

Motivational Factors and Fluctuations of Japanese EFL Students

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of survey-based research investigating motivational traits and changes that Japanese learners of English demonstrate after they begin studying English at school. In his study of university students and their language learning, Sawyer (2007) found that (a) motivation is high at the beginning of junior high school, but then decreases; (b) motivation decreases from the first to second year in senior high school, but increases in the third year; and (c) motivation is high immediately before the university entrance exams, but then decreases after entry to university. Sawyer maintained that the factors which influence these changes are teachers' influence at junior high school level, and peers' influence at high school and university.

The present study mirrors Sawyer's work. A large number of motivation studies have been conducted in the ESL context, but there has been limited research on longitudinal motivational changes. In order to examine such changes, the researcher focused on a group of English major students, using data from a revised version of Sawyer's (2007) instrument.

The results show that the motivational fluctuations as reported by Sawyer (2007) were statistically significant and that the participants were motivated

or demotivated in similar ways, except at the university level. However, the findings indicate that at the junior high school level, teachers' influence was one of the strongest motivating or demotivating factors, and the same can be claimed about "peer influence" or "group influence" at the senior high school and university levels.

Introduction

Motivation is one of the key issues at the secondary and university education levels in Japan. This is attested by the fact that major nationwide newspapers (e.g., *The Asahi Shinbun* and *The Yomiuri Shinbun*) have a column reporting on students' motivation for studying, especially English. These columns focus on problems and techniques of sparking students' motivation. In addition, the importance of motivation is testified by the fact that workshops organized by boards of education and academic conferences never fail to include presentations on motivating students' learning of English.

More importantly, it is common knowledge among high school teachers in Japan that although at the onset of junior high and senior high school, students' motivation for learning English is generally high, they gradually lose their motivation by the end of the first year. Occasionally, students' motivation improves in the third year. This motivational fall has been well-documented by practicing teachers (personal communication with many teachers). In fact, based on my personal 13-year-experience at a prestigious high school, this fluctuation in motivation occurred in several subjects such as English, mathematics, and Japanese. The phenomenon was often discussed by my colleagues.

However, declining motivation has not always been viewed negatively because at academic schools, students start to get involved in intensive studies of academic subjects and preparation for university entrance exams. As a result, students need some “breaks” when they can recharge their batteries during their three-year course of high school studies (personal communications with Hara, 2004). Some teachers consider the declining motivation as inevitable and that it is not a serious problem. In fact, when preparation for the university entrance exams intensifies at the beginning of the third year, students’ motivation recovers and peaks (personal communications with Otake, 1995). Teachers at these academic schools know that most of the students can self-regulate their learning or can be guided by teachers and/or classmates to motivate themselves to pursue their goals.

On the other hand, this may not be the case with junior high school students. Teachers are generally worried about the fall in student motivation for learning English after they start studying English in the first year. At the onset of their English study, their preference or motivation for the subject is highest among the five major subjects, i.e., English, Japanese, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. However, when they reach the second year, student interest in English declines (MEXT, 2003). Two possible explanations are that the grammar becomes complicated in the second year (Sakai, 2005) and students do not like the way the teachers teach (Sawyer, 2007). Many junior high school teachers seek ideas to improve student motivation for studying English. For instance, teachers at the Nagano English Teachers’ seminars (2006) stated that high school entrance exams did help intermediate to highly proficient students’ motivation. However,

there is generally no increase in motivation among the less proficient students.

These anecdotes, intuitions and data show that motivation is not static, but dynamic (Dörnyei, 2001). Therefore, it is important not only to spark students' motivation but also to maintain it over the long term so that they can attain their learning goals. Motivation fluctuates over time (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998; Irie, 2003; Sawyer, 2007). It requires time as learners go through complex stages of learning from forming a learning goal, instigating motivation for action and maintaining it until their goal is achieved (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998). To achieve adequate levels of English proficiency, motivation is needed for the intensive study (Onoda, 2005).

In an investigation of student motivation, Sawyer (2007) conducted a survey-based research on the fluctuations of students' motivation for learning English from the beginning of the first year at the junior high school to the third year at the university. In general, the results seem to reflect the intuitions of practicing teachers. However, there are different results reported by other researchers (e.g., Nakata, 2003). Therefore, in order to confirm Sawyer's findings, the researcher conducted a replication study to examine how the motivation of Japanese students changes over the years and possible reasons for these changes.

Whether the variation in L2 motivation is inevitable or not, as senior high school teachers perceive, these fluctuations seem to support the theory that motivation is not static but dynamic. It changes across the course of student learning as explicated in the process model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998). The model indicates various stages in motivation, such as (1) the preactional phase, composed of goal setting, intention

formation, and the initiation of intention enactment; (2) the actional phase, with three stages: subtask generation and implementation, appraisal and action control, and; (3) the post actional phase, which includes forming causal attributions, elaborating standards and strategies, and further planning (Dörnyei, 2001). Their claim is in line with Ushioda's (1996) conceptualization of L2 motivation at the college undergraduate level, in that motivation is dynamic and is subject to students' learning experiences, whether positive or negative, and emotions which occur while learning.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, several studies have been conducted on changes of motivation among Japanese learners. Regarding the junior high school level, a number of studies (e.g., Koizumi & Kai, 1992) reported that students' motivation for studying English decreases soon after the initiation of their study in the first year. Nakata (2001) has found that soon after they start learning English in the first year, Japanese students diverge into roughly two groups, a highly motivated and highly proficient group compared with a poorly motivated and limited proficient group. Sawyer (2007) claimed that students' motivation is high at the onset of their study at junior high school, but then decreases, forming "a U-shaped curve" of fluctuations in motivation. At the senior high school and university levels, several researchers claim that motivation declines from the first to second year in senior high school, but increases in the third year (Matsukawa & Tachibana, 1996; Sawyer, 2007), forming "a J-shaped curve." At the university level, not many studies have been conducted, but Hayashi (2005) found that motivation is ultimately high immediately before the university entrance exams, but then decreases after entry to university. These results have been supported by Sawyer (2007).

Sawyer (2007) also confirmed previous studies' findings regarding major influencing factors: teachers' influence for junior high school students, and peer influence for high school and university students. These findings are generally in line with previous research (Dörnyei, 2001; Irie, 2005; Matsubara, 2004).

Teachers' influence is thought to be one of the most important factors that shape students' motivation for learning. They "affect the motivational quality of the learning process by providing mentoring, guidance, nurturance, support setting" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.21). In addition, teachers function as an "emotional amplifier of the group whose appeals and examples are crucial for mobilising the group" (Jesuino, 1996, p.115). Dörnyei (2001) maintains that the four important effects that teachers have on students' motivation are: personal characteristics, teacher immediacy, active motivational socialising behaviour and classroom management. All of these factors motivate or demotivate students for language learning. In the Japanese EFL contexts, the teachers' influence is often reported as a motivating or demotivating factor. Irie (2005), based on her research on junior high school students, found that one of the teachers in her study maintained her students' motivation for a long time. At the senior high school level, Onoda's study (1995) indicated that students' motivation was highly influenced by teachers' personalities, enthusiasm, teaching techniques and English proficiency. In fact, several students said in their comments referring to their ideal teacher: "Although his (the teacher in question) expectations of us were demanding, I understand his teaching was so well-planned that it enabled us to be intellectually stimulated and acquire a high proficiency, which I think also could help us to get into

good universities” (Onoda, 1995, p.5). On the other hand, some students criticized an English teacher, who was considered to be unpopular among students: “We became apathetic about and lost interest in learning English because he just read prepared explanations and we did not feel any passion in his approach to teaching” (Onoda, 1995, p.6). Thus, as Sawyer’s study (2007) indicates, teachers’ influence emerged as one of the important factors that affect students’ motivation at secondary school level.

More importantly, teachers are leaders in a classroom. It could be said that the classroom climate largely depends on the teacher’s personality, teaching skills and English proficiency. Teachers are group leaders in the classroom and play an important role in facilitating group norms. “...Group norms...regarding learning effect, efficiency and quality substantially enhance or decrease the students’ academic goal striving, work morale and learning achievement” (Dörnyei, 2001). One of the crucial elements of group dynamics is group cohesiveness (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003), which in turn is a strong motivation facilitator and predictor of proficiency (Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). The importance of group dynamics has been shown in Japanese EFL contexts. Matsubara (2004) found that low proficiency students had closer relationships with each other and the teacher than high proficiency students, and that these relationships motivated their studies. In Sawyer’s study (2007), peer relationship was influential on students’ motivation at the high school and university levels.

These findings are intriguing and intuitively appealing to practicing teachers. However, it raises the question why there are some differences in motivational fluctuations among individuals at different times. There is a need for a detailed study of motivation, such as a replication of Sawyer’s

investigation.

Research Questions:

Since this is a replication study of Sawyer's study (2007), the same hypotheses are examined by both quantitative and qualitative methods.

1. How do motivational tendencies of Japanese instructed learners of English fluctuate over time?
2. What salient individual differences among learners emerge?
3. What are the frequently recalled reasons for fluctuations in motivation?

Method

Participants

The participants were 182 first-, second- and third-year English majors (145 females and 37 males) at a medium-sized university in eastern Japan. Some of the students were in the researcher's English course and others were in other teachers' English courses in the academic year of 2007. The proficiency levels ranged from post-intermediate to pre-advanced levels as can be seen in Table 1. Unlike Sawyer's study (2007) where the participants were third-year non-English major students, those in the present study are all English majors and include first to third-year students. These students are considered to be average students by the university criteria, but their TOEIC scores may give the impression that they are post-intermediate level students and more proficient than the participants in Sawyer's study (2007), whose average paper-based TOEFL score was 460.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the TOEIC Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
TOEIC	182	521	880	673.51	102.26

Instrument

A revised version (see Appendix) of “My English Learning Motivation History” (Sawyer, 2007) was used to elicit data from students. The original instrument is “a graphic representation of recalled changes in level of motivation at 24 points from the onset of school English learning until the present” (p.74). In his instrument, levels of motivation could be indicated from Very Low to Very High by drawing a continuous line from April in the first year of junior high school to March in the third year of university.

However, given the fact that participants in the present study range from the first to third year, the instrument could be used to collect data up to September in the first year for first-year students. To simplify the data analysis, the data were collected at three times a year, that is, in April, September and March. Although the present study is a replication study of Sawyer’s study (2007), there are differences in the data collection and analysis.

Finally, it is important to note that a retrospective, longitudinal data collection method has problems. For instance, one could claim that it is doubtful whether participants could recall past events accurately or not, thereby rendering the analysis untrustworthy. However, Hayashi (2005), although admitting the shortcoming of the method, stresses acceptable levels of validity and reliability of retrospective studies, by citing Featherman’s

analyses (1980) of validation studies, including longitudinal retrospective studies. In addition, as pointed out by Hayashi (2005), a retrospective design has a number of advantages, such as using the same frame of reference across time points in interpreting questions. Given the fact that it is extremely difficult to keep track of a large number of participants for a long time, the use of a retrospective approach in the present study seems to be a reasonable compromise.

Procedures

Students were given a revised version (see Appendix) of “My English Learning Motivation History” (Sawyer, 2007), written in Japanese, after the beginning of the second term in 2007. They were asked to indicate their motivation level and possible reasons for this after the researcher’s explanation of the study. The researcher was there to ensure that all the participants answered the questions and to deal with queries. It took 20 minutes to complete the instrument. The sheets were handed in to the researcher after an individual student after each student completed the task.

Analysis

The same procedures as used by Sawyer (2007) were applied to the data. The quantitative data were entered into SPSS 11.5 (2005) and a range of descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. The qualitative data, such as comments explaining possible causes for motivational fluctuations, were subjected to a content analysis with no predetermined categories. For the present paper, only the main preliminary results are reported.

Results

Using data from the questionnaire, a repeated measures ANOVA was used to analyze variations in the motivational levels at 20 time points in order to investigate whether there are any significant differences in student motivational fluctuations.

When repeated measure ANOVAs are administered, one of the requirements is the sphericity assumption. “The sphericity assumption is meaningful only if there are more than two levels of a within-subjects factor. If this assumption is violated, the p value associated with the standard within-subjects ANOVA cannot be trusted” (Green & Salkind, 2005). One possible solution for the violation of this assumption is to correct the degrees of freedom accordingly (Green & Salkind, 2005).

Mauchly’s test of sphericity was significant indicating that the assumption of sphericity had been violated ($\chi^2(189) = 844.42, p < .05$). Therefore, degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity. There was a significant main effect of *Time* at $F(12.79, 2314.17) = 9.187, p < .05$.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Motivational Levels at 20 Time Points
(N=182)

	Mean	<i>SD</i>
J1A	5.25	1.72
J1S	5.01	1.61
J1M	4.63	1.56
J2A	4.60	1.57
J2S	4.92	1.46
J2M	5.20	1.50
J3A	5.04	1.61
J3S	5.01	1.64
J3M	5.26	1.66
S1A	5.69	1.46
S1S	5.41	1.59
S1M	5.46	1.42
S2A	5.71	1.47
S2S	4.90	1.53
S2M	5.14	1.38
S3A	4.84	1.52
S3S	5.21	1.50
S3M	5.06	1.69
U1A	5.58	1.31
U1S	5.51	1.33

(The letters and numbers stand for the following time points: J= junior high school, S=senior high school, U=university, 1=first year, 2=second year, 3=third year, A=April, S=September, and M=March.)

Given the fact that there were significant differences in their motivational fluctuations, follow-up within-subjects contrasts were performed with each pair of the subsequent time points in order to find out where the significant differences lay.

Table 3
Contrasts between Times

Time 12 and Time 13	($F(1, 181) = 10.186$)
Time 21 and Time 22	($F(1, 181) = 19.246$)
Time 22 and Time 23	($F(1, 181) = 5.689$)
Time 33 and Time 41	($F(1, 181) = 12.976$)
Time 41 and Time 42	($F(1, 181) = 4.892$)
Time 43 and Time 51	($F(1, 181) = 4.851$)
Time 51 and Time 52	($F(1, 181) = 52.409$)
Time 52 and Time 53	($F(1, 181) = 6.843$)
Time 53 and Time 61	($F(1, 181) = 4.960$)
Time 61 and Time 62	($F(1, 181) = 10.630$)
Time 63 and Time 71	($F(1, 181) = 15.010$)

The results indicated that the following differences were all significant at $p < .05$. In other words, there were significant motivational differences between any of the two subsequent time points, such as between Time 12 ($M=5.01$, $SD=1.61$) and Time 13 ($M=4.63$, $SD=1.56$), Time 21 ($M=4.60$, $SD=1.57$) and Time 22 ($M=4.92$, $SD=1.46$) and the like.

Therefore, regarding the participants in the present study, a similar graphic pattern to the one Sawyer indicated emerged: (a) motivation is high

at the beginning of junior high school but then decreases. (b) motivation decreases from the first to second year in senior high school, but increases in the third year; and (c) motivation is high immediately before the university entrance exams. However, the participants in the present study maintained their motivation after the entry to the university. In addition, there was another important difference to note: unlike the results of Sawyer's study, students' motivation was generally high (4.6 or above) on the average at any stage, and their motivation did not fluctuate so much as those in his study and uniformly. Instead, there were individual differences in the fluctuation patterns.

Visual inspection of students' answer sheets indicate that not many students became demotivated soon after the first term of the first year at the junior high school as Hayashi (2005) reported. Only 84 students out of 182 students became demotivated at the junior high school level. Furthermore, unlike the results of Matsukawa and Tachibana's (1996) study, only 45 out of the 182 participants reported that their motivation decreased soon after they entered senior high school. These trends were reflected in the mean scores in Table 2.

To answer the third research question, the students' written responses were analyzed by examining their comments for possible reasons for their motivation. The analysis shows the following results. Reasons are presented in the order of the number of responses.

(A) At Junior High School Level:

Reasons for students' high motivation are:

(1) a good teacher that has high teaching skills, (2) feeling an improvement in English proficiency, (3) being able to understand the class, (4) having a

goal of passing the high school entrance exams, (5) having a chance to talk to an ALT, and (6) high expectations of learning English.

Reasons for students' low motivation are:

(1) getting bored with a lecture teaching style, (2) a teacher lacking in teaching skills, (3) studying for entrance exams, and (4) difficult textbooks, especially grammar.

Thus, it can be concluded that teachers and their teaching skills are the most important factor at the junior high school level.

(B) At Senior High School Level:

Reasons for students' high motivation are:

(1) meeting a good teacher, (2) having an overseas study seminar or a studying abroad experience, (3) feeling a sense of improvement, (4) meeting good friends who study hard and improve their English, (5) studying for the university entrance exams, (6) English materials that are intellectually stimulating, (7) high expectations of learning English, and (8) the prospect of learning at this university.

Reasons for students' low motivation are:

(1) a teacher you cannot trust or who lacks teaching skills, (2) studying for the university entrance exams, and (3) difficult teaching materials and entrance exam questions, especially grammar.

Thus, it seems that teachers and their teaching skills, chances to use English, university entrance exams and group dynamics, which are influenced by teachers, are the most important factors at the senior high school level.

(C) At University Level:

Reasons for students' high motivation are:

(1) an ideal learning environment with native speaker teachers, (2) meeting people who are motivated to study and can speak English well, (3) having enthusiastic and friendly teachers, and (4) going abroad experiences.

Reasons for students' low motivations are:

(1) Over-demanding, required English classes, (2) inferiority complex by being discouraged by classmates who speak English well, (3) feeling that classes are not stimulating enough compared with high school English, (4) having classmates speaking Japanese in class, and (5) a busy schedule largely occupied by part-time jobs and club activities.

As a result, it can be said that teachers, their teaching skills and group dynamics are the most important factors at the university level.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analyses, it was found that there were statistically significant differences in students' motivation levels at various times. It follows that there was a similar pattern to the U-shaped curve of motivation fluctuation at the junior high school level and a shape similar to a J-shaped curve at the high school level that Sawyer (2007) found. However, at the university level, student motivation was high and they still maintained their motivation even after they had spent six months at the university. However, their motivation after September of the first year was not measured.

Although the general pattern of the motivational changes followed these curves, it has to be noted that the motivational changes varied individually and there is no graphically simple summary or a simple conclusion.

One of the reasons for differences in motivation at the university level could be the differences of the participants. Sawyer (2007) and some

other studies used average level proficiency, non-English majors, but the present study was conducted with post-intermediate level, English majors who are motivated to study English. These students, as suggested in their responses and the mean scores, maintained their motivation because they seem to be intrinsically motivated. Their behavior seems to be supported by their descriptive feedback to the survey instrument, which indicates that although their motivation occasionally declined in junior and senior high school, they continued to study on their own, in spite of having a teacher they could not trust or other negative environmental factors. However, in order to determine the reasons for these results, a cluster analysis should be conducted and follow-up interviews with a number of students will be necessary.

Regarding factors influencing the motivation fluctuations, Sawyer's findings are largely confirmed by the present study: teachers' influence weighs heavily on junior high school students, as Hayashi (2005) claims, but it also affects senior high school and university students, together with entrance exams, chances to go abroad, and group or peer influence. Group or peer influence is particularly predominant at university. It may be attributed to the fact that at this university, most of the skill-based courses are taught by native speakers who try to generate interaction among students by employing group and pair work. Teachers' teaching skills and group members' motivation and contribution influence students' learning and motivation. In fact, comments made by several students suggest this interpretation: "I do not like other students in a group to speak Japanese, when contributing their ideas to the group. I think it's the teacher's responsibility to have all of the students actively participate in tasks in

English.” On the other hand, if they are in a class with motivated students, it seems to depend on the person whether they may be motivated by peer pressure or demotivated because confidence is undermined. However, either situation seems to have much to do with the teacher’s approach and teaching skills. Therefore, even at the university level, teacher’s influence is the most important factor for student motivation.

It is an interesting finding, which Hayashi (2005) also discussed, that preparing for entrance exams can have a positive and negative influence for students’ L2 learning. Preparing for the entrance exams motivated 51% of respondents when they were junior high school students, and demotivated 20%. However, examination preparation generally motivated them when they were in the final year of senior high school. With the prospect that they could acquire high-level oral skills by learning from a native speaker at this university, a large number of students were motivated to study English in the third year of the senior high school. At this university, all the skill-based and content-based courses are taught in English, mostly by native speakers of English, and it appeals to many applicants. However, for several students, examination preparation decreased their motivation because “it forced us to focus on studying reading, grammar, and vocabulary.” It seems that it depends on how students approach such intensive studies, that is, whether they try to make the most of the examination preparation and integrate it into their struggle to improve their overall proficiency. One of the students stated that, “The intensive learning for the entrance exams can be fruitful because you can improve vocabulary, grammar, and reading, and writing skills in high school. If you add listening and shadowing practices to it, that will be a good preparation for improving speaking and writing at

this university. I don't understand why my classmates did not like studying reading and grammar so much. They are obsessed with a myth that exam English and practical English are two different things.”

Another reason to note is chances to go abroad. Opportunities to go abroad definitely boost students' motivation to study English. However, motivation can decrease, especially when they meet a teacher who is not good at teaching after returning. This seems to be the case whether at senior high school or university.

The present study generally confirms the results of Sawyer's investigation, though some differences emerged in motivational fluctuations because of slight differences in the research methods and participants. However, the results are useful for practicing teachers in Japan because they show that teacher and peer influence, which might be partly controlled by teachers, are at least two very important factors. In other words, the results clearly indicate that teachers can motivate and demotivate students at any level of education, depending on how they treat their students.

However, this study has a limitation. Student motivation changes after September in the first year of university were not measured. A future study should include a large number of third-year and fourth-year students. Equally important is the fact it is worth conducting research using cluster analysis to find out motivational fluctuation patterns and reasons for them.

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Appendix

英語の学習意欲の変遷

現在、英語の学習意欲の変遷に関する研究を行っています。中学校、高校時代、及びこれまでの大学生活を振りかえって答えてください。

学習意欲のレベル：1：非常に低い…4：どちらとも言えない…7：非常に高い
 考えられる理由：一文で、特に1, 2や6, 7をつけた場合、また学習意欲に変化があった場合は必ず記入してください。(入試、友人、先生、留学など、具体的に書いてください。)

		学習意欲のレベル	考えられる理由
中学校1年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校1年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校1年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校2年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校2年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校2年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校3年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校3年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
中学校3年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校1年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校1年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校1年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	

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高校2年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校2年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校2年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校3年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校3年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
高校3年	3月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
大学1年	4月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
大学1年	9月	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	

お名前： _____ 学籍番号： _____

ご協力ありがとうございました。