L2 Selves Experienced among Sri Lankan Learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the L2 Selves of Sri Lankan JFL learners to find out the affecting motivational factors that shape their L2 Selves. The L2 Self comprises of an Ideal L2 Self: a future image of a proficient language user achieving career and educational goals, and an Ought to L2 Self: an embodiment of expectations of significant others and avoidance of negative outcomes. The sample for this research consisted of 19 JFL learners studying Japanese as a main subject/major for their Bachelor of Arts degree in two state universities in Sri Lanka and the technique adopted was a semi-structured interview. A deductive content analysis of the interview data yielded 8 codes. A further analysis of data revealed that learner JFL self-concept consists of a strong Ideal and a Feared L2 Self. A deeper analysis of the social, cultural and geopolitical factors affecting the JFL learner self-concept showed that they can be categorised under causal and teleological dimensions which seemed to play salient roles in shaping the learner L2 self-concept. Causal dimension consisted of factors pertaining to the learning experience: positive attitudes towards Japan, its people and culture, and intrinsic interest in the language and positive attitudes towards learning. Teleological dimension comprised of various types of goals i.e., instrumental/incentive goals connected with career and education, and living in Japan. Furthermore, learner self-reports showed that they are very enthusiastic in learning, having a pro-active, self-regulatory approach to learning Japanese, and the sense of failure and success influence their L2 Selves.

Keywords: Sri Lankan learners of JFL, L2 Motivational Self System, learner self-concept, L2 Selves, qualitative method

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Motivation which is considered an Individual Difference (ID) variable has been a much researched area in the literature on education and psychology and the motivation to learn a second language (L2) is an influential and a newly emerging

research area in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2001:3) contend that motivation concerns what moves a person to make certain choices, to expend effort and persist in action. Therefore, motivation moves the individual forward in a particular action. This scenario is no different when it comes to learning an L2. Motivation makes a qualitative difference in the learning experience where high levels of motivation positively correlate with the success of learning an L2. However, learning of a language is a complex and a qualitatively different process due to its socio-cultural nature (Dörnyei, 2005) that it entails the adoption of not only the language of the target community but also their cultural behaviours and ways of being. In the mainstream understanding of psychology, human motivation is currently being connected with the human core rather than being considered an externally regulated phenomenon. Similarly, learning an L2 is connected with one's personal core; identity where the learner develops a bicultural and sometimes a multicultural identity when learning an L2. Recent theorising in the field of SLA motivation shows that learner motivation to learn an L2 can be explained effectively through the self-concept of that learner (Dörnyei, 2005). In this sense, motivation to learn an L2 is the effort expended to reduce the discrepancy between the current self and the Ideal/Ought to self.

Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) has a comparatively longer history when compared with other foreign languages within the Sri Lankan education system. Since its introduction as early as in 1967, it has developed in many aspects. A total of 8,454 JFL learners studying in 77 institutions under 125 teachers are recorded in the latest survey conducted by the Japan Foundation (JF, 2018). It is offered as a subject as early as the GCE Ordinary Level examination and the GCE Advanced Level examination, a phenomenon quite unique in the South Asian region. Several universities offer Bachelor of Arts and honours degrees, diploma and certificate courses[1]. However, in the local context, despite the popularity, Japanese does not hold a valued position in the Sri Lankan society in comparison to English; the link language and the language of upward mobility. It is only a foreign language as opposed to English which is considered a second language. Moreover, in a global context, Japanese cannot be considered a 'lingua-franca', being spoken in a limited geographical repertoire; Japan. While English is considered a basic skill (Graddol, 2006) in the highly fluid, modernised world, it is not an absolute requirement to learn Japanese. Also, there are not enough Japanese-related career opportunities in Sri Lanka (JF, 2009, 2012) and higher education is not an easily accessible or available

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[1] These universities are namely University of Kelaniya, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Peradeniya University and Moratuwa University.

option given the high cost of tuition fees and cost of living in Japan. In such a scenario, what moves learners to choose Japanese and continue learning the language?

The focus of this paper is on discerning the motivations of JFL learners in Sri Lanka and analysing them in a self-framework, drawing its theoretical background from the Second Language Motivational Self System (L2 MSS) put forward by Dörnyei, (2005). The L2 MSS is a radical transformation of the theoretical base posited by the Social Psychological perspective of L2 motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1959), which has been the dominant theory in L2 motivation research for more than five decades (Dörnyei, 2009). Through this new conceptual framework, motivation is explained in terms of an internal process of identification with the person's self-concept: the notion and attitude a person would have about him/herself. What kind of self-concept/s do JFL learners of Sri Lanka have? What types of L2 selves do they have and what are the factors that help shape their L2 selves? This study aims to explore the composition of the L2 Selves of Sri Lankan JFL learners and consider affecting motivational factors that shape their L2 Selves in order to find answers to the above questions.

1.2 Studies on Motivation and Second Language Motivational Self System

Dörnyei (2005) reformulated L2 motivation within a self-framework by incorporating the theory of Possible Selves by Markus & Nurius (1986): a significant area of research in psychology. It is woven around the individual's ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986) referring to a future self-state that guides the individual for action. The Possible Selves theory distinguishes between 3 main types of possible selves: (1) 'ideal selves that we would very much like to become', (2) 'selves that we could become' (which is the default case), and (3) 'selves we are afraid of becoming' (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954).

Furthermore, Self-Discrepancy Theory put forward by Higgins (1987, 1996) particularly mentions 2 concepts that played a central role in developing the L2 MSS. They are the 'ideal self': a self that we would ideally like to possess comprising of wishes, hopes and aspirations and the 'ought self': a self that one believes one ought to possess, which is the representation of someone else's sense of duties, obligations or responsibilities. In summary, the ideal self could be interpreted as the individual's own vision for himself whereas the ought self embodies someone else's vision for the individual (Dörnyei, 2005). In addition, the Self-Discrepancy Theory posits that the desire of an individual to reduce the discrepancy between his actual current self

and the future projected self (represented by the ideal/ought selves) can be identified as motivation.

The L2 MSS comprises of the following components

1) Ideal L2 Self- L2 specific dimension of the 'ideal self': if the ideal self we would aspire to reach speaks an L2, we would like to reduce the discrepancy between our current actual self and the future ideal self. In such an instance the ideal self will act as a strong motivational force. Traditional integrative and internalised instrumental motives would fall into this category. It entails the L2 learner's own vision, hopes, wishes and aspirations to become a competent L2 user. For instance, a favourable disposition and a sincere liking towards the Japanese people, Japanese language, Japan and its culture, desire to secure Japanese-related employment both locally and in Japan, aspiration to proceed for higher education and live in Japan would fall into this category.

2) Ought-to L2 Self- L2 specific dimension of the ought self: this embodies the aspirations one ought to possess in order to comply with the expectations of others and to avoid negative outcomes. External instrumental motives would fall into this category entailing someone else's expectations or vision for the L2 learner. For instance, to study Japanese studiously in order not to fail exams or not to disappoint parents could be categorised in this group.

3) L2 Learning Experience- situated, 'executive' motives relating to the immediate learning environment and learning experience of the L2 learner constitutes this component. Specifically, in this dimension, aspects related to the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group and the experience of success would come into play. In line with Dörnyei's (2005) contention, this component of the L2 MSS is conceptualised in a different level from the two self-guides. For instance, the attitudes towards the Japanese language teacher and the learning process, notions and satisfaction, ease and difficulty of the Japanese language-curriculum, peer support would come into play in this category.

Several empirical studies have supplied statistical evidence to support the credibility of L2 MSS in explaining learner motivation effectively (Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos et al., 2011; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009) focusing on English learners in diverse settings (Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Japan, China & Iran). A number of studies have attempted to design theoretical or empirical models relating to the theory, exploring the roles of the constituent components of the L2 MSS and various other variables (Kim, 2009, Lyons, 2009, MacIntyre et. al., 2009, Segalowitz et. al., 2009, Ushioda, 2009).

2. Objectives

Although many studies have been conducted in several settings, this study is unique in the following aspects. (1) Most studies are concerned with English as a Second Language/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners and a very few have taken JSL/JFL students into consideration in this new paradigm. (2) And especially Sri Lankan learners of JFL have barely been the object of an extensive study on L2 learners. Existing studies focusing on Sri Lankan learners of JFL have so far been based on the classical Social Psychological perspective of L2 motivation by Gardener & Lambert (1959). (3) Replication in different settings is needed as cross cultural differences can exert a strong influence in the motivational structure of language learners (Taguchi et al, 2009). (4) Moreover, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) have shown cross cultural variation as a future research direction in L2 MSS research. (5) Furthermore, research related to the L2 MSS is largely dominated by a quantitative paradigm (i.e., Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos et al., 2011; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009) whereas a very few have been conducted using a qualitative framework (i.e., Kim, 2009, Lamb, 2009, Ushioda, 2009). Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative approach in its analysis since it is deemed best in understanding the underlying workings of student motivation in a self-perspective. Thus, the objective of this study is to bridge the gap in the literature by exploring the self-concept and L2 Selves that could be seen among Sri Lankan JFL learners and discern the affecting factors that construct their L2 Selves.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study is a part of an earlier project where the interplay of various components shaping the motivation to learn JFL in Sri Lanka was taken into consideration [2].

19 participants from the University of Kelaniya and Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, where Japanese is taught as a main subject/major participated in the study during the period of October to November 2014 (refer Table 3.1.1 for a summary of attributes of the interview participants). Adopting a semi-structured interview technique, the author audio-taped the self-reports of participants with their consent, which were subsequently transcribed. The medium utilised was Sinhala which is the native language of all 19 participants. The interview comprised of questions on several sections such as instrumentality, attitudes towards Japan, its people and

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[2] The data was collected as a part of my PhD research project (de Silva, 2015) in 2014. However, de Silva (2015) is based only on quantitative data collected as a part of the project.

culture and interest and positive attitudes to learning, self-concept (ideal self, ought to self and feared self), and motivated learning behaviour. The author then analysed the transcribed data adopting a deductive content analysis method searching for common themes which were later developed into several codes. The codification process was repeated until it was deemed that the codes sufficiently represented the data collected.

Table 3.1 Attributes of Interview Participants

	Number of Participants	Average Age	Learning Experience (years)
University of Kelaniya	10	22.05	5.54
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka	09	22.37	5.46
Total	19		
Average		22.21	5.5

4. Results

The deductive content analysis process yielded 8 codes which provide a collective picture of the interview data and summarises the qualitative descriptions by participants regarding the motivational components that shape their JFL self-concept. They are (a) instrumental/incentive goals, (b) integrative/intrinsic goals, (c) transition of goals (from intrinsic to extrinsic), (d) motivated learning behaviour (self-regulatory), (e) positive attitudes, (f) negative attitudes, (g) multiple temporary selves, and (h) temporal evolution of the self-concept. Table 4.1 provides a classification of motivational components that were found in the participants' self-report data.

Table 4.1 Classificaiton of Motivational Components

(a) Instrumental/incentive goals		(b) Integrative/intrinsic goals	
future utility of learning Japanese	(4)	need to communicate with Japanese people (1)	
career-related goals	(6)		
higher education in Japan	(1)		
living in Japan	(1)		
sucure entrance to university	(1)		
(c) Transition of goals (from intrinsic to extrinsic)		**(d) Motivated learning behavior**	
transition from intrinsic to extrinsic	(1)	extra effort expended (self-regulatory)	(18)
(e) Positive attitudes		**(f) Negative attitudes**	
Japan is an economically and socially developed country	(11)	Japanese people are not the same from inside	(4)
liking towards Japan, its people and culture	(4)	difficulty of coping up with the day to day workload	(1)
interest in the Japanese language and learning the language	(12)		
best among the all the subjects learnt	(4)		
desire to learn Japanese further	(6)		
learning Japanese goes beyond learning only the language, it's acquiring a whole way of life	(4)		
similarity with mother tongue	(4)		
teacher supports the learning process	(4)		
(g) Multiple temporary selves		**(h) Temporal evolution of the self-concept**	
ideal self guides	(13)	experiences at univeristy	(2)
feared self guides	(5)	experineces in Japan	(2)

5. Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed in relation to the social context of Sri Lanka taking into consideration the economic, social, cultural and geopolitical factors that shape JFL learner motivational self-concept.

The self-concept of JFL learners in this sample was multifaceted. They seemed to possess multiple temporary selves. 13 leaners clearly mentioned about having an Ideal L2 Self that guides them in the learning process while others made remarks

about having only a particular future state connected with learning Japanese[3]. The interesting fact is that, 5 learners among them mentioned about a coexisting Feared Self they want to avoid in achieving the goals in the learning process. Ideal Self-guides clearly embodied the future career and education-related, instrumental motives such as 'I see myself as a teacher of Japanese, a translator of Japanese, a tour company proprietor facilitating tourists including the Japanese' and 'I want to be employed in the diplomatic service'. Feared selves included a self that would fail semester exams, a self that would score low grades and subsequently lose the class distinction, a self that would have to repeat exams and a self that is unable to graduate. These fears were directly related to a larger entity where learners were afraid of jeopardising their future life which is firmly grounded on the success of learning Japanese. This could be explained in considering the following contention by Dörnyei (2005), who posits that the ideal self will have maximal motivational capacity when it is offset with a feared self in the same domain. Therefore, it could be assumed that having a Feared L2 Self in the same domain moves these JFL learners to expend more effort to achieve the ideal self they aspire for in learning Japanese. Ought to L2 Self which embodies the hopes and aspirations of significant others (such as parents, relatives and siblings) and social obligations not emerging as a significant factor is noteworthy in a context where students are considerably dependent on significant others and are influenced by them.

Further analysis of the motivational factors that help shape learner JFL self-concept, showed that they would fall into the classification by Ushioda (2001:117). In line with this categorization, factors in each language learner's motivational configuration could be classified into 2 dimensions: "causal" (deriving from the continuum of L2 learning and L2–related experience to date) and "teleological" (directed towards short-term or long-term goals and future perspectives).

Causal dimension mainly consists of 2 factors. First, factors pertaining to the learning experience: attitudes towards Japan, the Japanese people, Japanese culture and lifestyle, interest in the language and the intrinsic desire to learn the language all contribute to shaping learner motivational self-concept. Almost all the learners had a positive attitude towards Japan, its culture and people except for a few (5 learners) who had co-existent negative and/or mixed attitudes. Self-reports such as 'Japan is an economically and socially developed country' and 'liking towards Japan, its people and culture' showcase evidence for the above contention. There are several reasons for the learners to have such positive attitudes. (1) This positive attitude is

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[3] This may be due to the lack of understanding about the core meaning of 'self-concept'.

based on the friendly relations between Sri Lanka and Japan as Japan has been one of the principal sources of economic support to the country. (2) The geopolitical significance of Japan as an economic power and a leading member in the developed world could be pointed out as another factor. Japan's geographical and emotional proximity to Sri Lanka (as it is a fellow Asian country) and exemplary position as an Asian country which achieved developmental goals in a comparatively short time would have contributed for learners to have an inspirational attitude towards Japan where they would consider Japan as a role model. In such a context, being able to secure opportunities for higher education in Japan is highly anticipated and desired which in turn would be a gateway to working and living in Japan. This idea has higher prospects for Japanese learners as Japan is a monolingual country functioning mainly in Japanese. Aspirations and hopes of studying, working and living in a foreign country, especially a developed one are considered extremely promising and a high sense of individual superiority is witnessed generally in the society as opposed to the life in their own country. Studying, working and/or living in a foreign country are considered one's key for economic stability, better and luxurious life standards. Also, the general notion regarding the lack of employment opportunities for Arts graduates could be one reason for them to opt for more financially lucrative subjects like Japanese.

Second factor constituting the causal dimension: intrinsic interest in the Japanese language and positive attitude towards learning is supported by the role played by the teacher and linguistic similarities between Japanese and the Sinhala languages[4]. For most of the JFL learners in this sample teacher is an extremely important factor, an inspirational presence and a role model as they provide first-hand experience and guidance in the learning process. The fact that the subject matter is a foreign language in a FL context (as opposed to other subjects), where contact with the target community is sparse and the prestigious and authoritarian position a teacher holds in the Sri Lankan society all contribute in constructing this kind of an image. They are 'personalized models of ideal selves' (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009: 152), they become the bridge between the learners and the target language , culture and society by relating and introducing their own experiences in Japan and learning Japanese, enabling students who have not had first-hand experience in Japan (which is the majority)[5] to construct a mental image of the country, people and culture. Teachers were reported efficient and methodical as they might have been under the influence

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[4] Sinhala is one of the 3 official languages in Sri Lanka with a majority (87%) speaking the language. Sinhala is the mother tongue of all 19 participants of this interview survey.
[5] An average of 5-10 students get the opportunity to study in Japan on scholarships on short (2 weeks or more) and long term (1year) programs.

of the Japanese culture where being methodical is an inherent cultural trait. However, negative attitudes towards the Japanese people and an overload of coursework were also reported by a few. These could be attributed to individual experiences of difficulty faced by learners at various learning situations. Similarity in the sentence structure between Sinhala and Japanese and consequent notions of Japanese being easy to acquire when compared to languages which share similarities with the English language also is a motivating factor for students to consider learning and continuing to learn the language. Moreover, less anxiety and confidence in practicing and using the language, less fear in making mistakes support a positive attitude to learning.

The teleological dimension mainly comprises of various types of goals that shape the motivational self-concept of the learners. According to Dörnyei (2005), traditional integrative motives and internalised instrumental motives constitute the Ideal L2 Self. Instrumentalities of a promotion focus together constituted the Ideal L2 Self in much of the literature (Kormos, 2009; Kormos et al., 2011; Ryan, 2009). However, in this sample, the role of instrumental/incentive goals deemed more salient when compared to that of integrative/intrinsic goals in shaping learner motivational self-concept as integrative/intrinsic goals are hardly discernible in the learner motivational profiles. This could be explained when considering the social context and thought structures of the Sri Lankan society. Despite the fact that career-related goals don't typically emerge even in the tertiary level for FL learners (Dörnyei, 1990), career goals of Sri Lankan learners of JFL are clearly defined at the tertiary level. They are acutely aware of the future utility of learning Japanese. Career-related goals both local and international (mostly aspiration to be a teacher, translator, employed in the diplomatic service, international relations sector where social recognition is relatively high), higher education in Japan and living in Japan are among the most pursued goals in this learner sample. Therefore, education is the sole means to upward mobility when it comes to children coming from middle to low income family backgrounds. Furthermore, rather than learning other subjects in the Arts/Humanities stream, learning a FL would be an added advantage which would definitely enhance their chances of securing employment both locally and internationally[6].

Also, as learners of a FL (Japanese) they develop a 'language ego' (Guirora & Acton, 1979: 199) where they feel like a different person speaking a different language and

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[6] The number of learners of a FL is relatively few when compared to other subjects (i.e., economics, logic, history, Buddhist culture etc., Department of Examinations, 2011) making them a unique group.

acting differently as well. Statements like 'learning Japanese goes beyond learning only the language, it's acquiring a whole way of life' shows that Japanese language and learner identity are hardly separable and that their self undergoes change (Csizér & Kormos, 2009) through the learning experience they acquire. This is also embodied in their longing to become 'different' from others, especially the Arts graduates towards whom the social attitudes are not very positive.

Learner goals seem to be not static but constantly evolving. Existing literature shows that when learners gain more learning experience, more intrinsic goals are derived and extrinsic goals translate into intrinsic goals (Ushioda, 2001). Yet, in this sample, learner goals are translated from intrinsic to extrinsic. This could also be attributed to the above thinking pattern in the Sri Lankan society where education is the sole key to a future career and life success attaching more importance to utilitarian values in learning a FL.

Apart from the causal and teleological dimensions, student self-reports showed that learners were extremely motivated to learn and this learning was self-regulated rather than being externally regulated. They were satisfied with the curriculum offered and were willing to have more lessons in order to improve their skills in the language displaying a proactive and self-regulated approach to learning. Apart from regular lessons in the university, they engaged themselves in other language activities on their own such as watching movies and animation, listening to songs on the internet and practising Kanji characters etc. Moreover, sense of success and failure also is a salient factor in the motivational profiles of JFL leaners. The learners already possess a certain degree of a sense of achievement when entering the university as undergraduates since only a few are able to secure the chance of entering a national university. This sense of achievement is further heightened by obtaining high examination scores and especially the few students who received the chance of studying in Japan on scholarships[7] related that scoring high marks motivated them to learn the language more keenly consequently leading to securing high marks. Motivation affects success positively whereas achievement can have a reverse effect on motivation on the other hand having a cyclical effect.

1. Conclusion

In summary, this qualitative study attempted in unveiling the motivational undercurrents that shape JFL learner self-concept. Deductive content analysis of

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[7] Obtaining a scholarship itself has to do with JFL achievement as only learners who score high marks at the selection examination will secure the scholarship to study in Japan.

interview data yielded 8 codes. Deeper analysis of factors affecting learner self-concept revealed that the self-concept of Sri Lankan learners of JFL consists of a strong Ideal L2 Self and a Feared L2 Self in the same domain. Furthermore, quite contrary to the author's expectations Ought to L2 Self which is the embodiment of influence from significant others and obligations towards them did not emerge as a salient constituent factor. These motivational constituents shaping up their self-concept included teleological and causal dimensions where certain attitudes and goal structures backed by social, geopolitical considerations come into play.

One limitation of this study was the small sample size. Therefore, it is worthy to work with elaborate self-reports of a larger student sample to unravel the finer undercurrents of learner self-concept. Future research examining subtle undercurrents affecting the learner self-concept both during study and after terminating study would reveal how the JFL self-concept changes over time.

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