

Developmental changes in second language self-concept: A case study focusing on three Japanese learners of English as a foreign language

Akira NAKAYAMA¹⁾, Sarah FAHERTY²⁾, Glenn Amon MAGEE¹⁾ and Hiroki YOSHIDA³⁾

1) English Education Center, Institute for Education and Student Support, Ehime University

2) Sojo University

3) Kanto Gakuin University

Introduction

There has been a great deal of interest in the role of learner beliefs in second language (L2) learning, particularly in terms of how these affect the relationship between learners' affect (i.e., motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety) and their decision making processes. Researchers have also focused on the self-related constructs of affective and cognitive factors and have used several psychological theories to explain the phenomena observed, such as attribution theory, goal theory, self-determination theory, etc. The standard practice is to adopt quantitative methodologies using psychometric testing techniques to establish a theoretical psychological construct and model.

Although this statistical approach has provided researchers with an understanding of general tendencies in the characteristics of a group of learners (Papi & Teimouri, 2014), a "depersonalized" manner of investigation is not well-suited to uncovering the unique structure and development of a particular person's beliefs in a complex educational and social context (Mercer, 2011). In the face of the lack of research on this topic, there is a need for a thorough understanding of L2 learners' self-concept from a holistic perspective. Self-concept is by nature open to redefinition in response to contextual variation and change because a person's beliefs, which are the foundation of the self-concept, vary in response to one's socio-cultural and educational surroundings. Therefore, the findings obtained by means of self-report data in cross-sectional research designs are regarded as somewhat tenuous. Moreover, as factors affecting self-concept are also influenced by socio-cultural issues and norms, L2 learners' self-concept development

must be examined within a cultural context that includes educational settings. This raises the question of what characterizes the L2 self-concept of advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in a specific cultural environment, specifically in Japan.

To trace the processes involved in the formation, maintenance, and evolution of L2 learners' self-concept in the Japanese context, this paper examines the L2 self-concept of tertiary-level Japanese EFL learners with high proficiency. Highlighting the role of learner beliefs during the development of the L2 self-concept, we specifically consider the role of learners' beliefs about language learning before and after taking the English entrance exams for a Japanese university. EFL is a required component of the Japanese school curriculum, and so there is a stronger focus on "studying" English, particularly in preparation for university entrance exams, than there is on using English for communicative purposes. Thus, their beliefs about learning English, however, are likely to change after completion of the university entrance examination because their reason for studying English will have changed. For instance, their views change through taking university courses in English that focus on English for communicative purposes; otherwise, that this changes due to other reasons such as overseas studies, or faculty required presentations in English.

This paper begins by defining the notions of self-concept and belief, and offering a review of studies on the self-concept and beliefs of an L2 learner. The methodology of this study is then described, and the rationale for adopting the qualitative research paradigm expanded by Dörnyei and his colleagues (Dörnyei & Chen, 2013) are set out. Finally, data collected through

interviews with three advanced Japanese EFL learners are analyzed from the perspective of retrodictive qualitative modeling, and the developmental changes in self-concept are reported. The term “retrodictive” is used here in opposition to “predictive”, and refers to the tracing of reasons for individuals becoming second, or foreign, language learners by identifying relevant past experiences (Dörnyei & Chen, 2013).

Literature Review

Definition of the L2 Self-concept

We consider that L2 self-concept can be readily understood through the view that self-beliefs comprise both dynamic and relatively stable dimensions (Mercer, 2011). With regard to the dynamism of the self-concept, Markus and Wurf (1987, p.329) have defined the self-concept as “dynamic and capable of change, as it reflects and mediates the actions of individuals who are negotiating a variety of social circumstances,” meaning that one’s self-concept will vary over the course of one’s life and is affected by one’s social experiences. By introducing a “working self-concept” to the traditional model of self-concept (Epstein, 1973), Markus and Wurf (1987) explained the process of the alternation and modification in the dynamic self-concept.

Concerning the components of the dynamic self-concept, Markus and Wurf (1987) assumed that the self-concept consists of stable “core” elements that are independent of the domain-specific context and less susceptible to change, as well as “peripheral” elements that are less stable, but rather active, and are dependent on the domain-specific context. The psychological construct of the self-concept is thought to be nested in belief systems, which are described as multi-layered webs of relationships (Barcelos, 2003). As a stable part of a primitive belief system, a core concept is formed in an individual’s mind as a result of interactions with others (e.g., friends, teachers, and parents) and the social and educational environments of early childhood. Figuratively speaking, the personal self-concept gradually becomes larger, like a snowball, as an individual ages (Smith, 2012). Beliefs located near the periphery are updated and revised easily, but the core concept is not easily altered because of the strength of neuronal connections that form the “self”, as a result of individual life experiences. We define a belief as an organized portion of knowledge about one’s subjective feelings toward an entity or event.

When a belief is reinforced by repeated experiences or certain influential event(s), it becomes embedded in one’s self-concept. If not, a belief remains on the periphery as a part of the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

The Peripheral Elements of the L2 Self-concept

Since the L2 self-concept develops with L2 learning experience, certain peripheral elements of L2 self-concept, such as motivation, affect, and self-regulation (Mercer, 2011), can also change over time because they are directly affected by social and educational environments. This section describes the effects of these three variables on the formation of L2 self-concept.

Motivation contributes to the formation of the belief system, and makes L2 self-concept more complex. In the traditional L2 research paradigm, researchers assumed that motivation was well understood if it predicted learners’ future behaviors. For example, learners who seek the pleasure of learning new things are regarded as intrinsically motivated, whereas those who study English to get a good job in the future are regarded as extrinsically motivated. The present research, in contrast, assumes that learners’ motivations originate in their past experiences and adopts a retrodictive modeling analysis that consists of an in-depth examination of the history of each learner. In the sense that their past experiences cannot be changed, the development of their core beliefs and motivation is related to their experiences in a straightforward manner.

Affect, deriving from positive and negative feelings, is the second variable of the L2 learner that influences the pursuit of learning English (Mercer, 2011). In this regard, an interesting and well-known phenomenon concerns the role of both positive and negative feelings (i.e., those facilitating anxiety) in L2 learning (Scovel, 1978). Some EFL learners are motivated, despite fearing negative evaluation from others for their errors, hoping to escape embarrassing situations in the future. The self-evaluation maintenance model further explains the maintenance of a positive self-evaluation on the basis of others’ evaluation (Tesser, 1988). One of the central processes in this model entails comparison of oneself to others. For instance, some individuals avoid comparison of their accomplishments to those of a close friend, as this might threaten their self-evaluation (Suls & Wills, 1991), whereas others endorse self-evaluation through comparison with the poor performance of another (Gibbons, 1986). Thus, an original fear of receiving negative evaluation from others may be updated as

the person matures, meets new friends, and develops social relationships. In this way, affect is not static but is open to change under the influence of life context and social experience. As an example of this, Cutrone (2010) summarized Japanese communication styles and reported that Japanese EFL learners' predisposition to adhere to the cultural concept of "Wa" (i.e., maintenance of harmony in group situations) created difficulties for learning the target language, as they needed to maintain their self-evaluation both among friends and within the Japanese cultural system. To address these issues, this paper examines individual affect in relation to learners' comparison of themselves to others in the process of developing their L2 self-concept in the Japanese EFL context.

The third important variable affecting self-concept is self-regulation, as it not only shapes concrete goals for learning, but also defines self-concept allowing for its extensive elaboration. This means self-concept is not only open to change, but indeed varies optimally. While the above two psychological constructs are somewhat constrained in terms of their degree of agency and holistic competency, self-regulation guides and controls learners' actions (i.e., learning) in a specific domain. One compelling theory is that self-regulatory mechanisms work to enhance, scaffold, or protect learning-specific actions (Dörnyei, 2003). The interplay of these three mechanisms in processing a task is described as follows: "While learners are engaged in executing a task, they continuously appraise the process, and when the ongoing monitoring reveals that progress is slowing, halting, or backsliding, they activate the action control system to 'save' or enhance the action" (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 16). In this paper, self-regulation is discussed in relation to learners' judgment of linguistic competency and language learning behaviors.

Beliefs as a Source of L2 Self-concept

One important component of self-concept is a belief in the fixedness of one's competency (Mercer, 2011). In the case of the L2 self-concept, this entails the L2 learners' evaluation of their current competence in the target language. In Japan, the goal of EFL learning set by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sport, and Technology (MEXT), for both teachers and students, is the general integration of the four language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Therefore, English classes at Japanese junior high schools have recently trended toward a communicative-oriented atmosphere with many

oral exercises. However, most students in Japan who hope to enter a Japanese national or public university must prepare for an English test (the National Center Test for University Admission), which is conducted in a paper-based format and requires receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening) rather than productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). High-school classes in Japan therefore tend to focus on English grammar exercises, reading comprehension of texts, and listening-comprehension exercises conducted in controlled conditions that decontextualize English from their source meanings and reinterpret them as objects that can be understood within the Japanese cultural paradigm. This creates a clear discrepancy between the goals of the educational system and the reality of classroom outcomes, which has led to an unbalanced integration of students' English skills.

Another component contributing to L2 learners' core self-concept that is influenced by the Japanese socio-educational context concerns beliefs about the nature of EFL learning. In Japan, English is a formal school subject in both junior and senior high schools. Students study English for a total of six years, mainly in classroom settings, before entering universities. The English curriculum is constrained by the course of study offered by MEXT in that schools are only allowed to utilize one of a limited number of government endorsed textbooks for teaching and evaluative purposes. In addition, due to a lack of authentic English resources in Japan, students often do not have opportunities for exposure to English conversation outside their classrooms. In short, English is seen by many as purely as a school subject. Whereas L2 learners' beliefs about competency are embedded as cognitive-learning-style traits, beliefs about the nature of learning the target language are more flexible because L2 learners adjust their learning behaviors to the contexts in which the learning takes place. As these contexts, especially in Japan, include teachers' shared educational norms, one example being that many Japanese teachers put more energy into club activities than the subject they are licensed to teach. Indeed, as well as the teachers' and students' goals in studying the language, which is predominantly to pass high school or university entrance exams, it is difficult to change such beliefs while L2 learners remain in such contexts.

The Importance of Focusing on an Individual

Qualitative research studies using narrative data do not deal with population-based samples, but are a form

of case-centered inquiry aimed at producing context-dependent knowledge, which is entirely different from rule-based knowledge and predictive theories that aim to summarize case studies and make generalizations (Rimissman, 2008). In fact, although a number of studies have considered groups to describe the abstract system of beliefs related to L2 learning, the complex web of beliefs within a specific individual has not been examined. For instance, learners who have contradictory beliefs can still succeed in EFL learning. Hence, the individual belief system requires in-depth investigation via qualitative methods that focus on the individual (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

Method

Research Questions

The current study aimed to answer two research questions:

- (1) How did the L2 self-concept form in a Japanese EFL settings?
- (2) How did learning beliefs change over the course of studying English as a foreign language context?

Participants

Our initial participants were 30 Japanese university students who were all 23 years old and were born and raised in Japan. They had taken English classes in local schools (see Table 1). The students took four required English classes as university freshmen and took the minor course “Professional English Training Program” during their sophomore year. Among them, we focused on only three highly proficient, unique, and qualified students who were non-English major, had completed two English proficiency tests, had studied abroad for more than six months, and desired to use English as a tool in their future work. The participants signed the consent

form for this research study.

Takahiro, a pseudonym, was a male student who had started job hunting at the outset of this study. He was a student in the Department of Material Science and Engineering. According to the TOEIC-SW® test descriptor, he ranked at Level 7 in both speaking and writing.

Saeko, a pseudonym, is a female student and she had just started searching for post-graduate employment while participating in this study. She belonged to the Department of Education, but planned to work in a company.

Rimi, a pseudonym, was another female student who had also started job hunting at the outset of this study. She was a student in the Department of Law and Letters and majored in comprehensive policy making.

Table 2. Overview of the Primary Data Documents

Primary documents	Date collected
Written Text 1 (WT1): Responses in Japanese	May 21–24, 2012
Interview 1 (IW1): Interview memos in Japanese	June 11, 2012
Interview 2 (IW2): Interview memos in Japanese	June 28, 2012
Interview 3 (IW3): Interview memos in Japanese	August 1, 2012
Written Text 2 (WT2): Full interview entries in English	September 17, 2012

Data Collection

The sequence of data collection activities is outlined in Table 2. First, on a paper-based questionnaire, the participant was asked to answer, in Japanese, open-ended questions regarding what they thought about their English proficiency and the factors that contributed to their current English skills. Next, based on their responses, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in order to (1) record in

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

First Name	<i>Takahiro</i>	<i>Saeko</i>	<i>Rimi</i>
Major	Material Engineering	Education	Comprehensive Policy Making
Proficiency	Reading / Listening	Reading / Listening	Reading / Listening
TOEIC® 2009	265 / 340	255 / 295	220 / 340
TOEIC® 2010	325 / 400	295 / 400	325 / 410
TOEIC® 2011	390 / 490	340 / 450	410 / 465
TOEIC® 2012	410 / 480	340 / 495	435 / 460
	Speaking / Writing	Speaking / Writing	Speaking / Writing
TOEIC-SW® 2012	160 / 140	140 / 170	150 / 150
*Levels of TOEIC-SW Descriptor	Speaking: 7 / Writing: 7	Speaking: 6 / Writing: 8	Speaking: 6 / Writing: 7
Study Abroad	Canada: Apr 2010- Mar 2011	Australia: Jan 2010- Mar 2011	New Zealand: Apr 2010- Mar 2011

detail developmental changes in their beliefs and L2 self-concept, (2) record their thoughts regarding EFL learning at each stage of their education, and (3) help to code their questionnaire responses. As the required data concerned their past experiences and thoughts regarding a specific domain, they were asked to recall things related to their EFL learning in an introspective manner.

The interviews were conducted by a Japanese English teacher who was a certified school psychologist and had more than five years of experience in clinical university settings. Because the interviewer had well-established relationships and rapport with the participants, they could talk openly about their experiences and feelings. To keep the veracity of the statement and improve the accuracy of the retrospective reports, the interviewer adopted the technique of landmark-event-type questioning (Loftus & Marburger, 1983) where the interviewer asked the participants to remember their past experience, which helped the participants to recall the reference period and reduce telescoping effects (Sudman & Bradburn, 1973). The interview data were translated from Japanese to English and the translations checked by a native English speaker. The English versions were also checked and revised by the participants. Finally, the interview data were examined to identify developmental changes in their beliefs and L2 self-concepts in order to elucidate the role of learner beliefs in the development process.

The interviews required them to consider past events that had made a significant impression on them. Thus, it was necessary to focus on successful Japanese EFL learners rather than beginner students because it is impossible to predict who will be successful learners, or how they will become successful. In short, we concentrated on recording and describing the past experiences, what had influenced their beliefs, and whether any significant landmarks could be identified. This retrospective research strategy allowed us to investigate the complex, dynamic systems underlying the participants' self-concept. The term "retrodictive" is used here in opposition to "predictive", and refers to the tracing of reasons for individuals becoming second, or foreign, language learners by identifying relevant past experiences (Dörnyei & Chen, 2013).

Results

The participants exhibited unique trajectories in their

development of L2 learner beliefs. In this section, data for the participants are reported from two perspectives, namely core and peripheral components of self-concept, and developmental changes in self-beliefs.

Takahiro's Core Concept

Takahiro's response below highlights how different EFL skills were related during his learning.

As for writing skills, the sentences I wrote tended to be long before my speaking improved. However, once I can be more conscious of reading my sentences, the sentences I write [sic] have been gradually shorter and easier to read. (WT2 H, 90–92)

Takahiro's analysis of his competency referred to clinical issues related to learning English. The target of his comparison was himself, which means that rather than estimating his competency by comparing himself to others, he measured his proficiency in comparison to his prior abilities. This is typical of self-instructed learning. In the extract below, he demonstrated how he identified and tackled his weak points.

As for reading skills, when I was a high school student, I made every effort to read the passage as fast as possible and I never thought of phrase structures, like where I should make a pause in a sentence to find the groups of a certain meaning. However, the more my speaking skills improve, the more my reading skills improve in that I can pause when I speak in English to say what I mean to others clearly. By this, I could understand the phrase structures in a sentence more clearly. (WT2 H, 83–88)

The above extract shows that noticing the relationship between different skills and measuring his proficiency levels in English across skills contributed to Takahiro's improved holistic competence. He did not wait to be taught; rather he was active, independent, and responsible for his own learning.

Turning to Takahiro's beliefs about the nature of learning EFL, these were connected to his experience of studying abroad. He did not have any childhood foreign language experience, and so his ideas on the nature of learning EFL stemmed from his learning experience at school in Japan. However, regarding his experience of studying abroad in Canada, he reported as follows:

One of the factors that contributed to my improvement in English is the instruction that I received in a language school in Canada. The most effective way of teaching English, that I realized, was by one of my teachers, who was in charge of the advanced class I belonged to. (WT2 H, 119–122)

The contrast between his reported self-directed approach

to learning and his assertion that the teaching he received in Canada was a key factor in his improvement is interesting. It suggests that Takahiro was aware of the need to use the resources available to him in order to build his English skills, including self-made resources and those provided in class.

Peripheral Components of Takahiro's Self-concept

Takahiro's EFL learning motivation is identified in the following passage:

I could not make myself understood in English when I joined the 10-day exchange program abroad, but I felt and realized that it is [sic] quite fun to have such cross-cultural experience even when I felt uneasy and frustrated that I could not communicate with people there. This, in turn, led to my motivation for further study. (WT2 H, 114–117)

Regarding Takahiro's affect, his frustration related to an inability to communicate motivated him, demonstrating that it is possible for negative experiences to have a positive impact. The enjoyment Takahiro found in experiencing new cultures through English outweighed his frustration at not being able to communicate at the level he desired, as expanded upon below.

As for my speaking skills, I didn't have any confidence because I felt anxious about, for example, whether what I am saying is grammatically right or not, and my utterances were understandable for others etc. And I could only speak in short sentences in order not to make mistakes. However, this strategy led to me saying the surface things and make [sic] me to speak slowly and less fluently. (WT H, 94–98)

Again, above we see how Takahiro identified his weak point, anxiety about accuracy, which we saw above when he reported using his reading skills to improve his speaking skills. His anxiety about the accuracy of his utterances also illustrates his beliefs about correct English, and this can be connected to his experience in the Japanese school system, which focused on grammar and vocabulary, as is clear from the following:

However, the teacher always listened very carefully to the students' utterance one by one, and then the teacher corrected them even though they were very small mistakes each time. Thanks to this instruction, I could know very small, basic mistakes that I have made unconsciously. In addition, by knowing the parts of my utterance that were not pointed out and corrected by the teacher, I also could have more confidence. Like this, I could tell what I should correct from what I should not correct, which lead to my improvement of English. (WT2 H, 126–132)

The teaching style of Takahiro's teacher helped him

overcome his focus on accuracy, by helping him learn what was important: "I could tell what I should correct". By focusing on key words, Takahiro was able to balance his desire to speak correctly with his need to speak more fluently.

Saeko's Core Concept

Saeko's core concept was also investigated in a series of interviews. Firstly, her beliefs of competency were examined.

Although I have not intentionally prepared for the TOEIC test, I definitely think that my holistic English language skills have improved when I consult my scores. (WT2 S, 6–7)

Her assessment of her abilities was created using the TOEIC score as a guide, rather than her perception of her performance. The accuracy of her assessment suggests that she can correctly interpret her test scores. However, it appears that she is aware of its limitations, as she readily admits that she did not prepare specifically for these tests. She also demonstrates an awareness of the need to balance the four skills to achieve fluency.

As for me, I am different from the general Japanese university student, I recognize myself that I am good at listening and speaking but poor at reading. Since I think if I read more books, my 4 skills would be balanced. So I am now making an effort with joining the Book Club. (WT2 S, 28–31)

As the above quote shows, Saeko not only recognizes her areas for improvement, she also has the self-motivation to act on them. She realizes that by creating a book club, she will be able to work on her reading skills, which she has identified as a weak point in her English performance. Additionally, this quote shows Saeko's self-confidence. When comparing herself with Japanese university students, she does not over-evaluate her skills, although she recognizes that she is different to the norm. Creating a book club to improve her reading skills shows how Saeko's perceived competency effects her agency and makes her willing to engage in certain behaviors.

Next, Saeko's beliefs about the nature of learning English as a foreign language revealed another aspect of core self-concept of L2 learners. As the following quote shows, she understood the difference between receptive and productive skills, due to her time studying overseas. Her observation of the differences between the various types of English proficiency test shows that she has noticed the emphasis on receptive skills in English education in Japan.

While studying abroad, I took several prep courses for

Cambridge English Test, IELTS and TOEFL; I realized that reading and listening skills are heavily focused on in TOEIC, which is highly popular in English education in Japan. As for the example, I think that they are many people who cannot speak English even though they scored high in TOEIC. (WT2 S, 23–26)

Peripheral Components of Saeko's Self Concept

Saeko clearly expresses her motivation to learn English.

My motivation for studying English originated in my childhood overseas experience. I think I was 4 or 5 years old at that time. When my family stayed in the US because of my father's job, I was impressed by feeling different cultures, even though I was a child at that time, and also by communicating in English with people having different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, as I saw my parents speaking English, I came to have a strong motivation that I also wanted to speak English when I got older. (WT2 S, 42–47)

Saeko's motivation, then, is firmly rooted in her childhood, generated by her experience living overseas as a child, with her parents as role models. She was able to create a realistic goal by observing her parents' English ability, and this goal has remained stable throughout her English education. This motivation thus acts as a core concept that has not changed over time. She connects language to culture, viewing English as a tool for satisfying her curiosity about other cultures.

The cross-cultural experiences of her childhood are embedded in Saeko's mind, and are the origin of her motivation. This motivation has helped her pursue her English studies throughout her school career. Her belief in her potential aptitude may stem from her witnessing her parents, who acted as role models, communicating effectively in English during their time living abroad.

The following quote shows Saeko's excitement that she no longer had to focus on the general high school curriculum upon entering university. She has a favorable attitude to learning English, and this led to her sense of liberation when she could specialize in this subject. She sees being able to focus on English as a positive aspect of her life at university, and that further study is a valuable opportunity.

When I became a university student, I thought, "Uh... from now on, I can study English as much as I want!" In my case, I remember that I was studying mathematics, which is my weak subject, when I was at high school. (WT2 S, 49–51)

At that same time, I also realized that I can make myself

understood in English in daily life outside Japan with junior high school level English. However, I definitely need more terminology for deep and professional discussions. (WT2 S, 14–16)

Although Saeko realizes that she needs only elementary level English in order to communicate, she seeks to go beyond that to broaden the kind of conversation she can participate in.

Rimi's Core Concept

The extract from Rimi's responses below reveals another type of attribution of EFL competency.

In my personal experience studying in New Zealand helped me to improve all 4 skills so that they are all equally strong, but I still feel that I am not good at speaking English, and I am sure that this feeling will not disappear in the future. (WT2 R, 150–152)

Rimi's responses show that she attributed the integration of her English skills to her surroundings while abroad and that she realized that all four skills were strong. However, she still showed fear about speaking English. This ambivalent state might stem from her personality traits. Her cognitive style, which is considered to be stable throughout one's life, was to rigidly evaluate her English skills and proficiency. Additionally, in the process of self-evaluation, she appeared to underestimate her level of English proficiency. Such contradictory beliefs are clear from the following extract:

Some people may stop studying English because they have an inferiority complex. Others may continue to study English in order to overcome such inferiority complex. In my case, both have happened. This is somewhat contradictory, but since I am never content unless I am the best, I would make every effort to be the best. On the other hand, I also feel that I am so proud of myself that I don't want to try the game that I definitely lose. So, such mixed feelings may sometimes make me feel study English and sometimes not. (WT2 R, 170–175)

This extract raises an important question: How do such conflicting beliefs operate in different situations? As Rimi mentioned above, L2 learners are not always consistent in their beliefs about learning. Several ideas about learning English, although sometimes contradictory, can co-occur and affect the trajectory of learning. In Rimi's case, it seems that she wanted to use English only in situations where she could "win" or be the best. This belief conflicts with the reality that it takes L2 learners a long time to develop their skills, which means that it is impossible to start at a high skill level. However, Rimi evaluated herself through a comparison process,

meaning that she used a “game” approach to measure her proficiency. Although she claimed to make every effort to excel, she also tended to avoid situations that threatened her self-evaluation. By not trying a game that she might lose, she could keep her self-evaluation positive and continue learning and using English in the Japanese EFL context.

Rimi believed that she owed her English proficiency to English classes in high school, as is clear from the following extract:

I think that the basic foundations that I learned before my graduation from high school have a great impact on my current English skills, thanks to my teachers in my high school days. (WT2 R, 189–193)

Rimi seemed to be aware that her high school EFL curriculum was beneficial to her learning, and she had used that foundation to improve her English proficiency during her time at university. She also mentioned environmental factors, especially her family’s time overseas, as having had a strong impact on her EFL learning. Rimi reported the impact of her family on her English learning as follows:

Thanks to my parents, I have experienced such things [cf. the aforementioned experience], so I think the environmental factors have a great impact on me and contributed to my English skills. But even though my elder sister and brother were raised by the same parents and went to the same school as me, they are not at all interested in English. That is incomprehensible and also interesting to me. (WT2 R, 199–203)

Rimi’s belief in the role of environmental factors in EFL learning was challenged by her siblings’ disinterest in pursuing further English study. Rimi believed that someone with an upbringing like hers would automatically develop an interest in the English language. However, her siblings had the same upbringing but did not develop the same interests. In Rimi’s case, there must be further reasons why she became interested in English, as environmental factors were to the sole motivators.

Peripheral Components of Rimi’s Self-concept

As mentioned in the introductory section, this study focused on the participants’ motivation for learning English that originated in their past experiences. Consider the following extract in this regard:

However, not all of my classmates at that time who have taken the same English classes have acquired the same basics as me. In that sense, I think there is something I have, like motivation. In my case, there are two things. One is

that I had had a sense of failure in my overseas experience in childhood. The other is that I strongly wanted to live overseas since childhood. These two things have motivated me to study English. (WT2 R, 165–168)

Rimi acknowledged that her experience abroad motivated her to study English to an advanced level. Whereas she could not understand her siblings’ lack of EFL learning motivation, Rimi seemed to accept her classmates’ similar lack of interest. Although she had mixed feelings about her childhood experience abroad, it undoubtedly motivated her to study further. This suggests that Rimi valued the environmental factors of her upbringing more than her experience at school for provoking her interest in English. Her hope to live abroad motivated her further and was connected to her previous experience. Thus, Rimi’s motivation originated in the cross-cultural experiences she had at an early age, and this reinforced her belief in the role of environmental factors.

In addition, Rimi mentioned the role of her personality in her degree of EFL learning motivation:

If there is something to differentiate me from others, that would be my longing for being a good speaker of English and my personality that I am never content until I made it. (WT2 R, 182–185)

As mentioned in above, clear and fair perceptions and evaluations about one’s skills and mental states are the foundation for establishing a self-concept. Rimi’s “longing” simply pushed her forward, but the direction that she went was determined by her personality. This was related to her long-held inferiority complex. In addition, this was closely related to her affect.

With respect to Rimi’s affect, her pursuit of EFL learning can be understood in terms of both her positive and negative feelings, both of which can facilitate L2 learning. This is clear from the extract below.

Rather than the sense of my awareness that I am not good at speaking English, I think I have an inferiority complex toward both native speakers and those who speak English better than I. (WT2 R, 154–156)

Rimi’s negative feelings towards her English skills urged her to strive to improve her skills, although her preparedness for (or resignation towards) potential negative evaluation seems robust. As she confessed, she might judge a situation in terms of the evaluations of others close to her in a specific domain (i.e., in speaking English, which featured highly in her self-relevance). This means that avoiding such situations directly facilitated her English learning. For Rimi, affect can be translated

into self-regulation, which controlled her behavior in learning and using English in ideal environments.

Developmental Changes in Self-beliefs

When an L2 learner's self-beliefs about their EFL learning change drastically and are replaced with new beliefs, their purpose in learning English may also change, even though their learning environment remains the same. Various experiences can cause changes in self-beliefs, such as an unexpected meeting with good teachers, friends and rivals, environmental changes due to moving to a new place, or the existence of new opportunities. In contrast, original beliefs can be maintained if they have been gradually and steadily constructed as a result of past experience. In this section, with reference to the analysis in the previous sections, we examine developmental changes to his self-beliefs.

Takahiro's Beliefs

This section describes the developmental changes in Takahiro's beliefs about learning English. As an EFL learner in the Japanese context, Takahiro studied English in order to get a good mark on the university entrance exam, but he also acknowledged that English was useful for international communication, as is clear from the extract below. As mentioned in the previous section, this idea originated from his overseas experience in Canada.

Learning English not only is for preparation of the entrance exams but will also help me to communicate with foreigners more deeply. (WT2 H, 258–259)

Personal feelings can also be understood as originating from one's beliefs. The extract below shows that Takahiro was frustrated with his fellow learners and the curriculum, and that he could not set a clear goal for his English study.

When I was a high school student, my goal of studying English was quite obvious. It was so simple. As a university student majoring in engineering, I was told that I would need to study English more and gain a high proficiency. But in fact, we don't need to study English so hard to be an engineer who wants to work in Japan. And also the number of English classes is not so many. In addition, my friends in the same department do [sic] not seem to be interested in English. So, when I entered my university, it was difficult to have a clear goal for studying English. (WT2 H, 262–268)

Takahiro did not find like-minded friends when he became a university student; his classmates did not share his belief that English was useful. As a result, Takahiro did not have a clear reason for studying English; his initial experience at the university caused him to doubt

its necessity for his future.

To change this frustrating situation, Takahiro decided to study abroad. However, while studying abroad, he suffered from another negative feeling: fear of his future achievement, as expressed in the extract below.

Learning English was a preparation for studying abroad. I was really frustrated with my surroundings at that time. So when I decided to go and study abroad, my short-term goal for studying English was really focused. On the other hand, during my time abroad, I had felt somehow impatient. I think it comes from the fact that I spent a lot of my parents' money, and also from a kind of fear that I would not be a good speaker of English after studying abroad when I get [sic] back to Japan. And also, I had started to compare myself to the other foreign students who were surely brushing up their skills. (WT2 H, 271–277)

Takahiro's self-imposed pressure to use his time abroad effectively motivated him to work harder. This was exacerbated by his comparison of his own proficiency to that of his classmates. Takahiro's beliefs about EFL learning were thus updated in this new context, and he became more focused.

Takahiro said that he did not have clear beliefs about English-language learning until his experience as an exchange student. In that context, he realized the need for acquiring speaking skills so that he could enjoy communicating with others. His confidence in English grew as a result of the interaction between different variables, such as his relationship with teachers and his lack of integrated language skills. At the same time, this contradicts his general belief that English is essential as a school subject to be successful in the university entrance examination. Consider now the extract from Takahiro's responses following his return to Japan:

Actually, I just concentrated on finishing classes of my major and job hunting, and I did not study English so much. (WT2 H, 280–281)

Takahiro did not reflect on the advantages his English skills gave him in the employment market, suggesting that he retained the belief that working in Japan as an engineer does not require English skills. He did not continue to build his English skills during his free time; instead, he focused on job hunting. It may be speculated that, upon his return to Japan, Takahiro's beliefs were updated.

Saeko's Beliefs

This section discusses the developmental changes in Saeko's beliefs about learning English at each stage of

high school, university freshman, study abroad, and while job hunting.

Learning English is to prepare for the entrance examination. And it is mostly focused on reading skills. I think I like speaking English more compared to my classmates but I do not want to show it off to them outside my house and local community. And I also have a belief that learning English is to acquire useful tools. It was a contradiction for me to have both beliefs. (WT2 S, 222–226)

As a high school student, she had conflicted feelings about learning English because her educational context required her to study English as preparation for the entrance examinations, although she wanted to speak English more often. Additionally, she believed English would be a useful tool for her future, either professionally or personally. Despite feeling constrained by her environment, and hesitant to show her skills outside the classroom, she recognized that speaking English fluently is a useful skill to have. When she went to university, a change in her environment provoked a change in her beliefs.

... I was released from such contradictory beliefs when I could meet my friends of English study group “ESS” in university who have the same ideas as me on that and started studying English with them. (WT2 S, 229–231)

Unlike junior high and senior high school, I could easily find people who are interested in English and study English with them, which actually encouraged me to study English. (WT2 S, 53, 54)

As a high school student, her beliefs about learning English in order to pass an examination constrained her behavior. When she met friends who shared similar beliefs about learning English, beliefs originating in childhood experience emerged and worked to facilitate her learning behavior.

In an advanced English class, I was, for the first time, encouraged to express myself in English. Through this experience, I could clearly set my goal and come to know what I should learn for exchanging thought in a foreign language. While studying abroad, I thought that is learning English is to acquire tools for cross-cultural communication. (WT2 S, 234–237)

Saeko's beliefs changed once again with another environmental change, and this guided her learning behavior.

Following her experience abroad, Saeko reaffirmed her beliefs and reset her goals. In fact, she spent more time studying English after leaving the EFL context to return

into the ESL context. She formed the book club, and continued participating in the English Speaking Society (ESS) upon her return. Environmental factors, then, were very important for Saeko. Her environment at university provided her with the opportunity to collaborate with like-minded colleagues to improve on her self-assessed weak points.

Since I can speak English better than ordinary Japanese students, I realized again that English is a very useful language for my life.

Job hunting gave Saeko another opportunity to reaffirm her beliefs about learning English and building English proficiency. This relates to her original belief that learning English would provide her with useful skills. This belief is stable, as it remained throughout her education, and so is unlikely to change. Her realization that her English skills provide her with advantages over other students, who may not have such skills, supports this belief. As a result of this recognition, Saeko was able to develop realistic beliefs about using English in her professional life.

Rimi's Beliefs

This section traces the developmental changes in Rimi's beliefs about learning English at each stage, beginning with the extract below regarding the high school phase.

Learning English is just to concentrate on doing grammar exercises, reading some passages, and answering questions on the passages. In fact, the opportunities of speaking English are totally limited. It is surely related to the place I lived in... well, the high school I went to was located in a rural area, but we also had to prepare the entrance exams. (WT2 R, 295–298)

Thus, while she was in high school, Rimi felt a contradiction between several ideas about English learning. She appears to have felt constricted by the rural environment, which did not offer opportunities to speak English, but, like other high school students, she still had to prepare for the entrance examination. This further limited her English use. Her beliefs changed when she entered university, as seen below.

When I entered the university and took English classes for freshmen, I thought that it was different from... that I expected before. I thought that I should study English much harder than I did in high school. And I was a little annoyed like what I should do. I mean, because the goals of the classes seems to be very vague. But after that, when I met some students who were interested in studying English...

they were a member of ESS [English Speaking Society, a club activity], I could have fun talking with them in English. I could be more positive about studying English. And gradually, I wanted to study abroad. (WT2 R, 301–307)

Her behaviors in high school were somewhat constrained by her beliefs, but when she met like-minded friends at university who shared similar feelings and beliefs about EFL learning, her original (and strong) beliefs endorsed by her childhood experiences re-emerged. Environmental factors, then, played an important role for Rimi, just as they did for Takahiro. Encountering other highly motivated students gave Rimi opportunities to build her English skills beyond the classroom. Disappointed by the vague goals of her freshman classes, joining the ESS club helped Rimi form her own goals. Turning to her time studying abroad, Rimi reported as follows:

It is a loser who stays with and hangs out with Japanese students while studying abroad. Also I don't want to stay with those who dropped out from Japan. So I tried to leave them during my stay in New Zealand. (WT2 R, 310–312)

Rimi had very strong feelings about studying abroad. Like Takahiro, she wanted to make the best of her time there. Furthermore, she had a particular disdain for Japanese students who spent their free time with other Japanese students. She recognized the need to spend time with like-minded people in order to improve her English.

During her stay abroad, she reset her goals for learning English, and they became more focused than before, as is clear below.

When I took the TOEIC test, I got very good score even though I have never practiced and prepared for the test. I was very surprised at the results. But in turn, I felt pressure. I mean, I thought that I got this higher score, so I need to perform in English, which the level the test proved. (WT2 R, 315–318)

Thus, Rimi's beliefs were updated as a reaction to the micro features of the environment. However, she felt pressure to perform at the level suggested by her TOEIC test scores. This strict view of her own competence might have emerged from her childhood experiences, but this attitude toward EFL learning helped her to be a successful English learner.

Discussion

How Did L2 Self-concept Form in the Japanese EFL Context?

As was previously described in the literature review, the L2 self-concept is part of one's overall self-concept and develops with L2 learning experience. The core component of the L2 self-concept develops from the interplay between individual self-systems, the socio-cultural context, and the educational environment. More concretely, the participants in this study developed their L2 self-concept through accurate and precise perception of their competency within the interpersonal development of their "can-do" confidence and proficiency and by comparison to other people in their environment. However, the core components of the self-concept are always exposed to the social and educational context with temporary beliefs as responses to the environment. Not all of the temporary beliefs are captured in the core component, but beliefs that match the self-concept can be integrated.

The L2 self-concept can be understood better in terms of the idea that self-beliefs comprise both dynamic and relatively stable dimensions (Mercer, 2011). Particularly, by looking at each learner as a holistic being, different self-histories emerge. One aspect that is clear from this study is that, although learners' past experiences cannot be changed; he or she can be re-interpreted from a different perspective at a later date. This process can be a key to self-understanding as people re-interpret past events based on a matured understanding of oneself and the world. In that sense, L2 learning motivation that is endorsed by experience is not a static variable. In addition, one's personality and cognitive style are stable traits, and affective and cognitive responses toward one's surroundings (both people and environments) are stable in one's mind. Because the participants' EFL competence were gradually improving (and sometimes deteriorating), their self-evaluations of language skills varies over time in the course of their English study. Besides, the participants' beliefs about the nature of EFL learning were shown to be changeable and affected by contextual changes over time when moving from one institution to another. The important point to be noted here is that the L2 self-concept is continually changing simply because it is constructed and adapted in an ongoing manner throughout one's life. As the term "individual differences" in the field of second language acquisition suggests, the factors contributing to the development of the L2 self-concept are different for each individual and include motivation as a result of past experiences, personality, cognitive style, and related variables. Based on this

foundation, L2 learners construct their own self-concept in terms of their assessment of their present ability and the context. In this sense, learners' unique pathways have subtle differences.

The characteristics of the present participants' responses are worth mentioning in that they clearly recognized their current level of English competence. From the present data, it is possible to understand their different styles of learning English. They consciously integrated their four EFL skills, and, in turn, gained information regarding the improvement of their holistic language skills. Thus, beliefs about their abilities influenced their behaviors. The self-concept could affect decisions about the degree to which learners feel able to direct and control their agency in enhancing their L2 learning. Hence, a clear self-evaluation of one's own competence is an important foundation for establishing a self-concept as an EFL learner.

How Did Learning Beliefs Change over the Course of Studying English as a Foreign Language Context?

In terms of the role of beliefs in dynamic systems, at least three significant findings can be extracted from the present findings. First, there was shift from simple to complex development. For example, Takahiro's beliefs regarding the importance of accuracy did not change substantially as he progressed, as can be seen from his reaction to the education he received in Canada. This experience reconfirmed the beliefs about accuracy he had developed in high school. However, his ability to analyze his own competence improved and became more complex, although his experience abroad gave him a negative view of his competence when he compared himself to other foreign students. Rimi's beliefs about her general English ability become more complex as she progressed. Although she had mixed emotions about EFL learning throughout her learning pathway, her inferiority complex deepened as her proficiency improved. Her conflicting beliefs (i.e., wanting to be the best but never believing she had achieved that goal) intensified as she progressed. This was clear after her return from overseas, when her improved TOEIC score caused her anxiety and the feeling that she had to demonstrate that she merited such a score.

The second finding regarding development of beliefs relates to how they changed over time: The participants' original beliefs were updated. Takahiro's beliefs, for instance, were reconfirmed and updated by his experience overseas, although they remained similar

to his original beliefs. By comparing himself to other students in his language school, Takahiro felt inferior to them. However, his view that English would be a useful skill for his life was updated throughout his progress. While in high school, he saw English as both a way to pass a test and to communicate. This belief was updated when he moved to university and found himself with no real goal for learning English, particularly as he believed it was unnecessary for his plans to work as an engineer in Japan. This belief changed again when he decided to study in Canada, which gave him a new purpose for his study. Finally, he returned to Japan and focused on a new goal of finding employment; studying English became less of a priority. As for another example, Rimi's beliefs about environmental factors were also updated and strengthened as she progressed. She believed that her upbringing led her to develop an interest in English, although this interest was not shared by her siblings. This belief did not extend to her educational environment, as she readily accepted that her classmates did not share her interest. However, while studying abroad, she came to feel that it was important to use these environmental factors to her advantage, labeling those who spent their time with other Japanese learners while abroad as "losers". This shows that she believed in creating an environment that was conducive to language learning for herself. She also demonstrated this in her freshman year at university by joining the ESS. Her belief in environmental factors, then, moved from a focus on upbringing to a strong belief in improving one's own learning environment by finding like-minded friends.

The third finding of this study is related to changes in beliefs over time from a broad to a more specific (or focused) nature. For example, Takahiro's view of himself changed to include a more complex analysis of his skills as he progressed. His knowledge about the four skills and his assessment of his proficiency in each, as well as his knowledge of the interconnection between the skills, demonstrated his independence as a learner. He could target his weaknesses and give them specific attention. Unlike Saeko, Rimi focused primarily on her general English proficiency, although she referred to speaking as the weakest of her four skills. Her beliefs did not become more specific in this regard. Whereas her beliefs certainly became stronger, they remained static in terms of focus.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the interview data in this study revealed the nested construction of self-beliefs regarding EFL learning as a complex system. Beliefs, both individual and interrelated, had a strong and dynamic impact on EFL learning behaviors. Beliefs are interconnected and the links are weighted differently as a result of one's individual experience. Thus, by viewing an individual EFL learner as a holistic being, the L2 self-concept can be revealed. For the current participant, beliefs about EFL learning were formed in childhood or were affected by early intercultural experiences. Such beliefs, formed in early life, are relatively resistant to change and represent a limited number of systems. These systems, however, may give rise to an unlimited number of self-concepts and behaviors (i.e., individual differences). In the Japanese EFL context, it may be that learners' beliefs are skewed during the development of these systems by the emphasis on studying English purely for the purposes of entrance examinations, rather than as a tool for communication. The present findings might suggest that, in successful EFL learners, the original core beliefs (i.e., those stemming from childhood or past experience) can overcome the dynamic beliefs (i.e., those stemming from formal education experience). By the time such learners complete their formal education, they demonstrate autonomy in their learning, and their unique trajectories become clearer. As Dörnyei (2014) stated, the system itself is not complex, but the learner's behaviors are unpredictable because they are the result of a highly complex interaction between internal and contextual variables. As for the limitations of the present study, untangling the participant's web of beliefs is beyond its scope, and further study is required to understand the full extent of an individual's beliefs, including a variety of beliefs not covered by this paper.

Notes & Acknowledgment

Drafts were presented at the BAAL2013, the International Conference on Motivational Dynamics and Second Language Acquisition in 2014, and SLRF2016. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 25350360.

References

- Barcelos, A.M.F. (2003). Researching beliefs about SLA: a critical review. In: Kalaja, P., Barcelos, A.M.F. (Eds.), *Beliefs about SLA: New Research Approaches*. Kluwer Academic Press, Dordrecht, pp. 7-34.
- Cutrone, P. (2010). Helping Japanese ESL/EFL Learners Overcome Difficulties in Intercultural Communication. *Journal of the Faculty of Global Communication, University of Nagasaki, 11*, 11-22.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2003). Attitudes, orientations, and motivations in language learning: Advances in theory, research, and applications. *Language Learning, 53*(S1), 3-32. doi: 10.1111/1467-9922.53222
- Dörnyei, Z. (2014). Researching complex dynamic systems: 'Retrospective qualitative modelling' in the language classroom. *Language Teaching, 47*(01), 80-91.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Chen, L. (2013). Identifying learner archetypes and signature dynamics in the L2 classroom: A dynamic systems perspective. Paper presented at the AAAL2013, Dallas, TX.
- Epstein, S. (1973). The self-concept revisited: Or a theory of a theory. *American psychologist, 28*(5), 404.
- Gibbons, F. X. (1986). Social comparison and depression: Company's effect on misery. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*(1), 140.
- Loftus, E. F., & Marburger, W. (1983). Since the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, has anyone beaten you up? Improving the accuracy of retrospective reports with land mark events. *Memory & Cognition, 11*(2), 114-120. doi: 10.3758/BF03213465
- Markus, H., & Wurf, E. (1987). The dynamic self-concept: A social psychological perspective. *Annual review of psychology, 38*(1), 299-337.
- Matsuda, S., & Gobel, P. (2004). Anxiety and predictors of performance in the foreign language classroom. *System, 32*(1), 21-36. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2003.08.002
- Mercer, S. (2011). *Towards an understanding of language learner self-concept*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- Papi, M., & Teimouri, Y. (2014). Language Learner Motivational Types: A cluster analysis study. *Language Learning, 64*(3), 493-525. doi: 10.1111/lang.12065
- Rimissman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.
- Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect on foreign language learning: A review of the anxiety research. *Language Learning, 28*(1), 129-142. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-1770.1978.tb00309.x
- Smith, G. D. (2012). "Kit Drummers and the Snowball Self: A socio-cultural-psychological perspective on identity and learning realisation", Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
- Sudman, S., & Bradburn, N. M. (1973). Effects of time and memory factors on response in surveys. *Journal of the American Statistical Association, 68*(344), 805-815.
- Suls, J. E., & Wills, T. A. E. (1991). *Social comparison: about SLA: New Research Approaches*. Kluwer Academic Press, Dordrecht, pp. 7-34.

Contemporary theory and research. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 21, 181-228.