

## *Comparative Review of the Foreign Language Learning History of a Japanese and a Flemish-Dutch native Speaker*

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### **Abstract**

How we learn a foreign (second, third, fourth, ...) language contains diverse approaches. It depends on, to the great extent, each learner's personal background and aptitude such as the starting age, native language, motivation, goal(s), learning context, and life history. It is also dynamic, in the process of learning the target language, in a sense that 1) those previously mentioned factors can change longitudinally and 2) those factors are influenced by the community, society, culture and historical/geographical condition which the learner is originally attached to. What is reported in this qualitative research project is a twofold case study of two foreign language learners, one is a Japanese from Kobe, and the other is a Belgian from Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region). The former thus is a Japanese native speaker who also uses English and Dutch for her work and academic activities (together with her some knowledge of German, French and Afrikaans), and the latter is a Dutch native speaker who uses mainly Dutch, English and Japanese in business (with his background of learning Latin, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese). Through the observation and comparison of those two language learners – juxtaposing their similarities and contrasting the differences – we discover several pedagogical insights in language learning activities, which might be of help for those who struggle to learn foreign languages (specifically English as the first foreign language) in Japan. Also, some methodological indications are presented for English teachers in Japan who seek effective and efficient ways to guide their students.

Keywords: Language Learning, Learning Context, Personal Background, Individual Differences, Language Learning Experience, English Education In Japan

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## **Introduction**

Second (third, fourth ...etc.) language acquisition is not a straightforward goal to reach, and for that, diverse attempts and approaches have been implemented and still will be in the future. According to Atkinson, Rod Ellis regarded it as an enormously complex phenomenon, and it will benefit from a multiplicity of perspectives, theories, and research methodologies (2008). Atkinson cited the view of Swain and Deters (2007) as well in which they mentioned “a variety of alternative perspectives have blossomed, extending the boundaries of SLA, adding to and enriching its constructs and methodologies.”

This is a report of a twofold study of tracing back two participants’ personal histories of their language learning. The study is mainly based on the qualitative approach, by which we carefully retrace, observe, and analyze how they started learning their target languages, how it evolved, and what sort of effect this has brought to their life as the result. We aim, through that exploration, to find underlying clues to discover how some individuals approach new target languages as effectively and efficiently as possible when encountering them, and what we can distill from it as pedagogical implications in the field of SLA, some of which could be reflected in classroom practice.

## **Previous studies**

Dörnyei cited an interesting remark by Sternburg (2002) as below:

Much of what appears to be foreign-language learning aptitude may reflect a valuing process. In Belgium, those who learn Flemish as a first language are much more likely to learn a second and even a third language than are those who learn French as a first language. Why? Can anyone seriously believe that the difference is one of the language-learning aptitudes? Probably not. Rather, the difference is that of the perceived need for additional languages. There is a practical need for additional languages, and the languages are taught with this practical use in mind. (p. 19)

In fact, what Sternburg explained as “Flemish” is Dutch used in Belgium. It is one of the official languages of Belgium together with French and German (taalunie<sup>i</sup>, “the Dutch Language Union”, and Donaldson, pp. 4-7, 1983)<sup>ii</sup>. Dörnyei mentioned that the factors related to language learning achievements such as motivation, aptitude effect, individual differences and social setting demands are intertwined in diverse complexities and dynamics (p. 65 - 66).

The SLA field has mostly been developed and expanded centered around global English education, rather than “whatever second language” education. In this study, we cannot overlook this point, particularly when we observe how the two participants acquired the communicative ability to use English in their current daily lives. Saraceni stated that English is now habitually considered a global or an international language, namely “English everywhere” (p. 45, 2015). This was already recognized by Chrystal more than a decade before Saraceni’s findings (pp. 59-68, 2003). Willingly or not, the whole world lives in this reality, including Belgium and Japan. As Kumaravadivelu mentioned by citing Kaplan’s models (1966) of “Cultural thought patterns” (pp. 84-88, 2008), any country/region and their people now need to learn the English language

despite the enormous diversity in cultural and thought patterns. Naturally, this is not a straightforward task especially for those who are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In other words, it is more difficult for some people than for others to acquire the English ability, due to the differences in language and the peripheral circumstances under which they live. There is also a fear concerning cultural homogenization and maintaining their own cultural identities (Kumaravadivelu , pp. 93-94). Those are the factors that people in the so-called “expanding circle” by Kachru (Chrystal, p. 60-61) must face.

### **A twofold case-study**

In this study we have two participants whose language learning histories are dealt with. We call them AD and BM. The former (AD) is a Belgian (Flemish) industrial consultant operating his own business from Tokyo. The latter (BM) became an interpreter/translator and teacher of English at university in Tokyo, after raising her children and spending several years as a nearly fulltime homemaker.

AD majored in Computer Science in university and graduate school in Flanders, Belgium, and then, completed another Master-program in Computer Science in the USA (1982 - 83). He has developed his business in Tokyo with mainly Flemish corporate clients using his Dutch (L1), English and (mainly spoken) Japanese. BM majored in the English language and linguistics in university in Japan and obtained a Bachelor of Arts with the official teaching license of English for junior/senior high school issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Then she spent a year in a special program of a graduate school in the USA, studying Bilingualism and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in 1982 - 83. After spending many years as a homemaker in Europe and Japan, she went back to graduate school in 2005, and currently, she teaches various English classes in the Faculty of International Politics and Economics of a university in Tokyo while occasionally working as an interpreter of Dutch, English and Japanese for some European corporations and institutes. She also translates Dutch, English, German and French business-related documents, mainly into Japanese but sometimes also into English. See Table 1, to find out who they are.

	AD	BM
born and raised in	Flanders, Belgium	Kobe, Japan
L1	Dutch	Japanese
speaks	English, Japanese, German	English, Dutch
reads	English, German, French + some Spanish, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Japanese and Latin	English, Dutch, German + some French and Afrikaans

Table 1: Basic data of the target learners

The major method of research in this study was a set of interviews with the participants and a review of the records about the language learning events they have been through. From those pieces and elements of information, we can understand their evolution as language learners. This study is longitudinal and dynamic and is unique in the sense that it is very personal.

AD was born and raised in the suburbs of Antwerp, the largest Dutch-speaking City of Belgium (Donaldson, pp. 8-12). As a reasonable number of people around him at that time, his parents spoke German and French beside Dutch, their L1. They also read and understood a certain level of English. Flanders is right across England, and it was not unusual to see, in some towns, British army's soldiers. Furthermore, AD told that, although they have an hour time difference with UK, they had a cable TV network across Europe from early times, which enabled Flemish people, particularly children since infancy to follow, for example, BBC's TV programs. Also, Flanders being a relatively small region, there were many programs on TV that were made by German, French, American TV companies and that were broadcasted in Flanders with the use of subtitles. Taking quite a different stance from that of their neighbor countries such as France, Germany, and their domestic counterpart, Flanders has never employed the "dubbing" system, which inevitably leads the Flemish people to be continuously exposed to other languages like English.

When AD was a third grader of elementary school, he started learning French. AD explained that, because of the duality which his country had, it was "only normal" to have some simple French classes (Nishikawa-Van Eester & Van Eester, p. 69). AD continued that he remembers it was fun to have such a class in which no textbooks were used but they did attractive activities such as singing songs in French. It was obviously a pleasant memory.

He has an interesting background of the German language. His parents used to take their children to the German-speaking part of Switzerland for vacation where they enjoyed mountain walking. On arriving there, their parents immediately switched to German from Dutch, which their children got soon accustomed with. It was a natural behavior, in AD's view, that people use different languages according to where they live.

He recalled, somewhat nostalgically, that he and his young brother could go and buy ice cream by themselves during their summer vacations in Italy. His parents only imposed one condition: the children had to speak Italian to buy their ice cream. It was a stunning moment for the interviewer to directly follow those brilliant episodes in someone's boyhood. He himself feels that those happy memories are connected to his language learning experiences.

By the time AD went to junior high school in the 1970s, English had clearly replaced French in Europe. AD selected English as his third language after French. Meanwhile, he was in a course to take Latin, which was "an intellectual challenge" to the boy (Nishikawa-Van Eester & Van Eester, p. 70). Struggling with texts such as "Commentarii de Bello Gallico" provided him with a practice ground where he could read, think, analyze and understand what is written.

By the time when he went on to university and graduate school, he had learned French, English, German and Latin besides his L1, Dutch. His case is not really special as it followed a track prepared in official school programs.

BM was born and raised in Kobe, Japan. Kobe is one of the few cities in Japan where you can hear foreign languages in downtown. Yet, her family was perfectly monolingual, which was not abnormal at that time. They only spoke Kobe dialect,

which sounds quite different from Standard Japanese, based on the Tokyo accent. Standard Japanese was something you hear on TV and the radio, but nothing they could hear in real life.

As most of the children did those days, she started learning English when entering junior high. Most of the time was spent on grammar and reading during classes. However, she was lucky to have good teachers for those three years who gave their students time for “reading aloud” and “listening comprehension” as much as possible. Looking back, she thinks that she worked hard for the English classes because she liked those two activities very much. For the rest, most of the time was spent – practically – on the preparation for the entrance exam for senior high school.

The situation remained unchanged at senior high. English classes were organized to heavily stress on reading and grammar in order to squeeze the students into “good universities.” The school was a great fan of grammar-translation method, and it was essential for the students to “memorize” everything they learned. Often, how many words the students memorized was competed in class. On the other hand, in the reading class, BM found some activities quite interesting. For the entrance exams, the students read many essays and articles those days such as by Bertrand Russell. By this reading experience, she realized that reading and analyzing each sentence and passage fostered her analytical ability, and at the same time, it was a holistic comprehensive training. Later, she also recalled that, in the classes of Chinese classics (“kan-bun” in Japanese) it was quite similar to those English classes. By carefully tracking the logic, which is not that of Japanese, you are trained to stimulate your thinking ability. In that sense, it was very educational (Nishikawa-Van Eester & Van Eester, p. 81).

At university she learned basic German as a second foreign language and in the evening she joined another school (evening course) for three years and half. She was in the Faculty of English Literature during the day and in the evening, she was in a course of business English heavily focusing on oral communication. Nearly 100% of the teaching staff in the evening school were American missionaries. It was double schooling. After graduating from university, she joined a year program of graduate school in the US to study Bilingualism and TEFL.

After finishing the program, she flew to Belgium where she followed a Dutch course for three years, and then she learned basic French for two years. Meanwhile she taught Japanese (senior high level) at an international school.

Back in Japan, she stayed home for several years, and then she started a small translation business which later grew into translation and interpretation of mainly English, Dutch and Japanese. In the very end of 2004, she went back to graduate school and completed a Master’s program of TESOL and obtained a teaching certificate of “Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language.” She started teaching English courses at university in 2012.

	AD	BM
1968	started learning <b>French</b> at elem. school (5 <sup>th</sup> grade) for 8 years	
1970	started learning <b>Latin</b> at junior high for 6yrs (reading and grammar)	
1971		started learning <b>English</b> at junior high (1 <sup>st</sup> )

		grade) (till graduate school)
1972	started learning <b>English</b> for 4 yrs	
1974	started learning <b>German</b> at senior high for 2 yrs	
1977		started learning <b>German</b> (only reading) as a 2 <sup>nd</sup> foreign language at university for 2 yrs
1981	started learning <b>Spanish</b> for 1 yr (evening school) in Brussels	
1982	- joined a Master' program in Computer Science in the US after obtaining a Master in CS in Belgium	- graduated from university in Japan - obtained the official license of teaching English at the junior/senior high level in Japan - joined a special year-program (Bilingualism and TEFL) at graduate school in the US.
1983	- back in Belgium after obtaining his second Master's degree in the US - started working as an engineer (tele-communication) - started learning <b>Japanese</b> in Flanders	- back from the US. - started learning <b>Dutch</b> (evening school) in Flanders, Belgium, for 3 yrs (senior high level)
1984		- started teaching Japanese at an international school in Belgium, for 3 yrs (senior high level) - started teaching English (private business)
1986		started learning elementary <b>French</b> (evening school)
1989	started following a <b>Japanese</b> intensive course for 6 wks in Japan	
1994		started working as a translator (freelance) in Japan
2004	starting a consulting business	back in graduate school majoring in TESOL
2005		obtained the certificate of Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language
2007		- obtained the Master's degree in TESOL - started learning (self-learning) <b>Afrikaans</b> for several wks
2011	started learning <b>Portuguese</b> in Tokyo for 1 yr	
2012		started teaching English classes in university

Table 2: The language learning histories of the two participants

### Discussion and pedagogical meanings of language learning

As seen in Dörnyei's statement earlier, there are many learning contexts of languages. In this study, we looked at two individuals who are from contrastingly different backgrounds. To see the difference, see Table 3 that is a comparison of Flanders and Japan.

	Flanders, Belgium	Japan
Geography	Continental, Crossroads of Europe, Northern part of Belgium	Island(s)
No. of people	Flanders (Dutch-speaking): 6 Mil	126 Mil

No. of native speakers of the language	Worldwide Dutch: 20 Mil (Flanders, the Netherlands, Suriname, etc.) ⇒ “de taalunie” (“the Dutch Language Union”)	126 Mil
Need for foreign languages	Matter of survival (for business, for leisure) in daily life	Maybe no real, strong need in daily life?
Basic approach	Practical, Realistic and Natural	Big TESOL market

Table 3: Flanders (Belgium) vs. Japan

As the heart of Europe, Flanders receives many visitors from outside and handles active communication with people from outside. It is easy to imagine how busy “comings and goings” are. Surrounded by German, French and English-speaking areas, the population of Dutch speaking Belgians is merely six million. Even adding all the Dutch native speakers worldwide, it is twenty million. Because of this fact, the Dutch speaking countries and regions sustain an organization, “taalunie, the Dutch Language Union” (<https://taalunie.org/>). The language group is so small that the members make efforts towards two opposite directions: promoting their language strongly and accepting other languages, especially a powerful one (Kumaravadivelu, p. 94). Because English is the most powerful language, the group has no choice but learning it. Furthermore, they need English in daily life, which means they need “practical” English. The communication in English should be preferably as natural as possible. In such a case, grammaticality and accuracy do not really matter because the top priority of using the target language is to have smooth communication with others.

BM recalled that the first things she and her classmates learned in the Dutch class were how to ask for help when in trouble and explain what they wanted and why. When she was learning French, one of the model conversations or skits was “how to complain about what you don’t appreciate in a hotel room you got while traveling in France” and she found it quite impressive because that would never show up in the early chapters in the French class in Japan. Through this kind of experiences, she realized that that is the way they teach the target language(s) in Flanders. They teach the target language so that their students can use it, not just to pass the exam at school. In Japan, people spend so much money on “English conversation schools” after finishing university’s program. The fact you do so is a clear indication that people have no occasion to use English and to do something meaningful with it in everyday life.

Related to this practicality-issue, we can remember the Italian episode told by AD. His parents gave their little boys some pocket money and told that they could go and buy ice cream. But for that, they had to speak Italian, and that is something you remember even after grown up. This is certainly an effective way to learn a language. Also, spending vacations in a German speaking area in Europe is a good way to learn German. It is clear, but it is difficult as far as you live in Japan. Japan once even took advantage of this geographical fact and closed the entire country (1640-1853) except for a few special places such as “Dejima” in Nagasaki, an artificial island for the Dutch (Seargeant, p. 69). The psychological distance is affected by the physical one, meaning that if you choose an ideal image that is quite different from yourself, you might try to be like your ideal model, but it is not you after all. You feel it is normal that you cannot fully achieve the goal; all you can do is trying to get the model as close as possible. This is one of the problems associated with “English-native-speaking teachers” in school curriculums.

It is interesting that AD regarded studying Latin as an intellectual challenge. He further explained “Latin grammar is quite complex but reasonably well structured.” This is similar to the experience of BM when she learned 1) Chinese classics and 2) had to read sophisticated and elaborated essays such as by Russell. She felt that her analytical ability was steadily growing by trying to re-organize the structure of each sentence

There is an interesting analysis by Yoshida when he explained the learning context of Japanese learners of English (Lee & Han, 2006). Yoshida was a keynote speaker at an international conference of TESOL where he advocated his “Fish Bowl vs. Open Seas model” (2001). Table 4 is a rough sketch of his theory. Yoshida described Japanese EFL learners as fish in a fish bowl while general ESL learners in more authentic ESL contexts are compared to fish in the open seas swimming around freely (p. 196).

Applying Yoshida’s model to our study, BM’s case is compared to a fish in a fish bowl, and AD to a fish in the open seas. The former is a Japanese learner and the latter is a Flemish.

	Fish Bowl	Open Seas
Reliance on others	Teacher-centered, passive learning	Student-centered, learners’ autonomy, active learning
Preservation of ideal environment	Intolerance of errors, use of external role models (such as native speakers of English)	Tolerance of errors, use of role models similar to the learners
Isolation	No language borders	Tight isolation (language barrier)

Table 4: Yoshida’s “Fish Bowl” model vs. “Open Seas” model by Nishikawa-Van Eester

In Yoshida’s theory, he postulated six major aspects that account for the weakness of the Japanese EFL context holds. They are: 1) reliance on others, 2) passive learning in teacher centered class, 3) intolerance of linguistic errors, 4) limited learning environment, 5) undermining the importance of communication, and 6) limited role of English as a school subject. Contrastingly, the open seas model holds the characteristics as the following: 1) learners’ autonomy, 2) tolerance of errors, 3) authentic learning environment, 4) emphasis on cross-cultural communication, and 5) communication skills with other learners from diverse cultural backgrounds (p. 203, Lee & Han, 2006).

We can see Yoshida’s own words and phrases in his proceedings, how English is taught in Japan and Flanders, respectively (pp. 196-197, Yoshida, 2001).

Here are the summaries of the characteristics of each model:

[Fish Bowl]

Reliance on others: Teacher provides all material, activity, Students learn passively  
 Preservation of an ideal environment: Errors not tolerated, Other (“native-speaker”) model used

Isolated, artificial living environment: Communication not required, Meaningful only in limited context

[Open Seas]

Reliance on self: Fish must find appropriate water to live in

Fish must find their own food to eat

Adaptation to existing environment: Fish must adapt to existing water quality

Fish must adapt to existence of fungi and other foreign substances

Fish must find food provided by environment

Coexistence in a natural habitat: Fish coexists with other fish and animals

Fish shares natural environment

We can recognize suggestive, and profound pedagogical implications in Yoshida's proceedings, and we should keep these in mind when teaching English in Japan. Yoshida further suggested that, in order to change the current Japanese EFL contexts, we need to shift to the Open Seas model from the Fish Bowl model; however, he pointed out at the same time that this means changing the basic nature of EFL learners into autonomous learners (p. 197). This is a fundamental and revolutionary change that is closely related to the nature of the Japanese students. Moreover, this has to do with the educational system in Japan that focuses on selecting students via university entrance exams in which English is a subject to select "good students."

## **Conclusion**

Two stories of language learning provide us with an occasion to think about a number of questions on learning languages. Why do we learn new languages? How can we reach the goals we set for ourselves? What do we want to do once we achieve the goals?

We go back to the motivation issue by Dörnyei. What motivates us to learn (a) new language(s)? Does everybody have a motivation to start learning English in Japan? Maybe some students cannot find the motivation anywhere in their mind; they study English because it is a major school subject. They might study English merely to pass the university entrance exams. In that case, there is no room in the student's head for variables such as "willingness to communicate" (Dörnyei, p. 207) and/or the "ideal L2 self" (ideal language self) (pp. 105-106), which might help the learner's future life. If the learners do not get occasions to imagine what would be possible by using English in the future, they miss something.

The two learners showed that they were not just sitting to learn passively. Through many activities, they made sure that learning the target language is fun and experienced that language learning is rewarding in many aspects in their life. As AD stated, from early on in his life he faced the reality that different people speak different languages (Nishikawa-Van Eester & Van Eester, p. 73) and the Flemish people adjust themselves to the situation in which they live. It is a matter of survival. He further stated as follows: "Learning a language" has never been a goal in itself but it is a means to achieve another goal, and "Language learning is not difficult" (p. 93).

BM feels also that knowing more languages leads people to richer lifestyles. She hopes that her students will study and use English so that they will have more alternatives in their future lives, and they will lead fruitful lives through the

experience of language learning. She thinks that that is one of the teacher's functions in Japan.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://taalunie.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> Donaldson, digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlands letteren (2013).  
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