

Japanese University Students' Possible Selves and the Use of Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Learner motivation is one of the most researched areas in the field of second language acquisition, and it is studied widely today using the idea of *selves* from psychology. To date, little research has been conducted concerning the relationship between motivation and learning. This study addresses that gap by exploring the relationship between one type of motivation, possible selves, and language learning strategies. A questionnaire was distributed to 126 female university students, and nine of whom were subsequently interviewed in Japanese to examine their goal setting and their actual learning processes. The findings confirmed the participants' level of possible selves and their use of language learning strategies were interrelated. Participants with high level of possible selves tended to use language learning strategies more frequently and have clearer goals than those who did not. Participants with low level of possible selves did not envision using English at all in the future. These results suggest the importance of classroom teachers helping learners enhance their possible selves related to English.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, motivation, possible selves, language learning strategies

1. Introduction

Research on individual differences in foreign language education has been conducted since the 1970s, and it is one of the most crucial issues to consider in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Even though students may attend the same language classes, understanding of what is taught differs from learner to learner, and it is unlikely that every learner can reach the same target levels set by institutions and by teachers. In EFL contexts where learners receive a limited amount of input of the target language in their daily lives, such as Japan, it is inevitable that learners must study independently outside of their classrooms if they are to become proficient in the target language. Independent language learning, however, requires a lot of dedication, and it is difficult to maintain the motivation and continue

learning.

One of the most featured research areas concerning individual differences in SLA studies is motivation. Research on motivation has been conducted since the early 1990s, and it has become one of the most popular research areas in SLA. This research has developed several new theoretical concepts, such as the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). The L2 Motivational Self System was first proposed by Dörnyei (2005), and this system attempts to reform previous way of thinking about motivation by utilising the theories of the self from psychology (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Researchers have mainly conducted quantitative studies to see the relationships of three components: ideal self, ought-to self, and language learning experiences. By conducting studies using the L2 Motivational Self System, researchers have noted that the development of language abilities is non-linear, and the motivation fluctuates in the process of learning. Because of this, the complex dynamic system theory has been adopted to attempt to understand the non-linear development of learners, and greater attention has been paid toward attaining qualitative data, such as from case studies and interviews (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015).

To date, most studies on motivation have mainly emphasized the development of theoretical concepts (e.g., Dörnyei, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Yashima, 2009). In addition, they have focused on what kind of motivation learners have (e.g., Csizer & Krmos, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). Only a few studies, however, have considered the relationship between motivation and actual language learning (e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001; Vandergrift, 2005). Therefore, this study attempts to address that gap by exploring how one type of motivation, namely *possible selves*, influences the process of learning, especially the use of language learning strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Possible Selves

The notion of possible selves originated in the field of psychology, and they are the individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. Possible selves can be divided further into three types. The first type is the "ideal self," which is the self that a person would *like to* become. The second one is the self that a person *could become*, and the last one is the self that a person is *afraid of becoming*. (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Understanding the importance of possible selves in language learning can help motivate learners in their process of learning, and it connects the importance of learners having a vision. According to Oxford advanced learners' dictionary (2011), vision means "the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination," or "a mental image of what the future will or could be like" (p.1720). For example, people with a clear vision of becoming a doctor can imagine themselves working as a doctor. In other words, people with vision can imagine what it will be like when their goal has been achieved. Goals are similar to vision, but they are often abstract and cognitive plans for the future, and they emphasize what one wants to achieve. People with the goal of becoming a doctor focus on the process of it rather than seeing themselves working as one.

Motivation is also important for language learning, and Dörnyei (2005, 2009) developed the L2 Motivational Self System based on the idea of possible selves generated by Markus and Nurius (1986). This system contains the following three elements that contribute to learner motivation. The first element is the *ideal L2 self*, which is “the representation of the attributes that one would ideally like to possess such as hopes, aspirations, or wishes” (Dörnyei, 2009, p.13). The second one is the *ought-to L2 self*, which is the representation of the attributes that “one believes one ought to possess such as duties, obligation and moral responses” (Dörnyei, 2009, p.13). It means learners are motivated to do something because of social pressures rather than their own desires. The last one is *L2 learning experiences*, which means “situated ‘executive’ motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience” (Dörnyei, 2009, p.29). Among these three components, the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self are central components in the system. This is because people try to reduce the discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal future self, according to the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1998).

Although learners are motivated when they have a future image, merely having a future image is insufficient to become successful language learners. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) thus summarized several conditions that learners need to be met in order to be successful language learners. First, learners need to have a desired future self-image, and this image should be different from their current self and future self. Although it should be different from their current self, this future self needs to be plausible. In addition, learners need to draw a certain mental roadmap and make a concrete action plan to realize their future self. The future image learners have, therefore, needs to be plausible, and there should be an appropriate distance between their current and future self.

2.2 Empirical Studies of Possible Selves

As explained above, the notion of possible selves has been integrated into the theory of motivation, and numerous studies have been conducted to further develop the theory itself. There have been also several empirical studies that have tried to measure learners' possible selves. MacIntyre, Mackinnon, and Clément (2009) conducted one of the first empirical studies on possible selves, and they developed a scale to measure present and future possible selves. Their participants were 135 high school students from an all-girls school in a small English-speaking city. They answered 18 questions from the following five perspectives: (1) current self, (2) possible future self, (3) how desirable the future self is, (4) how likely it is, and (5) how often the participants thought about it. Two separate principle components analyses were conducted on the data, and the results showed that the scale is internally consistent and unidimensional. As a result of this study the researchers developed a reliable scale that measured possible selves.

Based on MacIntyre *et al.* (2009), who argued that their scale could be adapted culturally appropriate ways to various contexts, Irie (2011) conducted a pilot study with 242 participants in Tokyo and developed a possible selves scale for Japanese students. The possible selves scale in her study has 12 items, and is based on MacIntyre *et al.* (2009), Ryan (2009), Taguchi *et al.* (2009), and Yashima (2009). Each of the 12 items showed six different perspectives: (1) actual self (describe me now), (2) future self (describe my possible future), (3) desirability, (4) obligation, (5) likelihood, and (6) frequency. In the first two items, (1) and (2), participants selected either yes or no, and they answered with six-point Likert

scale in other items. The scale was analyzed based on the same process of MacIntyre *et al.* (2009) using the Principle Components Analyses (PCAs). The analyses confirmed that these six scales are internally consistent and unidimensional.

Irie and Brewster (2013) later conducted a qualitative study on 45 first-year Japanese students' ideal selves using Irie's (2011) scale. The purpose of this research was to explore the development of the ideal self of students from two universities, how they regulated their learning, and their notions of their possible selves. They first administered a questionnaire to divide participants into three groups. The first group was the developing group, which had participants who accepted many items as their current selves and as their possible future selves. The second group was the expanding group, where participants only accepted a few items as their current selves, but they accepted several more items as their possible future selves. The last group was an extraneous group where participants did not accept many items either as current selves or possible selves. Several students with different self-discrepancy profiles from each group were selected to interview.

The results demonstrated that the participants who had clear ideas of what they would become better regulated their learning compared to those who did not. The participants in the developing group envisioned a clear ideal L2 self and a roadmap to attain their goal, while the participants in the expanding group had a less-defined future self-image. The participants in the extraneous group did not have positive attitudes towards the future. Their study confirmed that those who have possible future selves related to learning English regulated their behaviors more compared to those who did not.

As indicated, possible selves represent future self-images, such as what people would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and having possible selves motivated learners. As learners who create a clear image are able to regulate their learning, investigating what kind of possible selves learners have is also important.

2.3 Language Learning Strategies

In addition to having possible future selves related to English, using learning strategies also enhances the effectiveness of language learning. According to Oxford (1990, p.8), learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations." The use of learning strategies enhances the quality of language learning, and it supports learners to become a good and successful learner. The learning strategies can be divided into two major classes, direct and indirect. Direct strategies are strategies that directly involve the target language, and it contains three types of strategies: memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. These strategies help learners to store information, understand new language in different ways, and guess what others say when they do not understand. The other type of strategy, indirect strategy, support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. Metacognitive, affective and social strategies are indirect strategies, and they help learners to control their learning process, regulate emotion, and learn through interaction with others.

Among these six different types of strategies, metacognitive strategies are considered to be one of the most important strategies. Using metacognitive strategies enables learners to set goals, to evaluate,

and to revise their learning. These encourage learners to regulate their learning and help them to be active participants in their own learning process metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally (Zimmerman, 1989). Especially in the contexts where learners have few opportunities to use the target language, regulating learning is important (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). The use of metacognitive strategies also seems to help learners to enhance their proficiency effectively (e.g., Vandergrift, 2003).

The relationship between the use of language learning strategies and proficiency has been researched extensively, and learners with higher levels of proficiency use strategies more frequently (e.g., Lai, 2009; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Peacock & Ho, 2003), and the types of strategies learners use vary due to proficiency. For example, higher-level students use the cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies more often than other students. They understand which strategies are beneficial for their learning and choose the strategies they need (Lai, 2009). In addition, it is said that the use of strategies and the level of proficiency are related regardless of learners' ages (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007).

Although several studies have indicated that the use of learning strategies and the level of proficiency are associated with each other, it is also important to remember that the use of strategies does not always result in the effective language learning (e.g., Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006; Yamamori, Isoda, Hiromori & Oxford, 2003). Some learners may use many learning strategies, but this does not mean the use of strategies always leads to efficient learning. Thus, Yamamori *et al.* (2003, p.384) points out, "The more, the better' is not always the case in strategy use."

3. The purpose of research

As shown above, there have been several studies focusing on the importance of language learners' possible selves. However, the relationship between possible selves and learning is still not yet clear. As indicated above, using language-learning strategies are essential in order to learn language efficiently, but whether the use of strategies and the level of possible selves are related with each other or not is yet unknown. Therefore, I will attempt to address this gap by investigating both quantitatively and qualitatively the relationship between Japanese English language learners' perceptions of their current and future possible selves related to their English and the use of language learning strategies.

The research questions raised in this study are the following:

1. How do Japanese English learners perceive their current and future possible selves related to English?
2. How do the learners' perceptions influence the use of language learning strategies?
3. How does this perception influence learners' goal setting and their actual process of English learning?

4. Methods

In this section, I will explain the methods I adopted in this study. This study adopts both a quantitative

and qualitative approach, QUAN→qual, following Dörnyei (2007). As a quantitative approach, a questionnaire study was conducted. To understand participants' use of learning strategies in more depth, qualitative data was also collected.

4.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 148 first or second Japanese female university students from one women's university. They were recruited from six mandatory English classes. Their mean age was 18.78, and their mean TOEFL ITP score was 515.33. All students in this university take the TOEFL ITP test. They majored in different subjects such as humanities and science. I explained the purpose of the study, and the participants signed participation forms before anonymously answering the questionnaire.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

4.2.1 The Questionnaire

The closed questionnaire¹ used in this study consisted of four parts containing 112 items in total. Part 1 of the questionnaire covered possible selves. Twelve sentences related to the use of English were created based on previous studies such as Irie (2011) and MacIntyre *et al.* (2009). Participants were to answer whether these sentences would apply them at 1) the current point in time, 2) by the time they would graduate from the university, and 3) ten years later.

Part 2 covered language learning strategies, with all 50 questions adopted from Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) in Oxford (1990). These questions were divided into six strategy types: memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social. Participants answered these questions with five level Likert scale based on the frequency of strategy use. Part 3 covered anxiety and self-efficacy, with 14 items in total, six of these items concerned anxiety, and they were adopted from Ryan (2009). Eight items concerned self-efficacy, and they were adapted from Mizumoto (2011), Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), and Ueki and Takeuchi (2012).

The reliability of each scale is summarized in Table 4.1. In this paper, only the results of Part 1 and 2 will be summarized due to the space limitation.

The questionnaire was administered to 148 students in Japanese at the end of July in 2015 at the beginning or toward the end of their regular classes. For the purpose of ensuring reliability, I excluded the participants who missed answering some of the items. Participants who did not meet the research criteria, such as those who were not Japanese or who were not first or second year students, were also excluded from the analysis. Accordingly, the data from 126 students was used for analysis.

A series of statistical tests was performed on the questionnaire data. First, the reliability of the scales and the correlation among variables were checked. Then, those results were analyzed using the principle components analyses, cluster analysis and ANOVAs with post-hoc comparisons.

4.2.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants among 148 questionnaire participants

Table 4.1

The Reliability of the Scales

Scales	Sub scales	Reliability
Part 1 Possible selves	A. Current selves (12 items)	$\alpha=.87$
	B. Near future selves (12 items)	$\alpha=.93$
	C. Distant future selves (12 items)	$\alpha=.94$
Part 2 Learning strategies	A. Memory strategies (9 items)	$\alpha=.63$
	B. Cognitive strategies (14 items)	$\alpha=.84$
	C. Compensatory strategies (6 items)	$\alpha=.71$
	D. Metacognitive strategies (9 items)	$\alpha=.92$
	E. Affective strategies (6 items)	$\alpha=.72$
	F. Social strategies (6 items)	$\alpha=.80$
Part 3 Anxiety and Self-efficacy	A. Anxiety (6 items)	$\alpha=.88$
	B. Self-efficacy (8 items)	$\alpha=.95$

in September and October 2015 after participants read and signed consent forms. The interviews, which were in Japanese and digitally recorded lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. Each interview explored the participants' goal setting in English learning with questions such as 'What is your goal in English learning?' and 'What are you doing to achieve your goals?'

The interview data were analyzed following the grounded theory approach explained by Saiki (2005). After the interview, all of the recorded data were transcribed into Japanese and then translated into English. After I finished transcribing, I divided the extracts into small pieces and labeled them. Then, for each coded data, I thought about the property and dimension to understand more about the data. After that, I categorized each data into groups, and then created the model of goals setting of each learner.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Questionnaire

Before I conducted statistical analysis with cluster analysis and ANOVAs, I first checked the dimensionality and validity of the possible selves scales in Part 1. Part 1 contained three scales on possible selves, 1) current possible selves, 2) near future possible selves, and 3) distant future possible selves, and it is important that these three are internally consistent. The principle components analyses were used as it was also adopted in Irie (2011) and MacIntyre *et al.* (2009). For all three scales, two factors were extracted. The screeplots for each scale, however, showed a clear break after the first factor, and thus a one factor solution was selected in each case.

After confirming that the three possible selves scales were internally consistent and unidimensional, a cluster analysis was employed to identify the relationship between the level of possible selves and the use of language learning strategies. Cluster analysis is an analysis to categorize people into

groups that have small within-group variation and large between-group variation. This study adopted a hierarchical cluster analysis with the Ward method, which groups participants close to one another until only one cluster remains. The variables used for cluster analysis were the mean score of three possible selves scales. With the help of a dendrogram, the participants were thus divided into five clusters.

After dividing the participants into five clusters, the validity of the grouping was confirmed using one-way ANOVAs. First, I checked whether the groupings were statistically significantly different concerning the mean score of possible selves or not. The results of the one-way ANOVAs indicated that the means of all groups, current selves, near future selves, and distant future selves were all statistically significantly different from one another ($F(4, 121) = 134.18, p < .01$; $F(4, 121) = 292.75, p < .01$; $F(4, 121) = 152.13, p < .01$). Tukey's multiple comparison test was also conducted as a post-hoc comparison, and all Tukey pairwise comparisons were significant ($p < .05$).

Describing the characteristics of the participants in each cluster, participants in cluster one and two had low level of possible selves in all three points. The level of possible selves for the participants in cluster three was close to the overall average. In cluster four, participants had a high level of possible selves. Participants in cluster five had a low level of possible selves as current selves, but they expected to have a high level of possible selves when they considered their distant future selves.

One-way ANOVAs and Tukey's tests were conducted to compare the means of the participants' language learning strategy use based on the groupings of the cluster analysis. Participants with high perceptions of possible selves tended to use strategies more frequently overall. As can be seen in Table 5.3, participants in cluster four and five used learning strategies more frequently than participants in other clusters. As for the participants in cluster four, which has the highest possible selves, they used cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies statistically more often compared to participants in other clusters ($F(4, 121) = 23.84, p < .01$; $F(4, 121) = 27.58, p < .01$; $F(4, 121) = 7.11, p < .01$; $F(4, 121) = 17.68, p < .01$).

Table 5.1

The Comparison of the Mean of Possible Selves in Each Cluster

	Overall		Cluster 1 (N=18)		Cluster 2 (N=38)		Cluster 3 (N=22)		Cluster 4 (N=13)		Cluster 5 (N=35)		ANOVA		Post hoc comparisons
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F (4, 121)	p	
A. Current selves	1.81	.56	1.24	1.00	1.48	.17	1.81	.30	3.04	.34	2.03	.27	134.18	.00	1<2*, 1<3*, 1<4*, 1<5*, 2<3*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 3<5*, 4>5*
B. Near future selves	2.35	.70	1.39	.18	1.92	.18	2.27	.16	3.64	.23	2.88	.29	292.75	.00	1<2*, 1<3*, 1<4*, 1<5*, 2<3*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 3<5*, 4>5*
C. Distant future selves	2.5	.72	1.57	.27	2.01	.22	2.45	.27	3.55	.39	3.14	.36	152.13	.00	1<2*, 1<3*, 1<4*, 1<5*, 2<3*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 3<5*, 4>5*

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 5.2

General Characteristics of the Five Clusters

Cluster	Number of participants	The level of possible selves
Cluster 1 (Low-possible selves)	18	Participants have low possible selves in all three points.
Cluster 2 (Relatively low possible-selves)	38	Participants have relatively low possible selves in all three points. There is a significant increase between current selves and near future selves, and current and distant future selves, but there is no significant difference between two future selves, and they have low future selves.
Cluster 3 (Average)	22	Participants have the level of possible selves, which is most close to overall average.
Cluster 4 (High possible selves)	13	Participants have high possible selves in all three points.
Cluster 5 (The large self-discrepancy)	35	Participants have low possible selves as current selves, but their possible selves increase statistically significantly towards distant future possible selves. The discrepancy between current selves and future selves is the largest among five groups.

Participants with lower possible selves, on the other hand, tended not to use learning strategies. The means of all six types of strategies were lower than 3. Among these three clusters, none of the use of strategies were significantly different one another ($p < .05$).

The results of the questionnaire indicated that the participants in this study generally had a relatively low level of possible selves. Participants in clusters one, two, and three, representing approximately 60% of participants, had lower level of possible selves in all three types. This suggests that they did not believe they had the characteristics described in the questionnaire, neither as current selves nor as future selves.

The level of possible selves and the use of strategies seems to be interrelated. Some previous studies have also shown that the use of strategies and the level of motivation were interrelated, and the more motivated learners were, the more strategies were generally used (e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Supporting the findings that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is strongly affected by motivation (Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001), participants in cluster four in this study appear to use these strategies more compared to the participants in other clusters. Possible selves is one type of motivation, and it may be typical that participants with high level of possible selves tended to use overall strategies more frequently.

5.2 The Interviews

In this section, I will describe and discuss the data obtained from the interviews. Nine participants were interviewed for this study, but here I will describe the results of only two interviews due to space limitations. The participants, Yukiko (Cluster 1) and Kasumi (Cluster 4), as we shall see, have entirely different goals toward language learning.

Table 5.3

The Comparison of the Mean Use of Learning Strategies

Variable	Overall		Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4		Cluster 5		ANOVA		Post hoc comparisons
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F (4, 121)	p	
Memory	2.83	.52	2.68	.60	2.67	.43	2.94	.54	3.21	.49	2.86	.47	3.67	.01	1<4*, 2<4*
Cognitive	2.79	.62	2.36	.56	2.45	.44	2.76	.42	3.74	.63	3.03	.43	23.84	.00	1<4*, 1<5*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 4>5*
Compensatory	3.06	.62	2.81	.53	2.78	.59	2.99	.54	3.68	.57	3.31	.52	9.43	.00	1<4*, 1<5*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*
Metacognitive	2.64	.87	2.00	.75	2.19	.50	2.42	.56	3.89	.70	3.13	.72	27.58	.00	1<4*, 1<5*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 3<5*, 4>5*
Affective	2.2	.67	1.95	.57	2.04	.55	2.04	.53	2.95	.76	2.34	.67	7.11	.00	1<4*, 2<4*, 3<4*, 4>5*
Social	2.55	.81	1.95	.58	2.17	.70	2.49	.52	3.59	.86	2.90	.62	17.68	.00	1<4*, 1<5*, 2<4*, 2<5*, 3<4*, 4>5*

Note. * $p < .05$

5.2.1 Goal setting

The first question in each interview focused on goal setting, where I asked all participants the following: What kind of goals do you have in English learning at this point, by the time you graduate from the university, and ten years from now? Extracts from Yukiko and Kasumi's interviews are summarized in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4

Participants' goals

Goals at this point	
Yukiko	Kasumi
I am really bad at English, and I can't speak English, and I have a difficulty to write in English. I didn't do well in the exam when I was a junior high school and a senior high school student. So, I feel I am really bad at English. I don't want to use it as much as possible. I want to avoid using it.	My goal is to communicate with people in English. When I use English, I often feel my English ability is limited. So, I would like to have enough English abilities which enable me to understand what others say and to express what I would like to say.
Goals by the time of university graduation	
Yukiko	Kasumi
I'm not planning to study in a graduate school, and I plan to start working after I graduate from the university. Probably, I need to use English somehow. So, I am wondering how I can go through that situation. I'd like to go through the situation somehow.	This may be too difficult for me, but I would like to improve my English abilities so that I can study math in abroad. I would like to be able to talk about my expertise math in English
Goals for ten years later	
Yukiko	Kasumi
I don't know what I'm doing even a few years later. I don't imagine myself very well. I feel I am happy if I don't have any troubles in my daily life.	In four years in the university, I don't think my English abilities improve well enough. So, I would like to continue studying by myself. I don't know what kind of job I will have in the future, whether the job is related with math or not, but I would like to improve both math and English abilities.

As shown above, Yukiko did not answer the question directly, and she did not describe her goals with concrete words. This indicates that she may not have a clear vision of her future self and may not have concrete ideas about what she would like to do in the future. In contrast, Kasumi expressed more concrete ideas concerning what kind of English abilities she would like to have now and in the future, and she stated specific reasons for studying English. As she is planning to continue studying math and English even after graduating from the university, she has expressed a desire to make an effort and to initiate self-study.

5.2.2 Factors influencing goal setting

As indicated in the previous section, Yukiko did not seem to set clear goals in English learning. Figure 5.1 shows how her personality and previous language learning experiences have shaped her negative attitudes towards English. As a result, these factors may contribute to her unclear future image.



Figure 5.1 Factors influencing Yukiko's goal setting

In the interview, Yukiko described herself somewhat negatively by using the following terms:

- I am basically lazy
- I'd like to manage to go through the situation which requires me English
- I basically think I am happy if I don't have any troubles in my daily lives
- When I watch TV program about foreign countries, I feel I want to visit there, but I don't do anything for that. I am a *hikikomori* [stay-at-home, reclusive] type.

These utterances, which reflect her personality, suggest that she generally does not make extra effort. She described herself as a *hikikomori*, which in Japanese means a person who stays at home all the time, and she seems rather introverted.

Her previous experiences may also interfere with goal setting. She said:

Well, when I was in an elementary school, I was studying in an English conversation school. I don't remember very well about it, but I think I was not bad at English at that time. When I was in a junior high school, I had a communication class with non-Japanese teachers. This

class was entirely conducted in English, and teachers didn't speak Japanese at all. I am shy of strangers, and I was really scared and had anxiety in the class.

Such negative experiences as Yukiko reported having as a junior high school student have been shown to influence motivation. Dörnyei (2005, 2009), for example, argues that the impact of the teacher and the curriculum is one of the components in the L2 Motivational Self System, and according to this system, it is especially important for learners to have positive experiences and to feel that they are good at learning language. Successful engagement with learning enhances the level of motivation, but Yukiko did not seem to have this. Thus, her negative EFL experiences with her teacher and her accumulated anxiety may shape her attitudes toward learning English today.

In addition, Yukiko stated that she had never been abroad. According to Tanaka and Ellis (2013), students' self-efficacy and confidence changed greatly after studying abroad because there was less nervousness and less fear of making mistakes. Likewise, Ueki and Takeuchi (2015) found that students' anxiety decreased after participating in a study abroad program. When people learn a foreign language, it is important to have lower level of anxiety (e.g., Liu, 2006). However, Yukiko has been unable to decrease her anxiety through such means. Instead, it has increased steadily over time.

As indicated in Figure 5.1, Yukiko's personality and her past experiences influence each other, and they may have prevented her from taking initiative to visit foreign countries and/or seek opportunities to meet people to speak English in Japan. This, in turn gives rise to her negative attitudes towards English, as shown in the following extracts:

- I am very bad at English, and I didn't have good grade in tests in a junior high school and a senior high school. I have negative attitudes towards English, and I want to avoid using it as much as possible.
- I'm glad if I can eliminate negative attitudes towards English, but I think I won't do anything specific.
- When I was a high school student, my grade in English was the lowest among five subjects, and I always had a problem because of English. I was always wondering what I should do, and I tried a lot of things. However, I couldn't solve the problems, and I still don't know how I should study English.
- I am bad at English, and it is a burden for me.
- My listening ability is devastating.

Although it seems that she has made effort to study English, she has not yet found her own way of learning English.

Next, I will examine the data from Kasumi's interview. Unlike Yukiko, Figure 5.2 shows that Kasumi's personality and past experiences have led to better understanding of her own problems and to her being able to establish her own goals.



Figure 5.2 Factors influencing Kasumi's goal setting

The following comments highlight her positive attitudes towards achieving her goals.

- I think I can reach certain level if I make effort.
- Well, if I make effort or if I have time, I think I can do that.

Kasumi seems to have a certain level of self-efficacy towards achieving her goals, which is not only essential in being able to achieve something but also determines the degree of achievement (e.g., Bandura, 1986). People with a high level of self-efficacy are able to deal with threats with confidence, and they are likely to perform better. Unlike Yukiko, Kasumi's positive attitudes toward her goals make her believe that she can achieve them if she makes effort.

Second, it seems Kasumi spends a long time before she makes a decision to challenge something, and she also tries to see herself with objective viewpoints. For instance, she believes that there would be some difficulties in studying abroad although she is willing to study abroad.

I want to study abroad. I'd like to visit foreign countries anyway. But I have a problem with expenses. Also, I think it is important to stay there for a year to improve English abilities, and I have a chance to study math there. But, when I come back here, the content of math here is also advancing, and I may not be able to catch up even though I study math abroad. I feel it is difficult for science students to study abroad. So, I think I can study abroad during summer vacation for around two months, but I think it is difficult to study abroad to study math for a long duration.

Kasumi also understands her ability objectively.

- In math course, I don't think I'm really good at math. There are a lot of things I can't understand even in Japanese.
- I have many things I need to understand in Japanese at first, and I don't have a lot of time to spend in English learning.

Third, Kasumi studies independently by using materials she is interested in, and she plans to continue studying even after graduating from university.

- I have a class about math English next year, and I'd like to check the terminology using that opportunity. There is a library for math, and more than half of the books there are written in English. So, I'd like to try to read them by myself even though I don't understand everything.
- (After graduating from the university) I'd like to continue studying by myself even though I accomplish the goal. In four years, I don't think I can be perfect, and I will try to improve more.

These extracts suggest that Kasumi is an independent and autonomous learner who is willing to make effort to master English by taking charge of her own learning (see Benson, 2011).

Second, she used English in real communication when she was a junior and senior high school student, and this made her "want to be able to speak English." She described a gathering of people from various countries where she had to make great effort to speak English by saying:

- At that time, I was small, and I couldn't say what I wanted to say and I couldn't understand what others said. I somehow communicated with them in English, but I thought I can communicate more deeply if I can express what I really want to say.
- I joined the gathering for a month when I was in a junior high school and a high school, and I had more chances to communicate with people when I was a junior high school student. I just said what I wanted to say anyway, but I don't know how much they understood me. I thought my English ability is not well enough.

Through these experiences, she learned the importance of being able to express herself in English. This not only taught her the importance of English, but also that she needed to make effort to progress with English to overcome her own English learning problems.

As the above extracts show, Kasumi seems to have a high level of self-efficacy, and she thinks about her situation objectively. Even though she "couldn't say what [she] wanted to say" and "couldn't understand what the other said," she just said "what [she] wanted to say" anyway even though she was unsure how much others understood her. Today she understands her limitations, but she still makes effort to overcome them.

- I need to study more about special terminology in math. In Japanese there are some special terminology, and I'm sure there are some in English, too. I have a class about that next year, but I'd like to learn it by myself using this chance.
- Not only special terminology, but also my vocabulary in general is limited. I feel I need to increase my knowledge, too. I haven't studied vocabulary using vocabulary book so far, and I feel I need to try that. Also, I think it's important to make an opportunity to increase the amount

of vocabulary.

Understanding one's own language learning problems is important because it indicates a certain amount of metacognitive knowledge, which refers to knowledge *about* learning (Wenden, 1998). This metacognitive knowledge concerning her own limitations may enable Kasumi to set clear language learning goals.

5.2.3. English learning

In this final section, I'd like to explain how Yukiko and Kasumi's goal setting has influenced how they currently approach their English study. Yukiko's strong negative attitudes towards English may explain her lack of specific goals for English learning and why she has continued using the same study method for years, even though she does not feel it is particularly useful.

Yukiko: When I was a junior high school and a high school student, I had a read-aloud handout. In the handout, the text (in the textbook) was written, and new vocabulary and expressions are written in Japanese. I read aloud the text from the beginning in English, and I had to practice reading it so that I can read it fluently. I still make this handout by myself if the text from the textbook is in the exam.

Interviewer: Do you make this handout because it is effective?

Yukiko: Well, it may be effective, but anyway it is easy and quick. I was always studying only with this handout when I was a junior high school and a high school student.

On the other hand, it is possible that Kasumi was motivated to learn English independently using her own methods because of the difficulties she had using English in an actual communicative situation and because of her interests.

- I didn't use vocabulary book because it was difficult for me to remember only vocabulary. I tried using various different vocabulary books and wondered which suits me.
- The teacher said that I should study only one vocabulary book. But, if I use a vocabulary book, I can remember only before the exam, and I forget them after that. So, in the end, I'm trying to study with my own way.
- For the exam or practice exam, I'm following my own way, and I think that's fine if I'm satisfied with.

As we can see, Kasumi uses many expressions to describe how she is trying to find individualized learning methods that suit her own purposes rather than those suggested by her teacher.

In sum, this section has shown, through the participants' interview extracts, how their goal setting is influenced by several factors and how this is connected to the way they learn English. Yukiko's negative

attitudes and her negative experiences may be preventing her from goal setting. On the other hand, Kasumi's positive attitudes and positive experiences may have helped her establish clear goals which lead her toward independent learning.

6. Conclusion

This small-scale study aimed to investigate the relationship between the level of possible selves and the use of learning strategies through a questionnaire and through interviews.

This study had three research questions. First research question was about the perceptions of possible selves Japanese university students have. It was found that the participants in this study had a low level of possible selves. Many seemed to believe that they would not use English in the future. The second research question was about the relationship between the learners' perceptions of possible selves and the use of language learning strategies. The results revealed that the level of possible selves and the use of strategies were related with each other. Participants with high level of possible selves tended to use overall language learning strategies more frequently. The third research question was about the relationship between the learners' perceptions of possible selves and goal setting. Participants with high level of possible selves seemed to set clear goals, while those with low level of possible selves had difficulties setting goals. It seems that the participants' personalities and their past experiences were a huge influence.

These findings have important pedagogical implications for EFL learning. First, it is important to enhance the level of students' possible selves related to English. As participants with high level of possible selves used strategies more frequently and set clear goals, the level of possible selves can be seen as an important key to promote English language learning. Teachers can help facilitate this by adopting activities to help learners to think about their future use of English. For instance, teachers can ask learners to write about what they would like to do in the future and how they would use English in such circumstances (e.g., Kato & Mynard, 2015; Kiyota, 2014). This kind of activity may help learners to envision their own use of English in the future.

Second, it is important for teachers to understand that learners learn language differently. Factors such as language learning experiences and personality constantly influence language learning, and as can be seen from the interviews, how learners are involved in language learning varies from person to person. There is no learning method which can lead to success for all learners (e.g., Griffiths & İnceçay, 2015), and it is important for teachers to help learners find an appropriate method that works well for them. Teachers, for instance, should let learners to think about all the possible ways to learn English based on their individual goals. It is important for learners themselves to realize that finding a method which is suitable for them is the key for improvement. In addition, it is also necessary for teachers to support learners based on their individual differences. As learners are all different, teachers should not provide learners with only one method. When teachers give homework to students, for instance, it may be beneficial to prepare several different types of homework based on the learners' different goals and motivation. Those who have concrete goals are probably willing to do homework even if it is difficult. Learners who study English without any specific purposes, however, may be reluctant to do so, and

preparing for something which is a little harder than their level would be important. Not only in assigning homework, but also in other situations, such as giving feedback, teachers can think about learners' individual differences.

The present study, however, has the following two limitations. The participants in this study were rather homogeneous. This study was conducted in one academic women's university where the participants' English skills are relatively high. Because of this, the results might be different had this study been conducted elsewhere. In addition, the data from the interviews are limited. The interviews were conducted once, and thus the information obtained might be limited. Multiple interviews would have provided more information about the learners' backgrounds, and I might have been better able to understand their individual learning processes.

Despite these limitations, this study helps understand the relationship between students' level of possible selves, their use of language learning strategies, and their process of English language learning. It is important to conduct further studies investigating different contexts and with more interviews. Each language learner comes from different backgrounds, and by understanding how their backgrounds influence their language learning, it may be possible to find some clues to help learners to promote their own English learning.

Notes

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1. The questionnaire is available upon request.

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