

Aspects of Adult English Learners: A Preliminary Case Study of Learners in their 30s and 40s

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Abstract

The research, which is concerned first and foremost with understanding adult English learners and learning in Japan, was preformed to illustrate the results of a case study conducted on adult English learners; white-collar workers in their 30s and 40s in a city in Japan. The paper generated four assumptions of adult English learners and examined learning from three perspectives: (1) their English learning and attitudes in schools, (2) their English learning and career and (3) the factors prompting them to continue learning.

1. Introduction

English learning, as a life-long learning process, is one of the most popular activities for Japanese people. Not a single day passes without TV commercials for English conversation schools being aired. Their advertisement posters are also posted all over public transportation and all other urban locations. In bookstores what we call “books on English (*Eigobon*)” are stacked to the ceiling and some of them are best-sellers. Books on TOEIC and STEP occupy the corner of the bookstores. According to Torikai (2002), four million copies of Nichibeï Eikaiwa Techou (Japanese-English Conversation Book) published in October, 1945, have been sold and became the first post-war bestseller. Every time Japan has hosted international events such as the Tokyo Olympic, a nationwide “English Boom” has resulted. English has attracted the Japanese for a long time.

In Japan, there are no signs that the number of English learners will decrease anytime soon, considering the persisting Japanese love

affair with English, globalization and technology. Despite the many Japanese English learners, however, there remain very few pieces of academic research covering adult English learners in Japan. For example, Tsuchiya (2000), Shirahata (1990) and Shirahata (1992), covering listening strategy, grammar acquisition and age respectively, analyzed adult English learners. Nakamasu (1996) compared adult English learners with high school students from the perspectives of social English and grammatical competencies. Kawasaki (2000), meanwhile, proposed an effective English teaching method for adult learners. Sato (2003) made a practical report concerning adult English learning while Kato (2001, 2002, 2003 & 2004) pointed out certain problems faced by adult English learners and in terms of their learning, as well as discussing the possibility of English learning in the context of life-long education in Japan. These research works on adult English learners, however, represent a far small quantity than those concerning child, junior and senior high school students and college students, showing that academic and

systematic research into adult English learners and learning are still very much in a nascent state. This may be due to the fact that educators and researchers have generally and traditionally considered learners and learning to center around children and students rather than adults, to whom less attention has been paid. Watanabe (2002) insists "Adult education has not established in Japan"; this is certainly true of English education in Japan. The author thinks that in addition to improving English education in Japan, the concept of adult English learners and learning effort should be considered worthy of understanding and support, helping to raise the standard of English proficiency among the Japanese and render Japan a more matured society, where life-long education is commonplace.

The study, which should be addressed as an urgent and fundamental priority, aiming to understand adult English learners and their learning in Japan, was intended to demonstrate the results of a case study conducted on adult English learners in their 30s and 40s in a city in Japan. The purpose of the paper is to generate certain assumptions concerning adult English learners and learning from the three perspectives: (1) their English learning and attitudes in schools, (2) their English learning and their career and (3) the factors prompting them to continue learning.

"Adult(s)" are defined biologically, legally and socially (Knowles et al., 2002), but in the paper, adults are contrasted with children and students and defined as followed: individuals aged over 20 years no matter what their occupational status is.

2. Method

2.1. The Data

The case study was conducted in Fukuoka City from February to April, 2004. The data collected for the paper was in the form of transcripts made by the author from semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 participants. The interviews were conducted individually at or in the vicinity of the subjects'

workplaces. They were audio-taped only when the participants permitted it, otherwise recorded by the author in shorthand and memo form. The interviews were all conducted in Japanese and all the data was translated from Japanese into English by the author.

2.2. The Participants

The 11 participants (female 2; male 9) in the case study were all aged in their 30s and 40s, working full-time in Fukuoka City, and learning English at the time of interview. They voluntarily participated in the study.

All the participants were born, raised and educated in Japan. Although not deliberately, they all happened to be engaged in so-called "white collar" occupations. Their English proficiency were unidentified; some of them had taken examinations such as STEP and TOEIC, but others had not. Their memory of English learning was relatively vague, since they had learned it for a long time. However they were certainly educated at junior, senior high school and university and English was taught academically for at least eight years. Following graduation, they continued learning English on a regular or intermittent basis. Their brief profiles are described in the appendix and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant in the interests of privacy.

3. Findings

3.1. English Learning and Attitudes in Schools

While children learn in order to acquire knowledge and experiences, adults have instead a tendency to introduce their acquired knowledge and experiences into their learning context (Watanabe, 2002). The present day learning of adults is possibly a reflection of their previous learning experiences. The previous learning experiences and attitudes must therefore be examined to understand the present style of English learning.

All the participants had attended academic high schools. The purpose of English learning both for them and their teachers was to pass an entrance examination of university. They

unanimously recalled their English learning in high schools as translation into Japanese, teachers' explanation of English grammar and English composition. They were not trained listening and conversation and did not only learn English in school, but also at home. They were assigned tasks of memorizing English words and idioms and they had a quiz on them the next day.

- “We had a lot of homework. If we didn't do, teachers scolded us severely.” (Ms. Egashira)
- “My English grade was awful. I was one of the worst two among the class.” (Mr. Aoyama)
- “My grade was one of the worst five in the class.” (Ms. Narita)

Only one participant responded that she liked English in high school days. All they seemed to experience very high psychological pressure and tension during their English learning period. Clearly, they did not have positive attitudes toward English and English learning in their high school days, but despite their negative memories, they restarted English learning again later in life. The reasons for this will be discussed later.

Their next most important reason for English learning, after the passing of competitive entrance examinations, was to earn enough credits of English for graduation. For this reason, they were taught general purposed English classes for at least two years. Although they no longer experienced the same psychological pressure and tension concerning English learning, they did not see any special purpose in their participation except for the acquiring of credits.

When they became senior students, they started job hunting. Mr. Aoyama, after being informally accepted from a foreign-owned company, started attending a private English conversation school which he paid for himself:

- Mr. Aoyama: “I was not told to attend the conversation school by the company. I just thought I would need English, because the company was a foreign-owned enterprise.”

Mr. Shimoda was accepted from a trading company and it sent a set of English learning

materials to him.

- Mr. Shimoda: “I had to take an English test just after joining the company. If I had not passed it, I would have had to repeat it again the next year. Of course I studied hard.”

The senior years were turning points for them in different ways; some traveled abroad and others looked for jobs. They spent their time very differently compared to the past.

Life transitions such as marriage, retirement, job change and birth of children are the periods when adults require learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Final year of university is also one of life transitions; from college life to the real world; and this caused them to reflect on what English meant to them and motivated them to learn English. Consequently, they actually learned English by themselves.

In schools the initiative of English learning was taken by teachers and its main motivation was to pass an entrance examination and acquire credits for graduation. External motivation made the participants study English. However when they became senior, some of them, including Messrs. Aoyama and Shimoda, voluntarily started English learning showing that life's transition points represent one of the key areas to start English learning.

3.2. English Learning and Career

All the participants in the case study are full time workers and their main reason for English learning was to make use of English for their business. In order to clarify the time and context in which they need English, the brief descriptions of three participants will be examined first;

Mr. Horiuchi, 40s, Civil Servant:

“I happened to be asked by a friend to attend an English conversation school. It was my opportunity to restart English learning after graduation. I was transferred into the international department, where English was needed for daily business and business trip to foreign countries. I was satisfied with the challenging job. I continued English learning even though I did not work for the department.”

Mr. Tokunaga, 40s, Company Executive:

“Originally I was poor at English and tried to avoid it as far as possible. After all I didn't need any English when I worked in Japan. After the transference to London was decided, I reluctantly started English learning. In London, I worked and learned at the same time. I'm still continuing English learning, even after returning to Japan.”

Ms. Narita, 30s, Civil Servant:

“I use the training system that the city hall offers to learn English, although I don't currently need any English at my workplace. I'm thinking to study abroad at a graduate school, utilizing the training system. I would like my dream to come true by the age of 40.”

Their stories can be categorized into three. In the case of Mr. Horiuchi, his opportunity to learn English came through his friend, which also connected to his later work and saw him continue his learning. A similar pattern was found in the case of Ms. Egashira, whose opportunity came through her boss. They did not have any particular reason to learn English for the first time, but they were transferred to another section and utilize English proficiency there, thus improving the quality of their work. English has helped them to develop their career and it is called “developmental pattern.”

In the second case, although Mr. Tokunaga tried to escape from English learning, but urgent business matters forced him to learn it. Messrs. Shimoda and Aoyama, meanwhile, are taking a correspondence course at the graduate school in Australia. They learn English while working and studying their majors, which will term “simultaneous pattern.”

The third pattern is that of Ms. Narita. She does not need to learn English for her present job, but instead, is learning English for her future career (study abroad). The same is true for Mr. Kubo, who would like to participate in senior volunteer activities in developing countries or remain long term overseas after his retirement. Ms. Nrita and Mr. Kubo are learning English for their future, which will be called “future-oriented pattern.”

The relationship between their English learning and career is categorized into three patterns. Their motivation to study English is mainly for “business.” However, the relation between their English learning and careers differed under scrutiny. The three patterns will clarify when and precise career timing that sees adults start English learning.

3.3. Factors of Continuing English Learning

Adults have freedom “to begin learning anytime” and “to quit learning anytime,” unlike children and students. Many Japanese people have the experience of starting to learn English every April and subsequently soon giving up. The reason why the participants in the study have been able to continue their English learning will be studied.

Merriam & Caffarella (1999) indicate that the research into “persons who do not participate in learning” should be discussed from personal perspectives (attitude, belief and life cycle) and social perspectives. “Learning participants,” could be discussed from the aforementioned perspectives.

3.3.1. Psychological Factor

As aforementioned, the participants had negative experiences when learning English in schools. What about their present attitudes toward English learning?

- “English is essential to me.” (Mr. Shimoda)
- “English is both for business and hobby.” (Mr. Hara)
- “I'm investing in English to enrich my possibilities in my future career.” (Mr. Aoyama)

Their positive and passionate statements clearly express their positive attitudes toward English. Although it is not absolutely clear when the attitudes began to grow and the nature of the process allowing such attitudes to form, these positive attitudes have undoubtedly arisen during their learning of English or their working experiences. Their positive psychological attitudes have prompted them to continue their English learning.

3.3.2. Socioeconomic Factor

The participants were white-collar workers in their 30s and 40s, with a relatively high socioeconomic status. They are part of the generation having had to bear family expenses, but they can nevertheless afford the cost of English learning without sacrificing too much of their personal life. The learning cost that the participants paid varied: "about ¥5,000 a month," "¥100,000 for a three-month course at English conversation school." One participant answered "2 million yen for English learning so far" and his statement is a good proof of his ability to afford that extent of learning cost to date.

They are also engaged in socially stable jobs and can establish their careers over a long period, with promotion a likely goal. They do not have financial worries about their daily life, even though they might fall into an unexpected circumstance. They have time to learn after work or on weekends. Economic and mental stability are good reasons for continuing English learning.

4. Discussion and Implication

The case study analyzed 11 English learners and their English learning, focusing on three points: (1) their English learning and attitudes in schools, (2) their English learning and career and (3) the factors prompting them to continue learning. Having explored their English learning history in schools, it was found that they were bad at English and they were subject to external pressure to pass entrance examinations and did not have positive attitudes toward English learning. Although previous negative learning experiences tend to obstruct learning in adults (Wlodkowski, 1999), but they actually went back to learning English after they grew up. What does that mean?

Noticeably none stated that they hated English, though they did declare themselves bad at the subject. Mr. Kubo, when pondering his high school days, answered, "My favorite subjects were science and math. I was bad at

English, but I didn't necessarily hate it." He meant that he hated to memorize English words and idioms and he did not attain good grade in English, but that he liked something about the subject nonetheless. These contradictory feelings about English imply that the type of English they learned in schools differs from their ideal English. Consequently, they were able to pursue their ideal English when they grew up.

After entering universities their main purpose of English learning was to earn credits for graduation. However, when they became seniors, they were able to experience overseas travel and job hunting, representing opportunities to think about English and thus restarted English learning voluntarily. The period just before graduation was one of life transitions from students to the real world. Life transition is possibly a good opportunity for people to begin English learning. The case study showed one transition, but other transitions such as marriage and job change may also act as catalysts for English learning.

It was found that relations between careers and English learning could be categorized into three patterns. Three patterns discovered were as follows: developmental, simultaneous and future-oriented patterns respectively. They are not fixed in nature but rather more flexible in terms of their career and personal life. The patterns demonstrate the timing and career context encouraging adults to study English.

Finally, the study went on to analyze the factors prompting them to continue English learning. Continuing English learning is one of the key factors to success to mastering the subject and also problematic area for adult learners. The study analyzed the participants from personal and social perspectives and pointed out that there were their positive attitudes and socioeconomic reasons.

Considering the above statements, the following assumptions about adult English learners and learning can be made:

1. Even though adult learners had negative experiences of English learning in schools, they could restart English learning later in

their life. The previous negative learning experiences were not necessarily obstructions to adult English learners.

2. Life transitions were good opportunities to restart English learning.
3. The relation between the career and English learning could be categorized into three patterns: developmental, simultaneous and future-oriented patterns.
4. Psychological and socioeconomic factors influence the continuity of adults' English learning.

Finally the limitations of the study should be mentioned. The paper was written on the basis of the case study conducted in one local city in Japan, targeting 11 white-collar English learners in their 30s and 40s. Demographically speaking, they cannot be said to represent all adult English learners in Japan. If other adult English learners are examined, different findings would probably come out. Moreover, the paper did not examine adult learners' English proficiency, method of learning and their actual learning materials, meaning that many areas of adult English learners and their learning remain to be unclear. In this sense, the author does not intend to generalize the findings in the study but they will help as a means of understanding adult English learners and learning.

5. Conclusion

In Japan English learning is one of the most popular learning forms of adult learning. Japanese people learn English at various places for various reasons. In globalization and arrival of life-long education in society, the number of adult English learners is set to remain high and English learning will even attract adults more. In spite of its popularity among Japanese people, however, educators and researchers have seemingly been less interested in adult English learners and learning and pedagogically and academically there seems less systematic supporting for them than for students.

The study was fundamental and prelimi-

nary in nature in order to help understand adult English learners and learning in Japan. Thanks to 11 participants, the case study was conducted and its findings discussed, focused on three perspectives: (1) their English learning and attitudes in schools, (2) their English learning and their career and (3) the factors prompting them to continue learning. Five assumptions of adult English learners and learning were also presented. Over-simplified generalization of the research should be avoided, but the research plays a role in attempts to comprehend adult English learners and learning in Japan.

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Appendix

Mr. Shimoda	Management Consultant	Taking a correspondence course.
Mr. Yoshida	Certified Public Accountant	
Ms. Narita	Civil Servant (Administrator)	A desire to study abroad.
Mr. Aoyama	System Engineer	Taking a correspondence course.
Ms. Egashira	Civil Servant (Administrator)	Trained overseas for 3 months.
Mr. Tokunaga	Company Executive	Stationed abroad (3 years in London).
Mr. Matsuki	Civil Servant (Engineer)	
Mr. Hara	Civil Servant (Administrator)	Completed Master's degree in the US.
Mr. Kubo	Civil Servant (Engineer)	
Mr. Kurazono	Civil Servant (Engineer)	
Mr. Horiuchi	Civil Servant (Administrator)	