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A case study into fluctuations in motivation towards learning Japanese language amongst British study abroad students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have paid attention to the effects of study abroad from the motivational perspective of students (Anderson, 2015, Li et al. 2013, Ueki and Takeuchi, 2015, 2017). While these studies have provided important insights into students' affective and motivational changes during their study abroad (hereafter 'SA'), few studies have shed light on these changes after their study abroad. Furthermore, although the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (hereafter 'the pandemic') on SA programmes is evident (Pedersen et al. 2021), the impact of the pandemic on students' motivation to learn their target language has not been extensively explored, and in particular few studies have examined the experiences of British university students in non-European contexts. The present case study aims to qualitatively investigate two British students' perceived changes in motivation during and after their study abroad in Japan, with a particular focus on the impact of the pandemic.

2. Related Literature

Recently Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System (hereafter "L2 MSS") (Dornyei 2005, 2009) has been widely employed as the main framework to investigate L2 learners' motivation for studying their target languages in various different contexts, including SA settings (Du and Jackson 2021, Frier and Roger 2018, Ueki and Takeuchi 2015, Ueki and Takeuchi 2017). L2 MSS is composed of three main components: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience. The first component refers to the "L2-specific facet of one's 'ideal self'" which can be a powerful motivator when L2 learners want to reduce the gap between their actual and ideal selves in terms of the effective use of L2. The second component concerns the "attributes that one believes that one *ought to* possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes" (Dornyei, 2009, p. 29) which involve instrumental motivations, such as academic success and economic rewards. It also concerns peer, family and societal pressures. The last component concerns "situated, 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience", such as the impact of the teachers, curricula, peer groups and the experience of success (Dornyei 2009, p.29). Dornyei (2019) further clarifies and re-defines the L2 Learning Experience as "the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process" (p.26), claiming that, "it is often the most powerful predictor of motivated behaviour" (p.19).

Another useful theoretical model for analysing motivational behaviour is self-determination theory (hereafter 'SDT') (Ryan and Deci 2018), which is based on the three basic psychological needs, namely, competence, relatedness and autonomy. Competence in this model refers to one's sense of efficacy or satisfaction with being able to influence one's internal or external environment. Relatedness refers to the sense of belonging and the need to feel connected to others who care about the person unconditionally. Autonomy, or a sense of voluntariness, refers to the need to regulate one's own experiences and actions so that one's behaviour can be fully engaged. These three needs are considered essential for individuals to develop intrinsic motivation, as well as well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2018, pp.94-101).

Using multiple interviews and questionnaires at different points of their sojourn, Du and Jackson (2021), employing Dornyei's L2 MSS, longitudinally examined two Chinese students' motivational trajectories during their semester abroad in Canada. Their study shows that the two students' motivational development was more

closely related to their perceptions of the fit between their Ideal L2 Self and the social and cultural environment in which language learning takes place than to the L2 self-discrepancy, in other words the gap between their current and desired language abilities. This suggests the importance of L2 Learning experience in sustaining one's motivation, especially in SA contexts.

Following Ueki and Takeuchi (2015) who quantitatively investigated the impact of SA on Japanese students' affective variables, including motivation, Ueki and Takeuchi (2017) explored the changes in L2 motivation for English learning of two Japanese students while they were in the same one-year SA programme in the United States. By qualitatively analysing the data obtained through three sets of semi-structured interviews before and after their sojourns, the authors illustrate how the students' Ought-to L2 Self became closer to their Ideal L2 Self and boosted their motivated learning behaviours, rather than increasing their anxiety, after their SA. Their study also shows that the students' self-efficacy was supported by experience of mastering their usage of the target language.

To investigate the longer-term effects of SA on L2 motivation, Frier and Roger (2018) examined the four-week SA experience of eight Japanese students in Australia through semi-structured interviews conducted a few weeks before and after, and six months after, their SA. Their analysis shows how the individual students developed their L2 self-image, either positively or negatively, depending on their perceived L2 learning experiences, and reshaped their L2 motivation. It also shows that the effects of SA on their L2 motivation persisted beyond the completion of SA.

In terms of the impact of the pandemic, although few studies have specifically investigated students' changing motivation to learn their target languages as a result of the pandemic, Lim's (2021) qualitative research on four Japanese EFL learners' motivation at the time of the pandemic suggests that students can maintain their motivation through their positive feelings about learning their target language, positive future self-images related to using their target languages, and positive responses to change, as well as positive peer influences.

Although none of these studies investigated the changing motivation of British students in Japanese contexts, they provide a useful indication that students' perceived L2 self-images and learning experiences during their SA play an important role in maintaining and enhancing their L2 motivation.

3. Study

3.1 Purpose and Methodology

The present study was conducted to answer the research question 'to what extent and in what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic led to fluctuations in motivation towards learning Japanese language amongst British university students of Japanese during their study abroad?' Gaining a better understanding of the student experience should provide insights which can feed into more tailored support of students and inform efforts to stimulate student motivation where needed. The students who were the subject of this study were in the second year of their Japanese degree programme at a British university and on compulsory study abroad in 2019-2020 when the pandemic began. The study employed preparatory questionnaires to provide initial data as prompts for interviews and two sets of 20-minute interviews were then conducted soon after students returned from their study abroad in August 2020 and again in April 2021. The entire cohort of 35 students were invited to take part in this study voluntarily, and nine and five students participated in the first and second interview respectively, with two of them participating in both interviews. At the time of the second set of interviews the participants had been taught online by their home institution for virtually the whole academic year (2020-21) due to the pandemic.

Both sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted using an online video meeting software, with questions based on the online questionnaires, which had been conducted approximately one month before the interviews, and primarily focused on changes in participants' motivation, their motivational factors and changes in their perceptions on their SA with a specific reference to the effects of the pandemic. This paper will focus on

the analysis of the interview data of the two students who participated in both interviews and investigate how their motivation towards learning Japanese changed both during and after their SA in Japan at the time of the pandemic. They had different learning environments during their SA, in terms of the geographical location of their stay, the size of the city and university they were allocated to and the type of accommodation in which they resided. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed by the authors with the help of auto-transcription software, and the data were then analysed qualitatively based on the L2 MSS. Firstly, the participants' perceived changes in their motivation and intended learning effort (Taguchi et al., 2009) were identified (See the Appendix 1 for examples), and then the causes of those changes were analysed in light of the Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience. Analysis was made based on 'idea units', namely a segment which carries a complete thought or idea, and each idea unit was coded as one or more nominal words, such as 'future job', 'communication' and 'frustration'. The coding process was inductive, with no predetermined codes, except for 'Covid-19 Pandemic', and the initial codes were thematically reorganised into more general codes. For example, more than twenty codes were initially used in relation to the L2 Learning Experience, as shown in the Appendix 1, which were later grouped into the six key themes, namely "learning environment", "feeling/emotion", "(change of) views/perceptions", "self reflection", "autonomous learning" and "Covid-19 pandemic". Special care was taken to identify the Ideal L2 Self and the Ought-to L2 Self, because "L2 learners' self images are versatile and changeable depending on the learners' degree of internalizing their future images" (Kim 2009, p. 57). Thus, for example, an utterance about a future job as a motivational factor can be interpreted either as an Ideal L2 Self or as an Ought-to L2 Self, depending on how clearly and deeply they can visualise their future images of themselves as L2 users. To avoid the influence of each author's interpretation, the analysis was first carried out by the authors individually and then discussed further until agreement was reached. SDT was not employed for the initial analysis but was later consulted as a supplementary frame of reference. More specifically, 'relatedness' in SDT overlaps to some extent with 'people' and 'social interaction' in our coding, and conversely, 'competence' and 'autonomy' may be relevant concepts to explain 'views and perceptions of oneself' and 'autonomous learning' respectively.

3.2 Research Participants

Participant 1

Jessica (pseudonym) was a female UG student who majored in Japanese and linguistics. Having expressed her interest at the pre-departure preparation stage in having a homestay experience during her study abroad, she was placed at a middle-sized university in a suburban area in the Kansai region of western Japan with a homestay arrangement with a single female Japanese lady as a host mother. In an online questionnaire conducted roughly one month after her departure for Japan, she responded that she was strongly motivated (five on the five-point-scale) for studying Japanese and listed language progress, cultural understanding, personal development and extending social network as very important (five on the five-point-scale) initial motivational factors.

Participant 2

George (pseudonym) was a male UG student who was also studying Japanese and linguistics. At the pre-departure preparation stage, he indicated his preference to live in a small town and was consequently placed at a small international university located in a rural area in the Tohoku region of northern Japan. He lived in a dormitory on the campus of the host university during his study abroad. In the same afore-mentioned questionnaire, he indicated that he was motivated (four on the five-point-scale) to study Japanese and considered language progress and personal development as particularly important motivational factors, whilst indicating cultural understanding and extending social network as somewhat important (four on the five-point-scale) motivational factors as well.

3.3 Data and Analysis

In both interviews Jessica expressed her strong motivation to study Japanese. Her motivation was consistently high before, during and after SA, although some moderate fluctuations were observed because of the placement in her host university and the exhaustion caused by her overworking. She noted,

“I think my motivation probably stayed quite high throughout the whole stay just because even before going, I’ve always been motivated for Japanese because it’s my it’s my [sic; below also] hobby.”
(J1-1¹)

As J1-1 shows, from the outset she was enjoying learning Japanese in its own right as a “hobby”, which can be considered as “intrinsic motivation” or “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.55). However, as she reflected in her second interview, her motivation to study Japanese was “personal and strictly academic” before she went on the SA. In other words, according to the L2 MSS, her Ideal L2 Self was not fully activated, although her Ought-to L2 Self was already somewhat active with the “instrumental orientation” (Dornyei, 2021, pp. 40-41), such as achieving a good grade. However, as time went by in Japan, her motivational factors changed into more “integrative orientation” (ibid., pp. 40-41) relations with Japanese people, in particular her host mother, at the centre. She noted,

“My motivation increased the most because I was able to make many relationships over in Japan and so the Japanese language became not just a theoretical piece of knowledge, but a way to communicate with my friends and my host mother and all the people that really took care of me while I was in Japan.” (J1-2)

This sense of “relatedness” or “feeling socially connected”, which is one of the three basic psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2018, pp.10-11), developed her L2 Ideal Self rapidly and significantly to the extent that she started concretely considering living and working in Japan after graduation. She went on to say,

“(…) being in Japan for this period of time confirmed my wish to live in Japan after I graduate. And so, in order to do that, I of course want to improve my Japanese as much as possible.” (J1-3)

Interestingly, she did not feel that the pandemic had much impact on her motivation, although she felt “the frustration at not being able to be in Japan until the end of (her intended) stay” (since students were recalled early to their home country when the pandemic broke out). Instead, she turned towards the future, assuring herself that she would be able to go back to Japan in the future while accepting the reality of the restrictions on travel due to the pandemic. In that regard she remarked,

“(…) since coming back here I’ve I’ve turned towards the future a bit more and thinking well if I study hard I will be able to go back to Japan anyway, so just be patient and do what I can. But it was it was an important lesson in realizing that there are many things that you cannot control and to be able to do my best within the circumstances available.” (J1-4)

Another source of motivation seems to have stemmed from her sense of “competence”, “our basic need to feel effectance and mastery” (Ryan and Deci, 2018, p.11), when she tried various new life experiences, such as a part-time job where she had to use Japanese in a real context. She stated,

“Trying new things that I’d never tried before, like for example doing a part-time job as a waitress um, which in (name of a country) or England I’ve never considered but I think being in such a different place to what I’m used to it was kind of a liberating factor because you’re already different anyway (…) I realise that maybe I was imposing some limits on myself that were non-existent before, so definitely my self-confidence increased.” (J1-5)

In fact, this verifies the importance of L2 Learning Experience, one of the components of the L2 MSS. As shown in the interview excerpt J1-5, her self-confidence was boosted by her successful L2 Learning Experience which in turn consolidated her motivation to improve her Japanese language skills further.

The second interview confirmed Jessica’s continuous strong motivation to study Japanese despite the fact that all classes were entirely taught online and there was no in-person social opportunity available with Japanese

exchange students once back at her home institution. Although she admitted, “there were difficult times” and she wished that she “could study in a normal way”, she seems to have realised the importance of taking control of her study and focusing on her self-study to improve her Japanese, noting that,

“(…) with the changing circumstances and the sort of online classes and things like that, I realized more than ever that in order to study Japanese it was up to me. It was my responsibility and if I did not make enough effort, things wouldn't progress.” (J2-1)

The sense of “autonomy” or need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions (Ryan and Deci, 2018, p.10), is the third basic human need which, together with relatedness and competence, plays a vital role in sustaining and enhancing a person’s motivation. Furthermore, her Ideal L2 Self, whereby she anticipated living and working in Japan after graduation seems to have been consolidated, as the circumstances brought about by the pandemic made her reflect deeply on her studies and future. At the same time, her Ought-to L2 Self for not losing her Japanese language skills also increased, as Japanese was the only means of communication with her host mother. She stated,

“I also realized that I really want to live and work in Japan after graduation.” (J2-2)

“(…) friendships and sensei (teachers) that I'm in Japan and I want to keep in touch with an my my host mother who's become my like second mother. It's kind of like I have built all these really important relationships to me and so in order to to study it in order to keep those relationships. (...) If I don't have Japanese, I will lose part of my relationship.” (J2-3)

In addition, another aspect of her Ought-to L2 Self concerning achieving good academic grades and obtaining academic qualifications, was hugely enhanced, as she was now able to picture a clear connection with her future goal to find a job in Japan. She said,

“(…) in terms of yeah, future sort of qualifications and maybe approaching and more towards the second half of my my degree, the end of my degree and in terms of finding a job for after graduation and this is included in my motivation now.” (J2-4)

In contrast with the relatively mild impact of the pandemic on Jessica’s motivation, however, George seems to have been more adversely affected by the pandemic both emotionally and psychologically. From the beginning of his SA, his motivation fluctuated both positively and negatively as a result of various circumstances surrounding him, including the initial excitement about living in a new environment and culture shock, the characteristics of his host university, his roommates and the perceived difficulty of Japanese language. Despite the fluctuations in his motivation, he believed that his overall SA experience in Japan was very positive, commenting, “I enjoyed myself tremendously and it was very sad I had to leave very early.” In light of the L2 MSS, he was developing both Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self, wishing himself to be more integrated with Japanese culture, and focused on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), a widely recognised official Japanese qualification and part of the requirement set by his home university, towards the end of his SA. He noted,

“Cultural integration, I'd say is probably the biggest one (motivation). Yeah, I I just wanted to be able to communicate efficiently and without needing the assistance of a friend or anything you know to do basic things, you know, like shopping or, ordering food. (...) with the idea of also doing the JLPT in July originally, that also was a big motivator to try and pass that.” (G1-1)

However, the pandemic directly affected his motivation when he had to leave Japan in the middle of SA. stating,

“(…) as I was leaving Japan, and as I returned to (his home country in the UK) it affected my motivation extremely dramatically. My motivation just plummeted. (...) .I'm still trying to get, I don't think I've recovered even close to what I was like back in. I'm trying to become motivated and pushing myself further to study but without being in the environment anymore it's hard to do that because I can't really communicate with anybody like nearby or with friends as easily.” (G1-2)

As his motivation was heavily dependent on his learning environment where use of Japanese was necessary for his daily life and communication, a sudden change of learning environment adversely affected his motivation, especially when he returned to his parents’ home and took the online classes provided by his host university in

Japan at mid-night due to the time differences.

His second interview also showed his struggle to adjust to his new learning environment in his home university in the subsequent academic year when all classes were taught online, and use of the university's facilities was somewhat restricted due to the pandemic. He noted,

"Being stuck in (name of a city) essentially under house arrest for a year is a non-motivational factor, and yeah, it's it's hard motivation in every subject I feel." (G2-1)

"Having my study area which is this desk here being right beside my bed is not a great motivation factor and going to the library I find to be quite difficult with scheduling because of how the system works currently as well as being in the library for six hours with a mask on is going to be very suffocating and that can be quite difficult, I find." (G2-2)

However, he found his new academic interest in translation through a module offered by his home university, which further developed into his Ideal L2 Self for a potential future career.

"I've become far more interested as of late in better understanding ways of doing translation work, both from Japanese to English and English to Japanese. (...) In potentially going to the media translation from Japanese to English and if need be, English to Japanese if I feel my development has improved to that amount." (G2-3)

In summary, Jessica had a strong Ideal L2 Self from the outset and even though the pandemic occurred she maintained her future vision and her motivation was not heavily impacted by the pandemic. George, on the other hand, suffered significantly with regards to his motivation for learning once his study environment was drastically altered. Later after returning to his home institution, however, over time he regained a purpose for studying Japanese and he discovered his new Ideal L2 Self.

4. Conclusion

Whilst the scale of the present case study was small, it is evident that the pandemic impacted the motivation of students of Japanese for learning Japanese during their study abroad in a variety of ways, and that the long-term impact was not necessarily negative for some. L2 Learning Experience, especially learning environment, may strongly impact students' motivation (as noted by Du and Jackson, 2021, and Ueki and Takeuchi, 2017), but self-reflection, sense of autonomy, and Ideal L2 Self can be the keys to overcoming in a challenging environment, such as the lockdown caused by the pandemic. Whilst Ideal L2 Self with a clear vision, such as one's future career, can be a powerful and sustained source of motivation, perceived personal development achieved through L2 learning experience can boost one's self-confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn may help students build up their solid Ideal L2 Self despite the inalterability of the prevailing circumstances created by the pandemic. Indeed, the above findings offer insights into fluctuations in motivation towards Japanese language learning beyond the immediate context of the pandemic, and hint at the relevance of other motivational factors which can sustain learning in a situation where students' mobility is unexpectedly prevented.

Going forwards, a fuller range of learners' individual differences should be examined more broadly through more wide-ranging and in-depth studies with a greater number of research subjects to provide a clearer picture of learner experience. Further studies of alumni experience and reflection can also be expected to reveal the long-term impact of the pandemic on motivation and identify ways in which that proceeds to impact areas such as career choice, amongst others.

Notes

¹ J1-1 means first quotation from first interview with Jessica; the same approach to referencing quotes from interviewees applies throughout the paper

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Appendix 1:

Codes for Analysis

1. Perceived change of motivation

Example:

- “My motivation increased the most”
- “extremely demoralising”
- “my motivation is much lower”

2. (No) intended effort

Example:

- “I am trying to make the best of it”

3. Ideal L2 Self

1) Integrativeness

- (Needs/desire of) Communication

2) Instrumentality

- Future life & career

4. Ought-to L2 Self

1) Promotion

- Good grades/Academic results

- JLPT

2) Prevention

- Exams

5. L2 Learning Experience

1) Learning environment

- People (friends, host mother, roommates)
- (Lack of) social interactions
- Location
- University/Courses
- (Lack of) resources/facilities (e.g. library)
- (Lack of) opportunity to speak Japanese
- (Lack of) boundaries b/w studies and breaks
- Online classes
- Virtual communication (e.g. use of WhatsApp with a conversation partner)
- Food/diet

2) Feeling/Emotion

- Exhaustion
- Homesickness
- Culture shock
- Intrinsic motivation: joy, personal interest

3) (Change of) views/perceptions

- About oneself
 - Sense of (lack of) progression
 - Sense of (lack of) achievement
 - Sense of (lack of) success
 - Sense of (lack of) personal development
- About target culture
- About target language (difficulty, achievability)

SDT: Competence

4) Self-reflection

5) Autonomous learning

6) Covid-19 pandemic

SDT: Autonomy

SDT: Relatedness