Learners’ self-concept and use of the target language in foreign language classrooms

Reiko Yoshida*

University of South Australia, School of Communication, Internal Studies and Languages, St. Bernards Road, Magill, Adelaide, SA 5072, Australia

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Abstract

This study examines how Japanese language learners’ self-concepts in the language learning domain are constructed and how they relate to the learners’ spontaneous speech in Japanese in the classroom in the transition period from school to university. Data was collected from four learners by means of diary writing and interviews along with in-class observation and audio-recording for approximately three months (one semester). Three learners initially avoided speaking Japanese in class due to fear of making a mistake—this did not contribute to the development of positive self-concepts. However, their self-concepts did gradually become more positive through their experiences of speaking Japanese with their classmates and overcoming their embarrassment when they made mistakes. The other learner, who was already confident in her speaking ability, found that interactions in Japanese with her classmates were not useful for the development of her speaking skills. Although her confidence did not decrease, her self-concept did not become more positive.

Keywords: Self-concept; Classroom participation; Beliefs about foreign language learning; Anxiety in speaking a foreign language

1. Introduction

This study explores the relationship between Japanese language learners’ self-concepts and spontaneous use of the target language in a foreign language (FL) classroom at an Australian university. Speaking target languages in the classroom provides important learning opportunities for language learners, especially in FL learning situations in which they may have few opportunities to use the target language outside of class. However, many second language (SL) and FL learners experience anxiety when speaking target languages in the classrooms, due to their fear and embarrassment about making mistakes (Hewitt and Stephenson, 2011; Liu and Jackson, 2008; Mak, 2011; Trang, 2012). FL learning anxiety is situation specific, differing from other types of anxiety, and is related to embarrassment and self-expression in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). While FL learners may desire to express themselves by speaking the target language in the classroom, they will nevertheless sometimes avoid using the language due to a lack of confidence (Yoshida, 2009).

* Tel.: +61 8 8302 4792; fax: +61 8 8302 4396.
E-mail address: reiko.yoshida@unisa.edu.au.
Further, learning Asian languages, such as Japanese, can be difficult for learners whose first language is English or another European language, and this may trigger greater anxiety in learners (Ferguson and Grainger, 2005). Studies of university-level Japanese students have shown that anxiety influences their performance (Aida, 1994; Komiya Samimy and Tabuse, 1992). The transition from secondary school to university is particularly a psychologically stressful period, which in itself increases learners’ anxiety, while learners’ self-concepts are particularly affected by social environments such as SL/FL classrooms (Jackson, 2008). By considering each of these factors, this study examines the relationship between the self-concepts of Japanese FL learners who are in transition to university, and their spontaneous speech in Japanese in the classroom.

FL learners’ self-concepts have been examined in terms of how they are constructed and how they influence learners’ performance (Aragão, 2011; Mercer, 2011a, 2011b). The nature of self-concept is complex and overlaps with other concepts such as self-efficacy, self-belief and self-perceptions (Mercer, 2011b). In the present study, ‘self-concept’ is defined as:

*a psychological construct that comprises a self-description judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgement in question in a specific domain.* (Pajares and Schunk, 2005, p. 14)

As this study investigates learners’ FL self-concept, the ‘specific domain’ here is understood to be the ‘FL learning domain’—or, more specifically, the domain of Japanese language learning as a FL.

Mercer (2011b) showed that one dimension of FL learners’ self-concepts—their beliefs about themselves as FL learners—is interrelated with their beliefs about FL learning, which are not components of self-concepts. The present study distinguishes learners’ self-concepts from their beliefs about Japanese language learning. Beliefs about language learning are learners’ ideas about language learning (such as ‘practise is important for Japanese language learning’), while self-concepts are learners’ ideas about themselves as language learners (such as ‘I am good at reading, but not speaking, Japanese’). However, the ways in which learners’ self-concepts and beliefs about FL learning influence each other is not very clear. Therefore, this study investigates how learners’ beliefs about FL learning and their self-concepts are related to each other. For example, if a learner believes in the importance of speaking skills in FL learning, he or she will perform learning actions to develop speaking skills, and will not be able to develop positive self-concepts until he or she perceives a development in his or her speaking skills.

The present study examines the relationship between FL learners’ self-concepts and beliefs about FL learning, in terms of their spontaneous use of FL in the classroom. Learners’ spontaneous speech in the target language in the SL/FL classroom seems to be related to their ‘willingness to communicate’ (WTC) in a SL, which is the learners’ ‘probability of engaging in communication (in a SL) when free to choose to do so’ (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) model of variables influencing WTC includes SL self-confidence and factors such as the desire to communicate with a specific person, and self-confidence in communicative competence in particular situations. FL learners’ spontaneous speech in the FL in the classroom thus appears to be closely associated with their perceptions of themselves as FL learners, including their perceptions of their own FL competence, which implies their self-concept.

The present study aims to determine how the FL self-concepts of Japanese language learners and their spontaneous use of Japanese in the classroom relate to each other, and how they influence different learners’ learning processes in the critical transition period from the courses of high schools to the university. In line with recent studies of SL/FL learners’ self-concepts and beliefs about SL/FL learning, this study considers learners to be active agents who construct/reconstruct their beliefs and create their own learning opportunities. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Japanese language learners construct their FL self-concepts in the transition period to FL learning at university?
2. What kinds of strategies do learners use to participate in the FL classroom by using the language spontaneously?
3. How are learners’ FL self-concepts and spontaneous use of Japanese in the classroom related to each other?

To address these research questions, the model of internal/external frames of references in FL self-concept formation (Marsh, 1986; Mercer, 2011b) and the theory relating to self-presentation in SL (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005) are used to discuss the construction of Japanese language learners’ self-concepts and their use of strategies for classroom participation. These theories are introduced in the following sections.
2. Internal/external frames of reference in FL self-concept formation

By revising the model created by Marsh (1986), Mercer (2011b) developed a model of internal/external frames of references in FL self-concept formation. Mercer (2011b) defined internal factors as ‘those that are centred primarily within the self’ and external factors as ‘those that stem primarily from outside the individual’ (p. 97). Internal factors consist of: 1) cross-domain comparisons (at the subject level, across FLs, across first languages and SLs, across skill domains, and across task domains); 2) belief systems (beliefs about language learning and attribution beliefs); and 3) affect. One of the English FL learners in Mercer’s (2011b) study believed in the value of hard work and the importance of practice. Mercer believed that through practising English, the learner’s self-concept became more positive. Mercer associated this with Dweck’s (2006) ‘growth mindset’, in which learners believe that they can develop their basic abilities through effort, compared to the ‘fixed mindset’, in which learners believe that their qualities are innate and fixed. This is also related to attribution beliefs about whether one’s success is attributed to one’s effort or to other factors, such as luck.

Developing a more positive self-concept may be easier for learners who believe in the value of effort within a growth mindset, as opposed to those who have a fixed mindset. Mercer (2011b) discussed a possible relationship between feeling competent and a positive response to a particular FL and the possibility of the indirect influence of affective factors, such as interest or enjoyment, on learners’ self-concepts through motivation. According to Mercer (2011b), an important affective state for learners is a ‘feeling of progress’, and this was frequently mentioned together with their motivation. Mercer stated that learners’ affective states may influence their ‘working’ or ‘trait’ self-concepts, which are malleable, but may not affect their ‘core’ or ‘state’ self-concepts, which are stable.

External factors consist of: 1) social comparisons; 2) feedback from significant others and reflected appraisals; 3) perceived experiences of success and failure; 4) previous language learning/use experiences in formal/informal contexts; and 5) critical experiences. Social comparisons, which are learners’ comparisons of their perceived performance and grades with those of others, are particularly evident in the transition period from school to university because the learners’ external frames of reference change with the change in their peer group (Mercer, 2011b). Mercer found that FL learners’ perceived experiences of success and failure influenced their self-concepts, while Navarro and Thornton (2011) and Yang and Kim (2011) found that SL learners’ perceptions of successful learning actions influenced the development of their beliefs about SL learning. These findings all suggest that learners’ perceived success can influence both their self-concepts and beliefs about SL/FL learning.

FL learners in the present study appeared to use some different internal and external frames of references in forming their FL self-concepts in the new learning environment of the Japanese class. Their use of different references may have contributed to the construction of positive or negative self-concepts, as well as increasing or decreasing their spontaneous use of FL in the classroom. While the model of internal/external frames of references is useful to examine the factors to form FL self-concepts, it is not possible to determine to which extent particular factors are internal or external (Mercer, 2011b). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is not to identify whether factors are completely internal or external, but to investigate what kinds of internal and external factors are related to the formation of FL self-concepts.

3. Learners’ self-presentation in SL/FL

The ways learners present themselves in a SL is related to how they perceive themselves as SL learners (Pellegrino, 2005). Pellegrino (2005) examined how SL learners present themselves in a SL through studying interactions with native speakers and how these speakers construct ‘selves’ in their in-country studies. According to Pellegrino, self-concept—which is ‘a system of knowledge and perceptions held by the individual about the self’ through the recording of events and these recollections—gives the individual ‘a sense of security’ related to their strengths and weaknesses and a sense of ‘predictability about the self’s future capabilities’ (p. 11). Pellegrino explained that learners present their self through their language use, but that in the SL environment, learners’ ability to control their self-image is significantly impaired. Pellegrino stated that learners need to feel validated; that others accept and appreciate their contributions in the SL; that they have social and psychological security in using the SL; and that their sense of social, linguistic and intellectual status is being enhanced. Without these conditions, learners may feel anxious that their self is threatened, along with their status as intelligent and capable individuals.

In Pellegrino’s theory, two types of factors affect learners’ self-construction:
social-environmental cues, including the learners’ personal characteristics, such as age, gender, physical appearance and behaviour

learner-internal cues, including the learners’ attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others and the FL; their own and foreign cultures; and the language-learning process.

Pellegrino further explained that learners who maintain a sense of security based on their internal cues are more likely to produce SL and take risks, as opposed to learners who rely more on social-environmental cues. Pellegrino also stated that when learners establish their sense of security in speaking the SL from within, others’ behaviour has less effect on it. These concepts of social-environmental and learner-internal cues overlap with the internal/external frames of references in FL self-concept formation, such as learners’ belief systems and social comparisons (Mercer, 2011b).

According to Pellegrino (2005), learners use two different strategies to reduce their anxiety in the study-abroad situation: they either keep using the SL and attempt to eliminate threatening elements (fight) or they reduce their use of SL to protect themselves (flight). There are a few different ‘fight’ strategies. First, learners can use self-talk to coach and encourage themselves that they can perform adequately in the SL. This strategy is similar to affective strategies (Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1990) such as self-encouragement or discussing one’s feelings with someone else (or with themselves). Second, they prepare themselves for SL interactions so that they can improve their success and thus ensure a greater sense of security in speaking the SL (interaction preparation). Third, they may choose favourite SL environments or interlocutors with whom they feel comfortable. According to Pellegrino’s conclusion, when learners rely more on internal cues to reduce anxiety, they tend to speak the SL more often, even in more threatening situations.

Pellegrino’s theory is applicable to the subject of the present study—the transition period to university in a FL classroom. In this situation, learners are initially unsure of their classmates’ personalities and FL proficiencies—even though the classmates are all non-native speakers—and of the native-speaker teacher’s teaching style and expectations, teaching and assessment materials, and so forth. As a result, learners may feel anxious that their social and psychological security and status are threatened. They may adopt strategies to reduce their anxiety in order to increase their use of FL (fight strategies) or to avoid using FL in order to protect their self-image (flight strategies).

4. Methodology

4.1. The language program

Data were collected from a first-semester second-year Japanese language course at an Australian university. There were 30 students of varying backgrounds in their first, second or third years of university study. The students had previously completed either the first-year Japanese course at the university or a Japanese course at high school. The course consisted of 13 weeks. The classes met twice per week and each lesson took 2 h. During the lessons, new kanji (Chinese characters in Japanese), vocabulary and grammar were introduced, and the learners usually completed pair/group work tasks to practise the language forms introduced. The researcher examined two classes—one of 20 students and the other of 10. The content of the lessons was equivalent between the two classes.

4.2. Participants

The present study was undertaken as part of a larger one-year study of six student volunteers, one of whom later withdrew from the course. Of the remaining five students, one had previously participated in a study about learner beliefs, undertaken the previous year in the first-year Japanese course. Therefore, this student was excluded because she was not in the transition period from secondary school to university, which was the focus of the present study. The study focused on the other four learners who had enrolled for the second-year Japanese course after learning Japanese at secondary school or an equivalent institution.

The learners signed informed consent forms after the study was explained to them. The personal information about these participants (see Table 1), including their previous language learning experience, was collected with questionnaires and interviews (see Appendices). Pseudonyms are used for the names of the learners. The four students
studied here were spread over both classes—Adrian was in the class of 20 students, while Sandra, Jason and Betty were in the class of 10 students.

All participants were in their first year of university. Adrian had worked in a service industry for one year between completing high school and beginning university. He had already learnt Japanese for 12 years during primary and secondary school, and found it enjoyable. Sandra had a medical problem when completing high school and decided not to enter university straight away. She had learnt Japanese for 10 years during primary and secondary school, and then for nine months at the Vocational Language Learning Centre (VLLC) after high school. Jason entered university directly after high school, where he had learnt Japanese for five years. Betty also entered university directly after high school, and had lived in Japan for 10 months as an exchange student during the previous year.

4.3. Data collection

Learners are not always aware of their self-concepts and beliefs about FL learning, and this can make the relevant data difficult to collect. Therefore, multiple instruments (including the learners’ diary writings, classroom recordings, classroom observations and interviews) were used to elicit the learners’ beliefs (including their subconscious ones) and to collect the data about their actions. The combination of interviews with journal or diary writing has been frequently adopted in recent belief studies (Aragão, 2011; Navarro and Thornton, 2011; Peng, 2011; Yang and Kim, 2011) because this combination allows the researcher to ask further questions based on the diary entries, and to thereby better identify the beliefs that motivate the actions.

4.3.1. Diary writing

Diary writing was used to determine the learners’ beliefs about themselves as Japanese language learners and about the language learning. In addition, it was used to identify the kinds of actions—especially spontaneous speech in Japanese during the classes—that these beliefs trigger. The students were asked to write about their Japanese language learning (both inside and outside the classroom) at least once every week. This study focuses on learners’ beliefs and actions in a classroom context; however, these also relate to learners’ behaviours outside of the class.

In their early entries, the learners tended to only report on actions. However, information about the beliefs behind those actions was also needed, so written instructions for the diary writing were provided to them to elicit insights about their own learning (see Appendices). The instructions suggested that the learners write how they felt when they noticed new items, difficulties, problems or achievements. The researcher read the diaries prior to conducting the interviews. Bailey (1983) pointed out the importance of honesty and openness by diarists when recording their feelings. As the researcher could build rapport with the learners in the classes and interviews by creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, this seemed to help them be open and honest when recording their feelings in their diaries. They often wrote about their feelings of anxiety and embarrassment when learning Japanese.
4.3.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken (once at the beginning, twice during and once at the end of the course) to examine how the learners constructed their self-concepts, and how their spontaneous speech in Japanese during the classes changed according to their self-concepts. The interviews varied from 30 min to 1 h, depending on the questions and the participants’ responses. The interviews were conducted in English, which was the first language of the students.

During the first interviews, the researcher asked the students questions about topics such as their previous experience of language learning, their reasons for learning Japanese at university and their expectations about their Japanese skills or abilities upon completing the course. These questions were based on their questionnaire responses. In subsequent interviews, the questions were related to the students’ diary entries and classroom behaviours. Although the researcher prepared some questions to ask the students, the structures of the questions could be altered and further questions asked based on the students’ responses. This flexible structure was effective in allowing for appropriate questions to identify the beliefs of the individual learners. Whenever the students identified actions (such as regularly preparing for lessons) without mentioning their thoughts about them, further relevant questions were asked during the interviews.

All the interviews were audio recorded by the researcher and transcribed by a native or near-native English speaker to analyse the learners’ beliefs and actions in the data. The transcripts were checked based on the audio recordings, with the Japanese expressions used by the interviewer and the students in the interviews corrected as required.

4.3.3. Audio recordings and observation notes

Classroom observations and recordings were completed to collect data about the learners’ classroom actions in relation to speaking Japanese, and these were compared with the learners’ self-reported beliefs and actions in order to strengthen the self-reported data. The four students’ speech was audio recorded during six different 2-h lessons for three weeks (at the beginning, middle and end of the course) to investigate any changes in their classroom actions. Each learner wore a microphone that was connected to a cassette tape recorder, so that the researcher was able to capture data about actions that were not obvious in the classes. After the lessons, the researcher listened to the recordings and took notes about the learners’ classroom speech, adding personal observations about each participant that were made during the lessons. The researcher transcribed the sections of the audio recording that related to changes in the learners’ beliefs and actions.

4.3.4. Data analysis

Content analysis is useful for identifying important factors in texts (such as learners’ self-reports) and for analysing the relationship between the factors by using coding and tabulation (Krippendorf, 2004). This approach has also been used in other recent studies of beliefs (e.g. Navarro and Thornton, 2011; Peng, 2011). Huckin (2008) explained the difference between the two types of content analysis: in conceptual analysis, a concept is chosen for examination and coded, and then the frequency of its occurrence within the text is recorded, while relational analysis builds on conceptual analysis by taking it one step further to examine the relationships between concepts in texts. Relational analysis was used in the present study to examine how the learners’ self-concepts and spontaneous speech in Japanese in the classes were related to each other.

Utterances that indicated the learners’ self-concepts, beliefs about Japanese language learning and actions—especially spontaneous speech in Japanese in the classes (in their diaries and the interview transcripts)—were coded. Actions included anything the learners had done in relation to their Japanese language learning, such as preparing for or reviewing classes or watching Japanese DVDs at home, as well as their spontaneous use of Japanese in the classes. The researcher tabulated the learners’ self-concepts and spontaneous Japanese speech in relation to their beliefs about Japanese language learning and other actions in the classes, and examined how their self-concepts developed in relation to the other factors, and how their self-concepts and spontaneous speech in the classes changed over the course of study. The researcher then examined the learners’ comments related to their self-concepts again and identified the internal/external factors (described by Mercer (2011b)) that influenced the construction of their self-concepts. The researcher also examined the actions tabulated previously and identified the learners’ strategies to reduce their anxiety and increase their spontaneous Japanese speech in class, using Pellegrino’s (2005) categorisations. Notes on the learners’ classroom speech and other behaviours in class were also compared with the learners’ comments in their diaries and interviews.
5. Results

5.1. Learners’ self-concepts at beginning of the course

Adrian, Jason and Sandra expressed difficulty related to participating in the lessons at the beginning of the semester:

I have been very hesitant to speak Japanese in class. I think this is because I am too afraid to make a mistake in my speech, so I avoid speaking altogether! I consciously think about every Japanese word in a sentence before I say it, rather than just letting the words flow. I have noticed that a lot of my classmates seem much more comfortable than myself when it comes to Japanese speech. I hope to be like that! (Adrian, week 2 diary)

Class activities like writing down questions and asking other class members definitely puts me out of my comfort zone, so I don’t particularly enjoy it and speak much, although I know speaking practice is important. (Jason, week 2 diary)

I like speaking Japanese, but I don’t really like speaking up in the class. If I’m wrong, it’s very embarrassing. (Sandra, week 1 interview)

These comments appear to be related to the learners’ past experiences of Japanese language learning, which aligns with Mercer’s (2011b) finding that previous language learning experiences influence FL learners’ self-concepts. Adrian received intensive lessons in a Grade 12 Japanese class from his native-speaker teacher. As there were only two students in the class, including Adrian, he did not have a problem speaking Japanese with his teacher and classmate. Jason had been in a large Japanese class of approximately 40 students with little pair or group work involved. Sandra had face-to-face lessons with tutors at the VLLC. These environments were different from the university Japanese classes with 10–20 students and a lot of pair or group work. As Adrian was in the class with 20 students, it seemed to be more difficult for him to speak Japanese there, compared to Jason and Sandra in the smaller class of 10 students. In the new classroom environment in the university, the learners seemed to be afraid that their SL utterances might not be accepted or appreciated by their teacher and classmates, and that their intellectual status might be threatened by making mistakes (cf. Pellegrino, 2005). As all three learners believed that accuracy is important for language learning, this contributed to their fear of making mistakes when speaking Japanese in the class.

The learners also stated in their diaries and interviews that participation is important for learning. Their avoidance of speaking in class conflicted with this, which reflects Victori’s (1999) finding that learners’ actions do not always accord with their beliefs. At this stage, their fear of making mistakes when speaking during the classes seemed to outweigh their desire to speak the language for practice. This suggests that learners’ FL self-concepts are influenced by their beliefs about FL learning (Mercer, 2011b).

Affective factors, such as embarrassment, influence learners’ FL self-concept (Aida, 1994; Bailey, 1983; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Komiya Samimy and Tabuse, 1992; Mercer, 2011b). The learners’ perceived avoidance of speaking Japanese due to the fear of feeling embarrassed when making mistakes influenced the development of their self-concept as ‘shy’ students when it came to speaking Japanese in the class. Adrian stated: ‘Yeah, I’m a bit shy in speaking Japanese. I should speak more, but I can’t’ (Adrian, week 2 interview), while Jason stated:

It’s a bit daunting—daunting with speaking in Japanese and talking with other people because I’m rather shy.

So if I make mistakes, uhn I have to get over my shyness most of the time [laughs]. (Jason, week 1 interview)

Sandra described herself as a ‘perfectionist’, and the desire not to make mistakes often appeared to encourage her to avoid speaking: ‘As such I dreaded being asked to answer any questions as I was sure to get it wrong and my perfectionist nature hates that’ (Sandra, week 2 diary). Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) pointed out the relationship between language learners’ anxiety and perfectionism. Therefore, Sandra’s high anxiety about making mistakes could be because of her perfectionist nature. These ‘shy’ and ‘perfectionist’ self-concepts, which had developed through the learners’ past experiences of Japanese language learning, seemed to become more stable due to their experiences of not being able to speak more Japanese in their university classes. The learners’ belief in the importance of accuracy,
and their self-concepts as ‘shy’ or ‘perfectionist’ based on their past language learning experiences, contributed to increasing their anxiety and fear about making mistakes when they spoke Japanese in classes during the transition period to university. As a result, they avoided speaking Japanese in the classes. As this avoidance behaviour conflicted with their other belief of the importance of class participation by speaking Japanese, they perceived their behaviour as a failure to learn by speaking, which is an external influence on FL learners’ self-concepts (Mercer, 2011b). This did not contribute to the development of positive self-concepts.

In contrast, Betty was confident in her speaking ability because she had received intensive immersion Japanese lessons from native-speaker tutors every week for 10 months while living in Japan. As Mercer (2011b) argued, study-abroad experiences have a strong influence on FL learners’ self-concepts. Betty was also studying French at university—a language she had not learnt before. She commented that even when she should speak French, she tried to speak Japanese: ‘My brain seems to think that if I’m not speaking English, I must be speaking Japanese, and because of this I am finding it a bit difficult to pick up another language’ (Betty, week 2 diary). A learner’s comparison of their own competence in different FLs is another factor that can influence their FL self-concept (Mercer, 2011b). Betty’s comment indicates her perception that her competence in Japanese was much greater than in French.

Betty also maintained contact with her Japanese host family by talking with them on the telephone and via Skype:

I also called my host family. I was proud of myself that I was able to understand that the lines were busy and that we should try again later. (Betty, week 2 diary)

This week’s study mainly consisted of talking with my host family on Skype. While I had a little trouble translating what my family said in English into Japanese, I found I didn’t have any real trouble asking questions, answering questions or just general talk with my host family. (Betty week 3 diary)

These comments indicate Betty’s perceived experiences of success in communicating with native Japanese speakers (Mercer, 2011b), thereby supporting her positive self-concept as a competent and confident learner of the language.

While Betty was confident in her Japanese speaking skills, she wanted to develop them further:

I want to improve my speaking because when I talk to native speakers, I often have to go like chotto matte kudasai [please wait a little bit], so speaking Japanese in the class is good for me. (Betty, week 1 interview)

Betty perceived herself as a ‘confident student’ in speaking Japanese and expected to improve her speaking ability further through the lessons.

5.2. Changes in learners’ self-concepts

While Adrian, Jason and Sandra initially hesitated to speak Japanese in class, this gradually changed. According to the researcher’s observation notes, they became more relaxed and seemed to enjoy the lessons. They first seemed to become comfortable with speaking Japanese in pair or group work:

I think when I am speaking with my peers, like when I am speaking at my table, I am more confident, just experimenting with Japanese a bit more. (Adrian, week 4 interview)

I do know them [classmates] better and also feel kind of confident with Japanese. I know it much better now and established connection with them, because I actually know them better. (Jason, week 4 interview)

I like the class atmosphere. It is good. Now I know everyone, so I’m quite comfortable and confident. I enjoy working with other people. I feel it’s easier to speak up. (Sandra, week 4 interview)

Pellegrino (2005) suggested that when learners find familiarity and commonality with their interlocutors, their social and psychological security in speaking a SL increases. The learners in the present study became familiar with their classmates and, after finding that they all made similar mistakes, could enjoy speaking Japanese with them because the threat to their linguistic and intellectual status decreased. This suggests that the learners made social
comparisons—comparisons between their own competence in FL and their classmates’ competence. Learners’ social comparisons are especially evident in the transition period to university, where changes in external frames of reference affect the formation of self-concepts (Mercer, 2011b). As the learners wanted to speak up in class, they tried to build their confidence further by practising more and preparing for the lessons in their own time, based on their beliefs that practise and preparation are important to develop the confidence that is essential for participation. Mercer (2011b) similarly found that a learner who believes in the importance of practise develops a more positive self-concept by practising the language more often. The learners in the present study practised Japanese more frequently and developed their FL confidence, which subsequently contributed to an increased WTC in class. Cotterall (1995), MacIntyre et al. (1998) and White (1999) all pointed out how confidence is an important factor for WTC and FL learning.

The learners in the present study practised Japanese at home to prepare for class and to increase their successful use of the language. The following comments indicate their beliefs about practise, confidence and participation:

I just think the more I do it, the more I get confident, easier it is—yeah, it’s just practise, practise, practise. (Adrian, week 4, interview)

The more I practise, the more I become confident. If I’m not confident, then I won’t want to participate, I suppose. And participating is important in classes to understand and reinforce the things we’re learning, so if I’m more confident, I can participate and learn better. (Jason, week 7 interview)

Unless I practise it, it’s just thinking, and I am pretty much a practical learner—I have to learn by talking, by doing, by feeling and experiencing, and that way I make the connections to, to what means what, and for me it’s extremely important. (Sandra, week 1 interview)

‘Practising to become confident’ is similar to ‘interaction preparation’—a strategy noted by Pellegrino (2005) through which learners decrease the perceived threat to their social, linguistic and intellectual status in SL interactions. Pellegrino (2005) also stated that when the predictability of SL interactions increases, learners’ sense of social and psychological security in speaking a SL also increases—this was evidenced in the present study. This effect seemed to make the learners’ preparations and practise for class easier, as well as reducing the threat to their social, linguistic and intellectual status in the class. The learners’ belief that the development of their confidence through practise triggered greater participation, which then contributed to better learning of the language, implies a ‘growth mindset’—the belief that ability can change through effort (Dweck, 2006). This suggests the possibility that learners’ self-concepts can become more positive through practising the language.

The learners started to speak up in Japanese in class, as was identified from the classroom observations and audio recording of their speech. This indicates that the learners’ WTC became higher. At the beginning of the course, the three learners often spoke Japanese in a soft voice that could not be heard by the teacher (the researcher)—this is a form of ‘covert participation’ in class. Their higher WTC by speaking directly to a teacher or classmates can be considered ‘overt participation’ (Yoshida, 2009). The below Excerpts 1 and 2 show Adrian’s covert and overt participation in class. In Excerpt 1, Adrian expressed his answer to the teacher’s question in a soft voice (see Appendices for transcription conventions).

Excerpt 1

(The teacher asks the class a question about the grammatical form ‘sugiru’ (do something too much))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T:</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you understand? A verb conjunctive form plus ‘sugiru’, ‘I ate too much’, I ate too much, ‘I drank too much’, I drank too much. Well, if you go shopping?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Kai sugimashita.” “I bought too much.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>You bought too much.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S: Kawa sugimashita? [error]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>T: Umm, ‘bought’ wa?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Umm, what is ‘bought’?
The grammatical item *sugiru* (‘to do something too much’) had been introduced previously. This form is used with a verb conjunctive form, which is the stem of the polite form of a verb. For example, *nomimasu* (‘to drink’) is the polite form of *nomu* (‘to drink’), and *nomi* is the stem of the polite form. Therefore, *nomi sugiru* means ‘to drink too much’. Similarly, *sugimashita* is the polite past form of *sugiru*; therefore, *nomi sugimashita* means ‘I drank too much’. After offering examples (in line one, above) the teacher asked the class what kind of expression could be made by using *sugiru* when they went shopping. Adrian answered with the correct expression, but in a very soft voice (line two). The teacher did not notice this, so she provided an English translation (line three). After one of the students expressed an incorrect form with *sugiru*, the teacher tried to elicit the correct verb form (line five). Adrian answered again, this time in a slightly louder voice (line six). Although the teacher noticed that Adrian had answered, she did not hear him clearly. After the teacher’s request for clarification, Adrian stated his answer clearly (line eight).

Later in the course, Adrian began speaking up more frequently, even without the teacher’s elicitation. In Excerpt 2, Adrian expresses his answers clearly and without hesitation, in response to the teacher’s questions to the class.

The indefinite pronoun, *no*, is used after adjectives or relative clauses, and means ‘one’ or ‘ones’. It replaces a noun or refers to a person, thing or concept that is clear from the context. The plain forms of verbs are used in front of the indefinite pronoun. The teacher asked the students questions related to the task in their textbooks and the learners were required to change the sentences in the textbook by using the indefinite pronoun, *no*. She asked S1 the first question, and the verb form in his answer, *kaita*, was incorrect (line two, above). After the teacher’s question to the class (line three), Adrian clearly stated the correct plain past form of the verb *katta* (bought) (line four). The teacher then asked S2 the second question (line five). After S2’s correct answer, the teacher asked the class for a different version of the
answer (line seven). Again, Adrian expressed the correct alternative sentence without hesitation (line eight). Adrian had gradually changed his class participation from covert to overt.

Sandra and Jason also changed their class participation from covert to overt. The three learners attempted to speak up in class and found that they did not feel intimidated or embarrassed even when they made mistakes:

I know a couple of times I spoke up and then, even when I found I said something wrong, I didn’t worry about that too much. While at the beginning I was really embarrassed, now I just try to shrug off—okay, I just made a mistake, now I know how to say it properly, in that way, getting a bit more positive about it. Looking at learning things, rather than a bit of mistakes. (Adrian, week 4 interview)

But that’s just a mistake I can make. No one is going to say ‘you messed up with what you are saying’. (Jason, week 4 interview)

I’m much more confident in myself and my abilities now so that I don’t feel too upset when I make a mistake, whereas at the start of the term I would have been more affected by it. Speaking up is getting easier. (Sandra, week 7 diary)

At the beginning of the course, the learners seemed to rely on social-environmental cues (Pellegrino, 2005) to protect their self-image as competent students in using Japanese in class, such as how their classmates viewed them when they made mistakes. However, they later began to focus more on their internal cues (that is, their own language learning), as found in the above comments. At this stage, social comparisons between their own FL competence and their classmates’ was not important because they already found that they were not behind the other students and that they could thus focus on their own learning and development of language skills. Pellegrino (2005) found that when learners rely more on their internal cues for self-image, their SL production increases. In other words, when learners’ self-concepts become more positive through focussing on the development of their self-confidence, rather than on social comparisons, their WTC increased. In line with this finding, the learners in the present study became more active and started speaking more often. Later in the course, the learners had become much more confident with speaking Japanese in class:

I think I’m a lot more confident speaking in class and I think I’m happy about that because I wanna overcome that issue. Yeah I think I’ve gotten a lot better and a lot more comfortable and just saying something that I think is correct and if I make a mistake, I just went, ‘okay, that was wrong and this is how I fix it’. (Adrian, week 14 interview)

I suppose if I make a mistake in class, it can be corrected, and taking on that constructive criticism. Yeah it helps you, which is why we study in the classroom not by ourselves. (Jason, semester break interview)

I can cope with making mistakes now, which I think is a real improvement for me! I feel more confident when I speak up. (Sandra, week 9 diary)

The learners’ self-beliefs changed from ‘being unable to speak up due to the fear of making mistakes’ to ‘being confident enough to speak up and learn from their mistakes’. It appears that the development of their positive self-concepts was related to increased motivation to learn the language. The learners’ positive self-concepts and beliefs about FL learning (the importance of practise, confidence and participation) seemed to strengthen through their perceived successful learning actions and speaking up without feeling embarrassed when making mistakes, as Navarro and Thornton (2011) and Mercer (2011b) found.

Further, Sandra developed a new belief by overcoming her perfectionist nature: ‘Now I know, in terms of language, no one can be perfect. Even native speakers can’t’ (Sandra, week 14 interview). Sandra’s belief about herself as a ‘perfectionist’ seemed to be due to her relying on social-environmental cues and social comparisons to protect her sense of social and psychological security when speaking Japanese. She sought to be perfectly accurate and appropriate in order to protect her intellectual status in the class. However, as she became familiar with her classmates, their
FL competence and the learning environment, her perceived threats to her sense of social, linguistic and intellectual security reduced, and she subsequently spoke up more in class and also established a more flexible viewpoint.

The diary writing and interviews gave the learners opportunities to reflect on their own self-concepts, behaviour and learning, and reduced their anxieties about learning a FL:

It [diary writing] is helping me sort of get out of all my fears on paper and doesn’t seem such a big problem anymore, like, uh it’s—it identifies what I am struggling with, so if I know what I need to work on, if that makes sense. (Sandra, week 5 interview)

As Lektorsky (2009) and Aragão (2011) pointed out, reflection plays an important role in changing learners’ beliefs about themselves. In the present study, diary writing became a remediation tool for the learners’ actions in the classroom environment, allowing them to reflect on their own learning or behaviours, determine their strengths and weaknesses, and change their attitudes or behaviours for more effective learning. Diary writing is also similar to ‘self-talk’—a learner strategy to reduce anxiety in SL interactions, noted by Pellegrino (2005). For Sandra, as seen above, the emotional release of diary writing helped her reduce her fear of language learning and speaking Japanese.

Betty, who was confident in speaking Japanese and expected to develop her speaking skills further through the course, was disappointed with her classmates’ speaking ability: ‘I want to have conversations in Japanese, but everybody always speaks English [in class]. They are talking in English, when I talk in Japanese—they don’t understand’ (Betty, week 4 interview). Betty tried to communicate with her classmates in Japanese not only through the textbook work, but also through small talk in the language. However, many students at this level did not have the ability to speak Japanese, except through answering questions in the textbook. Although the researcher asked her whether she would like to transfer to a higher level class, she preferred to continue at the current level because she wanted to review some of the grammar she had learnt at high school. Betty did not really enjoy helping her classmates in pair or group work and seemed to feel that her classmates would not accept her because they saw her speaking Japanese that they did not understand as her showing off: ‘I don’t want to speak up because I feel everyone will think I am trying to show off’ (Betty, week 4 interview).

Confident students may also fear a threat to their social status from their classmates’ perception that they are showing off their FL ability when they speak up in class. This finding indicates that learner’s confidence in FL competence does not always contribute to their WTC in class. Betty’s comment also implies she was making a social comparison, and that, after comparing her own competence in speaking FL with her classmates’ competence, she became disappointed and gave up trying to frequently communicate with them in Japanese. Her WTC as a whole seemed to decrease because of her lack of desire to communicate with her classmates (MacIntyre et al., 1998). As a result of this, she also started worrying about a decline in her speaking skills: ‘I’m a little bit worried that now I’m not constantly speaking with all the Japanese people that my language skills are going down’ (Betty, week 7 interview).

Betty’s belief that speaking Japanese with native speakers was the best way to develop her speaking skills stemmed from her experience of having intensive lessons with her tutors and talking with her host family while in Japan. This belief seemed to be made stronger through her experience of not being able to communicate with her classmates in Japanese:

All I want to do now is to back. I think studying Japanese at uni[versity] is pretty much useless considering how much I learnt when I was over there. Speaking with a partner who is not a native speaker is not particularly helping. (Betty, week 8 diary)

Betty often mentioned in her interviews that the in-country experience was enjoyable and enhanced her FL learning and the development of her FL confidence. Her study-abroad experience seemed to influence her self-concept both affectively and cognitively, as Mercer (2011b) stated. Although she expressed a strong desire to return to Japan, she did not contact her host family often, compared to the beginning of the semester. She did not have any particular Japanese friends in Australia and did not make efforts to make Japanese friends to speak with outside of the class, unlike Sandra, who often went to see one of her native-speaker tutors at VLLC, and Adrian, who regularly practised speaking Japanese with his girlfriend who was learning Japanese at a different university. Betty’s inability to develop her speaking in class affected her motivation in learning the language, and she became less active about learning outside of class. Affective factors, such as interest or enjoyment, indirectly influence FL
learners’ self-concepts through the development of their motivation (Mercer, 2011b). This was shown by Betty’s loss of interest in the Japanese language class and her lack of enjoyment with communicating with her classmates in Japanese. At the end of the semester, she expressed her disappointment at not having been able to learn anything from the university class:

When I came back from Japan, I was sort of excited to get back to learning Japanese. Hmm in the classroom … I expected to learn much more, but it’s sort of nearly the same as high school … I don’t know … I could not learn much. And then doing group, pairs is pretty useless. (Betty, week 14 interview)

Most of Betty’s comments were related to her learning environments and classmates, rather than her own learning or development. The present study suggests that when a classroom learning environment is not sufficiently challenging for a learner, they may focus more on social-environmental cues than on internal cues. This probably occurs when the learner finds that they cannot learn well in the given classroom context. Betty’s self-concept as a confident learner did not change; however, she did not feel any sense of achievement in the course and her self-concept did not become more positive than how she felt at the beginning of the course.

6. Discussion

This section discusses how the learners’ self-concepts were constructed and what kinds of strategies were used to protect their sense of social and psychological security and maintain their participation in the Japanese FL course during the transition period to university. This section also presents these issues’ implications for teaching.

6.1. Learners’ construction of their self-concepts

The learners’ self-concepts were influenced by different factors, including internal and external frames of reference in FL self-concept formation (Mercer, 2011b). The learners’ past experiences of Japanese language learning influenced their self-concepts, especially at the beginning of the course. Adrian, Jason and Sandra, who found the Japanese class at university different from their previous learning environments, felt anxiety from experiencing social embarrassment when speaking Japanese during class. Anxiety and embarrassment—affective factors that influence learners’ self-concepts (Mercer, 2011b)—contributed to further developing the learners’ self-concepts as ‘shy’ or ‘perfectionist’, which arose from their past learning experiences. Betty’s previous study abroad influenced her confidence in speaking Japanese, while the comparison between her Japanese and French abilities also made her perceive how she was competent in Japanese and seemed to contribute to her positive Japanese self-concept.

Social comparisons were another factor that influenced all the learners’ self-concepts, particularly at the beginning of the course. It seemed to be important for the learners to determine how their classmates’ FL competence compared to their own during the transition period to university. Adrian, Jason and Sandra’s fear of making mistakes when speaking Japanese during class decreased after discovering that their classmates’ FL competences were not different from theirs. This subsequently contributed to the development of their FL confidence, WTC and more positive self-concepts. However, Betty lost her motivation to communicate with her classmates in Japanese and found the Japanese class boring after discovering that her classmates’ competence in FL speaking was much lower than her own. Her social comparison and the affective factor of her disappointment with her classmates’ FL competence contributed to her lack of development of a more positive self-concept.

The other factor that influenced all the learners’ self-concepts was their beliefs about FL learning. Adrian, Jason and Sandra’s belief in the importance of accuracy enhanced their fear of losing their social, linguistic and intellectual status in the class by making mistakes. As a result, they avoided speaking Japanese in class, which triggered their self-concepts as ‘shy’ or ‘perfectionist’. To become more confident and participate in class more frequently, they practised Japanese and prepared for the lessons, in accordance with their beliefs that practise and preparation develop the confidence that triggers greater participation. By developing their confidence through practise and participating in class more often, their self-concepts became more positive.

The final factor that influenced all the learners’ self-concepts was their perceived experiences of success or failure. Betty’s perceived experiences of success in communicating with Japanese native speakers contributed to developing her positive self-concept at the beginning of the course, even though this success had occurred outside of the class. The other three learners’ perceived experience of their failure to speak up in Japanese in class did not contribute to
constructing positive self-concepts, while their perceived experiences of success when speaking up in Japanese and making mistakes without feeling embarrassed in the classes did contribute to developing positive self-concepts.

6.2. Learners’ use of strategies to protect their self-image and participate in class

At the beginning of the course, Adrian, Jason and Sandra used a ‘flight’ strategy of avoiding speaking Japanese in class (cf. Pellegrino, 2005) because of their fear of making mistakes and losing their social, linguistic and intellectual status. At this stage, the learners’ perceptions of themselves were strongly influenced by social-environmental cues, such as the comparison of their own FL competence with their classmates and how the classmates perceived their FL competence. When they became familiar with their classmates and the learning environment, they started using ‘fight’ strategies, which are attempts to eliminate threatening elements (cf. Pellegrino, 2005). They started to practise Japanese more often and prepared for class in order to increase both their familiarity with the classroom learning contents and the predictability of their success in participating in the lessons. They usually sat with familiar classmates, and they mentioned in their interviews that speaking Japanese with their favourite classmates helped them participate more actively in peer work. This illustrates a strategy of choosing favourite interlocutors to reduce anxiety and enhance participation in Japanese conversations. Sandra stated that the diary writing helped reduce her stress and anxiety and encouraged her to learn Japanese. This is similar to the ‘fight’ strategy of self-talk. When starting to use these strategies, the learners’ perceptions of themselves became more strongly influenced by internal cues, such as their own language learning processes. While three of the learners used both ‘flight’ and ‘fight’ strategies, Betty used only a ‘flight’ strategy, when, after finding that the others’ FL competences were much lower than hers, she reduced her speaking of Japanese with her classmates to avoid them perceiving her as ‘showing off her FL competence’.

6.3. Implications for teaching

This qualitative research project has drawn on a small sample size, and while this makes generalisation of the findings difficult, these findings may be useful for teachers who teach FLs in the transition period to university. Therefore, some implications for teaching to increase learners’ WTC are discussed in this section. First, considering learners’ high anxiety and uncertainty regarding their peers and learning environments, it is important to develop a friendly atmosphere in which learners do not feel too intimidated to speak the target language or make mistakes. As the learners in the present study mentioned, group/pair work is useful for getting to know classmates and speaking the target language without worrying about making mistakes. This is effective for increasing learners’ desire to communicate with specific people (their classmates), which is one of the most important factors for WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Diary writing can also help learners reduce their anxiety by releasing their emotions. Teachers can suggest that learners write diaries about their FL learning. If teachers read the diaries and return them to the learners with comments, the feedback or appraisal of the teachers as significant others may positively influence the learners’ WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). As preparation for lessons enhances learners’ confidence and participation, teachers can tell learners about the tasks provided in the next lesson and suggest ways they can prepare and practise for them. This can contribute to reducing learners’ anxiety to speak FL and can develop their self-confidence in the use of FL in the classroom, which is a crucial factor for WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

For more advanced learners, teachers may need to provide extra activities or suggest more advanced activities that they can undertake inside or outside of class, so that they do not find the lessons too boring. Finally, assessment of the learners should focus on the development of the learner’s own particular skills or performance, not on comparing their skills with those of their classmates. This would give the learners perceived success in FL learning, which is crucial for the development of positive self-concepts.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined Japanese language learners’ self-concepts and spontaneous use of the language in class during the transition period from school to university. This study has revealed the complex nature of the relationship between learners’ FL self-concepts and spontaneous use of FL. Learners’ FL self-concepts and spontaneous use of the language are closely associated with each other, and are influenced by factors such as the learners’ beliefs about FL.
learning, their perceived success or failure in FL learning, and affective factors such as embarrassment or feelings of progress. The learners were active agents who constructed/reconstructed their beliefs about FL learning, thereby creating opportunities to participate in the classes by speaking Japanese and developing more positive self-concepts in the difficult situation of the transition period, even though they may not have been always conscious of their self-concepts.

Appendices

Questionnaire for student participant

1. Name:
2. Age (if you do not mind):
3. Which languages do you speak or understand?
4. Have you learnt Japanese before starting the current course? If you have, please write the details (e.g. where and how long you learnt Japanese, including both formal instruction and self-study).
5. Do you have any foreign language learning experience except Japanese? If you do, please give details.
6. Why did you decide to learn Japanese? (You can be quite honest. If you decided to learn Japanese as a course requirement, answer so.)
7. What is your goal in taking the current Japanese course? What do you expect to achieve by completing the course?
8. Please complete the following sentence with your own words.

   I believe that foreign language learning is:

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________.

Diary writing

I would like you to focus on the following points for your diary writing:

1. If you have watched any Japanese anime or drama, read Japanese comics or listened to Japanese CDs during the week, please write the titles of them and how many times you have done these things. If you have found something new in them or picked up some Japanese expressions, please write what they were.
2. If you have prepared for or reviewed the classes during the week, please write what you have done.
3. In terms of classroom learning, please write what you have found new, easy or difficult. Please write any good comments or criticisms about the teaching.
4. Please write about your problems or the points that you are struggling with, as well as the points that you are good at.
5. Please write what you felt when you were doing particular activities in classes or at home, as well as what you actually did (e.g. when you found something new about Japanese culture, language or way of learning the language, and how you felt about it; when you found a problem or difficulty when learning particular items, and how you felt about it).
6. Please write in the diary as often as possible (e.g. two or three times a week). If it is difficult, please take note when you have done particular activities at home or after Japanese classes at university, and add them when you write a diary entry.
7. I would like you to write at least several paragraphs (e.g. a page of A4 paper). If you write in the diary often, some entries may be shorter, but I still would you like to include the points that were stated above.
References


