A Narrative Analysis of Green Global Talent Life Stories: Awareness of Ecological Issues and Orientation to Learning English [i]

Masako NASU
(Okayama University)
Masayuki TERANISHI
(University of Hyogo)

0. Introduction

Sustainability has become an important theme of concern among the international community, and interest in environmental issues, or green issues, is growing among Japanese university students as well. In the context of EFL in Japan, a high level of English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for being globally active, and the relationship between an awareness of environmental issues and interest in learning English is worth investigating. Yashima (2009) refers to an increased aptitude for solving international problems as an international orientation, arguing that having a long-term goal of engaging in "activities that contribute to international issues" and an increased international orientation are important factors that can motivate Japanese students to learn foreign languages.

Considering such a pedagogical context, this paper explores the relationship between the process of raising awareness of environmental issues and orientation to learn English using narrative theory and life story research methods in an interdisciplinary manner. To highlight the importance of "acts of meaning" (Bruner 1993), we gathered the life stories of people globally active in the environmental field through their oral interviews, and analyse the interview texts with the help of narrative theory to examine how learning English and solving environmental problems are related as "acts of meaning".

In the sections that follow, first, an overview of research on motivation in language learning is given and the situation of Japanese university learners is presented. Next, our qualitative research on foreign language learners through interviews is explained. Finally, we pick up one of the global talents we explore and conduct a qualitative analysis of his interview by TEM to visualize how his motivation to learn English has changed over time. We also analyse the interview semantically and stylistically to examine how his English learning experiences are linguistically embodied.

1. Background

This section explains the background of the current study by summarizing our investigation into how students at a Japanese national university learn English.

1.1. Motivation in Language Learning

Previous research on motivation for foreign language learning has examined the relationship between 'integrative orientation' and 'instrumental orientation' through contractive studies. Although the study to contrast intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is popular, it has been noted that this distinction may become less clear in studying languages with strong ethnolinguistic vitality, such as English. English has an established status and high practical value in the international community, which can blur the boundaries between these motivational factors.

The bar chart in Figure 1 displays survey results conducted in July, 2023 on English

learning motivation, with responses from 1,144 first-year students at a Japanese national university.
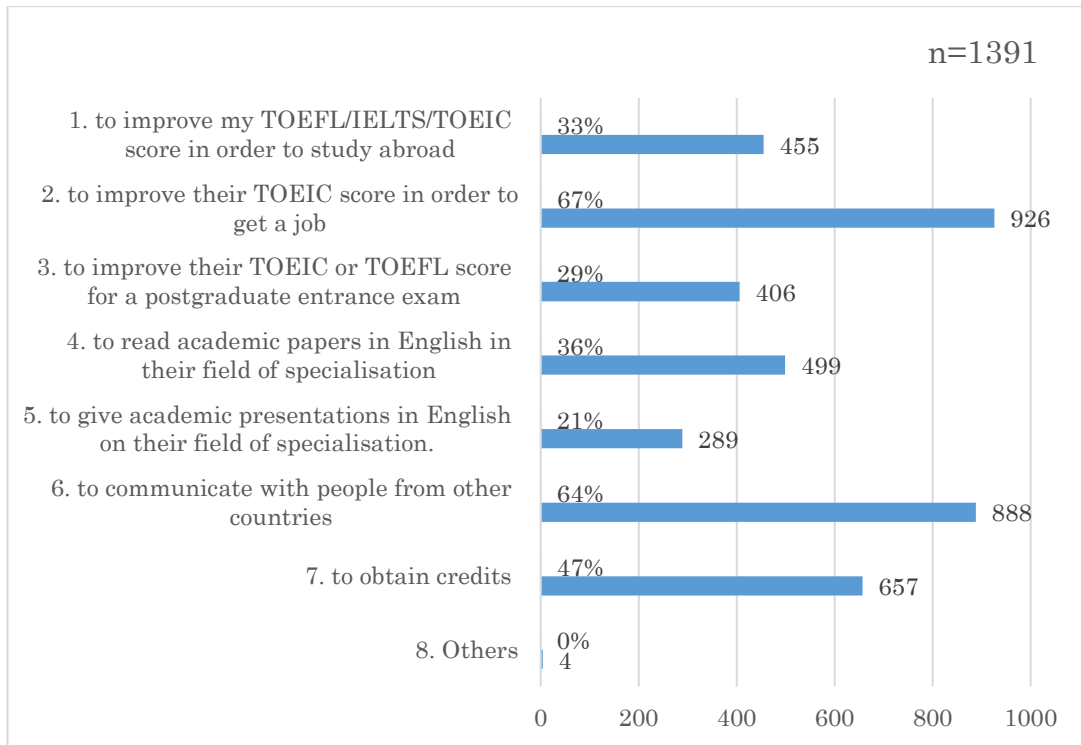

Figure 1: Motivation of English learning

Notably, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation exhibit equal levels of prominence. The top-ranking motivation, chosen by 66% of students, is the desire to improve scores on external qualification tests, such as the TOEIC, for job finding. This is an example of extrinsic motivation. The subsequent item, cited by 65% of students, reflects the intrinsic motivation of wanting to communicate with foreigners. Importantly, the survey allowed for multiple responses, revealing that many respondents identified with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. This suggests a high correlation and a blurred distinction between the two motivational categories.

1.2. Context of Japanese University Learners

As reference to the language learning environment of Japanese university learners, the bar chart in Figure 2 shows English usage in Japanese students' daily lives.
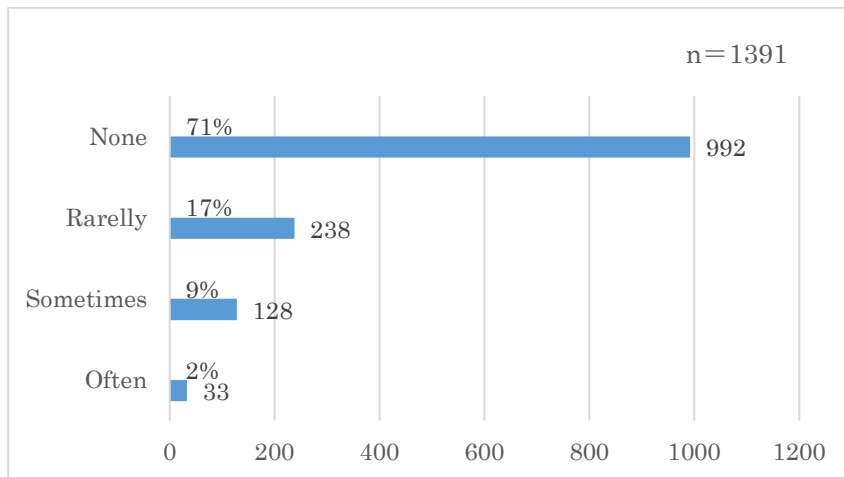
Figure 2: English usage in Japanese students' daily lives

In Japan, most people speak Japanese and do not need to use any other language. This was also the case for university students on campuses with many international students, with 72% not using English at all and 17% rarely using it. Approximately 90% of the students had no experience using English in their daily lives. This had a significant impact on the student's motivation to learn English. Japanese university students have limited exposure to an 'English-using self', making it challenging to embrace the Ideal L2 Self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

The line graph in Figure 3 shows the change in English language proficiency scores from the first to the second year at Japanese national universities.

The data includes approximately 2300 students divided among 11 faculties. The graph shows the change in results at three different time points: April for first-year students (immediately after entering university), December for first-year students (second semester of first year), and December for second-year students (second semester of second year). Of the 12 faculties, Agriculture, Engineering and Science exhibited a slight increase in English proficiency scores. This can be attributed to the requirements imposed by these faculties, which stipulate certain scores for graduation and progression. However, the remaining nine faculties experienced a slight yet significant decrease in their English proficiency levels. It is often observed that the university examination period represents the peak of English proficiency for most Japanese individuals in their lifetimes. After completing compulsory university English courses, typically taken until the second year of university, their English proficiency tends to decline from this period onwards. This phenomenon, referred to as the "downhill phenomenon," involves a decline in English proficiency after completing compulsory university English courses and is often associated with a loss of purpose or goals for the immediate future.
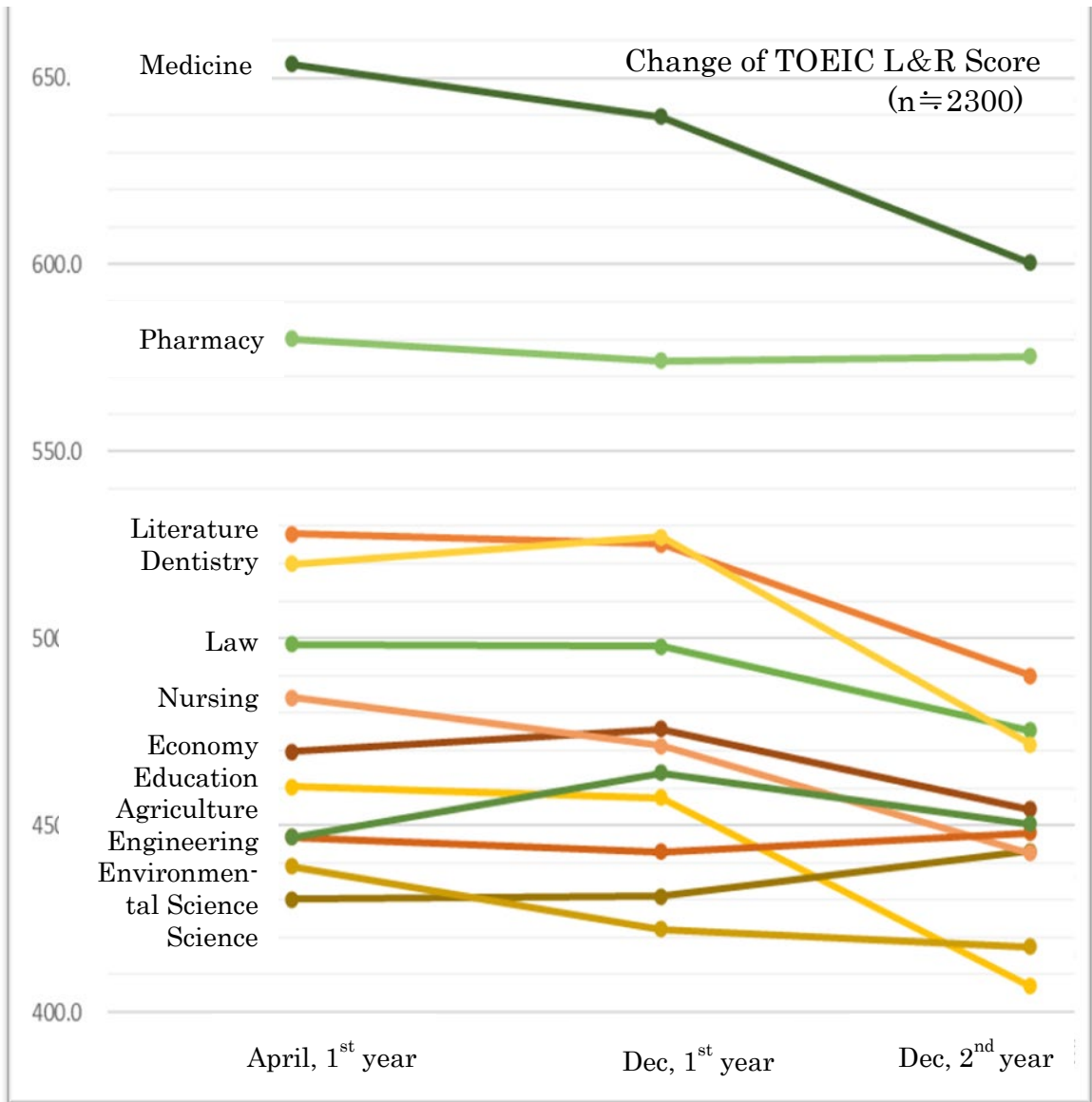
Figure 3: the change in English language proficiency scores

In addition, the international orientation towards studying abroad at Japanese universities has been weakened due to the coronavirus pandemic. Figure 4 shows the result of a survey of over 2,300 students conducted in 2023, which revealed that only around 25% of respondents had more than one month of experience abroad.
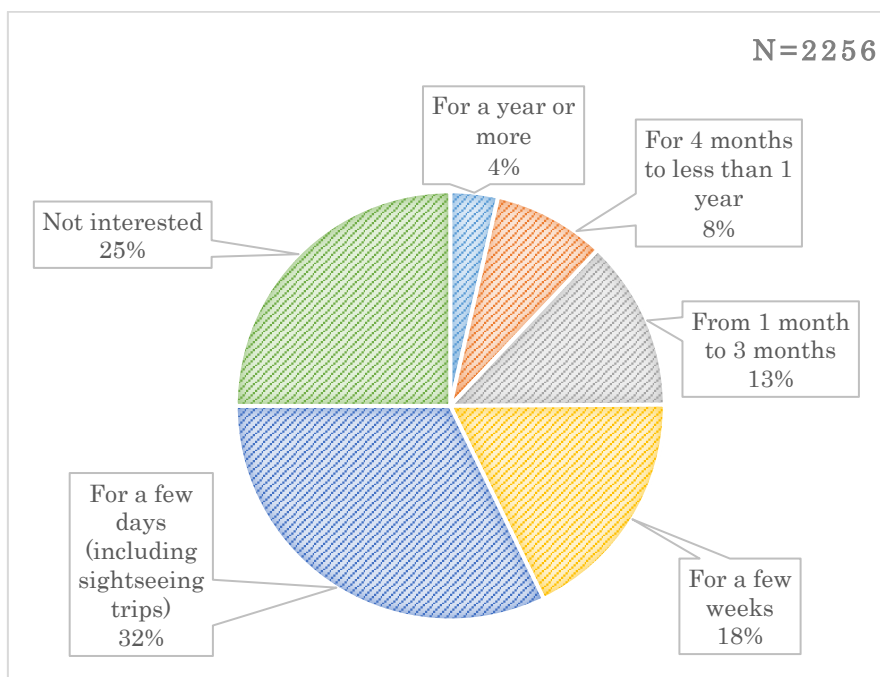
Figure 4: Wish to experience abroad

Given the current circumstances, developing a motivation model for English language learning is important to raise awareness among university students about the connection between English and themselves. Exploring how Japanese learners can shape their self-image, including the Ought to self, Possible self, and Ideal self, can enhance motivation and foster an international posture, benefiting learners' motivation and global outlook.

2. Research Method: Narrative Analysis

Considering the pedagogical needs to gain data for developing the motivation model, a qualitative study was conducted to examine the experiences of English language learners and come up with possible representative models. The study involved conducting 48 interviews, and the models were constructed using a qualitative research method called TEM (Trajectory Equifinality Modelling). Oriented to provide a holistic picture of long-term experiences, the TEM was developed in the social psychology field and is now increasingly used in second-language acquisition as well. The most important feature of TEM is that it has a 'time axis' and deals with learners' experiences over a long period. Trajectory and Equifinality are the features of the model, which highlight that learners can achieve the same desired outcome despite taking different pathways in their language-learning journey.

Figure 5 shows an image depicting TEM from the perspective of Sato and Yasuda (2012).
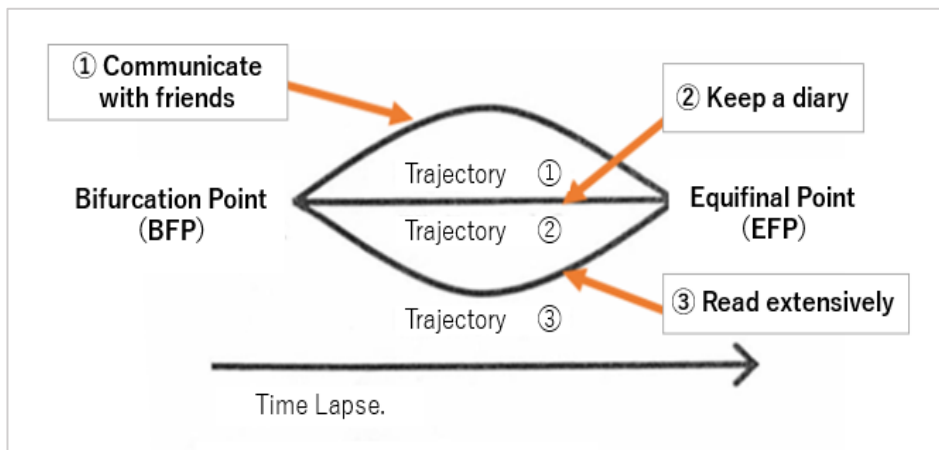
Figure 5: Conceptual image of TEM quoted and modified from Sato & Yasuda (2012:2)

The TEM concept states that learners can reach the same destination through several pathways. For instance, when the goal is to achieve a high level of English proficiency, learners may adopt different approaches; one learner communicates with friends, another maintains a diary, and the other continues to read extensively. Despite taking different routes, all learners have the potential to reach the same equifinal point, attaining the desired level of English proficiency.

Just as external factors like learning activities vary, learners also possess distinct motivations within their inner selves. These motivations propel them towards the equifinal point, which in this case is working as global talents. The trajectory of the internal motivation pathways is also multilinear. Taking some examples from the interviews, one participant said that she wanted to make friends with people from other countries. Another said that he longed to experience the unknown. Others wanted to work on environmental issues.

By using TEM, the project initially focused on external factors like learning activities and study abroad experiences in foreign language learning. As Figure 6 shows, our project has now shifted to explore internal factors such as motivations, attitudes, self-image, identity, and views of life. The aim of the current study is to visualise the life stories of foreign language learners through a narrative analysis of interviews.
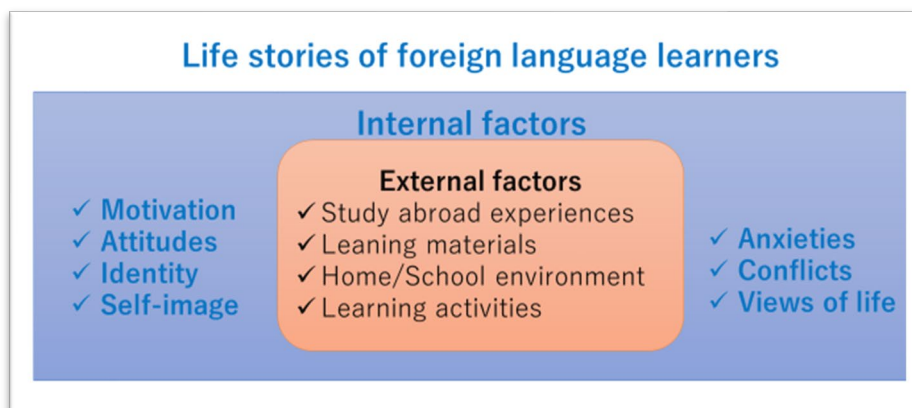

Figure 6: External and internal factors surrounding foreign language leaners

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3. Narrative Analysis of a Green Global Talent

The current study examines the interview of Learner A, one of the interviewees who were asked in detail about their internal factors of motivation. Learner A is a graduate university student in 2023 and he wants to work for an international organisation in charge of Meteorological Service. His English level is quite high with TOEIC L&R 985, IELTS overall 8.0, and Eiken Grade 1. He has study abroad experience of 9 month in the US when he was the fourth year of university. One of his major learning methods is subscription to *TIME* magazine. His strong motivation to learn English includes working for an international organisation such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in the future, especially, at an aviation meteorological station. Thus, he has had a clear image of ideal L2 self.
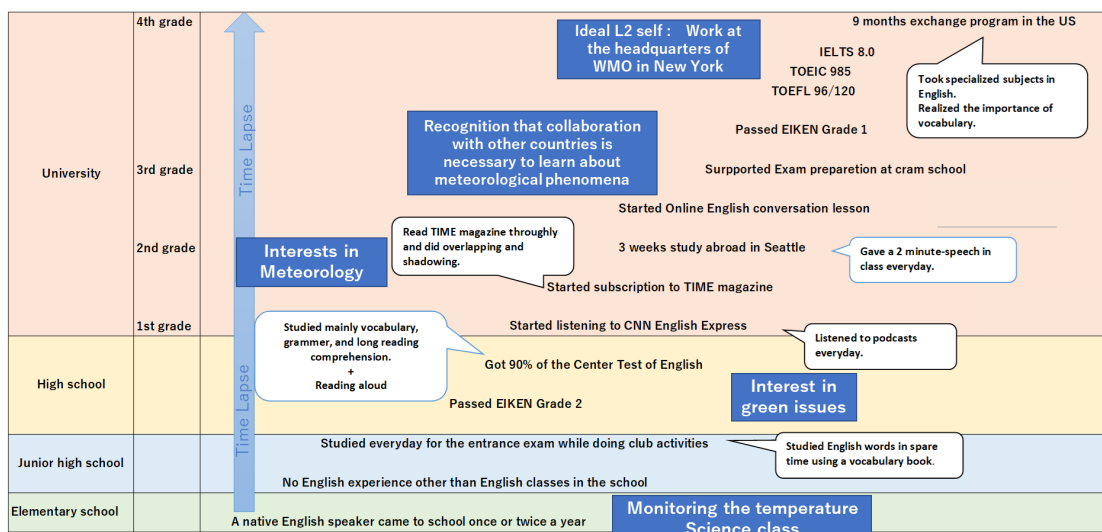

Figure 7：TEM diagram of Lerner A in English

Figure 7 illustrates Learner A's journey to English proficiency from primary school to university. One notable aspect is his preferred learning method, which involved reading publications like *TIME* magazine cover to cover. This approach aligned with his interests and concerns, and he actively pursued it during his second year of university.

Significantly, his interests in green issues and his motivation for learning English are overlaid on his TEM. In primary school, he enjoyed monitoring the temperature in an instrument shelter during science class. During high school, he became interested in green issues. Then he pursued his studies at a university in the School of Human Science and Environment. During Learner A's first and second years of university, a period often associated with the downhill phenomena in language learning, he developed an interest in meteorology through his university lectures. His motivation to learn English increased when he realized that research on meteorology requires collaboration with other countries. Despite the typical decline in English levels among Japanese university students during this critical time, Learner A's clear goal drove him to continuously enhance his English skills. He continues his efforts with the aim of working at the headquarters of WMO in New York.

4. Text Analyses of the Interviews

This section focuses on how Learner A expresses himself in the interview so that, in addition to contents of his words, qualitative aspects of his interview, such as modality or how strong his belief is, can be examined. The interview was conducted and then transcribed by one of the authors in Japanese and the transcript was translated into English by the authors.

According to the transcription of the interview, the total number of letters in Japanese is 13511 and interviewee's part is 6511. This shows that the interview is a dialogue in which both interviewer and interviewee speak equally. This is understandable because the Japanese speakers, especially young males, tend to avoid speaking long. In fact, Learner A often uses fixed phrase 'sodesu-ne', that means 'I agree'. In this sense, it may be better to avoid the word 'narrative' to refer to this data.

However, there are some sections in which Learner A speaks extensively to express his strong opinions. These engagements typically revolve around his interest in climate and the challenges he encountered while studying abroad and learning English.

4.1. Interests in climate

First, we examine how he describes his interest in climate in detail.

【1】 describes how he became interested in the climate as an elementary school student.

【1】

I was probably first interested in it (climate) in science class or something like that in primary school, and I cut out weather maps for free research or something like that.

Since this experience was long time ago (when he was an elementary school student), his testimony is often ambiguous by avoiding affirmation (e.g., 'probably').
In the following extract, he discussed temperature measurement at the screen shelter.

【2】

(1) When I went to see the screen shelter and actually measured the temperature, I found that the temperature varied quite a bit depending on where I measured it. (2) It's a familiar phenomenon, isn't it? (3) Of all the fields of science, I think weather is the most familiar. (4)I think that's probably why I became interested in it.

Although he still uses modal expression "probably" in the final sentence, his experience of measuring temperature is vividly described in (1) and (2). Significantly, he uses the emphasiser "quite a bit" to show his excitement with the experience. He also used tag questions to ask for the interviewer's consent. "The most familiar" (3) is also an intensifier and a variation in style may have something to do with his excitement in talking about temperature measurement.

In the next quote, he refers to the fact that weather is a global issue and shows his strong desire to address the issue internationally:

【3】

There aren't many weather phenomena that can be explained only in Japan, and in fact, we need to cooperate more with other countries to understand these phenomena

on a global scale.

His words indicate that English and environment are closely intertwined in his mind.

4.2. Awareness of study abroad

Learner A's awareness of climate change as a global issue motivated him to study abroad. In the following quote, he discusses the language school he attended as a second-year student.

> 【4】
> Many of the students in my class were from different countries, and I often couldn't use Japanese when communicating with them, but even so, in terms of specialisation, the emphasis was on everyday conversation, so when I thought about living and studying with other university students in the area, I felt that I needed to study a little more to keep up. (Emphasis is provided by Nasu and Teranishi.)

Unlike many Japanese EFL learners, he retained his motivation to study English because of his desire to study abroad. The modal verbs, "couldn't" (not "did not") and "needed to (study)", may be important stylistic features to show his frustration as an English speaker and sense of mission as an environmentalist.

4.3. Challenges in learning through English

As climate change is a global issue, he studied at an American university. His primary focus was to learn about climate-related topics through the medium of English, rather than solely focusing on English language acquisition. This approach challenges the conventional notion of English learning in Japan, which prioritises language acquisition as the primary goal. For example, Learner A described his learning as a conflicting experience:

> 【5】
> (1) The content itself was often things that I had already studied in Japanese, or things that I would have liked to see covered in more depth, but I remember that when I was in Japan, I never learned such mathematical or scientific expressions in English, so at first, I had a lot of difficulty reading the textbooks. (2) I remember that it was quite difficult for me to read textbooks at first because I had never learned such mathematical and scientific expressions in English when I was in Japan.

He made the point that what he was learning was easy in terms of content; however, once explained in English, it became difficult. This contradictory view is reflected at the semantic level and in complex sentence structures.

5. Summary

The current study investigates the connections between Japanese students' orientations towards learning English and their awareness of green issues. First, based on the quantitative data analysis of over 2000 university students, we argue that for learners who are not in an English-speaking environment, the first and second years of

university are critical for maintaining their motivation to learn English. This negative data of Japanese EFL students motivates us to make a model linked to each faculty/department of university. Second, based on the analysis of one global talent, we showed that environmental issues can serve as a strong motivator for English language learning, particularly for students with a high awareness of environmental concerns. Finally, by examining the global talent's interview, we showed that qualitative research is essential to understand the internal factors that influence language acquisition and to create an English language learning model that is suitable for students' specialisations.

This paper shows a case study which focuses on one environment and future global talent and, by examining more interviews of global talents, we hope to make clear the connection between EFL/ESL learners' orientations towards learning English and their awareness of green issues.

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