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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Learner Development Beyond the Classroom” for Issue 6 of the *Learner Development Journal* (LDJ6), edited by Isra Wongsarnpigoon, Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, Phillip A. Bennett, and André Parsons. Published once a year, each issue of the *Learner Development Journal* follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Beyond the Classroom, Beyond the Track: The Role of English in the Transformation of Career Perspectives in Three Females in Rural Japan

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This study explores the process of perspective shifting among female English language learners who participated in an English project-based learning programme in rural Japan. In Japan, academic achievement and career aspirations are determined by socioeconomic status, gender, and region. However, in English language education in Japan, there has not been sufficient research addressing the learning experiences of individuals considering such social contexts beyond the classroom. Therefore, this study investigates the reality and potential of English language learning among women living in rural areas. Three female graduates of a senior high school in Kagoshima Prefecture were purposively selected, and a 90-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with each. Trajectory equifinality modelling (Sato et al., 2009) was used for data analysis. The findings revealed how the three women overcame different constraints, including lack of access to diverse role models and peers, few opportunities to make meaningful connections between English language learning and real life, and parental attitudes towards investment in language education and family financial situation. Given the current state of educational inequality, this study represents a proposal to further the debate on how English language learning can make a meaningful difference to an individual's overall life and subsequent career choices.

本研究は、日本の地方において、英語でのプロジェクト型学習プログラムに参加した女性英語学習者の意識変容過程を探索する。日本では、学力や進路希望は社会経済的地位、性別、地域によって規定される(松岡、2019)。しかし、英語教育においては、教室を超えたそのような社会的文脈を考慮した個人の学習経験について十分に研究されていない。そこで本研究では、地方出身女性の英語学習の実態と可能性を探った。鹿児島県内の高校を卒業した女性3名を合目的なサンプリングで選定し、それぞれに90分の半構造化面接を実施した。データ分析には、複線径路・等至性モデル(Sato et al., 2009)を使用した。結果として、3名の女性が、多様なロールモデルや仲間との接点の少なさ、英語学習と実生活を有意義に結びつける機会の少なさ、言語教育への投資に対する親の考え方や家庭の経済状況に関する課題など、様々な制約を克服した過程が明らかになった。教育格差の現状を踏まえ、本研究は、英語学習が個人の人生全体やその後のキャリア選択に意味のある変化をもたらすことをめざし、議論を深めることを提案するものである。

Keywords

learning beyond the classroom, project-based learning, gender, rural context, trajectory equifinality modeling
教室を超えた学習、プロジェクト型学習、ジェンダー、地方、複線径路・等至性モデル

Japan is a society with educational inequality by international standards: Not only an individual's academic ability, but also educational expectations (how far they want to go in education, such as going to university) and career expectations (what kind of job they want) are defined by the socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and region of the family in which they grew up (Matsuoka, 2019a). In particular, environmental factors such as the availability of learning opportunities beyond the classroom, as well as cultural and historical characteristics of the region and school, are thought to contribute to inequalities in access to and the quality of English language education (e.g., Matsuoka, 2010; Mori, 2018, Yamamura, 2021). Regardless of their own efforts, young people's career paths are oriented, or *tracked* (Oakes, 2005), within this system of reproducing inequalities (Kariya, 2012).

However, little is known about the mechanisms that enable students from such disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue their desired careers, including admission to top-tier universities. To build a society in which all people, regardless of background, can have hope

for the future and choose a career path from a diverse range of options, it is imperative to qualitatively examine the *why* and *how* of cases that have succeeded in overcoming the constraints of educational inequalities in a specific context. Therefore, in the present study, I aimed to gain insights into how to reduce regional gaps in educational and career opportunities for Japanese high school students by investigating the potential for language learning experiences to positively influence their career choices in a particular regional context.

Literature Review

Educational Inequalities: SES, Gender, and Region

According to Matsuoka (2019a), in Japan, SES, gender, and region are often cited as the three main factors for educational inequalities. In the sociology of education, the degree of educational inequalities is often discussed based on the 4-year university enrolment rate, which also accounts for the fact that those with higher education have higher occupational prestige and income due to such inequalities (Matsuoka, 2019a). Table 1 compares Kagoshima and Tokyo in 2018, the year when the participants in this study entered college. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2018), Kagoshima Prefecture has the lowest 4-year college enrolment rate at 38.85%, less than half that of Tokyo. It is also noteworthy that there is a large gender gap.

Table 1. 4-Year College Enrolment Rate by Prefecture

	Female	Male	Gender Average
Tokyo	73.17	72.18	72.67
Kagoshima	34.11	43.44	38.85
National Average	50.14	56.31	53.30

Note. Adapted from *e-Stat. Tokei de miru nihon* [Japan in statistics], Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018 (<https://www.e-stat.go.jp/>).

Inequalities in Academic Achievement and Educational and Career Expectation

In addressing the factors related to educational inequalities, previous studies have dealt with not only students' academic ability but also educational expectations, aspirations, and attitudes of students, parents, and teachers. For example, Katase (2009) investigated regional gaps in the determinants of high school students' academic motivation in four regions of Iwate Prefecture. The study showed that regional gaps in education exist not only by prefecture but also between prefectural capitals and other regions within the same prefecture. Matsuoka (2019b) revealed that regional gaps in people's attitudes toward education increased from the 1990s to the 2010s. Furthermore, according to Matsuoka, the gaps in cultural capital related to SES partially explain differences in attitude among individuals and regions. While it is vital to note that SES may be a cause of regional gaps, the issue of regional gaps is more than an economic one, and hereafter I would rather focus on identifying challenges and possibilities beyond the economic dimension in rural Japan such as gender roles.

Educational Inequalities and the English Language

In comparison to other subjects, the English language learning environment is particularly vulnerable to social inequalities. According to Terasawa (2015), the social and family

environments of Japanese people influence their English proficiency, and the English proficiency gap is also related to the gap in college opportunities (see also Terasawa, 2017). In terms of gender, Kitamura (2020) interviewed Japanese adult women who work in English to address the gap between the assumption that English can expand and “save” women’s career options and the opposite realities in the Japanese context. Issues of social inequality surrounding English language education have received more attention outside Japan, including China (Hu, 2003), Indonesia (Lamb, 2012, 2013), and Hong Kong (Yung, 2020). Kubota (2011) cited previous studies that show how English education has disadvantaged the vulnerable around the world and argues that we should critically examine the state of English education today, when neoliberal ideas are more prevalent than ever. In today’s volatile society, where educational inequalities threaten to widen even further, it is time for both researchers and practitioners of English education to reconsider whether the diversification of learning methods inside and outside the classroom is actually stratifying learning opportunities for young people.

It is also worth noting that many studies, particularly in Japan, appear to have separated the English learner aspect from the individual’s life and focused solely on how to improve learners’ language proficiency skills in the classroom (Kubota, 2015). This study, on the other hand, sees language learning as a social activity that influences and is influenced by factors outside of the classroom.

The Study

I first contacted Mr. Matsui (pseudonym), who was organizing “glocal” (global and local) education programmes for senior high schools across the country, in February 2020. He was especially enthusiastic about educating young people in Kagoshima Prefecture, where he was born. At first, I only had an obscure idea of what Mr. Matsui was doing. However, as I learned more about him and previous participants in his educational programs, I found out that many of the participants in the English-medium project-based learning programme (hereafter “English PBL”) at Kokusai High School (pseudonym; hereafter KHS) in Kagoshima, particularly girls, had experienced a significant change in their career perspectives. In this study, I will focus on the trajectories of the participants who stated that they “achieved a more positive career path” as a result of participating in this English PBL. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What trajectories did the three participants, who achieved positive career outcomes through the English PBL, take to reach their final career decisions?
2. Did any regional (and other) constraints affect their career decision-making process, and if so, what were they?
3. How did the English PBL help them to overcome such constraints?

Methodology

Research Context and Participants

Located in the southern part of the island of Kyushu, Kagoshima is one of the most remote prefectures from major cities in Japan. The participants of this research are from Kagoshima City, the prefecture’s capital city. While Kagoshima City may be considered a relatively privileged environment compared to other areas within the prefecture, this study highlights the challenges that the participants overcame as high school students from Kagoshima Prefecture. In this sense, I position this study as a case study in one

of the prefectures most affected by regional and gender inequalities in educational opportunities.

The three research participants had previously participated in the English PBL at KHS in Kagoshima City. These three students were purposively selected as they self-identified as having changed their post-high-school career to a more positive one after participating in this PBL. To select the research participants, I asked Mr. Matsui, who had led this PBL, to introduce me to three past participants. The selection criteria were as follows:

1. The chosen participant changed their previously chosen career path after high school for positive reasons after participating in the English PBL.
2. From Mr. Matsui's point of view, each of the chosen participants' overall characteristics differed, including personality, academic ability, interests, and family background.

Table 2 summarises the profiles of the three participants in this study.

Table 2. *Profiles of the Three Research Participants*

	Name (Pseudonym)		
	Momo	Yuki	Ai
Age	20	20	20
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Major	Integrated Sciences	International Liberal Arts	Economics
Family	Father, mother, twin brother, younger brother	Father, mother, younger sister	Father, mother, younger sister
Prior overseas experience	Homestay in the USA (2 weeks, age 15)	None	None
Other characteristics (according to Mr. Matsui)	She was "academically high-achieving" and "a good role model to peers"	She came from a "low-performing junior high school" and was "out of touch"	Her parents were firmly against her going outside Kagoshima after senior high school

The three participants had several commonalities: All were female, born and raised in Kagoshima City (although all three attended elementary and junior high school in different districts), around 20 years old at the time of data collection, in their third year of university, and they had completed the English PBL at KHS and joined a study tour to the UK with the same group. It was after their enrolment into KHS that all three students learnt that the high school offered a short study tour to the UK. To join the study tour, they were required to complete a project-based learning programme in English as part of the integrated studies class. Then, upon selection based on document application and presentation, they could join the study tour. In their second year at KHS, approximately 40 students were selected to participate in this English PBL group while the rest of the students in the same grade completed their PBL in Japanese (around 300 students were enrolled in this grade at KHS); at a later stage, 15 out of these 40 students were selected to go to the UK.

My Positionality

The data were analysed in consideration of the reflexivity of the researcher (Sultana, 2007). I am someone from Kagoshima Prefecture who experienced constraints as a senior high school student when choosing my own career because of my gender and the geographical location of my hometown. Thus, to some extent, I position myself as a researcher with shared identities with the participants, including being a female Japanese EFL learner who grew up in the same region as them, experiencing similar challenges. Until my final year of senior high school, I was planning on going to a junior college in Kagoshima, as it was something my mother had recommended. However, learning English greatly expanded my own educational and professional opportunities, and as a result, I went on to a competitive English-medium liberal arts college, which would not have been an option had I stayed in my hometown. This led me to continuing my studies in a master's program at a British university and, currently, in a doctoral program at a university in Tokyo, Japan. Space does not allow me to describe the details of my own story, but my motivation to pursue this research stems from the fact that my own life has changed dramatically as a result of my English learning experiences. At the same time, however, I was an outsider listening to these women as an external researcher regarding KHS and this English PBL programme.

Data Collection

I conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant in Japanese for around 90 minutes. When I reached them, all three participants were studying at universities in different parts of Japan. I interviewed Momo and Yuki face-to-face in Kagoshima City during their summer vacation. I interviewed Ai via video call on Zoom as she did not plan to return home during the summer. Both our cameras were on, and we could see each other's faces during the call.

The questions in Table 3 were prepared in advance as an interview guide. The life story questions were adopted from Irie's (2022) study on the role of English in older Japanese learners, developed from McAdams (1988, 1993) and the Foley Center for the Study of Lives (2009). To leave room for exploration of events that I was not aware of but that were important to the interviewee, I tried to give the interviewee more control over the content of the interview. I minimised the number of questions I prepared in advance so that the flow of the conversation would be natural, and the order of the questions asked in the actual interviews varied among the three participants.

During the interviews, I made efforts to confirm the meaning of the participants' narratives by paraphrasing or summarising what I thought was important. Later, I read the transcriptions of the recorded data repeatedly and coded significant events that may have led to divergent decision-making. A Trajectory Equifinality Modelling (TEM) diagram, which is explained in the Data Analysis section, was created by arranging the events, choices, and relevant social factors experienced by each participant in chronological order.

Table 3. Interview Guide**Self-Introduction**

About your life from childhood until today

- How would you divide your life so far into chapters?
- What is the best thing that has happened to you in your life?
- What has been the biggest challenge (difficulty) in your life?

About going to KHS

- What brought you to KHS?

About the PBL

- What motivated you to carry out your PBL in English?
- What changes have occurred in you after participating in the PBL?
- If this PBL had been conducted in Japanese, what changes do you think would have (or not have) occurred?

What do you envisage yourself doing in the future?

Data Analysis

For the analysis, I used Trajectory Equifinality Modelling (TEM; Sato et al., 2009). This analysis method is suitable for depicting the process of value transformation from the existence of actual choice behaviours and outcomes, as well as other theoretically possible but unchosen alternatives. In the framework of TEM, the participants and researcher jointly draw the participants' trajectories. In this study, the *obligatory passage point* (OPP; the point that all the participants go through), the *bifurcation point* (BFP; transitioning point), and the *equifinality points* (EFP; final points reached) were set as in Table 4.

Table 4. Obligatory Passage Point, Bifurcation Point, and Equifinality Points in This Study

Obligatory Passage Point (OPP)	Bifurcation Point (BFP)	Equifinality Points (EFP)
Entry to KHS	Perspective shifting	Going to the university of their choice
Participation in the English PBL		

In addition to the points mentioned above, I also indicated in the TEM diagrams the past trajectories and prospects that seemed to be notable turning points in each participant's career decisions.

Findings and Discussion**Participants' Trajectories**

First, I attempt to answer the question, "What trajectories did the three participants, who achieved positive career outcomes through the English PBL, take to reach their final career decisions?"

Momo's Case

Compared to the other two participants, Momo had the most exposure to English language learning between kindergarten and starting high school. She was also the only one of the three participants who had travelled abroad before entering high school.

According to Mr. Matsui, who introduced her to us, she was an “honours student” type with very high academic ability and had served as head of a sports club. A TEM diagram of Momo is shown in Figure 1.

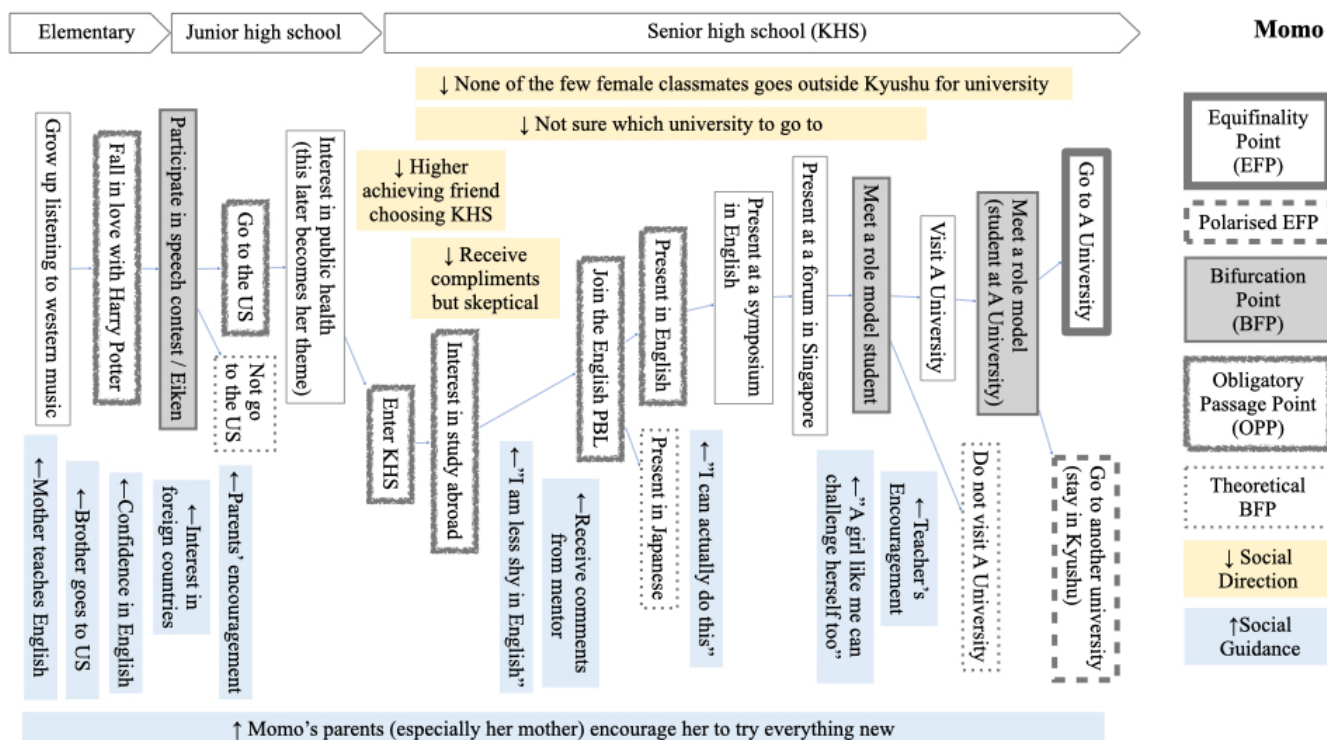


Figure 1. Momo’s TEM

Momo had been keen on all aspects of learning, including English, from an early age. Her mother was an English teacher, and she grew up listening to Western music. When she was in primary school, she became obsessed with the Harry Potter books in the school library, and this is where her fascination with the UK began. It was also during this period that her older brother went to the USA for a short period of study. She challenged herself in speech contests and English tests and gained confidence in English. When she was in junior high school, she, like her brother, participated in a short-term homestay programme in a sister city of Kagoshima City in the USA. Her parents were supportive of what she wanted to do. Momo enrolled in KHS largely because she liked the atmosphere at the school, where students worked hard not only in their studies but also in club activities, and because her friends with better grades than her applied to KHS. She was dedicated to both her studies and sports, and her teachers and friends often praised her for her hard work. However, she was skeptical that they really meant it. Momo was in a science-track class, where there were very few female students. Momo told me that none of the female students aspired to go to universities further than the Kyushu area regardless of their academic potential, while the male students wanted to go to more academically challenging universities in Osaka, Tokyo, and other major cities, all of which are geographically far away, so it would normally cost tens of thousands of yen by air or *shinkansen* (bullet train) just to get there. Even though Momo was very likely to be accepted into a top university in Tokyo, she originally had no desire to go there. She was somewhat reluctant about her career prospects and did not have a clear vision for the future.

Interestingly, there was an unexpected positive effect from completing the PBL in English. She felt that although she was hesitant to express her opinions in Japanese, she was able to “aggressively” seek feedback and make improvements when preparing her presentation in English. She also realised that she could express herself more freely in English. Furthermore, her success was not limited to the classroom. She presented her work in English at an international symposium for high school students to showcase findings from their PBL in Kagoshima and won a prize, which even led her to take part in a larger symposium in Southeast Asia. It was during this time that she made friends with people with similar goals in other rural areas of Japan and felt that she could challenge herself in something she could not have previously imagined herself doing. Being recognised for her scientific research at this international symposium and meeting other female students devoted to science with similarly high goals from other rural areas in Japan convinced her that “it was okay for me to aim higher.” Momo told me that doing this PBL in English had broadened her network of contacts and vision for the future. She said that if she had done the same thing in Japanese, this learning experience would not have had such a significant impact on her life.

Yuki’s Case

Unlike Momo, Yuki used to dislike studying in general, with little interest in English, until she entered senior high school. According to her, Yuki came from a “low-performing” junior high school and was “out of touch [グレていた; *gurete-ita*].” Although public junior high schools in Japan are based on location, not on performance, this context might partially reflect the result of the regional difference in people’s attitudes toward education as in Matsuoka (2019b). Yuki’s life story is arranged in chronological order using TEM as in Figure 2:

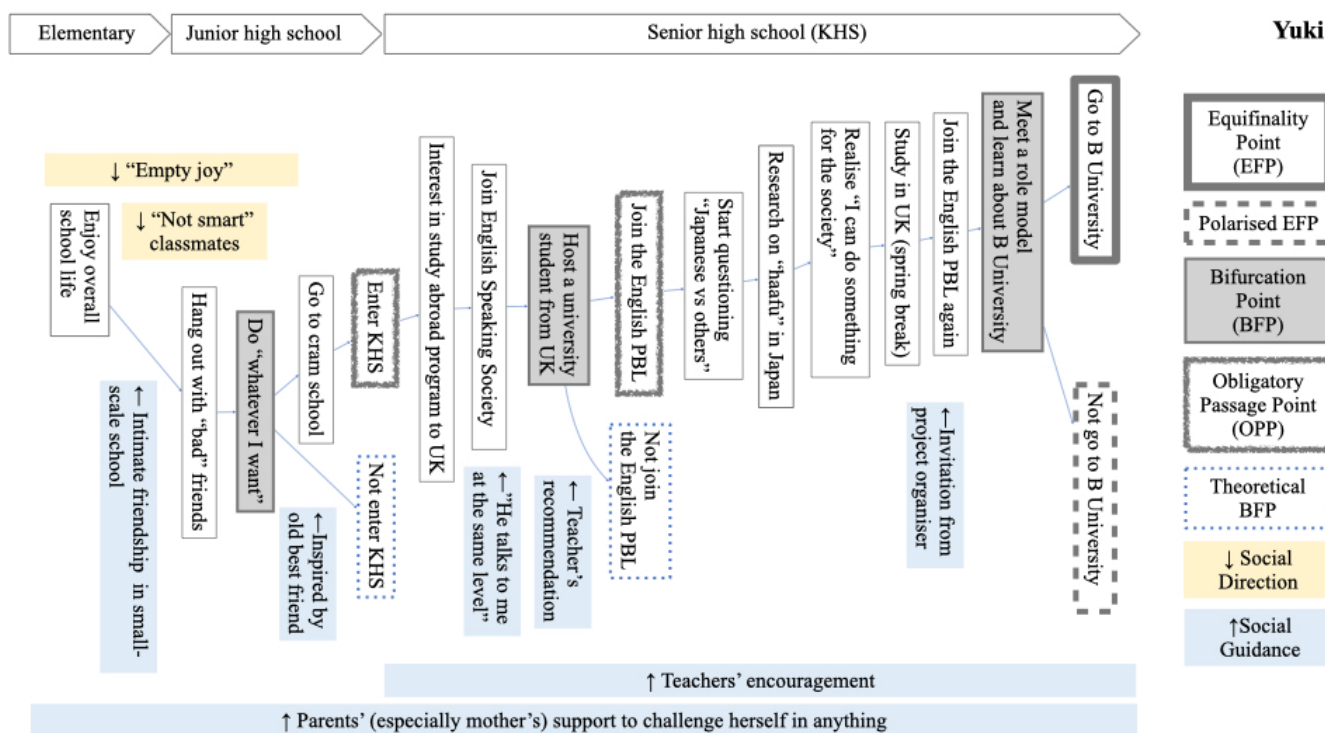


Figure 2. Yuki’s TEM

From an early age, Yuki was “given a lot of freedom” to grow up in a carefree environment, under her parents’ (especially her mother’s) educational policy of letting her do whatever she wanted. She says that the fact that her primary school was very small may have been another significant factor in her building a free and open-minded personality. (There are many small-scale schools in Kagoshima Prefecture, including in the city.) However, taking the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency was one of the few things Yuki was strongly encouraged to do, as her mother believed in the importance of investing in foreign language learning from an early age. While she is very grateful for this “free” environment, the freedom she was given led her to hang out with “bad” friends when she entered junior high school. She calls her experience of those years “empty joy.” At this stage, Yuki had nothing she wanted to do and was thinking of finding a job as soon as possible rather than going on to higher education. However, she started attending cram school because she admired her former best friend’s enthusiasm for studying, and as a result, she chose KHS, where many students aim to go on to high-ranking universities.

It was out of curiosity that she convinced her mother to let their family become a homestay host for an international student visiting KHS from a top university in the UK. This experience made her feel especially close to the English language and university students. “I thought overseas university students were people from a distant world,” she said, “but I was glad that they spoke to me as fellow human beings and from the same point of view” (my translation from Japanese). This encouraged her to join the English PBL and carry out a research project for people with foreign roots staying or living in Japan. She then started interacting with communities of international students. In this process, she came to realise that “there might be something I could do for society: to support people from international or mixed ethnic backgrounds who are having difficulties in Japan.” This realisation, in her words, was “meaningful joy.” Beyond that, she met a role model who studied at a Japanese liberal arts college where all lectures were conducted in English, which she thought was the place for her.

Ai’s Case

According to Mr. Matsui, Ai differed from Momo and Yuki in that her parents were initially opposed to her going to higher education outside Kagoshima Prefecture due to the family’s financial situation. However, as the interview revealed, after all her efforts to convince them, Ai’s parents even allowed her to spend an extra year studying as a *ronin* [浪人] after graduating from KHS, and in the end, she went to a private university in the Kansai area. *Ronin* refers to students who, after graduating from junior or senior high school, are unable to enrol in the next stage of schooling and study independently towards future enrolment. Ai’s TEM diagram is shown in Figure 3.

Ai was the only one of the three who had never really been exposed to English language learning until she started studying it as a compulsory subject in junior high school. She has a bright leader-type personality and spent her time in the jazz band in primary school. She was not good at English in junior high school, but she gained confidence when she was “very much praised by her teacher in an English recitation competition” in which everyone at school had participated, including her friends who had been taking private *eikaiwa* (English conversation) lessons outside school. Here, she decided that she might have a talent for English and that “it might be worth committing to it.” Although Ai was “not academically outstanding,” she had a strong sense of responsibility, was highly trusted by her teachers and friends, and was elected student council president at her junior high

school. This enabled her to enter KHS through a recommendation from her junior high school [推薦入試; *suisen nyūshi*], rather than through the general entrance examination [一般入試; *ippan nyūshi*].

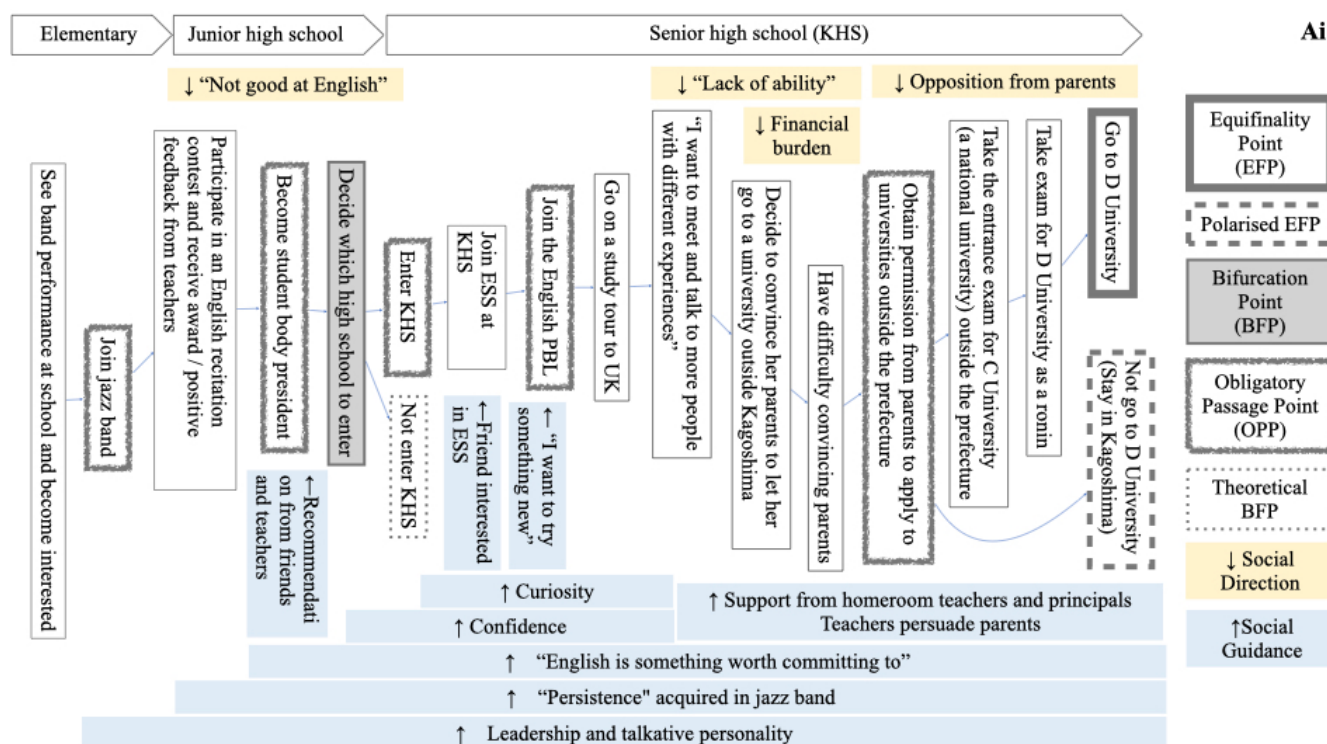


Figure 3. Ai's TEM

Ai had worked hard in music up to secondary school and wanted to try something new at KHS. She joined the English Speaking Society (ESS) because she had been praised for her English pronunciation in junior high school and because she liked speaking. As for the English PBL, she said, "I simply wanted to go to the UK, and I also wanted to challenge myself in various ways as a high school student, so I thought I'd like to take advantage of the opportunity I had." Then, she took on the challenge of the English PBL and chose a research theme of "revitalising tourism in Kagoshima." She had the opportunity to talk to people from various backgrounds, including foreign tourists in the city. Below is Ai's enthusiastic reaction after I introduced myself and explained the purpose of this research at the beginning of the interview:

In my PBL, I had many opportunities to try things I had never thought about before or things I had thought I could not do. As I did these things, saw many new things, and learned new things, I felt that I didn't want to stay in Kagoshima. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know more, and I met people who knew a lot more than I did, and I really felt that I was growing up more and more. I suddenly felt that I needed to think more about my career path, that I wanted to go out more and think about something more and expand myself. I feel that my experiences in senior high school were the catalyst for me to finally get outside Kagoshima and go to university and make a big move in that way. So, I'm very interested in what you're doing, Hayasaki-san [the researcher].

In the opening 2 minutes of the interview, Ai revealed how encounters with people who showed her new worlds and various discoveries during her high school activities made her realise her potential. At the same time, she developed a certain sense of crisis ("I need to

think more”), curiosity about her future career, and a desire to become a more proactive learner. This increased willingness to independently choose her future led her to step “outside Kagoshima.”

My Reflection

After interviewing the three participants, my first impression was that they seemed to be more powerful and have more access to various resources than I had imagined. In the first place, these three participants were lucky enough to have the academic abilities and/or experience in extracurricular activities to be accepted to KHS, which is one of the highest-level senior high schools in Kagoshima Prefecture. As for my own experience, I am from a much smaller city, approximately 40 km away from central Kagoshima, and my parents believed it was a “waste of money” to pay for me to attend a cram school. This idea seemed to be partly for financial reasons (I had two younger siblings that they had to support.) and partly because my mother especially believed that “girls don’t need to go to a 4-year university.” She also did not want me to move outside Kagoshima, much less overseas. In this sense, I found my situation closest to Ai’s. Fortunately, in the end, Ai and I were able to convince our parents to let us follow the paths we chose. Should we think we are just fortunate?

At the same time, the data show some barriers that even these fortunate women had to break, which they might not have needed to had they been learning in a different context. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

Undergoing Constraints and Overcoming Them

This section answers RQ2 (“Did any regional (and other) constraints affect their career decision-making process, and if so, what were they?”) and RQ3 (“How did the English PBL help them to overcome such constraints?”) simultaneously. There were various constraints on the trajectories of these three participants, three main ones of which are discussed below.

The first is the lack of encounters with diverse role models and peers. For example, Momo was in a science class and had no female classmates with similar goals, so she could not consider going to a university outside Kyushu. However, Momo’s participation in the English PBL broadened her scope for action. As a result, at an international symposium abroad, she met high school students from other rural areas of Japan who wanted to go out into the world and test their potential. This encouraged her to believe that she too could aim high. Interestingly, her role model was not from Tokyo or other urban areas, but “a girl from another rural area.” This may not be directly related to language learning and use, but it does speak to the importance of near-peer role models as advocated by Murphey and Arao (2001). Similarly, for both Yuki and Ai, the English PBL provided opportunities to expand their social network, which stimulated their curiosity. Furthermore, it meant a lot to Momo that experts listened to her seriously and gave her constructive feedback on the topic of her science project. In this sense, she also felt emotionally closer to *distant* role models. Momo’s case shows that even highly capable learners can find it difficult to take action with a clear vision if they do not have a model to aim for. The English PBL was the igniter of her positive challenge.

Second, few opportunities were available to meaningfully link English language learning with real life. This concerns the quality of the learning environment provided in and outside school and extended communities and has a strong link with the current issue’s

theme, “Learner Development Beyond the Classroom.” For example, when Yuki set out to take the high school entrance exam, she originally received an “E” grade, meaning that her chances of entering KHS were very low. Yuki’s junior high school was in a “rough” area where her classmates smoked cigarettes, and she said that her life would have been different in many ways if she had not been inspired to study by her former best friend. At KHS, she had opportunities to get to know students from overseas universities, who spoke to her amicably in Japanese, which they were learning. This made her feel closer to university students and people from other countries, and she also wanted to speak to them in their own language, English. With this experience and her open-minded personality, she was able to take advantage of the English PBL as a place to develop her interests and deepen her understanding of culture and identity.

A third vital factor, as evident in Ai’s stories, is parental beliefs about investment in education and about the economic situation of the family. Her parents were concerned about both financial issues and her academic ability, but she continued to strive for a university outside the prefecture, despite their opposition. Through the English PBL, Ai examined the revitalisation of local tourism (utilising the region’s unique resources) by interviewing foreign tourists visiting Kagoshima and visiting local businesses. She wanted to get to know the outside world as she began to wonder what she could do for her hometown of Kagoshima. Eventually, Ai’s teachers at KHS helped to persuade her parents to give her a chance to try for a more challenging target university.

Pedagogical Implications

This study has shown that English learning opportunities in the form of PBL, both in and out of school, can be a driving force in changing the career paths of high school students. English PBL may be a useful tool to make English language learning more personalised for individual interests. Of course, it makes sense to do PBL in the students’ first language, but the significance of doing this in English can be found in Momo’s narrative. Expression in a foreign language has the potential to liberate the self more than that in the first language. Of course, it should be considered that the reverse could also be true, as discussed in the foreign language anxiety research (e.g., Gkonou et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 1986). There is no doubt that conducting PBL in a foreign language is more challenging than in a first language. However, that is why PBL in a foreign language (for the participants in this study, English) made them feel more challenged and ultimately more accomplished. Another advantage of PBL is that, in principle, students can choose the topic according to their own interests, which is not necessarily so in conventional classrooms in the Japanese educational system, even in English-medium classrooms. This freedom of choice allows for greater student autonomy and makes learning and using English more meaningful and accessible.

Limitations and Important Emerging Questions

The data and discussion of the three participants in this study are not representative of Kagoshima Prefecture or the project participants but are only a subset of many cases. Although this study was an exploratory comparison of three individuals with different profiles, I hope to collect and analyse data about the learning experiences of more students on a municipal, school, or project basis in the future. Furthermore, at this stage, only one interview was conducted for each participant. In future studies, two more interviews will be conducted with each participant to further refine the TEM diagrams.

Many further questions also arose and remain unanswered: Are the students satisfied with the outcomes of attending university? Are they satisfied with the career options they are offered upon graduation? What makes a context “rural”—is it something definable, or should we leave it up to individuals’ interpretation? Ultimately, what constitutes success for language learners in this context? Is pursuing more challenging educational and professional opportunities always the best option? What other forms of transformation could language learning bring about? These questions will lead to a deeper understanding of under-researched *rural* or, in a broader sense, *local* contexts in English education in Japan and will in turn provide suggestions for learning in broader contexts. It is significant that this interview-based research, in which learners revisit their past learning experiences and explore with the researcher social factors behind their decision makings, has led to such important questions for the future.

Conclusion

This study explored how high school students in Kagoshima prefecture, which has one of the lowest rates of students entering 4-year universities in Japan, changed their perspectives on their post-high school career paths through participation in the English PBL and what sociocultural factors were involved in this process. The findings revealed how the three women experienced changes in their perspectives on their interests, abilities, and future visions through re-telling their life stories. The constraints these women overcame had both similarities and differences, including lack of access to diverse role models and peers, few opportunities to make meaningful connections between English language learning and real life, and parental beliefs about educational investment that were incompatible with students’ beliefs. Reflecting on the findings and discussion in this study, I recommend that schools and stakeholders should consider, in accordance with the characteristics of the region, connecting students with diverse role models, developing learning programmes in which students with diverse academic abilities and language skills can play an active role, and providing equitable guidance and intervention if necessary, regarding further educational and career opportunities after their learning. We, as researchers, should continue to inquire how English language learning can make a meaningful difference in an individual’s overall life and subsequent career choices and conduct comprehensive studies that look beyond the classroom.

Author Bio

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Review Process

This paper was open-reviewed by Simla Course and Colin Rundle of the *Learner Development Journal* Review Network and by the Journal Steering Group. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind review.*)

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