

**Yoshiyuki Nakata**

**Motivation and Experience  
in Foreign Language Learning**

**Peter Lang**

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***For my wife, Yuko***





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## Preface

This book is intended for a range of people involved in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Its basic argument, that language learning motivation is inextricably bound up with learners' learning experiences, has a clear implication for teachers of foreign languages (at primary, secondary or tertiary levels), teacher educators, researchers in TESL/TEFL, as well as applied linguists. Though it may be more applicable to those who are involved in foreign language teaching in the Asian context, it should be useful also for teachers from a range of foreign language teaching contexts and cultural backgrounds. Irrespective of differences in the teaching context, I believe, the kinds of practical issues and daily concerns encountered by teachers of English are likely to be similar across many educational settings and my findings may therefore have profound implications for teachers anywhere. For this reason, I intentionally have not excluded the contextual element but instead have sketched out a broad picture of the Japanese EFL context, in order that readers can sense the scope and nature of the context that shapes most of the learners' experiences and voices. This also reflects my view that motivation is context-dependent, multifaceted, and dynamic.

The account in the book of the ways in which Japanese learners of English at a Japanese university respond to being encouraged to be more autonomous in their learning (in short, they become more self-motivated) will be of interest to teachers in various other educational contexts who also want to show their students how to take more responsibility for their own learning. In addition, the book's discussion of how to investigate motivation for empirical purposes will, I hope, stir an interest amongst other researchers in this field; in particular the comparison between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

This work was made possible by many professors and colleagues. It began as a PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Dublin,



Trinity College, where I was a doctoral student in the Centre for Language and Communication Studies. First and foremost, I am greatly indebted to my supervisor Jennifer Ridley and my examiners (David Little and Peter Garrett).

I also would like to thank Ema Ushioda and John Chick, and many other colleagues (including Masumi Yamato and Kazuki Mori) for inspiration, encouragement, and their insightful suggestions.

All of the students I have taught in the past provided me with plenty of food for thought on motivation and stimulated me to explore various conundrums of motivation that have been hitherto relatively untouched, and I am grateful to them all.

Last but by no means least, I wish to express my gratitude to Graham Speake, Sue Leigh, and Adrian Baggett at Peter Lang and Bernard Dod for their help in bringing this book to completion.

As a teacher of English, my challenge is always to help students to become more motivated to learn a foreign language so that they will have a clearer purpose in learning a language, find a meaning in it, engage in it, and finally become autonomous learners and users of the target language. Hence, my challenge is also to help English teachers to find their own ways to motivate their students and become autonomous teachers. This is my second book on language learning motivation, the first being *Gengogakusyu motivation: Riron to jissen* [Language learning motivation: Theory and practice] (1999). I have been working on foreign language motivation as my research subject for about 15 years. Over the years, I have found a paradigm shift on approaches to motivation in *myself*, as you will see in this book. However, as a researcher, I am still at the developmental stage of working on this topic. The concept of motivation is one to which I unashamedly adhere.

Yoshiyuki Nakata  
Hyogo, Japan  
December 2005



# 1 Introduction

## Why I Wrote this Book — A Personal Tale

How do learners acquire motivation in language learning? How do learners become autonomous language learners? I think the easiest way to answer these questions is to use my own story based on my personal experiences as a learner, a teacher and a teacher educator, because I believe the best way of providing an introduction to the development of motivation and autonomy is to tell how I, as an individual subject, came to have a high (or certain) level of motivation in language learning and become an autonomous language learner. It is my hope that you will find the following story intriguing.

While I was in elementary school, I was not an apt pupil at all but rather a low achiever in most subjects. Occasionally, I was strongly encouraged by my teachers to attend follow-up courses after the regular classes had finished. In instances such as those, the last day of term would always be depressing for me. I would have to show the bad grades and the teachers' comments about my bad behaviour to my parents. I hated this, since I knew my parents would scold me. Sometimes they compared my progress, unfavourably, to that of my younger brother who achieved higher results. It seemed to me that my parents would evaluate me using those grade reports. To be fair, it was the only way my parents could know how I was doing at school and also probably the only way the teacher could inform them. Tests and the grades based on them assumed scary proportions in my psyche.

The learning process itself was not enjoyable for me for several years. This began to change in the fifth grade of elementary school when Japanese history was offered. My grandmother lived with our family. She would often relate incidents from history or from her past experiences to us in the form of bedtime stories. Therefore, much of what appeared in the Japanese history textbook was familiar to me and



also interesting since my grandmother had made the past come alive for us. In the class, I felt I had something to offer the other students and even my instructor to complement the text. As if by magic, memorising historical events and people became very easy thereafter. Accordingly, I got good grades in this course and no longer felt any anxiety about the coming test. The prospect of taking the test became a positive one as I was confident of my ability to do well. Interestingly enough, my performance in the other courses and even my behaviour at school changed for the better. I was excited by this phenomenal success. This was the first time I motivated myself to succeed. The impetus, though, was rather accidental.

Then, how about learning English? I have been studying English for about a quarter of a century, in fact since I was 12 years old. It was not always easy. But when I began to learn the language, I was faced with one dominant thought in the back of my head – why do I need to study English? Unfortunately, the teacher did not explain this to the students adequately. As more and more complicated grammar rules were introduced in the third year of junior high school the need to have an answer to this question became more pressing. And of course, once again I needed to attend follow-up study courses after the regular classes in English had finished. I had trouble with memorising in English all the rules and difficult lexical items that are used in the course of study in Japan. What was wrong? In elementary school, studying history was fun. My grandmother had opened my eyes to possibilities. But with English studies, something was lacking.

Nonetheless I became determined to motivate myself. I studied and memorised as much as I could – vocabulary, sentences, even the whole text for the test. I probably did not do it in the most effective way, but I spent a tremendous amount of time on it. Fortunately, I got a good result in that test. Although it may not be the best way to learn a language, I learned how to memorise for tests and how to get good results. It seemed that other classmates who always got good grades did this also. Within the limitations of the program it was an effective learning strategy. Since then, I have learned more effective ways to get good grades. With the possibility of success, learning English became much less stressful and interesting to a certain level. My question about the real purpose of it all had yet to be answered but I could now



worry a lot less about the looming college entrance exams. For these exams the purpose of studying English would be to ensure a high enough score to qualify for entrance to a good university.

Despite all my efforts, I was unable to qualify for entrance to preferred universities. This necessitated an extra year's study at one of the *yobiko* (preparatory or cram) schools for which Japan is famous (or notorious). The following year, I did manage to get into one of my preferred universities. Although I majored in economics, I was still interested in learning English. I took two English courses at university. These, however, were unsatisfactory since both were based on a tedious grammar-translation method. Therefore, I joined a school-based club called the ESS (English Speaking Society). Again, in this club, most of the activities were based on rote memorising. This approach did not seem natural and I quit the ESS. In my second year of university, I decided to visit Paris. It was my first time abroad. I was not fluent either in English or French. In attempting to deal with the mundane requirements of travel, such as making reservations, ordering food and asking directions, I realised the desirability of achieving fluency in foreign languages. Also, during the stay in Paris, I once sneaked into a lecture at Université Sorbonne-Paris IV without any language skills (French) and knowledge of that course. However, I still remember that enthusiastic lecture and discussions between the professor and students. After I returned to Japan, I began to study at a private English conversation school. The teacher, who possessed an MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), was stimulating, and employed a myriad of communicative activities not used in Japanese text-based school courses at that time. He taught me several strategies for learning English. We listened to VOA (Voice of America) and BBC radio programmes and he encouraged me to watch video over and over again in order to improve pronunciation, listening, and other analytical skills.

In my third year, I went to London to study English and stayed with a family for two months. In the house, there were two other students – one French speaker from Switzerland and a Portuguese speaker from Brazil. It was an exciting environment. Wherever I went, I needed to speak English, in homes, shops, underground stations, and post offices. Everywhere there were ample opportunities for learning



real-life English. As a result, I had no choice but to immerse myself in English day after day and find ways of living on my own. In the classes, it was also fun though not so easy for me to discuss issues with other students from Europe and South America. Nonetheless, the communicative approach employed began to break down my reserve. After the classes, it was stimulating to go to pubs or discos at night with classmates. I met a lot of people from many different countries and had a myriad of new experiences. We tried to communicate with each other in English despite having different accents and using different culturally based gestures. I am still in touch with friends from those days. These experiences were strong enough to sustain my motivation in learning English.

I am now an associate professor at a university where I am both a language instructor and a teacher educator. In all honesty, little did I envisage such a scenario when started learning English.

There are two well-respected scholars, Robert J. Sternberg and James D. Brown, who share experiences similar to mine. Robert J. Sternberg of Yale University was the keynote speaker at a conference on Individual Differences (27 March 1999) at Aoyama Gakuin University. He talked about intelligence and his personal experiences (see Miele, 1995 for more about this story). As a youth, Sternberg scored below average on IQ tests and his teacher deemed him lacking in mental facility. Sternberg did not agree and now believes there are flaws inherent in IQ tests. Today, he is a professor at Yale University and a well-known contributor to educational psychology. James Dean Brown, a big name in the field of testing and TESOL, is now a professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawaii. In a Japanese newspaper article (2000) he highlighted his experiences in the following way:

In fact, at the end of that second year, I was dismissed for academic reasons with a D-plus average. I had failed in all senses. I had failed my parents, and I had failed to live up to what I thought was my potential. Since my failing happened in 1966, during the Vietnam War, I naturally ended up in the military.  
(p. 5)