FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH IMAGINED IDENTITIES: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ASPIRATIONAL GOALS IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the role of imagined identities in shaping the engagement and participation of Japanese university students in English language classrooms. Despite a common perception that Japanese students' silence in class indicates disinterest or lack of participation, the research suggests that such silence may stem from cultural tendencies rather than disengagement. Through qualitative interviews with experienced English teachers, the study reveals that students who have clear, aspirational goals—such as becoming an English teacher, studying abroad, or using English in a professional context—are more likely to actively engage in class. These aspirations, or imagined identities, provide students with a sense of purpose and motivation, which helps overcome cultural barriers to participation. The findings highlight the importance of fostering personalized imagined identities in the classroom, which can encourage students to invest more deeply in their language learning while respecting their cultural values. This approach offers a culturally sensitive alternative to traditional Western pedagogies that may inadvertently exacerbate anxiety or discomfort in Japanese students.

Keywords: Imagined Identities, Japanese University Students, Silence

1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese students are often recognized for their silence in the classroom (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Goharimehr, 2017). Previous research has highlighted that native English-speaking (NES) teachers tend to interpret this silence as a sign of disinterest or lack of participation (Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017; Maher & King, 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that the silence of Japanese students in the classroom may not necessarily indicate a lack of engagement. Kim et al. (2016) suggest that both Japanese and Western students share a preference for conversation, but the contexts in which dialogue is encouraged or expected may vary. While Japanese students enjoy casual conversations, they tend to observe silence in classroom settings (Anderson, 2018). For instance, in classroom contexts, Japanese students typically wait to answer questions only when called upon by the teacher (Harumi, 2010).

In an effort to address this silence, some NES teachers may implement in-class activities that encourage active participation. However, Japanese learners may not be accustomed to teaching methods that prioritize such engagement, and assuming they can easily participate in these activities may be misguided (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). The transition from high school to university can be especially difficult for students, with many undergraduates struggling in language classes taught by NES teachers (Maher & King, 2022).

Simply reminding Japanese students of the importance of active participation in Western-style English conversations and urging them to speak up may not be effective. Many Japanese students already recognize the value of engaging in English classes and are aware of the differences between their own communication styles and those of Western English conversations (Harumi, 2010; Sasaki & Ortlieb, 2017). Furthermore, according to Goharimehr (2017), Japanese students may have little interest in fully integrating into English-speaking cultures, often preferring to learn English for professional or personal reasons.

Despite the silence of Japanese university students being a topic of much research, there have been calls (Goharimehr, 2017) for qualitative approaches that focus on identity to shed light on this ongoing phenomenon. A key gap in the current literature is the lack of research that directly examines the perspectives of English teachers. Their perspectives may provide valuable insights into the persistent issue of Japanese students' silence in English language classrooms. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the views of English teachers' understanding of why Japanese university students remain silent in these settings.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The eight teachers who participated in the study included five NES teachers and three native Japanese-speaking (NJS) teachers. They shared two key traits: all were seasoned English teaching professionals with at least 10 years of experience teaching English at Japanese universities, and all had lived in Japan for a minimum of 10 years. This background provided them with a deep understanding of both Japanese culture and English language instruction in Japan. A summary of the participant teachers' backgrounds is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participant information

Participant	Gender	Age range	Native Language	Nationality	Number of Interviews	English Teaching Experience
A	female	50-60	Japanese	Japanese	1	30 years
B	female	40-50	Japanese	Japanese	3	20 years
C	Male	50-60	Japanese	Japanese	3	25 years
D	Male	40-50	English	UK	3	15 years
E	Male	30-40	English	UK	3	15 years
F	Male	50-60	English	American	3	25 years
G	Male	30-40	English	UK	3	10 years
H	female	50-60	English	American	1	25 years

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study utilized interviews to gather data. Mwita (2022, p. 415) highlights that "Interviews are often preferred because they allow researchers to easily understand the actual feelings of the respondents on the phenomenon under study," making them valuable in qualitative research. For this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen to encourage participants to reflect on their teaching experiences in a Japanese university setting. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow for follow-up questions to clarify responses (Mwita, 2022).

Each participant's first interview followed a set of 13 semi-structured questions (see Appendix

1). These questions served as a foundation for participants to share their experiences and opinions. The semi-structured format facilitated the comparison of responses across participants, helping identify similarities, differences, and noteworthy data. The second and third interviews were based on responses from the first interview, allowing for a deeper exploration of specific experiences mentioned earlier. The researchers adjusted the questions for each participant to clarify responses and gather more detailed insights into their teaching experiences in Japanese university classrooms.

2.2 Findings

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as an effective method for identifying, analyzing, and writing about patterns and themes in qualitative research. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences. The steps for conducting thematic analysis in this study were adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines.

The teachers identified five specific situations where a student or students were notably more engaged in class or less silent than their peers. A common factor emerged from the teachers' descriptions: imagined identities.

An imagined community is one that a student aspires to join—one that may not be accessible at the moment but could become attainable in the near future. Within this community, the learner encounters appealing identities, which cultivate a sense of engagement and dedication (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagined communities offer a valuable lens for understanding individuals' connections to other communities, whether or not they have direct contact. As Kanno and Norton (2003) argue, the communities students envision and the identities they adopt can significantly impact their language learning and commitment.

The findings are supported by quotes from the interviews with the participant teachers. As there were numerous interviews conducted, each quote is labeled with a letter and number to indicate which participant and which interview the extract comes from. For example, B1 refers to participant B and their first interview.

Future Secondary School English Teachers

Participant H taught a group of students enrolled in teacher training programs, preparing for the national exam to become certified secondary school English teachers. According to H, these students had a strong desire to become teachers. H observed that students with specific goals, such as becoming English teachers, were more eager to speak English in class. For these students, the goal of becoming an English teacher represented an imagined identity.

However, within this group, some students were noticeably quieter and more hesitant to speak up than others. These students were uncertain about pursuing a teaching career, and as a result, they tended to be more reserved or silent compared to those with clear teaching aspirations. These students had not yet developed strong imagined identities, which made it harder for them to engage in class. The difference between students with and without established imagined identities in H's class was evident: those with a clear vision of themselves as future teachers were more likely to participate actively.

> *most of them are going to become English teachers so they feel a*
> *necessity to be able to use the language, they feel that they have to so*
> *they don't seem to be too hesitant. There's a few of them in there who*

are just taking the course or are unsure what they want to do, so sometimes they hesitate. (H1)

Future Junior High School English Teachers

Like participant H, participant F spoke about a group of students enrolled in a program to become junior high school English teachers. F observed that these students, having already set clear goals of becoming teachers, were highly motivated. The aspiration to become English teachers, along with the course they were taking, helped shape visions of their future selves, which in turn encouraged them to engage more in their English classes.

> *it was a department where we were attracting students who were going to be junior high school and high school teachers and so inherently they're already motivated to improve and to study.* (F1)

F's students shared a similar trait with the students in H's class who were not hesitant: they had clear goals of becoming teachers and a strong sense of their future roles and responsibilities, which motivated them to actively engage in English classes. They may have viewed language proficiency as a crucial skill for their planned teaching careers.

The interview data from participants H and F suggests that connecting with an imagined identity may help students overcome hesitation and participate more actively in class. In contrast, students who are unsure about their future goals and lack a strong connection to an imagined identity tend to be more hesitant, leading to lower engagement and participation in English classes.

Faculty Students

The following extract explores the factors behind the high level of investment and engagement shown by students in a program with a one-year study-abroad component in an English-speaking country, taught by Participant E. These students' investment in the course is linked to the creation of imagined identities of their future study-abroad selves and their aspirations to use English in their careers.

By forming these imagined identities, the students developed a strong connection to E's classes, driving them to improve their English skills. This suggests that having clear images of their future study-abroad experiences and English language goals can significantly boost students' investment in their English classes. In addition to their envisioned study-abroad experiences, another factor contributing to the students' increased investment was their goal of using English in their future professions. Many students in the program aspired to pursue careers requiring strong language skills after graduation. This aspiration to use English professionally likely motivated them to invest more in their English language studies.

> *The faculty students have an incentive to improve their language skills for many reasons. One is it's going to affect their study abroad experience and the other is a significant proportion of the faculty students in our faculty aspire to do some kind of profession after they graduate connected with their language skills.* (E1)

The influence of imagined identities on students' investment in their education was striking. The ability to picture themselves using English in both study-abroad and professional settings provided a lasting motivation for their increased engagement and desire to enhance their

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language skills. Active participation in English classes represented their commitment to their imagined identities as future English users in both study-abroad experiences and professional careers.

Motivated to Study Abroad Alone

Participant F described a student who demonstrated a strong investment in learning English. This student's dedication stemmed from a deep connection to an imagined identity centered on studying abroad in the United States. This imagined identity drove him to engage both inside and outside the classroom, motivating him to pursue additional English study on his own.

> And he's just incredible of course he was also motivated to study abroad and he did study abroad for one year. He went to the States and of course, he came back even better you know. (F1)

A personal and deeply felt imagined identity seemed to play a crucial role in this student's investment. This connection not only motivated him to engage in English classes on campus but also to pursue independent English study outside of school.

> He made effort; he made extra effort outside of class. (F1)

This student is similar to the faculty students previously mentioned, with one key difference: he was not part of a group of students studying abroad together. The motivation this student exhibited both inside and outside the classroom, before, during, and after his study abroad experience, suggests that the imagined identity he developed was central to his significant improvement in English.

The Unmotivated Student Who Became Motivated

The transformation of this student's journey serves as a powerful example of how an imagined identity can drive language acquisition. Initially lacking in English proficiency and disinterested in language classes, the student's newfound desire to interact with native English speakers in social settings likely shaped a mental image of herself as someone who must be a competent English speaker. This envisioned version of herself, particularly in the context of communicating with native speakers, became a key motivator that led her to invest significantly in her English studies.

> One student whose English was really bad but she likes to talk with the native speaker. By the time she graduated, she had one of the top TOEIC scores and as she increased the number of friends, native friends, her attitude towards the course became really serious. (B3)

This instance highlights an interesting link between the presence of NES individuals and the strengthening of imagined identities. According to B, although the student had limited direct interaction with NES people, her constructed identity allowed her to view NES individuals as accessible figures who could help her achieve her envisioned English-speaking self. In this context, NES individuals became pathways to her imagined identity, further fueling her dedication to learning English both in and outside of the classroom.

The Student Who Lost Her Dream

In contrast to the four students who showed increased motivation and participation, there is the case of a student whose imagined identity was taken from her, leading to her disengagement from English classes. This student, referred to as M in the following extract from F's third interview, provides a different example.

Student M, who had initially shown remarkable motivation and engagement in English classes, was particularly noted for her proactive approach to learning. Her strong dedication and initiative impressed her teacher, participant F. M's motivation had been driven by her goal of studying abroad and pursuing a career in the airline industry, specifically as a cabin attendant. She planned to attend a college in Canada that was known for its prestigious flight attendant program.

> *I was just really impressed, she impressed me as being super motivated. Then as a second-year student, she just seemed kind of listless and unmotivated. It turns out she was hoping to study abroad, she wanted to go into the airline industry and hoping to go abroad. Because of COVID everything was canceled so had her dream of going abroad to help her with her flight attendant or cabin attendant career goal was kind of shattered.* (F3)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted M's plans, leading to the cancellation of her study abroad opportunities and shattering her dream of enrolling in the highly regarded flight attendant program in Canada. As a result, her carefully crafted imagined identity was dismantled, triggering a significant emotional and motivational shift. F observed a noticeable decline in M's attitude and behavior toward her studies. Her once strong motivation diminished, leaving her feeling demotivated.

The aspiration to study abroad and pursue a career as a cabin attendant had been a major driving force behind her efforts in English classes. With that dream now seemingly unreachable, her investment in English learning faded.

M's example illustrates that the connection between imagined identities and investment in education can be influenced by social, cultural, and even global events. The rapid shift from strong engagement to disengagement highlights the profound effect that a personalized vision of the future can have on a student's motivation. Imagined identities play a crucial role in motivating students to engage in language classes, and such investment can enhance language proficiency and autonomy. However, external disruptions can significantly impact these imagined identities and the motivation of students.

The first four examples from teacher interviews indicate that imagined identities influenced Japanese students' investment in English classes. On the other hand, the fifth example shows that the sudden loss of an imagined identity can lead to a decrease in motivation and involvement in English classes. Imagined identities can be a vital initial step in fostering engagement, both inside and outside the classroom.

3. IMPLICATIONS

The interview data suggests that through imagined identities, Japanese university students, whether aided by teachers or independently aware of their power, could enhance their investment in English language learning. When Japanese students want to engage in learning but are hindered by their tendency to remain silent in class, imagined identities can help shift their mindset (Goharimehr, 2018). For this to be effective, imagined identities must be clear, realistic, and sustainable. Additionally, it's important to allow students to create imagined identities that align with their own cultural values and tendencies.

The implications of this study extend beyond individual students, emphasizing the potential of using personalized imagined identities as a pedagogical tool in language education. Teachers can harness the concept of imagined identities to inspire and motivate learners. By encouraging students to envision themselves using the language in real-world situations, teachers can tap into their aspirations and transform language learning from a mere academic task into a personally meaningful experience. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that imagined identities can be an effective tool for motivating students, particularly within the context of Japanese culture, where silence is often mistakenly seen as a sign of disinterest. By fostering these identities, educators can help students overcome cultural tendencies toward passivity and promote more active participation, all without requiring major changes in teaching methods. This approach supports the idea that, when used appropriately, imagined identities can bridge the gap between cultural communication styles and the demands of learning a foreign language. Therefore, fostering positive and achievable imagined identities could serve as an effective way to encourage Japanese university students to engage more in English language classes. This study not only demonstrates the value of imagined identities for Japanese university students but also reveals their transformative potential. It also underscores the importance of ensuring that imagined identities are clear, realistic, and sustainable, taking into account external factors that may arise.

Mendoza and Thian (2023) highlighted the importance of understanding the culture in Japanese university classrooms, noting its significant role in English language education. This suggests that, while students use English as a tool, they also wish to preserve their cultural identities and communication styles. Rather than attempting to address the silence of Japanese students through Western-style activities that emphasize active participation, incorporating imagined identities might better support their investment in English learning. By nurturing these identities, Japanese students need not adopt Western learning methods that may cause discomfort or anxiety. Instead, they can develop imagined identities that are both socially and culturally meaningful to them.

4. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the narrow cultural context, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. The study involved only eight teachers, all with at least 10 years of experience, limiting the scope of perspectives and excluding insights from less experienced educators. Moreover, the focus on Japanese students within a specific cultural context means the results may not be applicable to other cultural settings, as the dynamics of imagined identities could vary significantly. Additionally, the research relied solely on the perspectives of teachers, not students, which may not fully reflect students' experiences, beliefs, or challenges.

For future research, expanding the sample size to include a diverse group of teachers and students from different academic disciplines, universities, and cultural backgrounds would help assess whether the findings are universally applicable. Incorporating student perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how imagined identities influence engagement. Longitudinal studies could explore how these identities evolve over time and their long-term effects on motivation and language acquisition.

Future studies could also examine how technology, social media, and exposure to global cultures shape imagined identities, as well as how specific pedagogical strategies can help students develop clear and sustainable identities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the significant role that imagined identities play in shaping the language learning experiences and motivations of Japanese university students. Through a qualitative exploration of teachers' insights, the research demonstrated how students' engagement and investment in English classes are often influenced by their ability to envision themselves in future roles where English proficiency is crucial. These imagined identities—such as aspiring to become an English teacher, pursuing a study-abroad opportunity, or engaging with native English speakers—served as powerful motivators that foster active participation and self-directed learning, both within and outside the classroom.

The study reveals that when students can connect their learning to concrete future goals, their investment in language acquisition becomes more meaningful. In contrast, when a student's imagined identity is disrupted, motivation can rapidly diminish, leading to disengagement. This highlights the delicate balance between internal aspirations and external factors, such as cultural, social, and global events, which can significantly impact students' motivation and engagement in language learning.

One of the key findings of this research is that imagined identities must be clear, realistic, and sustainable to have a lasting impact on students' engagement. Teachers have a unique opportunity to foster these identities by encouraging students to envision themselves using English in real-world contexts, aligning language learning with their personal and professional aspirations. Such an approach respects students' cultural preferences, offering them the flexibility to maintain their identities while engaging with the language in a meaningful way. This contrasts with Western-style pedagogies that might inadvertently cause discomfort or anxiety, as students are often not inclined to embrace active participation in the traditional sense.

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Appendix 1: Interview One Questions
1. How did you feel the students reacted to …………activity? Why?
2. What do you think went well in class? Why?
3. What do you think you could have done differently? Why?
4. In what ways do you think the students have improved in this class?
5. Do you think there are any students that are not improving? Why?
6. Do you think there are students that want to study but are not participating? Why?
7. If you were able to plan and control the lessons any way you wanted,
what would you do?
8. How do you feel about these coordinated English classes with set textbooks
and curriculum? Are they beneficial for the students and their learning?
9. Why did you do …………….. in that particular class?
10. If you could teach the same class again, what would you do differently? Why?
11. How do you feel about the students' participation in your class?
12. How do you feel being white/Japanese affected the students' motivation in
your class?
13. Can you expand/clarify …………………………………..?