

## In the Midst of Emotion and Identity: Investigating Trajectories of Learners' Self-Esteem From Psychological and Sociocultural Perspectives

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Among the myriad components of identity, self-esteem, defined as our overall evaluation of ourselves, is indispensable for identity construction. The research reported in this article regards self-esteem as the mid point between emotions and identities, and features, from both psychological and sociocultural perspectives, students' retrospective changes of self-esteem by investigating multiple data sets. Participants were 43 non-English-major university students, and the data sets included two types of questionnaires (i.e., close- and open-ended) and, for most students, semi-structured interviews. In the analyses of different data in an exploratory manner, the findings are summarized as follows: a) students' gap between their current situation and their purposes of learning English contributed to their low self-esteem, b) their self-esteem and emotions emerged from ongoing situations mutually influencing each other, and c) how they make sense of "bad" events influences subsequent processes that lead to an increase or decrease in self-esteem. Grounded on two different perspectives (i.e., psychological and socio-cultural), the study sheds light on, both dynamic and complex aspects of self-esteem. In the final section of the paper, we conclude by discussing the importance of students' meaning-making strategies relevant to self-esteem experienced and accumulated from diverse contexts.

言語学習者にとって自分が何者であるかという問い、すなわちアイデンティティーの確立は重要である。アイデンティティーを構成する要素のうち自分自身を評価し、価値ある存在であると認識する自尊感情はとりわけ欠かせない要素である。本研究では自尊感情を感情とアイデンティティーの間と見なし、心理的・社会文化的観点から複数のデータを用いて学習者の自尊感情が過去からどのように変化してきたのかを調査した。英語を専攻としない大学生43名が参加し2種類のアンケート(選択式および記述式)、また殆どの参加者には半構造化インタビューも行った。異なるデータを探索的に分析した結果、a)現状と学習目標に於けるギャップが低い自尊感情に繋がること、b)自尊感情と眼前の状況から生じる感情が相互に影響し合っていること、c)「悪い」出来事に対してそれをどう意味づけるかが一連のプロセスとして自尊感情の高低に関わってくるのが明らかになった。心理的・社会文化的観点という双方の異なる立場から自尊感情に着目することで、本研究は自尊感情の動的かつ複雑な両側面に光を当てたものとなっている。また、自尊感情に関連して、学習者が積み重ねてきた多様な文脈からの経験をどう意味づけるかというストラテジーの重要性についても最終的には論じている。

### Keywords

self-esteem, psychological and sociocultural approaches, mixed methods, meaning-making, emotions and identities

### キーワード

自尊感情、心理的・社会文化的アプローチ、混合研究法、意味づけ、感情とアイデンティティー

“I don't think I can learn English because I've tried so many times.” “There's no point in trying, because I'm not smart.” “Nothing went well, so I'm at a loss about what to do.”

These heartrending voices, many participants' unburdening their heart during interviews, make make us (Ryo and Ami) pitiful because they belittled themselves, even though not being able to learn languages well never means they can do nothing. To make matters worse, such self-degradation eventually leads to self-denial, or identity crisis. In this connection, “Who am I?” is one of the most challenging questions that we may ask ourselves. One possible an-

swer to this question is “I am who I am because I am not you,” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 10). What we choose to share with others helps to define our identities. We take the position that identity consists of multidimensional components and depending on which components are expressed, we consciously or unconsciously create several identities that coexist kaleidoscopically; the constellation of shapes and colors change, mutually creating different patterns and interrelationships.

Among the myriad components of identity, self-esteem should be investigated for two reasons. First, from the learner’s side, self-esteem closely relates to identity formation because it can be understood as “the evaluative aspect of the self-concept, rated on a person’s own high-low scale” (Oxford, Cohen, & Simmons, 2018, p. 301). In other words, self-esteem can reflect how we perceive and value ourselves. Second, from the researcher’s side, Pavlenko (2013) partly welcomes the growing interests in investigating affective factors in SLA, a so-called “affective turn,” but states that many studies tend to focus on labeling variables themselves, not how they work. For example, emotion, regarded as one of the important constructs of identity, has long been ignored partly due to difficulties in defining and measuring it (c.f. Swain, 2013). In fact, however, emotions are indispensable for identity construction (see Miyahara, 2015), and through the lens of self-esteem, learners evaluate their own emotions that emerge from various life events (c.f. Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015). Considering these various mental constructs, self-esteem can be regarded as a mid point between emotions and identities. In this study, therefore, we focus on the relationship between self-esteem, identity, and emotion. By investigating self-esteem as a midpoint between identities and emotions, we hope to understand better how L2 (here, English) learners experience certain life events. From psychological and sociocultural perspectives, we also focus on how they retrospectively perceived them to describe the development of their trajectories of self-esteem.

## Literature Review

### *Emotion and identity*

When reviewing previous research into learner emotion, we were interested in seeing how other researchers have defined “emotion.” The multidimensionality of emotion makes it difficult to define, but one study that does try to address this is Gregersen, MacIntyre and Meza (2014). They define emotion as “a coordinated reaction typically covering four domains: subjective feelings, biological/physical reactions, purposive (goal-directed) behavior, and a social component that guides emotional expression and interpretation in situ” (p. 575) by referring to Reeve (2009). As their comprehensive definition shows, emotion has multifaceted characteristics (see also Prior, 2019). On the other hand, Averill (1980) emphasizes the socially mediated quality of emotions and states “an emotion is a transitory social role (a socially constituted syndrome) that includes an individual’s appraisal of the situation and that is interpreted as a passion rather than as an action” (p. 312). Based on this definition, emotion is socially mediated and includes people’s interpretations of ongoing situations from a social constructivist perspective (Oxford, 2015). In other words, emotion is socioculturally constructed (c.f. Moriya, 2019). For us, this is important because this sociocultural dimension of emotions potentially reveals the negotiated process of self-esteem as well as identity in learning environments.

Regarding the relationship between emotions and identities, many studies show emotions work as an underlying facilitator of identity formation (e.g., De Costa & Norton, 2017; Kramsch, 2009; Miyahara, 2015; Song, 2016) because identity indicates how people understand and view their relationship to the world, including socioculturally constructed emotions (Barcelos, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). However, previous studies have long ignored emotion

due to their emphasis on cognition, the subjectivity of emotion, and the difficulty in defining and measuring it (Swain, 2013). Therefore, although the importance of emotion to language learning was always understood instinctively, it is only recently that studies have gradually started to pay more attention to emotion as an influential factor in the field of language learning psychology (e.g., Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Gkonou, 2017; Imai, 2010).

## **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is relevant to “our overall affective evaluation of ourselves” (Williams et al., 2015, p. 48). More specifically, self-esteem can be defined as “the evaluative quality of the *self-concept*” (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 185) which reflects how we perceive and value ourselves, and affects L2 learners’ motivation, attitude, and performance (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Lapkin, Swain, & Psyllakis, 2010; Rubio, 2007). Brown and Marshall (2006) suggest three categories of self-esteem: global self-esteem, self-worth, and self-evaluation. First, global self-esteem refers to a “personality variable that represents the way people generally feel about themselves” (p. 4). Since it hardly changes across time and situations, this global self-esteem is also called trait self-esteem. People with high global self-esteem love themselves, but this does not necessarily mean that they have high abilities and skills. To keep this sort of self-esteem high, a feeling of being “good enough” is the key (Rosenberg, 1965; Tadokoro, 2002). Another component of self-esteem refers to feelings of self-worth. This refers to feelings and emotional reactions to particular events, and some researchers use the terms interchangeably (e.g., Convington, 1992; see Williams et al., 2015). The other indicator is self-evaluation and confidence. If someone thinks they are good at something, this means they hold themselves in high esteem. In fact, Bagheri and Faghih (2012) indicate that self-esteem cannot be measured by how much a person has achieved, but by how much they are satisfied with the outcomes of their actions. These three different perspectives positively correlate with each other (Brown & Marshall, 2006), meaning that people who have high self-esteem in one area tend to have higher self-esteem in the other areas.

In addition to the types of self-esteem mentioned above, like identity construction (see Miyahara, 2015), self-esteem is also socioculturally co-constructed in relation to other people’s reactions, and their complex interaction with self-perception and self-evaluation (Gliński, 2013; Rubio-Alcalá, 2017). In other words, success and failure in life can enhance or hinder L2 learning. Rubio (2014) discusses the dynamics of the development of self-esteem, together with self-concept. These studies on self-esteem reveal that although it can be regarded as psychologically complex and dynamic, and influenced by sociocultural factors, most of the studies have been conducted to investigate the partial aspects of self-esteem on L2 learning. However, considering the relationship between emotions, self-esteem, and identities, it would necessitate a holistic approach to expand our understanding of self-esteem. This is because it emerges from entangled interactions between the world and perceived experiences in it (i.e., sociocultural emotions and self-esteem), with outcomes (here, identities) accounting for learners’ behavior (c.f. MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016). Therefore, this exploratory study addresses this issue by investigating how L2 learners experienced specific life events and perceived them retrospectively, in addition to how they described their trajectories of self-esteem.

## **Methodology**

The current study adopted mixed methods multiple case studies (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Multiple data sources were used: a questionnaire asking for participants’ backgrounds as well as the characteristics of their self-esteem, semi-structured interviews with

audio-recordings, and memos made during the analysis for triangulation. The aim was to qualitatively and quantitatively investigate students' self-esteem and its development. To enhance trustworthiness, investigator triangulation was conducted (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014).

### ***Research Context and Participants***

The context in this study was two undergraduate courses at a private university in Tokyo, where the first author observed all 15 classes. The aim of both courses was to develop the four basic skills for low-proficiency students<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 summarizes basic information on the courses.

**Table 1. Basic Information on Two Courses**

<b>Courses</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>N of Students (Male/Female)</b>	<b>Ss' Year</b>	<b>Ss' Major</b>
Course A	Compulsory	30 (14/16)	Sophomore	Management
Course B*	Compulsory	13 (11/2)	Various	Various

Note: In Course B, the students' years varied from sophomore to senior, and their majors included the following: management, humanities, sociology, and foreign studies (Japanese linguistics).

As Table 1 summarizes, both courses were regarded as compulsory courses at the university; however, none of the students were English majors, which means the students were not required to study English after finishing these compulsory courses. Although they did not necessarily wish to study English, many students actively engaged in the in-class activities because the instructor introduced various types of pair or group activities to facilitate social interaction between students. Therefore, from an observer's perspective, it did not appear that their motivation to participate in English courses was low. Prior to conducting the non-participant observations, the author obtained permission to collect data from the instructor of both courses. At first, the author was a complete stranger to the students but obtained their informed consent by explaining the research aims and objectives.

### ***Data Collection***

During this study, the data collection procedure was divided into two phases. The first one consisted of the questionnaire, which asked the students about their self-esteem using hypothetical situations, emotion management during language learning (Gkonou & Oxford, 2016), and their background. The second one was semi-structured interviews which focused on some questions relevant to their answers to the questionnaire.

During the first class, the first author distributed the questionnaire and then explained it, and the students answered the items in Japanese in around 20 minutes. Appendix A (close-ended) and Appendix B (open-ended) present the questionnaire items.

From the seventh to the fourteenth class, the first author conducted and audio-recorded 20 semi-structured interviews with 34 students. Due to the limited time, the first author could not interview the 43 students in two courses, so the 34 students among them were the ones who the first author managed to interview with no deliberate purposes. The total length of

<sup>1</sup> In a year of our study, this university divided students into such courses the university offered, according to their proficiency levels. Judging from their language background and instructor's evaluation, the students in the study would be categorized into beginner or elementary levels (i.e., CEFR A1 or A2).

the recordings was about 262.5 minutes (i.e., each interview lasted 13 minutes on average, and some interviews were in pairs). Beforehand, an interview guide was created to determine the following: what the students tried to improve, the reason(s) for evaluating self-esteem, and their original methods for learning English. After the interviews, the students were asked to record their impressions of the interviews on comment sheets. 20 students submitted these voluntary comment sheets.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze students' self-esteem from different angles, multiple analyses were required. We used SPSS to analyze our quantitative data (Appendix A and part of Appendix B), and determine the overall tendencies within the classrooms descriptively. Meanwhile, to analyze qualitative data (the other parts of Appendix B and interview data), we coded the responses without a pre-determined framework due to the exploratory nature of the study. The coding phases were divided into two: the first one comprised a brief open coding of the data, and the second one comprised a discussion of any discrepancies between coders' interpretations. If such discrepancies remained unsolved, we returned to the raw data again. This iterative process ensured the triangulation of data (i.e., investigator triangulation).

Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA) was identified as a suitable approach to examine the complex and dynamic aspects of self-esteem, by considering changes in emotions and their causes. TEA is a recent approach established by some researchers in cultural psychology and consists of three subcomponents (for further details, see Sato, Mori, & Valsiner, 2016). The basic tenets of TEA are also the same as Vygotsky's (1978) triangular model, which demonstrates how the relationship between subjects and objects is mediated by artifacts such as language. However, the Vygotskian triangle fails to capture dynamic characteristics because it only assesses interrelatedness, rather than changes (see Sato, Yasuda, Kanzaki, & Valsiner, 2014). Therefore, TEA develops Vygotsky's triangle to reflect the changes in participants over time. In this study, from the three subcomponents of TEA, the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM) was adopted because it focuses on expressing "...idiographic life trajectories using many conceptual tools" (Sato et al., 2014, p. 8). Figure 1 indicates one example of TEM, and by drawing an irreversible time arrow, the model considers the axis of time. Therefore, by adopting the concept of irreversible time within TEM, which rests fundamentally upon a Vygotskian philosophy, this analysis considers the dynamic aspects of emotions as well as the contextually complex aspects of emotions.

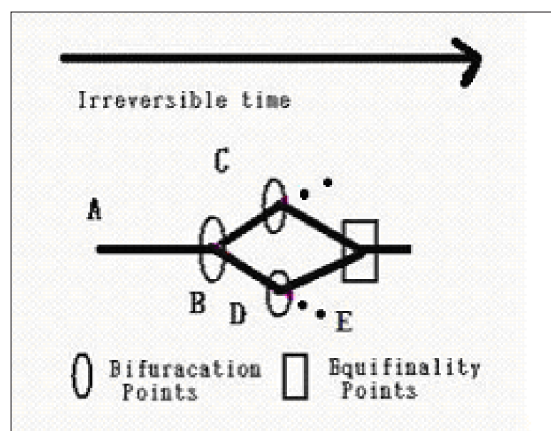


Figure 1. Basic notions of TEM (Sato, Yasuda, Kanzaki, & Valsiner, 2014, p. 97).

The current study addresses the following three research questions.

*RQ1: What characterizes students' self-esteem?*

First and foremost, the study carefully describes the characteristics of students' self-esteem and their attitudes to learning English. The questionnaire (Appendix A) and statistical analysis captured the overall tendencies in each course. However, quantitative data was not sufficient to try to understand each student fully, because numerical data itself does not include details of weighting value. In other words, even when responding with the same number, each student has a different image of it; therefore, it can be assumed that the number 4 in a Likert scale for student A could be equivalent to the number 6 for student B. Therefore, the second research question was formulated to compensate for the shortcomings of statistical analysis.

*RQ2: What were the psychological and/or sociocultural causes of such characteristics?*

The second research question was designed to clarify students' backgrounds and then help us understand how they weigh the value for each point on the scale. After summarizing the descriptive results of the questionnaire, we explored both psychological and sociocultural causes, both of which were likely to exert a powerful influence on students' self-esteem. In this study, for practicality, we used a simplified version of the MYE (managing your emotions for language learning; Gkonou & Oxford, 2016) questionnaire (Appendix B); however, the information from our other data sources allowed us to contextualize three hypothetical situations in the simplified MYE questionnaire (e.g., What kind of emotions would you experience in the following situation: *In your English class, you are now working with your classmate(s).*). To triangulate learners' open-ended responses, another type of data was needed to understand what experience have influenced on their learning. Finally, the third research question was formulated to determine their coping strategies.

*RQ3: What kind of coping strategies do students use when facing such circumstances?*

The third research question aims to further deepen our understanding of the students themselves. Based on both types of questionnaire results (Appendix A and B), we made an interview guide and conducted semi-structured interviews to connect their learning backgrounds with their reactions toward hypothetical situations. In addition to that, methodologically, the interviews provided further information on students' experiences (e.g., how they have managed or overcome situations causing their high or low self-esteem). More specifically, we wished to determine students' coping strategies for managing self-esteem issues as well as the reasons (RQ3) by holistically considering their characteristics of self-esteem (RQ1) and their experiences (RQ2).

## Findings and Discussion

This section firstly presents our data and then discusses findings relevant to each research question.

*RQ1: What characterizes students' self-esteem?***Descriptive statistics on Appendix A**

Prior to integrating qualitative data, we initially examined the students' attitudes to learning English and their self-esteem descriptively using the questionnaire data (Appendix A), and then investigated some of our foci more in detail to explore what could not be ascertained from numerical data alone.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the descriptive statistics on the questionnaire scales. One non-negligible finding from this result is that, overall, the mean score of students' purposes for learning English is higher than the other scales, which means that they have specific reasons for learning English (to chat with friends, to help others in trouble, to go sightseeing, to get jobs, and to read novels, for example). On the other hand, the mean score of self-evaluation was the lowest, followed by fulfillment, which indicates that although they are eager to learn English, they pessimistically evaluate themselves as "not enough," paradoxically contributing to hesitation in, and hindrances to learning the language.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on the Questionnaire Scales**

Scales (Items)	N	M	SD
Self-Regulation (Item 1-5) ( $\alpha=.82$ )	40	3.4	1.18
Purposes (Item 6-11) ( $\alpha = .85$ )	41	4.29	1.41
Self-Evaluation (Item 12-18) ( $\alpha = .87$ )	40	2.68	1.25
Motivation* (Item 19-22, 24) ( $\alpha = .747$ )	41	3.6	1.1
Fulfillment (Item 25-32) ( $\alpha = .82$ )	41	3.01	1.18
Self-Acceptance (Item 33-37) ( $\alpha = .769$ )	40	3.61	1.26

Note: For the motivation scale, originally, Cronbach's alpha was lower than .70 ( $\alpha = .597$ ), regarded as a preferential point when implementing questionnaire surveys (Takeuchi & Mizumoto, 2014). However, the descriptive statistics showed that this alpha level would be higher (i.e., more than .70) if Item 23 was deleted; therefore, we decided to delete it. One of the reasons for this lower alpha level were the characteristics of reversed scored items. In other words, some of the students may have overlooked negation ( *-nai* ending in Japanese). Regardless of the courses, all the six scales ranged from 1 to 6.

As the descriptive statistics show, the questionnaire data enabled us to deepen our understanding of students' self-esteem. They have clear learning visions and were eager to accept themselves (self-acceptance); however, they seemed to experience a gap between their current state and what they wanted to be in the near future. This gap led them to evaluate themselves negatively (self-evaluation). Our original definition of self-esteem was "the evaluative quality of the *self-concept*" (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 185). Therefore, we understood that students' self-esteem was not so high partly due to the gap between their current situation and their high goals for learning English.

*RQ2: What are the psychological and/or sociocultural causes of such characteristics?*

**Simplified Managing Your Emotions for language learning questionnaire (Appendix B)**

To obtain findings by interpreting the open-ended responses to the simplified MYE questionnaire (Appendix B), first, we produced descriptive statistics. Although the first question in each scenario (Question 1, 4, 7) simply addresses whether the students feel positive or negative toward each hypothetical situation, the overall characteristics are summarized in Table 3. As Table 3 shows, for more than half of the students, scenarios 1 (i.e., In your English class, you are now working with your classmate(s).) and 3 (i.e., Outside of your English class, you are now studying English by yourself at your house or university library.) were likely to cause positive emotions in total, but only scenario 2 (i.e., In your English class, you are now taking one-to-one tutorials with the teacher.) was likely to cause negative emotions. One possible explanation for this result may be the relevant power relations involved (Norton, 1995). In other words, in Japan, teachers are still regarded as authority figures; therefore, the majority

of the students feel negative emotions such as fear, nervousness, and anxiety in relation to teachers (c.f. Kudo, Harada, Eguchi, Moriya, & Suzuki, 2017).

**Table 3. Overall Characteristics of Simplified MYE on each Hypothetical Situation**

Scenario	Positive or Negative	%
Scenario 1 (S-S* interactions, in-class)	23:18	56:44
Scenario 2 (S-T* interactions, in-class)	15:26	37:63
Scenario 3 (Self-study, out-of-class)	23:18	56:44

Note: S-S indicates social interactions between peers while S-T indicates social interactions between students and teachers.

In contrast to Table 3 above, Table 4 presents detailed information on the emotions expressed by the students, elicited by open-ended questions where participants were asked to name the emotions they would feel in the hypothetical situations (Question 2, 5, 8). This data was coded by the authors. Overall, joy was the most common positive feeling in both courses. On the other hand, anxiety was the most frequently expressed negative emotion; however, each scenario seemed to elicit different emotions in students. Scenario 1 was more likely to elicit anxiety, scenario 2 tended to make them nervous, and scenario 3 caused boredom. Another interesting finding in Table 4 was that the codes “anxiety but excitement” or “anxiety but joy/excitement” appeared in scenarios 1 and 2. These codes did not occur frequently; however, some students expressed their emotions as “thrilling” (*zokuzoku-suru*) yet in a positive way.

**Table 4. The Details of Emotions Expressed toward Each Scenario**

Positive	Negative
<b>Scenario 1 (S-S* interactions, in-class)</b>	
<u>TOTAL (23)</u> : joy (12), anxiety but joy/excitement (4), comfort (4), ambition (1), excitement (1), N/A* (1)	<u>TOTAL (18)</u> : anxiety (8), nervousness (2), tiredness (2), awkwardness (1), confusion (1), disappointment (1), irritation (1), regret (1), N/A (1)
<b>Scenario 2 (S-T* interactions, in-class)</b>	
<u>TOTAL (15)</u> : joy (8), anxiety but joy/excitement (2), comfort (2), ambition (1), N/A (2)	<u>TOTAL (26)</u> : nervousness (9), anxiety (8), anxiety and nervousness (3), confusion (1), disgust (1), tiredness (1), N/A (3)
<b>Scenario 3 (Self-study, out-of-class)</b>	
<u>TOTAL (23)</u> : joy (9), comfort (6), curiosity (3), excitement (1), joy and excitement (1), N/A (3)	<u>TOTAL (18)</u> : boredom (5), tiredness (4), anxiety (3), confusion (1), disgust (1), dullness (1), sadness (1), N/A (2)

Note: S-S indicates social interactions between peers while S-T indicates social interactions between students and teachers. N/A indicates that students responded either positive or negative but did not offer specific explanations for this. The numbers in the parentheses indicate the code frequency.

Following self-evaluation, fulfillment was the second lowest mean among the other items (Table 2). Through an analysis of the scenario-based questionnaire (Appendix B), the caus-



es of low-self-esteem were more deeply understood as supplementary information to the numerical data presented above. According to each hypothetical scenario, anxiety, nervousness, and boredom were frequent emotions experienced by students (Table 4). Anxiety was aroused when their performance might impact upon their friendships in classrooms. For example, some students mentioned comparing their work with other classmates. When they heard classmates speak in English, they felt inferior, or when they felt inferior, they were afraid that their English might affect the atmosphere negatively. However, other students had mixed emotions of anxiety and joy/excitement. This supported similar findings by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) that expressed “two faces of Janus,” which explains how the experience of anxiety can cause different actions. We could not have observed the role of anxiety as a facilitative factor if we did not have multiple data sources. Students may inevitably experience nervousness due to their belief in the power and authority of an instructor. Even during the similar one-to-one interactional scenarios (scenario 1 and 2), there were few responses about anxiety to scenario 1. Therefore, students’ self-esteem fluctuates depending on different sociocultural contexts. Moreover, boredom seemingly emerged from both internal feelings and external causes. In other words, students’ low self-esteem would result in them feeling too bored to study on a psychological level, and vice versa. In addition, it is assumed that self-directed study is experienced as lonely, due to less social interaction with friends or classmates surrounding them. Therefore, we can say that students’ emotions emerge socioculturally, and their emotions and self-esteem mutually influence and are influenced by ongoing situations.

### *RQ3: What kind of coping strategies do students use when facing such causes?*

#### **Interview data**

Interview data revealed the past experiences of the students and helped explain some of the results of the questionnaires. Based on the result of self-evaluation scale (i.e., Item 12–18 from Appendix A) presumably affecting students’ self-esteem, we divided the students into two groups (i.e., high or low self-evaluation) and then coded the reasons they gave. The dividing line between the high (H) and low (L) groups was whether the mean score of each student’s self-evaluation was over or under the mean of 3.5 (i.e.,  $L < 3.5 \leq H$ ) of the 6-point Likert scale. According to this criterion, Table 5 summarizes some findings from the interviews. The upper part of Table 5 below refers to the questionnaire while the lower part is about the interviews. As the table shows, more than half of the students in H group had several experiences of going abroad and/or long stay there while most of the students in L group have never been overseas. Another interesting finding is that, whether they experienced time abroad or not, 23 students among 34 mentioned bitter memories in the past. For example, one male student in H group told the first author that he could not stand the reaction of other classmates who were surprised to hear him speaking English just after he came back from a homestay. Since this experience, he has used Japanese-accented English during English classes intentionally and tries to avoid communicating with other classmates in English, but outside the classroom, he has studied hard to improve his English with the purpose of communicating with other people from different countries. Meanwhile, one female student in L group told that when she heard her classmates speak in English, she compared her English proficiency with other classmates. Even though no one mocked or laughed at her English, she started to feel a sense of inferiority gradually.

Based on the information in Table 5, we created Figure 2, utilizing the concept of TEM. This figure simply summarizes some pathways including bifurcation points of high or low self-esteem. One of the most important factors in the figure is ‘Bad Events’. In fact, most of the students mentioned ‘bad’ experiences relevant to English (e.g., difficulty in communicating, some

failure, a sense of inferiority), but what is remarkable is how they interpreted and then reacted to these events afterwards. In other words, if they thought such ‘bad’ events as positive, these facilitated students’ English study or moving forward (action-oriented), but others tended to avoid learning or avert their thoughts if they got overwhelmed with bad experiences. Another important junction affecting self-esteem is whether they can accumulate good events or successful experiences as a result of studying English. If not, some students started to feel a sense of inferiority by comparing with classmates or those who have a good command of English because their attention to English tended to direct toward others, not themselves.

**Table 5. Overall Characteristics of Each Group from the Questionnaire and Interviews**

<b>Appendix A</b>	
<b>High Self-Evaluation (7/41)*</b>	<b>Low Self-Evaluation (34/41)*</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abundant overseas experience (5)</li> <li>• All mean scores of the other scales also surpass 3.5 or higher (3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No or few overseas experience (25;8)</li> <li>• The mean score of self-evaluation is 2 or lower (11)</li> </ul>
<b>N of students interviewed (7/34)</b>	<b>N of students interviewed (26/34)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using English beyond classroom (6)</li> <li>• Some ‘bad’ experiences when abroad or after coming back (4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting low score on English tests (6)</li> <li>• Few opportunities to use English within and beyond classroom (6)</li> <li>• Feeling inferior to others (5)</li> <li>• Difficulty in listening (3)</li> <li>• Hating an English teacher (1)</li> <li>• N/A (5)</li> </ul>

Note: Since one student forgot to answer one item, SPSS regarded it as a missing value, so this student was excluded from Table 5. The numbers in the parentheses indicate the code frequency. N/A indicates that students responded as low self-esteem, but did not have any experience for this.

As observed in the responses to the simplified MYE questionnaire and interviews (Table 5 and Figure 2), those students who experienced positive emotions were more likely to be action-oriented while those who felt negative were divided into two patterns: action-oriented or averting their thoughts. The former pattern was similar to the “two faces of Janus” (De-waele & MacIntyre, 2014), mentioned above; therefore, even if students felt negative emotions, they tried to do their best to manage or adjust to the sociocultural situation. Meanwhile, the latter focused more on psychological management or adjustment strategies because such students try to refresh their minds by shifting to a different situation to mitigate their emotional disturbances (i.e., emotion regulation; see Gross, 2015). Likewise, giving up on their tasks was also intended to manage negative emotions. However, this was not planned to facilitate the completion of students’ tasks; rather they averted them. One reason for the two patterns (i.e., either action-oriented or averting) derived from how the students had created meaning from “negative” events in the past. According to the interviews, even when students experienced similar “bad” events (e.g., getting low score on English tests, feeling inferior to other classmates, experiencing few opportunities to speak English), we found some students interpreted such events as valuable lessons while others regarded these memories as unpleasant. Therefore, we could say that different meaning-making patterns result in developing different strategies to manage emotions and self-esteem, leading to the reconstruction and maintenance of their identity as a learner.

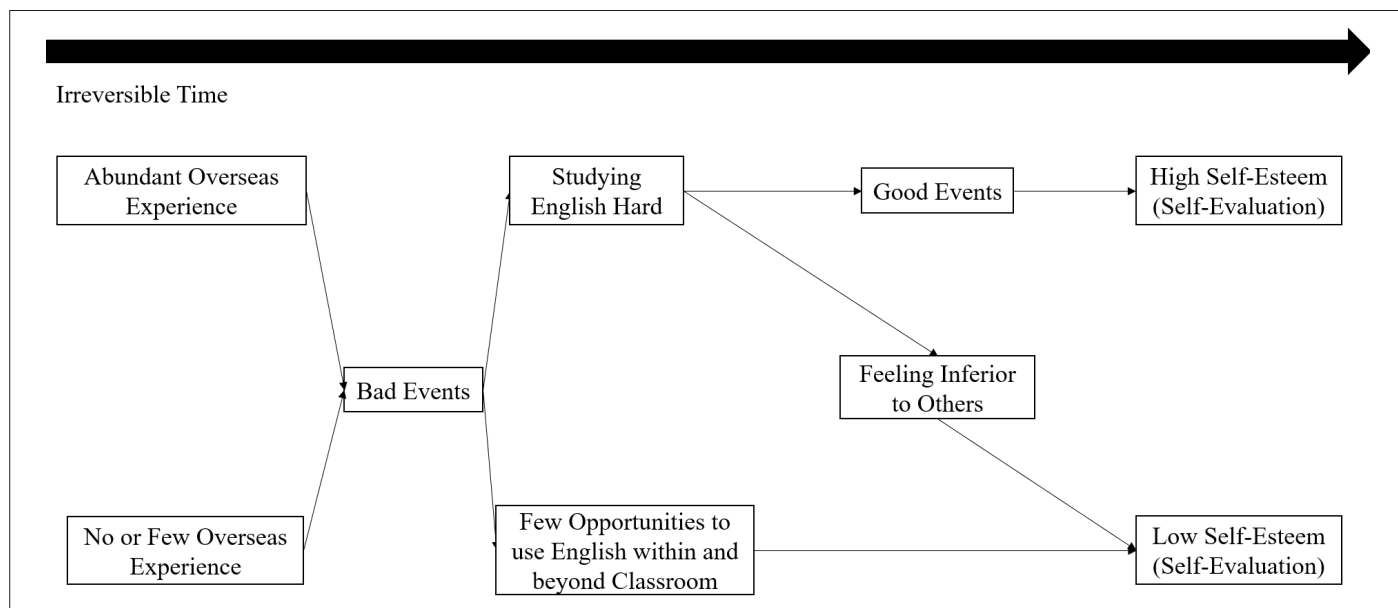


Figure 2. Trajectories of self-esteem. The largest arrow indicates the axis of time from right to left. The other arrows indicate each route connecting the following experiences.

Grounded on our data and findings, finally, we created Figure 3 to summarize how self-esteem functions in L2 learning as well as the interrelationships between emotions, self-esteem, and identities. As Figure 3 describes, learners appraise a particular situation (with others) or are evaluated by someone, where emotions are socioculturally co-constructed (Appendix B). Such emotions, regardless of valences, influence on their identities, but how these emotions are processed or internalized greatly depends on whether their self-esteem high or low (Appendix A and interviews). That is, self-esteem in this case functions as the lens of processing emotions. Therefore, low self-esteem might affect the overall process of identity formation negatively, so that learners find it difficult to make meanings of their past experiences, struggling with L2 learning (as heartrendingly expressed in the beginning).

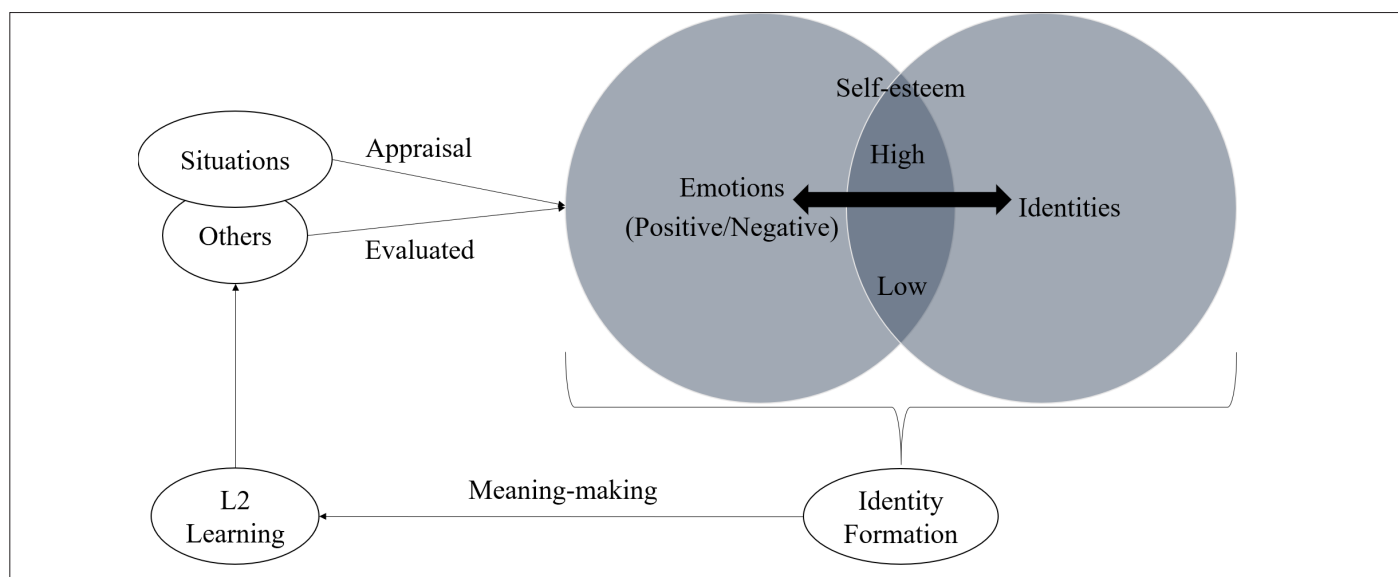


Figure 3. A cyclical model of emotions, self-esteem, and identities. Through the lens of self-esteem, learners evaluate their own emotions co-constructed from situations (including others), affecting their identities.

## Conclusion

The current study has explored Japanese university students' emotions with a focus on self-esteem and investigated the background of their high or low self-esteem evaluations utilizing various forms of data. To capture the overall tendency within the targeted classrooms, we utilized a Likert-scale questionnaire combined with open-ended questions to observe students' diverse reactions. We analyzed their short narratives about learning English from interviews to connect the different types of data. The findings were that students' self-esteem was not so high because their extremely ambitious learning goals tended to be beyond their limits (RQ1), that low self-esteem resulted from the interaction between emotions and situations (RQ2), and that to cope with such low self-esteem the students adopted one of two strategies (i.e., either completing or averting tasks) depending on their interpretations of past events (RQ3). Although we deepened our understanding about the target students within the specific classrooms observed, the limitations of our study include all single-shot data sets, each of which only focused on past-to-present shifts and was conducted only once. However, further studies may indicate our questionnaire should be administered several times to observe ongoing changes (preferably including several interviews of the same students) and that researchers, if they wish to make a comparison, could select similar classes or courses to compare their characteristics statistically and/or qualitatively. Finally, our study indicates that teachers and classrooms may simply be one of the environments students have encountered. However for students, this will be one of the important constituents of their identity formation as a learner, whether positive or negative. Therefore, even within classroom contexts, researchers and practitioners need to pay joint attention to what happens beyond classrooms because students have accumulated their meaning-making strategies from diverse contexts. As a result of this intricately entangled scenario, the dynamic adjustment of one aspect of the situation, affects all the others, like a kaleidoscope.

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This paper was open peer-reviewed by Katherine Thornton, one of the members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (Contributors have the option of open or blind review.).

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## Appendix A

### *Likert-Scale Questionnaire*

#### **Part 1**

Please choose one of the six responses at the lower right, circling the appropriate number in relation to the extent that each of the items below corresponds to your situation in terms of the way that you take English classes and study English at university.

1. In order to understand classes I independently study before and after class.
2. There is someone I can ask when there is something I do not understand in class.
3. I will try to work things out as much as possible so that I understand things in class.
4. I am aware of what I am not good at in class.
5. I know the methods for study that are necessary for class.

#### **Part 2**

Please choose one of the same six responses, circling the appropriate number in relation to the extent that each of the items below corresponds to your situation in terms of your goals in learning English and your own English proficiency.

6. I want to acquire the ability to read and understand academic and professional English sentences.
7. I want to acquire the ability to listen to and understand lectures and presentations on specialized content that are given in English.
8. I want to acquire the ability to write logically structured sentences in accurate English.
9. I want to acquire the ability to speak with others in English and to clearly express my own opinion.
10. I have a goal such as taking an external English test (TOEIC, etc.).
11. I want to acquire English skills (4 skills) so that I can properly follow classes at overseas universities.
12. English was one of my best subjects at high school (my grades were good).
13. Now that I am at university, I think my English ability is comparable to that of other students.
14. I think that my English reading skills are good.
15. I think that English listening skills are good.
16. I think that I am good at writing sentences in English.
17. I think that I will be able to give a presentation in English if I prepare.
18. I am confident in my English pronunciation.



### **Part 3**

Please choose one of the six responses at the lower right, circling the appropriate number in relation to the extent that each of the items below corresponds to your situation in terms of how you feel about studying English.

19. I have a strong desire to try to make my dreams come true in relation to learning English.
20. I am passionate about learning English.
21. I feel that learning English is worth my while and I am motivated to do so.
22. I approach learning English with a positive attitude.
23. I do not know what I really want to do in relation to learning English.
24. I have no goals in my English learning.
25. I feel mentally comfortable when I am learning English.
26. I have an open mind towards learning English, and I find it exhilarating.
27. I find learning English to be a lot of fun.
28. There are no days when I truly feel that learning English is fun.
29. I do not feel satisfied with learning English.
30. I feel that I am able to do the things I like in learning English.
31. I feel a sense of fulfillment in learning English.
32. I feel that I am at ease learning English.
33. I am able to honestly accept my personality when I am learning English.
34. I think it's okay to have my own style of learning English.
35. I am able to admit my good and bad points in relation to English learning as they are.
36. When I am learning English, I value my individuality.
37. When learning English, I try my hardest to develop the good aspects of myself.

Note: All the items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 indicates "strongly disagree" while 6 indicates "strongly agree"). In Part 1, the items were based on Zimmerman and Schunk (2011) and measured self-regulation. In Part 2, the items were partly based on our project funded by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Education, Waseda University. From Item 6 to 11, these items were created to ask about students' goals when learning English. As for Item 12 to 18, they were created to ask students about their self-evaluation of their English proficiency. In Part 3, the items were from Yasuda (2015) and the underlined items (e.g., Item 23, 24, 28, and 29) were reversed scored ones. According to his paper, the 19 items cover three constructs. In other words, from Item 19 to Item 24, they measured motivation for learning English. Item 25 to 32 measured fulfillment or positive emotions when learning English. The remaining five items measured self-acceptance when learning English.

## Appendix B

### Open-Ended Questionnaire

Read the following scenarios and answer the questions.	
<b>Scenario 1: In your English class, you are now working with your classmate(s).</b>	
Q1: What kind of emotions would you experience in this situation?	
Q1-a: Positive	Q1-b: Negative
Q2: Please name the emotions (one or more) you would feel in this situation.	
Q3: What would you do in order to manage these emotions in this situation?	
Q3-a: What would you do to <i>increase any positive emotions</i> in this situation?	Q3-b: What would you do to <i>handle any negative emotions</i> in this situation?
<b>Scenario 2: In your English class, you are now taking one-to-one tutorials with the teacher.</b>	
Q4: What kind of emotions would you experience in this situation?	
Q4-a: Positive	Q4-b: Negative
Q5: Please name the emotions (one or more) you would feel in this situation.	
Q6: What would you do in order to manage these emotions in this situation?	
Q6-a: What would you do to <i>increase any positive emotions</i> in this situation?	Q6-b: What would you do to <i>handle any negative emotions</i> in this situation?
<b>Scenario 3: Outside of your English class, you are now studying English by yourself at your house or university library.</b>	
Q7: What kind of emotions would you experience in this situation?	
Q7-a: Positive	Q7-b: Negative
Q8: Please name the emotions (one or more) you would feel in this situation.	
Q9: What would you do in order to manage these emotions in this situation?	
Q9-a: What would you do to <i>increase any positive emotions</i> in this situation?	Q9-b: What would you do to <i>handle any negative emotions</i> in this situation?

Note: Part 4 and 5 were omitted due to their irrelevance to this study. In Part 6, these questions were based on Gkonou and Oxford (2016). The first author simplified their original version of MYE (managing emotions for language learning) due to its original length and practicality of the study (for further details of MYE, see Gkonou & Oxford, 2016; Oxford, 2017). Similar to MYE, each set of questions were based on three hypothetical situations, and the students answered the questions about each situation.