Absorbed Expectations About English Study of Adolescent Japanese Students: Insights to the Ought-to L2 Self

Richard J. Sampson
Gunma University

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System draws the notion of possible selves into understanding language learning motivation. Whilst one element of this system involves language learners' perceptions of expectations from significant others, research has revealed inconsistent conclusions as to the role of these influences on motivation. Moreover, little research has uncovered a picture of the qualities of such absorbed expectations. This paper presents part of a qualitative study into the contextualized motivation of one class group of first-grade Japanese *kosen* students. Emergent from data collected over one year, the results reveal that these students held detailed, often conflicting perceptions of expectations absorbed from various sources in their social environment. The results suggest that further research is necessary to explore the development of such perceived expectations with students and to investigate the impact on motivation of conflicting detail in expectations.

Dörnyei (2009)のL2 Motivational Self Systemは、第2言語学習者の動機を理解するためにpossible self概念を用いている。 第2言語学習者が感じる「他人の期待」が動機付けになるというのがこのシステムの一部だが、その動機への影響に関して今までの研究結果は一貫性に欠けている。その上、第2言語学習者が感じる「他人の期待」の質に関する研究も少ない。本論は、ある工業高等専門学校1年の学生の動機を質的に調べる研究の一部である。1年間に収集したデータの分析により、学生が社会環境の様々な情報源から得た、詳細だが時には矛盾する期待を感じていたという結果が導き出された。第2言語学習者への「他人から感じる期待」を考察し、矛盾する期待が動機へ及ぼす影響について、更なる研究が必要とされる。

Dörnyei (2009) reconceptualised language-learning motivation with his highly influential L2 Motivational Self System. This system posits an important role for interactions between language learners' ideas of self and the learning environment in the development of motivation, and draws on the notion of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In part connected to Dörnyei's system, in the L2 motivation literature there is a growing consideration of learners as holistic human beings who have lives and experiences predominantly outside the language classroom (Ushioda, 2013). Indeed, one of the original proponents of possible-self theory, Markus (2006) contends that "the social world, particularly peoples' relations with others, is very often the source of the materials for the creation of possible selves, and has a large hand in what, if anything, is done with them" (p. xii). Considering these social elements, there is a clear need for research that encourages language learners to give voice to their perceptions of influences on motivation from their own particular social environment.

The L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei (2009) put forth a motivational system composed of three elements. The *Ideal L2 Self* is the image of who we wish to become, our *best* possible self in the second language-learning domain. The *Ought-to L2 Self* is what one believes about external influences, the "attributes that one believes one *ought to* possess to meet expectations and to *avoid* possible negative outcomes" (p. 29; italics in original). Such external influences are primarily socially constructed through the explicit or perceived expectations of significant others. Lastly, the *L2 Learning Experience* concerns motives emergent in the learning environment, such as the teacher, curriculum, lesson style, and so on.

Much research (i.e., Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Magid, 2015) and pedagogical material (i.e., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013) has focused heavily on learners' images of an ideal L2 self. For example, Magid's (2015) research with Chinese international students studying at a British university found that these students reported putting more time and effort into English study as their images of ideal L2 self became stronger. Regarding the ought-to L2 self however, recent literature gives a conflicting picture of its influence in different contexts (i.e., Csizér & Lukács, 2010; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Lamb, 2012; Pigott, 2011). For instance, Csizér and Lukács' (2010) research with high school students in Hungary found that the ought-to self had very little influence on motivated behaviour, with these scholars suggesting that "the lack of the emergence of an ought-to self dimension might . . .

be explained by the fact that the secondary-school participants are still relatively young to internalise the pressure the environment might put on them" (p. 6).

In contrast to such findings, research conducted by Pigott (2011) in the Japanese high school context found that 89% of respondents reported a stronger influence on their motivation from the ought-to L2 self than an ideal self using English in the future (p. 544). The present paper is an attempt to build on Pigott's insightful findings by exploring the detail of ought-to L2 self images that Japanese adolescent students in one class expressed during a qualitative research project.

The Study

The current paper focuses on one dimension of an emergent, interpretive study of EFL learning motivation carried out in Japan (Sampson, 2014). The research was conducted longitudinally over one year with one class of 40 students aged 15-16 years at a *kosen*, a 5-year college of technology. These first-grade students had just made a transition from the regular Japanese junior-high school system to a college environment in which their studies focused primarily on the development of young, work-ready engineers. The participant group existed naturally together in the context of the *kosen* for only one year (April 2011–February 2012), and so data were collected over this period that the group was defined in the environment of study.

Method

My previous experiences with older students at the college had been of disengaged learners who struggled to understand the purpose of their compulsory English studies. For this study, I used action research to introduce change-action activities to encourage members in a class group that I was teaching to reflect on and share their ideas about EFL motivation and an English-using self. I used action research as it lends itself to the pursuit of both new knowledge and change in classroom spaces (Dick, 2000). The discussion in this article focuses in particular on one of the introduced change-action activities.

Predominantly qualitative data collection tools were employed. Activity worksheets encouraged learners to reflect on and compare ideas of self and EFL learning motivation. Learning journals (LJ) elicited student experiences about using such activity worksheets and in general about sessions with me as their teacher. Phelps (2005) has argued that reflective journals are a particularly effective tool in education research as they allow participants to give voice to the "complex interplay of factors that impact upon an individual" (p. 40). Students wrote in these LJs in Japanese at the end of each session to allow the collection of detailed data that directly followed experience of the change-action activities and lessons. Although there were additional sources of data, the discussion in this paper draws on the aforementioned two forms.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed during the action research by looking for repetitions and regularities in data sources to find connections in the data (see Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Broad themes emergent from a selection of texts were compared with a further selection, involving the reading of all participant texts at that data-collection point. The analysis was conducted in the first instance in Japanese, with extracts then being translated and analysed again in English. Themes from the Japanese and English analyses were then compared for congruence. In line with the action research cycle, analysis was iterative as new data led me to introduce additional change-action activities to add further depth to my understandings.

Results and Interpretations

At various times throughout the year I noticed in students' reflections in their LJs hints of the ways in which they perceived expectations from society around them regarding their future English abilities. The following extract is representative (all names are pseudonyms):

> Through today's lesson, I thought once again how necessary English is for the globalizing world, for my future when I go out into society. (Aoi, LJ, 12/4/2011)

Aoi's writing reveals that she perceives English ability as a necessary quality of future membership of adult society in Japan, possibly due to processes of globalisation, leading to a sense of pressure from the world around her. In another example, a role-model presentation in which an older student made a speech about his experiences during an overseas internship, one student, Yuma, was encouraged to write in great detail about the influence of the opinions of those around him on his ideas of future possibility:

> I think that I want to do some kind of work related to space. If I only could, I've even thought

> that I'd like to become an astronaut. But from all around, all I hear is, "you're dreaming!" or "get real!" And then, I've even been told, "If you go overseas to where lots of international engineers come together, you'll have to speak not only English but many other languages too." But listening to today's presentation about the overseas internship, and the fact that you don't have to have perfect English, my motivation has gone up. I might be following a dream too much, but I want to try! (Yuma, LJ, 11/5/2011)

Yuma reflects on the ways in which the opinions of those around him have swayed his ideas of a future occupation. Such extracts from students reveal the possible influence of the ought-to L2 self on their conceptions of future possibility, as they perceive expectations from those around them.

Absorbed Expectations from Peers

As reflected in Yuma's writing above, a significant influence on attitudes towards learning English for many youths is the values perceived from immediate peer networks (Ryan, 2009). Hints of such influences were revealed in the regular LJ writing of students. For example, some students made social comparisons with others relating to their own level of effort in studying:

> At first today we thought about the goal we'd set at the start of second semester. Everyone had been doing something, even a small thing, to move towards their goals. But I haven't been doing anything, so I got uneasy. So I think I'll change it to a smaller goal that I can achieve soon. (Taichi, LJ, 8/12/2011)

Taichi's reflection implies an initial perception that his peers would also not be expecting serious engagement in working towards English goals. He expresses surprise and anxiety however when he realises that this perception was misplaced, and motivation through this peer-comparison to adjust his actions. Other students also wrote of perceived inferiority with others leading to expectation:

> When friends said they did an [overseas] homestay, or lived in England, I thought I want to get close to English so that I don't lose out to those kinds of experiences. (Sayaka, LJ Reflection 1, 5/10/2011)

Sayaka compares herself with peers who have experience overseas, and notes that she doesn't want to "lose out to those kinds of experiences." Her comment suggests that for her, comparison with peers encourages her to perceive such overseas experience as an expectation.

A further aspect of felt pressure from peers emerged through the way in which some students reflected on expectations of a certain level of English ability, usually through achievement on tests. For example, one participant made several comparisons with his sister and her experiences of English learning and taking a common test of English in Japan:

> My older sister is really good at English, and she's been making fun of me, so that's given me more motivation. Although my sister has *Eiken* pre-1st grade, I've never even tried taking the Eiken test, so I've developed a kind of inferiority complex. But I think not having anything [test certificate] is really not all that good, so I want to try so I can get about the 3rd grade. (Shun, LJ Reflection 1, 5/10/2011)

Introducing Change-Action

Such responses from student LJ writing prompted me to introduce an activity that explicitly encouraged students to write brief ideas of expectations connected to English from teachers, companies, and family members. They then mingled and compared these perceptions (see Appendix A for the worksheet used). Although these written reflections do not allow an understanding of their connections to motivation for these students, they do allow some insight into the kinds of perceptions of pressures and expectations regarding English that students may have been bringing into the classroom with them. The following three sections describe some of the key themes emergent from this activity (all responses are dated 11/1/2012).

Absorbed Expectations from Teachers

Firstly, student writing reveals a split between a majority of students who believed their teachers had only basic expectations of competence for them, and a minority who perceived higher expectations of competence:

Lower expectations of competence

- The least necessary level of English (conversation, reading etc.) (Masa)
- Able to use to the level least necessary in society. (Tetsuo)
- Want me to acquire basic English ability. (Makoto)

Higher expectations of competence

- Want [me] to master [it]. (Koji)

These students have clear ideas of what teachers expect of them regarding their English studies, and unfortunately these perceived expectations were not on the whole positive. It is well documented how the expectations of teachers can influence student motivation and engagement in learning (Brophy, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001). As Dörnyei (2001) put it, "if you [the teacher] show commitment towards the students' learning and progress, there is a very good chance that they will do the same thing" (p. 34). However, the message that the majority of these learners brought into the class group was that teachers held quite low expectations for their English learning.

Absorbed Expectations from Companies

In contrast, learners' perceptions of expectations from companies regarding their English abilities not only featured pressure to attain a high degree of competence, but also included reference to specific tasks or purposes for which they might be expected to use English:

- English ability to the degree that can do business with foreign business partners. Can understand electronic communications correctly. (Eiji)
- Level such that [I] can convey [my] will at meetings and presentations. (Tetsuo)
- English ability to a degree that [I] can be active even overseas. (Seiya)

As the final extract from Seiya attests, students often believed that companies would expect them to use English when going overseas or for communication with those overseas. Whilst Ushioda (2013) has argued that in the modern world the idea of *foreign* language learning has in many ways become untenable due to the relative ease of both virtual and physical travel (p. 5), the perceived expectations of companies that these students brought with them into the classroom suggest that, for many, English is still something predominantly foreign:

Going overseas

- Even if [I] go overseas, not an embarrassing level of English. (Reiji)
- Can work overseas. (Kousuke)

Communication with those overseas

- Dealing with orders from overseas etc. (Masa)
- Someone capable who can use English in the case that the other company is foreign. (Satoshi)
- Email communication with overseas companies. (Jiro)

Absorbed Expectations from Family Members

The expectations that students perceived from their families also revealed the use of English primarily outside of Japan in the form of travel:

- Can interpret at travel destinations. (Eiji)
- Useful for travel. (Teru)

In parallel with the perceived expectations of teachers, student writing showed that many students believed their families held very low expectations for their progress with English study:

- Can do somewhat. (Reiji)
- Not hoping anything especially. (Koji)
- Not necessary. (Ryo)
- Nothing special. (Yu)

As Brophy (1998) contends, "each person has a unique motivational system, developed in response to experiences and to socialisation from significant others in his or her life" (p. 168). For adolescent students, parents are one such significant influence. Research by Taylor (2013), with EFL learners in Romania found that neither their teachers nor parents really expected English to play an important role in the students' future. Taylor also observed a gap between teacher and parent concerns and student conceptions about English: Whilst the former primarily considered English an academic subject and held short-term expectations about grades and examinations, students "could not emphasise enough how much they wished lessons would prepare them for real life" (p. 119). The writing of students in my study is perhaps even more shocking due to the apparent disinterest that these students perceive from their family members. For students who bring into the classroom with them a belief that family members, those who have probably been closest to them up to this point in their lives, are not hoping anything especially for their English studies, motivation to learn must undoubtedly be affected.

Sharing Understandings of Expectations

Student LJ writing concerning this activity hints that expectations are experienced as part of the ought-to L2 self, as students reflected on a kind of pressure to match up to these expectations:

> When I think that there are people who expect things of us, I thought that I have to do my best. (Daiki, LJ, 11/1/2012)

> Up until today I hadn't really thought deeply about how there are expectations of me, but through thinking, something became heavy. . . . I thought to study hard. (Kazu, LJ, 11/1/2012)

As Kazu's extract reveals, it also appears that the ways in which the change-action activity encouraged students to reflect on their own understandings whilst comparing with their peers allowed a valuable opportunity to notice ideas about expectations:

> I was able to think afresh about myself and the people close around me. All the other people's ways of thinking were all different. I thought [they] would be thinking something kind of the same, but every person had their own different thoughts. (Taku, LJ, 11/1/2012)

Conclusion

The analysis in the current research revealed various forms in which participants perceived conflicting expectations about their English learning and future English use from those around them in their particular social environment. It hints that students perceive expectations as a form of pressure, but also that this pressure may be subconscious. The research suggests the potential benefits of explicit exploration with students of their ideas of such absorbed expectations, as well as the chance to compare their own ideas with those of their peers and perhaps the actual expectations of those around them. Teachers could allow students to discuss past research findings about the expectations of teachers and potential employers from the students' particular context (in the *kosen* context, one excellent source is *Koseneigo kennkyuuiinkai*, 2008). Another potentially fruitful activity would be to ask students to interview close family members and their peers about what they hope or expect for that individual. Through such activities learners might become more cognizant of expectations about their EFL learning, and reflect on the reasons for those expectations. Further research is necessary to investigate how perceptions of these absorbed pressures develop, in what ways they influence motivational trajectories of individuals over time, and how dynamically changing, congruent, and discrepant perceptions of expectations from the social context interact.

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Richard Sampson has been working in the Japanese educational context for over 15 years. He holds a MAppL from the University of Southern Queensland (Australia), and a PhD from Griffith University (Australia). His research interests include language learner and teacher motivation as a complex system and possible selves. He can be contacted at <sampson@gunma-u.ac.jp>.

Appendix: Expectations Activity Worksheet (English translation)

You may have various predictions or expectations about your own future, for example, "such-and-such English ability is necessary", "there might be an occasion to do such-and-such using English" or "as a graduate of *kosen* I want to be active in such-and-such a field." However, in the table below, don't write your own ideas, but instead write what you think other people are expecting of you.

	English	*Kosen* Graduate
1. Teachers		
2. Companies		
3. Family		

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