Anagnorisis and narrative incorporation: How significant incidents affect language-learning behavior

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Abstract

This paper examines how fleeting experiences exert a disproportionately powerful effect on the language learning motivation and behavior of university students. A thematic analysis of interview data is used to show how *significant incidents* have two principal consequences. The first, *anagnorisis*, is an immediate, revelatory change in beliefs about language learning. The second, *narrative incorporation*, is a process through which the memory of the incident and/or its anagnorisis becomes a constituent of self-narratives. It is argued that the significant incident is best understood not as an external influence on motivation, but as a component of the learner's worldview.

Keywords: significant incident; anagnorisis; narrative incorporation; motivation; learning experience

1. Introduction

In this paper I examine how significant incidents influence language learning, and how they can be conceptualized in terms of existing models of motivation. The importance of experiences in shaping our lives is self-evident, but the long-term effect of particularly memorable, idiosyncratic events on language learning

behavior is the target of relatively little research. It is to be expected that quantitative research addressing motivation as a general trait should overlook the significant incident. However, in the qualitative realm, too, I suspect that the need to find commonalities between learners, their experiences, and their behavior, may have led researchers to discount the utility of studying what appear to be highly idiosyncratic phenomena. The aim of this study is therefore to address a hitherto underexplored motivation-relevant phenomenon, the significant incident. I draw on findings from the critical incident literature and my own analysis to show that significant incidents in fact share certain general characteristics. I start by offering an overview of critical incident technique (CIT), and a selection of relevant findings from the L2 motivation field. After a justification of the methodological approach, extracts from interviews conducted with five university-age Japanese learners of English are presented with commentary. The results of a thematic analysis illustrate how these learners' behaviors are regulated by the consequences of memorable experiences from their formative years. The paper concludes with a consideration of how the findings can be reconciled with existing conceptions of motivation.

2. Background to the study

Two bodies of research supply the theoretical background to this study. I start by introducing a body of work occupying a theoretical niche of its own, *critical incident technique*. I then address recent research investigating language-learning motivation as a complex dynamic phenomenon.

2.1. Critical incident technique

Critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) was developed as an instrument for institutional problem-solving using the content analysis of interviews. Facts about individuals' behavior in defined situations were gathered, and then used to develop broad psychological principles of utility in solving practical problems (Flanagan, 1954). During the Second World War, under the auspices of the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States Army Air Forces, John Flanagan and his colleagues used CIT to formulate a set of critical requirements for combat leadership in cognitive, affective, and behavioral terms. Flanagan's (1954) seminal overview of this body of work has been more frequently cited than any other by industrial and organizational psychologists in the second half of the 20th century (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Malio, 2005). CIT has subsequently been used in organizational psychology and management (Cope & Watts, 2000), healthcare (Webster & Mertova, 2007), intercultural practice (Chell & Allman, 2003), and cross-cultural training (Wight, 1995).

The literature on critical incidents in education (Thiel, 1999; Tripp, 1993; Woods, 1985, 2012) focuses on how critical incidents can be manufactured or managed to pedagogical advantage. The documenting and analysis of critical incidents has also become an established part of reflexive practice technique (Cruickshank & Applegate, 1981; Farrell, 2008, 2009). In education, the focus of research has become broader than the original aim of establishing effective performance requirements. Instead, understanding participant experience and decision-making has itself become a target of research. Chell (2004), for example, views CIT as a means of gaining an understanding of how incidents and their consequences are perceived and managed by the individual. Woods (1985) shows how critical incidents are indispensable to understanding life-change, and that they define reality and identity for the experiencer.

With the shift of the research focus to the individual, some have questioned whether it is possible to ascribe criticality to an incident, prompting alternative suggestions for descriptors such as *revelatory* and *significant* (Keatinge, 2002). I use the term *significant* to describe the incidents because I hesitate to imply by definition that if a given incident had not happened, then such-and-such an outcome would not have followed. *Significant* is also a more appropriate descriptor for the longer-term effects of such events. In the aggregate, the sizable CIT literature suggests that significant incidents tend to exhibit the following characteristics:

- They are seminal moments in learning and/or self-awareness.
- They lead the individual to question the way things normally operate.
- They have a traumatic, shocking, surprising, or risky element.
- They are unplanned, unanticipated, and uncontrolled.
- Their full impact on the individual's understanding and worldview becomes apparent only in retrospect (Cope & Watts, 2000; Tripp, 1993; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

I contend that these characteristics can be encapsulated in two categories. The first of these is coined here as *anagnorisis*, after the moment in a play when a character makes a critical discovery leading to a new understanding of reality—in Aristotle's (n.d.) words, "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (*Poetics*, XI*)*. The second consequence of the significant incident, *narrative incorporation*, describes the process by which memory comes to serve as a foundational component of beliefs and narratives used by the learner to make sense of learning. Narrative incorporation serves a preservation and confirmatory function, maintaining a vision of reality against the pressure of contrary forces (Woods, 2012). It is important to note that the object of study is not the incident itself but how it is remembered, and the meaning attributed to it; for example, the fear an adult feels towards dogs because of a childhood recollection of being attacked by the family canine, is real (and a legitimate object of study) even if, in fact, the dog only intended to play.

The categorization into anagnorisis and narrative incorporation is, as will be shown, well grounded in empirical data. It is also consistent with CIT literature. While hitherto untapped by L2 motivation researchers, the above categorization constitutes a valuable resource for researchers interested in the role played by significant incidents in language learning.

2.2. The significant incident and L2 motivation

Motivation is a famously slippery concept to nail down in a universal definition. It has been defined as an account of behavior (Dörnyei, 2001a), a latent variable (Gardner & Tremblay, 1994), a cumulative arousal (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998), a manifestation of desire (Dörnyei, 2005), and an emergent phenomenon (Ushioda, 2001) – such is the conceptual indeterminacy that led the American Psychological Association to consider removing it as a search term from their psychological database at one point (Walker & Symons, 1997).

Within the L2 motivation field, a substantial amount of quantitative research has been conducted on environmental influences on language learning motivation such as the classroom environment and pedagogical practice (Chambers, 1993, 1999; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei, 2001b; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Yashima, 2009). Compared to such well-researched variables, events outside the classroom that trigger changes in beliefs and behavior are often highly idiosyncratic and therefore difficult to capture using traditional quantitative methods based on group averages (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1960; Noels, 2001). In principle, a qualitative approach (Lamb, 2004, 2009; Norton, 1997, 2000; Ushioda, 2009, 2015) focusing on the individual, or a small number of individuals, offers easier methodological access to the significant incident. Rather than traits, qualitative methodologies tend to focus on how the learner thinks about language learning, the beliefs underlying this thinking, and how participant understanding shapes behavior (Ushioda, 2001). Lamb (2004, 2009), for example, shows how changes to the motivation of young Indonesians derive from the way they are involved in on-going processes of identity construction during adolescence within their institutional and cultural context.

Work on long-term motivational change within the qualitative realm has tended to reflect findings in educational psychology (Shunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007), showing how elementary and junior high schools have a negative effect on the motivation of incoming students (Chambers, 1999; Koizumi & Matsuo, 1993). In related research into life-long language learning, Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005) identified six salient *motivational transformation episodes* (MTEs) associated with a reformulation of learners' motivational disposition. One of these, *moving into a new life phase* (e.g., leaving school or starting work) was found to

instigate a revision of learning goals. The idea of a transformational episode clearly resonates with that of the significant incident, but MTEs have unfortunately not gained traction within the field.

While the role of particular memorable incidents in influencing learner motivation remains undertheorized in the literature, work addressing motivation from a self or identity perspective provides a possible theoretical link between such incidents and changes in behavior. Views of the self, which are altered by anagnorisis and narrative incorporation, have been shown to have a direct and unequivocal effect on behavior, attitudes, and motivation (Dweck & Molden, 2008). The two most influential self-related concepts within L2 motivation work are *possible selves* and *self-discrepancy*. Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are symbolic futures to be approached or avoided: "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 99). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), they are likely to derive from salient categories within the sociocultural and historical context, including *immediate social experience*. The significant incident clearly can fall into this category. According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1996), discrepancy between the *actual* and *hoped for* selves causes psychological discomfort that the learner is motivated to alleviate by bringing the selves into alignment. As outlined below, significant incidents may either inspire particular hoped for selves, or reveal to the learner "deficiencies" in their actual selves. In general, the significant incident is a catalyst for learners to reconceptualize their view of themselves in relation to the world, and what they can do about their situation through language learning.

The recent movement incorporating concepts from complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) into the L2 motivation literature has encouraged researchers to address the complex and dynamic nature of language learning and motivation (Dörnyei, 2011; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Van Geert, 2007). In previous research (Pigott, 2012), I used a simplified version of Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) complexity thought modeling procedure to analyze the language learning motivation of a small group of Japanese university students. I found that a CDST approach was of utility in describing how participants' experiences in junior high school were integral aspects of their L2 motivation as university students. *Non-linearity*, for example, explains how seemingly inconsequential incidents such as intercultural encounters at an early age can potentially exert a disproportionately significant effect on motivation (a *butterfly* effect), while eight years of test-focused compulsory English classes often exert a disproportionately insignificant influence. The influence of such incidents is contingent on the *initial conditions* of the "learner system" (i.e., learner characteristics). Or, if the learning trajectory itself is taken to be a complex system, the

significant incident can be understood to generate particular initial conditions for learning. In line with Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) observation that events closer in time may in fact be less relevant to behavior than particularly important events widely separated in linear time, the influence of such events operates over timescales that dwarf more usual targets of the researcher such as the task, lesson, or curriculum.

Recent research within the CDST paradigm has focused on motivational change over various timescales. Yashima and Arano (2014), for example, examined motivational change during the course of four years spent at university. Henry (2015) analyzed motivational changes over the course of a single academic year. MacIntyre's (2012) idiodynamic method addresses motivation at the level of the second, using software to examine the "fluctuations of approach and avoidance tendencies" (p. 114). The findings presented here add to this growing body of research by examining changes to motivation occurring over the space of up to a decade.

My view of the use of CDST concepts within motivation research are in alignment with Mercer's (2015) observation that they provide useful metaphors collectively reminding theorists not to take an overly reductionist approach toward understanding motivation. It bears remembering, however, the old adage about babies and bathwater. Schumann (2015) writes that a CDST approach allows researchers to "abandon the notion of single and linear causality and frees them from the implicit demand in conventional research for large subject studies" (p. xvi). This may be true, but I would argue that this is precisely what decent qualitative approaches have been doing long before interest in CDST concepts arose. It is, to my mind, regrettable that the incorporation of CDST thinking has not led researchers to embrace the rich, existing array of qualitative approaches available, but rather to bypass them in the enthusiastic rush to develop "CDST-specific" qualitative methods (cf. MacIntyre, Dörnyei, & Henry, 2015). The method used here, thematic analysis, is a tried-and-tested one, and has nonetheless proved effective in elucidating the nature of the language learning-related significant incident, including characteristics that are amenable to a CDST interpretation.

My own tentative solution to dealing with the conceptual amorphousness of motivation, noted at the head of this section, is to think of motivation as accounting for short-term changes in behavior. I proposed a definition along these lines in previous work (Pigott, 2017b):

> Given fundamental drives, beliefs, identities, circumstances, behavior is directed in a particular direction. Motivation can be understood as the exercise of conscious control over behavior whereby the current learning trajectory is either maintained despite factors that would otherwise divert it, or altered in the face of influences supporting its continuation. (p. 12)

If motivation were thusly more tightly defined, I suspect it would find close corollaries in concepts such as *grit* – deep commitment to long-term goals and a refusal to give up in the face of failure (Duckworth, 2016), and *resilience* – positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). This would provide a clearer research target to researchers new to the field. It could also lead to a welcome focus on other important learning influences such as significant incidents. I return to this point in the conclusion.

3. Method

My theoretical interest in the significant incident derives from my experience of researching L2 motivation through the analysis of interview data (cf. Pigott, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). In interviews about language learning, participants invariably recall memorable experiences from their formative years that sparked their interest in language learning. For example, experiences such as making friends with an exchange student in high school, or chancing on a book about gender relations in Norway (Pigott, 2012) raise awareness, in a dramatic and sudden manner, of the utility of English ability as a means to the end of studying and living overseas. The significance of such memorable experiences is as striking as the lack of attention paid to them within the motivation literature.

Table 1 Interview details

Pseudonym/age	Interview/date		Total time
Koichi (M), 22	1	27th April, 2012	4hr 2min
	2	2nd November, 2012	
	3	24th January, 2014	
Daisuke (M), 24	1	28th April, 2012	3hr 48min
	2	4th August, 2012	
	3	13th December, 2013	
Ryota (M), 19	1	12th May, 2012	3hr 45min
	2	23rd September, 2012	
	3	13th December, 2013	
Manami (F), 20	1	1st June, 2012	4hr 54min
	2	29th September, 2012	
	3	10th January, 2014	
Nana (F), 22	1	9th June, 2012	4hr 30min
	2	24th November, 2012	
	3	6th December, 2013	

The findings presented here are taken from a larger project investigating five Japanese university students' engagement in language learning by way of an exploratory, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The primary analysis resulted in a drives-based, *learning as a means of self-fulfillment* (LMS) model (Pigott,

2016). Accounts of significant incidents and their consequences are taken from transcripts of 15 unstructured interviews with five students, recruited opportunistically (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) from classes at a Japanese university specializing in modern languages. Each participant was interviewed three times over a period of 18 months, yielding a total of 21 hours of recordings (see Table 1).

Prior to participating in the interviews, participants were informed that the research would be anonymous, and that all recordings, transcripts and research notes would be stored under password protection. Written consent was then obtained from participants. Interviews were conducted in a university classroom and recorded on two IC recorders. The purpose of the interviews was to explore participants' English learning histories in as much detail as possible. Topics covered included memorable experiences, rationales for studying English, and views about English. An illustrative sample of questions that were asked to most or all participants is given in Table 2.

Table 2 Representative interview questions

Topic	Question(s)
Learning history	Tell me the story of your English learning, starting from the beginning.
	Tell me about your English classes in school.
Memorable (in a positive or negative sense) language learning-related experiences	What have been some important influences on your English learning?
Reasons/rationales for studying English	Why do you study English?
Feelings towards and/or conception of English	What is English for you?
English in Japan	Do you think Japanese people need English? (Why?)

Since some of the participants were planning to study abroad, my expectation was that, by spacing the interviews out, new things would be learned about participant motivation in each interview, due to their current circumstances – for example, changes in motivation during and after studying abroad. Surprisingly, however, the topic of conversation in the second and third interviews tended to return to a discussion of memorable experiences that had occurred several years earlier, to which participants attributed their *current* motivation for English.

A thematic analysis was carried out to identify influences on learning behavior lying outside the scope of the LMS model. Transcripts were coded according to procedures established by Gillham (2005): Relevant sections were identified, and excerpts were coded iteratively through repeated reading of the transcripts and listening to the recordings, until themes emerged. One of these influences is the significant incident (the others were *cultural identity* and *institutional constraints*).

4. Results: Anagnorisis and narrative incorporation

This section presents empirical support for the corollaries of the significant incident, *anagnorisis* and *narrative incorporation.*

4.1. Corollary 1: Anagnorisis

Through anagnorisis, the significant incident triggers a change in worldview and behavior. Table 3 summarizes the five significant incidents and anagnorises identified in the data.

Table 3 Critical incidents

Incident	Shorthand	Anagnorisis
1 (Nana)	From homeless to cool	Being able to speak English makes one cool, and commands respect.
2 (Daisuke)	"I can be a star"	Through my English ability, I can excel in college.
3 (Ryota)	Train station humiliation	Not being able to speak English is humiliating – a personal failing.
4 (Manami)	A Titanic realization	English can be used to help people in need.
5 (Koichi)	"So that's how the world works"	English is indispensable in the modern world.

The following sections present extracts from the interview transcripts selected to illustrate the two corollaries of the significant event. Extracts are accompanied by explanatory commentary designed to summarize key features, or to elaborate on the broader context, or theoretical consequences of aspects of the extracts. Chevrons indicate the use of Japanese, while parentheses contain my own clarifications of meaning.

4.1.1. Anagnorisis 1: From homeless to cool

As a junior high school student, Nana went to a restaurant. There, she encountered an unkempt customer to whom she took an instinctive dislike. Shortly thereafter, something unexpected occurred:

Extract 1

I went to a <yakiniku> [grilled beef] *shop with my friend or with my father I don't remember . . . and we sat down, and there was this guy looks homeless. Really dirty or something and I was like "What is he?" but here comes this blonde beautiful woman and they started speaking English . . . and I was like "wow", really shocked . . . . after they started speaking English my first impression totally disappeared and I was thinking "Wow he must be really smart."* (Interview 1)

Nana's anagnorisis took the form of the revelation that the ability to speak English can transform someone from "homeless" to "cool." She recounts how she began to analogize the incident to her own situation:

> Extract 2
>
> *. . . I was really shocked and I realized if I could speak English that well, people are gonna be really impressed with me . . . yeah because if I dig it more* (if I think about it more . . .) *I realized no one was impressed with me . . . I was good at math but everyone is good at math. There was nothing I was really good at, just average or lower, so my parents never complimented me . . . so I was just maybe thinking "I wish I could speak English that well" . . .* (Interview 1)

At that time, Nana had been an unhappy teenager, in trouble at home and at school. The idea that English proficiency could earn her respect from others was intoxicating. In her own words: "I was shocked and also excited – you know, this could happen to me!" (Interview 3). As noted in the literature review, a significant incident can have a "shocking" element to it. This shock can be understood to stimulate the appearance of an English-speaking possible self.

4.1.2. Anagnorisis 2: "I can be a star"

During high school, Daisuke developed an apathy toward studying that peaked during his time attempting to enter university in the United States. He remained stuck in the preparatory English course for two years, spending his time outside of class playing video games by himself. Upon his return to Japan, he spent several months in a listless state before passively agreeing to enter a university specializing in language education. During an orientation weekend for new students, he experienced an anagnorisis that led to a profound change in attitude. He realized that his maturity and language aptitude would give him a competitive advantage over his peers:

> Extract 3
>
> *. . . at the camp . . . I realized that a lot of students cannot speak English as I could so I realized "OK, I think I can pretend I'm a good student and the impression people will have of me will be good, and also the tuition is expensive, so I think I can study here and successfully."*

This anagnorisis was the confluence of a host of factors such as maturity, experiences, and perhaps a sense of guilt felt towards his parents. It also speaks to his need for distinction and social status, the degree of which is perhaps contingent on his personality (D – Daisuke, I – interviewer):

Extract 4

D: *Like my father, I actually enjoy talking with people from different countries.*
I: *Why is that, do you think?*
D: *This part is difficult I don't have the vocabulary to explain it . . . I don't think this is the best way . . . that I'm special . . . <yuunou>* [able, capable] *. . . I feel superior than other people – you know communicating in English, something like that – not everybody can do so naturally . . . when I do this I feel that I'm good at it that I'm different, I mean better than other people. I feel pride, the long-nosed thing – braggart. I think that's the reason . . .* (Interview 3)

The camp experience triggered in Daisuke a sweeping revaluation of his life and goals, representing a "seminal moment in self-awareness" (see Background to the study). From that point on he maintained a stellar academic record at college.

4.1.3. Anagnorisis 3: Train station humiliation

The third example illustrates how anagnorisis need not necessarily be pleasant. Coming home from junior high school one day, 14-year-old Ryota was approached by a tourist with a map in his hand, asking for help:

Extract 5

R: *I think he was confused, or I think he didn't know how to buy a ticket or something and suddenly, all of a sudden, he came near, came over to me and said something but I couldn't understand what he was saying.*
I: *What did you do?*
R: *Just gesture. Did a gesture* (waving his hand in front of face, meaning "sorry, can't understand/help").
I: *So he's standing there, and you're gesturing . . .*
R: *Yeah, for five minutes . . . I try to get him to give up and I just wanted to go home.*
R: *I was just felt confused, and a little bit annoyed*
I: *How about his proximity, his physical proximity? Was he close to you? Far away?*
R: (laughter) *Too close, so I was so . . . a little frightened, scared.* (Interview 2)

This experience revealed to Ryota what he viewed as a personal deficiency in language ability. In order to rectify the situation, a change in behavior was necessary. He recounts his reaction to the incident as follows: "I felt so embarrassed . . . not only about my English level but also I couldn't help him buy a ticket, so that's the starting point of my English study" (Interview 1). From then on Ryota began to work harder in English classes. This incident has a traumatic element to it. In terms of the motivation literature it brings to mind the idea of a feared self – a non-English speaking self – to be avoided.

4.1.4. Anagnorisis 4: A *Titanic* realization

Manami recalls watching the movie *Titanic* during her high school years and being moved to tears by a scene in which a family heads to its death because it cannot understand a sign written in English:

> Extract 6
>
> M: *In a scene in Titanic, there is a person who can't understand the . . . notice and "What is the meaning of the word I can't understand I can't run away, escape!" . . . The ship is sinking and everybody is panicking and the person cannot understand what's happening – and I saw the scene. I thought the person can't understand English so they can't do anything, so I want to help people who can't understand language. At that time, I was learning English so I want to learn English perfectly and . . . German or Spanish or something, and I can help the person who can't understand the word or language . . .*
> I: *So you like helping people*
> M: (with emphasis) *Yes . . .* (Interview 1)

This completely unexpected event and its anagnorisis revealed to Manami the power of language to do something very dear to her heart – help people. She now works for a hotel frequented by foreign tourists in Kyoto, using her English in the service of others.

4.1.5. Anagnorisis 5: "So that's how the world works . . ."

Koichi first encountered English courtesy of his cram school teacher, who was preparing him for his junior high school entrance exams. As an aside one day, his teacher informed Koichi that he would be studying English for the first time in the new semester, and that he should take this subject seriously:

> Extract 7
>
> I: *He told you you should study English?*
> K: *Yeah*
> I: *What did he say?*
> K: *. . . whatever I do I have to speak English . . . if I want to work all over the world, if I want to go out from Japan, English is a vital language . . . Or even when we are in Japan . . . English used not to be that important but nowadays it's getting important . . . is basically what he said.*
> I: *So before that you'd never really thought about English?*
> K: *No, I don't think so . . .* (Interview 2)

As noted previously, the significant incident is a function of the person and the environment. If Anagnorisis 2 was strongly personal, stemming in part from Daisuke's psychological need for distinction and his recent history of abject failure, then Anagnorisis 5 is more external in origin, taking the form of received wisdom from a respected elder. After this conversation, Koichi's understanding of the world and his place within it changed, and his behavior along with it:

> Extract 8
>
> K: *His message was so strong and it makes me to study.*
> I: *Do you know why?*
> K: *He explained, he had an example of a guy who is really good at math but who has just been to America or England. He had <gakkai>* [a conference]*, and he has a lot of knowledge of math or science but he couldn't speak at all so he had to have a translator so that was not cool.*
> I: *Not cool.*
> K: *Not cool . . . It's not direct. Even if we're not native English speakers we have to speak in our words to get them understand.* (Interview 2)

This significant incident is perhaps the most straightforward in nature. It clearly led Kosuke, in a relatively matter-of-fact manner, to "question the way things normally operate" (see Background to the study).

4.1.6. Discussion

In this section, I showed how certain incidents trigger a change in how participants view the utility of English study. The anagnorises presented ranged from the dramatic (Nana, Manami), through the humiliating (Ryota), to the matter-of fact (Daisuke, Koichi). Their characteristics align with those observed in the CIT literature: They were all seminal moments in self-awareness, having been retained in the form of powerful memories; they led the individual to question the way things normally operate; and they were unplanned, unanticipated, and uncontrolled. Some significant incidents were shocking, or even traumatic, while others (Anagnorisis 5) were more matter-of-fact. In terms of the motivation literature, all of the significant incidents can be understood as some kind of transformational episode leading the learner to discover future possibilities in the form of future ideal or feared selves. Compared to the numerous other day-to-day episodes that learners encounter and forget, these episodes can be understood to have a butterfly effect on learning. The significant incidents introduced above appear, in some ways, to be more important than hundreds of hours of classroom learning in causing motivational change (non-linearity), and to set consequential starting conditions for motivated language study. The results are

congruent with a CDST interpretation. In the following section, I examine how the memory of the significant incident, or its anagnorisis, becomes a foundational component of self-related narratives.

4.2. Corollary 2: Narrative incorporation

Narrative is how we impose a sense of order on a chaotic montage of life and experience (Bamberg, 2007). As we shape our stories over time and according to context, they in turn shape us. This section addresses how the memory of the incident forms the keystone of influential self-narratives over time.

Nana (Anagnorisis 1; Extracts 1 and 2) recounts being reminded of the restaurant experience upon watching the reality show contestant Susan Boyle on TV while attending boarding school in the UK:

> Extract 9
>
> *A similar feeling I found was in the UK in the high school there was a common room we were watching a TV show. There was this ugly woman not ugly but old woman . . . and the audience were disappointed "Oh no, a bad one comes again," including me and my friends were thinking like that and here she comes and started singing a beautiful song that similar shock . . . that guy dressed up like a homeless speaking English that well – I don't know . . . When I was watching Susan Boyle I remembered the homeless guy. It was that shocking for me . . . appearance is not . . . doesn't matter to learn language, I thought.* (Interview 2)

For Nana, language ability, like a beautiful singing voice, is an equalizer for those who grow up with certain disadvantages or insecurities. The lesson she learned through the original anagnorisis finds support in subsequent experience and, at the same time, one presumes, events are likely to be interpreted in terms of the anagnorisis. This can be observed in Nana's recollection of volunteering at the Kyoto marathon:

> Extract 10
>
> *N:*   *. . . [at] the marathon there was a place like they were organizing . . . yes and the staff looked at me a little like "here comes a lazy university student." They looked at me like that but as soon as I spoke English it changed the way they looked at me . . . that's what I did and they looked at me like "wow." At first you know "her hair is brown and put too much make-up on" but then after I spoke English they changed the way looked at me so . . .*
>
> *I:*   *And how did you feel?*
>
> *K:*   *Felt good really I had the really . . . how do you say. I didn't feel confidence when I was young . . . and how do you say I forgot . . . <hyouka> [assessment], I had a low evaluation of myself, so that's why once they said "wow you can speak English"*

> *and then I felt "wow English could be the things I can feel like you know proud, confident."* (Interview 3)

Viewed in conjunction with her account of childhood unhappiness, the significant incident can be seen to constitute a key part of a narrative of hardship, anagnorisis, struggle, and ultimate success. It is not only a "learning-changing" incident, but a life-changing incident, since language learning is of such importance to Nana.

Ryota (Anagnorisis 3; Extract 5) says the following of an experience in a high school English class several months after his uncomfortable train station encounter:

Extract 11

R: *I can't forget the first time I could make myself understood in English. That experience gave me the motivation so if I did more, the probabilities of understanding each other is more increased, so I just worked so hard, more and more all the time.*

I: *Can you tell me about the first time that you made your ALT* [assistant language teacher] *understand you?*

R: *I just asked "can you tell me the way to the station?"*

I: *You asked your ALT?*

R: *ALT teachers understood that word. That sentence.*

I: *This is in a class?*

R: *After the main English class working together, so ALTs gave us some questions, useful expressions in daily life, like what I said just now . . . that sentence . . . so I just tried to speak like a native speaker, and I said "Could you tell me the way to the station?" and she understood quickly.*

I: *So what did she say?*

R: *"Oh great" and "the station is . . ." and, <sono choushi> keep going* [keep up the good work] *. . . and I just wish I had the motivation in the class before I met the man in the station, yeah . . .* (Interview 2)

At the time of the interview I was puzzled by how such a seemingly humdrum exchange was felt to be so significant by Ryota. In the third interview, he explained that this direction-giving exchange was a sort of replication of the train station experience from which, this time, he escaped unscathed. He measures other experiences, too, in terms of this incident: "After entering high school I met my ALT teachers they remind me . . . of that incident in my junior high school (time)" (Interview 2). He recalls the incident periodically in school, or when he works as a guide for tourists in Kyoto, reminding him of the consequences of failure, spurring him to work harder.

For the other three participants, the specific memory of the significant incident appears less of a fixture in their thinking about themselves and the course of their lives, but the anagnorisis that it triggered remains salient, having taken root in how they see the world. When asked "what is English for you?,"

Daisuke's (Anagnorisis 2; Extracts 3 and 4) answer bears a resemblance to his account of the significant incident in its emphasis on distinction from peers:

Extract 12

Probably my identity . . . My English is not perfect, but this is what I can do better than normal people, yeah, this is the tool to describe that I am Daisuke . . . who I am, what kind of things I can do . . . those things. Identity. I like that word . . . I still have that pride right now that, you know, I have more opportunities (than his peers) *to communicate with people from different countries . . .* (Interview 2)

Manami's realization that language could be used to help people (Anagnorisis 4; Extract 6) is, years later, an established aspect of her worldview. She explains the purpose of communication as follows:

Extract 13

To . . . know the person's feeling, and know what the person (wants). *I want to know that . . . It's maybe my goal, because it connects to service and I want to be said by person "thank you" or "I needed you"* (i.e., I want to earn people's gratitude) *so, yes . . . Maybe my goal is . . . mmm maybe it is easy* [simplistic] *but talking is my goal.* (Interview 3)

Her desire to communicate coexists with the need to help people relax, and achieve closeness, and she rationalizes her plans to study other languages such as German in terms of how she can use it to help people more.

In the literature review I noted that research in the critical incident literature suggests that the full impact of critical incidents on the individual's understanding and worldview becomes apparent only in retrospect. This observation finds support in the analysis presented here. In fact, it appears that the term "full impact" could be something of a misnomer. It is not necessarily the case that the impact of a significant incident crescendos to "full impact," at which point the intensity of effect remains constant. Rather, the impact of the incident is continuously redefined depending on context. The significant incidents that prompted Anagnorises 1 and 3 remain salient features of the contemporary thought of Nana and Kosuke, while the memory of the other significant events have faded somewhat into the background (although not completely – they still arise upon prompting in an interview, for example). While their anagnorises still "ring true" with current beliefs and behavior, this may not necessarily hold true in the future. In the previous section, it was noted that the significant incident is a function of the person and the incident itself. The same is true of the longer-term effects of its anagnorisis. As Koichi (Anagnorisis 5; Extracts 7 and 8) shrewdly observes in response to my inquiry as to why he remembered his cram school's

message so vividly: "Because I'm still interested in English. If I was studying something else maybe I would have forgotten" (Interview 2). A significant incident may gain or lose significance over time.

This section has shown how the significant incident can be seen to have an immediate effect on self-awareness that leads the learner to question the way the world operates (anagnorisis). It also addressed the more challenging task of examining how the memory of these experiences exerts an influence over the long term (narrative incorporation).

5. Conclusion

This paper used a thematic analysis of interview testimony to show how significant incidents are an important influence on language learning behavior. It offers support for research conducted in the critical incident literature while suggesting that these characteristics can be grouped into two broad categories, anagnorisis and narrative incorporation. The first of these is relatively straightforward, the latter a much more challenging category. In terms of the motivation literature, one way to position these findings with reference to motivation theory is to posit that significant incidents have a formational influence on possible selves, such as ideal selves and feared selves. As a consequence of significant incidents, English ability is revealed as a means of attaining prestige (Nana, Daisuke), a tool to help people (Manami), an aptitude necessary to avoid humiliation (Ryota), and as a plain necessity for the millennial Japanese (Koichi).

The call for papers for this special issue requested contributions addressing how learning experiences shape students' motivation and, through motivation, their achievement in second language learning. If, as I suggested at the foot of the literature review, motivation is to be defined as affecting short-term changes in behavior, motivation is not necessarily essential as an intermediary conceptual function through which beliefs lead to action. Significant incidents could be understood not to act directly on motivation over the long term, but on the realm of behavioral possibilities open to the learner (in CDST terminology, the *state space*). Behavioral change due to a change in worldview (and one's role within the world) does not necessarily require conscious execution (or motivated behavior). According to this view, motivation is reduced to a bit part, rather than a starring role, on the behavioral stage.

The results presented here offer succor to teachers who despair of "systematic" approaches to language pedagogy, and suggest that more success may be gained from deviation from the curriculum to convey the fun of language learning or intercultural exchange, whether this be by inviting guests to class, or by going on class outings. To educational authorities (in particular I am thinking

of my own context in Japan) I would contend that the findings remind us that language learning is a personal undertaking that cannot necessarily be forced (at least not successfully, without a great deal of wasted time and effort) on people who do not see themselves as needing the language in question.

On the basis of the findings presented here, it would appear that the significant incident warrants increased research attention, and there are surely many fruitful avenues down which to travel. I will suggest three ideas to conclude this paper. First, the distinction between anagnorisis and narrative incorporation is, admittedly, arbitrary. It is difficult to state exactly where the distinction lies between the immediate criticality of an incident, and its absorption into, and alteration of, more stable beliefs and worldviews. Complicating matters further, there are cases in which anagnorisis occurs some time – perhaps years – after the purportedly critical incident, as can be inferred from expressions such as: "looking back, I realize that [such and such] was a real turning point in my life . . ." I hope that further research can shed light on, and improve, these tentative theoretical categories. Second, it may be possible to differentiate between types of anagnorisis. This might be done according to a scheme along the lines of that suggested by Koestler's (1967) acronym AHA, denoting the type of "aha" (scientific); "haha" (humorous); and "ah" (artistic) moments of truth in the creative process when "bits of the puzzle suddenly click into place" (p. 185). Perhaps the types of anagnorises and narrative incorporation covered in this paper concern the creative aspect of *figuring out what to do with one's life*. This leads to the third, and most challenging task facing the continuation of the research presented here, and that is to explicate more concretely the role of narrative in shaping beliefs and behavior. Here, Harari's (2017) distinction between *experiential* and *narrative* selves – "forever busy spinning yarns about the past and making plans for the future" (p. 293) – may provide and interesting starting point for future research.

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