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Imagined Identities and Communities in an EFL Context

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Abstract

It is often assumed that language plays a significant role in identity construction and there is a link between language, origin, culture and identity. While the native and target culture can shape language learners' imagined identities and future participation in communities of practice, the EFL learners' imaginaries also impact their motivation and language learning practices. Drawing on post-structuralism in the field of foreign language learning, this qualitative case study attempts to understand how the Japanese EFL learners' cultural identity impact the construction of L2 identity and learners' motivation as members of imagined communities. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire among eleven undergraduate students in a Japanese university. The findings indicate that the learners who incorporated imagined identities and communities in their learning goals are more motivated toward language learning as opposed to those who lack confidence and imagination of their future identities or a desire to join community of practice. Moreover, EFL context as the community of practice can impact the EFL learners' construction of new identities as English learners and act as a major factor in motivation to get engaged in language learning practices.

1. Introduction

As a response to globalization, universities aim to boost their international profiles and adopt policies toward internationalization. Japanese policies are focusing on globalization through student and faculty exchanges, as well as increasing the focus on foreign language learning. it can be claimed that Japanese education system is one of the most successful ones in the world and there has been much effort to improve English teaching in different levels of education as well. However, there are still discussions around the challenges that the English education system deals with. Despite the fact that Japanese students study English hard and for relatively a long time before and after the university entrance exam, there is still a prevailing dissatisfaction with their English proficiency and communicative skills. There are several reasons into why English classes are mostly teacher-centered and students seem to lack motivation or willingness

to communicate. Investigation of the relationship between identity and language learning motivation in terms of cultural context will provide us with a better understanding of the learning process and constraints.

In the field of English learning as a Foreign Language (EFL), scholars have struggled to conceptualize and develop a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. Identity, derived from post-structuralism, is a comparatively new theory in the process of language learning [2]. The identity of the language learner addresses the ways in which language learners understand their relationship to the socio-cultural contexts, how that relationship is developed or constructed across time and space, and how the learners understand their reflections for the past and possibilities for the future [9]. Wang [15] states that identity includes how one perceives oneself and how one is perceived by others; it also includes how one positions oneself in relation to the existing background (native culture) and the new settings (target

culture). Furthermore, identity should be regarded as socially constructed and situated, always "dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place" [2, 9]. In the fields of ESL, research confirms the pivotal role identity play for learning to happen. The adoption of a new culture and identifying with the sociocultural aspects of speaking in a different language is crucial to learning. Therefore, the native and target culture can play important roles in shaping the identities and it is necessary to comprehend the educational implications of the cultural and linguistic differences that are found to be increasingly decisive in shaping identity.

Identity is approached from different perspectives such as the pursuit of global, bicultural or multicultural identities [7], or the desire to adopt social or professional identities and join imagined communities of practice [5, 10]. Foreign language learning is a relational activity that occurs between specific speakers situated in specific socio-cultural environment or contexts. Generally, these contexts are viewed as "imagined communities". The term "imagined community" was originally coined by Benedict Anderson [1]. He believes that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". Imagined community is referred to group of people who are not immediately tangible or accessible and we connect to them with the power of our imagination. Thus, in Wenger's view, imagination is process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" [16].

Sometimes, the learners` motivation to learn English is integrative; to mingle with the target speakers or to provide the possibility of future joining of imagined communities of practice, that is why some learners quit community ESL programs without advancing due to a "disjuncture between the learner's imagined community and the teacher's curriculum goals" [10]. In an EFL context where learners have little access to English speaking communities, identifying with the target culture or mingling with native English speakers wouldn't seem so realistic. However, imagination can still play an important role in learning to provide the possibility of future joining of imagined communities of practice. One significant aspect of poststructuralists, especially in critical pedagogy, is engagement with imagination [13]. The desire to adopt future identities or join imagined communities as Norton [10] proposes can be a major force for language learning in an EFL context. Through the power of imagination, people can arrange their environments, expand their identities, and change their reality. Imagination, thus, works as "a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities" Imagination is a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities which allows us to go beyond the focus of the EFL learners' immediate environment as learning of another language reflects the desire of learners to extend their repertoire of identities and to connect to a wider world of possibilities [12].

Hence it is important to realize the learners' actual and desired memberships in "imagined communities" and potential difficulties and barriers preventing learners from doing so. In this way, learning is seen as situated process of participation in particular communities of practice [16]. This aspect of learning which connects learner' participation in a wider world has not been explored much. Learners' orientations toward imagined communities might have implications on their identities and learning in similar ways with their direct involvement in real communities. However, in foreign language teaching practices, there is usually little or no attention to identities of language learners which is shaped by the cultural context. While it is also necessary for the student to learn the culture of the foreign language [14]. Regarding language learning, it is important to take into consideration and understand how language is "constructive of social formations, communities, and individual identities" [8].

Cultural context has an impact on foreign language acquisition as students are representatives of the identity and culture of their first language and where they come from. The characteristics of the native culture can influence the way learners construct new identities and future communities they want to be a member of as L2 speakers. As a student is trying to construct an identity he is influenced by external factors such as society and culture. If the identity and culture of the first language are different from the culture of the foreign language, the learner might face constraints to move toward her L2 identity and lose motivation in learning. Meanwhile, she might challenge this socially constructed identity, and express her prejudices as it can restrict her from practicing her imagined identities and desire to participate in imagined communities of the target language speakers.

2. Research Problem and Purpose

There is a need for more qualitative research in EFL contexts such as Japan as opposed to ESL immigrant communities in US and Canada to investigate the context-based relationship between the identity and foreign language learning. Founded upon poststructuralist views over language, culture and society this study sets out to examine the imagined identities and communities of Japanese EFL learners and how those imaginaries impact their desire to learn and practice English. Moreover, the study seeks to understand how the learners construct their identities and imagined communities in relation to the cultural context and what factors inherent in the culture might restrict them in developing their identities. This study may help teachers to have a better understanding of how individual dynamics and constructs of motivation and identity, influence the language learning process. Finally, the study can be of great help to educators to design or improve language learning programs supporting the developments of individuals in all manners targeted, while enhancing our understanding of learning as a socially constructed activity.

3. Research Questions

1. Are the concepts of imagined identities and communities in operation in EFL learners' motivation?
2. What is the impact of cultural context on the students' identity construction?

4. Methods

This qualitative research applied a case study approach. Participants consisted of eleven male and female university students who were taking an English writing course in the first and second years of their undergraduate studies. As the students were enrolling a national university in the Kansai area, they were assumed to have a high level of English proficiency enough to be able to respond the questions in English. Meanwhile as Japanese students are more comfortable in typing as opposed to speaking and also they were recruited through a computer-assisted writing course, data were collected through an online questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of five questions addressing different aspects of the study such as learners' goals of language learning, the situations and people they feel comfortable to speak English with, their interest in English language and people and their desire to join future communities of practice. As for the ethical considerations, the study received human ethics approval from the author's university. To assure participants' anonymity their real names were replaced with pseudonyms in the discussions.

5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Participants' information.

N	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Field of study
1	Akira	Male	17-21	Engineering
2	Naoki	Male	17-21	IT
3	Kota	Male	17-21	Physics
4	Yuuki	Male	17-21	Electronics
5	Masa	Male	17-21	Science engineering
6	Naoya	Male	17-21	Economics
7	Isao	Male	17-21	Economics
8	Daisuke	Male	17-21	Physics
9	Haruka	Female	17-21	Engineering
10	Sakura	Female	17-21	Biology
11	Miwa	Female	17-21	Law

5.1. Imagined Identities and Communities

The overall results confirm the role of imagination of future goals and identities as an important factor in learning a foreign language. The learner is motivated when the new language provides him with future opportunities and social or material capital. An imagined identity can be constructed as a fluent English speaker, a competent global citizen or simply a confident and open-minded individual. Having clear goals and being able to imagine oneself in future is crucial for maintaining motivation in learning. As opposed to previous research which specified leaners as either motivated or unmotivated, identity provides a better platform to describe the learners' ambivalent desire to learn and practice English. Most of the participants in this study have specific goals of learning. Akira is only interested in learning about foreign ideas, he imagines himself as an English speaker who has foreign friends. However, he is not interested in English people and countries. Therefore, for this learner, Integrative Motivation [4] or a personal affinity for the people who speak English doesn't consist his future identity. His imagined identity is an English speaker with foreign friends. The imagined community he wants to relate to is foreigners rather than English people. His L2 identity can be defined better in terms of the concept of *international posture or a* tendency to relate oneself to the international community rather than any specific L2 group, as a construct more pertinent to EFL contexts. Considering English as a lingua franca in today's globalized world, it is increasingly more difficult for Japanese EFL learners to imagine a clear target group or culture to identify with and be part of [17].

However, Haruka's goal of English learning is to speak with people whose mother tongues is English, while she also mentions the desire to talk with foreign people in general. She wants to use English abroad and study in foreign universities. However, she mentions clearly that she doesn't feel any changes in her personality after learning English. Meanwhile, she has a clear image of her future identity as a fluent English speaker who wants to join international academic communities. Similarly, Naoki is very interested in English learning as it enables him to communicate with the people of the world and help foreigners find their way in Japan. Although he doesn't feel any changes in his identity, he is very motivated. He imagines the identity of a fluent English speaker very ideal for his future goals. He likes video games and wants to meet people with the same interest through learning English. Finally, Kota mentions that his intercultural experience in Singapore, gave him a positive image of international community and how English is really used. He likes to talk to English native speakers as well but his main goal is to master communicative skills to interact with foreigners so he can join international communities for business.

For Yuuki, English is hard yet motivating. He admits:

"Memorizing English words is very hard, but I think learning English is very useful. When I tell foreigner information about Japan. Yes, English words and Japanese words are not same, so I feel different when I speak English. I want to always express my thinking in English. I will be able to look things from many sides."

For him, although the task of learning is still difficult, English is a means to his new identity. It enables him to more freely express himself and expands his perspectives. The existing of this L2 identity helps him to neglect the difficulty and maintain his motivation.

As it can be inferred from these examples, for most of the participants, the concept of international orientation is more significant rather than identifying with the English community or culture. However, as these learners have clear images of their future identities which are accessing to

opportunities overseas or becoming fluent English speakers, they seem to be more motivated than the students who are not aware of those concepts. Nevertheless, for other learners English learning is not integrated into their future identities nor they hope to join any communities. For example, Masa says:

"...I don't like English, because English is very difficult for me. I'm not good at and don't like remembering. Usually I don't want to use English, but I use English when foreign people ask me to tell way. When I use English, I'm very uncomfortable because I can't talk what I want to talk. I learn English only to pass the exam. I can't image myself because I can't learn advanced English...."

Masa doesn't like English as he finds it difficult. Also he considers himself incompetent. It can be connected to lack of linguistic self-confidence or a person's perceptions of their own competence and ability to accomplish tasks successfully. This construct is affective and corresponds to language anxiety, specially the discomfort experienced when using an L2. Linguistic self-confidence is established through interactions between the language learner and members of the language community, and strengthened based on the quality and quantity of these interactions. In participating multi-linguistic communities or imagined communities, self-confidence fosters language learners' identification with the language community and increases their willingness to pursue learning that language. However, for Masa, learning English mostly serves to passing exams. He cannot imagine his identity as an L2 speaker. This lack of imagination or clear goals seems to have influenced his motivation and identity construction. His inability to freely express his identity in English has demotivated him in doing so.

Naoya: *"I feel comfortable speaking English with foreign people ...I don't feel that much of a change after learning English or talking to English speakers. My goal is to understand every article that is written in English.... I don't hope to join English speaking communities because now, I don't feel the need to join English speaking communities.... I prefer less interactions with my teacher because when I speak English, I don't have the confidence to tell my thoughts and feelings."*

Although Naoya has a clear goal to understand English articles, he doesn't feel any changes in his identity and doesn't wish to join any imagined or actual communities of practice. Accordingly, he prefers to have less interaction with his teacher. He doesn't feel confident in expressing himself in English either. This shows how the concepts of imagined identities and communities can influence learners' motivation and approaches toward English learning. Furthermore, an imagined community as the term implies, is not necessarily an actual community. It can be far from what can possibly be materialized for a learner in the real world. This interesting example clarifies it more:

Daisuke: *"...It's because English is beautiful and broaden my thoughts. I feel comfortable when I give presentation in English. I like to speak English with Taylor Swift. I hope to use English in spaceship. English accents are rhythmic and*

beautiful, so I like music in English. Listening to music in English might change my life better. Yes, I hope to join international conferences of science because I want to become physicist. Probably my life would be more rhythmic and I will try to express my thoughts in more beautiful way. I prefer more interactions with our teacher, because I also want to talk and express my opinion in English. I like this class."

These comments show how motivated and positive this learner feels toward learning. English broadens his thought and identity. He feels comfortable giving presentations and expressing himself in English. He has a very romantic and imaginary concept of learning English. His imagined community consists of celebrities with whom he is determined to meet and imaginary places like a spaceship. These imaginations which are not too accessible or realistic seem to motivate Daisuke to have more motivation to interact with his teacher and express his opinions in English.

5.2. Cultural Context and Identity

For Sakura English learning is motivating as it brings her new thoughts she didn't have before. Her future identity is speaking English like native speakers in foreign countries. She doesn't feel so confident in speaking English so she prefers to talks to her friends. Because she thinks: "*...English has straight ways to describe things more than Japanese. So I have to say straightly in English….*". Similarly, Yuuki said: "*English words and Japanese words are not same, so I feel different when I speak English*". English and Japanese languages are different in many ways. Many of the difficulties that Japanese learners have with English are more the result of cultural differences. There is a respect for abstraction and indirect communication which can cause Japanese learners to struggle to find the best way to express themselves.

Miwa has to face similar struggles:

"*In Japan, people do not say everything, so they cannot understand what they mean, but if we speak English, we have to express all of my opinion; so I can understand what I am thinking and how I am feeling. If I get only Japanese culture, I cannot imagine idea more.*"

For Miwa, the cultural context seems to be limiting in developing L2 identity. She is well aware of the fact that to be able to improve her speaking, she needs to express her opinions. She thinks that Japanese don't express all their opinions so within this culture, she cannot imagine new ideas. The impact of culture on students' language practices and identity development is well understood from Kunihiro's [6] words about Japanese communication styles. "In Japan, language, communication through language, has not received the same emphasis as in the West... It has been considered poor policy to use words as a tool to express one's views, to persuade the other fellow or to establish any depth of understanding. Language as an instrument of debate or arguments is considered even more disagreeable and is accordingly avoided. Thus, in Japanese society, use of words becomes a sort of ritual, not often to be taken at face value. It

is only one possible means of communication, not *the* means of communication as is often the case among English speakers" [6].

Isao and Naoya are also conscious of such linguistic and cultural differences:

Isao: *"In English I should write or say my main topics or opinions first, which is opposite to Japanese... My aim of learning English is to share my feelings or thoughts with others that don't speak Japanese."*

Naoya: *"I feel comfortable speaking English with foreign people rather than speaking with Japanese people. It feels very weird when I have to speak English with Japanese students in English class."*

For these learners, Learning English is a means of expression of thoughts and ideas toward people who are from a culture different than their own. It seems that English provides them with more identity positions to express themselves. Naoya doesn't feel comfortable practicing English with his Japanese classmates. it is possible that he needs to keep up with the same communication norms as that of Japanese which might restrict him from overt expression of thoughts or standing out as an English speaker. From the standpoint of cultural theories, collectivism is a feature of Japanese society which means putting harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions [3]. This can be another example the effect of cultural difference on learners' identity construction. For Naoya, the community of practice is a community of foreigners where he feels comfortable to practice English. An English classroom does not fulfill his imagined community.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that most of the participants in this study are motivated and have specific goals toward language learning which compose their imagined identities such as fluent English speakers with foreign friends, and joining future communities of practice such as foreign universities or companies. However, the English learners with lower linguistic self-confidence seem to lack a clear image of their future identity and don't incorporate participation in communities of practice in their learning goals. They prefer to avoid interactions. Moreover, the sociolinguistic differences between Japanese and English seem to have both positive and negative effects. For some learners, English provides them with a new identity through which they freely express their new thoughts and expand their horizons while the communicative and cultural differences of the native context might limit them from constructing new identities due to its disjuncture with their imagined community.

Furthermore, for most learners, the imagined community is mostly established with instrumental and intercultural orientations or as Yashima [17] put it international posture rather than identifying with the English culture or community. Previously it was assumed that integrativeness or the extent to which learners position themselves in relation with the L1 and L2 community and the intensity of the learner's desire to be closer to the target community members, determines the degree of L2 acquisition and motivation to learn the target language [4]. However, considering Japanese EFL learners who hold strong ethnic identity and lack the strong identification with the target culture, the concepts of identity and imagined community provide better understanding of their motivational orientation. It will also shed light on the underlying socio-psychological aspects of learning and cultural context which influence learning motivation and identity construction. Every time language learners interact in the target language, whether in the oral or written mode, they are engaged in identity construction, development, and negotiation. In the Japanese context which is mostly teacher centered and students are known to be less willing to communicate, the educators and teachers must encourage more interactions and inspire learners to set future goals of English learning. Engaging the learners' portable identities, teachers can provide a more motivating environment which is closer to the learner's imagined community.

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