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Social Language Learning Spaces: Globalization Glocalizedⁱ

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Abstract

In this era of globalization, Japanese universities will have to accommodate an increasing number of local students wishing to learn foreign languages and they will also have to welcome more international students to their campuses. While universities will undoubtedly take steps to ensure that both groups have positive educational and intercultural experiences, we contend that it is also incumbent upon them to implement measures designed to facilitate the adaptation of international students to Japanese society. In this article, we examine the role social learning spaces can play in helping universities respond to these challenges. We argue that these facilities can make an invaluable contribution by supporting language learning and cross-cultural acclimatization for both international and Japanese students. The term social learning spaces refers to places where students can come together in an informal or quasi-formal environment in order to learn from and with each other. To illustrate our points, we draw on the data from a five-year ethnographic inquiry carried out at one such facility on the campus of a large national university. After describing the social learning space, outlining the study, and tracing the theoretical orientation guiding the interpretation of the data, we focus on the benefits social learning spaces can afford international students wishing to improve their language skills and adapt to Japanese society. To conclude, we reflect on how social learning spaces can support the process of globalization by making local universities more globalized places.

Keywords: Affordances, complex systems, emergence, globalization, Japanese as a foreign language, social learning spaces

At universities across Japan there is a drive towards globalization. Some universities are struggling to understand what this means in terms of educational practices and day-to-day operation. One thing is clear: globalization will mean welcoming more international students to their campuses. Accepting international students into programs and providing courses for them is one thing; however, universities will also have to take steps to ensure that these students have positive educational and personal experiences while in Japan. In this article, we examine the role social learning spaces can play in facilitating the globalization of Japanese universities and the adaptation of international students to Japanese society.

Social learning spaces are places where learners can come together to learn with and from each other. In the case of social learning spaces for language learning on the campuses of Japanese universities, they are places where Japanese and international students can meet, make friends, practice their target languages and gain firsthand knowledge about other cultures and their people. They are important because they embody globalization being realized through action on a local level, a unique form of glocalization.

Over a five-year period, we carried out an ethnographic inquiry into a social learning space, the L-café – and its predecessor, the English Café – located on the campus of a large national university in Japan. We have been investigating this environment by conducting interviews with students, administrators and teachers, and by having senior students trained as research assistants carry out participant observation. As a result, our data consists of roughly 150 interview transcripts and reports documenting over 1000 hours of participant observation. The results of a thematic analysis of this data has served as the basis for numerous conference presentations and publications in which we examined how the learning opportunities available in this environment benefitted Japanese who wanted to learn to speak English (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014; Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, forthcoming). In this article we focus on how participation in the social learning space can benefit international students wishing to improve their Japanese language skills. However, we begin by describing the learning space and discussing some of the theoretical notions that guided our interpretation of the data. To conclude, we consider the possible implications for language learning on campuses in Japan and the globalization of Japanese universities.

The L-café

The L-café had a very modest beginning as the English Café, a narrow one-room venue. The vice president responsible for English education had a vision of a space where Japanese students could practice the language in a relaxed, comfortable environment (Tahara, 2016). As a result, the English Café opened in 2009 adjacent to a large, busy food café located on the ground floor of a building dedicated to student services and club activities. Although the room was not that small, several tables surrounded by chairs, a large screen television, shelving for language learning materials and laptop computers, an administrative area for the manager and her

student helpers, all conspired to make the room seem cramped and crowded. One fortunate feature was that most of the wall space was glass which made the room airy and bright. Because Japanese students would need someone to practice their English skills with, international students were invited to drop in. Soon the English Café was a popular meeting place for international and Japanese students.

Although students came to relax, chat with their friends, have lunch and even study, most came for the weekly English lessons. These lessons took the form of peer-taught, non-credit-bearing, small-sized classes. They were taught by international students or Japanese students who had a good command of English and understood the difficulties the learners faced. Because the classes were not credit-bearing, they lacked the pressure usually engendered by tests or homework assignments. They became hugely popular because of the informal friendly atmosphere.

In addition to the classes, a series of events was planned throughout the year. These events included a welcome party for the international students arriving in October, a Halloween Party, a Christmas Party, a Hanami Party (cherry blossom viewing party), and eventually a going away party for the international students and graduating Japanese students. In between these occasions, students were encouraged to propose and organize other events – such as an ice-cream party – and to participate in cultural activities in the local community.

Over the years, the English Café expanded as it attracted more and more students. Eventually, it moved to a much larger space and transformed into the L-café, a multilingual, multi-cultural facility. Throughout the years, students have been encouraged to take photographs of the day-to-day activities, the special events, and the people who have given life to these facilities. The result is a repository of photos documenting the transformation the café has undergone. A picture is worth a thousand words so we invite you to visit the L-café website or Facebook page for photos of the spaces, the people and the events (see endnotes for detailsⁱⁱ).

Thoughts on Learning

For the students who were regular visitors to the English Café and later the L-café, mustering the courage to walk through the door into this strange, new environment was the first step on a journey to a new world of cross-cultural friendships and unimagined learning opportunities (Nakamoto, 2016). For us as

teachers and researchers, investigating their experiences, we, too, embarked upon a metaphorical odyssey that led us to see learning, learners and learning environments in new ways.

Shortly after its opening, we saw the English Café as a community of practice. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). What we observed were groups of students who shared a common goal, i.e., learning a foreign language, and who deepened their knowledge and expertise as they interacted with more established members of the English Café, participated in a wide range of activities, and gradually became valued members of the community.

When we began our study, the participants’ references to “space” and “place” in the first round of interviews prompted us to explore these constructs. We were surprised to discover in the literature on human geography that places are social constructions (Cresswell, 2004). By this we mean that spaces are transformed into places by people carrying out actions in a particular space, and subsequently talking about this space and defining it as a place where these activities occur. Through a more careful analysis of the data, we realized that how people define a space will influence their decision to enter and what they do inside (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014). For example, Japanese students defined the English Café as a place where they had to speak English, which prevented many from entering because they feared their proficiency was inadequate.

However, the focal point of our study was not individual learners per se but rather the English Café as a learning environment. Therefore, we adopted an ecological approach in which we viewed the English Café as an ecosocial system (Lemke, 2002) and the learners as part of the system or environment. This approach enabled us to work with two key concepts: affordances and emergence.

By examining learners’ various activities, interactions and relationships, we sought to identify affordances that gave rise to opportunities for language learning. Affordances are opportunities for action as they are perceived by the individuals in an environment (Gibson, 1986). They are not necessarily properties of the environment; rather, they emerge as learners interact with the environment (van Lier, 2004, p. 62). Emergence, another key concept of the ecological perspective, takes place when relatively simple elements in an environment interact and reorganize – or self-

organize – into more complex systems, patterns, or behaviours. When learners are active in a language learning context, affordances emerge through their engagement (van Lier, 2004).

Over time we came to see the L-café as a complex, dynamic ecosocial system. According to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), the defining feature of a complex system is that its behaviour emerges from the interaction of its components. In the case of the L-café, its character is determined by the interaction of the people in the environment. They come and go: international students go back to their home countries, Japanese students graduate, and new faces appear supporting the emergence of different behaviors and ways of interacting. The L-café as a complex, dynamic system is always changing, always in a state of becoming.

Learning at the L-café

Over the five-year period that we did our study, unless you walked into the English Café or L-café when one of the small peer-taught classes was being held, you might not see any of the vestiges of learning normally associated with a university setting. This has prompted at least one administrator to pose the question: Where does the social stop and the learning begin? We contend that his question is flawed because it is based on the assumption that learning and social activity are binary opposites. Our research, supported by Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory and situated learning theory (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991), suggests that the learning and the social are one. An examination of the learning opportunities available to international students in the English Café and the L-café illustrates this crucial point.

A key question to ask is “what Japanese language learning opportunities were available to the international students?” As Allan, an American student, noted in an interview, “the playing field was not level” because the whole point of the English Café and the main thrust of the L-café has been to promote English language learning. For example, while a wide variety of peer taught English classes are offered, none are available in Japanese. Therefore, in the absence of any structured learning opportunities, what possibilities were there for international students to improve their Japanese language skills?

The answer to this question lies in Allan's comment that the L-café is “a place you use for social networking...through that social networking your Japanese can

become better”. Other students we interviewed offered insight into how this worked. Ahmed, a Kuwaiti PhD student who worked at the English Café, explained, “When I make new Japanese friends when I am in English Café, I talk to them in English, but outside, if we go out for dinner, we talk in Japanese. And that, of course, improves my Japanese.” Once international students and Japanese become friends there is a tendency for them to communicate in Japanese. Allan noted, “Whenever my friends come to English Café now, we mostly talk in Japanese.” The key for international students is to make friends with their Japanese peers.

Providing international and Japanese students with a place to meet is perhaps the prime affordance of the L-café. Lena, a Serbian graduate student, made the point that “before the English Café, there was no place where Japanese students could meet foreign students, except for example, if you belonged to the same *kenkyushitsu* [research lab], but there’s no opportunity to talk to them.” Similarly, Ahmed said, “I was a little bit disappointed, I’m in Japan, difficult to make friends. But after English Café opened, I met many friends...and we practice both languages.”

Ahmed’s reference to practicing both languages raises an important point. There are two categories of international student on campus: there are English-speakers and non-English-speakers. For the international students, whose first language is not English, the L-café provided opportunities to improve both their English and Japanese. Cheng, a Thai student, made the comment that with “more Japanese students coming to L-café to practice English, I have more chance to speak in English.” Asked about opportunities to improve his English, Kevin, a French-speaking exchange student explained, “I met lots of people from America, or any English-speaking countries, so it helped me improve my English or broaden my horizons by having more vocabulary.” Another French national, whose double major was Japanese and English, said she chose to come to this particular university because of the opportunities the L-café afforded for learning both languages.

Students also noted the opportunity to learn “real” English and “natural” Japanese. When asked how she benefitted from the L-café, Cheng said,

First of all, I can make a lot of friends and by talking to them my Japanese improved a lot. I can feel that the first day I arrive here, my Japanese that I use is like written form. And after I keep talking with Japanese friend, my Japanese become more regular, more common and natural.

Answering the question, “What does the English Café offer students in addition to the regular courses they have available to them?” Rick, a Chinese student from Hong Kong, replied, “Real English.” He elaborated by saying, “You can’t really learn English through classes. Well, I mean, you can, but it’s a different type of English.” He added that when students come to English Café and make friends with English speakers, they have a chance to learn real English.

Learning to speak a language as it is used by people in everyday contexts requires gaining cultural knowledge and understanding. Dongik, a Korean student, commented on how he benefitted from participation at the English Café:

I’ve been studying Japanese for four years, but even like I’m very fluent, doesn’t mean I can communicate with Japanese well, ‘cos, I should know their culture. In Café I always had many friend there so they teach – I could learn their background in Japan, US or Britain, not only the language but the background culture. That kind of experience couldn’t be learned on the textbook.

When asked if she thought the English Café could exist without the international students, Lena, said,

It’s not just the English or the pronunciation – it’s the whole cultural exchange thing. Because most of the time that’s what people are talking about: What about this in your country? What about that? Can you show me something about this or that? It’s not just language.

The L-café and the previous English Café provide a forum for intercultural exchange and opportunities to learn about other cultures firsthand.

For the international students, the English Café and the current L-café have served as the gateway to the Japanese culture and community. Ahmed notes that one of the advantages of coming to the English Café was the opportunity to learn about and participate in local events, which broadened his knowledge and understanding of the local urban community and Japan. Similarly, Lena said, “I always drop by to say ‘hello’ or to see what’s happening or to check the board with the events.... I know that’s the place to be if you wanna gather some new information.” Elsewhere, Lena noted, “When you know there are other people in the same situation as you and you can all help each other out... when these connections between foreigners and Japanese students are made... they have Japanese friends so they are like part of this Japanese community.”

Helping friends out is a key feature of the kind of learning that takes place in these facilities. For example, students help each other with homework assignments.

Cheng said, “When I have to write essay or presentation, I get help from my Japanese friends. When I have kanji that I don’t understand, I can ask them also.” Similarly, Kevin said, “I receive proofreading in my Japanese papers because my Japanese is far from being perfect. I don’t have the same vocabulary as Japanese people do.” An important feature of this help is that it is reciprocal. Commenting on the help he provides his Japanese friends, Kevin said, “I’m not correcting the paper myself. I’m just guiding them through the process.” Kevin’s comments suggest that students are getting help within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), a metaphorical learning space in which assistance from someone with more expertise enables learners to improve their performance and gain skills and knowledge. When learners get help with something today, they will be able to do it on their own tomorrow (Vygotsky, 1978).

Getting help within their zone of proximal development enables learners to transition from other-regulation to self-regulation, in other words, through this process, learners become more autonomous (Kohonen, 2001). Speaking about the kind of help learners give each other, Lena said, “One of the reasons why I tell them you can do this or you can do that and give them information is because I want them to know and to learn and to be able to do it alone later.” Getting the help they need when they need it promotes learner autonomy.

Autonomy in the form of learners’ freedom to exercise their agency has been a key feature of both the English Café and the L-café (Murray & Fujishima, 2013). When Rick was asked, “What was the best thing about the English Café?”, he answered, “You can go at any time and leave whenever you want.” Similarly, Lena said the best thing was “this lack of pressure”. Commenting on what the English Café offered students in addition to the regular university courses, she said,

If you enter the English Café, you can exit anytime. You don’t have to stay there or you don’t have to go there every day. Or, also nobody will mind if you make a mistake, so maybe the freedom.... You can do whatever you want...you decide, you set your own time and your rules, in a way.

Elsewhere we have argued that the autonomy the learners enjoyed at the English Café and later at the L-café was actually a crucial affordance that enabled them to act on the learning opportunities they perceived when they saw fit and in ways that suited their sense of self and personal learning styles (Murray & Fujishima, 2013).

Implications

So, what are the implications of all this? First and foremost, we need to recognize that making a place for oneself in a foreign country and culture is extremely challenging. For this reason, we need social learning spaces where newcomers – international students and Japanese students perhaps new to university life – can meet, become friends and support each other pedagogically and emotionally. Secondly, within these facilities we need to give students metaphorical space – understood as the freedom to exercise their agency – so they can interact, engage with the community as it emerges and, in doing so, learn. Thirdly, as educators, we need to make space in our conceptual understanding of learning in institutional settings for the notion of learning beyond the classroom. Learning languages and cultures is intrinsically social. Therefore, we need learning spaces that facilitate the emergence of learning opportunities by enabling learners to exercise their agency as they interact with each other and engage with the environment.

Conclusion

As complex dynamic systems, social learning spaces are all about change. They change from semester to semester and from day to day as international students and Japanese students come and go. They also change for individual students depending on their level of engagement. Asked how the L-café was a different place from when she started coming a year earlier, Cheng responded:

I feel I'm involving more than last semester. I feel like it's completely new place for me and I feel closer to the people there. I feel like everyone, or even me, sharing that place like an owner. It's like everyone can take care of it – have to take care of it.

Through her engagement, not only is the L-café a changed place for Cheng, but she has a sense of belonging, ownership and responsibility for the common good.

While how students experience a social learning space can change; conversely, experiencing a social learning space can change students. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, we have collected stories from international and Japanese students in which they write about how their experiences at the English Café and the L-café changed their lives (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). However, change does not stop there: social learning spaces can change the face of the institution.

Social learning spaces have a key role to play in the transformation of universities into more globalized places. When we asked Lena if she saw any

evidence of the English Café changing people's lives, she gave an impassioned response:

I think it's changed a lot of people – many lives so far – because before English Café opened, I was in Okayama for six months and I felt really isolated. I mean, there was no place you can meet people who you can talk in English with.... We met so many people since English Café opened. Before that, it was really nothing was going on. There were none of these events where we could all hang around.... And now, also the whole Okayama University looks like a more international place... it [English Café] provided this international character to Okayama University.

By providing a place for international students and Japanese students to meet, become friends, and learn from each other, the university is enabling a process whereby both groups become more globalized citizens. In return, their engagement in this complex dynamic system is making the university a more globalized place. Social learning spaces are important because they facilitate glocalization – the enactment of globalization on a local level through day-to-day activities.

Notes on the contributors

Garold Murray is associate professor in the Center for Liberal Arts and Language Education at Okayama University. He is editor of the book *The Social Dimensions of Learner Autonomy* (2014), and co-editor of the books *Social Spaces for Language Learning: Stories from the L-café* (2016, co-edited with Naomi Fujishima), and *Space place and autonomy in language learning* (2018, co-edited with Terry Lamb).

Mariko Uzuka is a professor in the Center for Global Partnerships and Education at Okayama University. She established and managed the L-café and its predecessor, the English Café. Currently, she is in charge of advising international students, but continues to work closely with L-café.

Naomi Fujishima is a professor in the Center for Liberal Arts and Language Education at Okayama University. She currently serves as vice-president of JALT, the Japan Association for Language Teaching. She is co-editor of *Social Spaces for Language Learning: Stories from the L-café* (2016, co-edited with Garold Murray).

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ⁱⁱ For photographs of the LC, people and events, visit the L-café on Facebook: type 'L-café Okayama University' into the search window, or type the full address into your search engine: <https://www.facebook.com/lcafeokayamauniversity/>