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Language Learning and Teaching

Lifelong English Motivation and Identity: A Case Study

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Abstract: The current case study investigated the strategies to enhance motivation toward studying English and examined impact of its experience on identity. The author, as an informant, reminisced on his experience regarding studying English from junior high school period to completion of his Master's degree in the United States. The data were interpreted by the author from a third person perspective. The effective strategies to keep motivation were identified as achieving a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and social support (Elwood, 2006). A unique identity as an English-speaker self emerged in his early years of studying English. Although he denied his Japanese-speaking self, after years of struggle, he found his identity between a Japanese-speaking self and his English-speaking self.

Introduction

Global talents travel around the world in last few decades. To nurture such talents who thrive in the trend of globalization, the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has strongly promoted communicative English education in public schools. A report of international English proficiency test (EF EPI) said, however, Japanese adults ranked on 26th in 60 countries, and have not improved English in past six years (Education First Japan, 2014). One of the roots of the problem is emphasis on preparation for university entrance examinations (Gorsuch, 2000). Instructions tend to be based on the beliefs of the teachers (i.e., a certain methodology is effective for every student) and lack the perspective of individuality of the students such as psychological state and attitude toward English.

Previous research identified the key factor for successful language learning. Elwood (2006) interviewed nine university students in Japan and found that they had realistic evaluation of their English ability, highly motivated to do something internationally, and strong support system such as friends and teachers. Furthermore, such highly proficient English learners perceived emergence of identity as an English speaker.

Aforementioned factors are especially strong elements and those interact each other when an individual learn the second language.

Six out of nine informants of the Elwood's (2006) study, however, were returnees. Thus, opinions of the high proficiency in English who had grown up in Japan may have been underrepresented. This article provides supplement information with highlighting a narrative of a person who grew up in Japan and also has high English proficiency. This article also provides longitudinal aspect of language acquisition. Language cannot be acquired in short term. The longitudinal perspective also helps readers to understand how the aforementioned factors interacted in an individual's life. The purpose of this paper is to describe the episodes, thoughts, and emotions of an individual and discuss them in academic context.

Method

The informant was the author. Episodes, thoughts, and emotions regarding English were reminisced about the time between when the author began studying English in junior high school and the time completing Master's degree program in a university in the United States (U.S.). The reminiscence was interpreted in third person perspective.

Background of the informant. The nationality of the informant is Japanese. He was born and grew up in Japan. The first time he went outside of Japan was at the third year of high school, to visit Toronto to see a former Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at

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his school. While he was pursuing for bachelor's degree at a university in Japan, he went to Toronto for six-month internship at a sports facility. After the college, he worked at a non-profit organization for two years. Then he went for backpacking world trip (Nagata, 2010). He came back to Japan and work for a while, and he went to the U.S. and completed his Master's degree. Now, he is ready to begin his Ph.D. program in another university in the U.S.

Results and Discussion

Junior High School. The basis of the motivation toward English emerged in this era. Intrinsic motivation played a key role. He studied it just because it was fun. He especially enjoyed an external resource (i.e., a radio English lesson program) that was more appropriate level for his ability than the school English classes. The matched level of ability and the task difficulty made him experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). His lost sense of time is the evidence of the flow experience. In its state, learning effect reaches maximum. The effort of listening English every day, at least a short amount of time, was important to nurture the sensitivity to the English pronunciation.

Growing up in a rural town in Ibaraki prefecture, I did not have any contact with English until the age of 12, when I began taking English classes in junior high school. I was not interested in languages until then. By the time of my entrance of junior high school, my mother had assigned me a radio English program (and this was the only thing my parents could afford to do). I do not think the English classes at school was not challenging and interesting, but the English radio program was. I think it was appropriate to my level of ability. I completed one 15-minute lesson a day, and program was short enough for my attention span. I just liked the program because the more I study, the more I can understand foreign language that I had ever thought I had known before. It was a new and fresh experience I had never experienced before. So I often lost time while exploring things that I wanted to know. Two or three hours are easily passed without I realized. Also, I found it was fun that many of *Katakana* words in Japanese were originated in English. I was especially interested in the

differences in pronunciation, so I paid special attention to the sound of the words. I still remember that I wondered why the pronunciation of a word "hospital" was different between our Japanese English teacher and an American Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).

The informant did not have much English speaking opportunity in junior high school. The first English speaking experience came relatively late, but was so positive that made him more devote to the language.

I do not think we had real English speaking opportunity for a while. I remember an ALT came to our class, and we did some conversation pattern practices with her, but it was far from real English speaking experience. I liked to understand listening English, but I did not even think I have expected to learn English conversation then. What really changed my attitude toward English was a personal contact with an ALT. I had an opportunity to participate in English speech contest in the senior year of junior high school. An ALT supervised my speech practice, and I had a casual conversation in English for the first time. The phrases and words I had learned and practiced to use were understood by a person in front of me. That feeling of efficacy was the emotion that I had never experienced before.

High School. As discussed by Gorsuch (2000), high school English education was university entrance exam oriented. Such characteristics were rather welcomed because the informant's school is a *Shingaku-kou*, in which all students aim to enter universities (therefore, strong expectation for grammar and form-oriented instruction by both students and parents).

I was playing baseball in a school team in my high school. The practice was so hard, that I had hard time to maintain my motivation in English (and also in other subjects). The learning contents in English classes were much difficult than that of junior high school, and had little time to study it because of the baseball practice. The class was far from communicative, but based on grammar and translation practice. So, I little by little began to lose interest in English.

Person to person interaction opportunity using English brought him back to the world

of English. The studying methods were similar to Kikuchi's (2008), but he sought more opportunity to speak English in person. Realistic evaluation of his English ability that was discussed by Elwood (2006) was critical importance to achieve continuous improvement (Bandura, 1977). Around then, he began to realize that English speaking self is not the same as Japanese speaking self. Kanno (2003) discussed that an individual who stays in a second language environment develops a certain identity. His level of involvement in English was not as long as the participants of Kanno's discussion, still this may be a sign of emergence of an identity.

The turning point was a Hokkaido trip event led by teachers of the Japan Exchange Teachers (JET) program. The trip was a one-week program that high school students spent time with JET teachers and do activities all in English. This opportunity re-opened my eyes to English. It reminded me of the feeling that English is fun. I was not very good at playing baseball and was almost giving up then. So I came back from the trip, and I shifted my way of life. I quit it and devoted to studying English.

I played English radio station to make my environment. I bought a few English conversation CD books and made them as a model. I practiced again and again to master the expression. Also, I used TIME magazine for reading materials for reading and vocabulary building. I used an English dictionary to get used to explain things in English and I took class notes in English. I do a lot of things, but all in all, I always check my abilities. Vocabulary levels, reading speed, listening comprehension... I did not use objective assessment tools, but I just cared things like that all the time, and chose the task to try my ability. In addition, I began to find more opportunities to spend time outside of classes with ALTs whom I made friends with. We went out for bowling, for dinner, and for movies.

From then, I began to feel that myself who is speaking English is different from who I was. I thought I was a shy and introverted person, but when I speak English, I was extraverted, active, and open-minded. I think I went out with ALTs friends because I could feel like I am a different person.

Although he did not enjoy English classes in school, he found the education was helpful when he began his graduate study.

Honestly, I was not very good at English in classes. I was not very big fan of reading and writing, so I was trying not to do it as much as I could. One day, I got a failing grade in writing class. And an English teacher asked me to come talk with him. He said "I know this is not your favorite task for you. But at the same time, I know you like English. Let me tell you, now it might be very tough time to practice English like this, but you definitely will realize the worth in the future. You may not notice now, but writing skill becomes the most important once you go out to the working world". I believed that he said it to me because he trusted me. Such support helped me to overcome the mental barrier of writing. I thought the training that I received when I was in high school was very helpful when I entered graduate school. If I have not tried hard to practice English then, I may have had hard time to complete the Master's degree program.

College and Work. The identity that he realized when he was in high school has become established in this time. Two different identities coexisted inside of him. Similar to one of the informants in Elwood's (2006) study, he was comfortable with it. Perception of the identity may be different because the informant in Elwood's study was a returnee who had to use English to live, but the informant of this paper used English only when he wanted to.

In my life in college, English was around every day. Although I was in Japanese university, seeking for friendship with international students and faculty allowed me to use English quite often. It was everyday thing to speak English and interact with people from different cultures. Attending parties, tutoring international students, visiting professor's office... opportunities were limitless.

Being a different personality when I spoke English was so comfortable. I actually never thought it was weird to have two personalities in myself. I think I rather took advantage of it. I sought English speaking opportunities when I felt tired of Japanese styles of relationships. I think I could come back and forth easily between Japanese personality and English personality.

For the informant, the motivation cannot be discussed without human relationships. Mentors who showed the future life models were the significant motivators for him. At the time when he had less opportunity to use English when he began working, support system (Elwood, 2006) such as friends and mentors played an important role to keep him motivated.

The biggest impact on my life in this time was meeting with my lifelong mentors. A Japanese professor who finished his Ph.D. degree in the U.S., and an American professor who had completed Ed.D. degree while he taught at universities impacted big time on me. Influence of these people made me think about foreign university for higher degrees in the future.

After I graduated from college, I started to work at a sport organization for people with disabilities. The work was at a typical Japanese work environment that had a strict hierarchy and long working hours. I did not have any opportunity to use English at work. Without English-speaking friends and mentors, I do not think I could keep my interest in English.

Travel & Grad School. The informant for the first time struggled with his identity. He felt distance to the Japanese speaking self. He thought English speaking “me” was real self. He may have reached such conclusion because of the differences in knowledge levels between Japanese speaking society and English speaking society. He may have thought Japanese society is too strict to show their real self because he knew more rules and customs. After when he went to work in the U.S., he learned more rules and customs for the society and somewhat earned balanced view. When he had balanced perspective, the identity problem gradually solved. As Kanno (2003) discussed, he found his identity in between Japanese and English.

My life shifted when I quit my job and began backpacking travel abroad. Again, using English became everyday thing. It was wonderful opportunity to think who I really was. The smiles I had met during my trip were not fake at all. I thought I was like wearing a smiling mask for being polite at the work even though when I felt like crying. Then, who is the real me? This was

the time I realized that the real “me” was my personality when I spoke English.

After the world trip, I was offered an opportunity to go for Master’s degree program in the U.S. It was a struggle for a while because the required level of the language was so high. Classes and work, and assignments and thesis brought me to be in deep thought. I thought I was extraverted, active, and open-minded when I spoke English, But I found in the process that I am more introverted. I thought I found a right personality in between my Japanese one and English one.

Remembering the high school teacher’s words, I felt that his words were true. The basic skills of writing I learned from him were very useful. And I really thanked that the mentors to be so supportive before and during I was working for the degree. I do not think I could finish the program without their help.

Conclusion

Motivation is hard to keep in the process of learning second language. The informant kept his motivation mainly in two ways: assigning appropriate level of tasks that helped achieve flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and using social support such as friends and mentors (Elwood, 2006). Consistent monitoring of my level of English ability made possible such effective assignment of the tasks. Challenging to myself and completing the tasks certainly improved his confidence and made him challenge to the next level (Bandura, 1977). Such assignment of challenging task (i.e., $i + 1$) may have followed the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1987).

Social support played especially important role in keeping his motivation. He had friends and mentors who can talk when he felt down. The trust and friendship kept him in English world. For him, English is not just “a tool”, but something that connect person to person.

Through the English learning process, different identity emerged and established, and finally integrated as one. As Kanno (2003) discussed, the person who was in other culture for long time follow such development and integration of identity. However, there were significant differences in

length of time spent and environment between Kanno's participants and the informant of this paper. It is not clear if such identity process can be applied for every individual. Further research should be done to clarify the process of identity for grow-up-in-Japan population.

This paper focused on one individual's experience regarding English. The findings should not be generalized from this single case study. Still, the information may be useful for language learners, language teachers, or researchers. The elements in this paper should be used carefully.

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