

EFL Learners' Stories: Ideal L2 Self and Their Learning Experiences

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The stories of two Thai students who were selected from a quantitative study of 233 freshmen are provided in this paper. They were interviewed multiple times about their English learning motivation and experiences using a narrative approach. The Ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) and the *person-in-context* relational view of motivation (Ushioda, 2009) were used to analyse multifaceted aspects of both individual and contextual factors shaping their L2 self-identities. The findings suggest that they developed their ideal L2 selves to meet Thailand's integration within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015. Their selves appeared to be strengthened by sustained efforts to communicate in English in formal and informal learning contexts. Applying these findings, teachers and educators will be better able to capture the interplay between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences and to understand the more meaningful dimensions of local, social, and overseas learning experiences of EFL learners.

本論は、233名のタイ人大学1年生に対する小規模な量的調査から2名の学生を抽出し、その事例を紹介するものである。この2名の学生に対して、ナラティブアプローチに基づいた英語学習の経験と動機づけについてのインタビューを複数回実施した。どのような個人的・文脈的要因がL2自己認識の形成に影響するかを多面的に調べるため、理想L2自己モデル(Dörnyei, 2005, 2009)および文脈内存在的視点(Ushioda, 2009)に基づいて分析を行った。分析の結果から、彼らは2015年のタイを含むASEAN経済統合に合わせて、理想L2自己を形成していることが示唆された。また、フォーマルおよびインフォーマルな学習環境における英語コミュニケーションの継続的な努力により、彼らのL2自己が促進されていることがうかがえる。これらの点を考慮に入ると、教師は教室内および教室外での学習経験の相互作用をよりよくとらえ、EFL学習者の地域・社会・海外における学習経験のより有意義な側面を理解することができるであろう。

Thai students, like Japanese students, have studied English in monolingual countries that have never been colonised. They have limited opportunities to speak English

in their daily lives in EFL settings. In particular, Thai students have to struggle to study English to gain educational and professional opportunities to improve the quality of their lives. In my former work experience as a lecturer in a Thai university, I was normally assigned to teach general English to 1st-year students with different majors. I found that some students feel unmotivated to perform rote-memorisation activities and wanted to study simply to pass examinations to meet the curriculum requirements. In contrast, other students felt motivated to learn and could sustain their efforts in both academic and nonacademic contexts. Hence, I was motivated to explore students' perceptions of their language learning motivation and experiences.

It seemed the concept of imagined communities (Norton, 2000, 2013) was relevant to understanding the impact of globalisation and the dominant status of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in Asia. First, English is the official language under the AEC integration in 2015. In compliance with the ASEAN Charter, Article 34, "the working language of ASEAN shall be English" with the slogan "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, p. 29). An estimate of the current number of ASEAN users of English, including in South Asia and East Asia, is 812 million people (Bolton, 2008). As a result of the AEC integration, they tend to use ELF to communicate. That means Thai students now have more opportunities to contact or even work with other nationalities in face-to-face communication, or to travel to other countries and use English. Second, due to technological advances and the influence of virtual communication, students increasingly tend to access, invest in, and acquire English proficiency and skills as part of their L2 self-identities through the Internet and social networking. There are no longer any geographical boundaries among English language users in the digital age. Ryan (2006) addressed how these temporal and spatial barriers are overcome by EFL learners' social imagination. Thus, their motivations and their perceptions of imagined communities need to be studied and re-evaluated constantly using a qualitative approach to gather rich data. Teachers may desire to understand learners' stories of where and how they access English to help them forge their L2 self-identities.

Theoretical Background

One possibility for understanding learners' development of L2 identity is through drawing on the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), validated in several Asian countries (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). This paper is focussed on two components of this model. First, the ideal L2 self describes "a desirable self-image" of the L2 user (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 87). For example, if students have an ideal of being proficient speakers of English, they feel motivated and attempt to reduce the discrepancy between the actual self and ideal self by regulating themselves to achieve their goal. According to Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory, the actual self represents the attributes that learners or others believe they actually possess and who they are at any given time. The ideal L2 self is repeatedly correlated with the variable of intended learning effort (Taguchi et al., 2009). Still, it is not clear how the ideal L2 self and learning effort are qualitatively related and constructed for Asian students, particularly in the Thai context. Second, the L2 learning experience refers to situation-specific motives to learn L2 such as the impact of teachers, peer groups, or previous successful learning experiences. In this study, I aimed to capture the learners' actual selves and ideal L2 selves by contextualising their in-class and out-of-class experiences.

However, several previous studies in Asian contexts on the L2 Motivational Self were conducted employing quantitative methods. To complement the model and capture holistic and naturalistic aspects of learners' L2 selves and identities, I applied a *person-in-context* relational view of motivation (Ushioda, 2009) to capture L2 students' English learning processes and experiences in the Thai context. Ushioda argued for an emphasis on "real persons, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions; a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background" (p. 220). She also addressed the importance of focussing on "multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded" as the interplay of the learner's personal and social identities in classrooms and diverse nonacademic contexts. Similarly, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) agreed that sociocultural factors and contexts impact on individual motivation and are aligned with learners' collective goals and values.

The research questions reflect this contextualised understanding of motivation:

- RQ1. How do the students perceive and report their in-class and out-of-class experiences in learning English?
- RQ2. How do they feel during different stages of learning?
- RQ3. How do they access English to forge their L2 self-identity?

Methods and Participants

After receiving ethical approval from the Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee, I administered an online questionnaire to 233 freshmen at a private university in Bangkok. Items from the English Learner Questionnaire (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009) were employed to select highly motivated students (see Appendix). Two of these highly motivated participants were then invited to participate in multiple in-depth individual interviews. Both were male, aged 19, majoring in English. They had moved from their hometowns in southern Thailand to Bangkok to pursue this major. They had not studied or travelled overseas longer than 3 months. The participants were asked to bring photos, English diaries, and artefacts related to their experiences. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated from Thai into English. After collecting data, I analysed the data through a process of broadening (generalising), burrowing (deepening), and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) using Bamberg's (2012) analytic narrative frame. To strengthen the soundness of these narrative approaches, I employed thematic analysis that "is probably best suited to multiple case studies" (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014, p. 77). The focus was to compare learners' narratives in both datasets, identify shared themes, and analyse identity-oriented components of "persons" instead of focusing solely on "individual differences in an abstract theoretical sense" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 216). The accuracy of the report was validated by returning to participants several times for member checking and triangulating among data sources.

Results

In-Class L2 Learning Experiences

The participants, Ake and Nott, had some similarities and differences in their L2 learning experiences. Ake enjoyed taking the basic speaking course at his university.

Vignette 1

I was impressed with a female Filipina teacher. The way she taught us was very enjoyable, like our friend. She did not stick to contents much. In that class, the teacher asked us to describe each photo of five to six photos on the Power Point slides. We did not have to prepare beforehand. We were very attentive and engaged. If anyone made errors, she would say them in the other way round. We then realized that we were putting the words in the wrong order or making grammatical errors. I learned a lot from this activity. First, it made me witty. I could think and speak

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rapidly. Second, I could say without caring much about grammar. I could say what I thought right away. *Ajarn* (teacher) was not serious. Although my vocabulary is limited, I could use basic ones. To me, she was the best teacher who taught from the heart, not from the book. (Ake, interviews on June 3 and 17, 2014)

Analysis

Ake was motivated by the group work activity in class. He perceived that his ideal teacher engaged with students as real people—social beings—rather than simply as language students (see Ushioda, 2009). The most valuable aspect of his learning experience was the matter of heart. He felt motivated to study with the teacher who understood his motives and put a great effort into teaching. He did not want his teacher to employ a grammar-translation approach, orient towards using textbooks, lecture and talk at him as if his brain were empty. This teacher had successfully created a friendly and approachable atmosphere. His teacher's motivational strategies engaged the students because they were voluntarily competing to speak, which made the learning process enjoyable and challenging to Ake. Particularly, his teacher seemed to care about him and encouraged him to speak out and save face. Despite using broken English, he could speak and express who he was. This also allowed him to enhance his ideal L2 self and reduce the limitations of his actual self while performing a meaningful activity. This state occurred because he was given the opportunity to practise speaking English with limited interruption from the teacher. The students thus could naturally learn from their grammatical mistakes without losing face among their peers because their teacher corrected mistakes indirectly.

Vignette 2

I felt happy with an American lecturer. *Ajarn* did not teach like other lecturers who kept explaining about complicated passages on the Power Point, loads of contents and slides. His objective was to encourage us to speak as much as we could and we had the conversation tests frequently. For instance:

Teacher: What country would you like to travel?

Nott: Myanmar.

Teacher: Why would you like to travel there?

Nott gave him the reasons and asked:

Would you like to travel with us?

I did not perceive him as a lecturer while speaking. I really enjoyed keeping answering and questioning continuously. I had a fun and smooth conversation. Particularly, when he asked me any questions, I could automatically answer him without any pauses. (Nott, interview on June 17, 2014)

Analysis

While having a speaking test with his favourite native speaker, Nott could relate to a trip he was planning over the summer break. By using follow-up questions, his teacher successfully invoked and stimulated Nott's transportable identities during the interaction. Transportable identities refer to the implicit, powerful components of learners' identities that allow a student to imagine himself out of class and lead to a higher level of personal involvement and effort and a further sense of investment in self (Richard, as cited in Falout, 2011; Ushioda, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). In this scenario, his teacher tried to foster and scaffold Nott's autonomy and motivation. They felt connected. Nott was given the opportunity to speak on any topic of interest to him and create his dialogues naturally without any restrictive teaching practices. Not being treated as a language learner, Nott did not feel forced to perform tedious grammar drills or rote-memory tasks that did not engage his identity or motivate him. Rather, he highly valued the activity and learning experience because he could envision and connect with his real life outside the academic setting. Thus it was crucial for his teacher to "ignite the vision" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 33) and allow Nott to construct his ideal L2 self. When his desirable future self-image was created, he could follow up with his imagination and realistic expectations beyond the classroom. This reflected the link between his ideal L2 self and transportable identities.

Based on these two vignettes, it can be seen that both of the participants prioritised speaking skills and felt engaged in communicative tasks or tests. Their perceptions of their speaking experiences reflected the interplay between their ideal L2 selves and actual selves. Ideally they would like to speak and express themselves in English fluently. Thus, they valued the impromptu activities and fluency-oriented, rather than accuracy-oriented tasks. This reduced their linguistic anxiety and engaged them in conversing naturally with their foreign lecturers. These findings indicated that they could develop their ideal L2 selves while performing these tasks and extend their actual selves.

Ideally L2 learners should be aware of the gap between their current self and ideal L2 self to increase their learning efforts. However, both of these learners invested their time differently in out-of-class contexts. Dörnyei (2009) addressed how some learners may experience "the absence of sufficient motivation" (p. 19). He discussed how these learners cannot take effective action in reality despite being able to visualise their self-image as

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English users. When I asked Ake and Nott about their future jobs, they visualised themselves working in the service industry such as being tour guides or flight attendants. However, Ake did not tell learning stories that showed how his efforts and autonomous learning outside of class related to his goal. Motivated learners are regarded as autonomous learners (Ushioda, 2011b). Still, Ake and Nott's agentic self-regulation of learning was quite different. In class Ake felt engaged only with communicative tasks he enjoyed. He could not regulate himself to perform linguistic and cultural activities out of class like Nott could. His sense of agency seemed to be remote and pulled his ideal L2 self apart from his agentic current self. He thus could not drive himself to act upon his learning goals. Like other students, he simply preferred listening to western music and sometimes downloaded MP3 files to his smartphone for his own pleasure.

In contrast, Nott's behaviour was more agentic than Ake's. Sometimes, when he became aware that his motivation was low while doing some in-class activities, he tried to reconnect and remotivate himself to gain self-directed learning experiences out of class. He would drive himself to socialise with foreign friends and engage in linguistic and cultural activities without perceiving them as obligations. Despite being a 1st-year student, he described concrete and meaningful learning processes and experiences as a successful L2 user. Particularly, he proudly shared with me that his team was one of the eight winning teams participating in the project entitled "Exploring ASEAN: Blog Contest 2014" held by his university. This project was aimed at encouraging students to have memorable backpacking experiences in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Malaysia. After completing the trip, they had to share their travelling and intercultural experiences through university forums and blogs. By organising this project, his university played an integral role in shaping his imagined communities.

Out-of-Class L2 Learning Experiences

Nott shared with me a series of memorable photos of the trip on his smartphone. One photo showed him and his three friends with smiling faces, standing in front of Yangon City Hall, a traditional Burmese landmark. He illustrated his motivation to explore the new culture.

Vignette 3

I was the person who initiated the idea, wrote the proposal, and asked my English-major friends to join this project—only our team were freshmen. No one had ever been overseas before. We needed to be brave. When I reached there, I tried to

speak English as much as I could. I felt motivated to speak English. I really dared to speak English while travelling there while I dared not speak like that in Thailand. I could speak what I thought straight away. I felt happy to meet and make new foreign friends from European countries such as Austria, Russia and Poland. While staying at guesthouses, they approached us and we exchanged Skype ID. However some local people in some areas could not speak English with us. We had to use the sign language or draw pictures to illustrate our ideas. (Nott, interviews on June 17 and August 22, 2014)

Analysis

Nott had made a considerable commitment to participate in this project. He chose to travel to Burma because he believed this country was colonised by a western country and the cost of living was not high. He envisioned himself gaining more opportunities to speak English than he could if he remained in Thailand. Nott did not aim to integrate with any target language communities. Instead he belonged to AEC and perceived the value of English itself. He was agentic in developing his proficiency from EFL to ELF contexts. By mingling with nonnative tourists and local people, he could speak without any linguistic anxiety and relate to English-speaking communities there. While chatting with foreign friends, he noticed that he was braver and had a strong sense of speaking efficacy. This confidence is consistent with Boonchum's (2010) finding that English-major Thai undergraduates are likely to positively change their L2 self-identity and feel more confident when they have foreign friends and experience different norms of behaviour and cultural values. To maintain a relationship with these ELF speakers, he empowered himself to use virtual communication (Skype) in the future. Similarly, Yashima (2013) found that EFL students tended to sustain their L2 learning motivation through participating in real and imagined communities that helped strengthen their possible L2 selves. Nott's agency beyond the classroom was pivotal to the past and current development of his ideal L2 self.

Vignette 4

I started chatting on social network, Hi5 and MSN when I was 13-14 (Grade 7-8). I liked chatting with foreign friends. So far, I kept chatting with my Indonesian friend. He liked Thai culture and wanted to learn Thai language. He asked me how to speak and translate Thai words via Line. The advantage was that I could practice using English. I taught him Thai language and communicated with him in English. He was good at English. Recently he would like to travel to Hat Yai, not Bangkok, so

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I could not be his guide but gave him advice instead. (Nott, interviews on June 17 and August 22, 2014)

Analysis

Nott's story echoed the positive association between his intended effort and imagination to communicate in English and make friends from different countries, particularly in Asia through virtual communication. According to Wenger (1998), the concept of imagination refers to "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). Nott gradually developed his L2 global identity by chatting continually with his Asian friends from school to university. Despite studying in a provincial area, he had attempted to create experiences to enhance his speaking and communicative skills. He perceived that he had very few opportunities to speak English at his school, so he persisted in speaking with his foreign friends through social networks. He enjoyed chatting, even with nonnative interlocutors, maintaining relationships while gaining linguistic and cultural competencies.

Discussion

The learners' accounts reflected the interplay between their academic and nonacademic learning experiences in diverse settings. The notion of ideal L2 self can illuminate the learner's perceptions and the changing nature of their motivation while engaging in learning activities. It appeared that Nott's ideal L2 self also seemed to be strengthened by his sustained efforts to communicate in English in both in-class and out-of-class contexts, including his overseas experience with ELF communication. Irie and Brewster (2013) regarded the richness of experience as investing in "experiential capital" (p. 125) that could broaden undergraduates' abilities to visualise and regulate themselves as proficient users to achieve their goals. Nott not only engaged in meaningful communicative activities, but he also realised who he was and learned to relate to the bilingual and the L2 global identities as a language student. Compared to Ake's narratives, Nott's accounts portrayed in a more comprehensive manner the learning motivation of a successful language learner in diverse learning contexts. In contrast, despite being categorised as a highly motivated learner in the quantitative phase, Ake did not expend vigorous effort and force himself to communicate in English. Hence, he may not achieve communicative goals as expected.

The concept of *person-in-context* is applied to facilitate understanding of the dimension of local and social learning experiences of learners in the linguistic landscape of

Thailand. Ushioda (2011b) argued that "motivation is not necessarily achievement-oriented but value-based and identity-oriented" (p. 221). She suggested that the learners' perceptions of motivation and autonomy must be analysed to capture how their L2 self-identities are forged in the process of social interaction. Nott's narratives vividly represent how his transportable identities were activated and sustained in in-class and out-of-class contexts. Based on accounts of his nonacademic experiences, it appeared that he did not rely on simply communicating with native speakers but attempted to initiate and maintain relationship with other ELF users in the region for intracultural and intercultural communication. Nott exercised a stronger sense of agency and social identity than did Ake.

Conclusion

An understanding of how the learners' perceptions and learning processes develop within their L2 self-identity is useful to educational stakeholders because it allows them to see the interplay between the in-class and out-of-class learning contexts for learners. Schools and universities play a key role in creating learners' imagined communities, broadening learners' global perspectives, and equipping students with linguistic and intercultural skills. To support these goals, schools can organise communicative activities and set up experiential student projects or field trips in association with schools and universities in member states of AEC.

Pedagogically, the real challenges for teachers are how to create motivational activities for learners' enjoyment and engagement. How can they encourage students' confidence and sense of autonomy in order to sustain their English learning motivation to communicate and enhance their skills by themselves? As seen by the narratives of the learners in this study, their teachers played a crucial role in designing, creating, and being part of idealised and meaningful activities that encouraged the students to engage and improve their communicative skills. Teachers can invoke and stimulate learners' transportable identities rather than applying the grammar-translation or tedious language activities that may not engage the learners' identities (Falout, 2011).

Yashima (2013) suggested that teachers can connect local classroom communities to their L2 communities in ways that may encourage students to use their own imagination. One pedagogical possibility would be to encourage learners to interview foreign tourists or officers and report in class or through YouTube. Teachers and students could work together as co-teachers and co-learners in individualised dialogues and classroom interaction. Such support, or scaffolding, may optimise students' L2 learning results and enable them to perform tasks independently in out-of-class contexts. It seems that

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the learners in this study were highly motivated to speak naturally and fluently through these kind of activities. Takahashi (2013) urged teachers to help learners form their ideal L2 selves and reinforce the idea that linguistic mistakes in communication often occur. However, students need to notice and learn from these mistakes by themselves within real opportunities to “try on” their ideal L2 self in supported communicative situations (see also Sampson, in press).

Bio Data

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items

Criterion Measures (learner's intended effort and motivation towards learning English)

- If an English course was offered at university or somewhere else in the future, I would like to take it.
- I am working hard at learning English.
- I am prepared to expend a lot of effort in learning English.
- I think that I am doing my best to learn English.

Ideal L2 self

- I can imagine myself living abroad and having a discussion in English.
- I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with foreigners.
- I imagine myself as someone who is able to speak English.
- Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English.

Interviewing Questions

- Could you share with me your favourite/memorable classroom experiences at your university?
- Why did you like the subject, activity, and teacher?
- How did you feel while doing the activity?
- What have you learned from the activity?
- Could you tell me about your out-of-class learning experiences?
- What activities do you enjoy doing during your free times?
- When did you start doing the activity?
- Why did you feel motivated to do so?
- What have you learned from doing nonacademic activities?