

A Reappraisal of Ushioda's Approach to L2 Motivation in the Japanese Context

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Abstract

This paper re-evaluates a well-known second language (L2) motivation model by Ushioda (2001), which criticized the quantitative and psychometric grounds of past L2 motivation research. After describing the situations surrounding English and English studies in Japan, I will review the basic tenets of Ushioda's model. Then I will apply the model to Japanese learners of English and categorize them into four distinct types, depending on what their motivating forces are. I will then discuss the implications of the model, i.e., the necessity for learners to concurrently have both past-driven and future-driven types of motivation, and the importance of making future L2-related goals specific. Finally, I will discuss theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Introduction

One of the areas within second language acquisition that tries to explain the variation in the rate of second/foreign language (hereafter L2) learning as well as the ultimate attainment of the L2 is L2 motivation. After the dominance of the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985, 2001), the field has witnessed the development of various models, including international posture (Yashima, 2002, 2009), the L2 motivational

self system (Dörnyei, 2009), and the application of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002, originally developed in psychology). One of the driving forces behind these proposals is the need to explain L2 motivation in light of the globalization of the world and the spread of English as an international language. Although these motivational models do not exclude the learning of languages other than English, they are in many cases concerned with English learning and motivation to learn English in the globalized world.

In this paper I will first review situations surrounding Japan with regard to English and English studies. Then I will discuss Japanese English learners' motivation by revisiting a well-known L2 motivation model by Ushioda (2001), which criticized the quantitative and psychometric traditions of L2 motivation research and proposed a model that is based on a small-scale qualitative study. The model is one of the L2 motivation models that is compatible with the role of English as an international language, and it tries to explain individual differences in L2 motivation on an individual basis rather than focusing on means and aggregates of L2 motivation. Since the proposal of Ushioda's model, much research has been done utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and many researchers have been arguing for dynamic L2 motivation models. Even under such circumstances, Ushioda's model is still invaluable for its focus on individual learners on a long-term basis. As such, I will apply the model to Japanese learners of English and draw both theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Situations Surrounding English and English Education in Japan

Situations surrounding English education in Japan have been characterized as the "permanent sense of crisis" (Ushioda, 2013, p.5). Since the government shifted focus of English education to L2 communication almost thirty years ago, it has proposed various policies and guidelines in order to nurture communicative competence of English among the Japanese people. Recent policies include the initiation of English (subject) classes

in elementary schools, the utilization of external language examinations, including the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), for university admissions, and the proposal of having high school graduates aim for the *Eiken* Grade 2 or above (MEXT, 2014).

These policies reflect the globalization of the world and the spread of English as the primary international language. The government emphasizes the importance of communicative competence in English among its citizens because it is considered to be a crucial skill on various aspects, be it politically, economically, or culturally. The media have also been reporting on various aspects regarding the spread of English almost on a daily basis.

Under such circumstances many Japanese learners of English seem to regard English as an important skill for their future, though many of them are not necessarily aware of the exact situations in which they will need it. Thus, many L2 learners consider English studies to be related to and necessary for their future in some way. Even learners with limited competence of English might well think that the language will be important in the future. Such a mindset might influence their motivation to learn English, as described later.

Basic Tenets of Ushioda (2001)

L2 motivation studies can be characterized as quantitatively oriented in the early days, partly because of the influence of social psychology (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, pp. 212–213). In such an approach, learners' L2 motivation was typically measured by Likert-type questionnaires. Various descriptive and inferential statistics were then utilized in order to capture the general patterns of participants' L2 motivation and to examine the relationships between L2 motivation and L2 achievement, which was typically measured by standardized tests or course grades. As discussed in Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the intent of this research was to distill learners' L2 motivation to

certain types and examine which types were closely related to L2 achievement. In other words, researchers assumed a cause-effect relationship between L2 motivation and L2 achievement. Ushioda (2001, 2009) has continuously criticized this tradition, stating that focusing on the aggregates of learners' L2 motivation patterns overlooks the importance of individual variations, especially changes in L2 motivation within an individual, for which qualitative methods might be more suitable.

According to Ushioda (2001), L2 motivation and L2 achievement are not a simple cause-and-effect relationship; as the researcher argues, if we adhere to this relationship, an unsuccessful learner might face a vicious cycle with regard to L2 motivation and L2 learning. That is, if a learner is not motivated it is likely that he/she puts little effort into studying the L2, receives poor grades, and does not achieve much competence. This will likely lead to even lower motivation. Instead, Ushioda (2001) proposed, based on a longitudinal interview study with 20 Irish learners of French, that learners can choose to focus on the positive side of learning, be it positive L2 learning/L2-related experiences (e.g., good course grades, positive experiences in out-of-class L2 communication, etc.) or future goals and incentives.

What Ushioda (2001) proposed is named effective motivational thinking. This means that learners can choose what they focus on in order to be motivated to learn an L2. For example, if some do not have positive L2-related experiences they can still be motivated to learn the L2 by choosing to emphasize their L2-related future goals. This includes looking for opportunities to study in the target language community or for work opportunities obtained by studying the L2. On the other hand, those who have positive L2-related experiences can focus on those experiences to be motivated to learn the L2 without focusing on clear future goals.

Another important issue that Ushioda (2001) raised is the temporal frame of reference. As explained above, L2 learners can be driven by either positive L2 learning/L2-related experiences or future goals regarding the L2. What Ushioda (2001) proposed is that a learner who is predominantly driven by past experiences can start to

be driven by personal goals in the later stage of learning. This is because it might take considerable time for future goals to crystallize, and learners who are in the early stages of L2 learning and have not achieved much L2 competence are not likely to see future L2 goals as relevant (pp. 117–118). Put another way, someone might be motivated to learn an L2 because he/she has a positive L2-related history, but as the learning unfolds, this learner may realize the opportunities gained by further learning the target language, thus starting to focus more on future goals.

Implications of Ushioda (2001) Regarding Japanese Learners of English

When the effective motivational thinking and the temporal frame of reference are applied to Japanese learners of English, it seems that the learners can be categorized into four types, distinguishing learners with respect to their motivational forces: whether they are motivated by their past L2-related experiences, their future L2-related goals, both of them, or neither of them. This categorization might be particularly valuable for further considering the pedagogical implications for each type of learner.

The first type of learner is one who has positive L2-related experiences but has not found future goals regarding English. Because of the positive learning history, these learners are likely to be motivated to study English, in many cases purely intrinsically. However, there remains a question of whether they will persist in learning or find relevance with actually communicating in English. Put another way, there might be L2 learners who are intrinsically motivated to learn English and gain good grades at school, but do not see the importance or necessity of putting their linguistic knowledge into actual practice. This pattern resembles a participant described in Hayashi (2013), a learner who was good at English as a school subject and aimed to gain good scores on exams, but did not aspire to pursue an English-related career. In contrast, if a learner can find L2-related goals in the later stage of learning, he/she is likely to persist in learning and exploit opportunities to communicate in English.

The second type of learner is one who does not have positive L2-related experiences, i.e., one who did not achieve much in English as a school subject or had negative experiences communicating in the L2, but sees future goals with regard to English. Although the model in Ushioda (2001) does not describe this pattern much, it is possible to see future goals in English without having positive past experiences.

Interestingly, there might be quite a few Japanese learners of English who would fall into this category. As seen above, English plays an important role in the globalized world, and gaining communicative competence in English has been strongly emphasized in various aspects of learners' lives in Japan. Influenced by these situations, many Japanese learners of English might see the importance and the necessity of nurturing the English communicative competence, albeit vaguely. Thus, in some studies in which the focus of research was on "ideal L2 self" (Dörnyei, 2009), i.e., the ideal future self-state regarding an L2, the general type of ideal L2 self was highly endorsed by many participants (e.g., Takahashi, 2012). In other words, these learners see the vague importance of gaining communicative competence in English or vague future goals related to English, but this might come without positive L2-related experiences.

The third type is the learner who concurrently has positive L2-related experiences and future goals. This type of learner is ideal in the sense that they will probably see the relevance of studying English, and they are likely to be motivated to learn English, supported by both positive L2-related experiences and L2 future goals. Although the model in Ushioda (2001) emphasized the change in motivational forces from past L2-related experiences to future goals, it is possible to possess both types at the same time.

The last type is the learner who does not have positive L2-related experiences or future goals regarding English. Although communicative competence in English has been emphasized by the government, in Japan, "the Japanese language prevails virtually in all domains of life" (Miyahara, 2014, p. 222), and some learners do not have opportunities to communicate in English at all. For these learners it might be extremely difficult to find the relevance of studying English and thus they are probably not motivated to study

English at all.

As described above, Ushioda's model is useful in considering Japanese learners' motivation to learn English, distinguishing the four types of L2 learners. The model goes beyond the simple cause-and-effect relationship, and is empowering for learners who have not been successful in classroom settings or in real-life communicative situations, for these learners can still be motivated without having such experiences. It seems, however, that the model would be more powerful if the duality of the two motivational types are concurrently considered and when the perception of L2 relevance and L2 communicative competence are taken into account.

First, learners might be most motivated to learn an L2 when they concurrently have motivation deriving from experiences and directed toward future goals. As Hiromori (2013) describes, it is better to have distinct types of motivation at the same time because each might wax and wane (p. 294). If learners maintain positive L2 learning/L2-related experiences and also have important and specific personal L2 goals, they are likely to be motivated to learn the language. If, on the other hand, they only have one type of motivation, the time may come when that motivation no longer has enough driving force.

Second, those who study an L2 predominantly because of positive past L2-related experiences need to gradually begin seeing future goals related to the L2 if they are to persist in learning. This includes, for example, clearly acknowledging what their ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2009) are, or realizing the relevance of English studies and English communication for their future, possibly career-wise.

Another point to take into consideration is the importance of specifying future goals. What is striking is that the second type of learner, i.e., those without a positive learning history but with (vague) future goals, needs to work on both aspects if they are to be truly motivated. On the one hand, not having positive L2-related experiences means that they probably have not acquired meaningful L2 competence. On the other hand, although they might have future L2-related goals, in order for these to exert a strong

motivational power they need to be put into concrete and specific terms. Although many Japanese learners of English might feel a general sense that English will be “important” in the future, unless these goals come hand in hand with specific action plans, they might end up being vague without motivational power.

Lastly, the importance of the subjective perception of English relevance and one’s communicative competence should be emphasized. L2 motivation is a complex construct related to one’s cognition and affect, and is closely related to how one perceives him/herself. In this sense, what matters to L2 motivation is how learners perceive the relevance of English and how English studies are to them. In other words, if one *perceives* English to be important in his/her life regardless of the actual necessity for English competence in real life, this *perception* is likely to be a driving force in studying English. Furthermore, perceived L2 communicative competence, which is a constituent related to L2 communication confidence (MacIntyre, 1994), is particularly important in foreign language contexts in helping learners become willing to communicate in the L2 (e.g., Yashima, 2002). Taken together, one’s perception, i.e., the cognitive aspect of L2 motivation just as Ushioda (2001) emphasizes, is crucial in the sense that it works as a filter for learners between L2 experiences and L2 motivation.

Conclusions

In this paper I first described the current situations surrounding English and English education in Japan. After describing the basic arguments of Ushioda (2001), I reevaluated the model by applying it to Japanese learners of English. The government has continually emphasized the importance of English communicative competence among its citizens, so many Japanese learners of English seem to consider that it will be important for their future. In Ushioda’s model, many of these learners can be categorized as L2 learners without positive L2-related experiences but with (vague) future goals. As described in the paper, the model will be more useful if we further take into account

the importance of concurrently having both past- and future-oriented motivation and making these future goals specific.

On a more practical side, teachers and policy makers should likely focus more on helping learners realize what the necessity of nurturing English communicative competence means in concrete terms, e.g., with whom that communication will be and what type of English will be used in those communications, etc. In other words, it will be important to help learners visualize actual situations in which to communicate in English. By helping learners have both positive L2-related experiences and specific future goals, they are likely to be driven to firmly nurture their communicative competence in English.

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