

Struggles and Successes of High School Students Studying Second Language: A Narratology Study

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Abstract

This paper examines five high school students' language learning experiences, grounded in the three-dimensional analysis of narrative research. Oral histories are organized in thematic structure to probe the struggles and successes of high school students learning a second language. The study concludes that three major disruptions occur, mainly in the aspects of lexicon and language function features, grammatical and syntactic features, and socio-communicative features. The students overcame these challenges by employing strategies that were effective to them. Learners' interactions, place of study, and conception of the English language significantly influenced their motivation to engage in the study of a second language. The interview results call for reforms in language instructors' pedagogical strategies and school policies in designing English curriculums for all courses in public and private high schools.

Keywords: ESL Struggles, ESL Success, Language Learning Strategies, Japanese English Education

An MIT study (Hartshorne et al., 2018) has found that challenges emerge, and learners will not reach the same proficiency in English similar to that of a native speaker, unless a learner starts to study as early as the age of 10. He further elaborated that since there is a shorter window before their learning ability declines, learners who start to study between ages 10-to-18 will still learn the language quickly, but they are less likely to attain native-level mastery. In contrast with other English language learning countries (those who started teaching English as early as kindergarten, such as the Philippines), Japanese public elementary schools introduce English to students in the third grade. Assuming that the learners have not encountered the English language by attending international kindergarten and have English speaking parents, Japanese students typically have their first encounter with the language three years after starting their formal education.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) is dedicated to removing the education gap and to implementing the English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization (MEXT, 2002). Japanese students are now spending a tremendous amount of time studying English as a foreign language. MEXT, as it aims for full-scale development of English Education in Japan, laid out new reforms in the current education system. They have recently produced and reconstructed new guidelines for the study of English, hoping to pave the way for confidence in communicating using the language geared toward hosting the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

With the new changes, students are now pressured to have a certain English proficiency level at every education level. The expectation for junior high school students is that they should have, by the time they are in the third grade, Eiken 3 certification, or

an understanding of English at the A1 level in the CEFR framework. On the other hand, high school learners are encouraged to pass the Eiken Pre-2 or Eiken 2 level exams, as they are the benchmarks for the high school level, which are equivalent to CEFR A2 and B1 levels, respectively. Students being pressured with the expectations, not only from the institutions they attend but also from the education system itself, are having difficulties coping with the aggressive trend of language learning in Japan. The Japanese education system is well known for its prescribed curriculum, challenging exams, and rigid conformity (Martin, 2004). Students in both public and private schools are expected to acquire the ability to communicate fluently and coherently in English by the end of their six years of English education. Students in Japan must take English for three years in junior high school and three more years in senior high school (Amaki, 2008). With the several years of exposure to the language, some of the students have a reasonably large vocabulary, and some can also understand many expressions, but “their communications skills were mainly limited to examples provided on the tapes or in their textbooks” (Amaki, 2008, p. 60). According to Martin (2004) however, despite the amount of money, effort, time, and energy exerted, the search for a student who can engage in an even marginal dialogue with a speaker of English could be a complicated matter. “Although many of these learners may have the linguistic competence necessary to communicate, many are uncomfortable and unable to communicate with people from cultures different from their own,” Cutrone wrote in 2010 (p. 11).

In the search for the truth regarding the nature of English study undertaken by the typical student, this paper gives an overview on the experiences of students in their English education (from the first day of encountering the language to the present) by listening to the untold stories of five high school students. The researcher aims to discover the aspects of high school students’ journeys through language education and understand the underlying issues they have faced along the course and the steps they took to overcome those challenges. It is intended to investigate the student’s successes in language learning and bring to light effective learning strategies that will allow more learners to achieve a higher English level. The paper lastly aims to discover the student’s perspective of language learning as it is influenced by their peers, their institutions, and society.

Research Questions

The researcher is prompted to search for answers to these research questions to achieve the paper’s aims.

1. What are the struggles of the students in learning a second language?
2. What are the events in their course of study, in which they have considered themselves successful?
3. What are the learning strategies employed in learning that is proven effective?
4. What is their frame of action in response to the challenges in their study of the English language?

Literature Review

The difficulties in second language learning are still a mystery for many scholars as well as language teachers. Investigating this aspect of second language acquisition requires a great deal of effort and resources since the factors that affect learners vary from every position and are also unique, according to individuals. Ehrman (1996) expressed the

possibilities of investigating this aspect through research, but after reviewing about 10 articles, there is still a discrepancy in students' successes and struggles in acquiring a second language.

Huang (2005) pointed out that "learning difficulties/constraints are also often concerned with insider's perception of teacher-learner roles and relationships, which are grounded within a certain culture of learning" (p. 3). In principle, teaching styles, strategies, and techniques play a vital role in learners' development. For example, students exposed to the direct language teaching method are often active and are expected to initiate communication in class in contrast to those taught with the grammar translation method. The roles in the latter are very traditional (Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Students learn what the teacher knows because they were instructed by an authority, which is the teacher. Meanwhile, students using the direct method are less passive. The teacher and the students are in a partner role where the teacher directs students, and they are learning the language in the process.

Martin (2004) highlighted that cultural and linguistic influences are fundamental impediments to EFL success in Japan. It is true that the student's orientation/motivation majorly affects what to learn and what is being learned. In the Japanese setting, they view English education as an option, not a necessity. The absence of an environment where L2 is required to be spoken is a significant concern in the field because, without its presence, the students fail to distinguish the importance of learning the language.

On the other hand, Fithriani (2019) discussed in her paper that "students believed that grammar was a problematic aspect to learn as they needed to memorize rules and apply them." Grammatical concepts, by default, are one of the significant stressors for ESL students when learning the new language, not to mention that learners are also expected to have a good grasp of communication using English. The pressure to speak L2 in a non-English speaking environment is also a factor of students' poor performance in class or demotivation. These aspects of the study are the cause of strain in obtaining a high competency level in the second language.

The literature above discusses the students' struggles through different lenses, their relationship in the classroom, how society affects the study, and last, students' perspective toward the language. Acknowledging the complexity of second language acquisition, we can presume that during the entire course of studying a second language, these are not the only occurrences of what one must go through to achieve fluency; instead, these are just some fragments of a more significant phenomenon, be it struggles or success, in the intricate process of language learning.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded on the three aspects of the narrative research approach developed by Clandinin and Connely (2000), deeply influenced by John Dewey (1938), which Wang & Geale (2015) have discussed. These three dimensions—interaction, continuity, and place—are used as an analysis guide to uncover hidden implications from the stories gathered. In the interaction aspect, the researcher investigates the participants' positions and their interactions outside personal spaces to understand further how their emotions, conceptions, and the influence of their social group affect their study of the English language. In the continuity aspect, on the other hand, the participants are expected to tell stories about their: (a) past experiences on language learning, (b) their current situation and progress in their language education, and (c) their future outlook on learning

the English language. Understanding the past, present, and future will unravel the complex nature of the inter-related stories they have provided. In the place aspect, the researcher hopes to understand how the location or the place where the learning is happening impacts language learning.

Method

Narrative inquiry is employed in this paper. Using a narrative format to present findings, a researcher can access rich layers of information that provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants' perspective (Wang & Geale, 2015). Using this approach allows the participant to convey their stories in an accessible or uncontrolled manner; thus, it gives the researcher the ability to analyze the specific subject and the spectrum that will pave the way to a clear understanding of the subject matter. The participants' stories are arranged chronologically to present the flow of their development and use thematic structure to explain the learning experience relationship.

Teaching in Japanese schools for three years gave me access to understanding the concept of Japanese language education. The participants in this study are five high school students who have answered the request to narrate their stories regarding their English education and the experience that comes with it. The form in which the stories are gathered is through oral history. The students are asked to elaborate and talk about every aspect of their English study from elementary school to senior high school.

Data Collection

The collection of data in the paper involves blended face-to-face interviews and social network communication. The data were collected primarily through 30-to-40 minutes of one-on-one or group interviews, but if additional information was needed, social network messaging was used to ask for further clarification. Using the semi-structured interview method, which Iwai (2008) used, the students were asked to recount their language learning experiences. They were also asked to express their perspective on language strategies. Open-ended questions were used so that "they could provide their honest voices, thoughts, and experiences and have opportunities to reflect on their experiences regarding" (Iwai, 2008) second language learning.

Since there were still some difficulties for students to express themselves in English, the interviews were conducted in Japanese. By doing so, the students were free to convey their outlook and elucidate critical information.

The questions below are the interview prompts used:

1. Please describe your learning experience, from your first encounter until the present.
2. What are the difficulties that you have faced in studying the language?
3. What are the things that you consider successful during the study?
4. What are the solutions you have found to succeed in your learning difficulties?

The prompts listed from one to four are the main prompts used in the interview. Additional comments and follow up questions are also present to gather more information or stimulate the respondents into providing more in-depth information.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were past students of the researcher. The members had attended the

researcher's class for two years in junior high school and have a good relationship with the researcher. Their participation in the study was purely voluntary after answering the intention survey online. The study participants were informed about the place, time, length, and content of the interview. Since the stories gathered in this study are personal, the researcher chose not to reveal any names in writing this paper to protect the students' privacy. The information and data collected were agreed to be used solely for this paper.

Participants' Profiles

The volunteer respondents of this study were five high school students currently attending different schools across western Japan. Four were in the Osaka area and one was from Shimane Prefecture. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym.

Student H

Student H is a 16-year-old student in a public high school in Shimane Prefecture. He belonged to a sports track. Unlike the other participants, his course did not focus on English. However, he attended English class three to four times per week, which is typically divided into two classes: a grammar class and a communication class.

Student R

He was a second-grade high school student in the greater Osaka area. At the age of 17, he had experience with English from the age of three. He was attending a private school with specific courses for sports, English, and general studies. When he was a first-grade student, he was in the English course, but he was transferred to the university preparatory course upon promotion.

Student M

Student M was a 17-year-old female student attending a private university high school. Attending the global course, she had the most advanced English skills among the five respondents. Her language journey was set in motion when she was four years old by enrolling in an English conversation school. She was pursuing her study with the view that English, just like any other toy, is a tool for communication and fun.

Student F

He was a 15-year-old high school student in a private university high school department in Osaka. He belonged to a course whose focus aimed to enter a distinguished university. His strand was called the "Tokushin course." It was a course where students were asked to study rigorously to safeguard their success in entering an acclaimed university. With his peers' influence at junior high school, his English learning motivation increased, and his objective was to enter the English department of his chosen university.

Student RK

Student RK attended the same private school as student R. He was in the university preparatory course, too. He started learning English when he was in the fifth grade of elementary school. He was a 17-year-old male and hoped to go to university by recommendation, not by taking the regular university entrance examination.

Results

Participants recalled their experiences and retold their stories providing extensive details of their encounters in their journey to second language acquisition. The students' five narratives gave a more straightforward prospect on the sophistication of second language acquisition. Although they possessed different views, attitudes toward learning, motivation, and studying techniques, I observed some common areas to all the stories. Their stories are arranged chronologically and thematically to understand what constitutes and affects their language learning endeavors. The collected and arranged oral histories are presented in the following section.

Student H's Story

The required hours for third grade in elementary school to study English are 36 hours divided across the academic year. The third grade is when Student H started his encounter with the study. The English class's aim in elementary did not require students to acquire any grammatical ability or language competence. Instead, they were held to get used to the language. He said they were mainly taught to memorize words, speakeasy conversations, and group activities to allow students to have a real feel of the language use. He was successfully seated as a champion in an English Quiz event, and from that time, he thought of studying English further. His junior high school involvement was different. His class was divided into two classes: the JTE's (Japanese Teacher of English) and Native Speaker Class, or the Alternative Language Teachers' (ALT), class. The JTE class was reserved for grammar class. In the class, they were taught grammatical rules, structures, and others.

On the other hand, the ALT class was for the application of knowledge from the JTE class. The communicative class was designed for the students to have an environment where they could practice spoken interaction with their peers and native speakers. He mainly liked speech activities because they allowed him to convey his thoughts. Although it was hard for him to construct one because of the challenging grammatical rules, not to mention language syntax, successfully doing the speech in front of the class with proper pronunciation and confidence is what he considered a milestone in his studies. The challenge, though, had just started because upon entering high school, English was on a different level. His verb conjugation studies, inflections, and forms in JHS were doubled, and he had difficulties in language functions. He elaborated that it is hard to understand or translate a sentence if one does not know the contextual meaning of words embedded in the sentence because of this aspect of English. He found ways to solve these issues to seek his teachers' help or reach out to the internet for quick answers to his confusion. Comparing his L1 and L2 grammar also helped him correctly understand the difference between the two languages. The high school dilemma about language functions was successfully overcome by teaching contextual meanings by providing practical examples.

Moreover, according to him, the teacher also expanded the words to different contexts and provided various proper usage examples. Music also played a vital role in his study since his hobby of listening to foreign music gave him a more vital interest to engage in the study of the subject. His curiosity to learn the meaning of the lyrics of a song allowed him to motivate himself successfully. Furthermore, he also saw himself traveling abroad and thought it would be useful for him to communicate in English during the trip. His drive to study the subject was growing substantially, and his thinking was that he needed to work harder to learn the language successfully.

Student R's Story

Influenced by his parents, whose jobs involve occasional English use, Student R started his journey when he was a third grader by attending English lessons at a cram school. Cram schools play a vital role in the supplementary or advanced education of students in Japan. They provide lessons that either complement the classroom lectures or conduct a higher-level lecture to prepare future studies students. Taking part in the classes for at least once a week, Student R had his most significant achievement in the study after a year, that is, passing the Eiken level 3 exam (CEFR A1 Level). He also mentioned that during his study in the said cram school, the teacher had spoken English throughout the lesson when giving instructions and explaining grammar, although he was Japanese. He mentioned that he had difficulty understanding the teacher's statements but recognized that his listening and comprehension capabilities had increased and, thus, he had earned his English level certificate. When he entered Grade 6, he started learning the language formally at his local elementary school. The presence of a native speaker teaching the lessons helped him improve his intonation and other speaking abilities. He was enjoying the study because it involved a lot of games and fun activities. His amusement in the language study however slowly diminished when he started taking classes in junior high school. Mentioning past tense, past perfect, future perfect tenses, and other tenses that constitute the different languages' different components, he expressed his difficulty in mastering those concepts due to the vast number of existing principles. He had a dire experience in the more in-depth study of the language concepts. Nevertheless, he felt a sense of fulfillment during the spoken activities conducted in the classroom. One of the most memorable experiences in his junior high school English study was his delight when the ALT in the classroom understood the message he was trying to convey. Homonyms had also caused troubles, according to him. He was perplexed with multiple-meaning words or Homonyms. He argued that one word in the Japanese language has only one meaning while words in English, depending on the usage, connote different meanings other than how they are defined in the dictionary.

In junior high school, as the student moves up to a higher level, the degree of language study is also expected to thrive drastically. Linguistic abilities in these timelines are expected to improve because the high school entrance examination contains onerous language-related sections, and vocabularies must be expanded, which means one must be receptive to learning complicated terms. Pronunciation is also affected in lexicon improvement, which sometimes results in difficulty vocalizing these profound locutions. The intervention made by both the JTE and ALT had allowed him to overcome these challenges and move forward in his course. Unfortunately, with all the speaking skills improvement he had in junior high school because of the consistent production of language in the classroom, facilitated by the teachers creating a real-life situation where students were asked to converse or do some acts, dexterity for good communication gradually shrank upon entering high school. Depending on the strand or the student's course study, the amount of attention given to English education varies. Students in English courses received more hours of English study compared to those of the standard courses. Although attending the English course for a year, his high school concern was that teachers were bombarding students with great quantities of language concepts such as modals and passive sentences, which would help them to pass their university entrance exams. "It is tedious," he said. The lesson only involved studying syntax, after which were tons of writing exercises that students needed to answer. "I want more speaking in

the class,” he added. Recently, most young learners have begun perceiving a foreign language necessary and a necessity in entering society. He said he sees himself in the future in a position where he can communicate freely with other people using English. The lack of communicative learning in his classroom is one of the main reasons his skills have lowered in these past few years.

On top of that, when he asked the teachers for clarification, they would answer back in Japanese even though he asked them in English. This had discouraged him because he sought to start a conversation in English to practice speaking and listening, yet he got the answer in his native language. When asked to compare his English before and currently, he said, “It is getting worse, I think I need to work more now.” Aware of his progress, he was continuing to exert effort to learn the language required for tertiary education.

Student M’s Story

At the age of four, her mother sent her to an English conversation school. The primary purpose was not learning the language but for making friends with other kids. Having fewer peers in her early childhood, *eikaiwa*, or English conversation, school was her mother’s solution. Unknowingly, this was the start of a more extraordinary endeavor that allowed her to attend a prestigious high school with advanced pedagogy in the international language. She continued to attend the said school for several years, and when she turned 10, she was able to pass the Eiken Grade 5. From then, she continuously took the exams, leading her to pass the Eiken Grade 2 exam in her third year in junior high school. During her study days, remembering vocabulary was one of her struggles, but she overcame this challenge by diligently doing her assignments and making the extra effort for her English studies.

Her early childhood days of learning the language, as she described, was full of amusement. As they were not engulfed with the study of grueling language structures, their class was brimmed in songs and games, which led her just to enjoy the learning of the language. In third grade, she formally began the in-depth study of the language. Facilitated by the homeroom teacher and a foreign assistant teacher, students studied different expressions. This kind of study load was doubled upon entering junior high school. Nevertheless, she continued to show exemplary performance in learning the language. Determined to achieve fluency in the language to communicate effectively, she even attended the municipal English recitation contest that she considered a success despite not bagging any award. Being chosen from almost 400 students to speak in front of different school representatives, not to mention with almost 70 native speakers who watched the contest, having the courage to speak in a language one has not mastered is a triumph. Dictation, shadowing, and recitations are just a few of the activities she had run into in the school. The studies that gave her the grasp of idiomatic expressions and communication gave her the ability to express her sentiment effectively. Compared to reading and writing, her listening and speaking were most refined among the language’s four macro skills. She could even hold a dialogue with a native speaker. Her present situation, on the other hand, was quite strenuous. More so than in junior high school, she was spending ten hours a week to study English (grammar and communication). Being in a global course or English course was one factor of this demanding schedule. Yearly, her school allowed its students to participate in exchange studies in other countries like New Zealand, Malta, Tasmania, Canada, Australia, and the United States. She stated that the most challenging thing to do in attaining fluency was having the mindset of English

speakers. Japanese speakers are well known to be shy, timid, and most of the time, they choose to be quiet to refrain from any form of argument. English speakers (not in general) are instead the opposite. The atmosphere is always bright, light, free, and fun. This aspect of communication affected by the cultural barrier is, indeed, a matter in which years of experience is needed. Her effort to carefully understand the language and the culture that comes with it resulted in obtaining a score of over 900 in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) exam. High school English is demanding; students are asked to read a large amount of literature aggregating to 50,000 words in a three-month term. English ability was highly valued in her institution, as almost half of the students attending the course go in and out of the country to pursue international exchange opportunities. Meaning, spelling, forms, and registers are things she had difficulty with even in high school.

Nevertheless, by asking the teachers and engaging herself in a conversation with native speakers in her school, she struggled with these hardships little by little. Teaching her classmates and being praised by the teachers for her exquisite aptness in the language were the moments where she felt satisfaction and victory. Despite the lack of influence from home, the improvement of skills of the people who went to international exchange and her school critical apprehension to English studies kept her motivated to develop her linguistic abilities more. When she was asked to rate her confidence in speaking the language, she gave a staggering 85 percentage. The rating is phenomenal because high school students often rate themselves substantially lower in the usual scenario. Recording one's voice when speaking and reviewing it later could improve pronunciation and intonation, she said. Knowing the different types of English spoken in different parts of the world is also what she considered a great platform to improve one's English ability.

Student F's Story

Starting in sixth grade, student F took his first step to second language acquisition through the usual public elementary school program. Without any interest in the language, he participated in the classroom activities that involved vocabulary drilling and casual dialogues initiated by the teacher. In the usual practice, classes done in the sixth grade below did not focus on the language's accuracy aspect; instead, it focused on fluency. Activities were directed towards developing the students' communicative abilities such as pronunciation, intonation, and interactional confidence. The lesson's format allowed him to immerse himself and foster his curiosity on the language without the usual stress of lexical or grammatical anxieties. Junior high school immersion is a different side of the story. The pressure to get a high score on the test is why he continued to work hard toward learning the language. In junior high school, students are usually composed of groups of three or more surrounding elementary school graduates, providing a more diverse population to the student body. The environment offered a system wherein students could see the difference between their skills and the skills of other students, not only for English but also in other aspects. Seeing his classmates explore English with higher development, he was encouraged to a state of earnestness to compete with those high caliber peers equally. His peers' social position in English competence buoyed up his drive to step up and aim for higher aptitude. His effort was supplemented by going to a cram school for nine hours a month. Parental paragon is also a facet in his study that motivated him to continue to pursue his language activities.

The nature of his parents' work as company employees, their connection, and the

situation at work that his mother and father narrated to him were some of the ideas that made him contemplate his future direction. Indeed, society is changing, and with the decreasing population of the country, opportunities for domestic and international placements are radically proliferating. The junior high school ambiance was the genesis of this mindset. Classes that involve regular communication were the culmination of fastidious grammar and syntax studies; he said that he always found it attractive. Despite the adversity to understand meanings because of how syntax and context affects the meaning of words, the increase of his lexical bank and the ability to put them into practice were just bits of what he perceived as a personal triumph. He valued his study; it was not because it was a requirement of the educational system but because he saw himself in the future using the language. His perspective in language learning also changed through the years, he would have lost an opportunity to travel abroad and communicate with people who share the same speech. Entering high school in 2021, while he could not get into the global or English course of his school, he still actively tried to get the best out of his studies by asking the teachers when there were misconceptions. The course design for a typical high school is a study in which they are prepared for university, representing his learning situation. Fast-paced schooling usually starts with a short introduction and practice of grammar after problem solving and translation. Since speaking is what he considered his language success, he missed talking in the classroom. The common practice to arrange words and form sentences, read texts and find answers, translate Japanese text to English and vice-versa, and answer numerous English quizzes were just examples of underrated learning tools that his teacher used. His conception of learning a language is that students are trained to communicate with English speakers competently, and he sees the traditional method a burden in attaining his self-concept of English study. Qualifying to enroll in the university's English department is his primary motivation in high school. Memorizing vocabulary and asking for teachers' intervention are just small parts of the techniques he used to overcome the strains in his studies. When asked if he can recommend techniques to successfully learn the language, "Study everything and spit it out. It is faster if you use your vocabulary when speaking," is what he answered. Indeed, producing the language orally is a good method of reinforcement and a lack of such activity could lead to lesser retention of language knowledge among learners.

Student RK's Story

Student RK spent an hour a week studying English while in grade six as part of the school's curriculum. He was immersed in skits, chants, and songs. Word memorization was the most basic form of learning that he undertook. One mandate for assistant language teachers when conducting their classes is that they must not use Japanese in instruction. Student RK, in his early exposure to the language, found it difficult. They were asked to repeat words, imitate sounds, and even memorize sentences without adequately understanding meanings. Beginning in junior high school, he started learning basic expressions. The concepts of sentence construction and interpretation of meanings had begun. In a way, they gave him the ability to understand context. The songs that the teachers played before and during the class was his method of remembering words. In this activity, the teacher made a worksheet with missing lyrics. Then the students needed to listen to the music to complete the lyrics of the song correctly. Like any other beginner, grammar for him was complicated. One specific aspect he mentioned was the use of infinitives. Using the word "to" to express plans and future endeavors was confusing

because of the elements needed to complete the sentence. There are also verb conjugation that is specific to such structures. Reading long English stories, texts, and scripts were the activities that he was not interested in. Reading and comprehending the passage's content and answering the comprehension check questions were part of this style.

Moreover, they were also asked to translate some parts of the reading and explain it to their understanding. With a limited lexicon and grammatical knowledge, he was made to exert enormous effort. Looking at the bright side, he attained communicative skills that helped him to express his opinions. Using the grammatical structures that he learned, he gained the confidence to speak with native English speakers. Being understood, he said, is always fulfilling. Unlike the other students, nothing influenced him to study. Classes were required, so he attended them. Seeing his parent securing an excellent job with zero English ability gave him the perception that it is unnecessary to study the language if one's future involves staying or living in the country. The students around him who thought otherwise were very inclined to study. Despite this, his mindset did not interfere with the study of the language. Admitted to a private school for high school study, when I spoke with him, he was attending a course that successfully prepares students to enter a university. Recognizing the aim of the course, English study in his program entailed a traditional style of teaching. Grammar translation was the dominant method, accompanied by a copious amount of practice tests which the teacher believed would help students retain learning. Immersed in a communicative style of learning in JHS, his study habits and motivation for learning English was slowly declining because he did not receive the chance to produce the theories that he studied. He valued interaction because he could test his skills, not only of speaking, but also other aspects like vocabulary, comprehension, and context understanding.

Moreover, since the study was advancing rapidly due to university test pressures, simple grammar was being incorporated with the passive voice, modals, and idiomatic expressions. However, one benefit for the students, despite Student RK's dissatisfaction with the teaching style and classroom activities, was one-on-one study/consultation before test. Teachers of English in high school also affects the students' communication aspect because they use Japanese more than English. Furthermore, even if they speak English, they speak with Katakana English, which is not a good influence on communication because of its improper sound production. He was not captivated by language learning when we spoke, but he yearned to communicate effectively using a second language.

Discussion

After hearing the stories of the students' personal experiences, I analyzed their descriptions. Discovering aspects that are an essential part of the narrative landscape, students' struggles, and success in their second language learning came to light. The framework laid out in this paper is used to interpret different occurrences to relate the pieces of their study histories.

What are the struggles of the students in learning a second language?

Students or non-native speakers engaged in the study for second language acquisition in the early days of their acquisition will experience different significant difficulties, not only because of the difference in the language components but also because of the background. Students in high school learning a second language in the center of the study

revealed three significant language learning difficulties.

The first struggle is difficulties in lexicon and language function features. The most basic learning unit is vocabulary. Without enough word stock, a learner will fail to fathom utterances in the second language. According to Mulder et al., “Building a rich vocabulary in a second language (L2) is essential to gain a sufficient level of L2 proficiency and, therefore, entails a large part of L2 education” (2019). The ability of a student to communicate and comprehend effectively in L2 is proportionate to lexical knowledge. Vocabulary does not only affect the ability to understand spoken words but also the contextual meaning of statements. The students mentioned that they struggle to comprehend contexts because a small change in word unit, even in sentence with the same structure, can affect the whole meaning. The knowledge of language functions is also critical. Interpreting implication based only on one meaning of words is a mistake that is common in L2 comprehension. Because of the lesser knowledge in application of words and concepts, learners often perceive the words as they see them without considering contextual meaning. As an example, students with essential vocabulary usually understand the sentence “How are you?” as a question asking for about someone’s emotional state. On the other hand, the question “How old are you?”, due to its similar feature with just addition of the word “old”, causes students to sometimes answer with their feeling instead of their age. Perfetti & Hart (2002), in their lexical quality hypothesis, wrote that elaborate semantic, phonological, and orthographic representations of words in the mental lexicon facilitate language ability.

The second struggle is grammatical and syntactic features. Grammar is the most common problem among learners of a second language. The difference in the syntax of learners’ L1s and L2s influence the learning significantly. Students who are taught using the grammar-translation method occasionally translate the words in a sentence as they see them. This can result in a preposterous composition. Usually, when people talk about grammar, the first thing to come to mind is the arrangement of words in a sentence. However, grammar means more than that. Grammatical knowledge also covers structures and facets like verb conjugations, verb agreement, adjective inflections, and other parts of speech that constitute a sentence. Respondents in this study mentioned that using the passive voice, modals, infinitives, and other language features, cause difficulties, especially when taught by teachers who give fast-paced lectures on these aspects of language study. The study of the grammatical features of a language requires a huge amount of motivation and teachers should be responsible in devising ways to teach grammar with ease to further engage students. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam write, “Since the 1970s, attention has shifted from ways of teaching grammar to ways of getting learners to communicate, but grammar has been seen to be a powerful undermining and demotivating force among L2 learners” (2011). Indeed, because of dominating preconceptions about grammar, the students in this study perceived grammar learning as difficult and tedious.

A third cause of struggle was sociologic-communicative features. Speaking remains the most wearisome ability to master for most second language learners. Students are very composed in the Japanese setting when they are tasked to showcase their language ability in terms of writing, listening, and reading. The atmosphere changes, though, when speaking is involved. Cultural factors, individual attitudes, and communication levels are some of the reiterated factors affecting underperformance which led to the creation of communication-based instruction but, still, approaches such as communicative language

teaching (CLT) which are designed to improve learners' communicative skills, fail to address the belief that "Language is best learned when the learners' attention is focused on understanding, saying and doing something with language, and not when their attention is focused explicitly on linguistic features" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 27). Students' skills either improve or decline in high school settings because of the scarcity of this language teaching strategy. Student M also mentioned that, aside from the difficulties of pronunciation, having the native mindset to respond in conversations entirely is a skill that is difficult to develop but helpful if attained. Native mindset is a thinking skill in L2 communication where the L2 speaker remodel his logical philosophies into that of a native to properly comprehend the conversation and respond in an appropriate manner.

What are the events in their course of study in which they have considered themselves successful?

The *Jitsuyo Eigo Gino Kentei* (Test in Practical English Proficiency, or *Eiken*), is the most common test high school students are required to pass before they go to their university. Having a certificate of proficiency from test institutions signifies that a learner has passed the standard like that of the CEFR. While three out of five respondents only possessed certification, all of them were vying to get the certificate of the Eiken 2 level or CEFR B1. Respondents viewed that having a certificate from the TOEIC, Eiken, or other English ability certifying exams is one primary indication that they have succeeded in acquiring standardized language abilities. Aside from this, for the participants effectively expressing themselves and being understood in their second language was also a significant leap in their study. It is well known that speaking is the hardest part of language learning. However, speaking and understanding a language is a triumph to celebrate, considering the absence of an environment where L2 practical application is required. Gaining confidence through teachers, classmates, and partners during skits and communicative acts helped the participants to heighten their mettle in language production. At the end of the day, the participants' ultimate goal was to gain communicative competence. Using the language is more important than just knowing about it (Al Hosni, 2014) because "there is no point knowing a lot about the language if you cannot use it" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 146). A learner demonstrating that he can utilize L2 when talking with native speakers or other speakers of the L2 who are fluent, is the highest exemplification of successful language learning.

What is their frame of action in response to the challenges in their study of the English language?

More knowledgeable other (MKO) intervention

MKO means more knowledgeable others. MKO is a concept based on Vygotsky's ZPD or zone of proximal development. "MKO is an important concept that relates to the difference between what a student can achieve on his own and what the student can achieve with the guidance and encouragement from a more skilled partner" (Lim Abdullah et. al., 2013). MKO intervention in the stories is observed when students who have difficulties understanding materials consult their peers or teachers and attain enlightenment in the difficulties they are experiencing. MKO intervention is present in

the stories among all respondents and can be deemed as their fundamental method in solving their suffering brought by diverse linguistic challenges. As the primary MKO in the class, the teacher gave them further clarification about their doubts. In case of an unavailability of the primary MKO, a peer who is more likely to understand that material functioned as a secondary MKO. MKO intervention in learning is also a form of scaffolding technique, so it is beneficial because learners' knowledge is reinforced while seeking further elucidation.

Internet consultation

The internet now is the biggest library being considered. With the massive amount of open educational resources on the internet, students can search for their answers during the study with just keywords and one click. Students who cannot consult a teacher during off lecture hours are usually browsing the internet for the answer. One respondent said that the internet helps him understand the meaning of words in different contexts because the search results provide the answers specific to the question and dispense various meanings related to the answers. The availability of these answers in easy access allows the student to solve the problems themselves. ScVrtič (2012) writes, "The development led from free content that one can individually teach himself, to social learning, where users have the possibility of mutual communication and exchange of opinions". Furthermore, Islam (2011) argued that "learners obtain knowledge on the Internet instead of lonely dependence on teachers and books. Learning resources from the Internet not only are very colorful, but also multi-channeled, multi-perspective, multileveled and multi-formed. In addition, it is very quick and timely. We can choose learning materials from the extensive resources we need on the Internet, thus which easily aroused keen interest in learning initiative" (p. 1084).

Music in language learning

Songs have become an integral part of our language experience (Schoepp, 2001). People learn a second language sometimes to learn the meaning of the lyrics of a song. Music became a platform for three of the respondents to remember vocabulary and work harder to study the language. By listening to English songs, students can learn words that are useful in communicating. Songs also are a form of expression. Students can learn the art of expressing themselves by listening to music and understanding the meaning of words used in literary, arts, and communicative settings. Israel (2013) writes that "Music and singing enables the speaking of English in a more relaxed and non-threatening context similarly, music allows for the learning of language structures and words, thus improving conversational and social communication skills." The linguistic features of music expose the students to authentic English, which is an essential factor in promoting language learning. According to Schoepp (2001), "it relates directly to both the affective filter and automaticity. If students are exposed to songs they enjoy, more learning will occur since they may seek out the music outside the classroom. The repetitive style of songs then promotes the automatization of colloquial language."

Conclusion

Language study is a complicated process, and it involves mastering a wide array of skills set to successfully acquire the second language. During the study, learners will experience success and failures. Trials and errors are other formulas of effective acquisitions, so a

learner must be earnest enough to endure the study's hardship. In terms of the high school students who are learning a second language, they encounter difficulties and successes that are not only caused by the second language (L2) itself but also from these three different dimensions.

It can be observed through the stories that students whose parents encountered the language in their work provided motivational factors that made the students in this study realize the importance of learning the language. The students whose parents did not utilize English, on the other hand, said the opposite. Correspondingly, their classmates served as models. Seeing other students to confidently communicate in English become a good drive for others in the study. Thinking that their classmates are like them, that they are born and live in the same environment, learners foster the belief that what their classmates can do, they also can do. In addition, teachers have the most significant influence. Teachers who encouraged English in the classroom created a learning environment where students could communicate freely using the second language. On the other hand, traditional teachers could not create a communicative classroom because they only focused on grammar-translation. Their methods resulted in the decline of student communicative ability.

Furthermore, the students' perceptions of the language changed through the study's course depending on their orientation and exposure. Learners who did not possess an interest in the language in the past, through different fun learning activities, were able to appreciate the study of the English language. They were also able to motivate themselves to improve their skills further. However, students who had enjoyed their class when they were in elementary and junior high school and were suddenly exposed to a classroom whose focus was passing a test, and who only had opportunities to slowly answer and read, slowly lost their interest in the language.

Finally, it was observed that the pace of study had an impact on the development of the English skills of students. Analyzing the five students' stories in the study, the school was the most significant influencer or motivational source. Five of the students drastically felt an increase in their motivation when they were in junior high school. The reason is because of the fun activities, communication practice, linguistic games, and performance acts. These events in their junior high school created a sense of interest in the language because, through the application, they understood that they were learning; their success in communication was proof that they could acquire a second language. Because of the practice of some institutions to focus on the university entrance examination, they lost the communicative component of language learning upon entering high school. Instead of pair works, group activities, and collaborative language learning, they began to keep their eyes focused on the textbooks and their hands working on a mountain-like pile of practice tests. The learning method in high school caused a decrease in their interest and motivation in the language. If their drive to study before was because they enjoyed using the language, then the reason for studying in high school was to pass a test. It is ironic because the Ministry of Education aims to produce students who can communicate in English competently. Yet, high school institutions seek to produce students who will go to prestigious universities rather than highly competent language learners.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to the stories of five high school students. Their stories mirror what is happening in real classrooms, but they do not reflect the whole population's experiences.

Furthermore, the students in this study were attending different courses of study, so learners' learning experiences in ordinary school courses could be different from those in specialized global or English courses.

Implications

Knowing students' backgrounds in their second language learning paves the way for institutions and language teachers to rethink their language teaching methods. Freeman et al. (2003) laid out four vital strategies for academic success. The third key is the most applicable to second language learning. They proposed that instructors should organize collaborative activities and scaffold instruction to build students' academic proficiency. We live in a technology-dominated society, and the strategy where students sit to wait for the teacher to transfer knowledge is obsolete. Teachers, either young or old, should update their teaching techniques to help learners get a deeper understanding of the language while employing up-to-date teaching strategies.

Similarly, high schools should redirect their focus in designing their policies and curricula toward English language education. Institutions should have the capacity to know their own students' interest in the language, such as how motivated they are, their expectations, their goal to learn the language, and how they want to learn. Schools should use this information to elevate the students' enthusiasm in developing their communication skills in the second language. While the school's reputation depends on the high acceptance rate in university entrance examinations, they should remember that building communicative competence among students is indispensable.

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