



Possible L2 Selves and Learner Beliefs of Secondary School Students

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With English being a compulsory subject from the third year of elementary school in Japan, long-term L2 learning motivation has become increasingly important. As such, it is necessary to ascertain the attitudes of learners towards studying English and its future use. The participants in this quantitative study were 265 Year 9 public Japanese junior high students. A questionnaire featuring 18 Likert-scale questions gauged student opinions regarding the strength of their ideal and ought-to L2 selves, and the value of communicative and grammar translation approaches. Results indicated that students had stronger ideal L2 selves than ought-to selves and were positive towards the communicative approach more so than grammar translation. However, their possible L2 selves were weak, and the participants were unable to distinguish the pedagogical approaches as two separate constructs. Recommendations have been included as to how best to encourage the creation and development of L2 possible selves to support long-term student motivation.

英語が小学校3年生から必修科目となり、長期的な第二言語(L2)の学習意欲がますます重要となっている。そのため、英語学習と将来の使用に対する学習者の態度を把握することが必要である。本研究は256名の日本の公立中学校3年生を対象とした量的研究である。18の質問から構成されるリッカート尺度によるアンケートを使用して、生徒のL2における理想自己と義務自己の強さ、コミュニケーション・アプローチおよび文法訳読法の価値に関する意見を測定した。生徒はL2における理想自己よりも義務自己が強く、文法訳読法よりもコミュニケーション・アプローチを好むことが分かった。しかし、L2における可能自己は弱く、生徒は教育アプローチを二つの別々の構造として区別できなかった。生徒の長期的な学習意欲を維持するため、L2における可能自己の創造と発展を促す最善の提案についても考察する。

Over the years, English has become a more prominent part of compulsory education in Japan to the point that it is now a mandatory subject from the third year of elementary school (Nemoto, 2018). With Year 3 and 4 students having one lesson per week, Year 5 and 6 students having two lessons per week, and Year 7, 8, and 9 students having four lessons per week, by the time they graduate from junior high school, students in Japan will have taken part in a minimum of approximately 630 English lessons. However, there has been a decrease in Japanese students interested in studying and working overseas (Taguchi, 2013). Since the country has a comparatively low immigrant population, many students may not believe they will use English in the future, with male students in particular less likely to have vivid visions of themselves as future L2 users (Henry, 2009). According to Dörnyei (2009), possessing a vivid and clear vision of oneself using the L2 in the future is vital to sustaining the motivation to learn a language. As such, it is important to establish whether young learners have already formed visions of themselves as L2 users. For those who have not, they can be assisted in creating such visions. For those who have, teachers can adjust their pedagogical approach to better align with how the students envisage themselves using English. In doing so, the realization that the pedagogical approach is directly related to their own long-term goals should increase students' motivation.

Ideal and Ought-to L2 Selves

The L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) consists of three fundamental concepts: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self represents the individual's own positive vision of themselves as a future L2 user (e.g., living overseas, having L2 speaking friends), while the ought-to L2 self is a self-image of what the individual believes they should achieve as an L2 user in order to avoid negative consequences (e.g., failing examinations, disappointing parents). These possible selves can serve as learners' guides, driving motivation by fostering a desire to narrow the gap between their current selves and their possible selves (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The



L2 learning experience, the third element of the L2MSS, pertains to learners' attitudes towards the learning environment (e.g., the curriculum, the teacher). As Dörnyei (2019) noted, the L2 learning experience can strongly influence the motivation of language learners.

The L2MSS, a synthesis of the psychological theories of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), has been used in research across diverse cultural settings and with different demographic groups around the world. Since its inception, there has been a surge in motivation-related research in the field of second language learning (Boo et al., 2015). This upswing in research activity is largely attributed to the L2MSS and its highlighting of the crucial role of motivation, which not only initiates the L2 language learning process but also provides the momentum to sustain it (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). However, tertiary students made up the majority of participants in L2MSS studies, leading Boo et al. (2015) to suggest that more studies needed to be conducted with secondary school students. Since high school students tend to prioritize studying an L2 for the purpose of passing high-stakes entrance examinations (Yung, 2019), junior high school students might be better placed to envision the role that English will play in their future beyond short-term goals.

Studies have consistently shown that female students have stronger ideal L2 selves than male students, regardless of age (e.g., Henry, 2009; Lamb, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Yashima et al., 2017). Henry (2009) found that while female students' ideal L2 selves strengthened over time, male students' ideal L2 selves weakened. Henry also suggested that gender-role intensification, which typically occurs in adolescence, might cause male students to eschew subjects which are stereotypically perceived to be less appropriate to their gender. To counter this, Henry believed that more multilingual male role models should be introduced to students, and that an increase of male language teachers may help to redress the decreased L2 motivation for male students over time.

Communication Orientation and Grammar Translation Orientation

In Japan, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been promoted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) since the 1989 Course of Study (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Since then, the increase in English lessons has been supplemented by a greater emphasis on the value of communicative English; in the 2008 Course of Study Guidelines the increased number of hours of English instruction was explicitly tied to providing more time for communicative activities (Tahira, 2012). Despite MEXT's promotion of CLT, its implementation has not been universally effective.

Cook (2012) found that, although they approved of CLT activities, teachers in Japan often did not use them in their classes. Some reasons given by the teachers interviewed for not using CLT activities were a lack of familiarity with CLT, the need to focus on entrance examinations, and classroom management issues. These factors led them to rely on using the grammar-translation method in their lessons instead.

Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) suggested that students' beliefs about the learning process are important because these beliefs have a significant influence on learning behaviors. A study by Sakui and Gaies (1999) showed that Japanese university learners of English were aware of the difference between a communicative orientation and a more grammar-focused orientation to learning English and had beliefs about the efficacy of the two approaches. Learner beliefs regarding the value of CLT can influence how willing they are to participate in communicative activities. In a study by Peng (2012), students who had a high willingness to communicate (WTC) believed that communicative activities were necessary, whereas those with a low WTC felt that they were superfluous and provided little benefit towards their primary goal of passing examinations. These beliefs manifested in the amount of effort they were willing to expend on participating in communicative activities in the classroom.

Yashima et al. (2017) found that female students scored significantly higher on communication orientation than male students, though no notable difference was discovered in the grammar translation orientation. One reason proffered by Yashima et al. was that female Japanese students might believe they could express themselves with more freedom in the L2 than through their L1.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. Do junior high school students have a stronger ideal or ought-to L2 self? And, do these results differ for female and male students?
- RQ2. Do junior high school students believe a communicative approach or a grammar translation approach is more effective? And, do these results differ for female and male students?

Method

The participants in the study were 265 Year 9 junior high school students (133 female and 132 male) from two public schools in a mid-sized city in Saitama Prefecture. This



was a quantitative study that used a questionnaire featuring one question regarding the gender of the participant and 18 Likert-scale items (see Appendix). The items were adapted from ones used in a study by Yashima et al. (2017) which examined the influence of learner beliefs and gender on the possible L2 selves of 2,631 first-year university students in Japan. The questionnaire was sourced from the IRIS Database (Yashima et al., 2023) in both Japanese and English. Some of the items were given minor adjustments to make them more suitable for junior high school students. The intended effort construct was removed because the use of self-reported intended effort has been criticized as not being an effective indicator of actual achievement (Al-Hoorie, 2018).

Participants responded to the 18 Likert-scale items regarding their attitudes towards studying English, and how they envisaged using the language in the future. The items were designed to address the constructs of communication orientation (4 items, $\alpha = .68$), grammar translation orientation (4 items, $\alpha = .60$), ideal L2 self (5 items, $\alpha = .87$), and ought-to L2 self (5 items, $\alpha = .77$). All of the items required participants to choose a response to a positive statement (e.g., *The things I want to do in the future require me to speak English*) on a partially labeled five-point scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). None of the other points on the scale were identified.

The study received prior approval from the principals of the two schools involved. The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms and a link to the survey was sent to one Japanese teacher of English (JTE) in each school in February 2023. The two JTEs were chosen because they were former coworkers of mine. The teachers gave a link to the questionnaire through Google Classroom and their students completed the survey during an English lesson. Students gave their informed consent prior to taking part in the study and were told that participation was optional and that their submissions were anonymous. No data were missing from the gender question and Likert-scale item responses.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all Likert-scale items including means and standard deviations. Two-tailed t-tests were run to examine the extent to which gender affected students' possible L2 selves and beliefs about learning approaches. Paired samples t-tests were run to examine whether there were significant differences between students' ideal and ought-to L2 selves as well as beliefs about the communicative and grammar translation approaches for both genders. An exploratory factor analysis was run to determine if any groupings of items should be considered beyond the communication

orientation, grammar translation orientation, ideal L2 self, and ought-to L2 self constructs in the study by Yashima et al. (2017). All statistical analyses were conducted using the program JASP (JASP Team, 2020).

Results

In response to Research Question 1 (Do junior high school students have a stronger ideal or ought-to L2 self? And, Do these results differ for female and male students?), Table 1 shows the results of the Likert scale questionnaire for the constructs of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self. A Shapiro-Wilk test showed that neither the ideal self construct ($W = 0.97$, $p < 0.01$) nor the ought-to self construct ($W = 0.98$, $p < 0.01$) were normally distributed.

Table 1
Students' Possible L2 Selves

Possible L2 Selves	Female		Male	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ideal L2 self	2.64	0.94	2.73	1.01
Ought-to L2 self	2.49	0.78	2.29	0.77

Note. $N = 265$. Responses on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

In terms of ideal selves, female students ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.94$) and male students ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.01$) did not differ significantly, $t(263) = -0.74$, $p = 0.46$. However female students ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.78$) had significantly stronger ought-to selves than male students ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(263) = 2.10$, $p = 0.04$. The effect size was small ($d = 0.26$). The ideal selves of female students did not differ significantly from their ought-to selves, $t(132) = 1.77$, $p = 0.08$, however the ideal selves of the male students did differ significantly from their ought-to selves, $t(131) = 5.09$, $p < 0.01$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.44$).

In response to Research Question 2 (Do junior high school students believe a communicative approach or a grammar translation approach is more effective? And, do these results differ for female and male students?), Table 2 shows the results of the Likert scale questionnaire for the constructs of communication orientation and grammar translation orientation. A Shapiro-Wilk test showed that neither the communicative



construct ($W = 0.96, p < 0.01$) nor the grammar translation construct ($W = 0.96, p < 0.01$) were normally distributed.

Table 2
Students' Beliefs about Learning Approaches

Pedagogical approach	Female		Male	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Communicative	3.86	0.66	3.74	0.82
Grammar translation	3.72	0.59	3.63	0.78

Note. $N = 265$. Responses on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

The difference in approval of the communicative approach between the female students ($M = 3.86, SD = 0.66$) and male students ($M = 3.74, SD = 0.82$) was not significant, $t(263) = 1.38, p = 0.17$. Likewise the difference in approval of the grammar translation approach between the female students ($M = 3.72, SD = 0.59$) and male students ($M = 3.63, SD = 0.78$) was also not significant, $t(263) = 1.01, p = 0.31$.

The difference in female students' approval of the communicative approach and grammar translation approach was significant, $t(132) = 2.37, p = 0.02$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.21$). There was not a significant difference between male students' approval of the communicative and grammar translation approaches, $t(131) = 1.63, p = 0.11$.

Considering the similar levels of approval of both pedagogical approaches and the low Cronbach's alpha for the constructs, an exploratory factor analysis was run to examine whether the participants were viewing the two pedagogical approaches as separate constructs. A four-factor solution was rejected due to three items not loading onto any factor and one item cross-loading. A three-factor solution was chosen as suggested by an examination of the scree plot, though this resulted in one item not loading onto any factors. The promax oblique rotation method was used due to the assumed correlation between the factors. Table 3 shows the results of the exploratory factor analysis.

Table 3
Exploratory Factor Analysis of Likert Scale Items

Item and Construct	Factor loading			Uniqueness
	1	2	3	
Factor 1: Ideal L2 self				
3 (Ideal)	0.97	-0.117	-0.17	0.27
7 (Ideal)	0.90	-0.024	-0.12	0.30
11 (Ideal)	0.77	0.050	-0.06	0.41
18 (Ideal)	0.73	0.069	-0.06	0.46
9 (Communication)	0.62	0.088	0.15	0.43
15 (Ideal)	0.59	-0.123	0.18	0.58
Factor 2: Ought-to L2 self				
8 (Ought-to)	-0.14	0.88	-0.18	0.36
17 (Ought-to)	-0.19	0.87	-0.03	0.36
16 (Ought-to)	0.02	0.52	0.15	0.63
12 (Ought-to)	0.20	0.47	0.01	0.66
4 (Ought-to)	0.20	0.44	-0.03	0.71
Factor 3: English instruction				
14 (Grammar)	-0.12	-0.14	0.79	0.51
6 (Grammar)	-0.25	0.06	0.63	0.68
13 (Communication)	0.02	-0.01	0.56	0.68
1 (Communication)	0.17	-0.11	0.48	0.71
5 (Communication)	0.21	-0.05	0.45	0.68
2 (Grammar)	0.02	0.06	0.45	0.77
10 (Grammar)	0.06	0.20	0.30	0.80

Note. $N = 265$. Applied rotation method is promax.



Internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha for the three factors. The results were fair: $\alpha = .88$ for ideal L2 self (six items), $\alpha = .77$ for ought-to L2 self (five items), and $\alpha = .72$ for English instruction (six items). The Chi-squared test results were $\chi^2(102, N = 265) = 229.86, p < .001$.

Factor 1 was labeled ideal L2 self as it consisted of the five ideal L2 self items and one communication orientation item which could be construed as relating to the ideal L2 self (i.e., *I study English because I want to be able to communicate with people in English*). Factor 2 was labeled ought-to L2 self as it solely consisted of the five ought-to L2 self items. Factor 3 was labeled English instruction because it consisted of both communication orientation and grammar translation orientation items. This conflation of the two pedagogical approaches suggests that, unlike the participants in a study by Sakui and Gaies (1999), the students did not perceive the communicative approach and the grammar translation approach to be separate constructs.

Discussion

With respect to the first research question, unlike the female students, the male students had significantly stronger ideal selves than ought-to selves. This suggests that contrary to expectations regarding the exam-orientation of Japanese students (Kormos et al., 2011), the male students were more motivated by the potential to use English for their own long-term goals, rather than for the short-to-medium term objective of passing high-stakes examinations. Other studies which examined the role of gender in possible L2 selves (Henry, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Yashima et al., 2017) have found that female students tended to have stronger ideal selves and weaker ought-to selves than their male counterparts. That was not the case in this study, as the female and male students did not differ significantly in the strength of their ideal selves, and female students had significantly stronger ought-to selves than the male students.

With respect to the second research question, there was no significant difference in approval between the two approaches for the male students, and female students approved of the communicative approach to a greater extent than the grammar translation approach. These results suggest that CLT has become an established part of the Japanese education system. Studies on teacher beliefs in Japan (e.g., Cook, 2012; Gorsuch, 2001) highlighted teachers' concerns that the communicative approach was detrimental to the ability of students to pass high-stakes entrance examinations. However, the participants in this study did not show any reticence regarding the efficacy of the communicative approach, indicating that they recognize communication to be

a vital aspect of language learning, rather than a distraction from the goal of passing examinations (Peng, 2012).

However, Cronbach's alpha for communication orientation (4 items, $\alpha = .68$) and grammar translation orientation (4 items, $\alpha = .60$) was poor when compared to the study by Yashima et al. (2017) in which the Cronbach's alpha for communication orientation ($\alpha = .79$) and grammar translation orientation ($\alpha = .75$) were appreciably higher. The explanatory factor analysis revealed that the participants were interpreting the two pedagogical approaches as being one construct. This combined factor suggests that, unlike the university students in other studies (Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yashima et al., 2017), the participants did not distinguish the approaches as two separate ways of learning English, but instead as interconnected and integral components of English language education. One reason might be that junior high school students have not been exposed to as many different methods of instruction, or instructors, as university students, and thus do not have the experience to compare different pedagogies and form strong beliefs as to how English should be taught.

Pedagogical Implications

Teachers can have a positive impact on the motivation, attitudes, and amount of effort their students invest in learning a language (Csizér & Kormos, 2009). Using this increase in individual engagement, students can be helped in creating and enhancing their visions of their ideal L2 self through motivational programs (Magid & Chan, 2012). In order to facilitate the development of learners' possible L2 selves, an L2MSS motivational program containing six-components was designed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) to

1. help learners to create a vision of their ideal L2 self,
2. strengthen the vision by making it more elaborate and vivid,
3. make the vision more plausible,
4. help learners to devise an action plan containing concrete steps towards their vision,
5. continuously activate learners' ideal L2 selves, and
6. use the ought-to self to remind learners of the obligations they have to learning the L2.

Magid and Chan (2012) examined two programs based on the one developed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) and found that, despite differences in the participant demographics, the tasks used, and the length of the intervention, both were effective at



increasing student motivation. While developing ideal selves might be challenging in Japanese junior high school classes containing on average more than 30 students (OECD, 2020), teachers can create contexts for English communication which all students are likely to encounter in the future (e.g., assisting tourists, travel overseas, conversations with overseas students in university). By presenting plausible scenarios, students can recognize the relevance of the language to their short- and long-term goals.

For those in elementary school who are unlikely to yet envision themselves as future L2 users, a connection with children from other countries could help the students to see themselves as part of a global community. Davidson and Liu (2020) found that cultural representations of Japan dominated elementary school textbooks and suggested that a greater variety of perspectives would help students to see themselves as global citizens. If teachers initiated cultural exchange programs in which their students communicated with students in other countries, it would provide them with the sense of being part of a global community and emphasize the value of English as a lingua franca. Since 2021, the Japanese government has provided each public school with enough laptops or tablets so that every student in compulsory education in Japan has access to their own computer. Each school manages the computers and students are able to use them in lessons. These computers provide opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication with other students around the world. In countries with comparatively small immigrant populations such as Japan, teachers may need to provide such stimulation for the students to envision situations in which they can utilize English for international communication (EIC).

For older students, the use of English to achieve specific goals will help them to envision how they might use English in their future. Yashima (2009) showed how a Model United Nations (MUN) could encourage the development of possible L2 selves in secondary school, by giving third-year high school students the opportunity to experience using the L2 in a meaningful situation. The third-year students who acted as delegates also served as ideal L2 self role models for the first- and second-year students who participated in the MUN as assistants. Such near peer role models can be very motivating because, due to their relatability, their admired qualities seem more attainable to younger students (Dörnyei, 2001). Teachers, especially those who share the L1 of the learners, can also be role models for students; by sharing their personal experiences of the language learning process they can help make students' images of their ideal selves more vivid (Wang & Liu, 2020).

Conclusion

The present study examined junior high school students' attitudes towards the communicative approach and the grammar translation approach, as well as their ideal and ought-to L2 selves. Since students with stronger ideal selves tend to favor a communicative approach, and students with stronger ought-to selves tend to favor a grammar translation approach (Yashima et al., 2017), it was hoped that the results would clarify which pedagogical approach would better fit with the participants' possible L2 selves. However, it was found that the students did not distinguish the two approaches as separate constructs, instead viewing them both as integral to the English learning process. In addition, the fact that the participants did not demonstrate strong possible L2 selves, could be challenging for teachers aiming to align classroom instruction with their learners' possible L2 selves.

Despite these issues, the fact that participants viewed both communicative and grammar-translation as valid approaches indicates the students recognize a balance is necessary to achieve their L2 goals. The approval of the grammar translation approach might be due to the perception that it is more beneficial to passing high-stakes examinations (Gorsuch, 2001), while the approval of the communicative approach in this study suggests that the students believe communication is an effective way of learning English.

However, despite the greater number of hours now being devoted to English, students may need targeted interventions from teachers to assist them with the development of ideal L2 selves. It is unsurprising that junior high school students do not yet have strong visions of themselves using English in the future. Indeed, many are unsure which high school they wish to attend, let alone whether their future career requires English. By providing opportunities for meaningful intercultural communication, students can envision themselves as part of a global community in which they use the L2 as a means of communication. Providing scenarios in which students use English to achieve specific goals can help them envision how English might be incorporated into their future careers. If students can be helped to create and strengthen their visions of their ideal L2 selves, they will be more likely to devote the necessary investment of time and effort in order to continue learning the language beyond the course of compulsory education.

Further studies should be conducted into the efficacy of L2MSS motivational programs with junior high school students to explore the value of incorporating such programs into the curriculum. In addition, qualitative studies which examine how students envision using English in the future would allow teachers to incorporate materials in their lessons which align with the goals of their learners.



Bio Data

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Appendix

The Questionnaire

Participants responded to the statements on a five-point scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

1. I believe that the best way to learn English is to enjoy learning it.
英語は楽しんで学習することが上達する近道だと思う。
2. Mastering English means acquiring English grammar.
英語を習得するということは、文法を習得することを意味する。
3. The things I want to do in the future require me to speak English.
将来英語を使って仕事をしている自分をよく想像する。
4. I study English because close friends of mine think it is important.
仲の良い友人が英語を学習するので、自分も勉強する。
5. I believe that the best way to learn English is to use it as much as possible.
英語が上達する近道は、とにかく積極的に使うことだ。
6. In order to understand English, I need to translate sentences from English to Japanese.
英語を理解するには、日本語に訳す必要がある。
7. Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself being able to use English.
英語を話せる人になるだろうと将来の自分をよく想像する。
8. I have to study English, because, if I do not study it, I think my parents will be disappointed with me.
自分の両親をがっかりさせるのが嫌なので、英語を勉強する。
9. I study English because I want to be able to communicate with people in English.
私は、人とコミュニケーションができるようになるために英語を勉強している。
10. I should be able to use English well if I memorize a certain number of words and learn grammar.
一定数の単語を覚えて文法を習得すると、英語は必ず使えるようになる。
11. When I think about my future, it is important that I use English.
将来のやりたいことのためには、英語を話す必要がある。
12. I consider learning English is important because the people I respect think that I should do it.
私が尊敬する人たちが英語を勉強するべきだと思っているので勉強する。



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13. In order to acquire reading abilities in English, we need to read a lot.
英語の読解力をつけるためには、とにかくたくさんの量を読むことが必要だと思う。
14. When I translate from English to Japanese, I understand the meaning better.
英語を日本語に訳してみると、よく理解できる。
15. One of my dreams is to be able to use English effectively in the future.
英語を自由に使えるようになることは、私の夢のうちの一つである。
16. Studying English is important to me because an educated person is supposed to be able to speak English.
教育を受けた人なら誰しも英語を話すことができるはずなので勉強する。
17. If I fail to learn English, I will be letting teachers and friends down.
私が英語を勉強しなかったら先生や友人をがっかりさせるので勉強する。
18. I can imagine speaking English with international friends.
外国の友人と英語ではなしているのをよく思い浮かべる。