

Qualitative Case Study of a Lifelong Language Learner

Glenn MAGEE

Introduction

This paper presents a qualitative case study of the experiences of a lifelong language learner living in Japan. First, this paper introduces a brief literature review of the concepts relevant to the case study. The research questions and methodology of this small-scale research project follow this. Finally, the paper reports on the results and discusses the specific individual differences in this case. In conclusion, this paper considers the relevance of qualitative case studies and their use for language teachers.

Literature Review

Social factors, including social class, sex, and ethnicity, can significantly impact learners in group learning settings (Ellis, 1994). Meanwhile, individual psychological differences (IDs) can result in unique attributes and qualities that distinguish one learner from another (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Until recently, a standard view of ID factors was as psychological constructs that are distinguishable, stable attributes of individuals. This view attributed ID factors to broad categories that placed human behaviours into these categories even though each component might be moderately related. Additionally, this standard view saw IDs as internal to the learner and thus independent from external factors of the environment.

Growing research interest in this area over the last few decades suggests individual learner characteristics may vary depending on different situations and over time. Staunch support for this view comes from research into complex dynamic systems (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Evans,

2022), neuroplasticity (Doidge, 2007) and Self-Theories (Dweck, 2000), which Dweck later developed into Mindset theory (Dweck, 2017). Studies from neuroscience, psychology, and language learning demonstrate that learner characteristics are not immutable and fixed but rather complex and comprised of various interacting parts that interact with the environment. For example, a study of London Taxi drivers (Doidge, 2007) found increased growth in the hippocampal area of the brain. The hippocampal region of the brain is involved with spatial navigation and memory. The novel study succinctly demonstrated that brain parts are highly malleable and constantly updated based on daily experiences and environmental influences. From this perspective, ID factors are socially interdependent and subject to change, making them plastic states that could develop gradually over the lifespan (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Mercer, 2012).

Studies of motivation present a clear example of such malleability. While there is less agreement over what constitutes motivation, there is general agreement in research that it is significant to language learning (Ellis, 1994). Motivation is a dynamic factor that fluctuates as it adapts to the changing parameters of the learning context. Factors such as the teacher, curriculum, and learner group influence a learner's motivation (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Al-Hoorie & Szabo, 2022).

Research using Mindset theory (Dweck, 2017) also seeks to illuminate how people's beliefs impact their motivation to learn and how they view their achievements. Dweck distinguishes between fixed and growth Mindsets stating that we should teach growth mindsets. Fixed mindsets refer to the thinking process that we cannot change, and growth mindsets refer to the thinking process that things such as our personalities and abilities are malleable and, therefore, can vary. Studies conducted by governmental organisations comprising large numbers of participants indicate that growth mindsets are a robust area of research that has positive implications for organisations and educators (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). It is unclear where Mindset theories sit with established ID factors in language learning research, as these beliefs blend with attitudes, self-efficacy, and motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Researchers have found that IDs may exhibit relatively stable

and dynamic dimensions (Mercer, 2011).

Another robust area of research focuses on the ID factor of language learning strategies. From the current research perspective on learner characteristics, what learning strategies were under the classic ID paradigm is now much more complex. Previous criticisms that seemed morally justified have lost their footing due to similar issues in ID concepts such as aptitude and motivation. The entire field of ID research has come under scrutiny increasing research interest in learning strategies despite theoretical concerns (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In a meta-study of research papers, Oxford (2017) found that strategies are defined differently. While mental processes influence all strategies, they manifest as a technique, tool, method, behaviour, or general tendency or approach. For this reason, Oxford notes that there is still no consensus on how to define strategies (Oxford, 2017, p. 25).

Research Questions

1. What ID factors contributed to the learner learning Japanese?
2. What motivated the learner to continue their Japanese language learning?
3. What strategies does the learner report using in their Japanese language learning?

Research Methods

The participant in this study is a 54-year-old female of Filipino descent who was born in the Philippines and carries that nationality. However, their early life was spent living in Dubai, and then they moved to Japan during their teenage years. The language of their parents, Filipino, was not learned until they reached their early twenties. English is identified as their first language, and although they speak Arabic fluently, most of their time in Dubai was spent conversing in English. The pseudonym Melda will be used for the participant. Melda presently resides in Japan and works as a nurse. A medical degree in dentistry is held by her.

To learn about Melda's background, the Language History Questionnaire (LHQ3) developed by Li et al. (2020) was reviewed, but it only covered up to four languages and was not helpful. Instead, notes on Melda's background were taken, as she has experience with multiple languages and has lived in various countries. Specifically, she was asked about her Japanese language-learning expertise since she has lived in Japan for four decades. It is worth noting that Melda is also proficient in Arabic, English, Filipino (including its Ilocano dialect), Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean.

Melda was then asked to write answers to an adapted Language Learning History (LLH) questionnaire from Deacon, Murphey, and Dore (2006) (see Appendix A). A preliminary analysis of the written LLH indicated that Melda needed help articulating her story in depth, so a short semi-structured interview participated in by Melda. The transcription of the written LLH was done by the participant using the voice typing feature in Google Documents. The oral interview, which took one hour, was recorded using the transcription feature in the online video conferencing application, Zoom.

One limitation of this study is that it is not generalisable. An individual who has learned a foreign language over a long period is the focus of this paper. Various factors may have contributed to their success in learning and adapting to Japanese culture. It is worth noting that the individual, Melda, only considered themselves partially successful and acknowledged that language learning is an ongoing process.

Results

Melda traces her interest in learning Japanese back to her experience of hearing Japanese Enka (a style of Japanese music) singers in Dubai. Her English language practice consisted of taking notes of English translations of song words in Japanese and then using these in conversations with foreign visitors that visited her place of work. Following these experiences from age 12, Melda visited Japan at 14 as part of a study abroad program. She describes her learning experience as limited. While her host family spoke with her in Japanese and advised her in English, the school she was studying at was less

valuable because they were more interested in her life in Dubai and speaking English than teaching her Japanese. Her primary learning experience came from immersion in the family rather than the formal school setting.

Melda had a unique approach to learning Japanese. She would listen to music and memorise the sounds like music. She also made sure not to have negative thoughts about language learning because it can hinder progress. Melda believes learning a language is an ongoing process, and frustration should not be dwelled upon. Even when she returned to Japan and didn't always fit in, she maintained her positive outlook to stay motivated in her learning journey.

Discussion

Melda learned Japanese autonomously through notetaking and finding answers to her questions. Autonomous learners who feel in control of their actions often excel in language learning (Liu, Wang, & Ryan, 2015). Melda's previous experience with learning languages could have intrinsically supported her self-motivated behaviour to learn Japanese (Peek, 2015). She has always loved books more than food, indicating that this learning strategy has been a lifelong habit. Implicit beliefs about learning also underpin Melda's view of learning as she does not see herself as having a unique ability for language learning. She remarked, "The only thing I always said it is. what and is. if that person can do, I can do it, too, If he, If that person can say those words, I can say it, too. Yeah, that's how to call that. It's not about the comparison or whatsoever. But you know it's just like I always told myself that we have an equal gift." (participant)

Her thinking process aligns with the idea that individuals with a mindset that values personal growth and development tend to have greater control over their actions. A growth mindset, therefore, can lead to thriving (success) in their learning experiences. Thriving manifests as a preference for learning-oriented goals over performance-oriented goals. Thriving also leads to a more robust endorsement of statements such as "It is much more important for me to learn things in my classes than it is to get the best grades." (Dweck &

Molden, 2017, p. 137). Melda remarks that she never took a proficiency test or exam because her first visit was before any formal testing system existed in the early eighties.

Melda's learning strategies were fascinating, especially her ability to recall words, phrases, and sentences as music, even when she didn't understand their meaning. She attributes this to her experience learning Arabic, which she considers a musical language and her interest in playing various instruments. This area has not been explored much in the literature on language learning, but some research suggests that processing language as music can benefit language processing (Delogu, Lampis, & Belardinelli, 2010). Melda also discussed the importance of immersion in a culture, setting goals, and using various strategies, such as finding language practice partners to learn Japanese.

These strategies suggest that a combination of different approaches was adequate for her. Her experience correlates with complexity theory in that language learning is not a linear or predictable sequence of events. Neither is a learner's strategy to achieve success (Oxford, 2017, p. 101). Echoing the idea that nothing is predictable or linear, Melda closed the interview and discussion by saying, "Oh, for me, I think I will not say that I will not use the word successful, because, you know, learning is never ending. and it's always said that if you define something, it it's done. It's a close book." (participant)

Conclusion

As a language teacher, it is vital to understand the unique and dynamic impact that individual differences have on language learning. By listening to our learners' narratives, we can gain valuable insight into their strengths, weaknesses, and motivations. Qualitative case studies can help us shift our focus from cultural or ethnic backgrounds to the complexities of being an individual in the classroom. I gained a deeper understanding of this interplay through a case study of a lifelong language learner living in Japan. Qualitative case studies can provide valuable information for language teachers, allowing us to understand our students' needs better and find

effective teaching strategies. By focusing on the experiences of our learners, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of language learning and support our students' success.

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**Appendix A: Adapted Language Learning History Questionnaire from
Deacon, et al. (2006)**

Please write a short essay about your experience of learning Japanese from when you began learning Japanese to the present. The following are some questions you might like to answer in your story.

How did you learn Japanese as a teenager?

What positive and negative experiences did you have?

What did you learn from these experiences?

What were you expecting before you came to study at a university in Japan?

What were you surprised about in your university classes?

How have you changed your ways of language learning since attending university in Japan?

What are the things that you found beneficial?

What are the areas that you still want to improve in?

What are your current language learning plans and goals?

What advice would you give to foreigners coming to study Japanese in Japan?