

What Less-Proficient EFL Learners Tell Us about Their Language Learning: Qualitative Analysis of Self-Regulated Learning*

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This paper aims to explore the characteristics of self-regulated learning from information gained in post-questionnaire interviews, with special emphasis on the differences between low-proficiency learners and high-proficiency learners. Self-regulated learning is a cyclical process to metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally boost learning performance (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Fukuda (2018a) quantitatively revealed the motivational and cognitive differences of self-regulated learning skills between the low- and high-proficiency groups, showing that self-regulated learning significantly influenced language learning achievement, which is consistent with most other studies. However, those have not addressed less-proficient learners enough to understand how they perceive self-regulated learning. Seven low-proficiency learners and ten high-proficiency learners participated and were selected based on a questionnaire regarding self-regulated language learning. The researcher adapted semi-structured interviews based on the factors in the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). The results showed the obvious characteristics that the less-proficient learners possessed. Interviews consistently revealed that the less-proficient learners had a peculiar self-regulated learning attitude that was different from the more-proficient learners. Because the less-proficient learners strongly emphasized the outcome of the exams or performance compared to others, they tended to rarely feel successful in their English education experience, which seemed to cause them to give up learning English and make them reluctant to ask teachers for help. These tendencies demonstrated the importance of teacher encouragement of learner motivational satisfaction and the promotion of the use of various metacognitive strategies.

Keywords: self-regulated learning, less-proficient learners, interview, MSLQ, self-efficacy

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1 Introduction

Currently, the concept of self-regulated learning (SRL) has received much attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Oxford, 2017). This has been accelerated by Dörnyei (2009), who argued the necessity of a shift from the study of learning strategy to a broader rationale. SRL is assumed to be the cyclical process that includes forethought of the task, control of the performance, and self-reflection of the performance voluntarily and actively (Pintrich, 2000). SRL contains cognition, motivation, behavior, and context of regulation; the concept of SRL understands the learner holistically, integrating the variables that were previously subdivided (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Previous researchers have found that the differences in SRL relate to the different levels of learner proficiency. For example, the examination by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1988) confirms the cause-effect model between SRL and academic achievement. That is, the higher level of SRL skills learners have, the more proficiency they might obtain. Although these studies successfully supported the hypothesis that successful language learners have the ability to conduct their learning in a self-regulatory manner, there have been limited studies focusing specifically on less-proficient learners. One of the reasons that low-achieving learners reject joining such investigations may be their unwillingness to expose how *lacking* they actually are (Yoshida, 2012). The current paper focuses on the attitudes of less-proficient learners to expand upon the work of Fukuda (2018a). The author conducted post-questionnaire interviews with those who originally had a willingness to join the study to relieve the participants' burdens. To this end, this study aimed to describe the significant characteristics of less-proficient language learners compared to that of more-proficient language learners through the viewpoint of SRL, whose flexibility gives us multiple perspectives (Dörnyei, 2009).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Self-regulated learning and high achievement

Given the many references by educational psychologists, self-regulated learners are assumed to attain a high level of academic performance (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990), set appropriate goals to complete a targeted task (Moeller, Theiler, & Wu, 2012), and commit and make efforts to learn even when they get bored or have problems (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). These cognitive activations are maintained by a high level of motivation. Motivation includes not so much the affect as the self-motivation beliefs, such as goal orientation and self-efficacy (Pintrich, 2000). Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, and MacKeachie

(1991) explained goal orientation as a perception of the reasons to engage in a task; it can be divided into two types—intrinsic goal orientation is to learn English as challenge, curiosity, and mastery, whereas, extrinsic goal orientation is for grades, rewards, and positive evaluation by others. In the situation of SRL, intrinsic value is known to contribute to self-regulatory learning (Kanat & Kozikoğlu, 2018). However, extrinsic goal orientation is considered the means to an end, so that it has the power to improve English skills only for short-term achievement (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

There are studies that proved self-regulatory skills positively affect second language (L2) performance. Through a questionnaire specifically focused on vocabulary learning, Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt (2006) theorized that highly self-regulated learners performed better on vocabulary tests than less self-regulated learners. In terms of listening proficiency, Vandergrift (2005) examined the relationship among metacognitive awareness, one of the SRL skills, the motivation of self-determination framework, and listening proficiency. He demonstrated that students' listening proficiency was significantly correlated with their motivation levels, which subsequently affected their use of metacognitive awareness. Csizér and Tanko (2015) investigated the relationship between self-concept and SRL in academic writing. They offered results that indicated that students who had a higher academic writing ability used significantly more SRL strategies, demonstrating a higher level of self-efficacy to lower levels of anxiety. These participants were also advanced L2 learners who majored in English and took classes requiring them to write an academic essay in English. Previous studies have contributed the exploration of the relationship between SRL and L2 general proficiency, specific skills, and other factors such as L2 Motivational Self System Theory (Kormos & Csizér, 2014). It might be true that skillful L2 learners such as those in the Csizér and Tanko (2015) study give us clues to how L2 is learned efficiently, how difficulties are overcome while learning, and how L2 learners become fluent. However, we need to shed light on the actual L2 learning situation faced by less-proficient learners.

2.2 The focus on unsuccessful learners

As Rubin (1975), who originated a study of good language learners, stated that successful language learners provide us the opportunity to learn how they become good at L2. Yet, there are few studies that have explored the characteristics of “unsuccessful” language learners, although Vann and Abraham (1990) conducted pioneer work, exploring how and what kinds of learning strategies unsuccessful learners used throughout a think-aloud protocol and task production. They argued that the number of strategies might be irrelevant in predicting whether L2 learners would succeed or not; rather, how they used them would be more important. As per their assumptions, two unsuccessful learners showed different cognitive strategy

usage and a lack of metacognitive strategies. What was novel in their study was that the method of data collection was not retrospective (i.e., a questionnaire) but introspection (i.e., a think-aloud protocol). They successfully elicited data, combined with several methods to collect data, which concluded that not all unsuccessful learners' strategies could be elucidated.

In a study focusing on learner affect, Xiao (2012) characterized the affective traits of successful and unsuccessful Chinese EFL learners in distance learning. An interview elicited a different type of motivation that unsuccessful learners felt extremely often—extrinsic motivation (e.g., heavy coursework) and the fact that they only learned English because it was demanded by their university. Also, unsuccessful learners did not have the confidence to learn English well, and they claimed that the reason for their slow progress in English was due to external conditions (e.g., taking care of children). His study revealed that distance language learning surely requires affective attributions, emphasizing the affective characteristics that successful learners possessed.

Nikolov (2001) qualitatively investigated a learning experience of low-achieving learners from a perspective of various foreign language (FL) motivation. She recruited 94 participants to answer, in a questionnaire, eight research questions concerning learning environments, such as materials and teachers. They appeared to have heterogeneous learning experiences, and they had potentially different perceptions of language learning. One of her inclusion criteria was that participants thought themselves unsuccessful, but the meaning of “unsuccessful” varied, and some of them had a high proficiency for second or third languages.

Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyon (2004) reported that 18 Chinese EFL learners showed successful and unsuccessful traits from the self-directness perspective. Using a grounded theory approach, clear differences in attitudes on learning, beliefs about university classes, learning strategies, and motivational experiences emerged. They distinctly captured the fact that unsuccessful learners had negative feelings about learning English and skill-specific beliefs, especially, placing a focus on vocabulary skills. They also simply memorized vocabulary without context, that is, all these experiences brought them to ambiguous objectives and filled them with anxiety or pressure about the proficiency tests. Gan, et al. (2004) revealed a deep relationship between self-directness and the attainment of English proficiency, which led to a deep understanding of the attitudes of unsuccessful learners. However, the description of the learners still largely focused on successful learners, as if the successful learners were a model of language learners as a whole.

There are studies comparing successful and unsuccessful learners as described above; however, almost all of them focused on the descriptions of strength that successful learners possessed and how they succeed in language

learning. Millroad (2001) argued that unsuccessful learners have a hidden history related to language learning experiences beyond the pain connected to being branded as a loser. He criticized the educational suggestions for instructors to face unsuccessful learners:

One suggested way to find the solution is to study the strategies of “good language learners,” and to direct the attention of unsuccessful learners to how the successful students arrive at their results. But have you ever tried how “comfortable” it is to wear other people’s shoes? ... Yet, not much attention has been given to the unsuccessful learners who are making efforts to stop being failures. (pp. 405-406)

As he remarks, it may be difficult to understand how to be a good language learner or teach effective SRL strategies that successful learners use to unsuccessful learners. Rather, teachers must understand the characteristics of the unsuccessful learners themselves. In fact, there is little research of unsuccessful EFL learners from the viewpoint of SRL. Therefore, the present study focuses on the characteristics of SRL by less-proficient¹ learners compared to that by more-proficient learners in order to confirm the quantitative differences between the two of them in Fukuda (2018a) and to elicit covert reasons why they do or do not self-regulate.

2.3 The quantitative difference between low- and high-proficiency learners

Fukuda (2018a) investigated the relationships between SRL and L2 proficiency, and she identified the six factors that were significantly different between the low- and high-proficiency groups: (1) self-efficacy, (2) intrinsic goal orientation, (3) task anxiety, (4) metacognitive strategies, (5) effort regulation, and (6) coping with problems. Self-efficacy and intrinsic goal orientation are considered the cores of the SRL (Pintrich, 2000) that provoke the cognitive strategies leading the process of SRL. On the contrary, test anxiety is known to have a negative influence on achievement (Zheng & Cheng, 2018); the less anxious learners feel, the better scores they might attain. As the results in Fukuda (2018a) showed, less-proficient learners had

¹ This paper uses a term “less-proficient/low-proficiency” learners instead of “unsuccessful learners” because the research does not examine learners’ L2 achievement. Rather, it focuses on how the differences in proficiency makes a difference in SRL, comparing “low” or “less” with “high” and “more” proficient learners. In addition, the participants in this study were all freshmen and could not be labeled “successful” or “unsuccessful” at this point.

significantly lower levels of self-efficacy, intrinsic goal orientation, metacognitive strategies, effort regulation, and coping skills, and a higher level of test anxiety.

However, her study reinforced the doubt that only three motivational factors (i.e., 1-3 above) did not influence L2 proficiency directly, but did so indirectly (Fukuda, 2018b). Thus, it is not clear to what extent different characteristics of SRL are inherent among L2 learners. To deeply understand where these differences originate and to precisely characterize the traits of SRL by less-proficient learners, qualitative procedures are encouraged (Crosswell, 2008). Therefore, the present study aimed to focus on these six factors squarely, and reveal how less-proficient L2 learners behaved as self-regulated learners.

2.4 Problems and research question

The current study pursued an objective to elicit the SRL characteristics of less-proficient L2 learners that lends substance to the quantitative observations in Fukuda (2018a, 2018b). In the light of the understanding of learner development and a lack of studies focusing on unsuccessful learners, it is necessary to uncover the less-proficient language learners' attitudes from the viewpoint of SRL. To this end, the interview after a questionnaire was conducted to reveal the characteristics of SRL that less-proficient learners possess regarding the six motivational and learning strategic factors, which obtained significant differences. Through comparison with high-proficiency learners, the SRL attitudes of less-proficient learners will be vividly described. Therefore, the research question is set as: How are the motivational and learning strategic attitudes in self-regulated learning by less-proficient EFL learners characterized compared to those of more-proficient learners?

3 Research Method

3.1 Participants

Seventeen Japanese EFL learners participated in this study (male = 4, female = 13). They all were university freshmen. To elicit the clear-cut explanation about SRL, using learners' standard deviations (SD) was judged plausible to select interviewees who had extremely high or low SD scores. Based on their SD of the questionnaire's score, 29 students were contacted via email for an interview; 17 of out of the 97 participants who answered the questionnaire conducted by Fukuda (2018a) accepted the offer with seven being less-proficient learners and ten being more-proficient learners.

Given the details of each proficiency group, it was found that students in the low-proficiency group (hereafter, L Group), majoring in literature and law, had never experienced studying abroad. Their years of learning English ranged from 6 to 11; thus, they started learning English from junior high school or from elementary school. The scores of their latest TOEIC exams were self-reported as being between 195 and 441². On the other hand, students in the high-proficiency group (hereafter, H Group) had learned English for 6 to 13 years (some of them started learning English before compulsory education), and two of them had studied abroad. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 620 to 680. Individual information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Summary of Interviewees' Information

Low Group						High Group					
ID	G	M	Y	E	S	ID	G	M	Y	E	S
L6	M	LI	8	-	415	H3	F	LI	13	-	640
L28	F	LI	6	-	441	H9	F	IC	13	-	680
L44	M	LI	6	-	195	H14	M	SC	13	1	655
L46	F	LA	6	-	340	H18	F	IC	6	-	630
L54	F	LA	6	-	390	H32	F	LI	13	-	660
L63	F	LA	11	-	375	H36	F	SC	6	-	640
L81	F	LA	11	-	420	H65	F	IC	7	1	650
						H70	M	SC	10	-	620
						H86	F	IC	6	-	650
						H94	F	LI	7	-	645

Note. Ss ID = students' ID as matter of convenience, G = gender, Y = years of learning English, E = experience of studying abroad to English spoken countries (months), S = TOEIC scores, M = male, F = female, LI = literature, LA = law, IC = intercultural communication, SC = science.

3.2 Material

In order to measure the degree of SRL skills, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & MacKeachie, 1991) was used. The original MSLQ has 15 factors including six motivational factors and nine learning strategy factors (four of them represent resource management: effort regulation, help-seeking, time and place to study, and peer learning). The MSLQ is respected in that it contains comprehensive aspects of SRL: motivational beliefs, metacognition, and resource management. To capture the learner traits from multiple perspectives, this questionnaire seemed quite capable.

² TOEIC score should be calculated by 5 points; however, all the scores were reported by the participants themselves.

Because this questionnaire was developed to evaluate SRL for any subject (e.g., math, science) and because its statements were too general to apply the EFL environment, the researcher revised them into more appropriate wording for Japanese EFL learners corresponding to their academic backgrounds. In Fukuda (2018a), the MSLQ was revised, and the reliability and validity were approved³. The questionnaire had 81 items and utilized a seven-point Likert scale with 1 = “not at all true for me” and 7 = “very true for me.” Participants answered this questionnaire on a survey website, CREATIVE SURVEY, where they provided their latest TOEIC scores and personal information.

3.3 Procedures and analysis

Seventeen participants were selected to be interviewed for an hour after answering the questionnaire measuring SRL skills. After confirming the participants’ consent, the interviews were recorded on an integrated chip recorder. A semi-structured interview technique was adopted, where the interviewer prepared the questions following the 15 scales of the MSLQ; they could also talk about themselves as much as they wanted. At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher showed the participants the paper version of the MSLQ filled out by the participants and then reminded them of their answers in order to help their retrospection. Participants were then asked to explain their own feelings, thoughts, ideas, wishes, and behaviors as they liked.

All utterance data was transcribed and coded as it followed six factors: self-efficacy, intrinsic goal orientation, test anxiety, metacognitive strategies, effort regulation, and coping with problems. They were analyzed by focusing on their content to present more detailed information for the significant differences between the groups.

4 Results and Discussion

The two motivational and learning strategy sections will be discussed separately because the MSLQ (Pintrich et al., 1991) was separately examined and both are crucial components of SRL (Pintrich, 2000).

³ Cronbach’s alpha was calculated: self-efficacy = .90, intrinsic goal orientation = .87, test anxiety = .72, metacognitive strategies = .82, effort regulation = .65, and coping with problems = .36. Coping with problems seemed to be influenced the number of items, and this component was similar to the original MSLQ (Pintrich, et al., 1991); therefore, it was kept.

4.1 Affective characteristics of less-proficient learners

In Fukuda (2018a), L Group obtained lower scores on self-efficacy and intrinsic goal orientation and higher scores on test anxiety than that of H Group. I will display characteristic data in each motivational factor.

4.1.1 Self-efficacy

The L Group students' lower scores on self-efficacy indicated that they were obviously less self-confident with less "can-do" attitudes and less positive impressions about learning English than the H Group. Interviews described clear tendencies between the two learner groups.

One of the obvious characteristics for less-proficient learners was that they did not have clear confidence regarding L2 learning, which resulted because they had never been successful in L2 learning, as shown below in statement (1). Most successful experiences for less-proficient learners relied on the "exam orientation," and extracts (2) and (3) unerringly expressed what it meant. Some learners had a certain satisfaction with their performance; however, the point is that many of them were examination oriented.

(1) I have never experienced success in English. For example, I've never felt I could improve something in English as a result that I did it, I mean, I have never overcome what I have trouble in. (L63)

(2) I was really bad at English in exams, but I passed, so I might be able to do it somewhat. (L28)

(3) I was glad to get a good score on the National Center Test for University Admissions⁴. I'm proud of it, my score was better than I expected. Actually, I got my best score on mock exam just before the day of the exam, but when I got it, I felt "Yes!" In fact, why I was glad was just because I feel like I could pass the entrance exam if I would get the right score, I mean, it wasn't a joy that I could use English better or I could develop my English skills. (L46)

On the other hand, high-proficiency learners believed that good results were the consequence of what they tried, performed, and made efforts to achieve; thus, they tended to have an "I can do it" belief, as extract (4) shows.

⁴ The National Center Test for University Admissions is an entrance exam for national universities that is conducted yearly as a requirement of the first screening assessment. Some of private universities have replaced it with their entrance exams. In the case of a student (L46), she applied both the national and the private universities, so that she took this exam.

Another distinguished point that the H Group students had was that they realized that their teachers approved of their skills, as in extract (5). The experiences like theirs are considered encouragement to make more progress in L2 learning; on the other hand, no one in the L Group mentioned receiving admiration from teachers.

(4) If only I study English in a proper way, I think I can gain good English skills, like returnees, and some of my friends have acquired English skills, so I must be able to do it. (H3)

(5) I feel able to use English because the score of the test is good; in addition, I have been thinking that I can do it because my teacher has offered me compliments on my English skills before. (H94)

The interview data showed that one of the differences to draw attention to lay in the students' confidence in English that was substantiated by feeling self-efficacy by their relationships with others. The lack of successful experiences in the past and getting teacher approvals appeared in both groups.

4.1.2 Intrinsic goal orientation

Intrinsic goal orientation was one of the factors that less-proficient learners did not possess. Their comments indicated no interest in or yearning to improve in English as seen in extracts (6) and (7); this is similar to previous studies (Kanat & Kozikoğlu, 2018). One of them had a bias against English itself, as is demonstrated in extract (8).

(6) I've never felt that English is interesting, and I've tried not to see it as my weakness. (L46)

(7) I don't have any longing to live in English-speaking countries either, those who are good at English prefer listening to foreign music, don't they? But I don't. (L28)

(8) I don't have an interest in English-speaking countries at all...these countries seem dangerous, and I have an instinctive dislike of imported foods from foreign countries; I would probably not have local foods if I were there. (L54)

Instead of having intrinsic goal orientation, the low-proficiency students had more extrinsic goal orientation, that is, goals resulting from obligation or necessity. In fact, although extrinsic goal orientation appeared in interviews irrespective of proficiency, low-proficiency learners felt so due to their concern about job hunting, whereas high-proficiency learners mentioned extrinsic motivation related to social needs. In other words, low-proficiency learners assumed the necessity of learning English as a

personal matter, but those who had a high proficiency viewed English as a more comprehensive tool for living in the world. Extracts (9) and (10) show less realistic thoughts of low-proficiency students, compared to extracts (11) and (12) by high-proficiency students.

(9) *I've not had any goal yet, but I would be glad if someone [foreigners] asked me the way...Unless I face a situation where my life could be risky, or I might suffer damage from lack of learning English, I don't need to develop my English score forcibly.* (L44)

(10) *I recently heard that it is advantageous to get a score above 750 on the TOEIC for job hunting, so I want to be able to achieve this level.* (L54)

(11) *It'll be absolutely beneficial to get the skill of English, and when I play sports, we can use English to communicate with various friends. English is fun, and I will keep learning it as long as English is needed.* (H70)

(12) *The Olympics will be held here and there have been a lot of foreigners in Tokyo. When someone asks me for directions, I don't want to become flustered; rather I want to respond it confidently.* (H3)

Some of the students showed an extrinsic goal orientation, which was seen in both less- and more-proficient learners; however, there were different traits. It is certainly true that the willingness to become better than classmates pushes learner engagement in L2 learning. In fact, the extrinsic goal orientation of the more-proficient learners, who also had intrinsic goal orientation, seemed more responsible for their motivation, as seen in extract (13). The less-proficient learners regarded their English skills as an unrelated matter to their friends' performances; see extract (14). Indeed, their "extrinsic-orientation" tended to be nearly same as exam-oriented motivation, as seen in extracts (2) and (3).

(13) *I must make efforts because most of my friends in the same faculty perform English very well.* (H65)

(14) *I regard mastering English as one of the special abilities, so I just think that I'm not good at English, while my friends who are good at English can use it. That's it, when I encounter one of my friends who is good at English, I just think, "Well. That's good. Whatever."* (L46)

While more-proficient learners had both intrinsic and extrinsic goals, less-proficient learners were extrinsic goal dominant; furthermore, however hard others made efforts to learn English, it did not echo to low-proficiency learners. This phenomenon seemed to relate to effort regulation, which will be discussed later.

4.1.3 Test anxiety

Test anxiety refers to being anxious while taking tests or exams. The t-test showed that less-proficient learners seemed to become more tense, anxious, and restless before taking tests. Indeed, the less-proficient learners mentioned experiencing high anxiety when taking tests. A student (L44) said, “*I think what if I had failed class?*” They felt strong feelings of anxiety, especially about getting credits in university classes; at the same time, what is interesting here is that they appeared not to seriously consider their test results as shown in extract (15). Also, extract (16) shows a lack of earnestness for English tests, indicating that the learner did not try hard on the exam; rather, he focused on just finishing it.

(15) *I feel anxiety, but I also think “whatever.” Even though I won’t get a good score, it will be okay for me unless I fail a class.* (L28)

(16) *During the test, I get distracted, so I checked the answers at random.* (L6)

More-proficient learners showed tension rather than anxiety, which appeared more strongly when they properly prepared for tests as the extracts below demonstrate.

(17) *I think taking tests is not to do it with reluctance, but to try my skill.* (H3)

(18) *I take tests, feeling like that I want to know my current level of English.* (H9)

Generally, test anxiety has a negative effect on L2 acquisition (Zheng & Cheng, 2018); however, it was clear that anxiety had two traits. One was anxiety with fear, and the other was anxiety with nervousness, and the latter is likely what the high-proficiency students possessed.

4.2 Cognitive characteristics of less-proficient learners

Among learning strategy factors, metacognitive strategies, effort regulation, and coping with problems had significantly lower scores by low-proficiency learners (Fukuda, 2018a). The author mainly describes these three factors combined with motivational elements.

4.2.1 Metacognitive strategies

This factor contained two main concepts of SRL—elaboration and critical thinking. It measured the degree to which learners integrate and associate pre-existing knowledge with new information to understand materials in learning English.

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The interviews revealed that the students in the L Group did not connect information when learning English; rather, they did not recognize its conception—how to elaborate. A student (L81) said, “*I don’t figure out ‘elaborating,’ I have no idea about elaborating what and what.*” They did not seem to understand the advantage of relating a variety of familiar concepts to English. In fact, they tended not to pay attention to English outside of the classroom, which seemed a conclusive point with students in the H Group. Here is an example of an extract from a student in the H Group exemplifying the elaboration strategy.

(19) During reading a story in English, I remember my experience of reading the same story in Japanese, I search it on the website; even if I encounter a new English story that is not familiar in Japan, that’s exactly what I search for on the Internet, also, in daily life, when I glance at a name board of a store written in English, for example, I remember, “this is what I’ve learned it in the previous lesson,” and make sure of its meaning. (H3)

In the first place, more-proficient learners did not seem to use the strategy forcibly. Indeed, they voluntarily paid attention to their circumstances and utilized websites and other materials such as books, music, and communication with others. However, those in the L Group reported not being exposed to English-used materials, as extract (20) describes.

(20) If I listen to Western music, I don’t want to listen to it for learning English, I listen to Western music to enjoy it, and if I read lyrics... I do only when I don’t understand what a singer sings by only listening, I’m sure that those who are fond of Western music must be good at English and pronounce it very well. (L28)

This student reported that one of her friends recommended listening to the lyrics of her favorite music, and this was the first time she listened to music with its lyrics. She thought that this strategy was useful to study English. However, she thought this behavior was a kind of studying, and listening to music was just a form of amusement for her, and thus, she never tried to do it after that.

With respect to critical thinking, less-proficient learners did not give any attention to doing so. They assumed that the content they read or heard could not be false; rather, they might not have had the willingness to read or listen to English critically because of a lack of excitement or interest. In the following exchange with the researcher, the student clearly mentioned critical thinking.

(21) Researcher (R): Do you critically see whether the content is logically correct?

Student (S): *I don't do that at all, I don't care, either. In fact, I don't pay attention to others' speech carefully in class.*

R: *Do you have any reasons to do so?*

S: *Because I'm bored in the class; not friends' speeches, but the themes are boring. I really don't care about speeches that I already know about.* (L6)

This demonstrates the tendency for less-proficient learners to try not to read texts or listen to speeches critically, which comes from lack of interest in English materials. They did not try to see English tasks, topics, and materials as a means to develop their deep thinking and understanding. High-proficiency learners reported to emotionally entwine their thoughts and reading materials, as typified in the following extract.

(22) *I often search for something that stuck in the back of my mind on the website ... I often doubt where this content is truly correct; I consider one opinion is only for a writer, but against my thoughts. In contrast, I sometime strongly agree with a content.* (H9)

4.2.2 Effort regulation

Effort regulation refers to how learners make efforts to continually learn English. Although it was one of the significant differences between the L and H Groups in Fukuda (2018a), interestingly, the interviews revealed some common strategies with respect to preparing treats such as sweets or comics to get motivated and setting a studying time limit when losing concentration by using alarms or stopwatches. The strategies to concentrate on their own learning were similar; however, it was found that strategies to keep learning did not work for less-proficient learners as a trigger to restart learning. In other words, learners in the L Group could not connect with strategies to keep concentrating on learning instead of using the same strategies as those in the H Group. A learner in the L Group showed her giving-up posture toward learning English in the following extract.

(23) S: *I think it's meaningless to learn English when I feel unmotivated, so I do other things, and if I want to learn again, I do. In this case, my reluctance, such as 'I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it!' just withers away instead of becoming motivation.*

R: *Do you feel unwillingness to study even if you would have to do it right now?*

S: *Yes.*

R: *What do you do in such a situation?*

S: *In the case of this situation, I don't do anything. I just give it up, like "I've had it." See, I realize how lazy I am.* (L28)

She showed a defeatist attitude to overcome an un motivating situation; besides, she had had experience with listening to music to get motivated, but it did not work. She said, *“I don’t get motivated in the first place, and I give up before getting motivated because I always think nothing wrong is likely to happen even if I don’t do that task.”* She thought that not doing tasks had no bad influence on her grade, and *“it’s fine to do it by the next deadline.”* She might be an exception, but her utterance reflected an insightful perspective. The less-proficient learners were not picky about the deadline of a task and their friends’ progress; they did not feel a sense of crisis regarding learning English. Instead, they did not pay attention to maintaining their learning environment because they felt as if learning English had no meaning for them.

On the other hand, learners in the H Group had a strong willingness to engage with the world in English; therefore, they tried to focus on what they learned even when they were distracted. Some H Group learners displayed unique ways to overcome boredom by thinking of what they liked. Here is an example of a way that a learner did this:

(24) When I read or listen to something I like, I often wonder those who made this product must have worked very hard, you know, when a composer produces music or a writer produces a book, he/she must make a lot of efforts to write a lyric, or I wonder how long he/she has spent efforts to write a book, and then, I feel like trying my tasks like “it’s my turn.” I attempt to follow these examples and do my best. (H3)

The H Group learners could control their learning by being inspired by others; that is, they understood what could enhance their motivation. Although the learners in both groups seemed to experience some pressure in learning English, all the data suggested that the L Group learners tended to give up in what had to be done, whereas the H Group learners tended to make themselves focus harder on the requirements of their learning.

4.2.3 Coping with problems

As Pintrich et al. (1991) mentioned: “The good students know when they don’t know something and are able to identify someone to provide them with some assistance” (p. 29). This factor involved how the learners could seek help and cope with problems; that is, the more learners ask for advice from others immediately upon encountering a problem, the better they could carry out their learning. Interview data was classified in three areas, which clearly supported quantitative differences—speed to solve, accuracy of answers, and preferences of who to ask for help.

The less-proficient learners did not tend to solve their problems as rapidly as possible, whereas the more-proficient learners did. The way of

coping with problems differed from one another, such as asking friends or searching on websites. However, learners in the L Group did not make efforts at clarifying what they did not understand, and their problems occasionally remained unanswered as can be seen in extract (25). It can be said that the low-proficiency learners did not stick to what they did not understand in learning English, and it seemed not to matter whether they could solve it quickly as extract (26) illustrates.

(25) If my friends were nearby me when I want to ask, I would ask them my question, but I don't bother to ask it via email. (L54)

(26) I will ask my friends, and I immediately do a screenshot with LINE [an application] if I face a problem on learning English; then I send it to someone who is good at it. (H9)

Next, most of the less-proficient learners did not prefer to ask someone to help; however, if they did rely on someone, they tended to choose the more convenient way to solve the problem:

(27) I ask my friends about my questions, and I don't make it clear by myself because it seems easy to ask somebody, just ask them by LINE, then they instantly tell me an answer. (L44)

Some of the less-proficient learners barely paid attention to accurate answers. They seemed comfortable obtaining any answer, even if it was wrong. To confirm this tendency, extract (28) by a more-proficient learner shows a different viewpoint about accurately solving problems.

(28) I will ask like, "my answer is this one, but the correct answer is that one, where did I make a mistake?" And then, I will ask my friend like, "I don't understand this point, but why did this become the answer?" Thus, I ask my friends to correct my performance or instruct me on the subject. (H9)

Preferences regarding who to ask depends on whether learners sought help from those who were better at English than them, which seemed to be an essential point. It was found that the learners in the L Group hesitated to ask for support from their teachers, as in the extract below, but those who were in the H Group preferred to contact their teachers.

(29) I seldom ask my teachers, I mean, I often take classes and spend time with my friends, but I meet my teacher only once a week in a lesson. I prefer to ask my friends who are always with me, rather than asking my teachers. (L63)

Extract (29) seems to be a natural reaction to teachers as authority figures; therefore, the L Group learners could not access them easily. They seemed to recognize asking for help from authorities as a psychological burden because they are “*pretty afraid of asking strict teachers*” (L81). This was an outstandingly different point from the learners in the H Group. One of them commented:

(30) R: *If you don't clearly understand something in a class, what do you do?*

S: *I ask a question of a teacher just after the class.*

R: *Don't you feel uncomfortable asking your teachers?*

S: *Not really, I rather like to ask my teachers, I very often ask them again and again.* (H86)

It was characteristic that the H Group learners preferred to ask their teachers for help, and they did not feel any barrier at all; rather, they deliberately chose their teachers to solve problems because teachers “*surely know English better*” (H65) than “*my friends who don't understand well.*” (H70).

5 General Discussion

In terms of the motivational aspects, the current study supported the hypothesis that there are characteristically different comments on self-efficacy, intrinsic goal orientation, and test anxiety. As mentioned in a definition by Pintrich (2000) in the introduction, the outset for maintaining SRL is a forethought phase including task analysis, such as goal-setting and planning, and self-motivational beliefs such as self-efficacy and interest in tasks. Therefore, motivational management is key to developing self-regulated language learning, and the less-proficient learners unfortunately might have difficulty regulating their motivation. They did not seem to have specific goals, and if they did, the goals were ambiguous and centered on a preference to get higher exam scores. Setting appropriate goals promotes better performance, which leads to learning effectively and autonomously (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015). It was thus found that less-proficient learners seemed not to have a strong compass with which to navigate learning English. The reason that they barely set goals might be a cumulative result of their entire English education. In fact, the low-proficiency learners mentioned that they had few opportunities to experience self-efficacy through communication with foreigners outside the classroom and being encouraged or obtaining approval by teachers inside the classroom. It can be suggested that they need to have a mastery experience to foster self-efficacy and to make them perceive language learning experiences

affirmatively. For instance, increasing the chances to talk with foreigners can raise learners' self-efficacy; however, it might be possible that teachers recognize learners' "*i + 1*" in L2 learning, comprehend their growth, and give them an approval as an ally. The approach, where teachers and parents encourage the learners to be proud of themselves, would foster their attitude to set precise goals in language learning.

Learning strategies also seemed to strongly relate to motivation. There was an obvious lack of metacognitive strategies, which is a vital component of SRL (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015), but the low-proficiency learners did not rely on them. This might be attributable to their poor motivation, as they showed that English is not attractive or may even be boring for them. Instead, they had not ever thought about how to learn English and had little chance that someone instructed them to appropriate strategies, which made them feel ambiguous about elaborating on materials or thinking about them critically. Thus, the less-proficient learners neither understood metacognitive strategies nor knew which strategies would promote their English skills.

Effort regulation also seemed to be an important factor in continuing to learn effectively in this study. Corno (2001) indicated that the notion of effort "is an aspect of volitional functioning" (p. 192). The interviews revealed that, regardless of the proficiency level, every learner was under enormous pressure when they faced specific tasks. However, compared to those who pushed themselves to finish their work, low-proficiency learners tended to give up a task when they judged a task not worth the effort or let it remain until they had more incentive; additionally, if their motivation did not increase, they did not particularly feel a sense of crisis. Some of them understood the necessity of achieving English, even though they had a dilemma about the worthiness of English proficiency. They were inclined to solve problems by the simple expedience of asking people around them. In sum, they were not likely to grasp what to do in order to regulate their efforts.

Coping with problems is a factor that is strongly related to one of the key components of SRL—help-seeking (Zeidner, Boekaerts, & Pintrich, 2000). According to Newman (2008), learners judge the necessity and the content of help-seeking and eventually seek out someone. Prior to this, he suggests that motivational status such as willingness to gain a good grade (object), self-efficacy for asking an authority (self-beliefs), and self-esteem (affection) contributes to what learners cautiously consider when encountering failures. In fact, the low-proficiency learners did not seek help from others even though they needed assistance, had low self-efficacy, and appeared not to have confidence in seeking help from friends. These elements can account for why these learners did not persist in prompt adjustment, felt burdened in seeking answers, and failed to absorb new information. As pointed out by Schunk and Zimmerman (2008), low self-efficacy might generate a harmful effect on help-seeking. Again, it can be concluded that empowering the learners to grow their self-efficacy for learning English

would be an urgent issue to promote self-regulated language learning before presenting or instructing the learning strategies described above.

6 Conclusion

The present study aimed to reveal the characteristics of less-proficient English learners from the perspective of self-regulated learning. It further confirmed the results that self-regulated language learning affected the proficiency of Japanese EFL learners (Fukuda, 2018). The results of this study allow us to understand not only the unique commonalities and differences in language learning attitudes between low- and high-proficiency learners, it also reveals the difficulties of precisely using learning strategies that less-proficient learners struggled with. The author here suggests that, as an educational implication, teachers primarily need to raise learners' self-efficacy in language learning since self-efficacy is largely related to learner performance. It works when learners face challenges, it decides how much stress learners experience while learning, and it leads learners to achieve learning goals. In other words, self-efficacy strongly influences the ultimate achievements of learners (Pajares, 2008). One of the ways that learner self-efficacy can be improved might be through goal-setting training. It is known that conditions of no goal-setting instruction are appropriate for high self-efficacy learners to self-regulate performance; meanwhile, conditions of explicit goal-setting instruction are best for low self-efficacy learners (Tuckman, 1990).

The results of this study suggest the need of instruction on how to set adequate learning goals for low self-efficacy learners. The suggestion that Margolis and McCabe (2004) advanced is a key solution and one of the suggestions for this matter. They indicated that teachers should help less-proficient learners create personally important goals, which should be specific, short-term, and achievable. Personally important goals refer to what learners want to achieve. Short-term goals can be achieved step-by-step so that learners can easily forecast and expect target outcomes. These types of goals will play an important role in preventing less-proficient learners from losing their motivation, and it will be conducive to their attainment of their long-term goals.

This paper has provided insightful perspectives on self-regulated language learning by focusing on less-proficient learners, especially with regard to how they capture their L2 learning attitude and how their perceptions are constructed. However, there were two major limitations that should be pointed out. The first problem is the English proficiency of the participants. The learners who participated attended a private university that is one of the most competitive schools in Tokyo. Additionally, most of them had the ability to pass the entrance exams. Therefore, the L Group

participants' proficiency might not be sufficiently *low*. The definition of low-proficiency is quite difficult, but the present study made clear how the students who are located in a low-level group think about L2 learning and themselves. The use of much less-proficient learners could lead us to potentially different issues regarding self-regulated language learning.

The second problem is the depth of the interviews. Most participants were more likely to tell a researcher their life story positively; however, less-proficient learners—and this might be inevitable—seemed reluctant to talk. If we access the participants in a particular situation such as this, it is necessary to consider their responses in careful detail. Also, the post-questionnaire interviews were single-shot interviews that simply elicited learners' retrospection. SRL is not an independent ability, but rather a cyclical process (Iwaniec, 2014; Zimmerman, 2000); thus, other methods such as observing learners longitudinally, utilizing stimulated recall, and using a diary to triangulate the data collection could strengthen the data. Observation can yield more reliable and valid data that could determine how learners are employing learning strategies. To deeply understand the findings in the present study, more triangulated qualitative research connected to learning processes could play an increasingly significant role in investigating self-regulated language learning.

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Appendix
The Components of the revised MSLQ (Fukuda, 2018a)

Sections	Components	Item Example
Motivation	Self-efficacy	"I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in the English class."
	Intrinsic goal orientation	"Understanding the subject matter of the English class is very important to me."
	Extrinsic goal orientation	"I want to do well in the English class because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends, employer, or others."
	Test anxiety	"When I take tests I think of the consequences of failing."
	Control of learning beliefs	"If I don't understand the course material, it is because I didn't try hard enough"
Learning strategies	Metacognitive strategies	"When reading for the English class, I try to relate the material to what I already know."
	Cognitive strategies	"Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized."
	Effort regulation	"Even when I course materials are dull or uninteresting, I manage to keep working until I finish."
	Task approach	"When studying for the English class, I read my class notes and the course readings over and over again."
	Peer learning in classroom	"When I can't understand the material in the English class, I ask another student in the class for help."
	Coping with problems	"I ask the instructor to clarify concepts I don't understand well."

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