt, complicated process of language learning is sanitized into categories such as vocabulary retention, proficiency gains, or TOEIC scores, which are then held up as goals, rather than *means to ends*, of language learning. In research, too, short-termism, and the related issues of over-specialization and theoretical reductionism conspire to support a system which offers insights into isolated aspects of language learning without adding to understanding of language learning as a life-long, holistic process.

For example, some proponents of task-based learning (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003) espouse a principled focus on form and spend a great deal of research time measuring the implications of slightly different form / focus balance, ignoring the fact that, in the vast majority of test-focused lessons, students focus almost exclusively on form, rendering such principled focus irrelevant. Another example: through Academic English classes, low-proficiency students can be mothered through successive drafts of an essay to arrive at a final draft, purportedly serving as evidence of an improvement in both English and academic standards. However, it can be argued that genuine academic inquiry requires the consideration of complex concepts in a language in which the student is reasonably fluent. The *academic* side of the exercise is therefore of questionable value for lower-level students; for many, the expression *academic English* is a contradiction in terms.

Methodological Reductionism

Methodological reductionism in the social sciences—taken here to mean the tendency to generalize over populations to derive universal rules—means that researchers tend to deal with trends and numbers rather than human beings. Ushioda (2009) observes that "Research on motivation has depersonalized learners so that it is not people but their componentized sub-personal parts that are orchestrating courses of action" (p. 216). Many supposedly universal models in the L2 motivation field can be seen as too context-specific to be of general use. For example, the argument that Gardner's (1979) influential socio-educational model of second-language learning is more useful in interpreting the ESL environment in French-speaking Canada than other contexts (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Social reality is sufficiently complicated that any general model is unlikely to be of more than heuristic use in understanding the motivational characteristics of learners in a given context. We might therefore expect the application of models that do not take into account salient points of the Japanese context, such as the entrance exam system and the lack of daily need for communicative ability, to be of limited use. In fact, as a casual glance through *The Language Teacher* or *The JACET Journal* shows, the use of such constructs is standard practice. The result of this reductionism is a dehumanization of language learning which limits research's ability to explain the very human undertaking of learning a language.

Is Change Likely or Even Possible?

In so far as research is, like practice, constrained by the ideology of English as panacea and by the tenets of short-termism and reductionism, its power as a catalyst for change is limited. Even if the system in and of itself were to be subjected to widespread criticism, change may be slow in coming. An example of this in practice can be seen in testing.

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) observe that tests are so pervasive in the United States that they diminish the quality of schools, deemphasizing joy, excitement and/or the challenge of learning, and emphasizing the mastery of test-taking skills. Curricula, they argue, "are no longer based on interests, needs, or curiosity, but are dominated by what is on the tests" (p. 105). In discussions of educational reform in Japan, university exam entrance reform is often raised, on the grounds that it would, through positive washback, improve pedagogical practice in high school (Mishler, 1990). However, such positive effects may be exaggerated. Currently, a small but growing number of English entrance exams for private universities are written by teams including native speakers focusing less on obscure, contrived examples and translation exercises, and more on relatively authentic reading and listening materials. It remains to be seen if pedagogical practice in school will adapt to these emerging trends, in part because teachers have little to gain from rocking the boat, and everything to gain from teaching the way they were taught. While a traditional, teacher-centered approach may be justified with the contestable claim that grammar translation is the most effective way to improve test performance, one unfortunate possibility may be that the bureaucratic system is simply stuck in a rut (or, in complexity theory terms, in an attractor state) (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

From a motivational perspective, the recent adoption of complexity theory (Dörnyei, 2009a) moves us away from reductionist conceptions of motivation, recognizing that it consists of multiple interactions between diverse components. This, and other relational perspectives (Ushioda, 2009) offer an alternative conceptual space within which to explore and re-frame understanding of motivation. According to a complexity view, deliberate change is likely to come about through an all-out attack on a system (Briggs, 2007). Such an attack on language learning in Japan would presumably involve a combination of allowing students to opt out of English classes in high school, offering them a wider choice of language study in the first place, drastically reducing the dependency on testing, and reforming teaching practice—all of this in the context of widespread educational reform across all subjects and institutions. Such change is unlikely in a top-down hierarchically organized system such as Japan's.

Perhaps, then, it is up to individual teachers to explore alternative approaches with which to serve students better. One way forward may be to revisit the humanistic/self-directed learning movement of the mid-20th century (Maslow, 1943, 1968; Rogers, 1961; Stevick, 1990). According to Maslow, self-actualization means "to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (p. 387). This *becoming* might be an ideal parent, a painter, or perhaps a fluent English speaker. A humanistic approach can be implemented by teachers in their own classrooms through a process of questioning and reassessing the tenets upon which one's own pedagogical practice is based (Pigott, 2012), and by familiarising themselves with the critical pedagogy literature (see, for example, Canagarajah, 1999). The effects of doing so will not necessarily be highlighted by the short-term measures so fashionable at the moment, except when they out-do existing methods for test preparation, which I propose (Pigott, forthcoming) might not be particularly uncommon. However, a humanistic approach has the advantage of making class time more rewarding and fulfilling for teachers and students alike. Much lip service is paid within the literature to autonomy and self-direction, but one cannot have one's cake and eat it, too: autonomy and top-down control are, fundamentally, diametrically opposed. Parenthood teaches us that finding a balance between the two may not be easy, but individual teachers' classrooms nevertheless have much to gain from becoming sites of resistance to prevailing ideology and practice. The teacher as rebel does, after all, hold a certain appeal for students (Yamaguchi & Tollefson, 2012).

Conclusion

Some of the points I have made above may be contentious, but I hope they merit further discussion. Seargent's (2009) contention that, "For vast portions of the world's population English remains a foreign language—often an obscure and unnecessary one—despite the prominent discourse which promotes its global reach" (p. 63) may not be comfortable reading for those of us involved in the bureaucratic push to motivate students to learn English. However, the unfortunate situation in which many such learners find themselves surely springs from MEXT's unwillingness to recognize that this contention may, to an extent, be true.

Established power structures may be part of the problem rather than the solution. Meanwhile, teachers have jobs to do, and it may be helpful for them to bear in mind that the effects of teaching reach beyond the short-term, diffused into the mysterious and unknowable future. Perhaps the most concrete thing to do in the face of this uncertainty is to focus, paradoxically, on the quality of the here-and-now in class, on the joy of intercultural interaction, creativity, and personal growth, and the satisfaction and benefits that can come from an earnest attempt to critically understand, question and challenge real-world problems within class. Whether from a humanistic (Rogers, 1961; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) or critical (Shor, 1992) perspective, much work has been done on ways in which to do this, although this work has, unfortunately, yet to enter the pedagogical mainstream in Japan or anywhere else.

Bio Data

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