

Full Circle: From EFL and ESL Learner to EFL Teacher

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Our personal learning and teaching background can influence the way in which we approach current teaching and research and any further language study. As an EFL and ESL student, a Japanese language learner and teacher, and a German teacher, my past experiences, combined with ongoing research into L2 motivation, exercise a continuing influence on both professional practice and my persona as an English teacher in Japan. This article is a narrative of my own language experience as both a learner and teacher of English. Evolving in nature, it is taking shape alongside my research focusing on study abroad and L2 motivation.

Introduction

While I commenced my foreign language teaching career as a Japanese language teacher at a secondary school in Victoria, Australia in the early 1990s, my journey as a language learner began with formal English language classes at elementary school in Germany. Postgraduate study from 2003 (Master of International Education, Doctor of Education) initiated an interest in international education and SLA research, in particular L2 motivation, and set in motion an ongoing reflection of my own journey as a language learner and teacher alongside set projects and doctoral thesis. I think it is impossible to be entirely objective as a researcher in social research, whether using quantitative or qualitative inquiry methods, and thus a researcher's background frames individual studies. Consequently, my research is interpreted through the lens of my own experiences in Germany, Australia and Japan as a teacher and student alike, as well as being informed by research on L2 motivation, study abroad and SLA. Furthermore, while formally my doctoral thesis was a longitudinal study of Japanese university students studying English, an autobiographical narrative of my own journey from EFL student to EFL teacher emerged alongside the thesis, and this in turn, is the focus of this article.

EFL experiences as a student

My first encounter with formal foreign language study commenced with English study in Year 5, the beginning of secondary school in Germany. While the newness of the experience was initially motivating, especially as we had visited relatives in Australia the previous year, I soon realized that studying a language was not an easy task, and it required substantial effort. I remember being frustrated at trying to pronounce words like *the*, *volleyball*, *school*, and *chicken* properly, and evenings of memorizing vocabulary and conjugations with my mother.

I was an average, moderately motivated learner in the two years of English study in Germany. I did not dislike English study, but English was just a subject, with limited usefulness outside the classroom. Of course I knew that English was considered important, but it is very difficult to accept this as a student if there are no practical demonstrations of this supposed importance and usefulness out of the class. Even though I had a pen pal at one stage, this did not turn into lasting, meaningful contact. As to why, I guess there was a limited range of topics to write about, and as we never met in person, the relationship lacked consistent new impetus to continue long term. Nowadays, while there are many more opportunities for students to interact in English with people from different countries online, and overseas school trips and study abroad have become common, it is still important to remember that the actual challenge of establishing meaningful relationships has not changed, nor has the tendency to stay within one's own sociocultural sphere.

TV, films, and music are areas often seen as being motivating to language learners outside of class. In Germany, unlike in some Scandinavian countries where subtitles are often used, TV programs originally broadcast in English were dubbed into German. In addition, while I enjoyed listening to music by Abba and other popular bands of the 1970s who sang in English, I did not actually seek out to understand the content of the songs, and in fact did not know what the songs were about until years later. In other words, encounters with English were largely limited to the classroom and communities of practice, whether real or imagined, were not developed sufficiently.

As for actual English classes in Year 5 and Year 6, these were timetabled four times a week and taught by a native German English teacher. The classes focused on the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, and while interesting and

challenging, they were certainly not “fun.” The 160-page textbooks (Ernst Klett Verlag, Learning English Modern Course 1 in Year 5 and Book 2 in Year 6) were quite different in content and layout to the textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan (See Figure 1).

I often show this Year 6 English textbook to English education majors in Japan, and they are usually surprised at the amount of text on each page, the length of the units (14-22 pages) and the type of exercises used throughout the textbook. I often recall my own introduction to English language study and this textbook when the MEXT proposal of making English a subject from Year 5 by 2020 in Japan is raised among English teaching staff and parents. Provided qualified teaching staff is available and a sound curriculum established, this proposal simply puts English education in Japan on par with many other countries, and should not be seen as having a possible detrimental effect on students’ first language acquisition.

Due to my experience as an English learner in Germany, I can strongly empathize with Japanese students learning English in a classroom-based environment. As discussed in Shoib and Dörnyei (2004), various motivational influences and temporal patterns which affect L2 development emerge throughout the learning period. Many of these are particular to the language learning process that occurs when English is learned as a foreign language or during limited-time sojourns abroad.

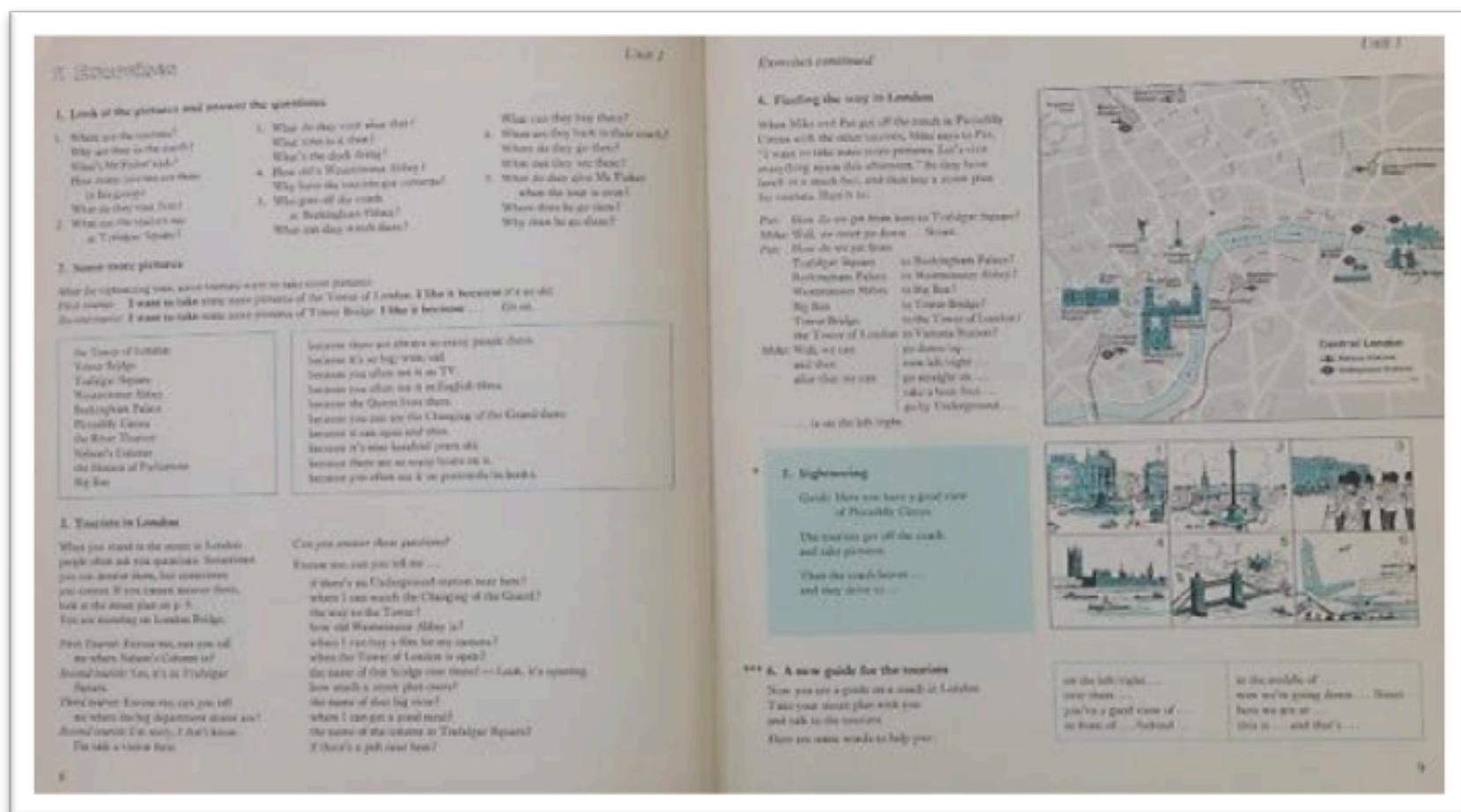


Figure 1 Learning English Modern Course 2

Note: Exercise 1 Writing: Answering wh-questions about reading passage on previous 2 pages.; Exercise 2 Reading/writing: Matching a reason tourists want to take a photo to a place; Exercise 3 Writing: Answering questions that tourists in London might ask you; Exercise 4 Speaking: Asking for/giving directions; Exercise 5: Speaking/writing: Make a story based on 6 pictures; Exercise 6: Speaking: Make a new guide for tourists using a street plan and some suggested phrases

ESL experiences as a student

My parents made the decision to immigrate to Australia when I was in Year 6. Needless to say, this shifted the level of importance English had in my life from almost negligible to major, as learning English in an ESL setting in Australia was a very different proposition to studying English in the relative “safety” of the foreign language classroom. I had to master English to manage everyday life and school; thus, learning English became a necessity. Although I spoke German at home (and still do), my main language of communication became English.

In Canberra, young immigrants of an age to enter secondary education are taught at an Introductory English Centre (IEC), an intensive government-operated English study facility, until they are ready to enter mainstream schools. My fellow classmates (about 12 students) were from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Romania, and the Netherlands. The language of instruction was English, and our goal was to improve our English skills to the extent that we could manage to keep up with all subjects in mainstream schools. While we used English during the day, most of us still spoke our native language at home. The time at the centre remains one of my most positive language learning experiences. It is very difficult to describe the sense of community that permeated the centre, but in

retrospect I think it was achieved through the establishment of a safe and supportive learning environment coupled with being among students who had the same goals, similar difficulties, and who also supported each other throughout the learning process.

After three months at the English Centre my English skills were deemed to be sufficient to enter a mainstream secondary school. The years at secondary school were marked as a period of acculturation, adjustment, and search for acceptance among my peers. I entered the mainstream school in the last term of Year 7. In other words, friendship groups among the other students had already been formed. I continued with extra ESL classes, which involved being taken out of some classes and led to being labelled as “one of the ESL student.” Books and articles on the experiences of long-term sojourners and immigrants, for example Block (2007), Kanno (2003), and Norton Peirce (1995), led to recall and greater understanding of my own language learning experiences during this time, an environment affected by not only L2 motivation per se, but also identity, sense of self, and emotions. Comments and actions by my peers related to my nationality, accent and English skills took their toll on my emotional state, and, as I found out when giving the presentation this year, still affect me to the present day. In addition, even though I became an Australian citizen in 1995, issues related to identity and nationality persist; for example in Australia, I am not quite Australian, in Germany not quite German, and in Japan, I am a semi-native Australian teacher of English of German birth.

School-aged immigrants are faced with having to use English not only for communication but also in order to master other subjects taught in English. In my case, some subjects, for example, math and geography, were easier than others as I had prior knowledge of them in Germany. Practical subjects, including music, sport, and art did not pose a major problem. English and science on the other hand, were challenging as not only the language, but also content, were new to me. Academic investment was the driving force behind improving my language skills to such a degree that I was able to obtain satisfactory results at secondary school, and continue onto tertiary education.

While similar to the experience of students on long-term study abroad programs, immigration, especially for teenagers and adults, is a different undertaking. As a teenage immigrant, a lack of confidence and English skills sometimes led to feelings of inferiority, and a sense that I needed to legitimize my stay in Australia by integrating as much possible in school and the community. Furthermore, there is a sense of finality or inevitability that is missing from the study abroad experience. After all, participants on study abroad programs know they will return to their home country after completing the program, and in some cases, return even before completing it. The importance placed on entry and acceptance into social networks and subsequent interactions for immigrants results in a socially-driven pressure that far exceeds that of study abroad participants. Consequently, academic and social investment played an equally important role during the first six years in Australia.

In conclusion, SLA research and subsequently published results need to be clearly framed and understood within their individual research settings, and clear distinctions between EFL and ESL experiences should be made.

Experiences as a foreign language teacher

I completed a Bachelor of Education degree majoring in TESOL and German (3 years of study) with minors (2 years of study) in Japanese and Physical Education. Ironically, I was offered a position teaching the latter two in a secondary school in Kyneton, Victoria. While the focus of this article is on my experience as an EFL teacher, the seven years as a Japanese language teacher gave me a solid background in language teaching, curriculum matters, and school culture. After my fifth year as a teacher, I decided that I needed to experience Japanese culture firsthand, and took leave without pay for one year. During this first stay in Yamanashi, Japan, I taught at English conversation schools and companies. It was an interesting and rewarding year of teaching, and rekindled my original interest in teaching English as a second or foreign language. Nevertheless, I returned to my position in Australia for another two years, before deciding to return to Japan as an AET in the same prefecture.

A number of factors contributed to being able to fit in smoothly as an AET at elementary and junior high schools. Above all, my teaching experience in Australia, in addition to my own English, Japanese, Spanish, and German learning experiences, and Japanese language skills made the initial transition from a career teacher within Australia to an AET in Japan easy. A willingness to participate in all aspects of school life, and being treated as one of the teaching staff added to my positive experience. While team teaching was new to me, I was able to establish a good rapport with all Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) that I taught with, as I could relate to and empathize with the JTEs on many levels. Having a native speaker of a language in the same classroom or even at the same school can have a supportive as well as an undermining effect on the non-native language teacher. The native speaker teacher is legitimized by an instinctive knowledge of the English language, and thus are teaching their “mother tongue”, whereas the non-native teachers, having gone through the same learning process as the students, are more skilled at teaching and explaining the intricacies of the English language in a way that the students find easy to follow, and which is also in line with stipulated curriculum requirements in Japan. In a way, I am positioned in the middle of these two teacher types, as I am technically not a native speaker of English and it is possible that this hybrid teacher-learner identity is less threatening to JTEs. Thus, team teaching in Japan, while having many benefits can also be professionally challenging to AETs and JTEs alike. The key is to harness the strength of both teachers in a balanced way in order to establish an environment conducive to the promotion and maintenance of L2 interest, skills, and motivation.

While I enjoyed the AET experience, I felt that professionally I needed to move on eventually. My first step was to complete a Master’s of International Education degree part-time. Consideration of employment options and conditions in Japan resulted in the

move to the tertiary sector. Being in charge of one's own class, and working within a Japanese university brought new perspectives and professional challenges, including the combination of teaching and research, 90-minute classes, and university culture in general.

Similar to my experience as an AET, I was able to integrate well into being a full-time staff member at a Japanese University. While often challenging, it is both professionally and personally satisfying to be in charge of my own classes again and to complete almost the same administrative tasks as my Japanese colleagues. University teaching gives me the opportunity to teach beyond basic language skills, as student career goals dictate the type of English study and cultural knowledge required for different professions. Teaching content-based courses also reminds me of my own performance in classes in secondary school in Australia. If prior knowledge is present, then learning about various topics in English is much easier than learning about entirely new concepts in English. Some students find this type of learning motivating and stimulating, whereas for others, it is very difficult. Lastly, I am also able to put forward suggestions for courses that may be of interest to students or a useful addition to their career preparations. These have included a team teaching course for pre-service teachers and business English courses.

My own English journey has now come full-circle in terms of being involved in language teacher education (pre-service and in-service) as part of my responsibilities at university. Young pre-service teachers need to be equipped with subject knowledge and confidence to achieve their career goals. This means both grammar-and-exam-based knowledge for passing the teacher employment exams and to teach the content of high school and university entrance exams, as well as knowledge and application of communicative language teaching methodology. Non-English specialist homeroom teachers at primary school require both sufficient confidence in their English skills, as well as specific foreign language teaching skills and strategies to conduct English classes on their own or as part of a team teaching class. I often draw on my own language learning experiences and teaching experiences, as well as my research to explain or illustrate specific points in classes, presentations and workshops. At the same time, I also encourage students and workshop participants to think and reflect on their own learning histories, as these may also provide valuable insights into their own (future) teaching and English language personas.

My journey as a language teacher and learner continues, and happenings on the way will no doubt result in new directions and opportunities.

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