Japanese learners' self-perceptions of their L2 English user identity development

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored influences that helped to shape Japanese L2 (Second language) English users' identity development. 81 Japanese undergraduates shared self-perceptions of their L2 English identity development from personal experiences, both domestically (in Japan) and internationally. The primary focus of this study was an exploration of enabling influences on Japanese L2 English identity development. A secondary focus was an exploration of constraining influences on Japanese L2 English user identity development. Findings from this study suggested that Japanese L2 English user identity development is influenced by the individual's awareness of what identity roles are accessible and available for negotiation, and what kind of learning occurs. Major influences that emerged through thematic analysis of the data indicated that *L2 English classroom-based experiences in Japan,* engagement in *study abroad and volunteer abroad programs*, and *overseas travel and living abroad with family* were the most commonly referred to enablers of Japanese L2 English user identity development. Additionally, *inadequate English language skills, insufficient exposure to English in daily life,* and *hesitancy (and avoidance) to communicate in English* were the three most commonly referred to constraints of Japanese L2 English user identity development.

Keywords: English language user, identity development, learner perceptions, Japan, EIL, L2

1. Introduction

Japanese second language (L2) learner identity, in the context of English language as a second language, has been studied from a socio-psychological perspective (see Goharimehr, 2017; Takahashi, 2013; Suzuki, 2017) in relation to Dörnyei's (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System. However, these studies and their utilization of this model have concentrated on L2 English learner self-perceptions of their ideal L2 self and all of the attributes that a person would ideally like to possess.The current study differed in two ways from these studies of Japanese L2 English learner identity. Firstly, the current study explored identity development of participantswhom the researcher viewed as L2 English users (rather than a traditional view of themas learners). The concept of them being users of English can be understood as positioning these individuals as belonging to the wider community of English speakingpeople around the world. As a result of the experience that participants had in learning and using English, the researcher identified and referred to them as L2 English users (see section 3 for further information about the participants). Secondly, these Japanese L2 English users' experiences were explored in relation to the interpretations of the factors that enabled and constrained the development of their L2 English language user development through self-perceived interpretations of their personal experiences. This research was intended to promote awareness among English language teaching professionals in Japan, and beyond, about how Japanese learners/users of English view what has significantly shaped the development of their language user (learner) identity, as well those factors that have constrained the development of their L2 English user identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Japanese L2 User Identity Formation

The construction of a second language (L2) learner's self-identity is an integral element of one's sense of awareness of being a L2 language user. In relation to L2 English learners (users), one's self-perception of his identity, as described by Norton (1997), can be understood in the context of how an individual relates to the social world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how an individual understands his possibilities for the future. Further to the point of the connection between identity and the individual's interpretation of self, Burke and Stets (2009) viewed identity as being derived from a set of meanings that define who the individual is when he occupies a particular role in society or that of a member of a particular group. In the current study, the identity of being a L2 user of English involved both classroom settings and society at large. For this research, the concept of identity being constructed through an individual's relations with his social world and his perceived position as a L2 English user in that social world was central to understanding the development of one's sense ofidentity as a user of English.

The current study was aligned with the development of Japanese L2 English user identity through a sociocultural lens. This is in contrast to research on L2 user identity which employs a socio-psychological lens on the construction of learner motivation. For the purpose of this research, it was important to make a distinction between these two perspectives and the reasoning behind the selection of a sociocultural lens. From a socio-psychological perspective, L2 language user identity development is significantly influenced through the construction of a user's motivation. One contemporary and representative model of learner motivation development from a socio-psychological perspective is Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Briefly, in this model, the ideal L2 self is considered to be a central component in the

system and the model refers to the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self and the representation of all the attributes that a person would ideally like to possess. In this sense, through a socio-psychological lens, constructs of motivation, as argued by Darvin and Norton (2015), frequently view the individual as having a unitary and coherent identity with specific character traits. In contrast, from a sociocultural perspective, identity is considered to be non-unitary, fluid, multiple, and contradictory (Duff, 2012; Norton, 2010). According to Norton (2001), identity construction needs to be understood in relation to social processes and inequitable power relations, for example, power dynamics between language users, between teacher and student, and so on. The current research explored the role of human agency and identity with consideration given to Norton Peirce's (1995) notion of investment. That is to say, the view that a language learner (user) invests in a language with the understanding that he will increase the value of his cultural capital and social power. The individual's understanding of his own agency in learning a second language was researched by Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004), who found that how one relates himselfto the world tends to motivate the degree to which he studies English and the extent to which he is likely to visualize his English using self clearly.

2.2 L2 User identity & Socialization

From a sociocultural perspective, L2 English user identity development can be viewed through experienced-based engagement of the L2 English user with his social world, in situ, and in relation to cultural, historical, and institutional settings (Wertsch, 1997). The personal experiences of Japanese L2 English users as shared through their self-perceived interpretations were considered by the researcher to potentially be unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in L2 usage (learning) and socialization (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The widely held perception that L2 acquisition-based studies have focused on the cognitive nature of L2 acquisition has been criticized by Firth and Wagner (2007), who suggested that this trend has marginalized the social and cultural dimensions they recognize as inherent to every instance of L2 acquisition. For example, L2 user engagement in Study Abroad Experiences (SAEs) involves traveling to, and spending some time in a target-language country during which time the L2 user (learner) may also receive Formal Instruction (FI) in the first language (L1). L2 learning involves the construction of identities, both in relation to specific activities, such as SAEs and F1, and social communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Hawkins (2004) argued that power relations embedded in different social contexts are the driving forces that shape the individual's awareness of how he is positioned, what identity roles are accessible, what opportunities are available for negotiation, and what kind of learning occurs. An important and distinguishing feature of English, in the context of it being an international language, is that L2 English users (or learners) utilize the language as a linguistic resource to gain access and membership to desired global discourse communities. For example, some communities may advantage their work or education, or further their opportunities for interaction with people with similar social interests globally (Alsagoff, 2012). The current research explored the social, cultural, and historical influences of Japanese L2 English user identity development in relation to an English as an International Language (EIL) oriented paradigm. That is to say, the identity development of L2 users who use English for international and intercultural communication (Sharifian, 2009) and in relation to the question of what is (and is not) relevant to their use and learning of English in local (Wang, 2013) and international contexts. Furthermore, the current research explored enabling and constraining influences on the evolution of Japanese L2 English user identity in relation to the individual's perceived engagement with his social world

which included settings that involved international and intercultural communication.

2.3 Studies Relevant to the Current Research
The researcher located only one Japan-based study about Japanese L2 English learners' identity construction that considered the individual's perceptions of his self-image of learner identity in relation his social world. There were no studies located by the researcher about Japanese L2 English users' identity construction. Capobianco (2017) examined how learning English as a L2 affected the way that adult Japanese learners saw themselves as being Japanese. Results from this study showed that the learners commonly developed a more intercultural identity. Although this intercultural orientation developed to varying degrees, each learner developed a greater orientation towards *cultural Otherness* as a result of their English language study.
The researcher found several Japan-based studies (Goharimehr, 2017; Takahashi, 2013; Suzuki, 2017) which explored L2 learner identity and were grounded in psychological constructs of motivation. These studies implemented Dörnyei's (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System. A review of these three studies by the researcher identified several relevant findings. Goharimehr's study (2017)found that L2 learners have aspirations toward desired social or professional identities; but for some learners, anxiety and low linguistic self-confidence affected their identity development. Additionally, Takahashi (2013) concluded that for L2 English learners there was a relationship between whether participants believed they had opportunities to communicate in English and the formation of their ideal L2 selves. Yet,for some of the learners it was difficult to imagine themselves as users of English. In this case, the learners simply stated the goals and purposes for which they wanted to useEnglish in the future. Lastly, Suzuki's (2017) study of motivated and less-motivated Japanese learners' ideal L2 self found that all of the high-motivated learners aimed to possess near-native skills, while low-motivated learners seemed to underestimate their ability to attain English skills, and had lower expectations concerning their ideal L2 self.These studies provided insights in relation to an ideal self-image of an L2 learner in a Japan-based context. However, the studies did not explore sociocultural influences on L2 English user identity development, which was an important consideration in the current research.

3. Participants
Eighty-one 3rd and 4th year Japanese undergraduates voluntarily participated in the current study. At the time this research was conducted, 39 3rd year participants were enrolled in their fifth or sixth semester of a university-based English language program. Additionally, 42 4th year participants were in their 7th or 8th semester of study in the same program. During the previous semesters, each participant had experienced learning settings with different class groups and teachers. The Japanese private university setting where the participants were enrolled in an English language program promotes an English as a lingua franca (ELF) philosophy. All participants had spent at least half of their formal schooling in Japan and experienced learning English as a L2 in Japan-based classrooms during that time. Additionally, they had all studied English since junior high school and had eight years or more of English language classroom learning experiences from which they could draw upon when writing their blogs or speaking in the focus group. With a Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score averaging 470 for the participating cohort, the researcher was confident that the participants' English language proficiency was suitable for their participation inthis study. The researcher recognized that the participants were users of English who had experienced interacting with people of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds during their studies, travel, study abroad, part-time work, etc. and had been exposed to

teachers and tutors from a diverse range of cultural-linguistic backgrounds while studying in the abovementioned English language programMethodology

The current research recognized that in the shared experiences provided by participants through their participation in blog writing and the focus group, multiple, and contradictory, but equally valid accounts of reality existed (Gray, 2014). Participants' perceptions were understood through an interpretivist lens and the researcher looked for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations (Crotty, 1998) that the participants had of learning as experienced through their individual journeys as L2 English users.

Data were collected from blog writing at the end of a two-week period and in relation to the first research question: *What has helped you to develop a sense of identity as a user of English?* Blog entries for this question were to be between 120 and 150 words in length. Additionally, data were collected from one 30 minute-long focus group discussion with 6 participants from the original cohort of 81. The focus group was conducted in English and in relation to the second research question: *Have there been any constraints upon the development of your identity as a user of English?* For the focus group, the researcher audio-taped and transcribed responses from the participants. Convenience sampling was implemented in this study because the participants were willing and able to participate in the research (Creswell, 2014). A constructivist paradigm was used in this study in order for the researcher to view the realities providedby the participants as perceived through their socially constructed relationships (Plowright, 2011). Consideration was given to Black's (1993) criticism of differences between opinions found in qualitative data where participants may articulate a particularview, but in practice behave differently. Thus, the participants completed their blog entries outside of class time voluntarily, confidentially, and anonymously in relation to other participants. The language of instruction in the English program was English, primarily. So, participants were asked by the researcher to write in English and use language translation software if they wanted to do so to support the detailing of their blog entries.

Data were analyzed initially through thematic analysis and supported by a combination of inductive and interpretive analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns of themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identification of themes resulted from the careful reading and re-reading of data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Interpretative analysis was then used to give meaning to data and make sense of social situations by generating explanations and inferences, developing insights, attaching significance, refining understandings, and drawing conclusions (Hatch, 2002).

4. Research Questions

RQ1: What has helped you to develop a sense of identity as a user of English? Give some examples.

RQ2: Have there been any constraints upon the development of your identity as a user of English? If so, give some examples.

5. Results & Findings

5.1 Blog Entries

As depicted in Figure 1, key factors which influenced participants' L2 English user identity development were categorized into seven themes. Data from these themes were in response to the first research question: *What has helped you to develop a sense of identity as a user of English? Give some examples.* Extracts from the blog entries are presented below.

Figure 1.
Japanese L2 English User Identity Development Themes
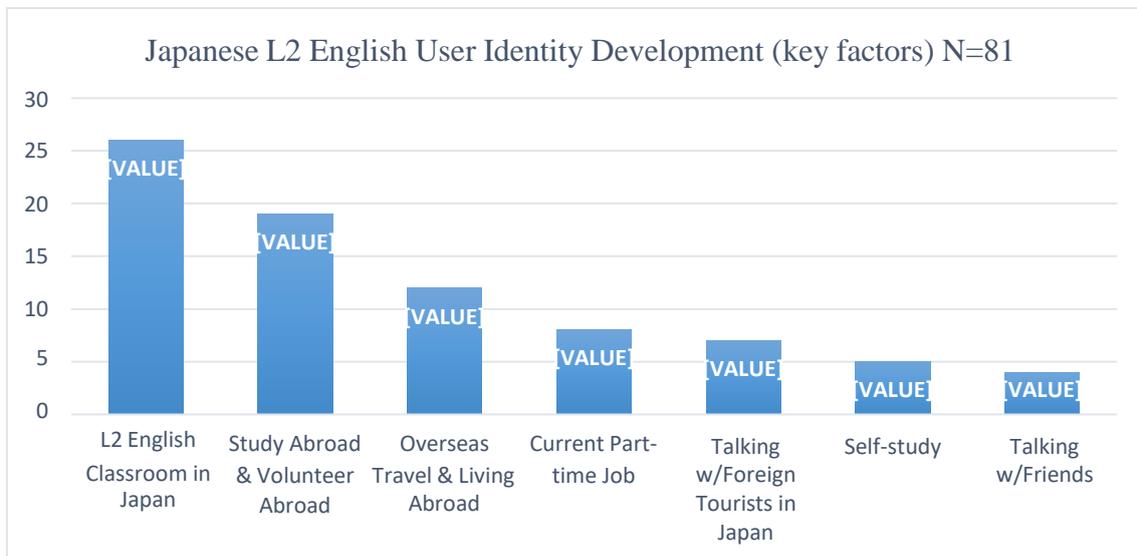
5.1.1 Theme 1: L2 English classroom in Japan (school and/or university)

Approximately 32% of participants (26 out of 81 participants) identified classroom-based experiences as important for their L2 English user identity development. As noted in section 3, prior to data collection the researcher established that all 81 participants had spent at least half of their formal schooling in Japan-based classroom environments. Many participants shared their perceptions of being immersed in English language study at a Japanese university and how it was influential on the development of their sense of being a L2 English speaker. Accounts from two participants follows:

> *I have a lot of classes since entered the university. The classes are related to English. For example, grammar, pronunciation and culture. It is a rare opportunity that can be conversation with English speakers of non-Japanese for me. I think they were to develop my English ability and identity.*

> *When I'm a sophomore at university, I went to an English conversation lesson every day at my university. Before I went to there, I have a strong resistance toward English, especially speaking. Because I had shame memories. These disturbed rising a speaking ability. At the beginning of the lesson I could not change the style. Gradually I could begin to speak for myself. My image toward English changed.*

One participant shared an account about the growth of his self-confidence as a result of his classroom-based experience with one teacher in junior high school:

> *At first, I hated going to the English conversation class because I could not speak English. My English teacher was American, and she always told us to value own thought. Also she told us "Don't be shy. Don't be afraid of failure." The word gave me courage to speak English. After that, I tried to speak English and participated in an English speech contest by myself.*

5.1.2 Theme 2: Study abroad & volunteer abroad programs

Roughly 23% of participants (19 out of 81) talked about how programs connected with studying abroad or engaging in volunteer programs enabled their development of an L2 English user identity. The researcher did not find out how many students had participated in such programs. Yet, this was the second most commonly referred to enabler. The examples provided by participants below indicated that participation in such programs enabled the development of one's L2 English user identity in relation to exposure to intercultural settings:

> *I think English class helped me to develop an identity as a user of English because when I was in Australia my teacher made me like English. My teacher is always told me "English is fun". She is taken my fear of English. But English to learn the Japanese junior high school and high school, it did not gave me the change and fun. Taking the communication with other people is give me a new identity.*

> *I got such a many things as a user of English. A lot of different cultures make my identity. Before I go to foreign country as trip and study abroad. I had just narrow view of the world. But now, I have been growing up with absorbing interesting experiences and knowledge.*

> *I belong to the student group that help Cambodian people. In last summer, I went to Cambodia. They can speak English, so we communicated in English. I was happy to communicate with them and I thought that it is a good thing that there is English in the world. Also, I wanted to communicate with them more, so I want to speak English well. The feeling helps me to develop an identity as a user of English.*

5.1.3 Theme 3: Overseas travel as a tourist & living abroad (with family)

Almost 15% of participants (12 out of 81) discussed their experiences of traveling outside of Japan. One student talked about such an experience:

> *It is time when it went to overseas travel that I feel the identity as the English speaker. Particularly, it is the trip to the country which does not assume English an official language. There are few Japanese speakers, and even an English speaker little situation help to have identity. I went to a trip to Vietnam the other day. There were few places to be able to communicate in both Japanese and English. By the experience, I felt the identity as the English speaker for the first time. The person will become easy to feel one's identity by becoming the minority*

The following extract was from a participant who had lived abroad (with family) for a period of time:

When I was young. From 3 to 5 years, I had been living in the Netherlands. From 10 to 12 years and I had been living in South Africa. So, I always withEnglish since I was young. But it was not "studying". It was "Natural learning". When I returned to Japan, way to English learning had change into the "studying" from the "natural learning". So, it turned into a learning method that is contrary to own identity. I became not good at English. Therefore, my English identity is not be obtained by studying. It can get by natural English existence.

5.1.4 Theme 4: Current part-time job

Approximately 10% of participants (8 out of 81) indicated that their involvementin part-time work influenced their sense of being a L2 English user. For example, speaking in English with customers in work environments such as cafés, restaurants, supermarkets, and teaching English in cram schools. The following example refers to one participant's experience of teaching English in a cram school:

My part-time job is teaching English to junior high school students. I have developed their English ability. For example, my students always got good grades in term and mid-term examinations. And my students passed the Test in Practical English Proficiency. I think that I have helped to develop an identity as a user of English. I try to always teach my students clearly. I want to have they come to like English.

5.1.5 Theme 5: Talking with foreign tourists in Japan

Eight per cent of participants (7 out of 81) selected the experience of communicating with foreign tourists who were visiting Japan as an influence on their L2 English user identity development. One example provided was:

When I went to Kyoto, Osaka, and Nagoya, many foreign tourists asked me how to go to anywhere. This opportunity was first time to use English in my daily life. I thought that my English skill was poor, but when I was in situation that I had to use English I could speak it. This experience helped me to develop my identity as a user of English. Since then, I think that my English skill is not poor, but my English skill is not good. Using English makes me to be confident of my English. So I'll use English in my daily life.

5.1.6 Theme 6: Self-study

Almost 7 per cent of participants (5 out of 81) wrote about the value that self-study, in the form of being tutored or studying alone, had on the development of their L2 English user identity. The example below refers to the influence of a tutor upon one participant:

I think English speaking practice is very important for me. When I was child, I was taught for English speaking practice from native-speakers and Japanese women. Japanese women was lived in neighborhood. She can speak English very well. She taught me to English writing and easy speaking. It was very interesting for me. Then, I learned basic English from her. In addition, when I was elementary school student, I learned English from native-speaker. She was very bright person so she can speak Japanese. Therefore I could not English very well, she taught me English for carefully. In addition, also she taught me culture of English zone. I could learn about English culture. There are my experience for English learning.

5.1.7 Theme 7: Using English with friends

Approximately 5% of participants (4 out of 81) discussed how talking in Englishwith their Japanese and foreign friends supported their English language user identity development. One participant shared his feeling about benefiting from speaking with friends and his concern about having inadequate L2 English communication skills:

I experienced a lot of things to develop my identity as English user. For example, my best development way for identity as English user is conversation with my friends. When I conversation in English with my friend, I think that my English skill is lack. I regret my English skill because I can't speak English better than my friends. So I want my English skill to grow up, and I study listening now.

5.2 Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussion centered on the second research question: *Have there been any constraints upon the development of your identity as a user of English? If so, give some examples.* The top three constraining themes that emerged and the number of times they were referred to by participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Tally of Top 3 Constraints to English User Identity Development Noted by Participants

	Top 3 Constraints	No. of Times Referred to by Participants	No. of Participants who Referred to Each Constraint (n=6)
1st	Language Skills	12	6
2nd	L2 Exposure	8	5
3rd	Risk-taking	6	3

5.2.1 Constraints Theme 1: Inadequate English language skills

Inadequate English language skills was the most commonly referred to constrainton Japanese L2 user identity development. Examples of this constraint related to inadequate proficiency of the Four skills (Reading, Listening, Speaking, & Writing), and a lack of ability to use communication strategies such as clarification and accommodation. One example provided by a participant was:

I do not have satisfactory knowledge about English communication. For example, I talk with someone [in English] but the conversation goes quick. I cannot quickly ask something and then I become confused.

5.2.2 Constraints Theme 2: A lack of English L2 exposure in daily life (outside of university life)

A lack of exposure to English in daily life was the second most referred to constraint. Participants particularly seemed concerned with their lack of exposure to L1 and L2 English users because of the very few opportunities in their lives to be regularly exposed to English in natural settings. One participant noted:

I live in Japan and everyone speaks Japanese. Of course, I can use English at my school [university]. But there is not much people to speak English with together in my daily life. It's a problem!

5.2.3 Constraints Theme 3: Risk-taking (hesitancy & avoidance of using English)

This theme indicated problems that the participants expressed about hesitating or avoiding communicating in English. In particular, engaging in opportunities to speak in English was an important concern for participants. An example follows of one participant's inability to take a risk and try to speak in English:

I had the problem sometimes before. I sometimes say the wrong and then I am embarrassed. So, then if I speak I will want to be sure of word before I speak.

6. Discussion

Findings from the current research were derived from themes that categorized the shared experiences of the participants as they were self-perceived. In relation to the firstresearch question, it was evident that participants related their L2 English user identity development to their social world in various settings and in the context of socializing with others. They provided clear evidence of what they thought was relevant to their identity development (Wang, 2013) as L2 English users in regard to local and international settings of language learning and usage. The two most commonly referred to themes from the blog entry data were: *L2 English classroom in Japan (school and/or university),* and *study abroad & volunteer abroad programs.* The researcher determined that from the blog writing, it was clear that all participants' entries displayed a sense of self-awareness of what was relevant to their identity development. As one participant reported, *I have a lot of classes since entered the university. The classes are related to English…It is a rare opportunity that can be conversation with English speakers of non-Japanese for me,* and from another, *I think English class helped me to develop an identity as a user of English because when I was in Australia my teacher made me like an English. My teacher is always told me "English is fun". She is taken my fear of English.* Responses from participants indicated that their self-perceived identity development was non-unitary, fluid, multiple, and contradictory (Duff, 2012; Norton, 2010). This was noted by one participant, under the theme of *using English with friends,*who said, *…my best development way for identity as English user is conversation with my friends. When I*

conversation in English with my friend, I think that my English skill is lack. I regret my English skill because I can't speak English better than my friends. This participant's observation highlighted the significance of identity development in regard to social processes and inequitable power relations (Norton, 2001) as expressed by his feeling of inadequacy because his friends could speak English better than him. AsHawkins (2004) noted, power relations embedded in different social contexts shape what identity roles are accessible. In relation to the theme of *talking with foreign tourists in Japan*, one participant talked about giving information to foreign tourists which positioned her with an opportunity to speak English in an authentic and meaning context. It could be assumed that the tourists did not speak Japanese well or that they had minimal local knowledge. Yet, she was able to take advantage of this accessible opportunity and assist the tourists in English.

Responses from participants in regard to the second research question: *Have therebeen any constraints upon the development of your identity as a user of English?* showed that, among the six people in the focus group, there were some constraining influences that were perceived as hindering their access to developing positive identity roles, and communicating as L2 English users. The three themes derived from the focus group were: *inadequate English language skills*, *a lack of English L2 exposure in daily life (outside of university life)* and *risk-taking (hesitancy & avoidance of using English)*. In this study, L2 English user identity development was strongly shaped by the influence of international and intercultural communication (Sharifian, 2009) as evidenced by the amount of data grouped into the following themes: s*tudy abroad & volunteer abroad programs, overseas travel as a tourist & living abroad*, and *talking with foreign tourists in Japan.* Yet, participants in the current study differed from those in Capobianco's (2017) study, who in the main, considered that their English learning and use of English led them to develop a sense of *cultural Otherness*, a fusion of being a distinct type of Japanese and/or having a more intercultural identity. It can be considered that participants in the current study displayed an openness to L1 and L2 English users as could be expected in an EIL paradigm where Japanese speakers of English referred to themselves as users (rather than learners) of English, in domestic andinternational contexts.

7. Limitations & Recommendations

The study was conducted at a particular point in time and the researcher did not have an ongoing opportunity to explore participants' L2 English user identity development over an extended period of time. Despite the first research question's request for some examples, almost all participants provided only one primary example, possibly due to the blog writing word limit. Further exploration of the phenomenon of Japanese L2 English user identity development among university students could benefit from being conducted over an extended period of time. Also, results from this study were from oneuniversity and a more expansive study with a wider participant base across two or moreJapanese tertiary institutions could be advantageous for developing a greater understanding of this research issue. Lastly, the second research question, from which data was collected through a focus group, could be included in the blog writing data collection in order to get a wider sample of responses for data analysis.

8. Conclusion

From the findings presented in this study, the researcher concluded that these Japanese L2 English users clearly demonstrated various ways in which their self-perceived interactions in relation to their social world enabled, and in some circumstances, constrained, their use of English and their L2 English user identity development. For researchers to gain a greater awareness of Japanese L2 English user identity

development, the researcher suggests an exploration of individuals' interpretations of social, cultural, and historical influences on their L2 English user selves, and how these individual identities evolve over time. The researcher hopes that professional educators will consider L2 user (or learner) perceptions of their own L2 English identity development when formulating and implementing teaching and learning materials, and classroom-based teaching.

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