Role Models and Motivators in English Language Learning in the Japanese High School Context

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Abstract

Role models and motivators can influence young people in a general sense and have a significant effect on their values and beliefs. As part of a larger project, we investigated the presence of L2 (second language) role models and motivators among 12 Japanese high school students (aged between 15 and 18), who took part in one-to-one interviews with the researcher. A thematic analysis of their responses was conducted to examine the extent to which the role models and motivators they mentioned had an influence on their L2 motivation. The results showed that parents were salient L2 motivators, although they did not, for the most part, act as L2 role models in a linguistic sense, as many of them did not speak English. On the other hand, teachers, famous people, and peers were shown to have a more important role, in terms of actual language acquisition, over the participants' motivation in relation to English language learning in the school context. Finally, we propose a pedagogy that utilizes the influence of L2 role models and motivators in the classroom and highlight areas for future research in this area.

Keywords: **role models, motivators, Japan**

As teachers, we constantly seek ways in which to engage our language learners, both within the classroom and in related learning environments. Engagement is intrinsically linked to motivation and "what motivates a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, and to persist in action" (Ushioda, 2008, p.19). While we may seek to understand motivation, how it operates and how it is triggered, it is a multi-faceted concept, difficult to explore both theoretically and empirically. It is therefore also very challenging to evaluate and understand from a research and theoretical perspective. After all, it is like trying to explain "nothing less than why humans think and behave as they do, and it is very doubtful that the complexity of this issue can be accounted for by a single theory" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p.4). Nonetheless, understanding more about L2 learner motivation will give L2 teachers and educators a greater practical understanding of, for example, how long a learner will continue to make the effort,

and how much effort they are willing to exert. It was these issues that motivated the research project reported in this paper in the Japanese high school context in which one of the authors works.

An important factor that is thought to increase L2 motivation is the identification and use of positive role models. Role models in general "can exert considerable influence in shaping our values, attitudes, and beliefs" (Muir et al., 2019, p. 1). Early research in this field investigated the influence that role models have on learning in a broader sense (Bandura, 1965; Lewis & Williams, 1994). Since that time, researchers have called for more studies to be carried out in relation to role models and motivation in the field of second language acquisition (Muir et al., 2019). This article responds to this call by presenting the results of a qualitative study recently conducted with a group of Japanese high school students studying English. These results are part of a larger project exploring the L2 motivation of Japanese high school students where L2 role models and motivators of different kinds were found to have a salient perceived influence on the participants. A sub-set of questions in the interviews (see methodology section below) aimed to uncover the different people who influenced the students' motivation to learn English but did not explicitly use the words 'role models' or 'motivators. Therefore, the study refers throughout to L2 role models and motivators. L2 role models refer to people who have motivated the participants to study English by providing a model which the learners wish to emulate. Motivators, on the other hand, refer to people who motivate or encourage the participants to learn English, for example, a parent, even though they may not provide a model to emulate if they do not speak English themselves. Consequently, it is possible for someone to be both a role model and a motivator, however, it is also possible to be a motivator but not a role model. For this reason, we refer throughout to L2 role models and motivators together in a broad sense, and to role models or motivators separately when it is necessary to make a distinction.

This study shows the responses of participants from a specific context and adds to our understanding of what exactly constitutes an L2 role model or motivator and to what extent some L2 role models are more influential than others, by striving to answer the following research questions:

> 1. Do Japanese high school students reference L2 role models and motivators, and if so, who are they?

> 2. Are some L2 role models and motivators more salient than others, in terms affecting motivation to learn in the L2 classroom?

Literature Review

Theoretical background: L2 Motivation and Role Models

Motivation in language learners is signaled by their observed engagement in classroom tasks and their sustained productive engagement in ongoing classroom activities, and teachers play an important role in encouraging this engagement (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). At the same time, researchers have highlighted a link between learners who have had positive contact with a different linguistic community, for instance, native speakers of the L2, and their level of motivation to learn that other language (Clement et. al., 1994)). As such, observing and engaging in learning, whether it is inside or outside the classroom, allows learners to learn from the experiences of others and creates opportunities for interaction between L2 learners and speakers who may act as role models and motivators.

Research in the last two decades, in the area of L2 motivation, has focused on the concept of the ideal self, the ought-to self, and the L2 learning experience, to show how learners'

language needs, desires, and experiences can explain how and why we study languages (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). The ideal self relates to the attributes that an individual would hope and wish to possess, while the ought-to self refers to the attributes that an individual feels obliged to possess, due to, for example, perceived parental or social obligations. The L2 learning experience takes into account the context in which the learning takes place. To investigate how these concepts can be applied in a practical sense, researchers have carried out studies in various contexts in L2 classrooms. For example, in her study of English learners at a Japanese university, Takahashi (2013) concluded that teachers can act as role models by helping to shape their students' L2 future selves and sharing their own learner experiences with them, thus becoming "important motivators for learners of English" (p. 7). A number of studies have investigated how role models in particular influence language learners' L2 motivation, and the following is an overview of this research.

An Overview of L2 Motivation Studies and role models

Some studies carried out on language learning in study abroad contexts (Jackson, 2018; Kinginger, 2011) are related to the existence of L2 cultural and linguistic role models (Duff, 2007). For example, pre-sojourn "chats with other international students about identity issues" (Jackson, 2018, p. 376) and "unbiased observation" (Kinginger, 2011, p. 67) have been shown to better prepare students for daily life and engagement with the host community through vicarious learning. Researchers have also highlighted the importance of near-peer role models (NPRMs) for L2 language learners (Muir et al., 2019; Murphey, 1998). A near-peer role model is someone who is similar to us in terms of "age, gender, ethnicity, or past experience" (Murphey & Arao, 200, p. 1). According to the results of a large-scale international study of 8472 English language learners (12% of whom were Chinese), NPRMs can act as language models, offer encouragement and reassurances, help inspire autonomous learning and provide feedback that teachers are not able to (Muir et al., 2019). In the high school context, NPRMs could be senior students or recent graduates, who have come back to share their language learning experiences. They could also be recent graduates who are now L2 teachers, and that consequently may show a link between NPRMs and L2 role models as teachers. This is important for the present study, which explores how NPRMs can be used in a practical sense in the L2 classroom (see section: Using L2 Role Models in the Classroom, p.19).

There is an extensive number of other studies that have highlighted the importance of L2 role models for adult language learners. Dörnyei & Csizér (1998) studied the teaching practices of 51 Hungarian teachers, and one of the findings of their research was that role models, in general, had an important influence on student motivation and that the teacher was "the most prominent model in the classroom" (p. 215). Bicaji & Shada (2018) concluded quite definitively from their study that in relation to communicative language teaching "the teacher serves as a role model" (p. 285). This point is also reiterated by Thompson & Vasquez (2015), who analyzed the language learning narratives of 3 native English-speaking foreign language teachers in the United States. They found that teachers were important role models for the participants, with one, in particular, referring to past teachers who were language role models 'of the person he could one day become' (p. 170). In terms of EFL, Torres & Casaneda-Pena (2016) demonstrated that Colombian parents can help their children study English even when they don't speak English themselves, by encouraging them to do their homework and having a positive attitude towards the target language; in this case English.

Apart from teachers, NPRMs and parents, L2 learners can also be inspired by role models from popular culture. Researchers have carried out studies relating to celebrities as role models for young people in general (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Fraser & Brown, 2002). One study looked at how using popular culture in language teaching "serves as a catalyst for increased motivation

and language practice" (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2013, p.3). However, it is not clear from this study if the idols themselves from TV shows and music groups can act as L2 role models specifically, or if they are inspired in a broader sense. This is an important point, not just for celebrity role models but also for all role models relating to language learning, and it reiterates the need for a distinction between L2 role models and L2 motivators. Motivators may inspire language learners in a broad sense, whereas only those who inspire specific, semantic influence in a language learner could be termed L2 role models in a linguistic sense. These studies are relevant to the present study which investigates how role models can be utilized in the Japanese high school English as a foreign language classroom context, and in particular how senior students who have had experience and exposure to English culture in other countries can act as a role model for aspiring English language learners. This form of learning from others is similar to experiential learning, which has also influenced research in the area of L2 role models as it is concerned with "learning from experience or learning by doing" (Lewis & Williams, 1994).

L2 Motivation and role models in the Asian Context

Research, specifically in the Asian context, has also shown the important role that parents play in language learning, whether it is in terms of learning an L2 as a foreign language or the parents' L1 (Kim, 2011; Sugita-McEown & McEown, 2019). Kim's (2011) study on Korean immigrant parents in the US explored the perceptions that they have of the influence their L1 (Korean) could have on their children's ability to learn English. This study showed that parents are one of the best resources for L1 education and that they can do this by encouraging their children to be proud of their own language and culture. MacWhinnie & Mitchell (2017), in their recent quantitative study into the link between EFL student anxiety and motivation among 241 Japanese university students, found that parents "may be a substantial predictor of motivation" (p. 11). They suggest that in the context of Japan, where the family plays an important role in society, the role that parents play as providers of encouragement is "by far the strongest predictor of motivation", especially in relation to the L2 self (p. 11). Dailey (2009) also believes that parents can be an important factor in whether a learner is motivated to study an L2 or not, however, she states that that is not always the case, mainly because many parents are not able to speak the L2 and as such cannot help them with their homework. Although she is not referring to any specific empirical evidence other than her own experience, she argues that this "lack of involvement in the language by the parent, may lead to low motivation from the student" (p. 16).

In a related study of Japanese university students and the role their parents played in their English language learning, Sugita-McEown & McEown (2019) came up with the term 'inclusive self' to bridge the gap between the ideal self and the ought-to self when taking into account the Japanese context where parents play a more inclusive role in the children's learning. They also stated that 'in Japan parental commitment/ support had a strong influence on L2 self-related motivations' (p. 937). This is particularly relevant to one of the research questions in the present study, which aims to explore the effect that L2 role models and motivators have on L2 motivation, encompassing their L2 selves. In this study, we position parents as motivators, because although they have a strong influencing role, it is unlikely (or unknown) that their children aspire to imitate them in the traditional or linguistic sense of the meaning of role model.

With a focus on teachers, Yu & Zhu (2011) in their nuanced study of teaching styles, showed how different styles can have an effect on the teacher-student relationship in Hong Kong and Macau, and how a teacher's behavior can have an effect on their students' behavior – and vice versa. In terms of role models, Yu & Zhu's study (2011) also highlighted how teachers can act as L2 role models by sharing their own experiences of learning a language with their students (Yu & Zhu, 2011). The present study aims to explore the different types of L2 role models and

motivators referenced by the participants and to show how they have influenced their English learning specifically as opposed to encouragement in a broader sense.

Method

Context and Participants

In total, 12 students took part in the study, referred to here as participants. They ranged in age from 15 to 18 at the time of the research, 2 were male and 10 were female, and all were Japanese high school students in the school in which the study took place. All 12 took part in an interview and completed a survey. As the sample size was not large, a focus on the qualitative aspect of the study enabled the researcher to probe for emerging data with each individual participant during the interview process. The school in which the research took place is a fee-paying high school where English is one of three core subjects studied along with Japanese and math. In terms of academic achievement, the school is ranked about average and follows a curriculum that is in line with national Japanese guidelines. Table 1 gives an overview of the student profiles, gathered as part of the study.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Student (Pseudo-nym)	Gender	Age	Year of study	Time spent in English-speaking country	Additional information
Kumiko	Female	17	3rd	Not given	Her mother spent 6 months in India when she was younger. She wants to work for the UN. She is applying to study peace studies in the UK.
Ryoko	Female	15	1st	Not given	
Yui	Female	17	3rd	Not given	She would like to work for a book company in the future and wants to use English for this job.
Ryota	Male	15	1st	Once for a holiday	His mother studied abroad in the UK when she was younger. He wants to return to America to work someday.
Takeru	Male	16	2nd	A short farm stay in Australia with the school when he was 14	
Runa	Female	17	3rd	Not given	She would like to use English for her job in the future
Moko	Female	18	3rd	Not given	
Haruka	Female	17	3rd	A homestay in America for 10 months shortly before this study took place	
Ami	Female	17	3rd	Not given	She wants to learn English for travel in the future
Miho	Female	16	2nd	She is going to take part in a short homestay in Australia	Her father lived in the USA for 3 years for his work and he speaks English
Mao	Female	17	3rd	Not given	She has had a private Japanese English teacher since she was young.
Yumi	Female	17	3rd	She did a short homestay in New Zealand shortly before this study took place.	She wants to be a ground staff in an airport or an English teacher in the future.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the fact that the participants were under the age of 18 when the study was carried out, all relevant ethical procedures for research with underage participants were followed. This included signed consent forms from not only willing participants but also their parents. These were given to participants who responded to an information letter, recruiting potential participants to take part in the study which was distributed to all year grade students. Consent to carry out the study was also received from the principal of the school.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher is also a teacher in the school in which the present study took place, it is appropriate to highlight any issues which arose due to this positionality and how the researcher dealt with these issues to avoid them having a bias on the results. Firstly, even though all 12 participants were students in the school in which the study took place, none of them were students of the researcher. Not allowing current students of the researcher to take part in the study ensured that students would not feel obliged to take part in the study in case they felt that non-participation would negatively impact their class grades. Also, a Japanese colleague was assigned as a *gatekeeper* for prospective participants to approach and enquire about participation, which they were introduced to in a general information letter. If they decided to take part, the *gatekeeper* then introduced them to the researcher. This allowed prospective participants to opt-out, not only at any time during the study, but also after they had made initial inquiries, without having to make themselves known to the researcher. Finally, during the interview process itself, the researcher maintained a friendly approach, to avoid a teacher-student type relationship which may limit or bias the results.

Data Collection

This study itself was part of a larger project on English learning motivation involving a mixed methods action research study from which we report on the qualitative aspects in this paper. The participants were told that the study was about their opinions of their English classes and their motivation to study English. The interviews were carried out on an individual basis between the researcher and each participant using an interview guide (see Appendix 1). They were audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2005), each lasting 15 to 30 minutes, which were then transcribed. The researcher asked questions in English and repeated them in Japanese for ease of understanding. The participants were instructed that they could answer in either English or Japanese or both (depending on their level of English, the participants either mostly answered in English with some Japanese or mostly in Japanese with some English).

Data Analysis

The questions and responses from the interviews were grouped into themes relating to the questions in the interview guide. The themes were either pre-determined, based on the interview guide, or ones that emerged from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Braun & Clarke (2006) recommend 'using highlighters or colored pens to indicate potential patterns' (p. 19) as a useful form of thematic analysis. This method of thematic analysis was utilized by the researcher in the present study due to the relatively small sample of participants and raw data gathered. L2 role models and motivators were one of 5 major themes which were predetermined by the researcher based on the questions from the survey and interview guide. Each of these themes was assigned a color, and data referring to or relating to them was highlighted in the transcripts and indexed accordingly under each of the 5 headings. Subsequently, the colored data which corresponded with each theme was then numbered according to which sub-theme it related to. A number of readings were carried out for each of

the sub-themes to identify keywords that emerged from the data, such as *parents, teachers*, etc. until the researcher was satisfied that all the relevant data had been colored, coded, and sorted in this way.

Findings

The results presented in this article examine the influence that L2 interpersonal relationships have had on the participants in terms of how they have encouraged them in some way in their English language learning. The theme of L2 role models and motivators, which emerged from the data gathered, is divided into 4 sub-themes, based on the different groups identified by the participants during the interviews: parents, teachers, famous people/celebrities, and peer groups (friends and classmates). The sub-themes friends and classmates were originally analyzed separately; however, it emerged that friends and classmates were the same for the participants in this study, therefore the researchers decided to merge them into one theme, peer groups. In order to better understand the context in which these various groups were referenced, a more nuanced analysis of the content of the interviews was conducted, the results of which will now be presented and discussed. The following sections use examples from the interview data, organized under the sub-themes to exemplify the most typical and prevalent perceptions and attitudes of the participants.

Parents as motivators and L2 role models

The Japanese cultural context is important when discussing the role that parents play in motivating their teenage children. Looking at the responses from the participants in the present study, we can see a number of references to their parents (10 out of 12 of the students mention parents). In the following extract, Ami contributes to our understanding of this type of encouragement (refer to Appendix 2 for notes on abbreviations and terms used in the extracts).

> **Researcher:** That's great. It's nice to have friends who encourage you isn't it. (1) How about your teachers or your parents, do they encourage you?
>
> **Ami:** My parents can't speak English but they encourage me to study English.
>
> **Researcher:** Especially English or all subjects? (JT)
>
> **Ami:** (3) English and all subjects. English is important for my (sic) (3) for going to university and also for when I graduate from university and become an adult. (J)

<div align="right">

Extract 1 – (Ami)

</div>

In Extract 1, Ami clearly states that her parents encourage her to study English. However, when probed as to whether her parents are uniquely or especially interested in her studying English, she simply states that they encourage her to study all subjects as they want her to go to university and they believe English is important to enter a university. She also states that her parents don't speak English. Therefore, according to how we have differentiated between L2 role models and L2 motivators (see the introduction section), this would suggest Ami's parents are the latter.

Haruka had a similar experience of parental involvement in L2 exposure from an early age. Even though her mother spoke only a little English, she exposed her to American TV shows and movies from an early age.

> **Researcher:** So, ah let's see, so how about other people around you, so do your friends or your teachers or your parents encourage you to speak English?

Haruka: Yes, my Mum did but like I'm not sure why she did it but she just let me watch lots of TV and movies from America so that's why I got interested in foreign countries' English.

Researcher: And your mother was a big encouragement, does she speak some English too?

Haruka: She does but a little bit.

Researcher: But she really wants you to study English?

Haruka: Yeah, I think so.

Researcher: Wow great. So, would you think that your mother has been the biggest influence on you for studying English?

Haruka: Yeah, I think so.

<div align="right">Extract 2 - (Haruka)</div>

Interestingly, of the twelve participants who took part in the present study, only two of them stated that their parents spoke English while the others clearly stated that their parents spoke little or no English. Specifically, when the researcher asked the participants if their parents spoke English, 4 of the participants (Ryoko, Yui, Runa, and Yumi) not only said 'no' but also laughed. It is possible to assume from their laughter that the idea of their parents speaking English would be absurd or maybe even embarrassing to them, signaling further that they are not role models but could still be considered to be motivators, in the sense that they encourage them to study English. However, as was mentioned in the literature review, this lack of parental engagement in the learning process can lead to lower levels of L2 motivation. On the other hand, Kumiko and Ryota both stated that their parents engaged in the L2 at home, albeit in very different ways. Kumiko revealed that her mother lived and worked in India for six months when she was younger and that she believed that this is why she encouraged her to learn English. She admitted that her parents only spoke a little English; however, she stated that they both read the Japan Times (an English daily newspaper in Japan) every day. Ryota also had a similar experience as he revealed that his mother did a homestay in England to study English when she was young and that she encouraged him to speak English. He also mentioned that his parents spoke English at home and that he found the exposure a good way to study. For Kumiko and Ryota then, parents influenced them as L2 role models, rather than encouraged them to study English as motivators, as in Haruka and Ami's cases.

Olusiji (2016) states that there are a number of factors that come into play when considering parents' likelihood to be active in their children's L2 learning. These include their background, educational attainment, financial status, and occupation. Significantly for the present study Olusiji (2016) says, "Parents who have benefited from the value and advantage of being able to communicate in English would want exactly the same for their children (p. 64). This may be the case for the parents of Kumiko and Ryota; however, we can see that Haruka and Ami's parents actively encouraged their children to study English without speaking it themselves. Again, in Kumiko and Ryota's cases then, their parents acted as English language role models for them, whereas in Haruka and Ami's cases, their parents encouraged them to study English in a broader sense as motivators, as their parents do not speak English.

Celebrities as L2 Role Models

In Pekkarinen's (2010) study on the linguistic role models of Finnish youngsters, he noted that many of his young participants identified certain famous people, who were speakers of the L2, and that many of the textbooks they used also contained famous people for that very purpose.

Pekkarinen stated that "whom a learner looks up to or looks down on as a model of using the second language has a great impact on his or her learning", and that "second language acquisition may get a great boost when a learner finds an idol" (p. 5). The present study concurs with Pekkarinen's research, as half of the participants (6 out of 12) mentioned idols with whom they established some kind of connection with the L2. Moko mentioned that she likes the Beatles and in particular Ringo Star. She said she started listening to their music two years ago although she fell short of elaborating on any specific L2 learning influence. The influence of Justin Beiber and Taylor Swift was mentioned by three of the participants. Firstly, Ryoko stated that she actually checks the meaning of the lyrics of her favorite songs on Google. This shows a link between famous role models and L2 acquisition. Secondly, Miho mentioned Taylor Swift along with Justin Beiber and used YouTube like Ryoko to access their music. When asked by the researcher if she thought she could learn English from listening to Taylor Swift and Justin Beiber, Miho said 'yes'. Also, in Extract 3, Ryota stated clearly that listening to Justin Beiber was like an English lesson for him.

> **Researcher:** I see. Great. Ok so am let's move on. Are there any famous people from foreign countries that you admire? (JT)
>
> **Ryota:** Ah
>
> **Researcher:** Not so many? (J)
>
> **Ryota:** Justin Bieber. (laugh)
>
> **Researcher:** Oh Justin Bieber. Ok. Why do you like Justin Bieber?
>
> **Ryota:** He is good at singing. And
>
> **Researcher:** He is famous in Japan, right?
>
> **Ryota:** He has, when he was young, he was a little bit crazy. (laugh)
>
> **Researcher:** He was a little bit crazy yeah.
>
> **Ryota:** I like it.
>
> **Researcher:** I see, Ok so. You like Justin Bieber, so does he inspire you to study English? (JT)
>
> **Ryota:** His, I think his songs taught me English and when I listen to his songs, I feel that it is maybe an English lesson.

Extract 3 (Ryota)

Likewise, as shown in Extract 4, Mao mentioned that the American TV actress and singer Rachel Berry is someone that she looked up to and she liked to listen to her singing in English.

> **Researcher:** Ok interesting good, and do you do you try to am (1) do you try to be like any famous person?
>
> **Mao:** Amm
>
> **Researcher:** Do you want to become like anyone? (J) Like Taylor Swift or someone like that (J)
>
> **Mao:** Am (1)
>
> **Researcher:** If there is nobody special then…
>
> **Mao:** Am (1) I like Lea Michelle, am American TV drama Glee so you know?
>
> **Researcher:** Yes, I do yeah

Mao: Oh, Lea Michelle is actually (inaudible) Rachel Berry and she is very cool and sings songs very well so I like this character the most

Researcher: Right Ok and do you sometimes watch those TV shows in English or in Japanese?

Mao: Am I watch (1) (inaudible) voice in Japanese but singing is in English

Extract 4 (Mao)

One of the most interesting comments came from Kumiko (Extract 5), who mentioned a famous role model from the world of politics. She mentions that she learned about Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist, in school and that she has inspired her to study hard in English so that one day she too could work for the United Nations. She has had a significant impact on her. She said that she was 'impressed' by her speech in English and that this has encouraged her to further her goals and work toward using English for her job in the future.

Researcher: You'd like to do the peace work for, that sounds very interesting, very good, Ok great. So, am (1) are there (cough) sorry, are there any famous people from foreign countries that you admire? (JT)

Kumiko: Am, I'm interested in Malala to do speech everyone, to do a speech in front of everyone am

Researcher: She is the girl from Afghanistan, right?

Kumiko: Yes.

Researcher: Oh, that's right yeah.

Kumiko: She lost am she injured the (inaudible)

Researcher: She injured her arm, right? I remember yeah.

Kumiko: Her arm yes em…But I'm impressed with her speech. I'd like to work in Africa for UNICEF staff or United Nations member.

Researcher: Oh, so Malala encouraged you or inspired you to do that.

Kumiko: Yes, and one day when I watched one movie, I was so shocked to see the current situation in Africa. Many children in the world cannot go to school and are suffering from malnu…

Researcher: malnutrition yeah, so you think you'd like to try and help in those countries and that's one reason why you study English to try and help

Kumiko: Yes, that's right. (J)

Extract 5 (Kumiko)

Half of the participants are therefore referencing celebrities who acted as English language role models for them, either because they like listening to certain celebrities singing English songs or in Participant A's case because she was inspired by an English speech made by a celebrity. Rather than being encouraged in a broader sense to study English, these 6 participants are referencing English language role models, particularly in the way that they influenced their English language learning.

Teachers as Motivators and L2 Role Models

When we look at the interview data from the present study, this concurs with the assertion that "teachers invoke and orient to students' transportable identities in the classroom and engage with them as people rather than as simply language learners" (Ushioda 2011, p. 17). Half of the participants mentioned the figure of the teacher as having encouraged them to study English. This is significantly fewer than the number of participants who mentioned their parents

influenced their L2 learning. However, as with the sub-theme of parents as L2 role models, the data gathered from the sub-theme of teachers as L2 role models can be divided into those who influence the participants in a broader sense as motivators and in a linguistic sense as actual L2 role models. In Extract 6, Haruka shows how she was not only encouraged by her English teacher but that she may have been looking at her as an English language role model.

Researcher: How about any of your teachers here in school do they encourage you?

Haruka: Suzuki sensei.

Researcher: Suzuki sensei encouraged you, did she?

Haruka: Yeah.

Researcher: Good, do you think she has been a big encouragement for you?

Haruka: Yeah cause well (in) my elementary school I learned English a little bit but I was not interested in learning English, I was not interested in learning English I was just interested in foreign cultures, but, well I think it was the first year of junior high school when I was 12 she was my teacher for English class and her explanation was really good, and I was like wait I can do this.

Extract 6 – (Haruka)

Haruka has clearly had and continues to get a lot of encouragement from Suzuki sensei (not her real name). In particular, she stated that her explanations were very good and that she gave her confidence in the belief that she could learn to speak English like her teacher, too. She also mentioned that she was still her teacher and had been all the way through secondary school, which shows the importance of not only the quality of the teacher-student relationship but also its longevity. Researchers have pointed out that there are a "broad range of features that characterize the ability of teachers to influence student motivation, including varying combinations of personality, enthusiasm, professional knowledge/ skills, and classroom management style" (Fewell 2009, p. 8). Moko also named the same teacher as Haruka as being the only teacher who spoke English in class, however, she did not specifically state that this teacher had encouraged her to study English.

In Extract 7, Takeru mentions that a 'native English-speaking teacher' he talked with in elementary school encouraged him to try to speak English.

Researcher: Great. Can you tell me, why do you like English? (JT)

Takeru: Ah, When I was an elementary school student, I was able to talk with my English teacher and since then I've liked English.

Researcher: English teacher? (J) So, was it a Japanese English teacher?

Takeru: No native.

Researcher: Ok and do you think you got inspiration from the native teacher? (JT)

Takeru: (Nods head)

Researcher: You did, you're nodding your head (laugh).

Takeru: Yes, yes (laugh).

Extract 7 – (Takeru)

In Japan, as Joe (2010) also acknowledges, North American and British English have long been held up as the gold standard of models of how to speak English and many textbooks and university exams are based on American linguistic norms. There are, however, a growing

number of theorists who argue that the native speaker is not always the best role model for the second language learner (Farrell, 2019; Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Nicaise, 2021; Raine, 2011; Young et. al., 2016). According to David Crystal, the number of non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers three to one, and as Japanese L2 learners are more likely to meet non-native speakers of English through business, education, and travel, it is difficult to see why the Japanese continue to be so fixated on the North-American model in particular (Joe, 2010). There is a growing number of English language teachers from India who are working in private English language schools in Tokyo and Filipino teachers who now work as ALTs (assistant language teachers) in elementary schools all over Japan (Joe, 2010).

The effectiveness of non-native L2 role models is highlighted by Mao who revealed that she has had a private English teacher since she was a kindergarten student, whom she met once a week for a 'man to man' lesson (a common term in Japan to refer to a private lesson between a teacher and one student). She mentioned that she was a Japanese teacher but that she had good pronunciation and focused on phonics. The fact that they have had a successful teacher-student relationship for such a long time, shows the benefits of having a teacher who can commit to an infinite period of time. This emphasizes the downside of the ALT industry in Japan as it does have a high rate of teacher turnover (Mondejar et al., 2012).

Peers as L2 Role Models

For reasons stated at the beginning of this article, the researcher dealt with the influence of classmates and friends together as peers. It seems logical to do so as high school students spend much of their time in the company of their school peers, who are already, or soon become, friends. Although some of the participants talked about school friends when asked about their friends, others mentioned near peers who they had either met at school or overseas. Research has shown that near peers role models are important for language learning and acquisition and that those who have experienced learning from L2 near-peer roles have 'entertained the idea that they too could become English speakers (Murphey & Arao, 2001, p. 15).

Kumiko and Ami both stated that their friend supported them in their efforts to speak English. In fact, Ami specifically stated that Kumiko encouraged her to speak English. It should be also noted that both participants approached the researcher together to inquire about the study, having read the information letter. This would allude to the fact that they are indeed friends who encourage each other with their L2 learning. In Extract 8 we can see that Ami mentioned that her friend, Kumiko, actually taught her English.

> **Researcher:** Ok, I see, I see, right, so now you are studying English at school do your friends, classmates or teachers encourage you to speak English? (JT)
>
> **Ami:** Yes, my friend, she likes English very much. She (2) teaches me English.
>
> **Extract 8 - (Ami)**

Haruka and Takeru also referred to friends they made while doing homestays abroad who influenced them with their English learning. Haruka in particular spoke at length about the influence her host family in America had had on her English learning. She stated that the friendships she made while in America 'really motivated' her to speak English and that she kept in contact with them through Skype and chatting online. She also attributed her improved speaking ability to being immersed in the language and stated that the 'environment made (her) speak', and that she was surrounded by 'lots of nice people'.

> **Researcher:** That's great how about any of your friends or your teachers at school, is there anybody who you think encourages you or tries to get you to study hard or to speak English a lot?

Haruka: Emm, you mean Japanese friends or foreign friends?

Researcher: Japanese friends or foreign friends, anybody in particular.

Haruka: Well when I was in America at first I couldn't speak English as much as I would like to right, there were just lots of nice people around me so I started to come to think that I have to learn English and communicate with them to have a conversation with them and have a fun time with them so yeah they did.

Researcher: Ok and am, do you think that the friendships that you made there really helped you and encouraged you to speak?

Haruka: Yeah it really motivated me like still now we are contacting like skyping sometimes "hey how do I miss you" or "I miss you too" and "I'll be back OK".

Researcher: And what do you think is the main reason why your English has improved so much?

Haruka: Well the environment made me speak, honestly, you know because they just speak English and my host family was not interested in Japanese culture, so like they didn't know about anything, so I thought, I have to tell about my country and in order to tell my opinion I had to use English as a tool so yeah.

Extract 9 (Haruka)

Haruka's comments allow us to understand more clearly the importance of the building and maintenance of friendships between L2 learners and speakers of the L2, and how this interpersonal relationship can have a deep and long-lasting influence on the young learner's L2 motivation. Huang et. al. (2016) agree and refer to an L2 relationship as an interpersonal, relational multilevel of need that "contains three different levels of needs, namely affection, inclusion and control" (p. 136). They explain that affection refers to "the desire of expressing emotions and gaining affection from others; inclusion refers to the hope of an individual of being accepted and recognized; control refers to the desire of an individual to influence people, things and objectives in certain aspects" (p. 136).

Haruka's comments about having to speak English in order to fit in and get along with everyone in her American host family and then feeling the need to educate them about Japanese culture directly relate to the three levels of need, affection, inclusion, and control, stated above by Huang et. al. (2016). This is emphasized by Takeru, who revealed that he still exchanged emails in English with his host family in Australia, even though it had been two years since he stayed with them. He used the emails to aid his studies by translating them into Japanese and then writing back in English. He also stated that he enjoyed the opportunity to teach them a little Japanese, too.

In Extract 10, Yumi referred to her Japanese friends and how they usually only spoke Japanese in their daily life. She also agreed that speaking English with them may feel strange.

Researcher: Am so how about the people that you know, your friends, your teachers, your parents. Do any of those people encourage you to speak English? (JT)

Yumi: Ah, only teachers.

Researcher: Teachers OK.

Yumi: Because my parents are not good at speaking English. (laugh)

Researcher: OK

Yumi: And my friends, ah, if I speak English, they will be very surprised and speaking English in daily life, ah, we only usually use Japanese so they don't encourage me.

Researcher: They don't encourage you to speak English, I see. Would it feel strange?

Yumi: Yes.

Extract 10 (Yumi)

Yumi's comments give us a possible explanation as to why classmates may not be important L2 role models in Japanese secondary schools. This is important as we know that "peers and classmates play a huge role in motivating each other" (Olusiji, 2016, p. 67). This lack of peer acknowledgement from some of the participants in L2 learning in the present study could have significant consequences for classroom pedagogy, particularly in classes involving native English-speaking teachers. As a large part of these classes are based on L2 communicative language teaching, involving task-based approaches that include pair and group work, effective peer interaction is necessary for successful L2 acquisition in this context. However, as mentioned previously in this section, Kumiko and Ami encouraged each other, and it is possible that one of them acted as an English language role model for the other. Furthermore, we have seen that Haruka and Takeru's English-speaking friends they made while abroad not only encouraged them to speak English but were English language role models for them through their continued interaction in English over the internet.

Discussion

Some of the participants' responses in this study related to how their experiences of speaking with friends they made overseas really encouraged them in their L2 studies. This highlights the importance of interacting and speaking while abroad. As mentioned previously, Kinginger (2011) states that it is important to prepare students properly before they go on a study abroad program and this includes giving them opportunities to speak to peers who have already been on such sojourns overseas. One of the research questions mentioned at the beginning of this article related to whether L2 role models and motivators could be harnessed and nurtured in a pragmatic sense in the L2 classroom. Near peers (Muir et al., 2019) may act as the perfect role models for language learners in the L2 classroom. Based on the results of this study, the researcher used near-peer role models in the classroom to encourage students in their L2 acquisition. This was achieved by inviting a senior student to the researcher's class to give a talk in English about their experience of studying overseas. The students were encouraged to ask questions in English to the senior student giving the talk. They also appeared very excited to be spoken to by a *senpai* (senior) and they listened very attentively to his experiences and advice as he spoke to them in English. However, it was noted by the researcher that the students found it difficult to ask questions (even in Japanese). Therefore, and upon reflection, in subsequent lessons, the students were given time to prepare questions in English first to increase the level of interaction in English. This resulted in more interaction between the students and their *senpai*. Although this was a one-off experience for the students, the researcher observed an improvement in learner engagement in the classroom, which shows how L2 role models can be utilized to have a positive effect on observed L2 learner motivation.

Due to a number of the participants having referenced celebrities are L2 role models, the researcher designed pedagogy that aimed to introduce native English-speaking celebrities in the classroom. In the researcher's own experience, the number of famous English-speaking celebrities that Japanese secondary school students refer to when speaking about their interests has been decreasing in the last decade. In contrast, the number of Korean idols referenced by students, in general, has increased significantly. This may be due to the K-Pop boom that is happening recently, not only in Japan but all over the world. As the participants in the present

study have shown, celebrities such as Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, and Malala Yousafzai, can be role models for Japanese students' English language learning. Therefore, the researcher suggests that English language teachers can not only act as role models themselves but also design pedagogy that utilizes English-speaking celebrities and provides authentic English language exposure to Japanese students. This can be achieved by increasing our learners' exposure to English language speakers from the world of movies, music, and celebrity influences, to increase our students' L2 motivation in the classroom and provide them with authentic L2 role models that they can engage with.

Conclusions

The participants of this study have shown that parents and teachers can be either L2 role models, influencing them to learn English in a linguistic sense, and also motivators, encouraging them in a broader sense. The participants also named celebrity English-speaking role models who had a great deal of influence on them. Participants with experience of near-peer L2 role models displayed examples of how these positive experiences influenced them to speak English, although others were either unable to name any near-peer role models that they knew of or stated that their friends did not encourage them to speak English. Secondly, pedagogy implemented from the results of this study has shown how near peer-role models can be harnessed and utilized in the L2 classroom with positive outcomes for student engagement, as observed by the researcher.

This study suffers from one important limitation that has to do with a relatively small participant sample, conducted in one Japanese high school. As the participants volunteered to participate in the study, it can also be said that they potentially chose to because they liked English, which might have slightly biased the findings. However, this type of data from teenage learners is notoriously difficult to secure, not least because of the complex ethical and data protection protocols that rightly need to be adhered to. This makes such research very valuable, not only for the researcher who works in this local context but for any researcher or teacher engaged in the topic of role models and language learning.

The present study can serve as a model for future research of this type in the high school context, which could be carried out on a larger scale with a sole focus on English language role models, to investigate if there is further evidence of the themes that were shown in this study in a nation-wide or even international context. Equally, the integration of materials about relevant role model celebrities is likely to increase L2 motivation and could be explored in future research in this field. In addition to the more traditional use of, for example, pop songs, there is now a range of artifacts that can be developed. These include reality TV programs, celebrity game shows, and a vast crop of materials from social media, to name but a few.

As this was part of a larger project examining English language learning motivation, future studies could also put more emphasis on investigating the particular part that near-peer role models play in increasing L2 learner motivation, as this was shown to be an area that has much potential for utilization not only in the high school context but in L2 classrooms in broader contexts.

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Appendix 1 - Interview guide (Questions relating to L2 motivators and role models)

1. Do your friends, teachers or parents encourage you to speak English?

   あなたのクラスメート、教師または両親は英語を話すようにすすめていますか？

2. What do your parents want you to do in the future?

   あなたの両親はあなたに将来何をしてほしいですか？

3. Are there any famous people from foreign countries that you admire?

   あなたがあこがれて いる外国人の有名人はいますか？

4. If yes, do they inspire you to study English?

   彼らは英語を勉強するようにあなたにインスピレーションを与えますか？

Appendix 2 – Abbreviations and terms for extracts.

1. (1) = 1 second pause

2. (J) = Translated from Japanese into English

3. (JT) = Also repeated in Japanese

4. (laugh) = denotes laughter

5. (sic) = appears as was spoken

6. (in) = word inserted to repair the sentence, in this example *in*