Efficient Data Collection Methods for Investigating Language Learner Identities

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The Opening Question

How do some Japanese university students manage to become functionally fluent in English in spite of the many disincentives they face? This question has puzzled me throughout my eighteen years of teaching in Japan. Japanese secondary school students are required to study a foreign language for six years, most commonly English. After six years, however, or for university English majors after ten years, many Japanese students cannot effectively speak or write English. American anthropologist Thomas Rohlen explains that English courses in junior-high and senior-high schools, conducted in Japanese, present students with large amounts of factual information. Students are expected to apply themselves with a "diligence" that is highly valued in all areas of Japanese society and culture. Classes, which are typically composed of forty students, are too large and time is too scarce for serious attention to fluency in the target language. There is too much material to cover through textbooks and writing translations.[1] While reforms have been attempted in the decades since Rohlen conducted his fieldwork, the curriculum remains dominated by the expectation that students acquire knowledge "about" English grammar and vocabulary rather than learn to use the target language for communication, despite official proclamations to the contrary.The tradition of locally produced entrance examinations drives instruction at each level by setting high-stakes gate-keeping rites of passage to the next level: students are examined mainly for their factual knowledge "about" English, and only superficially on their productive abilities on standardized mark-sheet forms.[2]

Japanese undergraduates face many other disincentives to developing fluency in English. English 'content' courses taught by Japanese professors are normally conducted entirely in Japanese. By contrast, the ei-kaiwa (English conversation) courses, required of most students at least once a week for two years, are often taught by native-speakers of English in the target language for most or all of class time. Such classes may have forty or more students, but in progressive programs class size is limited to twenty or twenty-five. One ninety-minute class in English each week, with modest homework, however, is usually not enough for students to develop and retain more than basic skills. Many instructors in such classes encourage students to be willing to take linguistic chances and learn from mistakes – some of the basic steps toward fluency. Unfortunately, insufficient time is allocated to such activities.

A major complication, as observed by American anthropologist Brian McVeigh, who spent several years teaching at Japanese universities, is the fact that native-speaking English teachers are commonly viewed in Japan as "entertainers" who are supposed to make English interesting and fun; they are sometimes seen as "miracle-workers" and a "cure-all" for the deficiencies of the institution.[3] With such attitudes in the air, students may have trouble taking their native-speaking English teachers entirely seriously. At the same time, students receive a very different message from their Japanese teachers of English as to what it means to be a student of English and, indeed, about what English is.

I have asked some of my Japanese university colleagues, many of whom are fluent English speakers who could be excellent role-models for students, why they do not conduct their English courses in English. Many explain that using English in the classroom would put too great a burden on the students. Others say that once the students graduate, most will never need to use English again, and so why bother with English as the language of instruction? Japanese colleagues as well as students say that they think it would be "strange" for native speakers of Japanese to talk to each other in English, even in English classes, when using Japanese is so much easier. This may be a self-confirming situation.

I contend that the disposition of most Japanese English teachers not to use English as the language of instruction has deep roots in Japanese culture; it also represents an epistemological stance that devalues language in use. In earlier periods of Japanese history, knowledge that was borrowed from foreign countries was viewed as instrumental and was understood through a reductionist process of breaking something into its component parts. In this way, the Japanese reverse-engineered Western firearms as early as the sixteenth century, and eventually steamships, railways and other modern technology starting in the late nineteenth century. One of the earliest and most persistent forms of foreign-language education in Japan has been the grammar-translation method. It is a highly reductionist activity, asking students to decode an English text and reassemble it in Japanese. It was used over a century ago for the instrumental purpose of understanding the world outside Japan. Today, grammar-translation is still a common practice in courses taught by many Japanese teachers of English. It should be noted, however, that in this method the target language is ultimately not English but Japanese. Students may well wonder about the value of English study if one-way communication is the principle aim.

Such a reductionist epistemology, extended to learning in general, may be understood in terms that Dwight Atkinson, American professor of English and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) at Purdue University, uses to describe the principles of cognitivism underlying current mainstream

1. Thomas P. Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 241-270.
2. Brian J. McVeigh, Japanese Education as MYTH (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 168-169.
3. Rohlen, 241-170 & McVeigh, 168-169.

linguistics: "Learning [is considered] as abstract knowledge acquisition. Learning means extracting perceptual cues from the environment and processing them so that they become representations. Knowledge must therefore be radically decontextualized and abstract: Internalized, it loses its concrete embedding in the environment."[4] Here Atkinson could be describing the grammar-translation method, in which a student gets lost in the atomized details and, after persistent effort, may know what the individual words mean; however, having rendered them in a way that is "radically decontextualized," the student still has no idea of what the passage is about. It provides a disincentive for students to use English, which may appear for many to be some subtle form of torture. As Atkinson continues further:

> Language has held a central place in cognitivist doctrine. This is partly because linguistic theory seems to provide the perfect model for how knowledge can be organized, stored, and activated in the cognitive apparatus–as a set of component units that are arrayed in production and processing in lawful combinations, i.e., as subject to syntactic rules. A cognitive "grammar" therefore consists of a set of symbols and a syntax for arranging them.[5]

Not surprisingly, the branches of cognitivist linguistics are heavily represented in Japanese academia. From their collective viewpoint, as I have come to understand it over nearly two decades, language study is a contemplation of the orderly arrangements of knowledge 'about' the target language and appreciation of the abstract beauty of its linguistic structures, unsullied by the messiness and errors of language in 'daily use'. When Japanese students of English receive such messages, explicitly in their course content and implicitly through their Japanese teachers' commonly preferred language of instruction, they encounter major intellectual disincentives to become fluent users of English.

Language-Learner Identities

I became interested in language-learner identities for its potential to help me know my Japanese students better and to improve my understanding of what they thought and felt about English. In such ways, I hoped to find answers to the opening question of how some Japanese undergraduate students of English become reasonably fluent speakers, in spite of the disincentives previously mentioned, among many others. Before adopting Language-Learner Histories as my focus, I spent several years unsuccessfully asking Japanese undergraduates to explore their identities through a very different frame of reference: Multiple Intelligences theory, developed by Howard Gardner, a cognitive psychologist in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University.[6] After weeks of thinking, writing, and drawing about their multiple intelligences, the students were generally satisfied but remained curious about other models of human nature. In time I realized I was approaching the subject from the outside, imposing an intellectualized model on the students, when I should have been inquiring about what was already going on in their minds.

Four years ago, I became aware of the growing body of work in language learner identities, one of several emerging alternatives to the cognitivist mainstream in SLA and linguistics. The most accessible and comprehensive overview of language learner identity studies may be found in a recent jointly-written article by Bonny Norton, in the Department of Language & Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, and Carolyn McKinney, in the School of Education, University of Cape Town.[7]

Norton pioneered language learner identity studies in the 1990s and quickly attracted a growing following by directly challenging some of the assumptions of the cognitivist mainstream in linguistics, personified by, but certainly not limited to, Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Norton argued that mainstream linguistics, by locating language entirely inside the mind as a purely mental process, had failed to acknowledge the social dimension of linguistic activity. Norton foregrounded several issues: 1) inequalities of power between interlocutors; 2) the social structuring of opportunities to use language; and 3) the complex dynamism and multiplicity of language identities, constantly shifting in response to varying social relations and capable of operating in mutually contradictory ways. In such a model of the complex and contradictory nature of identities, traditional binary views of motivated and unmotivated, among others, would be problematized.[8] For example, it would be entirely possible for someone to be motivated to learn a language but unwilling to 'invest' the necessary time and effort if the learning environment were seen as inhospitable – for example, permitting or condoning such indignities as racism, sexism, or homophobia. Indeed, it is the attention to human dignity that makes language learner identities so attractive. Historically, treating people decently has not always been a feature of language learning programmes. Strictly mentalist cognitive views of linguistics (and earlier behaviourist approaches) often failed to acknowledge the learner's feelings, insecurities, hopes, and other basic human needs.

The Research Project: Doing Qualitative Research

During the past three years, I have investigated the language learner identities of selected students in the English Department of a two-year women's college, attached to a major four-year university in Nagoya, Japan. After passing through the labyrinthine processes of the university ethics committee, I obtained permission to conduct research with undergraduate Japanese students in my own English classes, a good percentage of whom were sufficiently motivated and able to speak English with their non-Japanese English-speaking teachers.

Given the personal nature of the questions I wished to examine – how did some students manage to become fluent in English, and what role did shifting language learner identities play in this process – I chose qualitative interviews as the most suitable method for gathering the data. Keith Richards, of the Centre of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, provided valuable insights on how to conduct and interpret

4. Dwight Atkinson, "Introduction: Cognitivism and Second Language Acquisition," in Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition, ed. Dwight Atkinson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 4.
5. Atkinson, "Introduction," 4.
6. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. (New York: Basic Books, 2011 [1983]).
7. Bonny Norton and Carolyn McKinney, "An Identity Approach to Second Language Acquisition," in Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition, ed. Dwight Atkinson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 73-94.
8. Norton and McKinney, "An Identity Approach to Second Language Acquisition", 73.

Kinds	Dates	Amount	Methods	Materials	Approval
qualitative interviews (voluntary, outsied of class)	Jan-Feb 2010 & Jan Feb 2011	c. 25 participants c. 15 hours total	semi-directed, open ended; no LLHs	digital audio recordings; not yet transcribed	junior college ethics approval; participant consent
language learner histories (LLHs)	Nov-Dec 2011	75 participants (from 3 classes)	LLHs were begun in class; completed after class	A-3 paper; chronological notes	university ethics approval; participant consent
qualitative interviews (voluntary, outside of class)	Jan-Feb 2012	14 participants c. 12 hours total	semi-directed, open-ended; based on student LLHs	digital audio recordings; not yet transcribed	university ethics approval; participant consent

The table above summarizes my qualitative data-gathering from 2010 to 2012

qualitative interviews: principally to "seek the particular"[9] and to consider the interview as "a conversation with a purpose."[10] Richards helped me see that in qualitative interviews we seek "understanding" by "establishing a relationship with people" that enables us "to share in their perception of the world." Understanding that the entire process was "collaborative" gave me license to "draw from the speaker the richest and fullest account possible."[11] Keeping in mind that the interview was "co-constructed" enabled me to maintain perspective on what it might or might not reveal about the participant's "real self."[12] In all this and in his useful guides to structuring interview questions, Richards confirmed my belief that by talking directly with the students in a semi-structured way, I could pursue the questions and follow-up questions that would potentially elicit what I hoped to learn. Surveys and questionnaires, I thought, would not allow me to ask questions and respond to answers in real time. In this, I now know I was mistaken. For two years I relied on interviews alone, without some kind of prior writing from the students. Only recently did I discover how to remedy this problem.

In pilot studies in early 2010 and again in early 2011, I invited students of mine who showed an interest in English to participate in an interview with me. Inexperienced in the techniques of qualitative interviewing, I had not yet developed a systematic way of preparing the students or myself for the interviews. In these interviews, I struggled each time to create a context in which the students could discuss their language learning identities. The students struggled along with me, and after nearly an hour we sometimes reached a point where we had some idea of what we were talking about. In short, the interviews were starting to get somewhere just as it was about time to finish.

A methodological breakthrough occurred late in 2011 when I collaborated with a colleague and produced a two-page form on which the students could write a chronological record of their language learner histories, from their earliest memories up to the present.[13] This form, called a Language Learner History (LLH), has a history of its own. With a research colleague at Nanzan University, Avril Haye, I adapted the form of the LLH from work done locally more than a decade earlier by Tim Murphey, then at Nanzan University. Murphey's work involved publishing students' writings about their personal language histories. This provided examples of 'comprehensible language' near the Vygotskyian 'zone of proximal development' and 'high interest' reading for other students. It also provided "near peer role models", allowing Japanese students to share their various experiences of English with others like themselves who would be in a position to appreciate what they had to say.[14] Paul Tanner and Brad Deacon followed this model, publishing the accounts of the language learning histories of their own students at another university in Nagoya.[15] The idea of LLHs, as developed by Murphey and by Tanner and Deacon, is traceable to the work of Rebecca Oxford and John Green, who proposed LLHs as ways for students to identify and assess their own learning styles.[16] In all of its forms, the LLH was designed to stimulate some self-reflection and metacognition on the part of the learners. The differences were in the particular directions that each LLH asked the students to go in their thinking.

The LLH was the instrument I used in three of my classes in November 2011. I asked the students to write down their experiences of English, providing guidance with the Instructions. Then I asked students to label what they had written according to their own perceptions about their "turning points," "good" and "bad" experiences, "communities of practice," and "roles" they had played using English.[17] These terms were chosen because I thought they might stimulate thinking about identity construction. I also thought they would help students discuss their LLHs with each other, by asking questions about the labelled events with the help of a list of question sentence-starters. Afterwards, I hoped that the reflections stimulated by these discussions would help students add more comments to their own LLHs. The resulting data drawn from the LLHs and the peer question sessions were complete and replete in their own right. By November I was gathering hard data that was useful in itself,

9. Keith Richards, Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 53.
10. **Keith Richards, "Interviews," in Qualitative Research in Applied** Linguistics: A Practical Introduction, ed. Juanita Heigham and Robert Croker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 182-199.
11. **Richards, Qualitative Inquiry, 50.**
12. **Richards, Qualitative Inquiry, 80.**
13. Appendix 1
14. **Tim Murphey, ed., Forty Language Hungry Students' Language Learning** Histories: A Learners-Writing-for Learners Text Strategies for Learning (Nagoya: South Mountain Press, 1997), 1.
15. **Paul D. Tanner and Brad J. Deacon, ed., My English History: A Collection** of English Language Learning Histories (ELLHs). Nagoya: Nagoya City University, 2005.
16. **Rebecca L. Oxford and John M. Green, "Language Learning Histories:** Learners and Teachers Helping Each Other Understand Learning Styles and Strategies." In TESOL Journal 6 (Autumn 1996) 20-23.
17. Appendix 2

in that the LLHs were coded by question in such a way that they could be photocopied; then the individual questions, cut up and stacked, could be compared separately. Even more importantly, however, the intact LLHs could serve as guides to the interviews in ways that I had not experienced before.

From the seventy-five students who completed the LLH in class, I obtained fourteen volunteers for qualitative interviews outside of class in January and February of 2012. These interviews, conducted in my campus office, were digitally audio-recorded. Students were usually interviewed in pairs, and the students and I each had photocopies of their LLHs in front of us throughout the interviews. In fact, this was the principal advantage over the interviews in previous years. This time, there was a clear context for us to discuss. The students had already written about and reflected upon their previous experiences of English. There was little guesswork for the interview participants or for me. The process was transparent, and the interviews proceeded smoothly and productively, often running for well over an hour.

The Future

The next step now is to transcribe the rich data imbedded in approximately fifteen hours of interviews that were conducted earlier this year. There is much to rediscover and examine – particularly the stories of students who undertook overseas travel to English-speaking countries to test and extend their English ability in home-stays and language-school enrolment for a month or a summer. There are moments of revelation, when some participants discovered new identities in English: one as an unapologetic speaker of 'Japanese English'; another who wanted to use English to teach Japanese culture to non-Japanese people; still another who, as a part-time convenience store worker improvised identities in English to serve students from abroad who entered the shop. There are many such stories of struggles, successes and failures, waiting to be transcribed and interpreted. Regarding my initial question of how certain students manage to become fluent in English in spite of so many disincentives, will some tentative answers emerge? Will the conceptual framework of language learner identities provide explanations of what is going on in the lives of Japanese undergraduate learners of English? To these questions, I believe the answers will be affirmative; in any case, they will be the subject of further research. Complexity and contradiction are likely themes to emerge as the research develops in multinational and multicultural contexts, in a postmodern poststructuralist academic setting, involving qualitative sociolinguistic research into the language learning identities of Japanese undergraduate students of English.

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Appendix 1

Name _____ Student #_____ Group_____

My English Language Learning History (My ELLH)
-and Maybe 'My Heaven'-

Participant Code # _____ - _____ (e.g., NT-Q10 - 05) **Course** _____ (e.g., Oral Communication 4, Q-10)

Date: Day_____ Month _____ Year _____ (e.g. 25 November 2011) **Campus /Department** _____ (e.g., Nanzan Tandai)

My Code #	Stages of My Life	Dates & Events	Information
e.g., NT-Q10-05 _____	**From: Birthdate** **To: Time Before Kindergarten**	**My birthdate:** *e.g., 25 Feb.1990* _____ *e.g., 1994: Family trip to Hawaii*	*e.g., My father speaks English and likes to travel.* *e.g., I don't remember much, as I was young. But I do recall. . .*
e.g., NT-Q10-05 _____	**Kindergarten**		
e.g., NT-Q10-05 _____ _____	**Elementary School**		

My Code #	Stages of My Life	Dates & Events	Information
e.g., NT-Q10-05	**Junior High School**		
e.g., NT-Q10-05 _____	**Senior High School**		
e.g., NT-Q10-05 _____ _____	**University**		

Appendix 2

English Research Project:

Q & A About Your Language Learner History (1)

Directions for Getting Started with Q & A:

- Ask and answer the question with your partners. Tell what **happened as fully and honestly** as you can.
- If you learn something **new** about your language learning during your Q & A interview, please **write more** about it in the correct stage of your LLH.

1. Using English

Q. **How did you use English** when you were in _____(elementary school, high school, etc.)?
A. I used English by _____ (talking with the JET teacher, taking part in ESS, etc.)
OR: I didn't use English then.

Q. **How have you used English** during your time at the college / university?
A. I have used English by _____.

FQ. **Please tell me more about it**. What did you do?
A. Well, I used English when_____. I also used English when _____.

A.+ **How about you?** How did **you use** English?

2. Liking and Disliking English

Q. **Did you ever really like English**? When? How? Why?
A. Yes. I really **liked** English when_____because _____.

FQ: **Do you have any stories to tell** about the times you liked English?
A. Well, let me see. **I remember a time** when I_____.

Q. **Did you ever really dislike English?** When? How? Why?
A. Yes, I really **disliked** English when_____ because_____ .

FQ: **Do you have any stories to tell** about the times you disliked English?
A. Hmm, let me think. **I remember a time** when _____.

A.+ **How about you?** In what ways did you **like** and **dislike** using English?

Directions for Following Up 1 and 2:

- If you learn something new about your language learning during your Q & A interview, please write more about it in the correct stage of your LLH.
- Label the times you **liked** English **LIKED**. Label the times you **disliked** English **DISLIKED**.
- Label the times you had a **story** to tell about using English **STORY**.

English Research Project:

Q & A About Your Language Learner History (2)

Directions for Continuing with Q & A:

- Ask and answer the question with your partners. Tell what **happened as fully and honestly** as you can.
- If you learn something **new** about your language learning during your Q & A interview, please **write more** about it in the correct stage of your LLH.

3. Turning Points in Using English

Q. Were there any **major turning points** in English? (That is, when things got **much better** or **much worse**.)
A. Yes. There was a **big turning point** when I _____.

FQ. Really? **Can you tell a story about it?** What happened?
A. Well, let me think. **I remember a time** when I _____.

A.+ **How about you?** Did **you** have any **turning points** in using English?

4. Roles You Played by Using English

Q. **What roles have you played by using English**? (Have you played different parts by using English– for example, as a friend, tutor, helper, care-giver, direction-giver, interpreter, stage-actor, etc.?)
A. When I used English, **I played the role** of_____ when_____.

FQ. Really? **Can you tell a story** about this role you played in English? What happened?
A. Well, let me think. **I remember a time** when I _____ . I did this because _____.

A.+ **How about you?** What **roles** have you played in English?

5. Communities in which You Used English

Q. What are some **communities** in which you **used English**? (Where and with whom did you play a part by using English–for example, in a class you liked, in ESS, with friends, with an overseas home stay family, etc.?)
A. I used English when I was in / with _____.

FQ. Really? **Can you tell a story about it?** What happened?
A. Well, let me think. **I remember a time** when I _____.

A.+ **How about you?** What were some **communities** in which you used English?

Directions for Following Up 3, 4, & 5:

- If you learn something **new** about your language learning during your Q & A interview, please **write more** about it in the correct stage of your LLH.
- Label your **turning points** in English **TURNING POINT** .
- Label your **roles** in English **ROLE**. Label the **communities** in which you used English **COMMUNITY** .
- Label the times you had a **story** to tell about using English **STORY**.