A Narrative Inquiry into
Why Japanese Learners are Motivated
to Study English
in an Australian Language School

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Contents
Introduction
The English language in Japanese society
Economy, globalisation and English as an international language in Japan
Theories of motivation
Figure 1. A taxonomy of human motivation (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 61)
Literature review of studies on Japanese student motivation
Japanese students studying English in Australia
Data collection
Participants’ stories
Kanae’s story (Age:19)
Anika’s story (Age:26)
Sara’s story (Age:22)
Taro’s story (Age:18)
Episodes
Figure 2. The regulatory styles of motivation of Kanae, Anika, Sara and
          Taro in Ryan & Deci’s taxonomy.
Positive influences on participants' motivation
Negative influences on participants' motivation
Limitations
Potential areas for future research
References
Abstract

Introduction

Japanese learners of English as a Second Language are a significant student population in Australia. In 2012, Japan had the third highest number of offshore granted independent English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) visas in Australia. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) (2012), Japan also ranked seventh in the total number of Working Holiday Visa holders in Australia in 2012, growing 19.5% from the previous period. Yet despite this, little research has been done into why Japanese students choose to study English in Australia, and also the nature of their motivation to study English.

The objective of this research paper is to examine four Japanese university students’ previous and current experiences with studying the English language, elucidate some of the factors that motivate them to continue learning English and subsequently why they travelled to Australia to do so. The four Japanese student participants volunteered their time to reflect on their experiences with the English language from junior high school until the present day, whilst studying English at a language school connected to
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated to Study English in an Australian Language School

an Australian university.

In this research paper, the participants' individual stories are described using a qualitative framework known as 'narrative enquiry'. The use of narrative enquiry is derived from a view of human experiences whereby humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives and interpret their past in terms of these stories (Clandinin et al, 2007).

The English language in Japanese society

Japan has no history of colonial rule by a Western power; while it was occupied by the United States post Second World War, English was never mandated as a language unlike countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong and India (Sargeant 2011, p. 3). Accordingly in practically all aspects of daily Japanese life, English is not used, and is not required to survive, work or function in Japanese society. Indeed the Japanese language “is a highly sophisticated language which can translate anything from the latest technical terms in space engineering and medical science to literary works and matters in subculture” (Yano 2011, p. 133). Virtually anything with English origins is translated into Japanese and adapted so that it can be understood by the mainstream population. Hollywood movies are subtitled, Harry Potter books are translated into Japanese and menus at McDonalds and Starbucks are written in katakana.

Nevertheless, the potential usefulness and necessity of English to the average Japanese person has increased over the past few decades, for predominantly economic reasons. In Japan, decades of idle economic growth, an aging population and a declining birth-rate have resulted in a
shrinking domestic consumer market. Increasingly Japanese companies are looking to expand overseas sales, and also recruit non-Japanese staff as a result of a declining labour pool within Japan. Additionally some of the major Japanese companies are making English the official language, and others have made English ability a prerequisite for recruitment and promotion (Yano 2011, p. 130).

**Economy, globalisation and English as an international language in Japan**

A shrinking domestic consumer market has prompted some major Japanese companies to make English the official language, and English ability a prerequisite for recruitment and promotion (Yano, 2011, p. 130). One prominent example is internet shopping mall operator Rakuten, which has been conducting all board meetings and weekly company meetings in English since March 2012. Rakuten has around 6000 employees globally, including 400 non-Japanese. Rakuten is aiming for 70% of revenue to come from overseas e-markets in the future, and its CEO has been quoted as saying that *all staff* will be required to speak English. Toyota and Nissan have also announced moves to make English use compulsory in the office (NTD Television, 2010). Lastly, beginning in 2013, Takeda Pharmaceutical Company the nation’s largest pharmaceutical firm will require new college graduates to score 730 or more points on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) if they wish to work for the company (Daily Yomiuri Online, 2011).

In non-English speaking countries such as Japan, skills in English are becoming increasingly essential for global competitiveness, as English is a language that has global dominance (Phillipson, 2008 cited in Kubota, 2011,
As a result, English language teaching has been vigorously promoted by the government and within the business sector. In Japan, the ‘Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities’ released by MEXT, recommends for the general public to achieve basic English oral conversational proficiency, and professionals to develop further skills above basic competency. The MEXT document states: ‘it is important for all Japanese people to aim at achieving a level of English that is commensurate with average world standards. This will be based on objective indicators such as STEP, TOEFL, and TOEIC’ (MEXT 2003, p. 1 cited in Kubota 2011, p. 250).

Theories of motivation

If a person is motivated, then they are moved to do something, energized and activated towards an objective. One such popular theory of motivation is called Self Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985). SDT asserts that two main types of motivation exist, one based on an intrinsic interest in the activity itself, and the other based on rewards extrinsic to the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is defined as the undertaking of an activity for its inherent satisfactions, as opposed to some separable consequence. The intrinsically motivated person will be moved to act by fun or challenge, instead of external rouses, influences or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is an important type of motivation, however as people become adults, and take on certain responsibilities, their freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes limited by social requirements. As such, adults often become forced to take on roles and tasks that are non-intrinsically interesting (Seki, 2004).
Extrinsic motivation on the other hand involves performing an activity to obtain an outcome distinct from the activity itself. Four levels of extrinsic motivation have been conceptualised under SDT. These are external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation, depending upon how internalised they are into the self-concept (Carreira, 2012). These four levels of extrinsic motivation differ according to their varying degrees of autonomy or self-determination, (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Firstly, external regulation is seen as the least autonomous whereby behaviours are characterised by feelings of necessity to satisfy external demands or obtain rewards. Introjected regulation is distinguished by undertaking actions to avoid guilt or anxiety, or maintain feelings or worth, self-esteem and pride. Thirdly, identified regulation involves the person recognising the personal importance of a behavior, and therefore acceptance of its value. Finally integrated regulation occurs through self-examination and bringing new regulations into accord with the individuals

This taxonomy of human motivation is presented below in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. A taxonomy of human motivation (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 61)]
own needs and values. Whilst this form of motivation is both autonomous and unconflicted, it is still extrinsic because the behavior is done for its believed instrumental value (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 62).

**Literature review of studies on Japanese student motivation**

To date, much of the research on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational aspects of Japanese students to learn English has been conducted in Japan, at universities, high schools and elementary schools, and is largely quantitative in nature e.g. Kimura 2001; Yashima 2002; Seki 2004; Mori & Gobel 2006; and Carreira 2012. A study by Kimura et al (2001) investigated predominantly high school and university students and found that both integrative and instrumental motivations dominated (e.g. making friends from overseas or going abroad for English study or sightseeing). Seki (2004) surveyed several hundred students at three Tokyo universities, and their motivation towards studying English, and found that extrinsic motivation ranked highest, followed by integrative, instrumental and intrinsic motivation respectively. The results of Seki’s study indicated that students both integrated and internalised their extrinsic motivation into a more personal set of values (integration), thereby accepting the task value of English study. Subsequently student motivation remained strong all year in spite of university English classes that did not meet their stated needs and expectations (Seki 2004, p. 246). Finally, Mori & Gobel’s (2006) study of 453 non-English majors found that many students were instrumentally motivated (a form of extrinsic motivation) to study English, citing reasons such as wishing to live abroad in the future or use English for overseas travel. Quantitative studies like these have contributed to our awareness and conceptualisation of students’ intrinsic/extrinsic motivational
orientations.

Currently fewer qualitative studies exist of Japanese English students studying English, particularly in Australia at the university level. Of particular note is a case study conducted by Tanaka (2011), which followed ten motivated Japanese English learners for 18 months in Japan. Tanaka found that participants were also motivated by both integrativeness and instrumentality, similar to the findings of Kimura et al (2001) and Seki (2004). The participants were motivated to learn English to pass university entrance exams, raise English test scores (such as TOEIC) and earn recognition for being high performing students. A small qualitative study of motivational factors by Piggot (2011), identified that Japanese short term study abroad students in Australia described it first and foremost as a life changing experience, characterised by exposure to different customs and cultural experiences, and secondly an opportunity to improve their linguistic abilities.

Japanese students studying English in Australia

Japanese students in Australia typically enrol in an English language school. These language schools are sometimes stand-alone organisations, but often they are affiliated with Australian universities. The language school that was chosen for this particular study has a range of English language programs, designed to facilitate student learning progressively to improve their English. After completing selected programs and meeting the entrance requirements, students are able to obtain direct entry into undergraduate and postgraduate courses, both at the affiliated university and also at other education providers.
Data collection

Three methods of data collection were used in this study, described herein as Parts 1, 2 and 3 respectively. All questions were written in both English and Japanese. In Part 1, participants were emailed a questionnaire containing 18 open-ended questions about their experiences studying English. The questionnaire was designed to measure a variety of motivational constructs such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This questionnaire was compiled and devised by using a variety of questionnaire items adapted from previous questionnaires conducted by other researchers on motivation (Yashima 2002; Noels 2003; Mori & Gobel 2006 and Papi & Abdollahzadeh 2011).

Part 2 involved a face to face semi structured interview utilising 11 questions to ascertain students’ current experiences studying the English language in Australia. The semi-structured interview was utilised as a follow up to the questionnaire to elicit more elaborate descriptions of participants’ current experiences of English in Australia. Finally in Part 3, participants were requested to write a short essay (1/2 a page) in Japanese imagining how English might be a part of their lives five years from now.

Participants’ stories

Four Japanese students were interviewed as part of this research. Of these participants, three were female (Kanae 19; Anika 26; Sara 22) and one male (Taro 18). All participants were studying English at a language centre in Melbourne, Australia and were interviewed between October and December 2012. Their narratives are detailed below. Inverted commas are
used for all quotations, and longer quotations are indented without use of commas.

Within the participants’ stories, the use of the word ‘episode’ is used intermittently. The use of the word episode is both intentional and significant. The author believes that such episodes are profoundly important and influential to study abroad students, often with long-lasting affects upon student motivation, both positive and also negative. Throughout this narrative, such episodes are identified within the respondents’ stories, both prior to their arrival in Australia and during their stay.

Kanae’s story (Age:19)

Kanae was 5 years old when she first visited Australia with her parents. During our first meeting I noticed immediately when she started speaking, how well she spoke; smooth, fluid, natural sounding pronunciation, with only occasional pauses and errors. As a teacher of English to Japanese students since 2003, it was pretty evident to me that Kanae had more prior exposure to the English language than the typical Japanese English learner educated solely in Japan. Certainly there were some other good English speakers that I interviewed for this research, but Kanae was a discernible stand out. With the other students, I could occasionally see them searching for words while we spoke, hesitations or some rigidity with their pronunciation. Not so with Kanae.

Kanae attended a local primary school in Grade 1 for a year on the Gold Coast in Queensland. Upon returning to Japan, she continued her schooling
in Japanese, with English having little significance in her life until compulsory English classes commenced, first in junior, then senior high schools. She characterised her experience of English as:

Not interesting for me during junior high school at all. We mostly studied grammar from typical Japanese textbooks, and there were no chances to use the skills we learnt during class. Living in Japan, you don’t need English. But my teachers told me that if I learnt English I would be able to communicate with others. I thought, really? I never hear English when I go outside, and I rarely even see foreigners. So I couldn’t understand why the teachers would say that.

However this attitude changed after Kanae did a home stay in Canada for ten days during junior high school, seemingly having a lasting positive influence on her motivation to learn English thereafter.

When I was studying English at school in Japan, I used textbooks. I remember thinking: there were so many difficult words, why do I need to study these difficult words when I can use much easier words to say the same thing? But then, when I went to Canada, everyone was using the same words that I had seen in the textbook. I realised, ooooh now I understand why I need to learn this vocabulary!

As Kanae described this to me, I identified it as a turning point in her attitude towards English, and a significant episode in her life. Not only was studying English in Canada a fun experience, but after returning to Japan
she also had a realisation about the potential usefulness of English to communicate. After visiting Canada, Kanae started to feel that that she wanted to study English more to communicate with foreigners, and that she definitely wanted to study abroad again someday.

During senior high school, Kanae attended the same school as junior high school, and whilst she found the grammar, textbooks and classes largely uninspiring like before, she now at least had another reason to study harder, to enter university. 'University brand name is very important in Japan. I really wanted to go to a university in Kyoto, because I believe in the philosophy, and the status of that university’s name in Japan’. Kanae’s chosen university in Kyoto had a one year study abroad program, and as Kanae really wanted to study abroad during university, she studied hard to develop her English skills to pass the university entrance examinations during senior high school. After entering university in April, Kanae planned to study abroad in Melbourne in September 2012, which encouraged her to continue studying harder.

People who enrolled in my course (in Japan) had to study abroad in the future. I knew that some of my classmates had much higher English ability than me, so I needed to work harder too. When I see someone who is better at English than me, I really want to be like them.

However, Kanae’s university in Japan did not have a study abroad agreement with any universities on the Gold Coast. Kanae therefore decided to come to a university in Melbourne that did, arriving in Melbourne during August, 2012 with the intention of staying for one year.
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated
to Study English in an Australian Language School

Having lived in Australia before, she was eager to return, and spoke fondly of her time in Australia when she was younger, ‘I really wanted to re-discover the place where I spent my childhood’. Whilst living and studying in Melbourne, returning briefly to that same primary school on the Gold Coast in November, 2012 was a highlight of Kanae’s time so far in Australia. Her eyes glistened as she spoke nostalgically, ‘immediately I contacted my friends with whom I studied in Grade 1, and I visited the school again! It was really reminiscent, I could still remember little details such the road, trees and buildings’.

At the time of our interview, Kanae had been studying English for Academic purposes for three months and was planning to study International studies for a further six months before returning to Japan in August 2013. She was encouraged about her progress with the English language. Speaking about her own motivation to learn, she commented:

Because I will be here for another ten months, I will definitely get many chances to improve my English, and communicate with local people. If people understand my English and I understand them, it really increases my confidence. Sometimes people use vocabulary I don’t know, so I have to study harder to communicate with them. If you don’t understand English you can’t function here, so I am doing my best to learn as much English as possible.

In my eyes, the young adult named Kanae that I met was both optimistic and self-assured. I admired her confidence and determination, and also the way she viewed any negatives as potential positives. She described to me an episode where she had been watching the news, and was frustrated by
how she was unable to comprehend what was being reported, and how this had spurred her on to try harder, rather than give up.

When I watch the news sometimes I don’t understand what’s going on. It doesn’t feel good, and I worry that perhaps my English is not that strong. But then, I have only been here for a couple of month’s right, so it’s natural. By the time I go back to Japan, I will be able to understand it. I write down any difficult words that I don’t know, and my vocabulary is increasing every day. I will get there, I see can improvement already since last week.

Kanae was also highly focussed, always mindful of why she had come to Australia, and articulated very clear goals for studying English. After one year in Australia, she planned to return to Japan to finish her Bachelor of International Studies and then commence Post Graduate studies overseas, such as a Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

When I asked her to imagine herself five years from now, and how she thought English would be a part of her life, Kanae remarked:

I will graduate from my Master of TESOL, and I will be living in Australia, teaching English to non-English speaking students like me. Thanks to this study abroad experience now, I have met many people from various countries, whose personalities and characters are quite different from Japanese peoples, and had experiences I cannot have in my own country. For example, celebrating Christmas during summer was strange and wonderful. Also, in my part time
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated
to Study English in an Australian Language School

job, I work with people from various nationalities, such as Chinese and Malaysians. I can’t do that in Japan, everyone is Japanese. Studying abroad allows me to broaden my view, by combining the best aspects of foreign and Japanese culture. Foreigners are better at expressing their opinions strongly, and don’t hesitate to say no, compared with Japanese people who are more passive and accepting, even weak. But of course I am Japanese, and I’m extremely proud of that. My culture values respecting peoples’ views and not forcing one’s opinion, but being able to read the situation, and know which behaviour is appropriate at the right time. This too is important. So, I can get the good things and bad things from both cultures. I hope this understanding of other cultures will make me a better English teacher too.

Anika’s story (Age:26).

Anika first arrived in Australia in July 2012, selecting Australia as her study abroad destination, because she perceived it as being a safe country compared with other countries like the US. ‘America is not safe, so I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on my studies there’, she uttered. Planning to study a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in 2013, Anika thought Australia would be the ideal country to study English, because she was looking for business partners living in Australia.

Many students study abroad here from China, Vietnam, Venezuela and Pakistan. I think Australia is the best place to meet people from diverse countries. I want to immerse myself in their ideas and learn from their experiences. English is the key to success in business, and
most companies around the world are trying to extend their business overseas, so English is essential for negotiation.

Ultimately, Anika chose Australia not only for these reasons, but because of Australia’s relaxed MBA program entry requirements. Having little work experience made Anika’s choice of suitable universities overseas somewhat restricted, many universities required five years’ work experience as a prerequisite, whereas those in Australia did not.

Prior to visiting Australia, Anika’s exposure with the English language was entirely via compulsory English classes in junior and senior high schools in Japan. ‘Junior high school English was fun, it was not so serious, and there were no exams to enter senior high school because both schools were combined. So I didn’t feel any pressure to study, I just enjoyed it’. It was during senior high school that Anika’s younger sister went to Brisbane, Australia for two months to study abroad. Anika was 15 years old at the time, and the experience appeared to pique her curiosity about Australia as well. ‘My sister going abroad made me want to go to Australia too, she had a great time. She also became my rival, I didn’t want her to be better at English than me’. In Japan, short study abroad programs are common, particularly at private junior and senior high schools. With no such opportunities during senior high school, English was merely a necessary hurdle for Anika, remarking:

There were no opportunities to speak or listen to English. Classes focused only on passing entrance examinations to university. I had motivation to pass the test, but that’s it. English was boring, and I hated learning English as a result.
However this attitude changed again when Anika was a second year university student in Tokyo. Travelling to Germany on a six week study abroad program, Anika recounted the following episode:

I was unable to make myself understood in German, but some of the local students spoke to me in English. I had the opportunity to speak with them, and learn more about them and their culture via English. I became to view English in a much more positive way as a result.

I first met Anika in October 2012. Her fashion sense was what I’d describe as unconventional; lots of jewellery, bangles, skirt, long gloves, quite unique compared to what I had seen most Japanese girls wear on campus. Anika was enjoying the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class in Melbourne. She conveyed the impression of being highly motivated to learn English in Australia.

In my class there are no Japanese students except me. All of my friends in this school are foreigners, and I live with four Koreans. So I have to speak English all the time, even after school. I must study English hard to pass EAP and enter the MBA program.

Anika’s long term goal was to finish her MBA, and then start her own business in Australia. Prior to coming to Australia, she had already studied management and accounting for four years at a university in Tokyo. If able to obtain permanent residency, she indicated that she was hoping to live in Australia indefinitely. Anika was also fiercely competitive, whilst we were discussing her current motivation to learn English, the word ‘rival’ surfaced for the second time in our conversation. ‘My friends here in Australia
motivate me. Whilst I do consider them my friends, they are also rivals, I want to study harder to get better grades than them.’

Anika presented herself as aspiring and purposeful, and she intonated precise career goals, related to her future business pursuits and positive attitudes towards English overall. However there were also several things that had a negative influence on her motivation to learn English during her three months in Melbourne. One of these was tensions between the various nationalities during English class. She perceived favouritism towards the more vocal speakers in English class from the teachers commenting:

Students from Latin America are confident and can speak well, so not everyone gets the same talking time. The teacher lets them speak and doesn’t stop them, whereas Asian students are not good at speaking and our grammar is poor. Sometimes I feel discriminated against for not speaking up, not being a strong speaker, and I don’t want to study English any more.

Anika also expressed a concern that because there were many Chinese students in the class, these students often used Chinese too much during classes. ‘I don’t care about their nationality, but I can’t join in their conversation, so it’s boring’. At the time of writing, Anika was attending an EAP class with very few Japanese students, and she also resented the fact that the teacher would often ask questions on complicated topics such as politics. ‘I don’t want to talk about politics in front of Chinese or Koreans, because there have been many problems recently such as the Senkaku Islands ownership dispute’. In September 2012, violent anti-Japan protests erupted across dozens of cities in China, sparked by the Japanese
government announcing the purchase of three of the disputed Senkaku Islands, from private ownership to be made state property. In spite of these comments, however Anika indicated that she was generally satisfied with her English classes and was positive about her progress with the English language when we spoke in October 2012.

Anika described one impressionable positive episode that she had with the English language that had boosted her confidence, two months into her English odyssey. She decided to join an English language tour of the Great Ocean Road, about two hours out of Melbourne. According to Anika, twelve people had participated in the tour from America, Canada and Korea saying:

I met some foreigners on the tour. Most of them spoke English as their mother tongue. I didn’t have any confidence in my English, but once I started speaking, I realized, oh, I can speak English! I didn’t expect I would be able to communicate with them.

When I asked her to imagine herself five years from now, and how she thought English would be a part of her life Anika commented:

Depending upon whether I can get permanent residency or not, I will either be working in Australia, or perhaps in South East Asia collaborating with business partners (former students) I met at university. In both cases, English is essential for communication, so we can share our collective vision and work in the same direction. For me, English is a tool to achieve my goals and I hope it will also become my second mother tongue. Hopefully I will be able to
remain in Australia, and establish my own business enterprise with a group of partners from diverse backgrounds. At this time, we will all be working hard to launch this new enterprise, and with all my might, I will contribute to its success.

**Sara’s story (Age:22).**

Sara first arrived in Melbourne in January 2012. It was her first visit to Australia, by the time I met her, and she had already been studying English for eleven months. Sara’s decision to study in Australia happened by a process of elimination and default:

Actually I originally wanted to go to the UK, but it’s expensive and far away, so I decided I would go to New Zealand. But at that time (February 2011), New Zealand had a really big earthquake, so my family was worried. Therefore I chose Australia, it was my third choice.

Prior to coming to Australia, Sara had been studying English in Japan at a private language school for several months with an Australian teacher. This experience of interacting with an Australian teacher in Japan appeared to have created an awareness of Australia in Sara’s mind, albeit it had not been her intended study abroad destination at the time.

Before coming to Australia, Sara graduated from high school and studied at a preparatory school to enter prestigious Toyo University for one year. English was a compulsory subject in order to enter university, so she studied earnestly for the entrance examination, describing her motivation
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated
to Study English in an Australian Language School

as high at that time, but unfortunately she was unsuccessful in gaining entry into Toyo University. Disillusioned, Sara lost interest in studying English momentarily and travelled to Germany and the Czech Republic for a week, to clear her mind and ponder her next move. The trip proved to be a great boon for her motivation, a self-described turning point, and an episode that re-ignited her interest in learning English. But it wasn’t her love of English as a language per se, rather the utilitarian value of it:

I met a lot of people from many countries, and everyone was trying to speak in English. Europeans are good at speaking English, so I wished I could speak English well like they do. I don’t like English, but it is useful. I like talking with people from other countries. So I started studying English again.

I was curious as to why Sara had felt it necessary to travel to Australia to study English. If studying English was her only objective, not further tertiary studies like all of the other participants I interviewed, I wondered why she had felt it vital to travel such a distance solely for that purpose. After all, there are many private English language schools in Japan, and ample opportunities to study English at university, which would have allowed her to improve her English ability from within Japan. To illustrate what I mean, whilst I was living in Japan, I worked with a Japanese English teacher for several years, who despite having never once been overseas, had exceptional English fluency. I have also met many others like him over the years in Japan. Sara had a very definitive reply to this question, one that has frustrated me often as an English teacher to Japanese students. She replied:
I don’t want to speak in English with Japanese people, because we can communicate in Japanese. Why do I have to speak in English with them? It seems strange. I took a communication class at university in Japan. Typically we start speaking in English, but we end up speaking in Japanese.

Indeed, learning English in Australia is very different to learning English in Japan. I have taught English classes in both Japan and Australia, and a typical Australian classroom will often have students from various countries speaking maybe four to six different languages. Studying English outside Japan is different, because students are compelled to speak English as a common language, unable to revert to their native tongue whenever it’s convenient.

Sara had studied several English courses in Melbourne including General English, EAP and IELTS preparation, and was studying a Bachelor of Business Management at the time of our conversation in November 2012.

Right now my main motivation is to complete this course and graduate. I also want to be able to talk with Aussie people, sometimes when I go shopping, the staff member talks to me and I can’t understand. I feel embarrassed.

In discussing Sara’s current motivation to learn English, she also mentioned that her parents were quite encouraging, which had a positive influence on her motivation to try her best as well.

My father wants me to study English, he travels overseas on
business often, and cannot speak English very well. He has experienced many difficulties and stresses as a result. I don’t want to have these same problems as well.

When I asked Sara if there was anything that negatively affected her motivation to learn English in Australia, she was mainly concerned about her English reading skills. Sara had just commenced her Bachelor program and appeared bewildered, commenting:

I try to do homework every day, reading some articles, answering questions, then I go to class and we have a discussion. But there are a lot of words I don’t know, so I need to stop often and check the meaning. I’m like ahhh... I don’t want to do this anymore!

Nevertheless, Sara was realistic about her progress, and remained buoyant and determined to press on, saying, ‘if I don’t study harder my English will remain poor. Right now I feel annoyed, but if I keep studying I will be able to read more quickly soon’.

Socialising with non-Japanese friends in Australia, also appeared to be having a positive affect on Sara’s attitude towards studying English. She lived with an Australian host family and one Filipino student, so she had plenty of opportunities to use English every day. Her host mother had a home party that a large family group attended, and Sara had also gone out with a Japanese friend and a Canadian friend several times, and spoke English throughout the entire evening.

At first I didn’t want to speak English because my English is not
good. If I said something I thought maybe native speakers wouldn’t understand, so I was afraid to open my mouth. But then I realised if I didn’t try, nothing would change, so now I try to speak English.

Unlike the other participants I interviewed who all wished to remain in Australia, Sara was intent on returning to Japan after completing her three year Bachelor degree. She had clear objectives for her current studies which helped maintain her motivation to learn English.

In the future I want to get a good job in Japan. In Japan, the job market is tough now, so job hunters require a special skill or ability. Just a Bachelor’s degree is not enough. International companies want people with a good score on the TOEIC test, and they want people with international experience too. Many students can get a high score, but most people still cannot speak English. So I want to speak English fluently.

When I asked Sara to imagine herself five years from now, and how she thought English would be a part of her life, she commented:

Two years after graduating university in Australia, I want to be working in Japan. After spending four years in Australia, I hope I will have mastered English. It’s difficult to know exactly what kind of work I want to do now, but I hope to definitely use English at work. In daily life in Japan, English is not necessary at all. But I will be able to use English in my everyday life with the friends I made in Australia and also with new foreigner friends I will make in Japan.
Taro’s story (Age:18).

Taro’s chronicle begins like most Japanese students who study English, his first regular exposure to the English language began in junior high school. ‘I liked English, but classes were very boring, all we studied was reading and grammar. At school we were not taught how to speak English’. Throughout senior high school, Taro also expressed similar sentiments:

I went to a well-known private high school. Despite this, it was still no good because the Japanese English teacher couldn’t speak English well. Learning English was interesting for me, but I really wanted to practice speaking and listening too.

Outside school, English also played a small but meaningful part in Taro’s life; he liked Hollywood movies such as Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, and sometimes tried to understand parts of the dialogue without reading the Japanese subtitles. In his senior high school years, Taro often thought that he wanted to speak English, and wished to make friends with people from other countries.

Therefore it was no surprise that after graduating senior high school in 2011, Taro decided to come to Australia to study English in May 2012. When I first met Taro, he had already been in Australia for six months. He was the youngest participant in this study at 18 years old, having graduated from high school the year before and the only male participant that I interviewed. The majority of participants who participated in this study were female, indicative of the fact that more female than male study abroad students from Japan study English in Australia. Whilst the last
Australian Bureau of Statistics figure was conducted in 2005, ratios of Japanese students in Australia for education purposes are 65% female compared to 35% male, and have been so for more than twenty years (ABS, 2007). He appeared very pleasant natured, chatting away with little nervousness, as we went through my list of questions in turn.

Taro chose Australia to study English, not because he had heard positive things or was particularly interested in Australia, but rather for more practical reasons. He had pondered three countries in which he could potentially study English, the USA, Australia and the UK. But ultimately Australia had some perceived advantages over the other two countries.

The time difference between Australia and Japan is very short. The weather is nice, there are no extremes of temperature, and the public safety is good. I think the USA and UK are dangerous and the time difference too long, so it would be difficult to contact my family. In addition, my high school Japanese teacher’s daughter and son live here, so if I have any troubles they can help me.

He also mentioned the fact that he loved tennis, and was therefore really looking forward to watching the Australian Open live in Melbourne.

Taro first entered a General English (GE) class in May 2012, then English for Academic purposes (EAP) with the intention of further study in a Bachelor course such as Health Sciences or Commerce at university in 2013. He enjoyed General English classes immensely, and appeared highly motivated to study hard, finally getting to practice what had eluded him in six years of English classes in Japan. ‘English classes in Australia are very
different to Japan. We studied speaking, how to talk depending upon the audience, presentation skills and listening. It was very interesting’. When I asked Taro if there was anything that negatively affected his motivation to learn English in Australia, he was concerned mainly about his listening skills. ‘In class we have practice tests, and sometimes I can’t understand the CD. I feel a little shocked about my English ability, I think it’s certainly my weakest point’ he said with a sigh. Indeed Taro’s apparent lack of confidence with the English language appeared to originate from the fact that he was unable to study listening and speaking in Japan at school.

Seven months into his sojourn however, I was encouraged when Taro spoke of a few notable successes of his with the English language, both academic and personal. He had passed GE and EAP, progressing to a university pathway program, where he had the choice of studying either the Bachelor of Health Sciences or Bachelor of Commerce programs, which would amount to a further three years of study in Australia. On a personal level, he was also proud of several accomplishments with the English language. Describing a recent episode of a trip to Sydney, Taro commented:

I went to Sydney recently, it was my first time. If I had any trouble, I asked Sydneysiders in English for directions or information. I was also able to book a tour to the Blue Mountains, and accommodation via the telephone in English, so I was very happy.

In discussing his current motivation towards studying English in Australia Taro said, I am motivated to learn English now in Australia because of my parents. They paid a lot of money for me to come here, and they told me
that English is the most important language in the world. I wanted to explore the influence of his family on his motivation further, as he mentioned his parents several times during our conversation. In particular, Taro mentioned an episode with his uncle, which indirectly later prompted Taro to work harder at learning English. According to Taro, his uncle spoke English very well. He was a Japanese teacher who often went to the USA with his students on excursions and study abroad trips. Among Taro’s relatives, his uncle was by far the best English speaker in the family. One day Taro’s uncle’s family had said to Taro’s parents, ‘Taro shouldn’t go to Australia, because he has to graduate from university first in Japan. Perhaps later he can go study abroad’. My parents were taken aback by this remark, and a little angry too. ‘Taro can be better at English than him for sure. Let’s win they countered’. At the time, Taro’s parents couldn’t understand why his uncle would say something like that. However on later reflection the reason became more apparent. Taro’s uncle was the oldest member of the family and it seemed that he enjoyed his status of being the strongest English speaker, not wanting to have that distinction eclipsed by Taro. At this time of this episode, Taro was the only person in the family, who would have lived and studied English overseas for a lengthy period of time. When I asked him how he felt about his uncle now Taro chuckled, ‘I still like my uncle, but perhaps not as much as before’.

In the future, Taro expressed a keen desire to use English in his occupation. He described this as his main purpose for studying English in Australia, wanting to work in either in an overseas company, or a Japanese company with foreign affiliations like Rakuten (a Japanese internet shopping company).
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated to Study English in an Australian Language School

In Japan, we can’t get a job, it is very difficult. Most people can’t speak English, so if I can speak English, then it’s a little easier to get a job. In Rakuten they use English in the office, and in meetings, so I will have a chance to work in a company like that.

If Taro was unable to find employment in a company such as Rakuten, he indicated would also be happy to work in his parent’s office. His father managed the office of a Japanese newspaper on economics, which is why Taro was considering studying a Bachelor of Commerce. Given the opportunity to do so, Taro wished to remain in Australia, after graduating from university, describing remaining in Australia as his ‘Plan A’, and returning to Japan to work as ‘Plan B’.

When I asked him to imagine himself five years from now, and how he thought English would be a part of his life Taro ruminated:

I will be 23 years old and if things go well, I will have graduated from university and will be looking for work. I think it’s a waste if I can’t use my English skills at work, either in Japan or Australia. In Melbourne, Japanese companies like Rakuten are becoming global, so I am interested in working in a company like this. But then I wonder if I should get a job in Japan first, and then work overseas later. Sometimes I talk to my parents about it, but they say I need to decide for myself, so I am very concerned.

Episodes

The episodes highlighted throughout this narrative all share some common
characteristics, typified by an event, and then a realisation and attitudinal, behavioural or thought shift towards English after the event. All participants’ motivation towards English has fluctuated over time, which is only natural considering the lengthy period between first regular exposure to English during junior high school, and their more recent lives in Australia. In the case of Kanae, travelling to Canada during junior high school enabled her to realise the usefulness of English as a language to communicate. She was able to discover the importance of having a wide English vocabulary, something she had previously dismissed at school, regarding the study of vocabulary as a waste of time. Kanae’s second episode occurred whilst watching the news in Australia. Kanae recognised that her comprehension had improved from the week before, which energized her to keep studying.

Anika had several episodes detailed in this narrative with positive affects upon her attitude towards English. The first of these occurred in Germany, when she was struggling with the German language, but she found herself able to use broken English as a means of communication, the second in Melbourne with a tour group, where all of the participants (tourists) were speaking only in English. Both cases were an awakening for Anika, not only did she notice that she could actually communicate in English if she tried, but that talking with people in English about their respective lives and cultures was also interesting and gratifying as well.

Sara’s episode bears strong similarities to Anika’s, whilst travelling in Europe, she met people from many countries, all speaking in English. In Sara’s case however, whilst she really wanted to talk with everyone, she found herself limited by her English ability, so she started studying English
A Narrative Inquiry into Why Japanese Learners are Motivated to Study English in an Australian Language School

at a conversation school upon her return to Japan. In both Anika’s and Sara’s cases, their interest in English was re-ignited by directly experiencing the instrumental value of being able to communicate in English outside of Japan.

Finally, Taro spoke of two episodes, the first of which was regarding his uncle, who had discouraged him to come to Australia, and Taro’s insistence on winning, and the ‘let’s show him’ attitude that ensued as a result. The second was his pride in travelling around Sydney using English for the first time, booking hotels and tours and navigating his way around town, and the new level of confidence and commitment to his English studies that this trip gave him.

A finding which is common to three of the four participants’ stories is that it was only after leaving Japan, when they found themselves in an English only environment, whereby the respondents’ views towards English changed for the better. Becoming conscious of the English only world they were in, all participants appreciated its necessity in their immediate surroundings, and glimpsed its potential usefulness to their lives. This realisation was later manifested in actions such as studying English with earnest at school or university, increased confidence at having succeeded in communicating in English, or simply regarding English more favourably. Perhaps these results are not surprising, as indicated earlier in practically all aspects of daily Japanese life, English is not used, and is not required to survive, work or function in Japanese society. Even in the so called English only classes in Japan, Japanese students will always have the luxury of being able to revert to a common language any time their English fails them, as Sara indicated. However, Japanese students travelling or studying
abroad are often forced to use English, therefore having to make a choice to either ‘sink or swim’.

This apparent lack of motivation towards English from Japanese students in Japan also presents some challenges for English teachers, both in trying to first initiate and subsequently maintain student interest and motivation towards English in the classroom. The majority of Japanese students studying English in Japan may not have such opportunities to study abroad, unable to glimpse the necessity of English in their immediate surroundings, therefore eliminating the possibility of experiencing the English ‘epiphany’, in the same way that my participants did. Whilst the answers to these challenges are outside the breadth of this research paper, it is certainly something that teachers need to be mindful of, as capturing and maintaining student motivation of students is a challenging endeavour for many English instructors in Japan.

![Diagram of motivation regulation styles]

Figure 2. The regulatory styles of motivation of Kanae, Anika, Sara and Taro in Ryan & Deci’s taxonomy.
(Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 61)

In terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with reference to Ryan and Deci’s taxonomy (2000), all of the participants displayed evidence of extrinsic motivation, varying in their degrees of internalisation. Kanae for example, exhibited integrated regulation, her actions were self-determined and her reasons for her actions appeared congruent with both her values and needs. Anika and Sara may be classified as being extrinsically motivated via identification. Both identified with the personal importance of their English studies, and accepted their regulation as their own. On the other hand, Taro could be classified as being extrinsically motivated under introjected regulation. Taro had feelings of pressure to avoid guilt or anxiety or obtain ego enhancements and pride. Taro often commented that he felt he needed to study hard because his parents expected him to, and were paying a lot of money (avoidance of guilt), and also that he had come to Australia to prove to his uncle that he could succeed in studying abroad for one year (ego & self-esteem).

**Positive influences on participants’ motivation**

Broadly speaking, all four participants spoke of working towards the goal of future studies, and all indicated that they were doing their best to study English so they could enter an Australian university and continue their studies in English. In Kanae’s, Sara’s and Taro’s cases this was to enter a Bachelor program, in Anika’s case to enter a Master program. In all cases, participants had clear goals for being in Australia, and a vision of how their English studies would enable them to enter university. All participants definitely saw a place for the role of English in their lives in the future,
either via their careers or in their private lives.

In terms of motivational definitions, all participants could be described as being instrumentally motivated (a type of extrinsic motivation), as their motivations for study were related to pursuing further studies, getting a promotion or earning extra money. As Brophy (1998) reminds us, with an instrumentally motivated learner, half of the battle is already won, “because we do not need to change or improve existing values but rather simply link the successful completion of the task to consequences students already value” (Brophy, cited in Dornyei 2001, p. 56).

Living in an English only environment was also a strong motivator, all of the participants lived with people who spoke English as a first language, and often socialised or worked with people who only spoke in English. This emerged as a powerful influence, because unlike English classes in Japan, where students always had the safety of being able to revert to Japanese when their English failed them, in most cases participants had to speak English, in some cases struggling to communicate in English to get their message across. However rather than demotivating them, the result was often the opposite, it made these learners realise that their English wasn’t sufficient, and encouraged them to study harder. This is evidenced by comments from Kanae such as ‘I write down any difficult words that I don’t know, and my vocabulary is increasing every day. I will get there, I can see improvement already since last week’. Living in an English only environment was also a positive motivator for both Kanae and Sara, because it enabled them to broaden their views of the world, by combining the best aspects of foreign and Japanese culture. Similar findings were reported by Tanaka (2011), with candidates speaking positively about
transforming their identities via a new way of viewing the world and self-expression. Likewise, the comments of Kanae and Sara such as ‘I can get the good things and bad things from both cultures’ and ‘I like talking with people from other countries’, reflected some of the enjoyable aspects of exposure to different customs and cultural experiences.

**Negative influences on participants’ motivation**

Several participants expressed negative attitudes towards the use of the Chinese language by large numbers of Chinese students in their English classes. As at 31 December 2012, students from China represented 22% of student visa holders in Australia by citizenship country (DIAC, 2012). Typically a common complaint was that because most classes had a relatively large number of Chinese students, these students would often speak together in Mandarin. This evoked feelings of isolation and annoyance from participants because they too couldn’t understand nor take part in the conversations. The timing of these complaints is also significant, at the time of the participant interviews, there had been considerable negative press about China in the Japanese news, including violent anti-Japan protests in China, due to a territorial dispute with the Senkaku Islands.

Secondly, a factor that negatively affected participants’ motivation was difficulties with comprehending English class content at various times. Both Sara and Taro commented they sometimes felt their motivation and interest levels dropping in response to classes that they perceived as being too difficult for their level. This finding also has implications for language schools when administering level placement tests and determining students’
levels. Classes that are perceived by students as being too difficult (or too easy), will likely have a negative affect upon their motivation.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that all answers in Parts 1, 2 and 3 of this study were self-reported, via both questionnaires and interview. One of the risks of using self-reported questionnaires is that participants may be tempted to describe their behaviours in a more positive light, according to what they believe to be positive or expected answers. This phenomenon is known as social desirability bias (Cheng and Dornyei 2007, p. 156). In order to mitigate social desirability bias, both the initial email invitation and the questionnaire instructions highlighted the confidential and anonymous nature of the data collection, and the fact that no results of this study would be reported to the language centre. Participants were asked to respond truthfully and candidly, and no financial incentives were offered to participate. Notwithstanding, totally candid responses cannot be guaranteed with the use of such self-reported questionnaires.

Secondly, the classification of participants’ regulatory styles of motivation, using Ryan & Deci’s taxonomy was a subjective undertaking, wholly determined by the author of this paper. After analysing the data reported to me by students, I plotted students’ perceived motivational levels according to Ryan & Deci’s four regulatory styles of extrinsic motivation. It is quite possible that another researcher might have classified students differently, based on that researcher’s interpretation of student responses. Secondly, the questions used in the questionnaires as part of the data collection process, may not have included appropriate question items that
equally incorporated all four regulatory styles of extrinsic motivation. If the
questionnaire items themselves were poorly designed, this would tend to
limit the range of potential responses (and therefore the potential
categorisations) that could be assigned.

Thirdly in terms of the methodology, the study relied to some extent on
retrospective accounts of past events, such as participants’ experiences of
English in junior and senior high school, which may be subject to
inaccuracies in recollection. An attempt to mitigate this was made
however by having a present section, and analysing participants’ current
lives in Australia using real time discourses. However as motivation is
complex area, and changeable over time, it is extremely difficult to get a
full picture of student motivation without multiple interviews, as
participants’ moods and motivational levels fluctuate constantly in response
to external stimuli.

Potential areas for future research

The current study attempted to illustrate using narrative, the experiences
of four individuals’ motivation towards English since junior high school,
with particular reference to their adult lives and their more recent stays in
Australia. Further research in this area may be enhanced by using
multiple interviews, discussions and follow up with participants over a
lengthier period of time, for example, spanning several years. An approach
such as this might better capture the capricious nature of students’
motivation towards English over time, in response to the people in their
lives, the students’ own learning goals, and their learning environments.
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A Narrative Inquiry into 
Why Japanese Learners are Motivated 
to Study English 
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Abstract

This qualitative study examined four Japanese learners of English in an Australian English language school, and their motivation towards studying English, both in Australia and prior to their arrival. Using narrative enquiry to describe the learners’ journeys, the study found that the majority of learners had experienced at least one ‘episode’ with English. Such episodes were typically characterised by an encounter with the English language, followed by a realisation and attitudinal, behavioural or thought shift towards English thereafter. Whilst studying English in Australia, the motivation levels of the four Japanese participants in this study were influenced both positively and negatively. Positive motivators included such things as wishing to enter an Australian university and living in an English only environment, whereas negative motivators included the student population of the English classes and classes that were perceived as being too difficult. All participants reported that they felt external pressures to study English, both from parents and from Japanese companies, the latter increasingly requiring new recruits to have minimum proficiency standards in English tests such as TOEIC. It was determined that all participants were extrinsically motivated to study
English in Australia, when viewed from within an intrinsic/extrinsic motivational taxonomy, at varying regulatory levels according to one commonly accepted taxonomy of motivation. This study illustrates the powerful manifestations of extrinsic motivation, individual learner disposition and the changeable nature of second language motivation.