Mind the Gap: Student-Developed Resources for Mediating Transitions into Self-Access Learning

Daniel Hooper

Tokyo Kasei University

tywardreathdan@gmail.com

Author biography

Daniel Hooper is an associate professor in the Department of English Communication at Tokyo Kasei University. He has been teaching in Japan for 17 years in a variety of contexts including primary/secondary schools, English conversation schools, and universities. His research interests include teacher and learner identity, reflective practice, self-access learning communities, and communities of practice.

Abstract

Making the transition from classroom language learning to a self-access center (SAC) can be a daunting prospect for many learners. This study examines the discomfort experienced by learners transitioning into a SAC and the different cognitive, social, and symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2007) that can help to scaffold this environmental change. Based on observational and interview data collected from a longitudinal ethnography of the Learning Community (LC), a SAC-based student-led learning community, this study determined sources of anxiety for new SAC users and the ways in which the learning community attempted to address these issues. This study's findings revealed how gaps in knowledge between exam-focused English study in secondary education and communication-focused English in SAC social learning spaces contributed to learner anxiety in addition to insufficient social scaffolding for SAC newcomers. The LC members responded to these problems by operationalizing learners' existing skills, proactively engaging new members, and providing low-anxiety modes of access to new knowledge. This study highlights the various sociocultural obstacles that SAC newcomers must negotiate and the valuable role of student learning communities as socializing agents bridging the gap between learners' past and future worlds.

教室での言語学習からセルフアクセスセンター（SAC）へ移行することは、多くの学習者にとって困難なことである可能性があります。本研究では、SACに移行する学習者が経験する不安感と、この環境変化の足場となる認知的、社会的、象徴的資源（Zittoun, 2007）を検討する。本研究は、SACを基盤とした学生主導の学習コミュニティであるLCの縦断的エスノグラフィーから収集した観察データとインタビューデータに基づき、SACの新規利用者の不安要因と、学習コミュニティがこれらの問題に対処しようとした方法を明らかにした。その結果、中等教育における試験中心の英語学習とSACの社会的学習空間におけるコミュニケーション中心の英語との間にある知識のギャップが学習者の不安につながり、さらに、SACの新規利用者に対する社会的足場が十分でないことが明らかになった。このような問題に対して、LCメンバーは、学習者の既存のスキルを運用し、新しいメンバーを積極的に巻き込み、新しい知識にアクセスするための不安の少ない方法を提供することで、対応した。本研究は、SAC新入生が乗り越えなければならない様々な社会文化的障害と、学習者の過去と未来の世界のギャップを埋める社会化エージェントとしての学生学習コミュニティの貴重な役割を明らかにするものである。

Keywords: social learning spaces, transitions, learning communities, learner anxiety, learner support

Throughout our lives, we pass through multiple different worlds or frames. A new job, a new class, a new group of friends - all of these life transitions come with both challenges and opportunities. As we transition into a new "sphere of experience" (Zittoun, 2006), we face discontinuity and must renegotiate the knowledge, identities, and sense of the world that we bring with us from the past. This "rupture" is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety and discomfort that, if unaddressed, prevent us from taking advantage of the opportunities for learning and growth that change lays at our feet. Conversely, if we are afforded means to deploy our existing knowledge, if allies in our new world hold out their hands to guide us, and if we can orientate ourselves within the instability we face, entering these new worlds enriches both our learning and sense of self.

For many, entering a self-access center (SAC) represents a transition into unfamiliar territory. Compared with the teacher-centered and exam-focused classrooms of many Japanese high schools, the "foreignness" of a SAC with its relaxed atmosphere and appearance, multilingual staff, and starkly different educational tenets can be at once alluring and intimidating for learners (Mynard et al., 2020; Murray & Fujishima, 2016). In particular, SAC social learning spaces can be a daunting proposition to learners fresh out of secondary English education as the chasm between their high school grammar lessons and an SLS's free-form and conversationally-oriented activities can appear uncrossable. It is only through access to transitional aids within a SAC that these learners may gain the confidence and support necessary to bridge this gap and continue to actively engage within a self-access environment.

To explore the transitional challenges that students face when initially engaging in self-access language learning and the various resources that may be deployed to help them negotiate this rupture, this study examines the formation and continued practice of the LC, a SAC student learning community. By utilizing Zittoun's (2006, 2007, 2008) conceptual framework relating to life transitions to analyze data from an approximately 18-month longitudinal ethnography, I hope to contribute to the understanding of the pressures learners face when entering SACs, and how practitioners and SAC users might mitigate the negative impact of these ruptures.

Transitioning into Social Learning Spaces: Possibility and Uncertainty

A wealth of studies exists indicating the value of SAC social learning spaces (SLSs) for the development of L2 conversational proficiency, building social connections, and encouraging learner identity negotiation (Mynard et al., 2020; Kurokawa et al., 2013; Murray

& Fujishima, 2016). One element of many SLSs, and indeed SACs more broadly, that has been argued to positively contribute to their developmental potential is their status as *heterotopic* spaces (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). The concept of *heterotopia* was originally proposed by Foucault (1986) and is described by Igarashi (2016) as "a place that is capable of juxtaposing several spaces in a single real space and that creates an illusion of other places that are not there or nowhere" (p.51). The argument for SACs, and particularly SLSs, being heterotopic comes from the fact that many contemporary examples in Japan simultaneously embody elements of the home culture and numerous other cultures outside its borders. For example, SLSs are often characterized by their multicultural and multilingual nature and sometimes even feature a pseudo-foreign aesthetic with international flags and signage in English and other languages (Mynard et al., 2020; Hooper, 2023). Of course, the international flavor of many SLSs can be a draw for students and may allow them to foster a sense of membership within an imagined community of international L2 users. This phenomenon can be observed in a range of studies both inside and outside of Japan (Mynard et al., 2020; Balçıkanlı, 2018; Kurokawa et al., 2013) and is encapsulated in the following description of the L-café, an SLS at Okayama University.

> 'L-café is like an airport to me,' one of my friends described the L-café to freshmen who were interested in going there. 'Everybody is from different countries, all different languages are spoken, and all this makes the atmosphere so special that L-café seems to be anywhere but Japan.' (Nakamoto, 2016, p. 81)

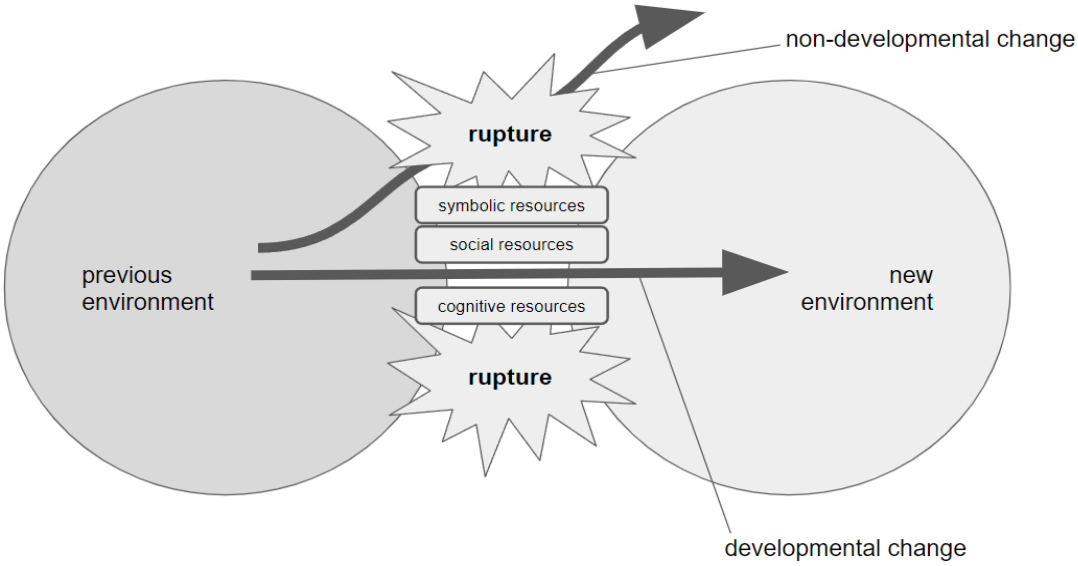
Despite the apparent benefits of the heterotopic nature of SLSs, however, Murray and Fujishima (2016) caution that the *liminality* or "in-betweenness" (Turner, 1967) of such spaces can also be a source of anxiety for some. The hybrid nature of a SAC SLS - not quite Japan but not wholly foreign - cuts both ways, representing "a space of possibilities" (Murray, 2018, p. 110), but also potentially creating a sense of *displacement* (Igarashi, 2016) or discomfort to the uninitiated. Learners' experiences of displacement within SAC environments have been well documented and this recognition has contributed to a recent movement seeking to enhance learner accessibility within the field of self-access in Japan (JASAL, 2022; Thornton, 2021).

Within Japan, the struggles experienced by students transitioning into self-access language learning environments, and more specifically social learning spaces, are arguably

exacerbated further by a persistent ideological divide within Japanese English language education between the study of English as an academic subject primarily for test-taking purposes (*eigo*) and the development of oral communicative proficiency in the language (*eikaiwa*) (Mynard et al., 2020). On top of the fundamental emotional upheaval that comes with any major life transition, Japanese students often experience additional *rupture* (Zittoun, 2006) - instability, confusion, or discomfort - stemming from the relative incoherence of the *eigo* and *eikaiwa* ideologies. While junior high school and high school English classes often feature frequent L1 use and few opportunities for conversation practice, when students enter SAC SLSs, they are often required to adhere to English-only language policies and find it difficult to converse with other students who are already highly proficient in *eikaiwa* (Mynard et al., 2020). According to Zittoun (2008), whether transitional rupture leads to negative (non-developmental) or constructive (developmental) change depends a great deal on what resources individuals have access to within a new environment or situation. Zittoun categorizes three types of resources that she argues may have a positive mediational effect on those experiencing life transitions: 1) cognitive - already-acquired knowledge or skills that can be operationalized in the new setting, 2) social - people who aid through affective support and socialization, and 3) symbolic - cultural artifacts that engage the imagination beyond the immediate physical setting (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Transition, Rupture and Mediational Resources



If students transitioning into a new learning environment have a means of accessing these various transitional resources, it is more likely that they will be able to constructively process the displacement/rupture experienced in heterotopia such as SAC SLSs and engage in positive transformative change.

Self-Access Student-Led Learning Communities

One approach within self-access language learning and also general education that has been posited as a measure to address the struggles that students face in their transitions across institutional and ideological boundaries is that of student learning communities (SLCs). SLCs are small intentionally-created communities of students that aim to enhance both individual and collective learning in a given area decided on by the group (Hooper, 2020; Watkins, 2022). Much of the existing literature on student learning communities has emerged from studies of higher education in the US where they were proposed as a way to facilitate out-of-class learning and also offer support to freshmen students who may be struggling with transitioning into tertiary education and university life in general (Lenning et al., 2013; Tinto, 2003, 2020). Drawing upon Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy, Tinto (2020) highlights the role of learning communities in addressing the needs of first-year university students struggling with different manifestations of rupture including a lack of belonging and low self-efficacy. One participant from Tinto's (2020) research described the emotional and learning support that participation in her learning community provided.

> In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had discussions about everything… it was like a raft running the rapids of my life. (Tinto, 2020, p. 19)

SLCs are a relatively recent phenomenon within self-access language learning with much of the literature stemming from the promotion of interest-based learning communities at Japanese universities (Hooper, 2020; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Watkins, 2021, 2022). These SAC learning communities are student groups who meet and learn collaboratively based on language learning objectives or simply because of a shared interest such as music, movies, or social movements. Watkins illustrated in a recent study (2022) how students'

participation in these SLCs was linked to satisfaction of their three Basic Psychological Needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017) (see Figure 2) of *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*.

Figure 2

Three Basic Psychological Needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

Autonomy	"the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions" (p. 10)
Competence	"our basic need to feel effectance and mastery" (p. 11)
Relatedness	"feel[ing] cared for by others" and "feeling significant among others" (p. 11)

Watkins found that participation in SLCs satisfied learners' *autonomy* in that it allowed them to become the locus of control and exercise volition regarding what they learned, when and how they learned it, and who they learned it with. In addition, learners' need for *competence* was met as the student community leaders strived to create safe, low-pressure environments in which everyone could take risks without fear of embarrassment or derision. Power distribution was also evident in the SLCs, with members frequently being given opportunities to actively contribute to the stewardship and innovation of their community. Finally, *relatedness* satisfaction was observable in many SLCs as senior members were encouraged to proactively engage in prosocial (benevolent) behavior and support newcomers' emotional needs. This atmosphere of mutual helping was further reinforced by the fact that each SLC developed a shared goal/interest or community *domain* (Wenger et al., 2002) that in turn stimulated the formation of a coherent group identity. Watkins' study illustrates the potentially positive mediational role of SLCs for both senior students developing leadership skills and for junior students negotiating educational transition. In the following study, I hope to build upon the existing self-access SLC research and explore how such student communities may contribute to the fostering of developmental change from students' transitions into SAC environments and reduce negative affect created by displacement and rupture.

Using the existing research outlined here as a foundation, in this study I will investigate salient causes of rupture for students entering SACs or SLSs. Furthermore, I will examine the different (cognitive, social, and symbolic) mediational resources that learning community participation may afford students transitioning into a SAC environment.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This study is based upon a larger-scale longitudinal ethnographic case study (Hooper, 2023) of the LC (pseudonym), an English conversation SLC located in a university SAC. The LC was formed by students in the SAC of a small, private university located in the Kanto region of Japan. The community was formed in 2017 and then continued in an online format from 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each LC meeting featured one set conversation topic decided on by the leaders or chosen from suggestions from LC members submitted in a weekly feedback form. During each session, members would move into small groups, discuss the topic bilingually, research any words they couldn't express in English using a website called DMM Eikaiwa, discuss the topic again in only English, and finally meet back as a whole group to share and discuss any new phrases or vocabulary they had learned. The LC met once a week and all of the community's activities were planned and managed by a small group of student leaders. The student leaders were in turn provided institutional support and opportunities for intentional reflective dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2016) by Keiko (pseudonym), a learning advisor who supervised a number of learning communities in the SAC. The participants of the current study included numerous LC members spanning three different generations as well as several other relevant stakeholders among the SAC staff who could offer insight into how the LC community functioned and its role within the SAC as a whole (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

List of Study Participants (Hooper, 2023)

LC participants		
Commenced participation in study in autumn 2019		
Ryoya	English major	LC leader (in his 3rd year) from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Yuki	English major	LC leader (in her 3rd year) from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Harumi	English major	LC member (in her 3rd year) from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Tenka	International communication major	LC member (in her 1st year) from Sept. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Mizuki	International communication major	LC member (in her 1st year) from Jun. 2019 to present
Commenced participation in study in spring 2020		
Sara	English major	LC leader (in her 4th year) from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Riri	English major	LC member (in her 2nd year) from Apr. 2019 to present
Hinako	English major	LC member (in her 2nd year) from Apr. 2019 to present
Natsuko	English major	LC member (in her 2nd year) from Apr. 2019 to present
Former LC participants and SAC staff (commenced participation in autumn 2019)		
Kei	High school teacher	LC leader from 2017 to 2019
Keiko	SAC learning advisor	
Yukiko	SAC administrator	
Amy	SAC director	

Data Collection

LC member participants were selected through purposeful sampling carried out via a simple questionnaire based on their level of experience and degree of comfort and active participation in the community. I also conducted participant observation of LC sessions once a week for a one-year period and took detailed field notes on the LC's practice based on Spradley's (1980) "nine dimensions of descriptive observation" - space, object, act, activity, event, time, actor, goal, and feeling (see Appendix). Furthermore, I collected written or oral language learning histories for each LC member participant based on a model developed by Murphey and Carpenter (2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and focused primarily on their impressions of the LC and what role they perceived the community to have for them personally as well as within the SAC. For all language learning histories and interviews, participants were informed that they could respond in either

English, Japanese, or a mixture of the two. My proficiency in Japanese allowed me (with support from a range of Japanese L1 speakers) to conduct all of the language learning histories and interviews bilingually. This choice was made in order to facilitate the deepest possible responses from my participants and also to help them feel more at ease during the data collection sessions. Finally, artifact collection was conducted over an approximately two-year period where I collected slides from each LC session, minutes from LC leader meetings, and promotional materials for the LC. All data collection procedures were approved by the institution's research ethics board and transparency relating to my study was consistently maintained with SAC staff for the duration of the research.

Data Analysis

For the current study, I revisited the original data and inductive codes that I developed (utilizing NVivo 12 software) through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from my original ethnographic case study (Hooper, 2023). The reflexive thematic analytical process is guided by the following six stages: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Upon revisiting my original codes and themes, I subsequently used Zittoun's (2006, 2007) sociocultural theory of life transitions to deductively recode the data based on the following categories:

- rupture
- cognitive resources
- social resources
- symbolic resources

In the following sections I will address these categories in detail and will attempt to illustrate the rupture that LC members faced in the SAC and how their community worked to respond to these struggles.

Findings

Problem

Rupture

In terms of the discomfort or uncertainty that learners experienced in the SAC that catalyzed or influenced their participation in the LC, several causes of rupture were frequently observed based on a number of linguistic and social factors. As has been found in other studies of Japanese language learners' experiences in higher education (Mynard et al.,

2020; Miyahara, 2015), the ideological shift from *eigo*-oriented classes in secondary education and *eikaiwa*-focused instruction in university was found to be a key factor impacting how my participants were able to transition to SAC engagement. Many participants stated that their junior high school and high school classes were focused primarily on preparation for entrance examinations and that they generally lacked opportunities for communicative English use. Consequently, in most cases, their experiences in secondary education were discussed in negative terms. Furthermore, the majority of participants displayed a clear international posture (Yashima, 2009) and indicated a strong desire to develop their proficiency in *eikaiwa*.

> Researcher: If you were going to explain to an alien, (laughs) how could you describe the type of person who goes to the LC?
> Mizuki: Hmm. They are so friendly, so I can talk with them easily, and so they want to improve their English skill, especially in speaking. (Mizuki, December 6, 2019)

Despite this apparent motivation to develop their English oral proficiency, however, a common theme was the rupture that the majority of LC members experienced when initially transitioning to the university and the SAC as freshmen. In particular, these feelings of rupture were related to one SLS within the SAC, the Chat Space. The Chat Space was an English-only space in the SAC that was perceived by the LC members to be for highly-proficient English speakers, a notion that was reinforced by the frequent presence of international exchange students in the space and the "free chat" model with no set conversation topics. This meant that LC members often reported negative experiences related to the Chat Space where they unsuccessfully attempted to join in the activities there or felt intimidated, judged negatively, or believed that their presence burdened other Chat Space users.

> Riri: I tried [to] join and I walked around the Chat Space. But they speak really good English so I felt nervous and I [went] back to...
> Researcher: So the gap was, you felt it was too much?
> Riri: Yeah. Like, if I got used to the community, maybe I'm okay. But [it was] the first step to join, so…(Riri, January 8, 2021)

Furthermore, some members felt that *eikaiwa* proficiency was a ranking criterion within some areas of the SAC, with the ability to fluently converse with "native speakers" representing the benchmark for success. This meant that the students transitioning from *eigo*-oriented environments sometimes experienced identity threat and feelings of inferiority that, due to their longing to be fluent English speakers in an international community, could lead to feelings of intense anxiety.

> Sara: If [native speakers] don't understand what I say, I have to explain more and maybe my brain stop[s] and nanka, word ga detekonaku natte… **(like, the words don't come out…)**
> Researcher: You feel like people judge your English or…?
> Sara: Yeah, yeah. So, I'm so scared of people who judge or make a ranking. (Sara, July 16, 2020)

The rupture stemming from a perceived gap in *eikaiwa* proficiency was further compounded by social rupture from the free-form nature of certain SLSs, which made it difficult for newcomers to break the ice and insert themselves into an already-established social group. It was against this backdrop that the LC was formed. From its earliest iterations, it was clear that the community was designed in order to act as an alternative to areas like the Chat Space and provide support for those students keen to develop their *eikaiwa* competence, but struggling with their transition into the SAC.

> [SAC] dewa eigo wo hanashitaikedo chotto nanka hairizuraina toka omotteru hitokara shitara sugoi ii community da to omou kara souiu eigo wo benkyou shitai kedo ibasho ga nai tteiu hito no tame no ibasho ga LC no rooru na ki ga shimasu ne.
> **(The LC is a really great community for people who want to speak English in the SAC but feel it's hard to enter. I feel like the role of the LC is a place for people who want to study English but have no place to belong.)** (Kei, February 15, 2020)

Solutions

In the following sections, I will discuss how the LC responded to the issues described in this section, the cognitive, social, and symbolic resources that the LC afforded, and how

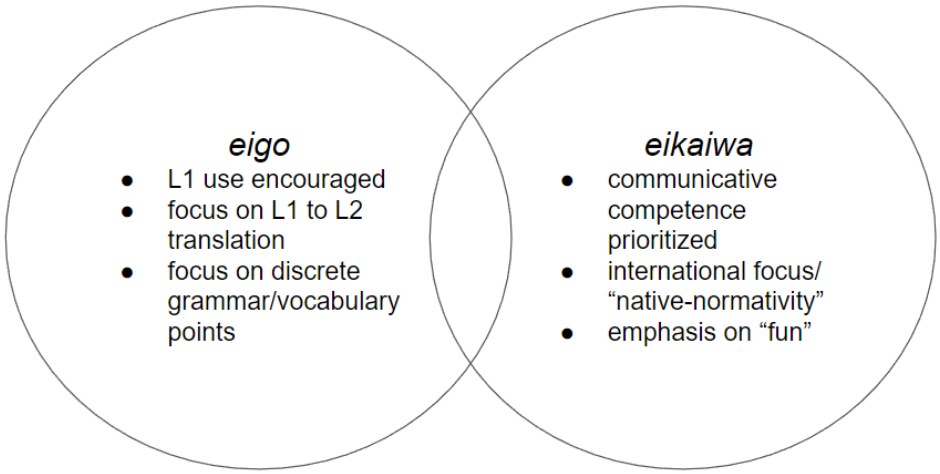
the community maintained an accessible environment for members across multiple generations.

Cognitive Resources

Cognitive resources are "forms of technical, reasoning or heuristic expertise, and practical or formal knowledge" (Zittoun, 2007, p. 7) that may be mobilized in order to negotiate transition and rupture. Clearly, one key type of knowledge tied to rupture among the LC members was linguistic knowledge. Firstly, due to a gap between the *eigo* that they had learned in secondary education and the *eikaiwa* proficiency that was prioritized in contexts like the Chat Space, many of my participants found that the knowledge that they brought with them did not translate into their new learning environment. This led to non-developmental change in the form of feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and sometimes complete withdrawal from participation. In response to this situation, the LC's practice developed as a bridging of the two ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* - a liminal "third space" (Kramsch, 2009) in which members could operationalize their previously-acquired knowledge (*eigo*) while moving towards developmental change and the development of new knowledge and skills (*eikaiwa*). Based on different ideological traits of both *eigo* and *eikaiwa*, one can see that within the LC, members selected elements from each that they felt suited their own particular needs and dispositions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Hybridization of Eigo and Eikaiwa in the LC (Hooper, 2023)



In LC meetings, members were initially given an opportunity to discuss the weekly topic together in both Japanese and English and then had time to find translations online for anything they could not initially express in English.

> You can practice speaking English and vocabulary or grammar because in that group they can use English, they can use Japanese also. So, if you can't understand, you can use Japanese and you can check each other or you can ask senior students. So, you don't have to be more nervous or need not hesitate. (Tenka, December 4, 2019)

The LC's language policy provided newer or less confident members with opportunities to utilize the L1 knowledge they brought with them, was more aligned with the study practices they experienced in secondary education, and acted as a source of scaffolding while they attempted to develop their *eikaiwa* competence and social bonds. The ability to switch between their L1 and English also was observed to have afforded multiple opportunities for peer teaching within the community among both senior and junior students alike. This bilingual co-construction of knowledge can be seen in the following observation of the final vocabulary sharing portion of an LC session.

> One of the freshmen is kind of checking if "dokutoku no nioi" means "unique smell", but then Mizuki is drawing on one of the previous sessions when they talked about the difference between "smell" and "odor", etc. So they are sharing knowledge. (Observation, December 1, 2020)

The community practices developed by the LC leadership essentially enabled its members, and particularly newcomers to the SAC, to deploy the skills and knowledge that they brought with them from their previous sphere of experience (secondary education). This allowed even inexperienced LC members to engage actively with the community while also providing an affective "safety net" for those who would be too anxious to participate in the free-form, English-only environment of the Chat Space.

Social Resources

Social resources refer to people who can be drawn upon during transitions for knowledge, emotional support, and guidance with socialization into a new sphere of experience (Zittoun, 2007). As stated in the previous section, support for newer LC members was a clear focal point within the community. Social resources for LC newcomers were facilitated in a number of key ways including: 1) deemphasis of *senpai-kōhai* relationships, and 2) leadership expressions.

As previously discussed, the issue of being ranked while participating in a SLS was identified by several LC members as a potentially negative influence on newcomers. This notion of ranking or hierarchies being antithetical to an accessible community was also reflected in the LC's approach to *jouge kankei* or seniority-based hierarchies in which *kōhai* (juniors) are commonly required to act in a differential manner to their *senpai* (seniors). Due in part to past negative experiences in other communities and partly influenced by Keiko and the autonomy-supportive culture of the SAC, the LC leadership cultivated an environment in which these traditional hierarchies were flattened and both *senpai* and *kōhai* were encouraged to interact with each other in a friendly and open manner. This welcoming atmosphere represented a key tenet of the community and was highlighted in promotional materials for the LC.

> "Yeah, so we have freshmen and senior students together. So we can cooperate with each other and the seniors will always talk to new students. It's that kind of friendly place, where it becomes a community for all students." (SAC Newsletter)

During LC meetings also, the LC leaders would proactively engage with newer members and would try hard to provide them to contribute to the community during group work and the final vocabulary share sessions. Furthermore, the de-emphasis of *jouge kankei* was frequently reinforced through the language I observed being used by LC leaders as they introduced the nature of the community to new members.

> "Senpai to iu ka, kyonen kara kita hito." **(Not *senior*, a person who started last year.)** Wow, that's interesting. That was an interesting choice of words, like deemphasizing the senpai thing. (Observation, July 14, 2020)

The ethnographic data from this study revealed that leadership practices in the LC had a considerable impact on the nature of its community of practice. I identified three key types of leadership expression that the LC leaders implemented - democratizing, caretaking, and scaffolding (Hooper, 2023). The last expression - scaffolding - can be observed in the decisions surrounding the community's language policy and the continued efforts taken to actively engage newcomers in the LC's practice through knowledge sharing. Democratizing leadership practices are evident in proactive calls for feedback (shared in a weekly Google

Form) where the LC leaders would ask the membership for ways to improve the community, highlight any problems or struggles they experienced, and contribute new topics for the community to discuss. The aforementioned efforts to flatten the power dynamic of the community and facilitate a freer sharing of ideas and opinions between *senpai* and *kōhai* alike further reinforced this push for a democratically-managed community. Essentially, the democratization of the LC by its leadership helped to maintain an environment in which even complete newcomers could vocalize anxieties they were experiencing during their transitional period. These concerns could then be taken up by the leadership and fed back into the LC as affectively-supportive countermeasures in a constantly-evolving social process.

> Ryoya told everyone, "As I always say, [the LC] is not just for me and Yuki. It's for you guys. That's why we always do this, always do the questionnaire." (Observation, November 17, 2020)

Finally, the caretaking role of the leaders involved sharing useful information casually with new members about classes, study strategies, learning materials, and so on while also ensuring that the community remained in alignment with the overall autonomy-supportive mission and tenets of the SAC. The leaders' relationship with Keiko was a central element of this as all of the LC leaders were SAC peer advisors who were enrolled in a leadership course with her. This interdependent brokering relationship (Wenger, 1998) allowed the leaders to have constant access to intentional reflective dialogue with Keiko, and conversely afforded Keiko valuable insights into what was actually happening in the learning communities on the ground level, thus enabling her to support them more effectively in the future.

Symbolic Resources

A person using a symbolic resource might be someone using a cultural artifact such as a book, movie, or piece of music in order to make sense of and gain orientation within transitional rupture (Zittoun et al., 2003). Another trait of symbolic resources is that, unlike their previously-discussed cognitive and social counterparts, they allow a "distancing beyond the here-and-now" (Zittoun, 2007, p. 7). There were found to be a number of symbolic resources utilized within the LC in order to help its members to move towards developmental change during a turbulent time in their learning lives. Perhaps the most influential example of a symbolic resource in the LC was DMM Eikaiwa, a website that members used to research casual conversational or slang phrases online so as to supplement the cognitive resources they

brought with them into the community. The members would use the site to find posts written by English speakers from around the globe (but primarily from Inner Circle countries like the US and the UK) who would respond to questions asked by Japanese English learners (see Figure 5). DMM Eikaiwa was particularly important to the LC in that it afforded them access to what they determined to be "native" or "natural" English in lieu of direct access to "native speakers."

Figure 5

Sample DMM Eikaiwa Post (Hooper, 2023)

Several LC members had negative past experiences interacting with "native speakers" and participating in sites like the Chat Space that threatened their identities as competent English users. However, as previously discussed, they also strongly desired to develop their *eikaiwa* competence and possessed a strong international orientation with many members hoping for future engagement with an imagined community of international English users. DMM Eikaiwa, therefore, functioned as a powerful symbolic resource affording the community access to their desired imagined community and its associated knowledge without risking panic, demotivation, and other forms of non-developmental change.

Conclusion

This study illustrated that the rupture students experience when transitioning into SAC environments, and in particular SLSs, may be the result of a gap between their previous sphere of experience (secondary education) and the new environment and culture they are faced with. These feelings of rupture are arguably exacerbated by English-only language policies and a perceived lack of linguistic or social scaffolding for newcomers. However, examining this situation in a more positive light, it can also be recognized that institutionally-supported student learning communities have enormous potential in contributing to SAC accessibility through the provision of cognitive, social, and symbolic resources for learners in transition.

This study has a number of implications for SAC practitioners. In terms of SAC practice, the insights gained regarding the LC community's deep understanding of SAC users' affective struggles and needs reinforce the immeasurable value of active student participation and management within SACs. The emergence of communities like the LC can serve as a barometer to administrators of surreptitious problems within SACs that may have thus far slipped under the radar. Furthermore, by examining Keiko's pivotal support role in regard to the LC, this study also highlights potential future avenues into which the learning advisor role may expand such as community support and leadership counseling. In sum, this study sheds light on the mutually-beneficial nature of dialogic relationships between SAC staff and student learning communities for the purpose of creating more supportive and accessible learning environments.

References

Balçıkanlı, C. (2018). The 'English Café'. In G. Murray & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Space, place and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 61–75). Routledge.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* Freeman.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2). 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). An overview of self-determination theory. In E. L. Deci & R. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 3–33). University of Rochester Press.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics, 16*(1), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

Hooper, D. (2020). Modes of identification within a language learner-led community of practice. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 11*(4), 301–327. https://doi.org/10.37237/110402

Hooper, D. (2023). *Exploring and supporting self-access language learning communities of practice: Developmental spaces in the liminal* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.

Igarashi, M. (2016). Writing tutorials at the L-café. In G. Murray & N. Fujishima (Eds.), *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café* (pp. 50–59). Palgrave Macmillan.

Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL). (2022). *JASAL2022 National Conference*. https://jasalorg.com/jasal2022/

Kanai, H., & Imamura, Y. (2019). Why do students keep joining Study Buddies? A case study of a learner-led learning community in the SALC. *Independence, 77*, 31–34.

Kato, S., & Mynard, J. (2016). *Reflective dialogue: Advising in language learning.* Routledge.

Kramsch, C. (2009). Third culture and language education. In V. Cook & L.Wei (Eds.), *Contemporary applied linguistics* (pp. 233–254). Continuum.

Kurokawa, I., Yoshida, T., Lewis, C. H., Igarashi, R., & Kuradate, K. (2013). The Plurilingual Lounge: Creating new worldviews through social interaction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 37*(1), 113–126. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.04.014

Lenning, O. T., Hill, D. M., Saunders, K. P., Solan, A., & Stokes, A. (2013). *Powerful learning communities: A guide to developing student, faculty, and professional learning communities to improve student success and organizational effectiveness.* Stylus.

Miyahara, M. (2015). *Emerging self-identities and emotions in foreign language learning: A narrative oriented approach*. Multilingual Matters.

Murphey, T., & Carpenter, C. (2008). The seeds of agency in language learning histories. In P. Kalaja, V. Menezes, & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 17–35). Palgrave Macmillan.

Murray, G. (2018). Self-access environments as self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 9*(2), 102–115. https://doi.org/10.37237/090204

Murray, G., & Fujishima, N. (2016b). *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Mynard, J., Burke, M., Hooper, D., Kushida, B., Lyon, P., Sampson, R., & Taw, P. (2020). *Dynamics of a social language learning community: Beliefs, membership and identity.* Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/MYNARD8908

Nakamoto, N. (2016). The door to the L-café, the door to the world. In G. Murray & N. Fujishima (Eds.), *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café* (pp. 80–85). Palgrave Macmillan.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.* Guilford.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation.* Waveland Press.

Thornton, K. (2021, June 25). *JASAL: Supporting a growing self-access community in Japan.* Relay 6th LAb session: Landmarks in SALC contexts. Thinking back, moving forward, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRpm039soLM

Tinto, V. (2003). *Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success*. Higher Education Monograph Series, Syracuse University

Tinto, V. (2020). Learning better together. In A. Jones, A. Olds, & J. G. Lisciandro (Eds.), *Transitioning students into higher education: Philosophies, pedagogies and practice* (pp. 13–24). Routledge.

Turner, V. (1967). Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In V. Turner, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual* (pp. 234–243). Cornell University Press.

Watkins, S. (2021). Becoming autonomous and autonomy-supportive of others: Student community leaders' reflective learning experiences in a leadership training course. *JASAL Journal, 2*(1), 4–25. https://jasalorg.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/3-autonomy-supportive-training-for-student-leaders-final2.pdf

Watkins, S. (2022). Creating social language learning opportunities outside the classroom: A narrative analysis of learners' experiences in interest-based learning communities. In J. Mynard & S. Shelton-Strong (Eds.), *Autonomy support beyond the language*

learning classroom: A self-determination theory perspective (pp. 182–214). Multilingual Matters.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Yashima, T. (2009). International posture and the ideal L2 self in the Japanese EFL context. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity, and the L2 self* (pp.144–163). Multilingual Matters.

Zittoun, T. (2006). *Transitions: Development through symbolic resources.* Information Age Publishing Inc.

Zittoun, T. (2007). Symbolic resources and responsibility in transitions. *Young. Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 15*, 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880701500205

Zittoun, T. (2008). Learning through transitions: The role of institutions. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 23*(2), 165–181. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03172743

Zittoun, T., Duveen, G., Gillespie, A., Ivinson, G., & Psaltis, C. (2003). The use of symbolic resources in developmental transitions. *Culture & Psychology, 9*(4). 415–448. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0394006

Appendix

Observation notes (May 12th 2020) based on Spradley's (1980) "nine dimensions of descriptive observation"

Space	First real on-task exploration of online functionality on Zoom, struggled with navigating the virtual space due to issues relating to host status and breakout rooms - two of the three organizers had to stay in the main room (Yuki couldn't manage breakout rooms at all due to iPad issues), discussed how much easier face-to-face scenario was, SAC still 'present' through Ryoya's Zoom background of the SAC and the slides background of the [meeting area], the main Zoom room and the chat function still allowed all members to throw out ideas to the whole group, discussed the importance of not meeting up in person (institutional rule)
Object	Objects are essentially linked to iPads and maybe computers, but the organizers also used cell phones to contact each other when they had a crisis with the breakout rooms, requested members to use online search engines (eikaiwa sites?) rather than dictionaries, they shared all vocabulary from the chat in a separate document on Line later in the week, they gave out a survey at the end of the session to request members' feedback and ideas for potential topics
Act	Before the session, the organizers were assigned different roles (mainly by Ryoya), my observation was limited to the main room but the session started with general housekeeping and an explanation of the group's aims, flow in terms of stages (Japanese discussion/research of English/English conversation/group share), and introduction of the topic - everything was done in Japanese or bilingually by Ryoya, the organizers moved members into breakout rooms and took turns to go through monitoring their progress, another organizer broadcasted messages to the breakout rooms informing members of when each new stage should begin, when everyone came back to the main room, members wrote in their phrases into the chat, the organizers picked out certain phrases and asked the members to describe/explain them, the organizers also offered supportive comments, asked questions, joked, and tried to relate the phrases to everyday life
Activity	I couldn't see much of the activity as it was going on in breakout rooms, in the main room the organizers were discussing issues related to management of the session and considerations about topic choice, technology, etc. in Japanese together, before the start of the meeting, more established members joked and chatted with the organizers in casual Japanese
Event	The main events in the session appeared to be - a) pre-session (chatting, joking, organizing, setting up), b) greetings, housekeeping and introducing the community, c) Japanese conversation in breakout rooms, d) English (online) research in breakout rooms, e) English conversation in breakout rooms, f) whole group sharing time, and g) final housekeeping and greetings

Time	Yuki is in charge of time management. The organizers arrived about 15-20 minutes before the session started (12:00), other established members started showing up (12:10), session starts at 12:20, introduction to session (12:20 -12:30), breakout rooms from 12:30 - 12:45, some members showed up late (around 12:28 and 12:42), session ends at around 13:00
Actor	Ryoya appears to inhabit 'main' organizer role - he takes lead on all explanations and delegates roles to other organizers, Yukiko (SAC liaison) is also present throughout to offer support and monitor session (?), Yuki is given time management role and Sara is in charge of managing breakout rooms, each organizer takes turns (except Yuki due to technical issues) to move between breakout rooms, 31 members in total for this session, each member has a number next to their name to denote year in university (how about senpai-kōhai?), Tenka shares vocab in whole group stage, so does another 2nd year student (regular) and another 3rd year student (seems like regular), Ryoya and Sara offer supportive comments and ask questions during this stage, a first year student also explains a phrase to the group, one more (2nd year?) student explains another phrase, Ryoya has a very active role during this stage and is often at times akin to an entertainer, finally organizers and Yukiko have a short debriefing chat after other members have left
Goal	According to Ryoya's explanation and slides, the LC is to "Enjoy talking in English" and "Find useful vocabulary for daily conversation", comfort seems to be a thing because of the language policy, their concern over the appropriateness of the topic (marriage), and the numerous disclaimers about only showing their camera or offering an explanation in the session if they're comfortable, I noted that affect seems to be a big consideration, laughter as a big part in providing a fun and relaxing atmosphere appears to be key, Ryoya states that it doesn't matter what year they are (thus challenging senpai-kōhai) but he also asks the older members to help the newer ones (maybe this is senpai-kōhai lite?), not only the topic and phrases, but the language they all use with each other (both English and Japanese - "later") is casual/slangy and this appears to be part of the domain
Feeling	I guess the feeling I got from the session was structured but casual. They appear to have a clear idea of what they want to do but try to do in an accessible way, laughter was a common thing - lots of jokes in both Japanese (mainly) and English being cracked, I guess the other thing would be relatability - they link all of the phrases to everyday life and even their own experiences - the language policy also appears to assist them in this, Ryoya and Sara in particular appeared to be almost entertainer-like in their management of the group and often made jokes and humorous comments during the latter stages, they would also sometimes make comments about the members they already knew establishing familiarity with each other, finally one thing that struck me was how active the sharing session was and how engaged members seemed when they were analyzing vocabulary and its nuances (lots of smiles and laughter)