
Feature Article

Learner Motivation of University Students in Non-credited Conversation Sessions

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The present study investigates learner motivation in a non-credited voluntary English learning facility, called English Island (EI), at a Japanese university. By collecting questionnaire data from 56 students as well as responses gained from four successful learners, this study reports to what extent the students make use of EI, what encourages or hinders them to go to EI, and in what ways the students perceive EI to be useful for their English studies. The study discusses the results from the viewpoint of learner identity as well as a pedagogical perspective on learner motivation in order to gain an understanding of learner motivation in a context like EI, which is outside of a traditional classroom environment.

本稿は、日本の大学における単位としては認定されない任意による英語学習施設English Island（以下EIとする）における学生の英語学習に関する動機付けについて研究を行ったものである。56名の学生から集めたアンケート回答結果及び意欲的に参加し成果を得た4名の学生による回答に基づき、学生がどの程度EIを活用したのか、EIへ参加するにあたり何が足掛かりとなったのか、あるいは何が妨げになったのか、また、英語習得のために学生は、どのような観点からEIという場を捉えているのかということについて検証している。本研究では、教室ではなく、従来の授業環境とは異なったEIという場において、学習者のアイデンティティーおよび動機付けに関する教育学的視点から学生の動機付けについての研究結果を考察する。

Very few people would disagree with the statement that motivation is one of the most important ingredients for successful learning outcomes; consequently, motivation has been extensively studied in education and psychology. The field of language teaching and learning is not an exception, and research has provided a diverse range of explanations as to what constitutes motivation (Dörnyei, 2001b; Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001). Among this wide range of definitions and theories of motivation, a particularly relevant perspective for the current study is that motivation can be viewed as an “investment” (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Norton (2000) challenges the longstanding dichotomous distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), arguing that learner investment is non-static, dynamic and pluralistic. Investment in learning a language is based on a learner’s complex social history and accompanies multiple desires, which are often ambivalent. When learners decide to invest themselves in speaking a target language, they are not simply exchanging words “but they are organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 2000, p. 11).

Extending the concept of identity further, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) propose a *possible self* theory of motivation. This theory argues that learners have two different senses of self, called *ideal self* and *ought-to self*, which can influence their motivation positively. Ideal self refers to the state in which a learner possesses “the attributes that someone ideally would like to possess” and ought-to self means “the attributes that one ought to possess” (p. 4).

In addition to these theoretically driven perspectives of motivation, some researchers have attempted to explain motivation from a pedagogical viewpoint; specifically, examining how teachers understand this complex construct (Dörnyei, 2001a; Williams & Burden, 1997). Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that motivation consists of three stages: 1) having an initial interest, 2) transferring the interest to learning behaviours, and 3) sustaining effort.

In particular, they argue that one of the most important aspects of motivation is the third stage, sustaining effort, “It is important to emphasise here that motivation is more than simply arousing interest. It also involves sustaining that interest and investing time and energy into putting in the necessary effort to

achieve certain goals” (p. 121).

This notion is particularly applicable for language learning because attaining a certain level of proficiency requires a considerable amount of energy and time, and it is vital for learners to sustain their motivation throughout their learning career. From this point of view, it will be worthwhile to study student motivation outside of regular classrooms. The duration of classroom learning is usually only 15 weeks a semester in a Japanese university context and provides a highly structured learning environment for all students regardless of motivation and their incentives for taking a class, which can range from wanting to master English, to fulfilling requirements for future job applications, to earning credit requirements. In this paper, we will describe the motivation of Japanese university students in an English speaking facility called English Island (EI). EI offers convenience to the students in terms of location and schedule but is not compulsory or accredited. A facility such as EI can be placed somewhere in the middle of a continuum of different learning contexts; freer than compulsory language classes so it requires more initiative from learners, but more constrained and structured than self-study contexts because it is facilitated by a native speaker teacher. It also provides a casual learning environment, a place to meet other motivated students, flexibility in topics discussed and the ability to attend as often and for as long as students wish.

The study specifically tries to answer the following questions:

1. What factors encourage or inhibit students from using EI?
2. How do students view learning outside of the classroom?
3. What factors influence some students to regularly attend EI?

Methods

In this section, we will describe EI and the research context, the roles of the authors in this study, and the questionnaire and case study data collection procedures.

English Island

As most readers probably know, the problems Japanese students face in learning

English include a lack of opportunities to practice conversation skills, inhibitions about speaking up in class, and fear of making mistakes (Harumi, 2011; Sakui & Cowie, 2008). One method that Kobe Shoin Women's University, where the authors work, has used to address these issues is to provide students with the opportunity to converse with native English-speaking (NES) teachers in a casual atmosphere outside of class in a place called EI. It is located in the center of campus and has large windows on two sides so passersby can easily see inside. It has its own small room with a round table, posters of English-speaking countries, pictures of Shoin students studying abroad, and some English magazines including *Teen Vogue* and *Reader's Digest*. Sessions are open to all students regardless of major or status, i.e., full-time or auditing, and no reservations are needed. English Island is advertised in campus brochures, during the entrance ceremony for first-year students and in fliers posted throughout campus. All first-year English majors also take a tour of EI and are encouraged by their teachers to attend. The sessions are held during second period, lunch and third period, 10:40-12:10, 12:10-13:10, and 13:10-14:40, respectively. One of seven NES teachers from four countries (one from Canada, one from the Philippines, two from the UK, and three from the US) is scheduled to cover each session, in which they supervise and converse with students.

The ability of the participating students ranges from false beginner to fluent, and the number of students from one to twelve, with an average of three to four. Conversation topics can cover anything from weekend plans to childhood experiences to current topics in the news. In addition to offering students extra chances to practice their English skills and overcome their inhibitions, EI provides them with invaluable cultural experiences and encourages them to actively communicate with people from other countries. Although in recent years it has become common to provide such learning opportunities outside of the classroom in the form of self-access centers and language exchange settings, it was quite an innovative and novel idea to have such a facility at the time that EI was initially set up about 20 years ago.

Table 1 shows the total number of students who visited EI as well as the average student number per session each month from April to July, 2011. The

attendance for each slot varies from zero to seven, averaging just below 3.6 students per session over the four-month period.

Table 1

Total Student Attendance and Average Attendance per Session in EI

| Month (2011) | Total | Average Per Session |
|--------------|-------|---------------------|
| April | 203 | 3.9 |
| May | 186 | 3.3 |
| June | 223 | 3.3 |
| July | 207 | 3.8 |

These average numbers do not vary dramatically from month to month, which shows a consistent and sustained level of attendance by students as a whole. Unfortunately we do not have the data to show exactly what percentage of these students repeatedly made use of the facility or how many students visited EI only once. The average enrollment each year of English majors is 130. What percentage of attending students are English majors cannot be known exactly, but the consensus among EI instructors is that the majority of participating students are English majors.

Roles of the Authors

Let us next describe the roles of the authors of the current paper concerning EI. The first author (Keiko) is a full-time Japanese teacher of English at Kobe Shoin and helps to handle EI administrative tasks. These include interviewing prospective NES teachers, helping to decide EI scheduling, and keeping track of student attendance at EI. The second author (Jared) is a native English speaker who teaches English classes at Kobe Shoin as well as supervising one EI session every week. These different roles give us different perspectives on EI as a complex mix of inside and outside participants. We are both “insiders” because we teach English classes and we are very familiar with our students. On the other hand, Keiko does not attend EI and usually views it from an administrative perspective,

which gives her an “outsider” perspective. Jared’s weekly conversations with students in EI give him an “insider” perspective. The current paper amalgamates this complexity by taking advantage of teacher insider and outsider positioning in this report on student perspectives of EI.

Data collection: Questionnaire and case studies

In order to answer the three research questions, two types of data were collected. First, questionnaires were distributed to 56 English major students to find out their perceptions of EI. The questionnaires asked students to what extent they know about EI, how often they visit, and how they perceive learning in and beyond the classroom. The questionnaires were administered in Japanese to the authors’ first- and second-year students during credited class time.

In order to obtain more insights into the effects of EI on language learning, we decided to collate case studies of English Island learners. Jared first asked eight students who had not participated in the original questionnaire but who had regularly attended his EI sessions within the last three years to write about their experiences in detail by answering ten questions in English. The ten questions ranged from “Why do you attend EI” to “What are your overall impressions and feelings about EI?” Students were allowed to answer in English or Japanese, to use as many words as they felt necessary and had the option to skip questions. The eight students were selected because Jared perceived that they had made frequent use of EI and had made considerable improvements in their English proficiency. Of the eight students that were approached, six volunteered to participate. From these six, we selected the four students that wrote the most comprehensive answers to the ten questions to be our case studies. After receiving their responses, Keiko asked three additional questions in Japanese.

Results

The results of the questionnaire will be reported below with a few brief comments of explanation and reflection. These then lead into the results of the case studies followed by a discussion section which, will try to draw together the implications

of the two sets of results.

Questionnaire results

Q1. Have you been to EI? YES/NO

Out of 56 students, 15 students answered that they have been to EI and the remaining 41 students have not.

Q2. If YES to question 1, do you now or have you attended regularly?

Out of the 15 students who have been to EI, the following numbers show that they do not attend very often: 10 students attended once; 3 students attended twice; and 2 students attended three times or more.

These numbers are surprisingly low from an administrative perspective. It is thought that through the brochures, fliers and entrance ceremony that EI is well advertised, especially among English major students who also take a tour of the EI room.

Q3. If NO to question 1, do you want to go and what are the reasons you have not been?

Out of the 41 students who have never been to EI, quite a large number of students (34) reported that they would be interested in visiting EI but had not been able to do so. About 80% of the students listed lack of time as a reason for not attending EI. Other less frequently reported reasons are that students do not feel confident talking only in English, and that they cannot find a strong enough reason or initial trigger to actually visit EI.

Q4. Do you think studying English only in classrooms will ensure good abilities? Why or why not?

This question aims to find out whether these students think studying English in a classroom is enough to improve their English or whether they need to go beyond the classroom to pursue some other types of learning, such as in EI. A total of 46 out of 56 students responded that learning only in a classroom is not enough. Only four students thought that classroom learning (including

homework) would be enough to ensure the level of English proficiency that they want to attain. The remaining six students did not respond to this question.

Our next section focuses on why some learners move from a state of apparent initial motivation to actually exhibiting motivated and persevering behaviors. In order to gain some insights from more successful learners who have made it to these second and third stages of the Williams and Burden (1997) motivation model, we now turn to our four case studies.

Results of case studies

While each of the four case study participants have varying levels of English, they all believe that EI has been a great benefit to their English abilities. The names included are pseudonyms. Emi answered all questions in English and the other three students answered in a mix of English and Japanese. The first author has translated the Japanese answers into English.

The first student, Mayu, was an English major and graduated in March of 2011. She regularly attended EI for all four years of her university study. As a first-year student, she spoke virtually no English and her listening was very poor. By the time she graduated, she was conversationally fluent, which she partly attributes to EI. She claims that more than improving her practical skills, like grammar and structure, EI gave her the confidence and opportunity to communicate with native speakers in a relaxed environment. Jared remembers the first time Mayu attended one of his sessions. Her hands were visibly shaking and she could only nod her head when he asked how she was. She gradually gained confidence to a level where she entered several English speech contests and volunteered as a language partner for exchange students studying Japanese. At the time of writing, she is engaged in a year-long working holiday in New Zealand, something which would have petrified her four years previously. In terms of making that motivational jump from Williams and Burden's (1997) stage one (having an initial interest) to stage two (transferring the interest to learning behaviours), she describes why she attended EI for the first time:

I saw other students talking to a native speaking teacher and wondered how

it was possible. One day I wrote in my diary, “Ms. A talked to Mr. B for 30 minutes one to one. How is it possible!?!” Because I had never talked to a native speaker to that extent, the incident stayed very clearly in my memory. The senior students who could talk English fluently at EI looked so cool! They were not only fluent in English but they were friendly and nice, giving me information on various things like which classes they recommended and which events were taking place.

I thought it is a waste not to take advantage of this opportunity [at EI]. Also it was really fun to be able to feel that I was gradually learning new expressions and vocabulary words. (Japanese response)

Our second student, Yumi, is currently a fourth-year English major. She has already been hired by an international trading company for a position in which she will need to use English on a daily basis. Yumi is a very outgoing and friendly person who actively participates in regular classes. Her response shows that she wants to improve her English as well aspiring to be like other students who are more fluent in English, “I wanted to improve my English. Also, I thought the girls who were talking in English were so cool! I envied them and wanted to be like them” (English response).

Similarly, our third student, Satomi, showed interest in improving her English, and she also commented on the influence of friends that made her go to EI. She is currently a second-year English major. As she does not have a plan to go abroad to improve her English, she thought attending EI sessions was a good alternative to going abroad in order to study English. She further commented that EI has boosted her confidence a great deal and has helped her perform better in class. She says that her speaking tests have become surprisingly easy. In response to why she attended EI for the first time, she writes:

I thought that it wasn't good that my major is English and I couldn't speak English fluently. And, I have friends who have gone to foreign countries to study abroad. I wanted to be like them. But, I didn't have a plan to go to English Island until a friend asked me to go with her. I attended the first time

with her. (Japanese response)

Our fourth student, Emi, is an auditor. She does not recall exactly how she learned about EI, but believes it was through the fliers and walking by the EI room. She is in her 50s and is a part-time English teacher at a local junior high school. Her initial motivation to attend was that she wanted to improve her speaking and listening abilities in order to become a better teacher. While her major at university was English, she had taken 20 years off from work in order to raise a family. The first time she attended EI, she was scared that because she was older she was not going to be accepted by the other students. However, the other students have really taken to Emi and even refer to her as Emi-san instead of using her family name, which delights her. Emi's English is quite good, but she claims EI has really helped her improve and has given her greater confidence when talking to native English speakers. She also values the opportunity of learning about the daily lives of people in English-speaking countries. She attends EI one to three times a week. She writes in English about the experience of attending for the first time:

I did not have any idea who are at EI and what they talk there, so I was nervous before I went. But I heard anybody could go, so someone like me—a middle-aged woman—could go. At first I thought I would go and check things out so I pushed myself a bit for the first time I went. Summoning up the courage and opened the door, everyone (a teacher and five or six students) all looked at me. I said “Can I join you?” then the teacher smiled and said “of course!” and the students smiled and nodded at me. That was the moment when I felt it is really okay for me to come here.

I had thought that they would discuss a particular topic but it turned out that we had a chit chat on various topics. Everyone was speaking in English and enjoying it. Some of them were fluent and some of them were trying very hard. The atmosphere was a lot more relaxed than what I had anticipated and I thought as long as I listen to what teachers say, it would be useful. That is why I decided to continue.

For her response as to how often she attended EI, Mayu writes that she went to EI twice a week on average, but she also commented that her motivation fluctuated and that this influenced her attendance. When she felt confident, she attended as often as five times a week. When her confidence waned, she would not go.

Yumi, and Satomi go to EI almost every day during lunch. Emi attends one to three times a week.

Mayu gives an extended response as to how she believes EI to be useful, written in Japanese and translated below.

We study grammar and vocabulary in class but we do not have any chances to practice speaking. We do not think in English. In contrast, the main language at EI is English so we start to think in English, which is very practical. But my base for my English is classes. I learned 65% in classrooms, 25% EI and the remaining 5% through English learning books, TV, radios. I think it is very effective to be able to speak in EI what we have learned in class (Japanese response).

Emi further reports that she should take advantage of different types of learning opportunities both in the classes she audits and at EI. She claims that EI is a good place to practice speaking and listening, but EI is not suitable for her neither to improve her writing skills nor to learn about advanced English grammar in a systematic way:

It is a bit difficult to single out this is what I learned today but by keeping going to EI, we can improve our listening and speaking skills gradually. It is a small group and it has a relaxed atmosphere. It is difficult to improve these skills in Japan, so EI offers valuable experiences to us. It is possible to be able to attain well balanced English abilities by taking advantages of both classroom learning and learning at EI.

Discussion

These students' reports collectively raise three important issues: the relevance of the social aspect of learner motivation; the importance of student awareness of the learning process; and, the need to view motivation from a pedagogical perspective. We will briefly discuss these three points below.

Let us first examine the social aspect of learner motivation. As Dörnyei (2001b) acknowledges, motivation research has increasingly recognized the importance of the social aspect of motivation and the findings of this study also support this claim that the social aspect has some impact on student motivation. What is especially applicable to explain learner motivation in the current study is learner identity (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995), specifically the theory of possible self (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). We could argue that all four successful students decided to "invest" in speaking in EI (Norton, 2000). The reason why they kept participating in EI sessions was that they saw symbolic representatives of what they wanted to be like in the future, that is, an ideal self was represented by other competent students at EI. Both Mayu and Yumi witnessed other students speaking English fluently at EI and how they were nice, helpful and friendly; these students were "cool". In this case, the ideal self is not only a fluent English speaker, but also possesses desirable social behaviours. We could argue that Mayu and Yumi thought that investing themselves in going to EI and speaking with the teacher and other students was worthwhile because it could bring them closer to an ideal self who encompass both language abilities and positive social behaviours.

Similarly Emi has also invested herself in EI. In comparison to younger learners such as Mayu and Yumi, however, Emi's sense of self seems closer to an ought-to self. She is a mature student with a good level of English and has a clear idea of what she wants to accomplish for her English studies. Because of her age and life experience differences she did not relate to other students as an ideal self but she seemed to have a clear sense of her ought-to self by projecting an image of what she wanted to achieve. In addition to having this ought-to self contributing to the maintenance of her high level of motivation, a welcoming gesture by the teacher and other students gave her a sense that she was allowed to enter into a

new learning community.

The second theme emerging from the case studies is that the students clearly have their own theories about learning English. All of them can articulate what types of learning are possible in the classroom and EI respectively. They specifically state that the classroom is a good place where they can learn the structures of language (reading, writing and grammar) and EI is a good place to transfer that knowledge to practical applications for listening and speaking.

Lamb (2006) argues that self-management skills are an important attribute for learners to have, especially in a more autonomous learning context than a classroom. He writes:

The aim is for learners to manage their own learning by planning what they wish to or need to achieve (both short- and long-term goals), making choices from a range of learning activities and resources about how they are going to achieve this, and monitoring and evaluating their progress. (p. 97)

The case study participants reported in the current study were competent in setting their own learning goals in terms of deciding what exactly they wanted to learn in EI, managing their learning, and adapting learning strategies to take advantage of different learning opportunities (the classroom and EI) that were provided (Nicolaidis, 2008). Since our data is limited in scope, we cannot strongly claim that the successful learners reported on here went through this process at all times, but we can argue, if only tentatively, that they can articulate what types of learning they want or need and where they thought they could find them.

The final point this current study raises is that of a pedagogical perspective on the motivation process. Specifically, how we can interpret our results to reflect the three stages of motivation outlined by Williams and Burden (1997). The questionnaire results from 56 English major students suggest that many of them do show initial motivation. They reported the importance of studying English beyond their regular classes and that the casual environment of EI offers them an opportunity to improve their speaking skills. This awareness seems to represent

what Yashima (2009) calls “international posture” (p. 144). By this she means that Japanese students recognize the importance of English and have a willingness to go overseas and interact with English speaking people. However, having this awareness does not seem to be sufficient enough to move many students from the first stage to the second or third stages of motivation.

Based on our study, the percentage of learners who move from the first to the second stage is very small, and there are probably even fewer in the third stage (sustaining effort). Indeed, students in the first and second year have many required classes and their schedule is tight; therefore, it is understandable that they report that even though they wish to visit EI they do not have enough time to do so. On the other hand, however, this is the precise reason why the university places NES teachers in EI during lunchtime in addition to regular class period times, so that students can make use of a non-class period for furthering their English skills even within the constraints of their tight schedules.

Some research shows that it is common for many learners to report having initial motivation, but what makes a difference is whether they transfer that type of motivation to actual behaviour. In their study on teacher perspectives of learner motivation, Cowie and Sakui (2011) found that teachers reported this kind of verbally espoused motivation as “false motivation” by which they mean that students express their motivation verbally but do not necessarily transfer that to motivational behaviours. This aspect of motivation is something that we can probably all relate to in our personal lives, such as wishing to diet but failing to control our eating, or announcing that we will stop a bad habit such as smoking but failing to do so.

Then what are the factors that move these few learners from the first stage to the second? We could say that a key factor is overcoming some sort of barrier and breaking out of their comfort zone of “just wanting to get better”. The participants who continued to go to EI all had some initial struggle and anxiety about going to EI. One factor that pushed these students to keep going was for them to focus on the positive side of learning outcomes. For example, even though Mayu’s hands were visibly shaking from nerves when attending for the first time, she continued to attend because she found it fun to learn new English expressions.

These positive sides of learning are seeing an ideal self in other students, being welcomed to the learning community, setting clear goals and recognizing their progress. We all know that learning is generally an arduous and stoic process whether you do it alone or in a class. But having some type of positive experience or a drive or a goal, either in the form of an ideal or ought-to self mentioned above, or a sense of belonging, could override the negative aspects of learning. By focusing on her goal of wanting to be able to speak like her friends who had traveled abroad, Satomi overcame her initial lack of interest in EI as she states, “I couldn’t talk when I’d gone to EI first, so it wasn’t interesting for me...” (English response)

These findings offer some practical suggestions for teachers who are involved in a learning context like EI. They can first make sure to lower the anxiety threshold to encourage learners to visit EI by creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Teachers of course can create such an atmosphere by themselves but they can also foster a sense of a warm community in collaboration with other students. This study implies that learners identify with other students as ideal selves, which can be an empowering and motivating reason for learners to keep studying English. Exploring different ways to make the most use of these role models might be worthwhile for teachers to pursue. For example, we can encourage role models to share the process of how they have learned English with other students in casual and formal settings. In this case, it is helpful that potential role models present themselves in a friendly and competent manner; it is also educational for them to have a chance to share how they have learned, both in good times and bad times, in order to show that the learning process is not linear and that students monitoring and managing their own progress is an important aspect of language learning.

Conclusion

The present paper reports on a study of learner motivation situated in a casual conversation environment on campus at Kobe Shoin Women’s University. The report suggests that a large percentage of students have motivation in which they

state that they want to improve their English, and in order to do so, a facility such as EI is a useful place to visit; but a relatively small percentage of students actually go to EI to improve their English there. These few students overcame their initial anxiety, lack of confidence and lower ability levels in order to improve their English communication skills. Several factors seem to have played a crucial role in helping them to overcome these barriers to taking part. One of them is the social aspect of a positive experience such as seeing another student as an example of an ideal-self or feeling a sense of community and the other is a strong sense of goals and determination backed up by good self-management techniques. It will be useful for students to be explicitly aware that these factors could help them overcome the inevitable obstacles that they will face in their learning careers.

An obvious caveat of this study is that it is a small-scale research project and that it is not extensive in terms of the short duration of data collection and limited types of data. It would be useful to interview more students who go to EI regularly in order to investigate what else, in addition to the factors mentioned above, can contribute to continue studying English at a place like EI. Also, it will be insightful to interview students who have never been to EI or stopped going after a few times in order to gain more insights to see what is preventing them attending. Further research studies, especially longitudinal ones, will shed light on students' motivation processes, which can help teachers understand how to encourage students to take advantage of learning environments such as EI.

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