This paper presents a longitudinal investigation of L2 learning motivation in undergraduate students taking English courses at one university in West Japan. The objectives of the study were threefold: first to investigate the development of individual motivational trajectories over time; second to identify ‘critical incidents’ in students’ past experiences with English that may help explain differences in initial orientations; and third to attempt to relate those orientations to eventual L2 learning outcomes. In a mixed-methods design the study adopted a two-stage procedure: Stage 1 employed a self-report survey to measure motivational orientations at two time points: once at entry to the university and again after completion of the two-year compulsory core English program. This was subsequently used to produce individual ‘motivational profiles’ that tracked four previously established dimensions of motivational orientation: Internationalism; Grade-Orientation; Attitudes to Native Speakers; and Interest in English media; along with TOEIC scores submitted over two years. Stage 2 then used narrative elicitation with selected students to highlight ‘critical incidents’ in their experiences with English, both before and during their time at the University. To facilitate fullest possible participation, interviews were conducted in the students’ L1 (Japanese) by a near-peer research assistant. The outcome of Study 1 was a set of longitudinal profiles that show remarkable consistency over time (i.e. reliability) and are therefore thought useful for drawing comparisons between individual cases. Stage 2 then facilitated interpretation of the profiles in relation to dominant themes that emerged from narrative accounts provided by the students. Overall, the study is thought to provide strong insights into the formative processes underlying motivation in Japanese EFL learners.

Keywords: motivation, EFL, university.