The beliefs and practices of good language learners

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Abstract

When people learn a language, their beliefs can influence the way they study. For example, misconceptions about language learning might hinder a learner’s choice of strategies, which could further affect their progress and motivation to learn. This research explores the beliefs and practices of good language learners. It is carried out within an interpretive research paradigm, using qualitative methods and related instruments like open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data.

A sample of four Japanese students who were engaged in further language study in the UK, and who are regarded as good language learners, were interviewed about their beliefs and practices related to learning a language.

This study discusses the results that have been generated from interview data of competent language learners. The beliefs and practices of good language learners will provide some insights which could contribute to understanding why successful learners progress more rapidly than other learners, which, in turn, might offer deeper insights about how to help students improve their learning of a language.

要旨

外国語学習では、同じように学習していても、上達の早い学習者も、なかなか上達しない学習者もいる。このことから、上達の早い学習者は、どのようなbeliefsを持ってどのような学習をしているかというのに、研究者の関心は集まった。外国語学習についてのbeliefsとは、「外国語はどのように学習すべきか」とか「外国語を習得するためには文法が一番重要である」などの、外国語学習についての考えや信念のことを指す。このbeliefsが、勉強方法や気などにも影響を与え、さらには学習成果にもつながるため、学習者や教師はbeliefsについての認識が必要である。本研究では、イギリスで英語を勉強している学習者の中から、外国語学習に成功したと考えられる4人の日本人学習者のbeliefsと勉強方法を探求した。インタビューで収集した4人の学習者のデータを用いた質的研究を、解釈的視点で考察した。
1. INTRODUCTION

The number of Japanese students, including English-language learners, studying in English-speaking countries is increasing. Most of them expect to attain greater English proficiency by staying in an English-speaking country for one year or so. However, it is questionable whether merely residing in such a country is sufficient, because many people who do so do not necessarily acquire a good command of the target language. In extreme cases, those who stay in a foreign country for many years are sometimes unable to carry out even everyday conversations. It is likely that there are some factors which differentiate successful language learners from their unsuccessful counterparts. In fact, I have met some Japanese people whose English proficiency, especially oral proficiency, seems of a very high quality compared to other language learners. Exploring their beliefs and practices about English language learning might provide insights leading to possibly better approaches towards language learning. The present study is carried out within an interpretive research paradigm, using qualitative methods.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning or acquiring the second language

More than three decades ago, different views of the second language acquisition process were proposed by Krashen (1981) and McLaughlin (1978). Krashen argues that second language acquisition occurs unconsciously in using a target language, whereas McLaughlin claims that conscious learning is important for the automatic use of a target language. With regard to these conflicting views, Schumann (1983) suggests that the process of second language acquisition can vary according to individual learners. Although some learners may find it easier to use conscious grammatical learning, others may prefer to involve themselves in target language use to acquire proficiency.

In the context of teaching language, there has been a shift from introducing language as a set of forms (grammatical, phonological, lexical), to introducing language as a functional system (Tarone & Yule 1989). When language is perceived as a functional system, the use of language receives greater attention, which is described as communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) present three key components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Tarone and Yule (1989) argue that traditional language teaching methods
and materials have focused mainly on grammatical competence, with less attention given to sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In the real context of communication, a learner with only grammatical competence would not be able to cope with transactional or interactional conversation, because natural conversation is dynamic, not a mechanical exchange of sentences.

2.2 Learner beliefs

The terms “knowledge” and “beliefs” are not always easily distinguishable. Pajares (1992) discusses the difficulty of pinpointing where knowledge ends and belief begins. He sees that belief is based on evaluation and judgment, and knowledge is based more on objective fact. Calderhead (1996) takes the view that knowledge usually refers to factual propositions and the understandings that inform skillful action, whereas beliefs generally refer to suppositions, commitments, and ideologies. Nespor (1987) suggests that beliefs have stronger affective and evaluative components than knowledge.

According to Flavell (1979), metacognitive knowledge is one of four classes of phenomena used to monitor cognitive activities. He claims that metacognitive knowledge can have a number of important effects on the cognitive activities, and plays a significant role in various domains such as language acquisition and learning. In this respect, from a language learning perspective, metacognitive knowledge could be regarded as an aspect of learners’ beliefs.

Richards and Lockhart (1994: 52) note that “Learners’ belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners’ motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favor”. Mori (1999) describes the nature of learners’ beliefs from various perspectives. Learner beliefs consist of multiple independent dimensions, each of which has unique effects on learning, and the nature of the learning experience could affect the formulation of learners’ beliefs, for example a rich learning experience could refine them. She supports the correlation between beliefs and achievement. Beliefs in ‘innate ability’ and ‘avoidance of ambiguity’ are associated with lower achievement. If students have beliefs in ‘innate ability’ and perceive their own ability as uncontrollable, Mori recommends that teachers should make students aware of the possibility of improvement with effort.
2.3 Good language learners

Defining a good language learner is problematic. The learner who is fluent in terms of communication, especially in spoken language, is not necessarily grammatically proficient at a formal level or good at producing written work. The opposite also holds true. Krashen (1981) claims that a learner who is overly concerned with grammatical accuracy may hesitate to communicate and have a lack of fluency. On the other hand, if language learning is developed mainly through using language to communicate without great attention to grammatical accuracy, there can be some disadvantages such as producing consistently inaccurate grammatical forms of the language, although the learner may be relatively successful in communication. Tarone and Yule (1989) suggest that the long-term effects of such a learning experience can undermine language proficiency.

Although defining a good language learner is difficult, it seems that some learners progress rapidly while others experience slow progress, which could be linked to individual factors influencing second language learning. Lightbown and Spada (1999) classified such individual factors into seven categories: intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs, age of acquisition. Investigating individual learner variables is not easy, partly because of the lack of clear definitions and methods for measuring such characteristics, which do not operate separately but interact in complex ways.

Tarone & Yule (1989) claim that there are two domains which could influence the learning process: the ‘affective domain’ and the ‘knowledge domain’. The ‘affective domain includes concepts such as attitude, motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Self-confidence or self-esteem is regarded as having an effect on successful learning, because it is a crucial factor in the learner’s ability to overcome occasional stumbles in the process of learning a second language (Tarone & Yule 1989). Their research suggests that self-esteem prevents learners from thinking that making errors is foolish, and helps them to ‘reach out beyond themselves,’ whereas the lack of self-esteem could be an inhibiting factor for the language learning process.

Another factor that makes it difficult to understand how the variables involved in learning a language concerns the definition and measurement of language proficiency. Some research reports that highly motivated learners are likely to be successful language learners, while other research claims that highly motivated learners do not get better scores
on a proficiency test. These conflicting findings can be explained by the fact that language proficiency tests do not measure the same kind of knowledge. If proficiency tests measure oral communication skills, highly motivated learners in informal language learning contexts may be more successful, but this does not seem to be the case when proficiency tests measure metalinguistic knowledge.

Furthermore, interpreting the correlation between two factors is problematic, because it is difficult to define which factor, success or motivation, is the cause of the other, especially as both could be influenced by other factors. It seems important to keep the complex nature of learner characteristics in mind when we try to explain successful language learning.

2.4 Attribution theory

Attribution is defined by Kelley (1967) as the process by which individuals interpret the causes of events in their environment. The causal explanations of lay people have been central to attribution theory. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) present two assumptions of attribution theory. The first assumption is that individuals are motivated to understand and master their own world in order to make it more predictable and controllable. The second assumption is that people try to understand the causal determinants of their own behaviour as well as the behaviour of others. Heider (1944) coined the term ‘naïve psychology’ of the layperson and attempted to formulate the processes by which an untrained observer, i.e. a ‘naïve psychologist’, makes sense of the actions of others. Weiner (1979) reported that ability, effort, and task difficulty have been identified as perceived causes of success and failure in academic and other achievement situations. From this point of view, Weiner has made a great contribution to attribution theory in achievement contexts, which could be applied to the field of language learning and teaching. In the attributional process, he identified three causal dimensions: stability, locus, and control, which would affect the perceived causes. Weiner suggested that people are inclined to mention four main attributions for their perceived successes and failures: ability, effort, luck, and the perceived difficulty of the task, the former two factors are internal, whereas the latter two are external (Williams and Burden 1997). Whether people see that ability and/or effort are stable or controllable differs greatly between individuals. Williams and Burden (1997) claim that different combinations of attributions and causal dimensions are likely to lead to different action outcomes. For example, if students believe they lack the ability to learn a foreign language and see this as a stable internal factor beyond personal control, they will
be unlikely to make efforts to improve.

Williams and Burden (1997) report interesting findings from research in this area. First, attributions are likely to be situation specific rather than global, since the nature of the event will affect the attributions. Second, it seems that people develop different attributions to account for success and failure. Considering that little research into attributions has been carried out in the area of language learning, further research looking at individuals might be helpful for a better understanding of language learners. Williams and Burden argue the importance of research on individuals’ views of themselves as learners, because it can lead to the understanding of the reasons learners give for their perceived successes and failures. Changing learners’ perceptions about these might lead to better control of language learning outcomes. For language learners, viewing their successes and failures as unstable and controllable would be one promising possibility for them to become autonomous learners.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

In order to explore the possible characteristics of good language learners, the following research questions were posed.

1. What beliefs do good Japanese language learners hold about language learning?
2. Did they modify such beliefs after studying in the UK?
3. What are the attributions of good Japanese language learners?
4. What are the practices of good Japanese language learners?

3.2 Participants

When thinking of competent learners of the English language, one could say that students who are studying at universities in English-speaking countries are ipso facto good at learning a language, because they have usually passed some sort of English proficiency test before entering the university. Among Japanese students studying or working in the UK, four participants were chosen to collect data about the characteristics that underpin their own performance. In this respect, participants were chosen in terms of their communicative ability, i.e. speaking and listening. This is a non-probability sample, also known as a purposive sample (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). The four participants were selected on the grounds of their exceptional communicative competence and
speaking skills in English. Tomoki and Takuya were male, and Mariko and Satomi female (pseudonyms). They were in their twenties or early thirties.

Tomoki had been studying in the UK for about 4 and half years, with four months in an English language school, and four years as an undergraduate at a university. His spoken English was British English and very natural and fluent, and, probably because of his special proficiency in English, he was working as an assistant for international students. This was his first time studying abroad.

The distinguishing trait of Takuya was his extraordinary progress in spoken English. When I met him for the first time, he could fluently express himself in English. However, people who had met him five months ago stated that he could only speak limited English, which he admitted to when interviewed for this study. He had been studying in the UK for eleven months, the first five months in an English language school, and the rest of the time at an English language centre at a university. Another feature, which differentiated him from most other Japanese students, was his strategy of deciding not to speak in Japanese in the UK, even when talking to Japanese people.

Mariko is a student on a master’s course in English literature. This is her third time living in the UK. She lived in London with her family for one year when she was a high school student, and she studied in the UK as an undergraduate seven years ago. As a master’s student she wrote five assignments of 5000 words each, together with a dissertation of 20,000 words in only one year. Majoring in English literature must have been difficult, since the majority of her classmates were native speakers of English. Her spoken English is consistently at a high level of proficiency both as regards appropriateness and register.

Satomi had been a student in an English language school in the UK, but was now working as a salesperson in a boutique in the UK. At the time of meeting her in the boutique where she worked, I was listening to her English without looking at her, and, I thought she must be British, since her English was very natural, having a strong southwestern British accent and intonation. I was very much interested in her, because I have rarely met a Japanese person who spoke English with a strong regional accent.
3.3 Procedure

A semi-structured interview was used to collect data on the research questions. This involved preparing an open-ended questionnaire, in order to receive the participants’ answers before the interview and let them know the questions to expect in the interview. However, only two out of the four participants filled in the questionnaire; the other two participants did not have time and/or preferred to be interviewed without knowing the questions in advance. When they were asked to participate in the research, I explained its purpose and assured them that their responses would be confidential. Seven questions were asked: three questions were concerned with beliefs about learning, one was about the change after staying in the UK, two questions were about self-concepts and attribution, and one question about practice or efforts to improve each aspect of English (See Appendix). Questions on beliefs about learning were selected from Richards and Lockhart (1994), and questions about attribution were selected from Williams and Burden (1997). The other questions were devised by the researcher.

3.3.1 The semi-structured interview

Only one participant was interviewed on any one day. Although Takuya wanted to be interviewed in English, the rest of the participants were interviewed in Japanese. All of them talked about their views and experiences in a relaxed manner for a period of 90-120 minutes in a quiet room, and all of them were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. Although their answers sometimes digressed from the questions, I let them speak since this can provide unanticipated statements and stories, and elicit participants’ interpretation of their experience. As an intensive interview allows an in-depth exploration of the participants’ beliefs, it is likely to be a useful method for interpretive research. There are four categories of questions in the interview according to each research question (See Appendix).

3.3.2 Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and organized into discrete categories and coded according to each question using a content analysis approach.

One limitation of this study is the definition of good language learners. Although I tried to set a standard and to find appropriate participants, their selection might have been too subjective, because I focused mainly on communicative oral competence, i.e. speaking and listening.
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I will link the results to the discussion of the interviews for each of the four categories.

4.1 Beliefs about learning

4.1.1 What do you think “learning foreign language” is?

The participants perceive ‘learning a foreign language’ as something related to communication, for example, to acquire the means of communication, or learning from everyday conversation. One participant felt that being able to communicate with others was ‘cool’ for him. In Mariko’s opinion, if one begins to learn a new language, it is necessary to learn the fundamentals from a textbook, but after that it is better to go to a country where a language is used, because without a situation where one can use a language, the language cannot be a means of communication. Mariko expressed her views as follows.

_Learning a foreign language is just accepting everything such as language structure or expression. It’s not something we can completely master, or we can learn from something like a textbook, or dictionary. The best way is to put yourself into the area where the language is spoken, and just accept everything._

Similarly, Takuya explained;

_Learning a foreign language is to use language in a real situation rather than to study it in front of a desk._

Tomoki’s perception about learning a language is to use it, for example, listening to music, watching TV or talking to people in order to acquire the means of communication. Satomi conceives learning a language as understanding an expression and learning from conversation that takes place in everyday life.

In Brindley’s (1984) report, learners held the assumptions about learning as “Learning a language consists of learning the structural rules of the language and the vocabulary through such activities as memorization, reading and writing”. However, the participants in this study expressed a very different view about learning.

4.1.2 What do you think are the most important aspects of learning English?

As for the most important aspects of learning English such as memorizing vocabulary
or understanding grammar, Mariko thought reading was most important because we could learn the pattern of English rhythm or expression by reading plenty of English sentences. Tomoki regarded ‘getting used to it’ as most important and he thought it would be difficult to choose between vocabulary and grammar, because lacking one such aspect makes it difficult to communicate. However, pronunciation or intonation could be important aspects since these have a significant role in making phrases or expressions meaningful. Takuya expressed his perception as follows.

The important thing for me is to enjoy learning rather than to force myself to study hard. I like learning languages and having a conversation with people. I am good at grammar or writing, so for me speaking is the most important thing to do now in the UK.

Satomi emphasised the importance of listening since using language to communicate requires listening and speaking. She also mentioned that how one spends time in an English-speaking country was important. For six months after arriving in the UK, she did not use Japanese except when phoning her mother in Japan.

Although the four participants have different views about the most important aspects of learning English, three of them emphasised oral aspects, such as speaking, listening, pronunciation and intonation. Their experience of living in the UK could be the cause of such views. Mariko’s belief about reading being the most important aspect might stem from her major, which was in English literature.

4.1.3 What do you think are the best ways to learn a language?

Concerning the best ways to learn English, there was a consensus on the matter. The participants thought living in and using the language of an English-speaking country is the best way. On top of that, Takuya made the following remark about the importance of how to spend the time in an English-speaking country.

We shouldn’t stay with our friends who are from the same country when we study abroad. We should stay with people from other countries.

Tomoki thought that the best way to learn a language is to spend as much time as possible with native speakers of English since it enables one to learn a language as well
as its culture. Although Mariko also advocates living in a country where the language is spoken, she felt that only staying in the country for a certain period was not sufficient. For Mariko, the important thing is to try not to use Japanese if there is one non-Japanese person in a group. She attempted to have many non-Japanese friends. Even if living in Japan, it is important for her to force herself into a situation in which she has to do English assignments by the deadline.

Takuya tried to use English in the UK as follows.

> Occasionally I am forced to speak some Japanese to Japanese people if they speak to me in Japanese, but mostly I don’t use Japanese. I sometimes found it easier to speak English rather than to speak Japanese because I can say what I want to say in English but I can’t say it in Japanese due to the language difference.

Brindley (1984) reports the comments by learners on a communicatively oriented English class: “You need a teacher to learn English properly – you can’t learn it by yourself because there’s no-one to correct you.” However, the participants in my study expressed more self-oriented beliefs about the way of learning, possibly because intermediate and advanced learners of English need a more autonomous approach for learning.

Tomoki and Mariko mentioned that sociable and curious people could be good language learners because they could communicate with other people easily and positively, which corresponds with the argument of Lightbown and Spada (1999) who suggest that personality variables may be a major factor in the acquisition of conversational skills. Another trait of personality is making a steady effort, which is a necessity for language learning. Furthermore, good imitators can pronounce the foreign words in the same way as they hear them.

Satomi thinks that people who are not afraid of making mistakes are suitable for language learning. If people tend to avoid making mistakes, they might hesitate to use the language. It seems that perfectionists might find it difficult to study languages. This finding is in line with the claim of Mori (1999) who presents a statistical finding indicating that ‘avoidance of ambiguity’ is associated with lower achievement.
4.2 The changes in their beliefs and practices after studying in the UK

4.2.1 Did your thinking and practices in language learning change after studying in the UK?

All the participants said that their beliefs and practices in language learning changed after studying in the UK. They all think that English study in Japan was just a part of study to pass an exam, but in the UK it is the means of studying their own academic fields. For Takuya English study in the UK is a part of his enjoyment because he can enjoy using English and at the same time he can learn it. Mariko and Satomi realized that listening and speaking were more important and useful than reading and writing for learning English. Although many researchers report the difficulty of changing beliefs (Kern 1995; Kalaja 1995; Peacock 1998), it is likely that major changes in their environment made the participants’ beliefs change possible.

Satomi’s way of memorizing vocabulary items in Japan was rote learning in alphabetical order. Although rote learning is popular in Japan for preparing exams, students tend to forget what they memorized just after passing the exam, which seems waste of time and efforts. In the UK Satomi learned English words by using them in a sentence, and in this way of learning these words remained firmly in her memory.

Takuya didn’t try to memorize grammar or vocabulary in the UK, but instead he tried to use them in a real conversation, which was much more effective for him than trying to memorize them. He thought that language was something which we had to use in a real situation, so it should be very practical.

All the participants were aware that Japanese learners of English didn’t have chance to speak English in Japan, and thus they appreciated the way of learning in the UK.

4.3 Beliefs about self-concept and attribution

4.3.1 Are you good at learning English?

Individuals’ views of themselves as learners are important for their perceived successes and failures of language learning as Williams and Burden (1997) argue. Two participants answered that they were good at learning English whereas the remaining two said they did not think so.

Satomi thinks that she can learn a language easily because she does not care about making mistakes. Although many Japanese people are considered as perfectionists, she
just corrected the way she had said if she had made mistakes. Her belief about learning a foreign language is that it is impossible to be perfect in using the language for non-native speakers. Even if one cannot understand perfectly, it is important to use the language in vague grasp of the meaning.

Takuya was enjoying what he was doing as follows. In this sense, he thought that he was good at learning English.

\[ I \text{ don’t think my skill of learning languages is very good because I’m not good at memorizing something compared with other people. However, when I meet new people, I don’t hesitate to speak to them, which is very important to learn languages.} \]

Mariko didn’t think she was good at learning English because the result of her long period of studying English didn’t satisfy her. Although she thought she would be able to read English books without any difficulty when she became a doctoral student in Japan, it was still difficult for her. Tomoki considered his special proficiency in English was just because he had lived in the UK for four and half long years. He also thought that he was fortunate to live with British people. Mariko and Tomoki seem to have an unassuming way of thinking about their proficiency in English, and Takuya thought he had a weak memory, which is supported by the contention of Lightbown and Spada (1999) that successful language learners may not be strong in all factors of aptitude.

4.3.2 What are the reasons you are doing well as a language learner?

Is doing well up to you or someone (something) else?

Good language learners try to explain the cause of their success as Kelley (1967) defines attribution as the process by which individuals interpret the causes of events in their environment. Satomi had two reasons; she had a good British teacher who knew both her strong and weak points and gave her appropriate advice about studying English. Another reason was Satomi’s personality of being unafraid of making mistakes and her positive attitudes in speaking English. She tried to join the conversation whenever she found some people talking in English.

Mariko liked languages and was interested in the differences between languages. She didn’t find studying English painful because she wanted to achieve her aim of reading English novels and talking with foreign friends in English. Studying English
was something to help her accomplish what she wanted to do. Another experience of her secondary school days changed her perception about English. She came to the UK for the first time and lived there with her family for one year. She realized that English was not only a subject at school but also a means of communication. Interestingly, when she spoke in English, she felt that her personality had changed and could live an unrestricted way of life, namely she could be bold. While speaking in English, she had no fear of using incorrect Japanese honorific language. She would be embarrassed if she made mistakes in Japanese, but is more tolerant of mistakes in English. It seems that this outlook and her interests in English were the motives for her study.

Tomoki thought he was fortunate because he used only English in a department at a British university where there were no Japanese classmates. He lived with four British friends for three years. Such favourable experiences made him use English all the time. This coincides with research reported by Isabelli-García (2006) which shows that immersion in the target culture is valuable for language learners.

Another story of the source of Tomoki’s fighting spirit was interesting. His motivation came from his friend’s abusive comment in Japan. Tomoki failed to pass a university entrance exam and was preparing for the next year’s entrance exam. However, before taking the exam, he came to the UK. His friend said, “Are you running away from Japan?” He was shocked by the comment and thought he had to be successful in the UK. According to Williams and Burden (1997), specific emotions such as pride and shame are related to outcomes attributed to perceived internal, controllable elements. In Tomoki’s case, it seems that his pride and shame favourably affected his motivation. Although Tomoki failed to pass a university entrance exam, this increased his desire to succeed in another context, as Dörnyei (2001) claims. These were the reasons he was making good progress as a language learner.

4.4 Good language learners’ practice

4.4.1 What kind of practice did you do to improve the following aspects of your English? (Grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking, writing, pronunciation, other)

Tomoki’s way of reading is to read a book more than once, for example, he prefers reading five books twice to reading ten books once. He did not study “English” but he studied his field in English. When he read books, he tried not to use a dictionary too often
and guessed the meaning of unknown words. As for listening and speaking, he positively
joined conversations with British people. He became confident about studying English
when he thought he had mastered basic English grammar.

Although Takuya did no English listening and speaking in Japan, his practice changed
in the UK:

*In the UK, when I eat dinner or lunch, I watch TV or listen to radio. Whenever I go
out, I've got a portable radio to listen. I am listening to something in English all the
time. Speaking practice in the UK is just meet my friends and have a conversation
with them, not try to improve my speaking but to just enjoy myself.*

With respect to vocabulary and grammar, he continued to explain his practice:

*In Japan I try to memorize vocabulary just to pass an entrance exam for university,
but in England I just try to use them in a real conversation rather than writing them
at the desk. I studied grammar quite a lot in Japan because grammar is the most
important point in English study in Japan.*

Mariko did no English listening in Japan, but when in the UK made the following
efforts to improve each aspect of her English.

*For speaking practice, when I listened to an unknown English expression used by
somebody in conversation, I consult a dictionary and use the expression next time.
I carry a note pad all the time to take a note when I find a difficult English phrase,
and I look for the phrase in my dictionary at home. When I write English sentences, I
consult an English usage dictionary to check the grammar. I read a lot of books in the
UK with attention to the important points within limited time.*

As the English grammar that Satomi learned in Japan was very helpful for using
English in the UK, she was thankful that studying English grammar in Japan was
considered to be important. When she came to the UK, she already had basic English
grammar but did not have the experience of using it. Without the foundation of grammar,
she could not have improved her English as easily as she did in the UK, which was
further aided by talking and using English as much as possible. Although Krashen (1981)
claims that a learner who is overly concerned with grammatical accuracy may hesitate to communicate, the foundation of grammar is likely to be necessary for underpinning more flexible communication.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The participants in this study had some common beliefs about language learning. These belong to three groups. Firstly, all the participants appreciated having positive attitudes when using English, that is, they were not afraid of making mistakes and avoided trying to be perfectionists. Although being a perfectionist tends to be thought as a key attribute of a good language learner, this study suggests the opposite. Secondly, knowledge of grammar learnt from being educated in Japan was considered to be helpful for improving listening and speaking abilities. This diverges slightly from of Tarone’s and Yule’s (1989) argument that learners with only grammatical competence would not be able to cope with transactional or interactional conversation. In recent years, communicative language teaching has been prevalent in the world, but it should be kept in mind that good communicative ability is structured by grammar. Thirdly, the participants had a deep longing for the UK, the British version of the English language, British culture and its people. They did not like American English and were proud of having a British accent. This finding underscores the idea that longing is correlated to successful language learning.

The practices of the participants can be classified into four categories. Firstly, they made every effort to use English and tried not to use Japanese during their stay in the UK. Secondly, they avoided rote learning for building their vocabulary and instead used new words in sentences in real situations. Thirdly, when they read books, they did not use a dictionary so often and tried to guess unknown words, a strategy that is closer to being fallible than perfectionist. Fourthly, they had similar personalities with regard to communication. They liked to talk with other people and they were talkative not only in English but also in Japanese.

This study has two pedagogical implications for English education in Japan. Firstly, teachers and learners of English in Japan should keep in mind that English is not only a subject at school but also a means of communication. If they think that English is a subject, the purpose of their study is to get high marks in the examination. In such a way of studying, communication ability would not be improved. The beliefs about language
learning of teachers and learners in Japan could be modified for better approach to language learning. Secondly, teachers should carefully think about what type of examinations would be appropriate for better language learning, because examinations have a huge influence on language learning especially at school. Some type of examinations could make students nervous about making a slight mistake, which would produce perfectionists who seem to be unfavourable for language learning.

REFERENCES


**Appendix: Four categories of the questions in the interview according to each research question**

The three questions concerned with beliefs about learning *(Research question 1)*

1) What do you think “learning foreign language” is?
2) What do you think are the most important aspects of learning English? Why?
3) What do you think are the best ways to learn a language?

One question about the changes after staying in the UK *(Research question 2)*

1) Did your thinking and practices in language learning change after studying in the UK? How did they change?

The two questions concerned with beliefs about self-concept and attribution *(Research question 3)*

1) Are you good at learning English? How do you know?
2) What are the reasons you are doing well as a language learner?
   - Give me an example of when you did well.
   - Is doing well up to you or someone (something) else?

One question about the participants’ practice or effort to improve each aspect of English *(Research question 4)*

1) What kind of practice did you do or efforts did you make (or are you doing) to improve the following aspects of your English? Please explain in detail.
   - (Grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking, writing, pronunciation, other)