University students and current/future English discourse community membership

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L2 learner identity has been informed by the paradigms of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), imagined selves (Wenger, 1998), and ideal selves (see Dornyei, 2005). Although much research has been conducted on the L2 identity of individual language learners, comparatively less research has been carried out on individual language learners’ L2 identity as members of discourse communities and especially their relationship to other members of their L1 and L2 discourse communities.

Contrary to Markus (2006), university language learners may not be able to envision future English discourse community membership and may instead perceive English as a classroom-bound discourse community. They may lack connections and a sense of identity vis-a-vis other L1/L2 English discourse communities. Data from students (n=106) at a private university in Japan will be presented and discussed. Students reported their motivations and future objectives after joining a competitive English program via a questionnaire while a 10-item survey instrument assessed their perceived membership as – and in relation to – other members of English-speaking discourse communities.

In this presentation, previous findings will be further enriched by semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted as a follow-up. While the learners had concrete motivations for joining the program, their sense of membership as English speakers was less developed, particularly in relation to L1 English speakers. Thus, research-based recommendations for developing stronger L2 discourse community identities for language learners will also be presented.


Keywords: motivation, L2 identity, discourse community.