

Proficient Japanese International Communications majors' perceptions of successful EFL learning strategies: Self-reported comparisons of learning experiences in K-12 education and Meisei University's International Communications program

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Abstract

The present qualitative interview study inquired about the learning experiences of relatively proficient Japanese EFL learners and their perceptions of workable EFL learning methods. The research reached 13 participants in an International Communications Program of a private university in Japan. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and examined the learners' previous and current university EFL learning experiences, their outside-class EFL learning strategies including the utilization of digital technology, their perceptions of the workability and importance of self-regulated learning techniques, and educators' advice they received regarding their outside-class self-regulatory learning processes. The results revealed that the participants almost unanimously preferred communicative or conversational language practice and contextual sources in their self-regulated EFL learning. The respondents also proved to possess high ability to find or establish communicative situations with foreign people or practice sessions among themselves. Beyond face-to-face situations, they were mostly able to refer to contextual sources such as movie transcripts, articles, lyrics or notes on previous conversations, and they reportedly intended to abandon grammar-translation practices experienced and disliked in their K-12 educational experiences. Their digital-technological learning tool repertoire did not produce a large variety and they admittedly received few suggestions from their educators on outside-class learning strategies, out of which their university educators' advice proved more applicable to them.

1 Introduction

The globally growing need for English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and skills development has imposed ever-increasing demand on educational stakeholders all over the world. Japan, a significant player on the global scene, has

been facing the challenge of shifting from grammar-translation English language teaching (ELT) approaches to communicative language teaching (CLT) practices (Mitchell, 2017). Beside the demand for educational reforms, the matter holds cultural boundaries that aggravate ELT development, one well-known crucial phenomenon being learners' *shyness* to communicate, rooting from many sub-layers of Japanese culture such as hierarchical relationships or shame-avoidance (Doyon, 2000), as well as contextual limitations because "the contexts in which they speak are culturally sanctioned and do not correspond to the cultural codes of the Western world" (Anderson, 1993, as cited in Cutrone, 2009, p. 58). Comparing English speaking countries with Japan, Des Marais (2020) explained that while in the first incorrect answers are more appreciated than no answers, in the latter, mainly due to humility and modesty as well as the frontal teaching approach with teachers providing the ultimate solutions, shyness and nervousness about possible wrong answers hinder students' communicational classroom activities. Des Marais (2020) also pointed out occasional reluctance to self-disclosure in the Japanese foreign language classroom, which may result in lower achievement in certain communicative EFL tasks. Although Japan has been welcoming native or foreign English language teachers in order to ease some of the pressure of introducing CLT in Japanese EFL classrooms, grammar-translation and learning-for-the-test approaches still seem to be dominating Japanese K-12 EFL education. Contrarily, the upcoming generation expresses the necessity for adequate English language skills either for jobs on the global market or joining international communities online and face to face.

With the rapidly advancing technology of our time, foreign language learning, especially EFL development, has partially moved outside organized classroom settings, increasing the need for promoting and facilitating autonomous learning processes (Benson, 2013). Beyond incidental and implicit language acquisition (Dóczy & Kormos, 2016), EFL learners are often determined to conduct focused, or in other words self-regulated learning (SRL) which enhances language acquisition (Oxford, 1990). Self-regulation bears

the characteristics of learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 1998); according to Holec's (1981) oft-cited description, learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), and Littlewood (1996) interprets it as "a capacity for thinking and acting independently" (p. 428) while emphasizing the importance of *ability* (knowledge and skills) and *willingness* (motivation and confidence). SRL "is viewed as *proactive* processes that students use to acquire academic skill, such as setting goals, selecting and deploying strategies, and self-monitoring one's effectiveness, rather than as a reactive event, that happens due to impersonal forces" (Zimmerman, 2008, pp. 166-167). As SRL encompasses *cognitive* and *affective* control over one's learning processes (Lewis & Vialleton, 2011; Murray, 2014; Zimmerman, 2005), this learning practice necessitates the acquisition and application of learning strategies. In Zimmerman's (2005) view, SRL is a *cyclical* process with three phases: a *forethought* phase in which learners form their learning strategies, a *performance* phase with active learning and constant self-monitoring, and a *self-reflection* phase where learners retrospectively look at their achievements, which step can impact their future learning processes. Along with applicable learning approaches, Zimmerman (2008) adds *self-beliefs* as a factor affecting successful SRL. This is in alignment with Bandura's (1982) *self-efficacy* theory, according to which a basic feature of human motivation is our perception of the degree of our own abilities in managing activities that we aim to accomplish and our self-efficacy is highly dependent on *persistence* and *effort*. These two influencers of self-efficacy are also important components of self-regulation, which suggests that self-regulatory learning processes and self-efficacy mutually impact one another. As seen above, the notions of autonomy and self-regulation overlap from several perspectives and, as Oxford (2017) pointed out, *agency* is a common feature of both concepts. She explained that acting as an agent in one's own learning processes required *capacity* and *will*, and while autonomy carries responsibility, SRL is based on causing effects and influencing one's own progress. Therefore, agency is a crucial element in self-regulation, especially in building learning strategies.

Motivation is a crucial element of both autonomous and self-regulatory learning (Csizér, 2012; Dörnyei, 1998). While Tseng and Schmitt (2008) highlighted the importance of learners' initial motivation in their self-regulated learning, a study conducted on motivation, self-regulatory strategies, and autonomous learning (Kormos & Csizér, 2014) found that although the globalized status of the English language may cause learners to be instrumentally motivated in EFL learning, motivation still shows connection with learner autonomy and self-regulation acts and a mediator. Dörnyei (1998) interpreted motivation as a *process*, in which “a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached” (p. 118). Synthesizing this idea with Zimmerman's (2005) SRL cycle, it becomes apparent that motivation is essential along the entire SRL process.

While the vast availabilities of digital and printed EFL practice opportunities allow students for experimenting with learning strategies, pedagogical facilitation of outside-class learning is fundamental (Cotterall, 2000; Lewis & Vialleton, 2011; Murray, 2014; Tseng et al., 2006) from both motivational and professional-developmental aspects. As Littlewood (1996, p. 431) stated, “one of our tasks as language educators is to develop strategies for helping learners to make choices at ever higher levels in the domains of communication, learning and personal life”. This aspect of educational practices has become ever so important with the appearance of emergency remote teaching (ERT) introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and applied worldwide (Carter et al., 2020) for several months or, in some countries or educational institutes, even for a year, during which learners were required to control their study processes and develop self-regulated learning strategies. Not only is it a demand on educational stakeholders to promote and facilitate autonomous and self-regulated learning throughout all stages of K-12 and higher education, but it is also becoming an inner need of learners themselves to be able to skillfully apply available resources and technology for learning purposes. Consequently, instructors and educational institutions ought to widen their

scope of instruction in the direction of the development of learners' strategies for outside-class learning processes.

1.1 Study objectives and research questions

The present qualitative interview study was inspired by the ELT practices conducted in the International Communications Program organized by the Department of International Studies at Meisei University, a private higher-education institution in Tokyo. The program focuses on intensive EFL development containing a minimum of three 90-minute English classes per week with foreign guest lecturers and several elective opportunities, such as cultural field work, an international summer-school teaching project, study abroad opportunities, or facultative conversational Language Lounges, to further improve learners' English language skills. General student feedback on the program and their EFL skills development expresses satisfaction with the program, although level differences and motivational divergence still occur among the participants of the program. This study contemplated to examine the learning processes of higher-level EFL learners of the program and hoped for gathering meaningful results with regard to EFL study approaches and learning strategies shareable with the upcoming generation of Japanese EFL learners and, therefore, contributing to the field of EFL education both in Japan and on the global ELT scene. While the original intention was to focus the interviews eventually on self-regulated vocabulary-learning strategies, the researcher's field of interest, several valuable themes and categories emerged in the notion of learners' general in-class and outside-class learning approaches as well as their self-reported comparison between their K-12 and university EFL learning experiences. As a result, this paper presents a part of the findings from the large dataset gained from the semi-structured interviews conducted in July of the academic year of 2021/2022, addressing the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1) How do proficient Japanese EFL learners view their English learning experiences in organized educational settings?

RQ2) How do proficient Japanese EFL learners employ outside-class

self-regulated EFL learning practices?

RQ3) What are proficient Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of successful EFL learning practices?

RQ4) To what extent do proficient Japanese EFL learners experience educational support for their outside-class self-regulated learning processes?

2 Research design

The purpose of the study was to scrutinize proficient Japanese EFL learners' learning experiences, applied self-regulated learning strategies, and their underlying reasons and perceptions of successful EFL acquisition. In order to best fulfil these research objectives, a qualitative interview study was designed among proficient Japanese EFL learners in the context of the Department of International Studies at Meisei University, Tokyo. The interviews were carried out in the academic year of 2021/2022, within the last two weeks of the first semester between 19th and 31st of July. The language of the interviews initially predetermined the selection of the participants as the research was entirely conducted in English by a foreign guest lecturer of the department, which solely allowed for the recruitment of students with adequate EFL proficiency. Although the students were approached via spoken and e-mail invitation with an emphasis of absolutely voluntary participation, they exhibited high willingness to take part in the study, resulting in 13 interviewees.

2.1 Research method

In order to fulfil the research objective of investigating the ways, reasons and perceptions behind the target population's EFL learning practices, one-to-one qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with the use of an interview schedule containing 13 main questions and, in some instances, follow-up question ideas. The queries were based on two broad pre-determined topics: 1) the participants' K-12 and university EFL learning background and

experiences and 2) their outside-class self-regulated EFL learning practices, the latter of which included the sub-topics of a) their currently applied self-regulated learning practices, b) their perceptions of the workability and importance of self-regulated learning techniques, and c) the sources of their self-regulated learning methods. The semi-structured interview design allowed for the scrutiny of emerging thoughts, ideas and concepts, as well as to investigate the pre-conceptualized matters of inquiry at a deeper level. As a result of thematic content analysis through coding and categorization, the 126 codes retrieved from the data set formed six themes and eleven categories. The first interview served as a pre-pilot session; however, as the circumstances, the recording technology and the interview protocol all proved to be workable for the study, the results of this interview were added to the dataset.

2.2 Ethical considerations

The nature of the research questions, especially learners' perceptions and experiences of their EFL learning processes required high attention to research ethics. The initial invitation clarified the topic and aims of the study, the expected time length, assurance of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation with no reward offered, and the option for withdrawal at any stage of the research. Upon reply, the interview appointment was arranged and the venue of the researcher's office was provided, eliminating any disturbance. Prior to the interview, each participant received two copies of the informed consent form including the research details mentioned above and consent request to the interview being recorded. After reading and the researcher's thorough confirmation of the participants' understanding of the content, the form was signed by both parties. The data was handled solely by the researcher through all stages of the study, including data collection, transcription, and data analysis. All data has been stored in a secure, password-protected folder with the researcher's exclusive access. With regards to the reporting of the research outcomes, the context and population of the study required the indication of the institute; however, participant anonymity was assured by the use

of pseudonyms and further considerations of data narration without revealing the respondents' identity.

2.3 Participants

Considering the broad aim of the study, which was to inquire about successful Japanese EFL learners' learning experiences including those of university education, all participants of the study were second- to fourth-grade students enrolled in the International Communications Program of the Department of International Studies at Meisei University. Through convenience sampling of students attending the researcher's and her colleagues' classes, as well as recognition of the need for adequate EFL knowledge for participation in a fully-English interview conducted by a foreign guest lecturer, the study reached 13 respondents: seven second-grade (Suama, Yuki, Shinzo, Natchan, Sariana, Uni, Nachan), two third-grade (Masayoshi, Takashi), and four fourth-grade (Wai, Kaito, Esu, Kou) students. All participants were aged between 19 and 22, and had previously attended K-12 education within the Japanese educational system with some, hereby relevant, variability in school types or other seized EFL learning opportunities. With nine male and four female participants, the study holds little gender variety; nevertheless, as the data concerning the main focus reached saturation point with the existing participants and scrutiny of gender differences was not a target of this current research, this gender distribution was adequate for analysis and discussion of the collected data.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

The interviews took place face-to-face in the researcher's office which ensured undisturbed closed space with the presence of only the interviewer and the interviewee. After the printed consent form was read and signed, recording started with the researcher's smartphone device; however, simultaneous note-taking was conducted to prevent data loss due to technological errors. The interviews lasted 41 minutes on average with no occurrence of unforeseen interruptions. After collection, the recorded data was transcribed verbatim and

underwent thematic content analysis of manual pre-coding, coding and categorizing procedures, which determined the main themes into which the data organized. Consistency check was twofold: first, intra-coder consistency was ensured by re-coding the data set at a separate occasion, followed by inter-coder consistency verification via debriefing (Davis, 1995) with a researcher outside the research context but previously provided with details about the context, topic and pre-coding scheme of the study. After successful consistency checks, interpretation and reporting the data began. In order to ensure credibility and transferability of the interpretative qualitative study, the current article aims to provide thick description of the findings (Davis, 1995).

3 Findings

The first research question focused on proficient Japanese EFL learners' learning experiences gained in organized, namely K-12 and university, settings. Naturally, various differences emerged regarding previous K-12 education: four respondents reported pre-K-12 English activities in kindergarten, three of them started in elementary school and six of them in junior high school. Three students mentioned study or life opportunities abroad which contributed to their EFL development. However, all but one disclosed ineffective language learning from their junior high school years, reasoning it with the grammar-translation approach resting upon textbook-based grammar practice tasks, memorizing English-Japanese translation-based vocabulary lists and regular test administration. Responses concerning high-school experiences varied to a certain degree; eight participants found this stage in their EFL studies motivational or somewhat more communicative, reasoning it with the presence of foreign or native English teachers or generally more communicative tasks. Those who were dissatisfied construed their high-school English learning as "boring" (Esu), with the main aim of learning for tests and not enough opportunity to speak (Sariana, Takashi). When comparing K-12 EFL education to that of their university, the responses were in agreement that they

did not have adequate EFL skills when entering university, moreover, two participants specifically remarked that at the beginning they did not understand their teachers. As some of them pointed out specific goals with EFL learning such as becoming an English teacher, working in international settings, or in one case even becoming an English linguist, their education prior to university made little contribution to supporting these learners' goals.

University experiences and, within that, the International Communications Program received more positive views; while Kou mentioned "learning a lot", others described it as "fun" (Sariana, Natchan), "interesting" (Takashi) or even "wonderful" (Kaito). The participants unanimously reported more speaking opportunities but seven specifically emphasized this aspect. Some students reasoned their appreciation of the program with its content: Suama highlighted the cultural aspect of her studies as a positive point, and Natchan attributed her EFL improvement partly to the opportunity to focus on one's topic of interest, saying "it really suits my English skill and I can study about what I'm interested in, like environment or gender equality or, like anything else". In some instances, students referred to the university's international relations programs, such as field work or the Meisei University Summer School Project (MSSP), both of which provide opportunities to meet and actively work with foreign students and, therefore, greatly contribute to their language development.

Beside the efficacious and enjoyable aspects of their EFL progress at university, the participants alluded to the year-long online learning form due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which ended a semester before the data collection stage of this research and was replaced by a hybrid educational setup including both online and face-to-face classes. While three students revealed enthusiasm regarding the MSSP or field work where they met students and teacher via video conferencing and characterizing it as an "opportunity to study English" (Nachan), others who followed general classes with online task sheets and video-conference class sessions found this type of learning experience unfavorable. Shinzo, a second-grade student admitted: "when I was first grade, which

was online class, so last year my English skill didn't improve. But to be a second grader, I have some face-to-face classes and I can speak face-to-face English, so that affects things, I think".

The second research question aimed to explore the outside-class self-regulated EFL learning processes of the participants. In this regard, an unusual finding emerged: more than half of the participants indicated finding or creating opportunities for speaking English. Seven responses referred to conversations with teachers, seven disclosed self-organized online or face-to-face English conversations with fellow students, four mentioned regular participation in Language Lounge or the Winter Study Group, and three maintained regular conversations with foreign friends or pen-friends using video-conferencing websites or instant messaging applications. One student even mentioned setting their phone in English for everyday practice. Other life-like sources of English included watching movies, videos or TED talks, listening to and singing songs, or reading news websites. Among the more commonly applied self-regulated learning techniques, whereby focused learning occurs on a specific learning material with selected learning strategies, the respondents mentioned the fulfilment of online tasks and home assignments for their face-to-face classes, preparation for high-stakes proficiency tests, revising their textbooks and writing a diary. Two students mentioned *shadowing*, a learning technique whereby they repeat previously heard utterances. With regard to self-regulated vocabulary acquisition, the most popular approach among the participants was learning words from the bilingual dictionary-like Wordbook widely used in Japan, placing sticky notes on objects at home, using a self-attained pronunciation book with a DVD, or reading English definitions of the new vocabulary.

Considering the constantly advancing technology and rapidly emerging digital learning opportunities of our time, within the investigation of self-regulated learning practices the study scrutinized digital EFL learning methods applied by the interviewees. Besides the wide use of web- or application-based dictionaries, the participants enlisted the use of search-engines when conducting

internet research for their university papers, the National Geographic website, and TED, as well as some applications specifically designed for EFL practice such as Vocabulary.com, conversation applications, Listening Trainer, Quizlet, Duolingo, Hamaru, and Taboo. As for input through their pastime activities, the most commonly used music and movie applications were mentioned, but Masayoshi detailed his self-developed technique of using the movie transcripts for further EFL practice:

I'm doing reading aloud with Netflix movies [...], I can find the subtitles, sentences [...], then I copy it into a document [...], bring out and check the words, check the pronunciation, then pronounce the sentences. [...]

I think that is the best way for me to learn English.

To further enquiry about the types of dictionaries used by the participants, most of the replies indicated bilingual dictionaries and only four students emphasized their preference of monolingual ones. While several respondents mentioned the use of the Wordbook, Sariana expressed her struggle in acquiring a monolingual dictionary:

[I use] English to Japanese, Japanese to English, but now I'm interested in English to English, the meaning [in] English. That's because my high school teacher always said 'you have to buy [...] the English to English dictionary', then I got so interested in it but I don't know what because a lot of kinds of dictionaries are in bookstores, what should I choose?

In relation to self-regulated learning, the interviews briefly pertained to the learners' perceived difficulty in EFL learning. While one respondent found it very difficult and another difficult, others pinpointed aspects of EFL learning such as grammar or vocabulary learning as being more difficult than other aspects. Some found it relatively or quite easy, while Yuki said it "depends on the goal" and Shinzo felt it "difficult but interesting". Two students specifically stated that learning English is not difficult at university.

The third research question intended to find out about the interviewees' perceptions of successful EFL learning practices in which two categories were distinguished: that of their beliefs on the effectiveness of certain approaches

and that of their beliefs on the importance of specific learning or skills-development aspects. Some aspects were prepared as prompts for the interview sessions such as the importance of learning outside the classroom or learning vocabulary items separately, while others emerged during the interview. As predictable from the above presented findings regarding the learners' efforts to find opportunities for conversational practice, communication and speaking was generally considered both important and effective among the students partaking in this research. Within this concept, three students specifically mentioned the effectiveness of learning with foreign teachers. Another meaningful outcome of the study is the importance of context: two answers explicitly stated the importance of context in EFL learning and several of them implied it through the application of shadowing complete sentences retrieved from life-like situations, using dialogues as source material for further practice, or learning English from movies, music and speaking. A relatively low number of interviewees found self-regulated EFL learning important: five students replied in the affirmative, while Umi stated that

50 per cent I can say yes, but other 50 percent I say no because [...] all Japanese people learn [...] alone so they don't have the opportunity to talk in English actually [...] but, of course, we have this need of knowledge, how to communicate, I mean grammar or vocabulary or something, so learning alone and sitting is sometimes good but sometimes not good, I think.

In one response solitary self-regulated learning was considered demotivating. With respect to self-regulated learning via online platforms, more negative replies were recorded which might be viewed as a washback of the previous years' fully online experience. One respondent, however, found this learning venue effective and saw positive prospects for online learning opportunities in the upcoming years.

The fourth and final research question asked about the extent to which proficient Japanese EFL learners experienced educational support for their outside-class self-regulated learning processes, with interview questions

directed to recommendation or advice from EFL educators along the learners' EFL learning path. Unfortunately, many replies confirmed no professional guidance; nonetheless, the gathered data on affirmative responses provide certain insights into the matter. Most of the suggestions from K-12 EFL teachers seem to draw a pattern of non-contextual learning, which conforms to the grammar-translation approach widely used in Japanese K-12 education: apart from one instance where conversation was advised as learning outside educational settings and reading or reading aloud in two other assertions, the rest of the responses included noting down English words with their Japanese translations, using bilingual dictionaries, reading word explanations, revising the textbook, or conducting additional practice with the help of a workbook. Kaito simply phrased K-12 educational help as "boring suggestions". On the contrary, university teachers advised not being shy to talk, attending Language Lounge, using life-like input such as movies, a special textbook with English and Japanese sentences and sentence-building tasks; and only two responses mentioned learning vocabulary out of context, one using Quizlet and another acquiring plenty of vocabulary for boosting EFL knowledge. In addition to educator's recommendations, some utterances revealed other sources of learning advice; one student used a card game named *karuta* for practicing words in a playful manner, and three instances revealed advice from friends, two about noting down dialogues or useful sentences encountered in movies or music, and one recommended preparation for the TOEIC examination.

4 Discussion and conclusion

The present study focused on successful learning practices outside organized classroom settings in EFL learning and, through a qualitative interview inquiry, asked proficient Japanese EFL learners' perceptions in this topic. First, their EFL educational experiences were scrutinized in their K-12 and university phases, then examination of their outside-class self-regulated learning practices followed with focus on their perceptions about workable strategies and,

finally, the last query explored their encounters of educators' advice for their self-directed learning. Among the main findings, the study demonstrated that, despite the fact that in some occurrences high-school ELT practices had built in communicative approaches, most learners felt their EFL skills insubstantial after graduating high school. Most of them, however, experienced considerable improvement when they were in an environment providing opportunities for communicative language practice, conversational opportunities with foreign teachers and fellow learners, international relations with teachers and learners from abroad, or exploration of global topics or their own topics of interest. The experience raised their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) and motivated them to reach out to further EFL practice availabilities such as tandem learning with foreigners via video conferencing websites or arranging English conversational sessions among themselves. This self-initiated learning organization can be loosely related to the self-reflection phase of Zimmerman's (2005) SRL cycle as successful learning outcome of a process triggered further self-management of the learners' own development, and it is also in alignment with motivation being a crucial initiator and element of SRL (Csizér, 2012; Dörnyei, 1998).

As generally seen in the interviewed students' responses, their perceptions of successful EFL learning strategies are often related to learning through context. Whether they chose conversational opportunities or solitary self-regulated learning approaches, they found dialogues, sentences encountered in life-like situations such as conversations, movies, songs, or reading material more applicable sources for their EFL acquisition. Selecting contextual association as opposed to learning vocabulary items or grammar rules out of context proves that they abandoned apparently unsuccessful grammar-translation learning practices and built strategies upon workable learning experiences, therefore, proactively causing impact on their SRL processes (Zimmerman, 2008). The learners' choices of technological or digital learning tools, however, did not produce a wide variety; on the contrary, each respondent recalled only one or maximum two applications or websites they turn to in their self-regulated EFL learning. This can be drawn in parallel with the fact that in many instances

students reported no assisting advice from their EFL educators and even when they were recommended learning opportunities, those were often related to real-life conversational practice. It also justifies their reluctance or dislike towards online learning, especially in the ERT period introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However successful their EFL learning has been, they all reported their need for further improvement and, although their EFL proficiency was adequate for this research project, their level of expression interfered with their fluency at times. Nevertheless, their repertoire of approaches is to a great extent limited to opportunities of personal encounters and, had they targeted to achieve higher goals or better proficiency, their existing learning tools may only partially fulfil their requirements and most suggested communicative strategies are situationally dependent. Moreover, this research investigated self-regulated learning merely among learners who were proficient enough to take part in an interview conducted in English and, although they possessed a number of learning strategies, some of which are applicable in self-regulated learning, there is a larger population of unsuccessful EFL learners whose range of strategies are limited to previously learnt grammar-translation techniques.

The findings of this study hold several underlying pedagogical implications. Firstly, providing context to newly approached learning material can enhance learners' understanding and memorization; furthermore, context would not only augment acquisition but also ease learners' association of their learning material with situations and even cultural perspectives that foreign language learning requires, especially considering Japanese EFL learners' difficulties in corresponding to Western culture (Cutrone, 2009). Des Malais (2009) proposed the use of scenarios in Japanese EFL classrooms as a possible solution to Japanese learners' difficulties in expressing self-related or private matters; such practice can provide more tangible roleplays and discussions as well as encourage learners in overcoming certain levels of their shyness. As a result of positive experiences in L2 task achievements, learners' beliefs in their capabilities, i. e. their self-efficacy, may increase, which can be a motivating factor in their EFL learning practices (Bandura, 1982). This phenomenon, similarly

to Zimmerman's (2008) cycle of SRL, can be a repetitive and ever-improving process bringing an increasing number of achievements that affect further language developmental cycles. Once learners feel a higher level of capability to improve their EFL skills, they may become more motivated to conduct outside-class SRL processes and, in order to facilitate such learning activities and learners' long-term EFL improvement goals, educators must equip learners with sufficient learning tools and approaches that can be utilized in their self-directed learning (Cotterall, 2000; Littlewood, 1996; Murray, 2014; Tseng et al., 2006).

In conclusion, this research provided meaningful insights into successful Japanese EFL learners' learning conducts outside organized educational classroom settings. Their preferences of communicative and conversational approaches justify their ability to speak English at a higher level than most of their fellow EFL learners at the same age and educational level. They also enlisted certain self-developed, encountered, or suggested learning methods that can assist their language skills development and may be beneficial for less proficient EFL learners. Their limited recalls on teachers' suggestions of workable SRL methods and tools suggest that to enhance and develop learners' outside-class learning processes, increased pedagogical attention is required.

4.1 Limitations of the study

Although the interview protocol of this study was carefully designed and the data collection was carried out with the intention of exploring the research interest as best as possible in order to answer the research questions, the present study holds certain limitations. First of all, more participants could reveal more information in order to ensure valid conclusions. Furthermore, more variability of the background of the participants could produce different results regarding, for instance, gender distribution or their levels of EFL knowledge: this study only inquired among relatively proficient EFL learners, whereas in matters of learning strategies comparisons with less successful learners may present more tangible and meaningful results. Naturally, such extension of

the research would require interviews conducted in the participants' mother tongue but, in this regard, even this study may have produced deeper levels of understanding within the research topic if the respondents could express themselves comfortably in their first language. Finally, the learners recruited for this research project are all enrolled in a program where EFL development receives special focus with a considerable amount of learning opportunities; the hereby presented results, therefore, provide only a glimpse into Japanese EFL learners' outside-class learning processes and, although the gained results can provide grounds for certain conclusions as to how SRL processes may be enhanced, they can be viewed as generalizable only to a small portion of the population.

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