Exploring a language learning history: The journey of self-discovery from the perspectives of individual differences

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Abstract
Exploring a language learning history can help researchers, teachers, and students to reveal and understand various individual difference factors that positively or negatively influence language learning activities and strategy use. In this paper, I examined my English language learning history and delved into challenges and factors to overcome them and activate my autonomy. Based on the analysis of my learning history, three main themes were indicated: a) motivational shifts and goal-setting theory, b) learning beliefs and goal setting theory, and c) the relationship between learning strategy use and teachers’ influence. Furthermore, my learning history also illustrated that I tended to change all these features through both successful and unsuccessful experiences. Among them, goal-setting seems to be the most significant factor for me to study the target language. With clear learning objectives, I overcame many challenges and sustained high motivation by utilizing various types of learning strategies and having positive learner beliefs. Accordingly, noticeable relationships among motivation, learner belief, and learning strategy use were revealed through my learning history log.

Keywords: language learning history, goal-setting, learner beliefs, motivation, learning strategies

Introduction
Language learning is an activity composed of diverse factors, such as learning objectives, reasons to learn the target language, and the amount of engagement in learning (Ryan, 2019). Furthermore, the degree of language learning can be positively or negatively influenced by many individual difference variables, such as motivation, learning strategies, and learner beliefs. As each person has and accumulates his or her learning experience, quantitative research methods cannot fully delve into his or her individual difference variables. Qualitative research methods can track down each learner’s differences deeply and illustrate the possible influence of individual difference variables. In order to understand these factors
and reveal possible effects, a learning history journal can be a useful tool.

I have been studying English as a foreign language for about 20 years and experienced both successes and failures in various contexts, including at cram school, at secondary school, and at universities. Although I have had many unsuccessful learning experiences and low motivation, especially when I started to learn the target language, I have overcome many challenges and developed my language abilities sufficiently enough to acquire Grade 1 of EIKEN, which is equivalent to C1 level of the most prevalent English proficiency test in Japan. Therefore, it might be appropriate to consider me as a sample language learner. To explore my longitudinal engagement in learning English, my learning history log is a suitable tool because it provides many crucial critical incidents to (re)consider. This paper starts with my learning history. I then continue with the exploration of my learning history, which indicates three main themes that can indicate noticeable individual difference variables, a) motivation shifts and the goal-setting theory, b) learner beliefs and goal setting, and c) the relationship between learning strategy use and teachers’ influence.

My Brief Language Learning History
I was born in Japan in a Japanese family; thus, I had almost no opportunity to use English until 1997. Since then, I have been studying English for nearly 20 years while encountering many difficulties in improving my English abilities, fluctuating motivation levels, and utilizing various learning strategies.

As English classes were not provided in Japanese primary education at that time, I learnt the target language mainly through mechanical drilling activities, such as multiple-choices grammar practice, at a cram school where I always had to take mechanical drilling activities recursively until I acquire the full-marks. Furthermore, I also had a conversational class with an American teacher, which took place every Saturday, and I played card games with my cram school friends. I sometimes enjoyed learning English when I got all the questions correct and won the games. However, I did not find these activities very beneficial to be able to use the target language in a practical way because I just remembered grammatical rules and vocabulary and shadowed the teacher. Therefore, although I did not dislike English, I was not fully motivated to learn the language.

Although I started to learn English as a subject at a private secondary school implementing a six-year secondary educational system, I still had almost no opportunity to use English in authentic situations because the Grammar-Translation Method—the teaching method focusing on grammatical and linguistic rules, vocabulary, and translations from the target language to the first language—and the Audiolingual Method—the teaching method providing a great deal of pronunciation and pattern drills—were utilized. What was worse, as I was at the rebellious stage and perceived studying as meaningless, I stopped learning all subjects, including English, and just hung out with my friends after school.

In the third year of lower secondary school, my English teacher assigned a translation task as a year-long project, using the novel Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. I thought that it would be too difficult for low proficient learners like us to translate the whole story from English into Japanese. However, at the same time, I felt that it could be useful to learn many words and grammar whilst studying for entrance examinations for universities. In order to do the homework, I bought notebooks to copy down English sentences and Japanese
translations. I spent almost two hours every night consulting an electronic English–Japanese dictionary and searching for words and phrases used in the story. I wrote down the Japanese meaning of each word beneath the word. I knew only these strategies and believed that they were effective because this is what the teachers always told students. Interestingly, I did not get bored. Furthermore, I gradually became able to translate faster and understand the surface of the storyline without a dictionary. Although I spent almost two years on the homework and did not increase my English grades, I felt a sense of accomplishment at that time. Moreover, I thought that continuing to use these learning strategies could be helpful to develop my English skills.

In the second year of upper secondary school, I decided to become an English teacher at senior high schools in Japan. This is because I wanted to provide students as many opportunities as possible to read, discuss, and write about controversial issues in English classes so as to help them to develop their critical thinking skills and morals. However, my English test results were much below average. My scores were equivalent to about 50 out of 200 possible points on the national standardized test which consists of all multiple-choice questions in reading and grammar sections. In order to determine the possible reasons, I reflected upon my learning experiences and realized that I had never consulted a grammar reference book and did not know how to use grammar and words. As I still believed that mechanical drilling activities would help me to develop my English skills, I recursively solved 100 grammar mechanical drill questions per day before going to bed, utilizing a grammar reference book until I understood the reason why I got each item right or wrong. In addition, I also read English reading textbooks to develop my reading skills. As a result, I gradually increased my test scores and achieved 175 out of 200 points of the national standardized English test. However, I still did not know how to use English expressions appropriately.

After entering the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, I had many opportunities to interact with people in English. As DELT implemented a content-based English Curriculum (CBEC), I had to understand the assigned topic matter as deeply as possible and argue my opinions in speaking and writing. Furthermore, I also studied to acquire sufficient TOEFL-ITP scores in order to apply for a study-abroad program. Therefore, I read many easy books and watched interesting films in English almost every day. Furthermore, I also tried to read English newspapers to gain as much information as possible about assigned topics and learn some words. As I also had academic essay assignments, I tried to write, review, and revise my papers repeatedly. Whenever I encountered unfamiliar words, I kept them in vocabulary notebooks. While doing these activities, I became more curious about the given themes and wanted to learn them in English. Moreover, I began to learn the target language for communicating with others and broaden my perspectives of the world. Consequently, I accomplished my learning goals of applying for the study-abroad program and grabbed the opportunity to study at Oxford Brookes University in England for one year. I believed that CBEC as well as extensive reading and listening activities had prominent roles in fulfilling my learning aims.
Immediately after I arrived in England, I encountered some communication problems. As I extensively listened to British English through podcasts and films, I could understand what others were saying but not produce English smoothly. My confidence in communicating in English decreased, and I thought that my learning strategies might not have been very effective. However, I believed that additional activities, such as writing essays and talking with others in English actively, would help me to enhance my language skills. Therefore, in addition to assignments and extensive reading and listening activities, I hung out with English friends and wrote academic essays about topics I chose. By doing them, I gradually became able to argue my ideas and opinions and have smooth interactions with others in both speaking and writing.

All the learning strategies I employed had both advantages and disadvantages, depending on my learning aims and motivation. I now have many opportunities to discuss academic realms and some controversial issues with my classmates and friends in English. Therefore, in order to have fun and gain background knowledge, currently, I mainly conduct extensive reading and listening activities. Furthermore, I also write academic essays and ask my friends for feedback on them. These activities helped me to reach my current English proficiency. Accordingly, I firmly believe that reading and listening for pleasure and writing essays relevant to my interest and major fields have prominent roles in developing my English skills today.

The Exploration of My Language Learning History

Motivation Shift and the Goal-Setting Theory

Motivation can be conceptualized as a psychological power that language learners exploit so as to make attempts to learn the target language and fulfil their learning objectives (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) mention that motivation can offer “the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long, often tedious learning process” (p. 72). Furthermore, “changes in motivation are at the core of the motivation-learning relationship” (Ryan, 2018, p. 59). Therefore, it is essential to reveal a student’s motivation shift in order to delve into his or her engagement in language learning.

Reflecting upon my learning history, the goal-setting theory, which asserts that a learner’s goal has a positive relationship with his or her performance (Oxford & Shearin, 1994), had a prominent role in my English language learning because my motivation types and my strengths varied, depending on (un)successful learning experiences as well as the learning objectives. When I started to translate a British novel from English into Japanese as part of compulsory homework, I had more instrumental motivation, defined as enthusiasm to accomplish practical objectives, including utilizing the target language in business (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), than integrative motivation, conceptualized as eagerness to fulfill the interest in the target language and culture and engagement in international communities (McClelland, 2000). I just wanted to acquire a good grade and believed that this activity would be helpful for passing future entrance examinations for universities, which is a typical reason for secondary students in Japan to learn English commonly found in Japan (Ushioda, 2013). However, as I gradually understood the storyline and linguistic features, I became interested in English grammar and enjoyed translation activities. This successful experience also helped to increase my satisfaction with my language learning and raised my integrative
motivation. Furthermore, when I became determined and had a clear and measurable objective to learn English, such as to pass entrance examinations for universities in order to major in English language teaching and to acquire sufficient scores on the TOEFL so as to apply for the study-abroad program at Oxford Brookes University, my instrumental motivation rose noticeably, and I kept striving to study English until I accomplished my learning aims. Accordingly, as Noels (2013) reports, learners engage themselves in successful language learning when they are intrinsically motivated to learn the target language. In the same way, I could sustain the longitudinal learning when I set clear objectives for myself.

The similarities in these cases are that I had and/or set the learning goals and became engaged in activities to accomplish them. In addition, my learning was initially activated because of instrumental motivation and the goal-settings, with the motivation type gradually shifting to integrative motivation. Therefore, as Locke, Shaw, Saari, and Latham (1981) highlight, goals can raise and keep students’ motivation to learn the target language. I tended to have longitudinal engagement in learning English through trials and errors when I knew the explicit learning objectives and reasons for improving my language abilities. Moreover, as Dörnyei (1990) mentions, the noticeable relationship between instrumental motivation and the desire to attain learning goals can positively influence low and/or intermediate proficiency foreign language learners. I maintained these two factors and successfully enhanced my English abilities enough to acquire sufficient scores to pass the examinations and apply for a program to study abroad.

The Relationships Between Learner Beliefs and Goal–Setting

Learner beliefs can be conceptualized as “the beliefs that language learners have about what is involved in learning a language, how to learn it and their own language-learning ability” (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 340). Horwitz (1987) categorized learner beliefs into five types: “(1) the difficulty of language learning, (2) aptitude for language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivation and expectations” (as cited in Ellis, 2008, p. 8). Furthermore, some studies reveal that there is a positive relationship between learner beliefs and learners’ learning behaviors (e.g. Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Shibata, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explore which types of belief I had and how the beliefs influenced my learning attitude and behaviors.

My learning history indicates that I tended to have beliefs relevant to the challenges of language learning and language-learning strategies with learning objectives. While experiencing success and failures, I changed my beliefs in learning strategies and utilized alternative techniques. Among them, both my successful and unsuccessful experiences in England seems to have had a prominent role in forming my beliefs. When I arrived in the country, I immediately encountered difficulties in smoothly interacting with others in English, even though I understood what my interlocutors were saying. However, I reflected upon my learning experiences at my Japanese university and decided to apply additional learning strategies, believing that they would be effective to rebuild my temporary loss of self-confidence. This positive behavior and belief enabled me to be engaged in active English studies and improve my English abilities. Therefore, my case can indicate that learner beliefs and learning strategies applied can have a strong influence on learners’ learning behaviors (Boakye, 2007).
As Benson (2011) highlights, my reflections on learning experiences changed my beliefs. This shift helped me to form objectives and consider possible learning strategies to overcome difficulties. Furthermore, setting learning resolutions also raised my longitudinal perseverance to learn the target language, consistent with Locke et al (1981)’s argument that the act of goal setting can provide an opportunity to raise the learner’s self-confidence in language learning and motivation to learn the target language. Accordingly, setting learning objectives had a prominent role in forming my beliefs and resulted in positive engagement in language learning.

The Relationships Between Learning Strategy Use and Teachers’ Influence

Learning strategies are methods that a learner applies in order to accomplish his or her learning goals and improve his or her language abilities effectively and successfully (Oxford, 1990). Nevertheless, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) point out that learners sometimes employ inappropriate and unsuitable strategies for improving their language proficiency and achieve their objectives when they decide which method to utilize. This misjudgment of learning strategies can result in unsuccessful learning and demotivate learners to sustain their learning. On the other hand, Cook (2016) mentions that successful language learners have six characteristics in language learning use: a) understanding a suitable learning style, b) being engaged in the learning process, c) raising their awareness of linguistic and communicative features of the target language, d) being aware of their own language knowledge development, e) developing the target language as a different system from their first language, and f) accepting mistakes as indispensable. Therefore, in order to understand students’ (un)successful learning experiences, it would be important to consider their strategy use as well as their rationales for selecting specific strategies.

Language teachers have a prominent influence in guiding students towards specific language learning strategies (Ellis, 2008; Shibata, 2019). For example, in order to translate an English book into Japanese, I used an English–Japanese dictionary to try to fulfil the learning objective because my English teachers taught students in this manner and I knew only of this learning method. With this learning strategy, I gradually understood the story content and eventually completed the task, but I did not acquire higher test scores or grades. Nie and Zhou (2017) report that successful language learners tend to utilize various learning strategies in order to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. However, due to my ‘successful’ experience and my teacher’s recommendation, I believed that using a dictionary and translating English into Japanese would be effective for developing my English abilities and especially my vocabulary knowledge, even when my learning was unsuccessful. This obsession is consistent with Purpura’s (2014) argument that learners utilize specific learning strategies based on the challenges they have encountered and their successful experiences. As a result, I adopted these methods in the long run. This learning experience can also illustrate that learners sometimes employ inappropriate language strategies to try to improve their language abilities (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Moreover, the critical incidents illustrated that teachers need to provide various learning strategies for their students. My university teachers used extensive reading and listening activities as well as academic essays in their modules. These methods helped me to learn the importance of integrating various methods of studying English and the necessity of developing my English abilities effectively both outside of the
classroom while I was in Japan as well as in my studies during my time in England. Accordingly, my teachers had an obvious role in offering and recommending possible learning strategies throughout my English learning history, which can corroborate Ellis’ (2008) and Shibata’s (2019) positions.

Conclusion
My learning history revealed the manifestation of individual difference factors, especially the relationships between motivation shifts and the goal-setting theory, learner beliefs, and learning strategy uses. Through both successful and unsuccessful experiences, I tended to change all these features. However, the most significantly influential factor in (de)motivating me to keep learning English was whether I had explicit objectives or not. Without learning goals, I did not maintain high motivation to develop my English abilities and stopped progressing; on the other hand, with clear goals and objectives, I was able to achieve longitudinal engagement. Therefore, goal-setting seems to be the most significant factor in my study of the target language, and as such, I should prioritize it above all other factors.

With clear learning objectives, I overcame many challenges and sustained high motivation by utilizing various types of learning strategies and having positive learning beliefs. Instrumental motivation always played a major role in my English studies, and the influence of instructors also shaped my learning beliefs. However, successful experiences gradually made my learning motivation shift from instrumental motivation to integrative motivation and strengthened my belief in and use of learning strategies. Although this influence sometimes made me obsessed with using the same learning strategies, even when they were less effective in enhancing my English abilities, self-learning reflections and objectives aided me in implementing learning strategies successfully and improving my learning behavior.

All these learning experiences influenced my language learning style and my longitudinal learning beliefs. However, my learning history indicates that all of the featured factors—goal-setting, motivation, learner belief, and learning strategy use—always influenced each other. When one of them was not helpful, it negatively affected the other variables; on the other hand, when one factor contributed positively to my learning, so did the others. Accordingly, noticeable relationships among motivation, learner belief, and learning strategy use were revealed through my learning history. This discovery also aided me in reconsidering how to sustain the positive influence on each individual difference variable in order to develop my English abilities.

The author
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