

# Japanese Returnees' Language Learning and Social Identity After Coming Back

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## Abstract

In this presentation, I aim to describe the dynamics of how young sojourners confront linguistic issues in the “foreign” environment where one must reconstruct their bicultural identity by investigating 1) What are the effects of Japanese returnees' identity shift in second language learning after coming back to Japan?, and 2) How do Japanese returnees' use of English/Japanese language change in order to recover stable social identity? In the preliminary study, the returnee student and his parent were given semi-structured interview respectively. In the findings of preliminary studies, it was made clear that the individual's motivation towards second language learning is heavily affected by the values of a social group in which the individual belongs and the evaluation received by the group matters to oneself the most.

## Keywords

returnees, readjustment, language investment, social identity

## Introduction

Every year, more than 110,000 Japanese returnees which have lived in a foreign country for over a year are coming back to Japan; furthermore, the number is steadily increasing (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2016). Substantially, this implies that many of these returnee children are forced to enter an unfamiliar society twice in a period when their identity is not fully established, and Japan's homogenous culture can provoke deep confusion especially when the child came back from a Western culture (Enloe & Lewin, 1987). As they struggle with overcoming educational gaps and meeting new customs and people, the maintenance of second language they mastered is never ensured in the monolingualistic environment. As an attempt to address this

problem, this study investigates how and in what state of conditions Japanese returnees learned languages after coming back to Japan by reconstructing the history of their L2 adaptation to the society and L2 learning experiences after coming back to L1 environment.

## 1 Previous Studies

Previous studies on Japanese returnees have divided to roughly two themes: First, the issues of returnees' reentry and readjustment to Japanese society from the view of social psychology (Kanno, 2003; Ford, 2009). Second, the process of language retention in the fields of linguistics and SLA (Tomiyama, 2008). However, even though language learning and identity is inextricably linked and mutually constituted (Norton & Toohey, 2011), the negotiation of language learning and bicultural identities of Japanese returnees are yet unexplored.

## 2 Research Question

The following two research questions are proposed to see the interrelationship between returnee children's social identity and language learning.

- 1) What are the effects of Japanese returnees' identity shift in second language learning after coming back to Japan?
- 2) How do Japanese returnees' use of English/Japanese language change in order to recover stable social identity?

## 3 Method

A preliminary study was conducted to prepare for the main study. The participants were each given a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

### 3.1 Participants

Study participants were a returnee and his parent.

Returnees are individuals who spent at least two years abroad before entering middle school. Simultaneously, the returnee's parent who took care of the child and encouraged learning language during his/her sojourn and back participated in the interview independently. Parents are one of the important factors of children's education. Educational supports from parents are fundamental in children's pedagogy and parent's beliefs and motivation often have considerable influence on the child's mental development (Tomiyama, 2000). In the preliminary study, a male university student who came back at the age of 9 after six and a half years of residency in California and his mother participated respectively.

### 3.2 Analysis

The data collected from the audio-taped interviews will be transcribed and qualitatively analyzed based on Ford's procedure. The participants' narratives will be revealed by content and cross-case analysis. By parents' narratives and by case an additional final interview or Email exchanges with participants is added to clarify certain issues of what events and experiences have done to the participants' comprehension of English learning and how they interpret themselves.

## 4 Results and Discussion

In the preliminary studies, it was found that the participant's attitude towards his second language was greatly influenced by the surrounding social environment, or the largest social group he belonged to at the time. During the years in local elementary school when there were no English subjects, the male returnee faced the urgent need to catch up with other classmates in Japanese-oriented subjects. At the same time, his unsuccessful attempt to befriend with *Jun-Japa* (Japanese people who have lived in Japan ever since they were born) children had made him more attached to Japanese language. Although English education started in middle school, the low level of English taught to beginner learners did not provoke his motivation to study English again. However, after three years, the high school he entered had international mutual exchange student systems where there were enough opportunities for him to interact with competent English users from foreign countries. In addition, the peers positive

recognition towards higher English ability stimulated the male returnee to improve his English which he hadn't for years. On the other hand, the mother of the male returnee stated his actual investment was small even at that time due to his busy studying schedule for university entrance exam and his excessive confidence in his English ability. But even so, the subjective attitude towards language learning was influenced by the level of expectancy by the school and his peers. Therefore, it can be said that values of a social group which matters to the individual the most can affect the attitude towards second language investment.

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