LEARNER BELIEFS OF JAPANESE EXCHANGE STUDENTS AT A FINNISH UNIVERSITY

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Studying abroad in non-English-speaking countries has been increasing in Japanese higher education in recent years. While studying abroad, Japanese learners of English encounter English users from diverse cultural backgrounds, providing them with valuable opportunities for authentic interaction. Finland is a favourite destination for Japanese university students because of its high-quality education and the allure of Finnish culture, which is popular in Japan. The students who come to study in Finland have diverse motivations and goals, along with varying levels of proficiency in English. Valuable insights into these individual differences can be gained by exploring the students' thoughts and attitudes about language learning as well as their identities as language learners. These language learner beliefs influence their motivations, goals, and learning strategies, and thus their overall accomplishments. Our study explored the language learner beliefs of four Japanese exchange students studying various subjects at their home university who participated in English-medium courses focusing on English language and academic communication skills offered by the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication at the University of Jyväskylä. Data were collected through individual interviews conducted in Japanese, including visual data in the form of drawings (students' language portraits and learner portraits). We analysed the data from two distinct perspectives, those of a Finnish and of a Japanese educator, and juxtaposed our different interpretations to gain a more comprehensive picture of the participants' views. The combination of visual and verbal data provided us with a rich picture of these exchange students' learner beliefs and helped us to gain a deeper understanding of how they see themselves as students and how they feel about learning English. When teachers have a better understanding of their students, it is possible for them to address students' individual needs better, create a more inclusive learning environment and offer opportunities to establish a more supportive student–teacher relationship.

Keywords: Japanese learners of English, language learning beliefs, learner beliefs, language portraits, learner portraits, exchange students, study abroad

Opiskelu ulkomailla ei-englanninkielisissä maissa on lisääntynyt japanilaisessa korkea-koulutuksessa viime vuosina. Ulkomailla opiskellessaan japanilaiset englanninoppijat kohtaavat englantia käyttäviä henkilöitä, joilla on erilaisia kulttuuritaustoja, mikä tarjoaa heille arvokkaita mahdollisuuksia aitoon vuorovaikutukseen. Suomi on japanilaisten yli-

opisto-opiskelijoiden suosikkikohde korkeatasoisen koulutuksen ja Japanissa suositun suomalaisen kulttuurin vetovoiman vuoksi. Suomeen opiskelemaan tulevilla opiskelijoilla on hyvin erilaisia motiiveja ja tavoitteita, ja heidän englannin kielen taitotasonsa vaihtelee. Arvokasta tietoa näistä yksilöllisistä eroista saadaan tarkastelemalla opiskelijoiden kielenoppimiseen liittyviä ajatuksia ja asenteita sekä heidän identiteettiään kielenoppijoina. Nämä kielenoppijoiden omaksumat uskomukset vaikuttavat heidän motivaatioonsa, tavoitteisiinsa ja oppimisstrategioihinsa ja siten heidän saavuttamiinsa tuloksiin yleisesti. Tutkimuksessamme tarkasteltiin neljän kotiyliopistossaan eri oppiaineita opiskelevan japanilaisen vaihto-opiskelijan uskomuksia kielten oppimisesta. Opiskelijat osallistuivat Jyväskylän yliopiston monikielisen akateemisen viestinnän keskuksen järjestämille englanninkielisille kursseille, joilla käsiteltiin englannin kieltä ja akateemisia viestintätaitoja. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin japaninkielisillä yksilöhaastatteluilla, ja siihen sisältyi kuvallista aineistoa piirustusten muodossa (opiskelijoiden kielimuotokuvat ja oppijamuotokuvat). Analysoimme aineiston suomalaisen ja japanilaisen opettajan näkökulmista ja asetimme erilaiset tulkintamme vastakkain saadaksemme kokonaisvaltaisen kuvan osallistujien näkemyksistä. Kuvallisen ja sanallisen aineiston yhdistelmä antoi meille monipuolisen kuvan tutkimukseen osallistuneiden vaihto-opiskelijoiden oppijuuteen liittyvistä uskomuksista ja auttoi meitä ymmärtämään syvällisemmin, miten he näkevät itsensä opiskelijoina ja miten he suhtautuvat englannin kielen oppimiseen. Kun opettajat ymmärtävät oppilaitaan entistä paremmin, he voivat esimerkiksi ottaa paremmin huomioon oppilaiden yksilölliset tarpeet, luoda heille osallistavamman oppimisympäristön ja tarjota mahdollisuuksia kannustavamman oppilas-opettaja-suhteen luomiseen.

Introduction

An increasing number of Japanese university students are encouraged to study abroad by both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). According to the Office of the Council for the Creation of Future Education, before the COVID-19 pandemic, some 222,000 students went abroad for at least a short exchange period; the government's goal is to increase this number to 500,000 students at different levels of education by 2033. Finland is a popular country in Japan (see, e.g., Chiba, n.d.), also increasingly for study abroad. The Finnish Institute in Japan, which was established in 1998, promotes co-operation between Finland and Japan in science, higher education and culture. The University of Jyväskylä, with its eight Japanese partner universities, is one of the Finnish universities offering bilateral exchange programmes with Japanese universities (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.).

One of the authors, as a teacher of English courses for exchange students at the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) for several years, has seen first-hand how Japanese students as learners of English have had opportunities to use and practise their language skills in a multicultural environment both in and, on occasion, out of the classroom. However, not much is currently known about how the Japanese exchange students at JYU see themselves as language learners.

That is why it is important to gain insight as to what kind of learner beliefs these students have, given that they may have been used to different types of teaching and learning styles and may have had little access to the English language as a means of communication (e.g. Watanabe, 2013).

According to Kalaja et al. (2017, p. 222), learner beliefs refer "to the conceptions, ideas and opinions learners have about L2 learning and teaching and language itself", and they have an important role to play when it comes to the "learners' awareness of their approaches to learning L2s". Kalaja et al. (2016) state that interest in learner beliefs emerged in the late 1970s with the question of why some students learn foreign languages well whereas others do not. Even though the term "beliefs" was not used at that point and, instead, expressions such as "learning philosophies" and "mini-theories" were used, these points of view were important in learning foreign languages and had an effect on the learning outcomes. In terms of terminology, it took 10 years for the term beliefs to be established. Kalaja et al. (2017) point out that the interest in learners' beliefs has been increasing since the mid-1990s, but that there have been differences in how learner beliefs have been approached (e.g., discursive, metacognitive, sociocultural and contextual approaches).

The purpose of our study was to gain an understanding about the learner beliefs of four Japanese exchange students in relation to learning English. The students had taken part in various courses in English at the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication (Movi) at the University of Jyväskylä. In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of their beliefs, we have used both visual and verbal methods in our study. On the visual side, the students were asked to draw two pictures: a picture including the languages in their lives (see, e.g., Busch, 2013 or Park Salo & Dufva, 2018), and a picture of themselves as language learners (see, e.g., Kalaja et al., 2008 or Kelly 2009). To obtain more comprehensive coverage of their learner beliefs, we asked them to describe their experiences of learning English before and during the exchange. These interviews were carried out in their native language by a Japanese language expert. Suzuki (2017) has suggested using drawings in connection with studying Japanese university students' views since that might reduce the pressure that writing or expressing themselves verbally might cause.

Conceptual framework

Learner beliefs

Learner beliefs can be defined in various ways. Kalaja et al. (2016) pointed out that in the 1970s learning philosophies preceded the concept of beliefs, and in the late 1980s they were viewed from the metacognitive point of view, which could be studied by using interviews and questionnaires. This trend continues but has since been complemented by, for example, the contextual approach, which takes into account the learner's inside view. Barcelos (2014) emphasises the interactive nature of learner beliefs by pointing out that they can be seen as "a form of thought, constructions of reality, ways of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena which are co-constructed within our experiences and which result from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signifying, and of being in the world and doing things with others" (Barcelos, 2014, as cited in Kalaja et al., 2016, p. 10).

In terms of language learning, Kalaja et al. (2016) focus on the personal nature of beliefs by pointing out the significance of learners' personal meanings in situations where learners

reflect on language learning and relate these meanings to their experiences. The authors also recognise the importance of the context of beliefs as well as their dynamic nature. Learner beliefs can thus be seen as dynamic and interactive by nature. Barkhuizen et al. (2014) note that by using narrative inquiry, we can try to see how language learners organise their experiences and are able to represent them to themselves as well as others. In his view, narrative inquiry has the possibility to gain access to language learning as a lived experience, since it takes place over a long time and includes various settings and contexts. They also point out that given how narrative inquiry deals with stories, it can be seen from various perspectives. The first is found in the kind of research where stories are used as data, or where stories are used as a method for analysing data. A second division can be made between the biographical approach, where it is the researcher who analyses or tells the stories of the participants, or the autobiographical approach in which the researcher analyses and tells their own stories. A third division has to do with the focus of narrative research: is it the narrative itself or the content of the narratives? Typical research material consists of language memoirs, autobiographical or biographical case studies, or studies of multiple narratives, providing information on several topics, including, for example, learner strategies, motivation, autonomy, language policies, language loss, identity, context and affect, among others.

Language learner beliefs of university students have also been studied by Kaypak and Ortactepe (2014) among Turkish students in an EFL context. These students started to value intelligibility over accuracy, which helped them in successful interaction, and their learner beliefs were not found to be homogenous or stable.

Visual methods in the study of learner beliefs

Barkhuizen et al. (2014) point out that narratives constructed by more than one mode can be viewed as multimodal narratives. In general, they consider visual elicitation useful in collecting data in narrative research. Busch (2006) mentions that visual self-portraits have been used since the 1990s in Europe to investigate linguistic resources. They were first used amongst children in multilingual classrooms but later this method has been used with adults as well. The children were asked to use colour in pre-printed body silhouettes to show their languages in the picture. The colours were chosen by the drawer and no instructions were given on how to decide which colour is for which language. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) note that the meanings of visual structures and the meanings of language overlap in part, but in visual communication the meanings manifest themselves in terms of different uses of colour or compositional structures. Busch et al. (2006) also emphasise the importance of the interpretation of the author in the choice of colour and the location of different fields in the drawing. In addition, Kalaja et al. (2013) drew attention to Kress and van Leeuwen's viewpoint that visual images include both narrative and conceptual structures, where the role of narrative structures is to present actions, events or processes while conceptual structures give us a description of the characteristics of the participants; the latter can also be of symbolic nature.

Kalaja et al. (2008) studied Finnish university-level EFL learners by using a method where students have been asked to produce a visual narrative of their experiences in the form of a self-portrait and to add their own interpretation of the picture, making use of two different modalities. Based on the sociocultural approach, their focus was on the mediational means that were visible in the pictures and what they could learn about the students based on these

mediational means, as well as the role of drawings. The self-portraits of Finnish university students whose first language is Finnish Sign Language have also been studied by Kelly (2009), and Kusters and de Meulder (2019) have discussed the use of visual methods with signing students. Chik (2018) has studied the visual narratives of Hong Kong undergraduates and also other age groups in Berlin and Sydney, finding out, for example, that instructions play an important role in the outcome and that self-composed portraits encourage meanings to be reproduced across various modes. University students' learner portraits have also been studied by Barfield (2021) from the Japanese perspective to gain a better understanding of the connections between the students' languaged lives and different multilingual issues in the society.

As in Park Salo and Dufva (2018), our research is based on first-person experiences and the viewpoint on social circumstances where "the societal dimension is manifest in how individuals perceive, reflect upon and experience events and encounters, as part of their life world" (p. 423). In addition, Park Salo and Dufva (2018) draw attention to the emergence of emotions in multilingual surroundings, recognising the importance of face-to-face social interaction and societal-level institutions. These points could be relevant also for exchange students in a foreign country or in surroundings that are not familiar to them.

Language portraits possess several potential benefits. In Busch's view (2017), language biographies can help us decipher power relationships and language ideologies. Moreover, when we account for the perspective of speakers and their linguistic repertoires, it may allow us to see unexpected language practices and resources.

Contextual background

Teaching and learning English in Japan

English education has been considered important in both primary and secondary school systems in the past few decades in Japan. In 2011, foreign language activities (meaning "English education" in the Japanese context) were introduced to students aged 10 to 12 (i.e., fifth and sixth grades) in elementary schools. Since 2020, English has become a compulsory subject in elementary schools, and students start learning English from age 9. According to Nishibu (2008), English education in elementary schools was introduced mainly because of three reasons: requests from parents, perspectives on language acquisition, and a national strategy to keep up with internationalisation. In addition to these, the hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics led to the promotion of English education dramatically since Japan was chosen to host the games in 2013. Moreover, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2014) clearly mentioned that learners of English in Japan should be able to acquire "top-class" English proficiencies among Asian countries in order to survive in the current global societies.

Both cram schools (*juku*) and English conversation schools (*eikaiwa gakkou*) are common forms of educational support in Japan. According to Lowe (2015), cram schools are run by private businesses, and their purpose is to supplement the education provided in the actual schools in various subjects: the students are taught one-to-one or in small classes and in 2007, some 70% of students had taken part in this type of tutoring during their education with the ultimate goal of doing well in their university entrance exams. Bolen (n.d.) describes English conversation schools as privately operated, mostly taught by native English speakers and focusing on fluency in conversation. English conversation schools also vary, covering a

range of target and age groups, from young children to older people. As a result, in addition to attending compulsory primary and secondary schooling, a number of students go to cram schools and private English conversation schools after school in order to study English further. As for cram schools, students typically attend these in order to pass entrance examinations for secondary schools and universities where English is normally a part of an exam subject. Entrance exam systems differ between public and private schools in Japan, which means students need to address these differences. Some students also go to cram schools so they can catch up with classes at school. As for private English conversation schools, they are often considered as after-school activities (*okeiko goto*), where students take a particular lesson in, for example music or languages. They are also categorised as a fun activity compared to cram schools due to the different pedagogical approaches. In English conversation schools, kids learn English in varied ways, such as by singing songs and playing games. In contrast, at cram schools students attend lectures using textbooks. The two types of schools also have different target customers. Cram schools are mainly for students to continue their education at primary/secondary schools and universities, while English conversation schools are normally open to all generations, with classes for kids, businesspeople and other groups.

Studies regarding Japanese university students and language learning have been carried out, for example, from the point of view of the L2 self (Ryan, 2009; Yashima, 2009), and willingness to communicate, which increases with international posture and motivation (Yashima, 2002). Muroya (2022) has also studied Japanese students' willingness to communicate, comparing it to the willingness of English-speaking students of Japanese. Willingness to communicate and its relation to learning goals has been a topic (Fuji, 2023), as has students' resistance and teachers' responses in class (Sakui & Cowie, 2008) and classroom silence, the latter by taking into account the meaning of silence in the sociocultural context (Harumi, 2011). Tanaka and Ellis (2003) studied learner beliefs of Japanese students on a 15-week exchange in the US and discovered that the students' skills improved somewhat and especially their confidence and self-efficacy grew.

Research questions

Our research concentrated on understanding how Japanese exchange students see themselves as learners of English in Finland. The research questions we used in our study were as follows: (1) What kind of previous experiences do the students have when it comes to learning English?, (2) What kind of learner beliefs do they have regarding English?, (3) What do they find easy/difficult when learning English? and (4) What kind of motivation do they have in learning English?

Methods

The research setting

The research was carried out at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland among four Japanese university students, who were on an exchange programme. The study year they spent in Finland is not mentioned here to protect their identities, and for the same reason, we used pseudonyms and do not mention their home universities. At the time, they were 20 to 23 years old.

The University of Jyväskylä offers courses in English that are specifically geared to exchange students. The courses can focus on one skill, such as writing, or then they can be general courses in the sense that they cover several skills in English. At the time, the courses offered for exchange students included XEN0095 Academic English Communication 1 and XEN0096 Academic English Communication 2, which can be considered general courses, and XEN0097 Basic Academic Writing and XENX034 Intermediate Academic Writing. The students participated in these courses according to their personal study plans.

Data collection methods

A semi-structured theme interview was carried out in Japanese to enable students to express themselves in their native language. During the interview, the students were asked to complete a self-portrait that included the languages in their lives. The self-portrait was adapted from Busch (2013) in the same manner as in Park Salo and Dufva (2018), and instead of a person (silhouette) standing and waving with one hand like in the original, it consisted of a silhouette of a person standing in a neutral position with legs close to each other and hands down on its side. Judging from the silhouette, you could not tell if it was intended to be a man or a woman. In addition, the students were asked to produce a picture of themselves as a learner of English (a learner portrait), which was drawn free hand. Both these pictures were discussed in the interview. In addition, the students were asked to do a SWOT analysis about their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in terms of learning English during the interview. The topics of the theme interview included questions on their language learning background, how they saw themselves as learners of English and what they find easy and difficult when it comes to learning English. The students were offered coloured pencils to use in their drawings, but they could choose themselves whether to use them, and they were not asked to use color-coding in their drawings.

The interviews were recorded in audio format and each interview lasted about 50 minutes. In the analysis process, a summary in English was constructed by the interviewer, a Finnish Japanese teacher, to gain a preliminary understanding of the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed in Japanese first and translated into English by the Japanese author, who is a native speaker of Japanese.

Data analysis

We have used varied methods in our analysis to better understand the students' views. In students' language portraits, we have looked at their use of the silhouettes and whether they have chosen to use a text-based approach in their own additions to the silhouette, a visual-based approach, or a combination of the two. We have also paid attention to the use of composition, colours and symbols in the drawings. For the learner portraits, we have applied content analysis in line with Kalaja et al. (2008) to see what kind of mediational means are visible in the drawings. In the interview transcriptions, we highlighted thematic issues such as the students' background in learning English, their feelings about learning English, and what differences they see in learning methods between Finland and Japan. The researchers also held several online meetings to discuss what we can see from the data from Finnish and Japanese perspectives.

Results

In the results section, each student's results are presented individually. First their language repertoire and English learning background are described, including the feelings they have regarding English. These are followed by the results of their SWOT analysis and the two drawing tasks. Finally, the student's reasons for studying English and differences in teaching/learning are explained.

Student A: Mari

Languages: Mari is a 22-year-old student of international culture and teacher training studies. She knows Japanese, English and French and has started to learn Finnish and Korean while in Finland.

Background: Mari started learning English in junior high school at the age of 13. At the age of 15, she started at a private English conversation school where she studied for three years. She has also learned English through taking part in musicals. She is confident in Japanese and English and she would like to be able to talk about her studies at an academic level in English. She can use greetings in French and Korean, and carry out simple conversations in Finnish.

Feelings: Mari feels she is able to chat informally in English but says she is not able to have longer, more coherent discussions on a specific topic. Based on the interview, it was unclear whether she was referring to general or more academic topics. She feels her Japanese English teacher had beautiful pronunciation and she wanted to be like her teacher. Studying in Finland has made her realise that actually in Japan people are learning American English and she feels positive about "Japanese English" as she feels it is related to the Japanese identity. She would like to become a teacher but is constantly wondering if that is possible when she feels others are better at English than she is.

SWOT analysis: Knowing English enables her to learn more about studying English, as more papers are available to her on the topic in comparison to Japanese. It also enables her to live abroad. She finds it difficult to think about her weaknesses but not understanding what others say could be one. On the whole, thinking in terms of strengths or weaknesses seems to be challenging for her and not something she has given much thought to beforehand.

Language portrait: In her language portrait, Mari has chosen not to use any colours and she has written words in different languages either on the left-hand side or the right-hand side of the silhouette. On the left-hand side she wrote "soigine" which means "bye-bye" in her local dialect of Saga-ben. She wrote this word, which she uses with her family and friends, quite far away from the other words since at the moment she has a great physical distance from them. On the right-hand side she has written words in Finnish, English, Chinese and Japanese. These words consist mostly of greetings and ways of saying "thank you".
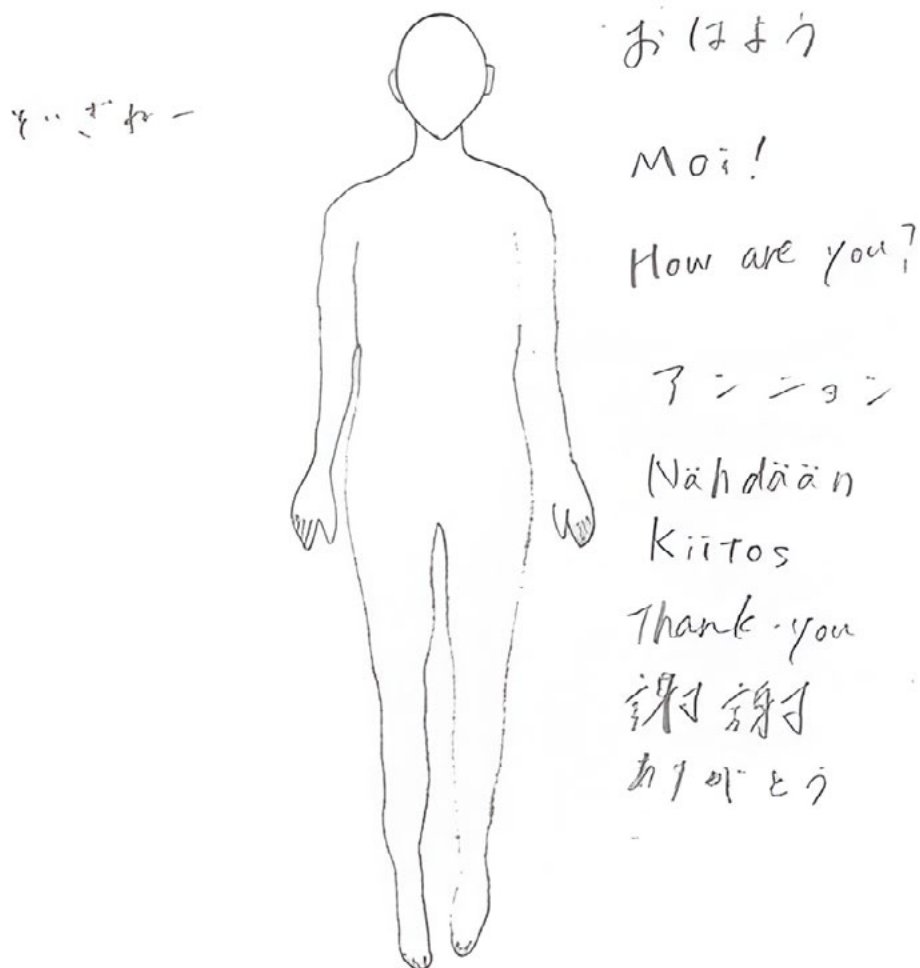
おはよう

Moi!

How are you?

アンニョン

Nähdään

Kiitos

Thank you

謝謝

ありがとう

おつかれー

Figure 1   Mari's language portrait

Learner portrait: In the second drawing, Mari has chosen not to use colours. In the middle of the image, she has drawn the shape of a human. The face is not visible, and it gives the impression that she has her back to us.

The area around her head is surrounded by flags of different countries (e.g., Finland, Japan, the USA, South Korea, China) and what appear to be thought bubbles, with one topic in each bubble, such as "job", "friends", "language", "study" and "life in Finland". She is alone in the picture and there is no visible communication in any direction. The drawing depicts her study life abroad, which would not be possible without English.

Figure 2   Mari's learner portrait

Reasons for learning: Mari wanted to learn English so she could use it as a business tool. Currently, it is a necessity for her because she lives in Finland and has to use it in her studies and with her flatmate. She would also like to become an English teacher, but she is not sure if her skills are good enough for that.

Differences in ways of learning English: Mari feels the focus of the English teaching in Japanese higher education is on testing skills, whereas in Finland the teaching is more communicative and includes discussions. After discussions, she tries to summarise what was said to help herself learn. In Japan, Mari did not have an opportunity to use English outside of the classroom, but here it is fun for her. However, she finds academic English hard to use.

Student B: Akito

Languages: Akito is a 22-year-old student of sports science. The languages he knows are Japanese, English and some Finnish, Chinese and Korean. The latter two he started learning in Finland.

Background: Akito started learning English at the age of nine when he was at school. He has learned English at school and by playing games. He went to a cram school for a few months when he was in junior high because of an entrance exam. He says he knows a little bit of Finnish and can talk about himself in Chinese and Korean. He uses English in situations where the other person's native language is English or when he is in situations where he can use English, such as airports, buses or public transportation as well as with friends from the university.

Feelings: Akito feels his reading and writing skills are on par with other Finnish and international students, but in comparison with them, he feels he cannot speak or listen "at all" and he says he is not good at "output" (production). He liked English in elementary school but he did not like it after that. Now that he has come to Finland, he says he does not hate it anymore although he feels he is not good at it, whereas Japanese comes naturally to him. He says he can express himself "in a rich and easy-to-understand way" in Japanese.

For Akito, the feelings are connected to his use of English outside the classroom. He says he feels happy when he is understood, for example, in schools where he goes to talk about Japanese culture, but then he is also frustrated when he is not understood because of his English skills. However, when he is in the position of learner, he says that "there is a lot of pure memorising and just doing, so there is no feeling, no emotional ups and downs, so you can't remember much."

Akito says that the change in language changes his personality in the sense that in English he becomes quiet and shy, even though he would like to talk more and that's why people think that he is a serious person. Living in Finland has made him realise that he was not used to using English, which made him feel that he does not know the language. He sees now that everybody makes mistakes, and he has become more willing to try out using English.

SWOT analysis: Akito feels he has a solid foundation in English based on the way he has been learning vocabulary and grammar, but he feels his weaknesses are speaking, listening and using English in real life. He is not used to using the language in practice and feels that preparing, thinking and translating from Japanese to English is too slow and that he cannot speak at the right moment. This makes him feel worried about making mistakes, which then reduces his willingness to speak. Because of the fear of mistakes he then gives up trying to speak in English and it makes him weak.

Language portrait: Akito is not sure what is expected of him when it comes to drawing the language portrait. Nevertheless, he makes a clear distinction as to where certain words belong, and why: things that are fun are connected to his heart and things that are connected to his head are difficult. He illustrates this by drawing lines to the points where the words belong. Words that come out of his mouth are either Japanese or then certain Finnish words such as "moi" (hi) or "kiitos" (thank you), since these are words he uses on a daily basis. English and Finnish do not come out of his mouth immediately, so he has drawn them on the top of his head, but Finnish takes up a smaller space since there is not as much information there in comparison to English. He marks coffee and basketball in the picture, since these are things he enjoys, and they are linked by lines to his hands and his feet. In comparison to other students' language portraits, it is interesting to see that in his portrait the language exists inside his body, similarly to the language portraits seen in Busch's studies of Peter (2013) and Pascal. Unlike in Busch (2013), however, the colours seem not to pay an important role and are not used inside the body to fill certain areas; instead, lines are used to indicate where different languages seem to belong.
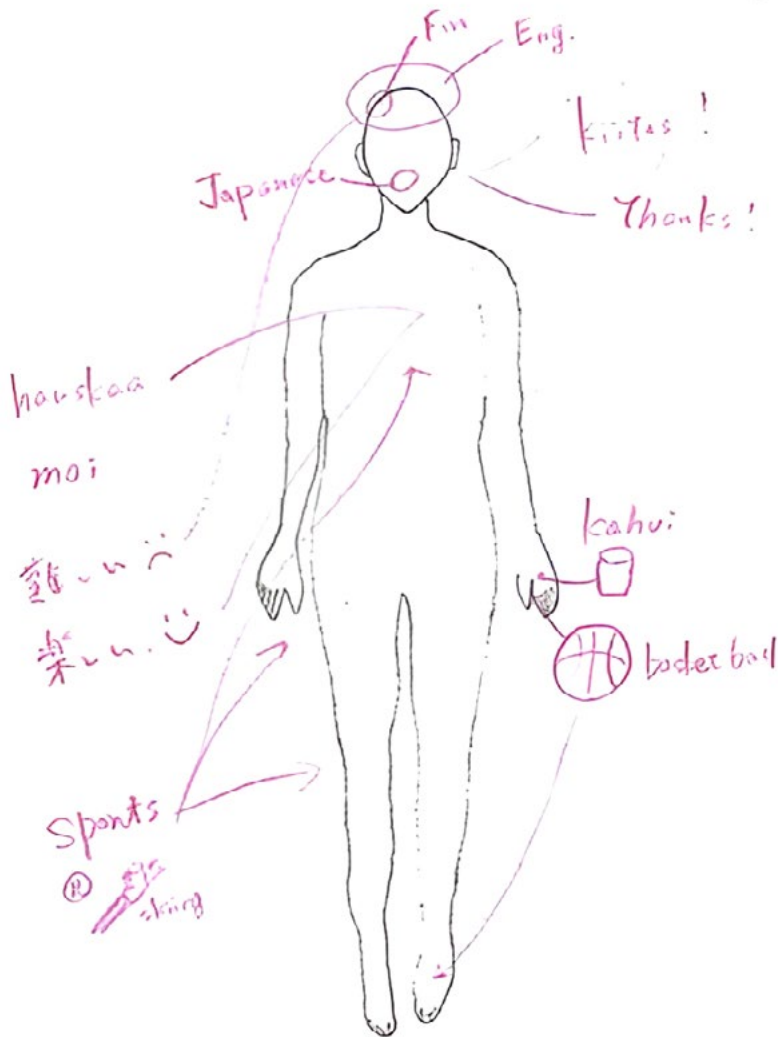
Figure 3   Akito's language portrait

Learner portrait: Akito's learner portrait has four parts: the first of them deals with feelings and he says he has a fear of failure. Even though he feels English can be fun and he enjoys playing sports as well as playing with children, the fear of failure plays a bigger role in his life. He believes that his lack of English skills causes his friends to see him as someone who is shy and does not speak a lot. Before coming to Finland, his studies included a lot of "input" but here he has had to produce the language more. He feels that throughout his school years his English has been improving but then at the university it worsened, but now it is improving again. Originally, he wanted to learn English to be able to study abroad but now he sees this from a broader perspective, wanting to use English in one way or another, and also to use it in working life after he has returned to Japan. He sums up his feelings saying, "I want to tell my past self that English is not something to be studied, but something to be acquired naturally."
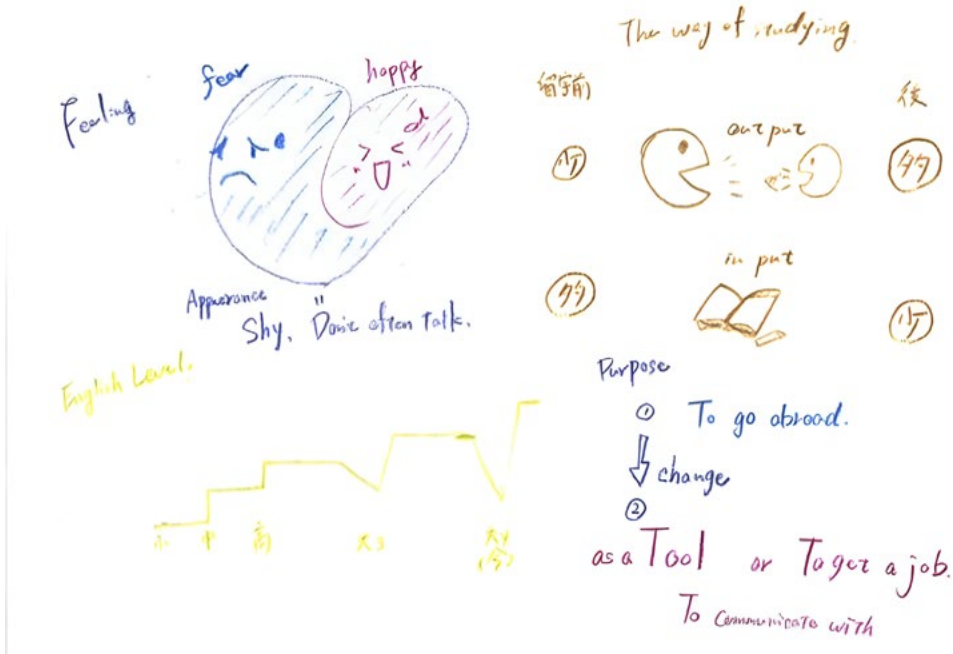
Figure 4   Akito's learner portrait

Reasons for learning: Akito sees English as a tool that enables him to speak with users of other languages. It is also a tool in the sense that it enables him to gather more information than he would be able to in comparison to just using Japanese or Finnish.

Differences in ways of learning English: Akito thinks the difference between the ways of learning English in Finland and in Japan has to do with "input" and "output". He feels that in Finland there are more discussions and presentations included in lessons whereas in Japan, grammar and vocabulary are considered important. He also notes there are no tests in Finland and that there are not many papers to write. Akito says he learns English in three ways: by studying textbooks, which is what he did in Japan; by using English as a tool when it comes to, for example, reading books; and by talking with people. For him, playing sports or playing with children is a good way to learn English because he feels he can use the language naturally and it is fun. The way he works now with English is that he translates what he hears from English to Japanese or paraphrases Japanese words into English, and he hopes that in the future he would be able to understand and respond in English.

Student C: Erina

Languages: Erina is a 21-year-old student of international relations. The languages she knows are English, Chinese, Finnish and Japanese (especially the Kansai dialect).

Background: Erina started learning English at secondary school at the age of 12. She has no experience of a cram school, but she mentions having learned a lot of English at university.

Feelings: In her opinion, Japanese is a difficult language and does not help in learning other languages but for her it is the best language to express herself. She says that Japanese people

are afraid of English and cannot speak it at all. Personally, she feels her English is better than those who live in Japan. She says she feels English is a "cute and charming" language. Even though she sees English as a communication tool, she says that it is "a tool to communicate emotions with friends and host families".

Thinking of languages, she says that she is very funny in Japanese. This is because she uses "interesting vocabulary and slightly difficult expressions" in her normal conversation, which makes her conversation distinctive in Japanese. In English, her lack of vocabulary prevents her from doing that and she uses a lot of body language instead when she feels she cannot use words to express herself. When she speaks English, she cannot express herself fully and feels she can express more in Japanese: "I speak English, but in my head there are many more Japanese phrases."

SWOT analysis: She looked at the strengths and weaknesses from a general point of view in Japan, and only after the two first points talked about her own perceptions. As a strength, she mentions that learning English can expand one's world tremendously, because then you are able to watch different movies and read books and magazines. She also says the content of films is different if it is dubbed. When it comes to weaknesses, she is not sure what can be called a weakness. However, she mentions how Japan is very competitive and that looking at test scores and deciding based on those whether you know English might be a weakness. From a more personal point of view, she says vocabulary is one of her weaknesses, since "it does not come out of my mouth easily", and she cannot understand it immediately. In Japan, she had opportunities to use English with tourists, since there are a lot of them in Kyoto, but in Finland she has the opportunity to use it all the time. She feels English can benefit her.

Language portrait: Erina seemed to like drawing and said that she enjoyed this type of activity. In her language portrait, she draws flags. The Japanese flag is large and almost completely covers her head and upper body. The Finnish flag is also large and starts above her right knee. On her left leg, below the knee, is a small Chinese flag. While these three flags are transparent and in front of her, there is also one flag which is behind her and not specific to any country; instead, it has the word "ENGLISH" written using different colours for different letters of the alphabet. Unlike in other students' portraits, some flags cover her body, but the silhouette is still visible underneath the flags.

She explains that the Chinese flag is small, because she has only just started to learn the language and feels she does not "understand a thing about it". Yet she does feel she has "a foot on the door" when it comes to learning it. The metaphor of legs continues with Finnish when she says that she has been able to dip her toe halfway into it. Finnish is all around her and she says that its scope is huge. Japanese, on the other hand, is "my base, my identity, my mother tongue" and that is why it covers half of her brain and her heart. She also explains why there is no easily recognisable flag with English. To her, it is not a language that belongs to the U.K. or to America, but instead it is a communication tool enabling her to communicate with people who are not American or British. She says, "People and I speak in English, so I have a multinational image."
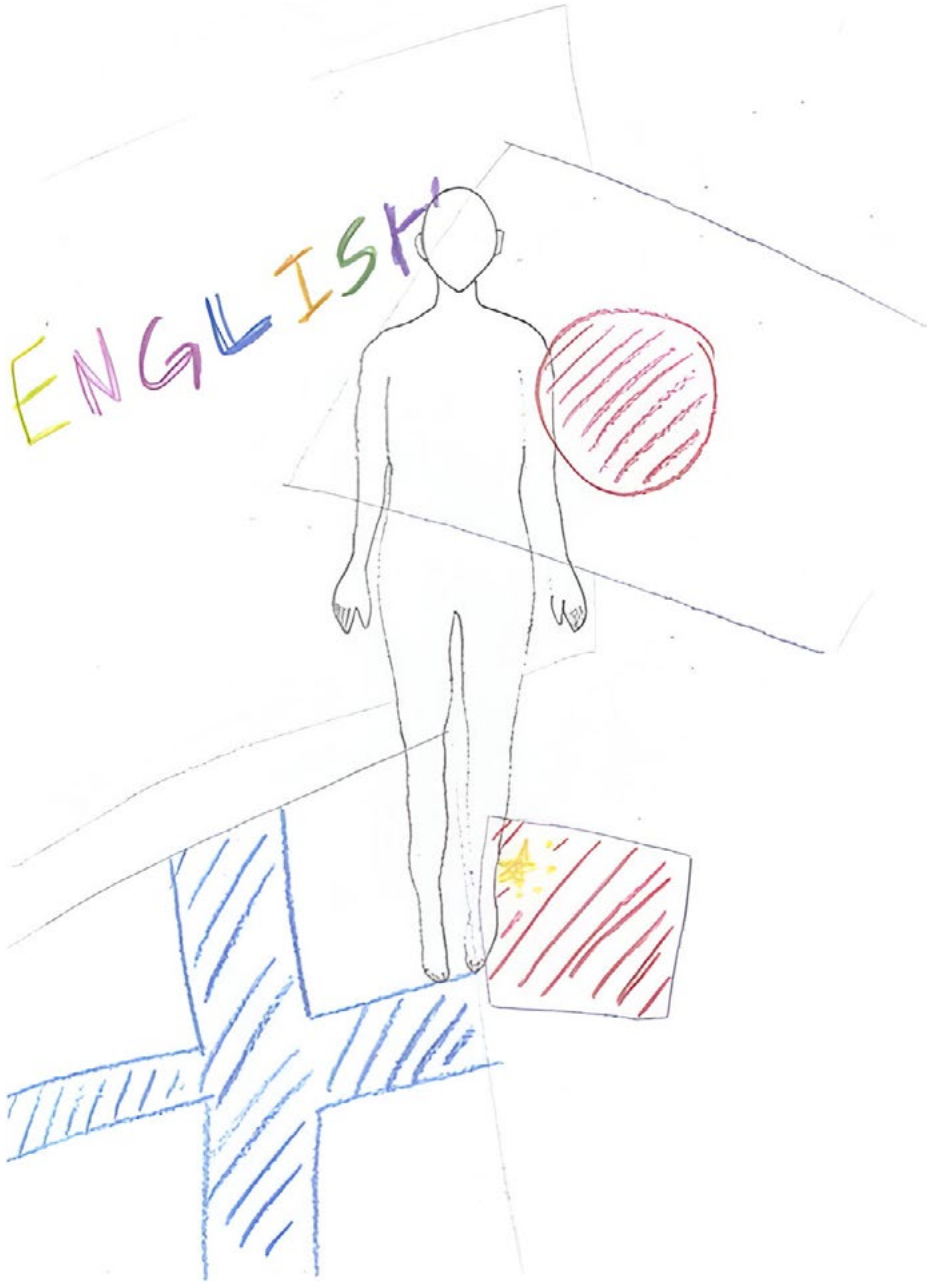
Figure 5   Erina's language portrait

Learner portrait: In her picture there is a character which resembles Pac-Man. There are two bubbles that seem like lines of thought which lead to a picture of a book, TED Talk and the word "CLASS". Then again, there are big and small colourful bubbles both coming in and going out of her mouth, but there are no words included in these bubbles.
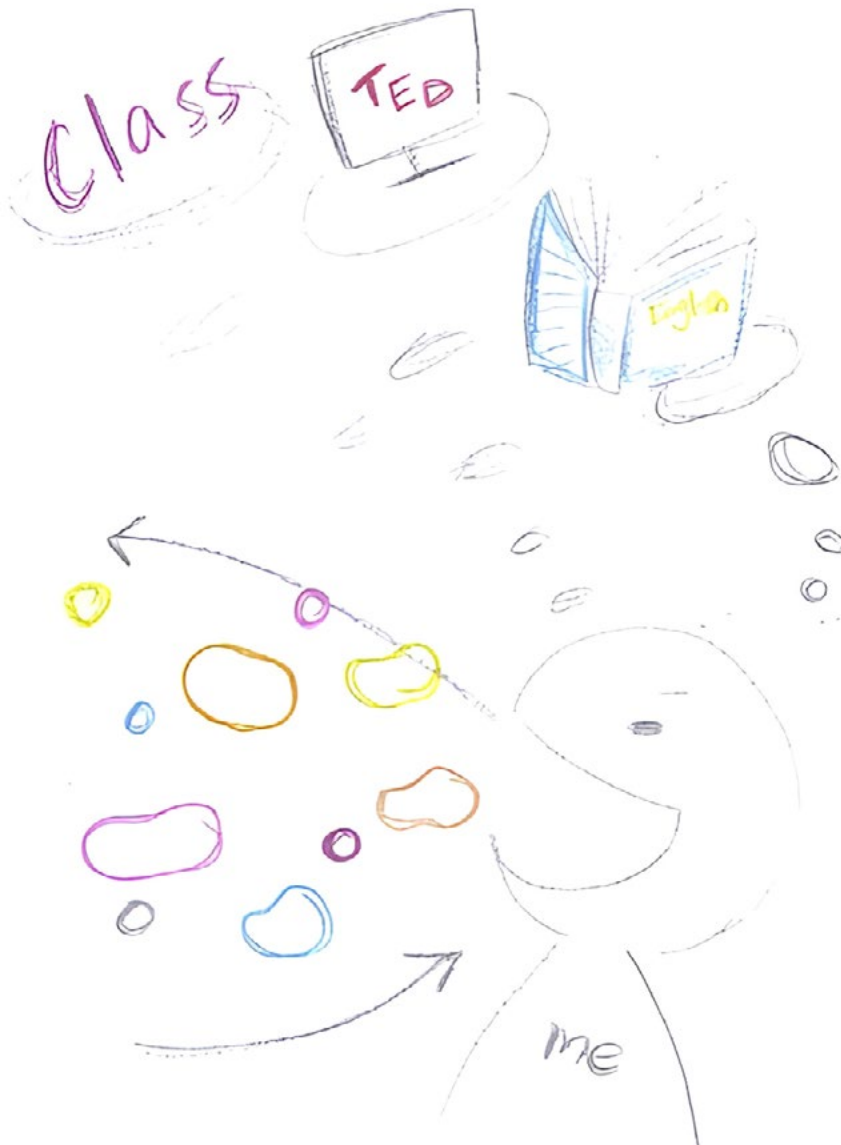
Figure 6   Erina's learner portrait

Reasons for learning: She says she needs somebody to push her or she will not feel motivated to study.

Differences in ways of learning English: She says that at school, learning English meant writing and memorising but that at the university there is more flexible ways of studying it. Yet she sees both ways as important because even though the university is a freer atmosphere, basic grammar and words are necessary. In Finland she has learned to use citations, and this has given her the impression of English as a demanding language.

Student D: Mina

Languages: Mina is a 20-year-old student from the Institute of International Language and Culture. The languages she knows are Japanese, English, Finnish and German. Japanese is her native language and she started learning English at the age of 9 at an English conversation school. She considers her English skills to be at the lower intermediate level and says that her English is above the Japanese standard. She studied German for a year at university and now she has been studying Finnish.

    Background: She started learning English by ear through songs. At that point she did not understand the content and had no knowledge of grammar, but when she started learning grammar in junior high school she was able to make connections between what she had learned at an English conversation school and the grammar she had learned in high school.

    Feelings: Japanese feels most natural to her, and she expresses herself most in Japanese. She likes English very much and enjoys communicating with people in other languages.

    SWOT analysis: She feels she has a strong heart and mentality, and that her pronunciation is good, and these are her strengths. However, she considers her academic skills in English, such as writing essays, to be her weakness. She thinks her reading is slow and grammar is "not very correct". When considering opportunities, she has no clear answer. She's been studying English for years, she says, and believes she does not have a lot to learn in terms of grammar, but she feels her speaking is not improving.

    Language portrait: The language portrait seemed to be difficult for her to do, since she repeatedly said 'e' while drawing it, an expression of confusion in Japanese. The drawing was done with coloured pencils. Unlike with the language portraits by Akito and Erina, she leaves the actual human shape in the picture untouched but draws the Japanese flag and the American flag on the left-hand side of the picture (so, on her right since the human shape is facing the reader) and the Finnish flag on the right-hand side. The Japanese flag is at the same level as her head, and underneath the flag there is a brush and a piece of calligraphy with the word 希望 (hope) written on a piece of paper. The American flag is at knee-level and underneath the flag there is an apple. On the other side, the Finnish flag is at the same level as her hand and underneath it there are three letters of the Finnish alphabet, namely *y*, *ä* and *ö*. All the flags are coloured, as is the apple, whereas the rest of the drawings are in black and white.

    She explains she chose to draw an American flag because in Japan she has learned American pronunciation, and she added the apple underneath the flag because she feels it is associated with America (she mentions New York as the Big Apple and the company called Apple). The letters *ä* and *ö* are letters in the Finnish alphabet that are not in English, and she added the letter *y* because she finds it hard to pronounce. The piece of paper with the Japanese word on it is there because of calligraphy, which is typically Japanese.
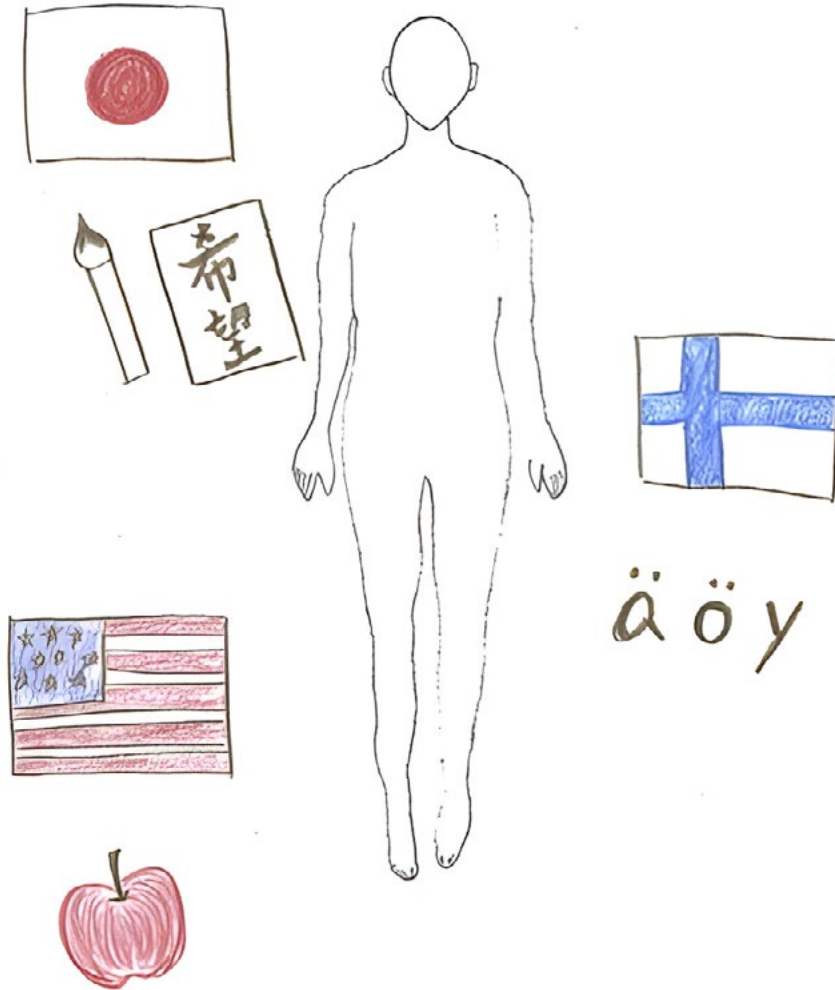
Figure 7   Mina's language portrait

Learner portrait: In her free-hand portrait she has drawn a profile of her head, and you can see inside her brain. The picture has big wide eyes and a closed mouth. In the middle with a red number one is an area labelled "nihongo" (Japanese). Below with a green number two is "English". "Suomi" (Finnish) has a small area at the top of her head and is missing a number. She has drawn them this way because Japanese always comes into her mind first, and English after that. This is true when she speaks English: the idea comes into her mind in Japanese, and then in English, so she thinks in Japanese first. With Finnish it is a different since she has learned it through English, so if she wants to say something in Finnish, she first thinks of it in Japanese, and then translates it into English and after that into Finnish, and the same way back. Despite her living in Finland at the time of the interview, Finnish does not get a number and she has written the word *Suomi* very small. In addition, even though she wants to learn languages to communicate with people, in the picture her mouth is closed even though her eyes are wide open.
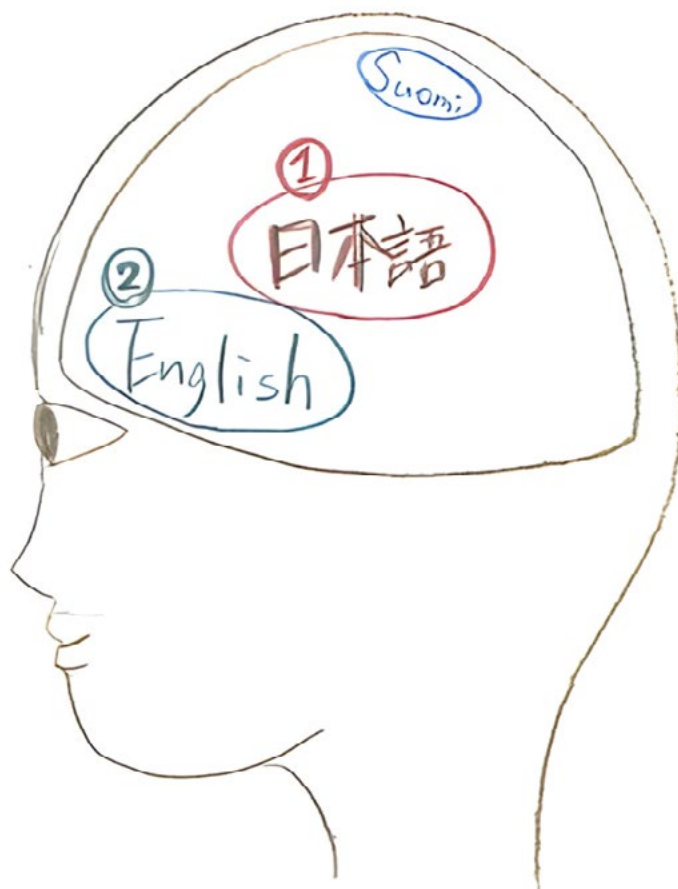
Figure 8   Mina's learner portrait

Reasons for learning: English is a means of communication for her, and she wants to use English to be able to talk to people from other countries.

Differences in ways of learning English: In Japan, English classes are mostly about grammar and writing, but in Finland she felt she needed a broader set of skills because she needs to be able to write, listen and speak. In her view, the Finnish way of learning has provided her with more practical skills. To her, speaking and listening are more important than reading and writing in order to survive. The best way of learning English, she feels, is to leave Japan and lead a life that is centred on English and using the language.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how Japanese exchange students see themselves as learners of English in Finland. This was investigated by finding out their previous experiences of learning English, their learner beliefs, what they find easy and difficult when learning English and why they are learning it.

Even though we cannot really compare the results of only a few students as such, we can consider the influence of their previous experiences of learning English. The strongest languages these students had were Japanese, which was their native tongue, and English, which was the first foreign language they had learned. Although they started learning English at different times and in different ways, many of these students felt confident about their English skills until they came to Finland. The differences in ways of teaching English in Japan and in Finland potentially play a part in this, since in Japan the focus is more on grammar and reading, whereas in Finland the university-level English courses focus more on the communicative side of the language.

The students' stay in Finland affected their learner beliefs by showing them that to be able to communicate, one does not need to have perfect grammar and that others, too, can get their message across even though their English is not perfect. Even though some of the Japanese students in this study may initially have felt shy about using English, they seemed to have been encouraged by the realisation that perfect English is not expected here. English proficiency is generally high throughout the Nordic countries, so the situation in Finland can be compared to that in, for example, Sweden. There, according to Siegel (2022), the Japanese exchange students were surprised by the high level of English proficiency of other students, including both Swedish-speaking students and exchange students from other countries, and talked about the feeling of inferiority and the challenges they had in keeping up with conversations with other students. In her master's thesis, Hirai (2011) mentions that Japanese exchange students studying at a Finnish university are motivated to join an exchange programme to be able to brush up their English skills outside Japan, and that in Finland they have gained more confidence and found new ways of communication. This situation may provide some links to Yashima's (2002) study, where an international posture increased the willingness to communicate despite the students' being located in Japan. Some links may also be found with Muroya's (2022) study where Japanese students' self-perceived linguistic competence had a greater effect on their willingness to communicate than did their actual linguistic competence.

The differences in the ways of teaching English in Finland and in Japan seem to have taken the Japanese students somewhat by surprise. These were reflected in what they found easy and difficult when learning the language. After arriving to Finland, some of them realised that other students' communication skills in English were better than theirs, leading them in some cases to feel shy about using English. Given that the focus in Japan has been on reading and learning grammar, the more communicative approach and the difference in the skill level in comparison to other exchange students provided Japanese students with a challenge they reacted to in different ways. Feelings play an important role in language learning and English as a language seems to have created both negative and positive feelings in these students even before they came to Finland. These results are in line with those found by Kaypak and Ortactepe (2014) among Turkish students of English, who eventually became more interested in communication than in being able to use the language perfectly.

Regarding the students' motivation, most of them saw English as a tool for either finding more information about a topic of interest or a tool that enabled them to study in the tertiary educational setting in Finland. The difference between academic use of English and everyday use of English seemed clear to the students and whilst many of the students said they could cope with the everyday use, many found the academic use of English challenging on account of not having much experience with it, especially spoken academic English. Recognising this

difference in the teaching of these students and finding ways to help them become proficient in the spoken language is something that should be taken into account while planning English courses for these students. For them, Japanese is a language they can use to express themselves whereas English has a tool-like quality.

Because the Japanese exchange students come to Finland on the basis of a bilateral agreement from certain universities only, it might be possible to highlight the difference in language learning to the students already at the stage when they have been accepted to the programme. Ways to advise and help them prepare for coming to Finland should be identified, even though the potential overlap in the Japanese university term in the summer and the Finnish university term in the autumn may complicate the preparations. However, new exchange students could be encouraged to, for example, listen to presentations containing academic vocabulary, such as TED Talks, podcasts, or various types of educational content on YouTube (e.g., talks or discussions by scholars on academic topics).

The use of visual methods to learn more about these students' learner beliefs provided some insight but also presented a number of challenges. In particular, clearer instructions might have been helpful to these students (see Barfield, 2021). Our original idea was to provide students with some freedom of choice, which is why the instructions were general ("Draw the languages in your life in this picture" or "Me as a language learner"), but it turns out some students were ultimately concerned about finding the right answer or solution, and it was not easy for them to understand that it was their answer we were after. All learner portraits are multimodal in the sense that in addition to the drawing, they also include differing amounts of text. Mari's learner portrait seems to be passive in the sense that her face is not visible, and the words included in the picture appear in what seem to be thought bubbles. Akito's drawing features four different parts, and it has a more active nature, in that it includes two people communicating with each other and a book and a pen as mediating artefacts. Erina's picture also includes mediating artefacts, such as a book, a screen with the word "TED" (referring to TED Talks) and the word "CLASS" in one of the thought bubbles. Despite the mediating artefacts and input/output symbols with arrows, she is alone in the picture. Mina's picture also includes just one person, and the languages are inside her head, and her mouth is closed. Mina's picture also contains no other people.

In general, it seemed that for these students, colours in the silhouettes did not have the same significance as the colours in, for example, Park Salo and Dufva (2018) or Busch (2013), where the participants gave the colours they used a more profound meaning, linking them with certain languages. In the Japanese students' drawings, the use of colours focused mostly on flags or then were predictable (e.g., the apple in Mina's drawing is red). Moreover, the importance of the surroundings in the second picture, "me as a language learner", seems to differ from those found in, for example, the drawings of Finnish Sign Language students (Kelly, 2009). The Japanese students' pictures have very little surroundings and what is there appears symbolic (such as how in Mari's picture there are flags) or technical (the book or screen in Erina's picture). In contrast, the Finnish Sign Language students' pictures emphasise the learning situation visually. The pictures of Finnish university students in Kalaja et al. (2008) fall somewhere between the two previous examples. They often depicted a recognisable person in their pictures, alongside various tools. The Japanese students in this study, however, have drawn mostly shapes or Pac-Man-type creatures in their learner portraits. These characteristics suggest that these Japanese students see English as something that surrounds them and that is accessible with various tools. It is also possible that they

ended up with this solution because they were not used to the kind of task in which they had to draw and include their feelings. Another question to consider is whether drawings made by hand are the best possible solutions for a task like this. Multimodal and digital tools could have provided a different outcome with Japanese students, who are generally familiar with the use of technology (see, e.g., Paiva & Gomes, 2019). Nevertheless, student drawings are the kind of tool that can provide us with information that is different than that provided by other methods, such as questionnaires.

When it comes to power relationships and language ideologies mentioned by Busch (2017), the importance of English both in students' studies and everyday communication was paramount, even though the students are located in Finland. The students also expressed interest in learning Finnish but, in practice, English is the most important language for them. The students' linguistic repertoire also included languages such as French, Korean and Chinese, for example, but the students' skill level in these languages did not seem to be very high.

Overall, visual methods have potential to get students to think about themselves as language learners, but it is also important that these methods are complemented by interviews in order to produce an accurate interpretation of the pictures and to provide the researchers with an opportunity to gain additional information. Nevertheless, the drawing gives the students a chance to look at language learning from their own point of view and enables them to have the freedom to include their own impressions without asking them questions about the topic of the picture first. Complementing the drawings with an interview can provide the teacher with insight into the way a particular student views different languages, their use and the learning process. This increases teachers' knowledge and understanding of their students and helps teachers take these issues into account, especially when they are dealing with students with cultural backgrounds that are different from their own. Because teachers are limited by their own language knowledge when asking about students' views on language learning, and since they may have to use English when it is the only mutual language, visual aids might help students express their views on learning English at times when their own capabilities of expressing themselves in English are not sufficient. However, our study sample was very small and the results cannot be generalised as such.

Conclusion

In this study, both visual and verbal methods were used to obtain information about the learner beliefs of Japanese exchange students in Finland. Even though the students were not necessarily familiar with drawing as a method and the result could depend on their creativity, the use of drawings added another dimension to the students' narratives. This, combined with interviews, provided a more comprehensive understanding of the learners' situation. Since beliefs and emotions in language learning are linked (Aragão, 2011), visual language portraits and learner portraits could offer a potential outlet for emotions. The drawings could provide a starting point for fruitful discussions between for example the learner and the teacher, offering the teachers better opportunities to understand the learners, thus giving the teachers possibilities to meet the learners' needs better and to create more inclusive learning environments for them. In addition to exchange students, this type of drawings could be helpful when working with various groups of learners to whom their language skills or their disposition may (for different reasons) hinder them from expressing themselves the way they would like to.

Acknowledgements

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