"I wanted to make memories with her": Motivation and a Cherished *Senpai–Kōhai* (Senior-Junior) Relationship

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Abstract

Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, this research paper shares a story of transformation that illuminates how the affordances of a Social Language Learning Space (SLLS), particularly the *senpai–kōhai* (senior–junior) relationships forged in these spaces, can foster growth. The co-constructed story presented and explored in this study drew on two texts. The first text is a reflective piece of writing which Mao Yasuda (co-author of this paper) produced following a year of serving as a volunteer in her university's SLLS. The second is a speech Yasuda made at an open campus event for prospective students, reflecting on how she had grown from a reserved first-year student to an English recitation contest prize winner by the end of her second year at university. These texts became the basis for a series of oral interactions between Yasuda and Clair Taylor, the Director of the SLLS and the teacher in charge of the volunteer activity course in which Yasuda participated. Notes from these sessions were also utilized in the inquiry. These reflective narrative-weaving processes uncovered some aspects of the *senpai–kōhai* relationship and motivation which have received little attention in the field of self-access language learning. Some implications for researchers and professionals working in self-access are discussed.

本研究はナラティブ・インクワイアリーのアプローチを採用し、ある学習者の変容の物語を共有する。それはソーシャル・ランゲージ・ラーニング・スペース（Social Language Learning Space: SLLS）の特性、特にその空間で築かれる「先輩・後輩」の関係が、いかに成長を促すかを明らかにするものである。本研究で提示・考察した協同的に構築されたストーリーは、二つのテキストに基づいている。一つ目は、安田茉央（本論文の共著者）が大学SLLSで一年間ボランティアを務めた後に執筆した省察的エッセイである。二つ目は、安田が新入生対象のオープンキャンパスで行ったスピーチである。そこでは、大学1年生の控えめな学生から、2年生終了時には英語朗読コンテストの入賞者へと成長した自身の軌跡が語られている。これらのテキストを基に、安田と共同研究者であるクレア・テイラー（SLLSディレクターであり、安田が参加したボランティア活動コースの担当教員）との間で一連の対話が行われた。これらのセッションの記録も調査に活用された。こうした省察的ナラティブを紡ぎ考察するプロセスを通して、セルフ・アクセス型言語学習の分野ではほとんど注目されてこなかった先輩・後輩関係や動機付けの側面が明らかになった。セルフ・アクセス言語学習分野の研究者や専門家に向けた示唆についても議論する。

Keywords: personal growth, near-peer role models, directed motivational currents; *senpai–kōhai* relationships

In Japan, hierarchical relationships between *senpai* (seniors) and *kōhai* (juniors) are ubiquitous, and these dynamics permeate educational settings. The *senpai* is a student who is a year or more ahead of the *kōhai* in the school system. University students regard those in a higher academic year as *senpai* and treat them with respect and deference. In *senpai–kōhai* relationships, the *senpai* is expected to provide guidance and support as the *kohai* is socialized into the group. The involvement of love and status in the social exchange can make the bonds between *senpai–kōhai* long-lasting (Qie et al., 2019). Similar relationships are found in other countries rooted in Confucian culture (Qie et al., 2019).

In English-language learning environments, the *senpai–kōhai* dynamic can be both beneficial and detrimental. It can sometimes add certain stressors, such as guarding and restraint (Doyon, 2000), when *kōhai* feel pressure to use respectful language and behaviors. However, the interdependent relationship characterized by the respectful stance of the *kōhai* and friendly, supportive advice-giving from the *senpai* works effectively in language tutoring contexts (Harwood, 2022). It can also be beneficial in the context of asynchronous written peer advising (Moriya & Kawasaki, 2023). In self-access learning communities, *senpai* can serve as "relatable role models" who provide "guidance, encouragement, and motivation" for younger students (Hooper, 2025, p. 19), positively influencing their learning trajectories (Hooper, 2020).

In this paper, we take a self-narrative approach to explore a story involving a *senpai–kōhai* relationship forged in a Social Language Learning Space (SLLS). We will begin with the story of its origins. On March 22, 2025, our university held an open campus event for prospective students to sample lectures and tour the facilities. At this event, Faculty of Foreign Languages undergraduate student Mao (co-author of this paper) gave a speech in which she described how a *senpai* friendship formed through English volunteer activities in the university's SLLS supported her participation in an English recitation contest. Clair, who is the faculty member in charge of the volunteer course, the SLLS' director, and co-author of this paper, was in the audience. She experienced an emotional response to the speech, witnessing Mao's transformation from a reserved first-year student to a confident public speaker. In a later consult, we, Mao and Clair, decided to proceed with this narrative inquiry, beginning a series of meetings in which we discussed Mao's experiences. In the process of co-constructing the personal narrative, we utilized the open campus speech, a reflective report Mao had written about her volunteer activities, and the notes from the meetings. Through this inquiry, we aimed to understand and illuminate the motivational currents that brought about this change so that the findings may be utilized by language teaching and self-access

professionals to create fertile conditions for other language learners to have similar transformative experiences.

Motivation for Language Learners

This section summarizes the research literature in three areas relevant to the topic of individual transformation in a SLLS setting, which were used as a lens to explore the story: personal growth, near-peer role models, and directed motivational currents.

Personal Growth

The quest for personal growth has been a focus for some researchers exploring language-learning motivation. In her rich narrative studies, Ros i Solé (2016) foregrounded that people learn languages not just for pragmatic purposes, i.e., to acquire transferable skills for the workplace, but as a personal journey of "self-development, self-cultivation and the development of a cosmopolitan self" (p. 59). Similarly, Consoli (2024) found that some Chinese students are motivated to study in the UK in order to become "a better self" (para. 27).

Personal growth has also been explored in SLLS contexts. Murray and Fujishima (2016) show how SLLS enable learners to benefit from other language users in the community in ways that both support language learning and enrich university life. They list a number of things students can do in SLLS that lead to personal growth, including the following:

- Make friends.
- Enhance motivation [by being surrounded by other motivated students who serve as role models].
- Receive and give help, encouragement and support.
- Get advice.
- Make memories.
- Have fun. (pp. 127–128)

Murray and Fujishima discuss how these positive experiences can help students feel safe and connected, which promotes sociability and self-expression, engendering self-actualization (Maslow, 1971), i.e., the full realization and fulfillment of their potential. Building on this, Hooper (2025), in his narrative studies, highlights the "altruistic mission" (p. 67) that motivates learners in SLLS, where they often seek to support others and foster a welcoming English-learning community. Through such prosocial actions, he argues, learners strengthen

their own "sense of personal value and competence" (p. 123). In essence, Murray and Fujishima (2016) and Hooper (2025) found that language development activity and personal growth can be intrinsically linked.

Near-Peer Role Models

There has been extensive research on the ways that (near-peer) role models can serve as powerful sources of motivation for language learners. Muir et al. (2019) found that the majority of language students have a role model, a target-language speaker (sometimes a celebrity or fictional character) whom they respect and want to be like, and for young people, this is more likely to be someone personally known to them. Based on a range of research projects, Murphey (1998) proposed that near-peer role models (NPRM), individuals close to the learner in key characteristics (such as age, nationality, and gender), present a more achievable and attractive target than native-speakers of the target language. He found that NPRM can affect motivation and choice of learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs, and that the influence can be long-term. Similarly, Haye-Matsui (2018) found that for female students, gender may be the most important of these shared characteristics. The young women she interviewed reported feelings of friendly rivalry with same-age, same-gender students, and a desire to emulate older women (mothers and teachers) they admired as confident speakers of English.

Research has explored NPRM in the Japanese context, relating it to the *senpai-kōhai* dynamic. Nonaka (2018) found that while some Japanese learners of foreign languages experience *akogare* (yearning, desire, in Japanese) for foreign places or a romantic relationship, others have similar feelings of *akogare* to be like a *senpai*, or to have the qualities (such as power, courage, and confidence) that other female peers possess. She argues that this *akogare* can be a powerful motivating force for language learning. Similarly, Walters (2020) uncovered culture-specific factors at play in NPRM in Japan. He examined how an NPRM intervention (in which first-year university students watched videos of slightly older, more advanced peers speaking together) affected students' beliefs about language learning. Lower-proficiency and less confident students reported stronger aspirational responses than those with higher proficiency or confidence. Notably, students who referred to the people in the videos as *senpai* were more likely to find the videos helpful than those who referred to them as "Japanese people" or by name. Walters suggests this was because some of the more confident viewers were exchange students and did not share their Japanese classmates' cultural frame of reference.

Directed Motivational Currents

Over the past decade, considerable attention has been given to "directed motivational currents" (DMCs)—unique periods of heightened motivation in which an emotionally significant goal becomes a dominant force in an individual's life, emerging from the alignment of personal, temporal, and contextual factors (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Dörnyei et al., 2015). Furthermore, Muir and Gümüş (2020) highlight that DMCs can be an individual or group experience. Examples of DMCs include rehearsing for a play, preparing for a competition, or learning a language for a trip overseas, when intense activity leads to rapid, trackable progress in a short period of time (Dörnyei et al., 2014). There are four key elements: 1. generating parameters (factors that come together to launch the process, typically involving a trigger); 2. goal/vision-orientedness (an inner sensory representation of the goal which guides the process); 3. salient facilitative structure (including the launch, subgoals, and automated routines); and 4. positive emotionality (in which activities are experienced as enjoyable due to the emotional loading of the target vision) (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Dörnyei et al. (2014) stress that DMCs are temporary, short-term periods of motivation, with energy "over and on top of the steady motivation any student will exhibit throughout the year" (p. 12). They disrupt normal life until the short-term goal is reached, and the student returns to their normal routine and "long-term goals and visions once again assume control of directing thoughts and actions" (p. 12).

Language educators have considered how they might intentionally generate DMCs, e.g., through projects and study abroad experiences (Dörnyei et al., 2015). To this end, research has focused on understanding the generating parameters, in particular, the triggering stimuli that launched the DMC for individual students. For example, Zarrinabadi and Khodarahmi (2021) interviewed 14 Iranian students who had experienced DMCs, and through qualitative analysis identified the triggers in each case. They grouped these triggers into two main categories: other-related factors and social-situational factors. Pertinent to this narrative inquiry, and to the understanding of how DMC may be triggered in SLLS in general, is the researchers' finding that others can induce a DMC in two ways 1. *goal contagion*, in which a learner decides to adopt the same goal as another person, due to their enthusiasm and rationale, and 2. (being a) *salient other*, someone who demonstrates attractive language abilities which impress the learner and may also give the learner positive attention, such as advice and compliments.

Weaving a Narrative Together

Narrative Inquiry

To make sense of Mao's transformative experience, we took a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term for research approaches that explore language learning through stories, focusing on making sense of experience through the narration and analysis of learners' narratives (Barkhuizen, 2011; Clandinin, 2022; Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, narrative "not only conveys information, but brings information to life," adding realism, authenticity, emotions, and values to research (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 553). Rather than treating storytelling and analysis as separate, sequential stages, narrative inquiry views storytelling itself as an analytical process (Barkhuizen, 2011; Clandinin, 2022; Ellis, 2004; Oxford, 2013). Oxford (2013) argues that co-constructing narratives is a multi-stage process in which learners first "filter, organize and structure information" (p. 102) as they tell their stories, followed by further analysis during the researcher's "re-storying" stage. In our inquiry, this stage was conducted collaboratively with the learner as co-researcher.

Traditionally, when researchers have explored the stories of language learners, the learner participants are only included in selected phases of the project, and their identities are hidden by pseudonyms, which means they receive no credit for their involvement in the study. In recent years, there has been a growing movement within educational research to *co-produce* research with learners, including the learner to a greater extent in all phases of the research project from inception to analysis and the development of practical applications of the findings (Hanks, 2020; Hanks, 2024; Manor et al., 2009/2023; Ota & Yamamoto, 2018). Hanks (2020) advocates researching *with* rather than *on* learners, arguing that if social justice is a genuine aim of research, "there is an ethical imperative for learners as well as teachers to be acknowledged and to be included (not hidden by pseudonyms unless they wish this) as full participants and co-investigators" (p. 16). She contends that this inclusive, emancipatory approach offers substantial benefits: by collaborating with educators, students become more engaged in reflective and analytical processes, contribute meaningfully, and are empowered to effect change within their learning communities. We adopted this approach in our inquiry, co-producing and collaboratively analyzing the narrative.

Research Questions

Through this inquiry, we attempted to make sense of Mao's experience, trying to gain a better understanding of how this change process came about and how it was lived and experienced. Guiding our inquiry were the following two research questions:

- What motivational currents propelled Mao's transformation from a reserved young woman into a confident public speaker?
- What role did Mao's *senpai* play in this process?

Background

The Setting

The setting for this story is Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University and its SLLS "Lounge MELT" (an abbreviation of Maximum English Learning Together). Lounge MELT consists of one spacious lounge with sofas, books, games, and musical instruments. It has a small, quieter annex with learning booths and an advising room. Its core mission is "to sustain a thriving plurilingual community by providing a comfortable, immersive environment where people use their English (and other additional languages) in real conversations" (Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, n.d.). Lounge MELT has an average of 22 users per day, and hosts several events per year, each of which attracts up to 200 visitors. Most of these events are planned by students enrolled in an elective one-year credit-bearing course called "English Volunteer Activity." Clair teaches this course, in which Mao enrolled in the 2024 academic year.

The "English Volunteer Activity" syllabus is structured to develop teamwork and other soft skills. The students complete three 90-minute training sessions in Lounge MELT before they begin two types of volunteer activity: 1. facilitating play in English at English World, the sister SLLS at the university-affiliated elementary school, and 2. planning and running Lounge MELT events. After the first semester of volunteering, Clair holds a reflection session in which volunteers share memories and individually draw a metaphor representing their experiences to promote deeper reflection and discussion. The volunteers are required to log 39 hours of activity in a web application over the year and submit a final reflective report.

The Recitation Contest

A key event in Mao's story is our university's English recitation contest, which is held every December. Participating students select a two-minute-long speech (often from YouTube), memorize it, and perform it on stage, focusing on pronunciation and delivery. This live-streamed event typically attracts 20–30 participants competing for attractive prizes. Although competitive, students usually engage in the contest cooperatively, forming supportive rehearsal communities where they practice and give one another feedback. Many participants make extensive use of Lounge MELT, with learning advisors assisting in

selecting materials and providing feedback. Mao took part in the 2024 contest alongside her *senpai*, choosing for her recitation, "Learning a language? Speak it like you're playing a video game" by Pascal (2017).

Our Story-Weaving Process

Our synergic story-weaving process unfolded over several weeks as we co-constructed the personal narrative in the following way. We drew on Mao's open campus presentation slides and script (originally written in Japanese and collaboratively translated into English), her illustrated year-end reflective report on volunteering, and notes from our oral discussions, during which we explored Mao's experiences through the lens of Clair's professional knowledge. The process involved questioning, listening, clarifying details, recalling events, and elaborating examples. We worked primarily in English, using translanguaging, dictionaries, and translation tools as needed to synthesize the texts and re-story the narrative for an audience of language educators and of self-access professionals. Collaboration took place in a shared online document, both synchronously and asynchronously, to preserve Mao's voice and ensure her intended meaning was fully conveyed.

Following the story-weaving, there was a further analytical process. We manually coded the written story, initially highlighting sections related to motivation, and later recoding in a non-linear, iterative process (Clandinin, 2022) involving more reference to the research literature, discussion of our interpretations, storying, and further reflection.

Ethical Considerations

There were several ethical considerations in undertaking this narrative inquiry. In self-narrative research, the presence of others in the story can create dilemmas (Sparkes, 2024). Autoethnographers highlight key issues such as story ownership, limits to confidentiality and anonymity in a digitally connected world, the feasibility of obtaining informed consent during an evolving narrative process, challenges with member-checks, and the need to avoid harm (Sparkes, 2024). We regard Mao as the owner of her story and determined that sharing it poses no harm to any participant. Because her *senpai*, Airi, appears prominently in the narrative, Mao obtained informed consent at the outset, following Airi's preference to use her real name. As the story developed, we reconfirmed her willingness to participate through a second oral and written consent process. A final member-check was conducted after completing the paper to verify factual accuracy and invite comments.

Preserving the Narrative Arc

In narrative inquiry, researchers consider how best to share the findings of their narrative knowledging (Barkhuizen, 2011). Many narrative inquirers want to share the stories they have crafted in addition to their thematically organized discussion. In studies involving multiple stories, intact stories may be shared in separate chapters in the volume (e.g., Murray & Fujishima, 2016) or in a separate companion volume (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022). In studies involving only one participant, the story or stories may be shared within the research text (Murray, 2009; Rahaman, 2025; Yamamoto, 2019). In Mao's story, the story structure is important. Thus, instead of decontextualized snippets of text, we have chosen to share as findings an abridged version of the story, preserving the narrative arc.

Mao's Story

When I became a sophomore, I decided that I wanted to output the English I had been inputting in lectures, so I took a class called "English Volunteer Activity." As volunteers, we went to the university-affiliated elementary school and played games using English with children during lunchtime. It was hard at first, but we were able to transcend the language barrier by watching the children's reactions and making repeated efforts to speak slowly and smile. We also planned parties in Lounge MELT for university students. We bought a lot of snacks and decorated the lounge. Thanks to the parties, I was able to make friends.

In that volunteer class, I met a senior who greatly influenced my life. Her name is Airi. She was very active and confident, worked several part-time jobs, and spoke English, Chinese, and Korean. She had so much life experience and was full of confidence. I admired her and wanted to be like her. There were only three girls in the group, so I wanted to get along with her.

Airi and I became best friends. She inspired me to keep challenging myself in many ways. In my first year, I had volunteered as a timekeeper at an academic conference, and in my second year, I became a manager of a club—something I had always wanted to try as I wanted to support the athletes. I also helped make videos for the new faculty's Instagram page.

In October, Airi asked me to enter the university's annual English recitation contest with her. To be honest, I did not want to at first. I am a nervous person, and I really do not like talking in front of people, even in Japanese. But Airi kept trying to persuade me, telling me I could put it on entry sheets when applying for jobs and trying to find a suitable talk for me to use. Watching the TED talks she showed me, I started to think, "Maybe I can do this!"

I realized that Airi was going to graduate that year, and it would be a waste not to do something with the senior I loved and respected. I wanted to make memories with her. Imagining the sound of the audience's applause and Airi and I laughing together, I decided to enter the contest.

From then on, I practiced a lot—every single day. I practiced in front of the mirror in my room every night. I memorized the words, and I performed them to my seniors, receiving advice and encouragement from them. We made videos of each other reciting and watched them back. I also received pronunciation instruction from my teacher and learning advisors. As a result, I received a special award. I was not nervous at all during the performance, thanks to the countless hours of practice, and I performed as well as I had in practice. I felt confident, excited. My senior also got second place, which was a great memory for me.

This year was really fulfilling, and I am glad that I chose the English volunteer class. I liken volunteering to the process of turning a stone into a jewel. A gemstone is just a nondescript stone at first. But if you polish it, it is transformed into something shiny and attractive. Let us say that we volunteers are just a stone of nothingness at first. But hosting a party to make people happy or playing with children using English to help them grow will benefit many people. We grow by putting thought and ingenuity into working for the good of others.

I especially appreciate Airi. I would not have done the recitation contest without her.

I would like to share what I learned from these experiences. I want to remember that I only live once, so I am going to do what I want to do and not regret it. I will keep that mindset. Looking back on my university life, it is better to think, "I did a lot of things," rather than "I didn't do anything." I will always try something new. I learned the importance of challenging myself to do many things, because I gain confidence when I have accomplished something. And I want to remember to cherish my relationships with others. It is important to value this.

Analysis and Implications

Our analysis identified both personal growth and NPRM as long-term, ongoing motivational sources, and a shorter period of intense motivation leading up to the recitation contest, which has the characteristics of a DMC.

Ongoing Motivational Sources: Personal Growth and NPRM

One ongoing source of motivation for behavior that permeates Mao's story is the sense of altruism and personal growth. The use of words such as "challenge", "growth", "fulfilment", "confidence", "smile", "glad" and "love" show that Mao's experiences and interactions with others, including her *senpai*, are loaded with positive emotions. Mao had a vision of serving as a club manager to help others even before entering the university, and her altruistic motives gave meaning to her group volunteer endeavors, helping the volunteers form bonds and providing the conditions for the *senpai–kōhai* relationship to flourish. Mao benefited from the kindness and care of her *senpai*, and a similar sense of duty and care to the incoming freshmen underpinned her decision to share her story at open campus. The metaphorical representation of students as "nondescript stones" who become shiny through the process of English volunteer activity shows Mao's awareness of her own personal transformation that she actively cultivates. The story arc illustrates how English is not an end in itself; the activities she engages in using English are involved in her ongoing self-actualization. The trajectory shows a journey towards fulfilment in which English learning, English use, increased sociality, public speaking skill-building, and genuine care for others are fused in a general movement of growth, connection, and personal development. Hooper (2025) similarly identified altruistic mission driving prosocial behavior in the SLLS community he studied. Murray and Fujishima (2016) discuss the affordances of SLLS for students' self-actualization. Exploring how this fusion of altruism and language learning manifests in different individuals or SLLS cultures and developing ways to further cultivate it could be interesting directions for future research.

Another long-term source of motivation is Mao's *senpai* Airi, who served as a powerful and attractive NPRM (Murphey, 1998). Mao is impressed by Airi's confidence and experience, which creates a possible future self as a goal: "I admired her and wanted to be like her." Airi is someone of the same gender to emulate (Haye-Matsui, 2018), as a sophisticated, multilingual student in her final year of university. As an NPRM, Airi represents an attractive possible future self, which energizes Mao's journey of self-growth: "She inspired me to keep challenging myself." It is also evident that Mao's *senpai* did not simply serve as a role model (Muir et al., 2019) to follow, but actively supported her *kōhai* both practically and psychologically, as we discuss in the next section.

DMC

Mao's participation in the recitation contest has the core characteristics of a DMC, entailing a period of intense activity in which the contest becomes dominant in Mao's life. The *generating parameters* (discussed in more detail below) include the opportunity to take part, *goal-contagion* (Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2021) from the *senpai*, and the watching of speech videos, which help Mao realize that the goal is achievable ("Maybe I can do this!"). The activity is *goal-oriented*—Mao's goal is to make memories with her *senpai* (a non-linguistic goal which drives her language learning efforts). The *facilitative structure* is evident, starting with a launch (deciding to join the contest). We also see *subgoals* (choosing the speech to perform, working on pronunciation targets set by getting feedback from others) and *automated routines* (practicing in front of the mirror, videoing practice sessions, watching the videos). There is evidence of *positive emotionality*—Mao willingly engages in "countless" hours of practice for the contest in a surge of activity and feels "confident" and "excited" as she performs.

There is only one way in which the DMC deviates from Dörnyei et al.'s model (2015). Dörnyei defines DMCs as goal/vision oriented, i.e., goals are sustained predominantly by a vision (a mental picture that students see and hear). Mao remembers the inner representation that guides her goal as exclusively auditory, with no visual component: "hearing the sound of the audience's applause and Airi and I laughing together, I decided to join."

The DMC Generating Parameters

Multiple factors aligned to launch Mao's DMC, with Mao's *senpai* playing a major role. The *senpai* decided to enter the contest first, and then actively persuaded Mao, so *goal contagion* (Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2021) can be considered a significant factor. Airi can also be understood as a *salient other* (Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2021), impressing Mao with her language abilities and giving Mao positive attention. However, the *senpai*'s role in the launch was more comprehensive and complex than these two categories suggest. First, she presented the opportunity of taking part in the recitation contest, an activity outside Mao's comfort zone, as she was afraid of public speaking even in her first language. Airi then encouraged Mao to believe herself capable of the challenge, and persuaded Mao of the value of attempting it, noting that it can be helpful to record this experience on an entry sheet when applying for employment, drawing on her status as a fourth-year student with experience in the job-hunting market. The *senpai* also makes the goal of speaking on a stage seem more achievable by taking the first step of selecting material for Mao, making it possible for Mao

to imagine herself speaking on the stage. Ultimately, though, the key factor in triggering the launch of Mao's DMC was a temporal one, arising from the transience of the *senpai–kōhai* relationship: the awareness that the *senpai* will graduate before the *kōhai*. Mao was spurred to take part in the contest because she knew that this would be the last opportunity to have such a meaningful shared experience with her *senpai*: "I realized that Airi was going to graduate that year, and it would be a waste not to do something with the senior I loved and respected. I wanted to make memories with her."

The *senpai* was involved not only in the initial triggering of the DMC, but also in continually retriggering it, as she nurtured her *kōhai*. She scaffolds Mao's practice, by engaging in activities such as video recording with her and giving explicit feedback, which helps the DMC maintain momentum. Throughout this rehearsal process, the *senpai*'s astute selection of material continued to be impactful, enabling progress that feeds the forward drive of the DMC. Pascal's (2017) TEDx talk encourages the audience to recognize that it is not necessary to have a high level of English to communicate well, and that non-native speakers of English should focus on the listener and the outcome when speaking, instead of worrying about accuracy and feeling judged. This message will have been internalized through repeated exposure and performance. Moreover, the repeated recital practice, which Airi encouraged and supported is associated with personality growth and trait change. Wirag (2024) has argued that by repeatedly immersing themselves in a role which embodies positive states, actors experience state-on-trait change, which can lead to (among other changes) more confidence and lower anxiety. It follows that by modeling the confident, upbeat, self-assured speaker Pascal, embodying her posture, intonation, eye-contact patterns, and gestures, Mao was repeatedly experiencing a confident state of flow which she became able to access whenever she subsequently steps onto a stage (even, as in her open campus speech, when she is presenting in Japanese). The *senpai*'s support in the DMC led to tangible progress, which not only fed the DMC but made lasting change.

The DMC Goal

The goal (to "make memories") in Mao's DMC may not be unique. This desire to make memories as a motivating force has been associated with the rise of social media platforms for documenting and sharing memories; Wiking (2021) claims that the Instagram generation are "architects of their future memories" (p. 210). Annabell (2022) documents this new perspective in the young women that she interviewed, finding that they actively pursue experiences that are "worth remembering" and noting that "articulating a desire to 'create memories' situates memories as a prospective experience [… not] active (re)constructions of

the past in the present […]. For these young women, memories are particular types of experiences that should be sought after" (p. 1544). According to Heath and Heath (2017), memorable experiences, or peak "defining moments" (p. 12) have four key elements: elevation, pride, insight, and connection. The recitation contest meets all these characteristics for Mao—elevation (the high stakes contest, appearing on stage), pride (in performing well and winning a prize), insight (into her new public speaking abilities), and connection (with her cherished *senpai* and other contest participants). Peak moments are associated with self-actualization (Maslow, 1971), in line with Mao's long-term motivation drives.

The current younger generation's desire to "make memories" (with *senpai* or in general) is an underexplored source of motivation in language learning research, opening potential avenues of research inquiry. Researchers could explore how widespread this drive is and how common it is as a DMC trigger. It might be interesting to investigate the kinds of experience which learners may deem "worthwhile", and whether and how this perspective can be leveraged by (for example) actively encouraging learners to think about and seek out the memorable experiences they hope to have in their university lives and beyond.

Practical Applications

Mao's story shows that the affordances of a SLLS support both Mao's long-term motivational drives and have a role in triggering a DMC (brief period of heightened motivation). Our analysis uncovered how one *senpai–kōhai* relationship formed in the SLLS had a particularly powerful role in these processes, both in the support provided by the culturally-specific role and due to the time pressure generated by the transience of the *senpai–kōhai* relationship which acted as a powerful trigger for a DMC in this case. These findings suggest a number of practical steps that faculty and SLLS professionals could take in tertiary settings, potentially benefiting language learners.

Faculty and other SLLS professionals in Japan could establish and develop activities to promote *senpai–kōhai* relationships aside from the established university clubs and circles. Activities where junior students can work alongside senior students, such as open campus events and volunteer activities, offer a means for students to share a sense of altruistic mission and may be ideal conditions for these supportive relationships to flourish. Faculty may recruit students to serve as interns at academic conferences, providing students of different ages an opportunity to work together in a stimulating environment where English may be used. Involving students in the production of university, faculty, or SLLS promotional material can also generate meaningful encounters between junior and senior

students that have the potential to lead to deeper ties. A "junior-interviews-senior" format lends itself well to SLLS promotional activities, where it can serve to inform students about spaces, events, and services while showcasing senior students who might serve as role models and informal mentors.

In addition to activity-based initiatives, SLLS professionals and student staff can promote *senpai–kōhai* relationships through more direct forms of interpersonal support. Facilitators can actively introduce younger students to their seniors, creating opportunities for *senpai–kōhai* relationships to kindle. We are aware (through personal communication from students) of cases in our own SLLS where such introductions have led to *senpai* support which continues post-graduation. SLLS professionals may also consider introducing Hooper's (2025) suggestions of student ushering and *buddy systems* (in which experienced peers support hesitant newcomers in their early SLLS visits). These practices could foster NPRM and positive *senpai–kōhai* relationships.

In Japan and beyond, educators may consider increasing the range of events organized by their SLLS or wider institutions, which students consider "worth remembering" (Annabell, 2022) and could potentially trigger DMCs. These anticipated events could include excursions, performances, presentations with large audiences, poetry readings, community activities, publications, and tours for visitors. The activities should involve some aspect of novelty and risk and serve to stretch students, taking them out of their comfort zone (Heath & Heath, 2017). This can create the conditions to motivate sustained autonomous learning behaviors as students prepare for them.

Conclusion

This paper presented a collaboratively produced analysis of a transformative student narrative, with the learner protagonist participating as a co-investigator. By focusing on the story of a single undergraduate student involved in a self-directed language-learning space (SLLS), the scope of the findings is necessarily limited. Mao's experience may not reflect those of other Lounge MELT volunteers or users, nor of students at the university more broadly. In addition, aspects of the *senpai–kōhai* relationship central to this narrative are likely influenced by cultural and gendered dynamics that may operate differently in other contexts.

Our intention in sharing this story was to uncover the motivational sources, pivotal moments, and supportive conditions that shaped Mao's development. We identified self-actualization and NPRM as ongoing sources of motivation and uncovered factors that

launched and guided a powerful DMC, demonstrating how a *senpai–kōhai* relationship supported this motivational surge and shedding light on the desire to make memories as a source of motivation, which could potentially be leveraged in SLLS. The narrative highlights the perhaps underappreciated value of *senpai–kōhai* relationships in Japanese self-access settings and suggests practical implications for self-access and language teaching professionals, as well as directions for future research.

The collaborative story-weaving process also proved deeply reflective for both authors. As we traced the forces that shaped Mao's decisions, sustained her motivated behaviors, and supported her growth, we found ourselves learning alongside her. Clair, a British educator who had long found the *senpai–kōhai* dynamic unfamiliar despite two decades in Japan, gained new insight into this relational structure and its parallels with her own teacher–student relationships. Mao, in turn, drew on the inquiry process to make new choices in her learning journey: she entered the 2025 recitation contest not as a *kōhai* but as a *senpai*, supporting two younger students in their preparations. This shift underscores the cyclical and generative nature of the *senpai–kōhai* relationship highlighted throughout the narrative.

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