

# Empowering Older Japanese EFL Learners

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## Abstract

This paper involved the collection of empirical data through a series of interviews with an elderly Japanese learner of English as a foreign language. Through these interviews, readers will come to better understand learner strategy, motivation, and social factors that may hinder development of EFL skills for older Japanese learners of English. Additional sample language details that focused on pronoun errors and pronunciation were also explored. One key reflective teaching note concerning this project was how the researcher/teacher learned how and when to give pronunciation and pragmatic assistance to promote fluency and consequently retain motivation while also encouraging accuracy as a sociopragmatic objective. This research is timely because Japan represents one of the fastest greying societies in the world. Therefore, a deeper understanding of intrinsic motivation and learner strategies will enable practitioners to develop more authentic material for this burgeoning group of EFL students.

## Introduction

The effect of age on second language acquisition remains an ominous subject in the field of applied linguistics. Controversy has surrounded the topic ever since the critical period hypothesis was used to determine the optimal age (s) for natural L2 learning. Earlier research by Penfield and Roberts (1959) argued that this ideal period was the first ten years of life since the brain still retains its plasticity. The theory stated that once lateralization to the left side of the brain was completed, it becomes more difficult for us to acquire an L2 at native speaker levels. Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow (2000) mention how other later studies introduced the term sensitive period to the research vernacular, which emphasized that language acquisition might be more efficient during early childhood, however, was not impossible at later stages in life. Extending this argument concerning age and L2 acquisition, Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) surmised that adults are superior to children in terms of rate of acquisition, and older

children learn more rapidly than younger children.

While recent decades have brought about a plethora of research, Ellis (1994) elicits a few noteworthy conclusions. Perhaps more importantly, the author leads readers to the more realistic conclusion that other factors such as learning styles and motivation may better explain why some older learners improve and even excel at second language acquisition while others simply do not. For this paper, I would prefer to focus more on these last two areas to better pinpoint the reasons certain people have the ability to improve EFL skills.

## Subject

Since first teaching the subject of this study nearly a decade ago, I came away impressed by his veracity for learning and relatively high motivational level. This is not often the case for Japanese adult learner EFL classes, where the word hobbyists may be more appropriate to describe these once a week students. Many hope to retain English skills for a short yearly holiday to an English speaking land, while others may join the class merely for the social camaraderie. Women usually outnumber men as the latter typically work longer hours, and with housewives holding the purse strings, it is a luxury that many men cannot afford. Besides, since their school days both sexes are raised under the notion that females are cognitively more adept at foreign languages.

When I entered this field a decade ago, I began to ask some questions regarding this phenomenon. Are women just better listeners? Could it be they dream of living in an English speaking society that promotes a better level of gender equity? Or perhaps women are more in tune with discussing their feelings? The answer is likely all of the above. Thus, for a Japanese man approaching his golden years determined to improve his EFL skills at such a late stage in life became an intriguing case study.

Through observation, hypotheses, and applications, this project became a personal odyssey that shaped me as an SLA researcher. I learned firsthand about fossilization, motivational factors concerning fluency, and when best to encourage accuracy to help the subject improve his communicative abilities yet not hinder his willingness to speak. For the purpose of this study we shall call the subject Hideo Takahashi and I will commonly refer to him as Hideo. One interesting aspect of Hideo is that when he joined my Monday evening ninety-minute group class he was in the midst of retiring from the presidency of his textile firm. He made it perfectly clear that he had worked too hard over the course of his life and never took time off, so he simply wanted to enjoy his golden years.

Like most people in Japan, Hideo started learning English in junior high school. Mostly he learned vocabulary words and grammar translation for testing purposes. During his

adult life, he seldom spoke English other than using it a few times at overseas restaurants and hotels. He felt that he wanted to learn, however, with a company to run, he did not have the time commitment to embark upon an appropriate course of study. When I first met Hideo, we went out for lunch a few times and since my Japanese ability was clearly better than his English, we usually spoke in Japanese.

About two years after we met, while Hideo was still a student in my Monday evening class, he was diagnosed with a congenital heart condition and was advised by doctors to refrain from traveling outside the country. Initially, I thought this medical condition would hinder his motivation to study English yet it did the contrary. Since he remained interested in foreign capital markets, and at the time a booming NASDAQ technology stock market in the States, this longing to become a more knowledgeable investor became his driving force. Hideo's motivational factors were clearly obvious. Looking back, without the wild ride of the internet dot. com stock bubble, I do not think Hideo would have remained as interested in his studies. As such Hideo mirrored Gardner's (1985) social psychological approach because he displayed both a want/will (cognition) and task-enjoyment (affect). For Hideo, English was a tool that enabled him to extend beyond the Japanese stock market, with its limited public disclosure and relatively poor historical stock returns, to a world that promised a higher rate of return and an opportunity to increase his proverbial nest egg.

With more free time upon retirement, at my suggestion, Hideo got a private tutor for one hour a week. This gave him more exposure to English communication and because the teacher had an interest in investing, this proved to be a good match for Hideo. It was his first experience outside a group setting and he was a little nervous that the tutor did not speak his L1. Initially, he told me it was a challenge, yet he persevered and showed marked improvement. I think I may have mentioned that having both his group lesson and his private class taught by Americans may be limiting his exposure to world Englishes. Shortly after our discussion, Hideo got an additional private tutor (a British teacher) and based on our occasional meetings, he began appreciating English as a global language and his idiomatic expressions reflected this move toward further diversity.

## Data and Analysis

The following questions refer to my interview with Hideo. Answers were transliterated directly, however, I did put in parentheses the correct word or pronunciation to help readers better understand error analysis, L1 transfer, and pronunciation weak points exhibited by the subject. Italicized rephrasing by the interviewer also appears to offer the subject a chance to repair his answer. This served as an accuracy exercise for the

subject. Conversational analysis appears after each numbered question.

1) How long have you been studying English?

It's a difficult question. From middle high school. (pause). After retirement, I studied English conversation with you. After that, I had a lot of native speakers/foreigners.

Analysis: I thought the hedging strategy used by Hideo to lead into the discussion was native-like and appropriate for such a broad question. His one error came when he confused middle school, which is more of a Japanese translation, with junior high school which is the American English equivalent. I think if he had said primary middle school which would have been more of an Australian English influence, I would have asked for clarification and taught him the difference. For brevity sake, I did not stop the subject as it was still the first question and fluency was my aim for this interview.

2) Why did you want to study English?

Just a hobby and I want to invest in American stock market. I s (th) ink I want to call many things in English. For example, if I have to call American brokerage. But, telephone is difficult for me. Z (the) n I have to study more and more.

Analysis: Here his mistake concerning "call" was a little difficult to comprehend. To his credit, he did however, continue and through the context of our discussion, the meaning was made clear by the word "telephone." Regarding pronunciation, I did transcribe his inability to make the "th" sound. Hideo's generation of EFL learners were never exposed to phonic learning systems at a young age and struggle forming this sound.

For many Japanese EFL learners, fossilization is first recognizable in the "th" sound, so native-like ability never does transpire. Does this mean they are unintelligible? The answer is resolutely no, because most speakers will listen for context and determine the meaning of the conversation by the words around it. Should I continually correct Hideo? I think this will depend on the teaching style, learner needs, emphasis on fluency versus accuracy, and if the correction will hinder more than help the learner in terms of motivation and empowerment. I have tried to help Hideo with his "th" sound, but we both decided that he has trouble with it and his time would be better spent on more communication activities and vocabulary expansion.

3) Do you think you have improved your English since you began studying with native speakers?

No, but my English teacher told me I was improving step by step.

Analysis: A short answer with an obvious L1 translation using the phrase step by step.

In hindsight, I should have said “gradually improving” as a way to have Hideo hear what a native speaker may have said in that situation.

4) How did you improve your English?

At first, what I want to say, I have to write the sentence in my head, then read it. But currently, I have don't have to write it in my head.

Analysis: Here we delve into some internal cognitive accounts of learning. Hideo exemplifies some of the form-function mapping commonly used in the competition model (Ellis, 1994). Latency plays a main factor here as Hideo is admittedly influenced by L1 processing strategies (writing out Japanese kanji characters in his mind) to determine word meaning. Now, he is more comfortable communicating in English and more likely personifies McLaughlin's information processing model as he has learned to routinize skills.

5) Do you feel you are a motivated learner? How so?

I don't understand. It is good or not? But it protect me from going ga-ga.

*It helps you from going ga-ga, do you mean from becoming senile?*

Yes, senile. English is exercise for my mind.

*Laughs.*

Analysis: I enjoyed his comment on motivation and realized that although Hideo is a highly self-motivated person, he would never admit that. Humility is, after all, a virtue in Japanese society. As Schmidt's groundbreaking work (1981) noted, motivation is the most difficult variable to assess. Like Schmidt's subject Wes, Hideo shuns grammar study and more formal rules and thrives on free conversation, debate, and current events.

Hideo's learning style could also be classified as natural acquisition. Authentic materials will work with Hideo if used as a communicative aim.

Hideo's comment that English is mind therapy should serve as a wake up call for EFL teachers because with the rapid graying of Japan, older learners have both the

disposable income and free time to study English. Practitioners must be careful not to apply the same lesson planning for this group as other classes. Instead, recycling material into communicative strategies is a much better option than focusing on pronunciation or new vocabulary that may soon be forgotten and could serve to frustrate or discourage older learners.

6) Do you think some Japanese people can learn English and others cannot?

Many people can study English in vain, but they cannot continue for a long time. Many old people want to make hobby and they change hobby. Maybe students' personality is important, I don't know. Sometimes, it depends on a good teacher. Many people if they have a good teacher will continue to study.

Analysis: For clarification sake, we will assume that Hideo meant study in vain. He hinted that EFL remains a hobby for many learners and his fellow retirees often change their hobbies. I think this is more reflective of the anxiety Japanese EFL learners may feel when communicating in L2. Horwitz (2001) notes that Asian learners may feel inherent levels of anxiety when participating in oral activities. This is likely the result of learners L1 being more indirect (read: less confrontational) than English with more nonverbal communication cues. Again, most language learners have a certain degree of intrinsic motivation that helps with learning.

## Conclusion

In examining Hideo's foray into EFL at such a late stage in life, the area of integrative motivation developed by Gardner (1985) seems to have much merit describing his success. Hideo displays an intrinsic motivation to learn, albeit along with the possibility for some financial gain, and a distinct curiosity to become more international with English as a communication tool serving as the stimulus. Also, his personality is more extroverted and this fosters his continued linguistic improvement. He is not shy to ask questions and seldom displays some of the anxiety that his compatriots seem to possess. Hideo would be the first to admit that he has a relatively high tolerance for risk and this innate trait contributes to his learning. In addition, some of the qualities of being a business owner helped Hideo take more control over his language studies. While his personality may not represent the majority of older Japanese learners, Hideo does serve as an excellent role model for other people of his generation.

Furthermore, it was an honor to teach him and learn about SLA and its effects on older learners. How accuracy and fluency are balanced with fossilization and cognitive ability is

a topic that requires further inquiry. For Hideo and myself, over the past five years we have often had lunch together communicating in English (no longer in Japanese) about some of the aforementioned topics. My assessment on L2 acquisition for senior citizens is that personality and motivation play a central role in developing EFL ability. Therefore, regardless of age, I still subscribe to the theory; where there is a will, there is a way.

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