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Learning, Struggling, Teaching: Language Teachers' Reflections as Language Learners

I was only one week away from taking the Japanese Language Proficiency Test when I ran into Daniel Hooper at the Creating Community Learning Together 9 (CCLT9) conference on November 30th 2025, so language learning was very much on my mind. Daniel and I quickly struck up a conversation about our own experiences as language students and the various ways that this activity has helped to inform our attitudes and pedagogical choices as teachers. The article below is the result of that chance meeting and our subsequent discussions.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND AUTONOMY

Perhaps the most direct way in which our language learning experiences impacted our respective pedagogical approaches was through our recognition of the central role that learner autonomy and out-of-class learning had on our Japanese development. This echoes a wealth of accounts from research into self-access language learning and learning beyond the classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011) that foregrounds the overwhelming impact that autonomous learning beyond the classroom can have on language learning development, metacognitive skill development, and identity construction. By promoting the view that a classroom, a self-access center, or a library are but single nodes within a complex network that forms each individual's language learning environment (Benson, 2017), we can explore, as well as legitimize, the value of affordances for growth beyond the walls of our classroom. Just as in our Japanese learning journeys, online games, crowded train carriages, part-time jobs, AI tools, and community events are recognized and recommended as valuable venues for self-regulation and language proficiency to blossom. What follows are some excerpts from our discussion on this topic:

Robert: The idea of learning outside of the classroom is one that is of interest to me as a teacher who values developing learner autonomy in the courses I teach. My own language learning reminds me of the importance of this. As an adult learner of Japanese, my studies are self-guided and fully depend on my own motivation and interest. When it comes to opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, it cannot be denied that being a foreigner living in Japan brings a large number of opportunities. There are also extrinsic factors for studying the language, such as feeling better integrated in society, and possibly even better job opportunities. However, I still feel that studying Japanese is a choice, as I know people who choose not to follow a path of acquiring the language, even after years of living in Japan.

Dan: Definitely, Robert. Everything you have discussed resonates with me a great deal. As with you, my language learning has been completely self-directed and autonomous. I have never really spent any time in a formal Japanese class, so it has always been my precious study time on the train, my trips to the local library or the local izakaya, and my own personal goal-setting for various tests, that has driven my language development. Also, I would actually take a stronger position in that I view language study, not simply as a choice, but as a responsibility as a language teacher. Early in my career, I always felt awful when I heard monolingual English teachers hypocritically judging their students on their lack of effort or ability in a second language, and I resolved never to be the same.

Robert: That is a good point, and it is sad to hear such stories. As I mentioned above I think it is important to try to keep up with studying Japanese. Of course, there are times when workloads can feel overwhelming. I know that there have been several times when my Japanese studies became secondary to other things that I needed to prioritize. As a teacher then I often consider how our students, living in a non-English speaking country, with English perhaps not being central to their major, may struggle with developing intrinsic motivation towards their studies. To keep students on track, teachers can have students reflect on times when they have felt motivated towards learning English, time-management, and other study practices. Doing this may be a way for learners to either keep engaged or re-engage with their English learning.

To expand on the above point, through our own struggles with Japanese, we were also keenly aware of the potential value of advising and reflective dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2016) in managing the motivational or emotional peaks and valleys that are inextricably linked to the messy business of language learning. As such, we have chosen to dedicate considerable effort to foster opportunities for students to engage in teacher- or peer-focused reflective dialogue, to promote near-peer role modeling, and to utilize tools designed to enhance students' psychoemotional wellbeing and metacognitive self-awareness.

Dan: I guess something that changed in the later stages of my career, and in particular when I started my MA TESOL, was that I moved beyond the why of autonomy - i.e, its importance for students' development - and began to focus more on the how. By this, I mean that I don't think that just by throwing a bunch of materials and online resources at students, we can expect them to be effective self-directed learners. My language learning was a key point here too. When I came across advising for language learning in my MA classes, it allowed me to understand more explicitly the fundamental importance of learner training and psychoemotional wellbeing across the lifelong marathon that is language learning. I remember wishing I had a learning advisor to discuss my Japanese learning with!

Robert: I too feel a deep connection to the idea of learner training. To set my learners on a path toward greater autonomy, I have recently introduced a series of activities into my classrooms to encourage students to think about both their learning in general and their language learning specifically. I had students create notes based on the Gibbs (1988) six-stage framework for reflection (a description of what was done in an activity, a description of the participant's feelings in doing the activity, an evaluation on if the student thought the activity was successful, an analysis of the aforementioned points, a summary of the key takeaways of doing the activity, and a final section being a discussion on goals for improvement and how to achieve these goals) and then discuss their learning experiences with a partner. I did not limit the theme of the reflection to English learning, and it was interesting to hear the students discuss their struggles with

other languages such as Chinese. I feel that engaging in this kind of dialogic activity can show students that they are not alone on their journey as learners, but that others may share similar experiences. Another bonus of using the Gibbs framework is that the discussions end with goal-setting and considering ideas to reach these goals. In my own Japanese studies I can set goals, but somehow, I feel that not discussing these goals with others makes me a bit lazy in my studies as I don't feel a need to be accountable to anyone but myself. It is my hope that when students share their goals with others it will give them a heightened sense of accountability to achieve their goals.

PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCE

Numerous studies have examined the various benefits that multilingual teachers bring to the language classroom. Beyond the enhanced ability to compare and contrast the grammatical, semantic, phonological, or pragmatic features of different languages, multilingual teachers are also often found to be deeply attuned to the positive and negative experiences that language learners may face (Ellis, 2004). A traditional *banking model* of education (Freire, 1993) requires that teachers transfer knowledge to a classroom of empty vessels unable to deploy their existing linguistic resources. In contrast, engaging with students' L1 allows us deeper access to their cultural worlds and encourages them to become more active contributors in the classroom. This, then, can conceivably chip away at the traditional teacher-student power gap, and create conditions for the "solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1993, p. 72). Below, we discuss this idea:

Robert: My own experience studying Japanese has, I believe, heightened my awareness of the contrasting features of the two languages. These differences are not just limited to the vastly different writing systems! For example, recognizing Japanese grammatical structures such as the causative, volitional, or conditional forms in real time while in conversation is oftentimes difficult. It can break my concentration and then I struggle to keep up as I try to find a way to enter back into the flow of the discussion. This has served to inform my teaching habits, as struggles such as this remind me of the importance of making language "automatic" by learning and quickly recognizing "chunks" and set patterns, and in finding ways to assist our students to do this. It has also made me more patient in allowing students thinking time to prepare for discussions and other speaking activities.

Dan: For sure. Actually, I frequently try to shift perspective when imagining challenges that my students are likely to face in a classroom activity. Sometimes when designing or explaining an activity, I stop and try to imagine, "What if the languages or roles were flipped? How well would I deal with this? Where would I struggle in Japanese?" This allows me to better determine where and how I might need to scaffold materials or activities, ideally before a problem even occurs! Also, in a more direct, practical sense, a lot of the learning tools (spaced repetition, AI tools, YouTube, etc.) that I have found useful can easily be introduced to students to give them more options for their personal language learning toolkits.

Robert: I agree with you on these points. I try to provide multimodal support in the classroom. One of the lessons that I learned through studying for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test is that I could understand, or at least guess the meaning of new Japanese concepts better when; 1) what was needed to be understood had more context, for example, it was contained in a sentence rather than as a lone vocabulary item; and 2) that it appeared in a written format that I could see along with a spoken explanation. With my students, depending on their level of course, I try to use either

a PowerPoint slideshow, or the whiteboard in combination with oral explanations. I also try to repeat key terms as part of the explanation. There are instances where I ask students to explain what we just learned, in Japanese, to a partner and then ask random students to give a brief summary of that point in English.

LOOKING AT OUR STRUGGLES AS PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Unsurprisingly, empathy has been identified as an important factor in creating supportive learning conditions for others. Recent studies and research summaries have identified the facilitative role of teacher empathy in fostering learner engagement (Zhang, 2022) and learner autonomy (Borges & Castro, 2022) in language classrooms. Furthermore, empathy has been found to positively contribute to the likelihood of caring relationships developing between teacher and students, with both parties coming to better understand and accept the other. A key consideration relating to empathy is that it is not a fixed trait, but can rather be developed through our experiences and actions (Mercer, 2016). Therefore, it could be argued that by enduring the emotional ups and downs of language learning themselves, teachers may be especially well-equipped to empathize more deeply with the pressures that their students face. Furthermore, as discussed in the following excerpts, by sharing their own past and present language learning struggles with students, we feel it is likely that a culture of trust and mutual empathy between teacher and student as co-learners can be fostered over time.

Dan: Empathy is something that I feel my language learning experiences have magnified over time. When my new students are lacking confidence at the start of the semester, I believe that it is my duty to help them through that. I recently related to a colleague that a lot of my work on self-efficacy and wellbeing in class is to ensure that my students don't feel the same way about language learning as I do. I have pretty high language anxiety, and often lack self-efficacy relating to my Japanese proficiency. Therefore, when I see students struggle with the same issues, helping them overcome them goes some way to clearing an obstacle that I personally know can be crippling.

Robert: We've talked quite a bit about some very real challenges associated with language learning. To put a positive spin on the idea of struggle, I am reminded of the work of Bjork and Bjork (2011) who describe the benefits of introducing desirable difficulties into learning. They talk about the need for generative output and spaced retrieval, as opposed to simply repeating things in order to bolster learning. These tasks are not easy to do, but a key takeaway is that it reinforces the importance of the struggle itself as a tool, and this is something we can remind our learners of. Of course, along with learning any new language can come a sense of vulnerability. My own lack of ability makes me feel unsure when I need to speak Japanese in public, and instead of seeing the opportunity, many times I practice avoidance. I am sure that our students must often feel the same way.

Dan: Principled Japanese use with students is another way of enacting empathy by "walking the walk" and putting my vulnerability out there for everyone to see. I don't believe that it is right for me to force my students into face-threatening acts without responding in kind. That being said, I also see empathy as a norm that needs to be applied to all of us and also needs to be trained. In the past, some students have mocked my Japanese in class, and without getting angry, I ask them to consider how they would feel if the roles were reversed and if their English was mocked, as well as to what end they thought I was using Japanese in the first place (to help them!). I hope that through these moments we can create a more empathetic and caring classroom.

It is a common goal of many teachers to help their students become more comfortable and confident as autonomous language learners. The challenge is to consider what approaches may be most effective in accomplishing this goal. One such pathway may be to create an empathetic classroom, which could be done by considering how a teacher's own struggles and successes as a language learner can be used to develop more effective pedagogical methods. We hope that the discussion above, as well as the sources referenced in this article, may inspire teachers to look at how their own language learning might inform their classroom practices.

AUTHOR BIOS

Robert Moreau is currently an assistant professor at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. He earned his MA in TESOL at Teachers College Columbia University, and has been an active university instructor for more than 15 years. With a desire to motivate other teachers, and to develop his own classroom practices, Robert has pursued research in the areas of reflective practices, learner autonomy, project-based learning, and academic writing.

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Indonesian and Japanese English Learners L2MSS

The objective of this study was to investigate the English learning motivation of Indonesian and Japanese university students. While a considerable number of studies have examined the motivation of Japanese learners of English, research focusing on Indonesian learners remains relatively limited. Given the growing importance of English worldwide, understanding learners' motivation in different cultural contexts is essential. This study aimed to compare the levels of English learning motivation between Indonesian and Japanese university students using the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) model (Dörnyei, 2009).

MY BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATIONS

I started teaching English as a second language in Japan 10 years ago. With young children as my students, at the kindergarten and elementary school ages, I didn't really see any motivation problem. Then I taught students of different ages, such as middle school and senior high school students. When I worked as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Japanese middle and high schools, I observed a noticeable reluctance among many Japanese students to be seen as competent English learners. It was not only in the school environment; generally outside the school environment too, around adult age, I observed the same trend. Through my interactions with people from various nationalities living in Japan, I noticed that learners from other linguistic backgrounds generally do not show the same level of hesitation or avoidance when speaking English, even when they are at different levels of fluency and speak with different accents. In contrast, many Japanese learners starting from junior high school age onward appear more reluctant to openly demonstrate their English ability.

This observation became one of the main motivations for my interest in research on motivation in second language learning. As a non-native English teacher, I believe there is value in exploring what Indonesian learners of English can contribute to the understanding of second language motivation. I wanted to conduct research that allows me to connect insights from the Indonesian context with the Japanese context.

HOW SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IS VIEWED IN INDONESIA AND JAPAN

Indonesia and Japan represent two non-Anglophone contexts in which English is taught both in compulsory education and at the university level. Educational policies in both countries are shaped by the perceived economic and social value of English in facilitating mobility and advantage in a competitive global economy.

Despite substantial differences, there are several cultural and educational similarities. Both systems are highly exam-oriented, and English remains a key subject in university entrance examinations. However, the general importance placed on English differs. Indonesia, officially a religious and ethnically diverse nation with a national language written in the Roman alphabet, has a linguistic environment more closely aligned with English. Japanese, by contrast, uses hiragana, katakana, and kanji, creating greater linguistic distance between Japanese and English.

Globalization has heightened the demand for English proficiency, which is now considered a critical employability skill. Employers in various sectors require English fluency for activities such as job interviews, workplace communication, handling official documents, managing online information, and interacting with foreign investors and international clients. As Indonesia strengthens its international relationships and local businesses expand globally, English proficiency becomes essential for future employment, job performance, and career growth (Stevani et al., 2024).

MY RESEARCH PROJECT

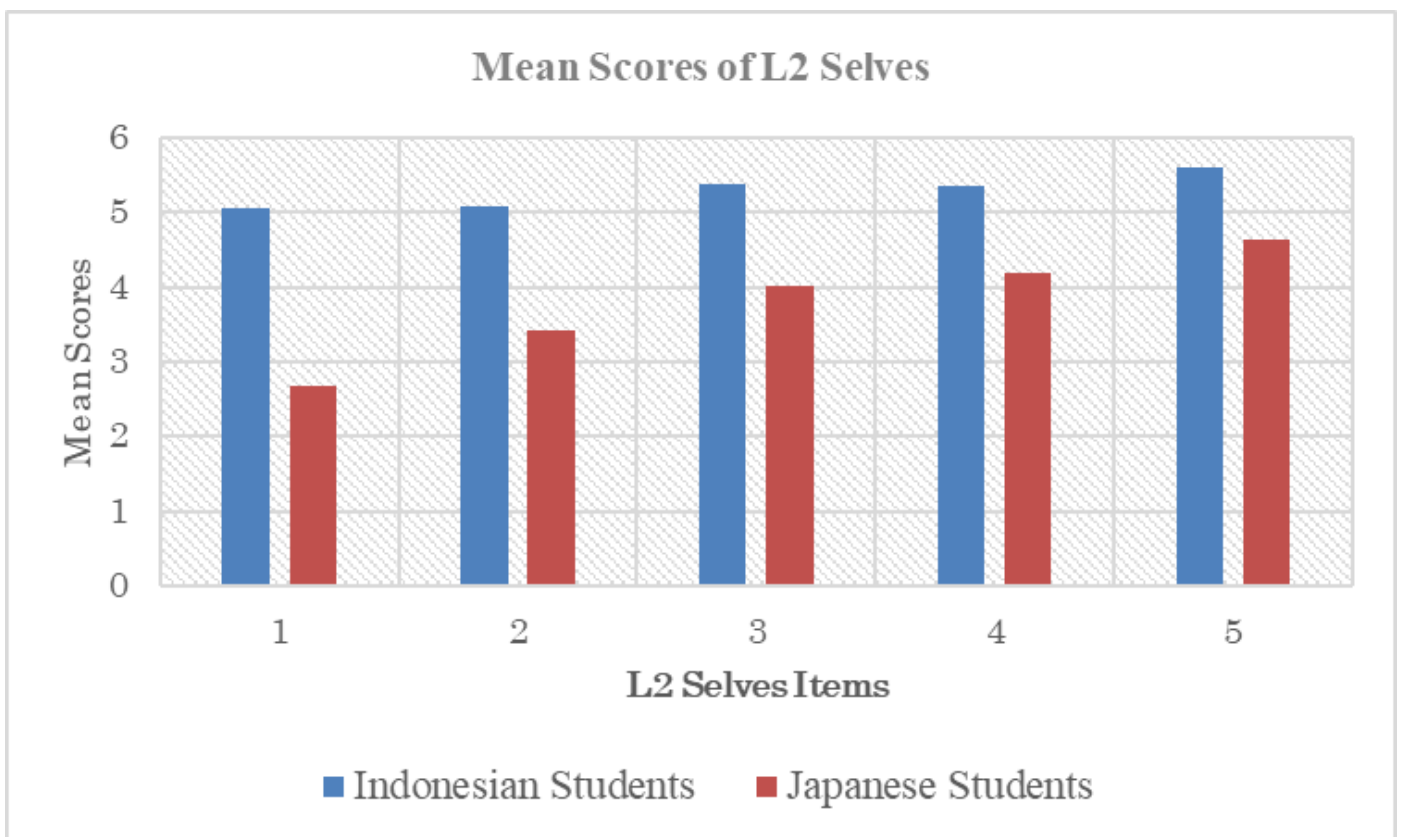
In particular, my research interest focuses on the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009) within the broader framework of second language acquisition theory. Because L2MSS has been widely used in comparative studies across different contexts, it provides a useful framework for examining similarities and differences in learner motivation. Through this approach, I hope my research can contribute to a deeper understanding of motivation in English language learning and offer insights that may be relevant for English education in Japan.

Data for this research were collected through an online survey administered to university students in Indonesia and Japan. The questionnaire measured six components of the L2MSS: Ideal L2 Selves, Ought to Selves, Family Influence, Instrumentality (Promotion), Instrumentality (Prevention), and Learning Experience.

RESULTS

Below are comparative graphs showing how Indonesian and Japanese students compared when describing their Ideal L2 Selves, their Ought to Selves (Feel of Duty), and the importance of Family Influence. The graphs below are chosen to show the most contrasting results from the Indonesian and Japanese students' answers. The likert scale consists of 6 points, from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 6 ('strongly agree').

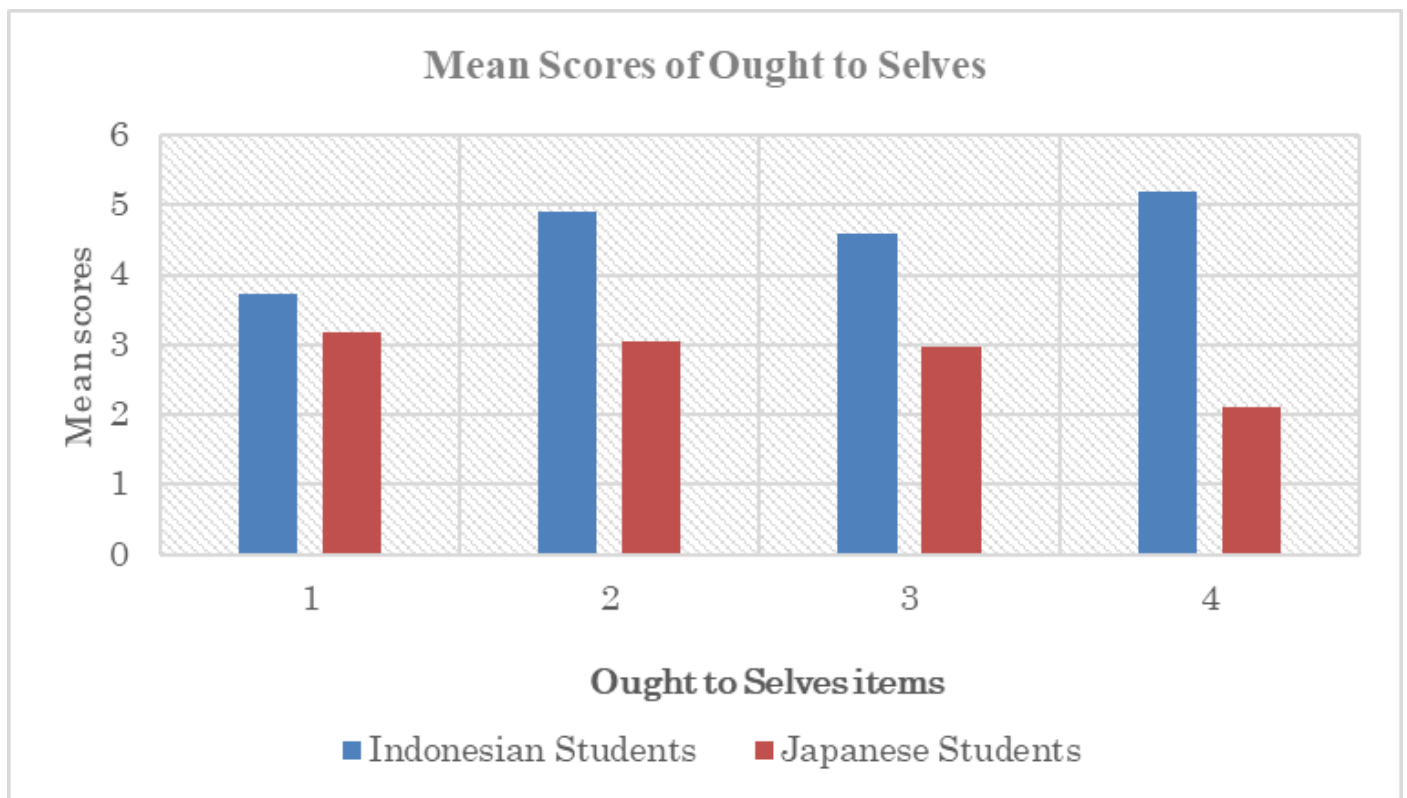
Chart 1: Mean Scores of L2 Selves Bar Chart



Note: No 1 - 5 in the x axis represent the statements that Indonesian and Japanese students were asked to agree with in the survey. 1. I can imagine myself living abroad and having a discussion in English; 2. When I think about my future job, I imagine myself using English; 3. I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with foreigners; 4. I imagine myself as someone who is able to speak English; 5. In order to do what I want to do in the future, I need English.

Indonesian students consistently report higher mean scores across all five 'L2 self' items, with scores gradually increasing from about 5.1 to 5.6 from left to right. Japanese students also show a steady upward trend from roughly 2.7 to 4.7, but their scores remain noticeably lower than those of Indonesian students throughout.

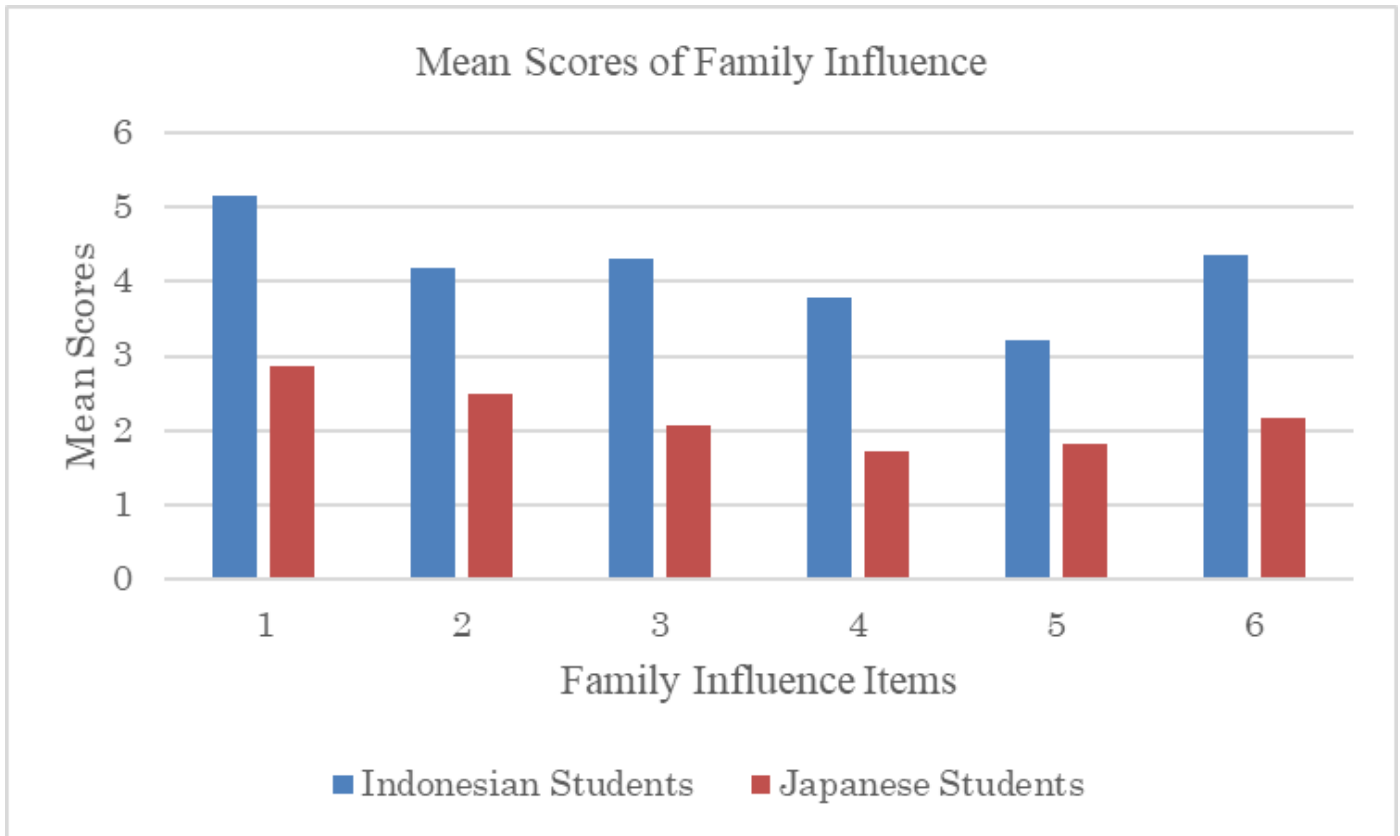
Chart 2: Mean Scores of Ought to Selves Bar Chart



Note: Number 1-4 in the x axis represent the statements that Indonesian and Japanese students were asked to agree with. 1. My close friend thinks that studying English is important, so I will study English; 2. My parents strongly believe that their children must study English and become cultured individuals; 3. Learning English is necessary because people around me expect me to do so; 4. My parents believe that I must study English to be an educated person.

Indonesian students report higher mean scores than Japanese students across all four Ought-to L2 self items, with their scores generally ranging from about 3.7 to 5.2. In contrast, Japanese students' scores are lower and show a slight downward trend left to right overall, dropping from around 3.2 to about 2.1 by the final item.

Chart 3: Mean Scores of Family Influence Bar Chart



Note: Number 1-6 in the x axis represents the statements that Indonesian and Japanese students were asked to agree with. 1. My parents encourage me to study English; 2. My parents encourage me to use English by reading and speaking it whenever I have the opportunity; 3. When there is time, my parents encourage me to study English; 4. My parents encourage me to attend extra English classes after class. (e.g. at English conversation school); 5. I have to study English, because, if I don't do it, my parents will be disappointed in me; 6. My parents strongly believe that I must study English and become a well-educated person.

Indonesian students consistently report higher mean scores than Japanese students across all six family influence items, with scores generally ranging from about 3.2 to 5.2. Japanese students' scores are lower and relatively stable, mostly lying between about 1.7 and 2.9, showing only slight variation across items.

Table 1. Group Descriptives and Independent Samples T-Test

Group Descriptives of the variables

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Average_L2Self	Indonesian	43	5.293	0.628	0.096	0.12
	Japanese	41	3.790	1.083	0.169	0.29
Ought to Self	Indonesian	43	4.405	0.885	0.135	0.20
	Japanese	41	2.829	1.099	0.172	0.39
Family Influence	Indonesian	43	4.167	1.053	0.161	0.25
	Japanese	41	2.195	1.074	0.168	0.49

Independent Samples T-Test for 3 variables

	t	df	P	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Average_L2Self	7.821	82	< .001 ¹	1.707	0.286
Ought to Self	7.253	82	< .001	1.583	0.277
Family Influence	8.494	82	< .001	1.854	0.296

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine group differences across the motivational variables. Results indicated statistically significant differences between the two groups in all measures (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

For Average L2 Self, the Brown–Forsythe test was significant ($p < .05$), indicating a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption; therefore, the adjusted *t*-test result was interpreted to mean that the groups differ a lot on Average L2 Self, and this difference is both statistically and practically important.

The two groups were also very different in terms of Ought-to Self and Family Influence. Significant group differences were found for Ought-to Self, $t(82) = 7.25$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.58$, and Family Influence, $t(82) = 8.49$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.85$, both indicating very large effects. Family Influence showed the strongest difference between groups. Across all three variables, the two groups differ substantially.

The very large effect sizes ($d > 1.5$) indicate these are not just statistically significant differences but meaningful, real-world differences. The statistical analysis was conducted appropriately, even when assumptions were violated.

The findings revealed that, among other things, family influence contributes more significantly to the learning motivation of Indonesian students than to that of Japanese students. This suggests that within Indonesian families, there exists a supportive “habitus” in which family encouragement directly enhances English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning outcomes. Although both Indonesia and Japan share collectivist cultural roots, and despite Indonesia comprising a diverse range of ethnicities, the results showed that Indonesian students have stronger L2 selves, and more parental influence in their second language (English) learning motivation.

It is suggested that due to socio-economic aspirations and parental influence, Indonesian students may develop a stronger English-speaking self. My survey results showed that Indonesian students demonstrated a stronger Ideal L2 Self, expressing greater agreement that they would use English in the future compared to Japanese students. This stronger Ideal L2 Self among Indonesian university students may be shaped by socio-economic mobility goals and parental expectations positioning English as a pathway to opportunity. Additionally, structural similarities and lower morphological complexity between Indonesian and English may increase perceived attainability, further strengthening learners' future L2 self-vision.

CONCLUSION

From these research findings, what can be suggested for Japanese learners of English is that they may need to shape a stronger L2 self. This means that Japanese learners of English need to be given more opportunities to understand how they are able to use L2 in real applications. English that is often associated with tests rather than real communication may weaken the Ideal L2 Self. What teachers can do is strengthen students' L2 self by helping students identify their personal goals involving English (travel, international friendships, careers). Teachers can also encourage

¹ Brown-Forsythe test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the equal variance assumption.

students to join short-term to long-term overseas opportunities. Giving students more contact with international students in Japan can also help, so that they have opportunities to use English in real situations.

As the Indonesian learners' survey results seem to show that they have more support from their parents, who think that learning English is an investment, future research in the Japanese context might focus on finding out more about how parents respond in the Japanese context. A survey of Japanese parents in schools could be implemented to examine how they view English and whether they consider it an important investment for their children. The survey results can contribute to second language research.

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