"It's Easier to Study Something You're Interested in": How Emotions Shape Agency for Language Learning Beyond the Classroom

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Author Biography

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Abstract

Emotions play a vital role in shaping language learner agency (White & Pham, 2017), yet the ways in which the two interact are complex, dynamic, and context dependent. Anxiety, for example, may either hinder or enhance agency depending on particular configurations of internal and external factors (Gkonou, 2015), while positive reciprocity between enjoyment and agency has been associated with successful language learning (Chen et al., 2025). This study investigates how emotions and agency interact within a self-directed learning program at a Japanese university supported by a well-resourced self-access center (SAC). Addressing two research questions on how emotions facilitated or constrained their agency, data from students' self-directed learning portfolios and stimulated recall interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis. Participants commonly associated prior classroom learning with dissatisfaction and inadequacy, yet as they transitioned into self-directed learning, many reported increased enjoyment and a sense of liberation that enhanced their agency and opened new affordances for learning. However, persistent language learning anxiety continued to inhibit their engagement with SAC services and resources. The findings suggest that while Japanese learners' negative emotions toward language learning may be more malleable than previously assumed, anxiety remains a significant barrier to SAC use. The paper also includes recommendations for SAC practices to help learners overcome this barrier.

感情は言語学習者のエージェンシーを形成する上で重要な役割を果たすが（White & Pham, 2017）、その相互作用は複雑で、動的かつ文脈に依存する。本研究では、セルフアクセスセンター（SAC）を備える日本の大学で実施された自律学習プログラムにおいて、学習者の感情とエージェンシーの関係を検討した。本研究は、感情がどのように学習者のエージェンシーを促進または制限するのかという 2 つの研究質問に取り組み、自律学習ポートフォリオおよび刺激再生法によるインタビューをテーマ別内容分析を用いて分析した。従来の教室学習に対して不満や自己効力感の低さを感じていた学習者が、自律学習への移行を通して、楽しさや解放感を経験し、エージェンシーを高め、新たな学習アフォーダンスを見出したことが明らかになった。一方で、持続的な言語学習不安は、学習者の SAC 利用を妨げ続けていた。これらの結果は、日本人学習者の言語学習に対する否定的感情が、従来考えられていたよりも可変的である可能性を示した。一方で、言語学習不安が SAC 利用に対し、大きな障壁であり続けていることも示唆された。本論文では、学習者がこの障壁を克服するため、教員およびラーニングアドバイザーの実践を含むセルフアクセス学習環境の調整について提案し、考察する。

Keywords: language learner agency, language learner emotions, self-directed learning, self-access, language learning beyond the classroom

Interest in the relationship between emotions and language learning stretches back well over 50 years comprising various threads such as the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), humanistic approaches (for example, Stevick, 1990), foreign language anxiety scales (Horwitz et al., 1986), affective strategies (Oxford, 1990), the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005), positive psychology (for example, MacIntyre et al., 2019), and many more. Interactions between emotions and learning are particularly powerfully implicated in self-directed learning contexts (Chamani et al., 2023), while learner emotions are held to be integral to the practice of language learning advising (Tassinari, 2016). Research has investigated how emotions interact with language learner agency to impact learners' experiences and learning trajectories. Since agency is not a stable trait but emerges through interactions between individuals and their environment, it is situated, dynamic, complex, and relational (Mercer, 2012). Emotions shape how learners perceive possibilities for action and whether they feel able to act. Meanwhile, agentive action generates emotions which impact agency by creating or preventing affordances for learning (Gkonou, 2015; Mercer, 2012). This means that agency and emotions co-evolve through reciprocity which can serve to either facilitate or constrain learning (White & Pham, 2017).

This report will outline findings from a longitudinal case study investigation of language learner agency in the context of a unit of study called the Self-Directed Learning Unit (SDLU) at a university in Japan. The research aimed to shed light on interactions between learners' agency and their emotions in the SDLU environment, including in relation to their use of services and resources from the university's Self-Access Center (SAC). SDLU is based around a series of 90-minute cycles in which learners set language learning goals, identify suitable learning methods and materials, engage in their planned learning activities, and write a reflection in which they evaluate what they have done and consider how to revise their approach for the subsequent cycle. The unit was designed as a bridge between classroom-based learning and language learning beyond the classroom (LLBC) to help prime students for autonomous, lifelong language learning. Although SDLU takes place on campus during scheduled class periods, students have a great deal of choice regarding what and how they study. Since the building offers Wi-Fi and the SAC offers various services and a wide array of physical resources, the number and type of potential affordances for learning is far greater than found in traditional classrooms. These contingencies leave more space for learners to enact agency than is generally possible in teacher-fronted language classrooms. This means SDLU provides a particularly fertile environment for investigating interactions between emotions and learner agency.

Literature Review

Research interest in the construct of language learner agency acknowledges that "learners are not simply passive or complicit," but make informed choices, resist or comply, and otherwise exert influence on their learning and use of language (Duff, 2012, p. 413). Agency is a multifaceted and complex construct (Ahearn, 2001), generally associated with choice and action, but also encompassing non-visible behaviours, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings (Mercer, 2012). Self-directed language learning, meanwhile, can be understood as a process in which learners intentionally shape their own learning by making informed choices about goals, strategies, and resources (Benson, 2011; Reinders, 2007). This process is inherently agentive, emerging through learners' engagement with the social, material, and institutional conditions that afford or constrain their actions (Murray, 2014; van Lier, 2004).

Self-access centers are dedicated, open-access learning environments designed to facilitate autonomous language learning by providing learners with a range of resources, guidance, and opportunities to make decisions about their own learning beyond the classroom (Gardner, 2022). While the term self-access language learning (SALL) is sometimes specifically associated with learning based in or around self-access centers, the pedagogy underpinning SDLU aligns with a more inclusive interpretation of SALL exemplified in Mynard and Shelton-Strong's (2022) definition of it as "language learning that takes place outside a formal language classroom with some kind of support" (p. 2). This broader conception of SALL is appropriate for this study because SDLU is designed to support learners' self-directed engagement with English beyond the classroom, whether or not they choose to make use of SAC services and resources.

Investigation of language learner emotions encompasses positive emotions, such as enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) and foreign language peace of mind (Zhou et al., 2021), as well as negative emotions, such as boredom (Kruk et al., 2021) and foreign language anxiety (FLA), a situation-specific form of anxiety that arises during language learning and use and may limit learners' sense of control and their ability to act agentively (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995). A growing body of research highlights how emotions can shape learners' agentive engagement. Chamani et al. (2023) found a correlation between positive emotions and persistence in self-directed language learning contexts, highlighting the role of affect in sustaining learners' autonomous engagement. Similarly, studies of LLBC have demonstrated that learners' personal interests, such as engagement with popular culture, online communities, or hobby-

related content, can provide powerful drivers for autonomous language use and development (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Lai, 2017). Research in the field of self-access has also demonstrated how emotions influence learners' willingness to act. For example, Kushida (2018) found that even highly motivated learners were reluctant to use SAC services because they felt nervous and lacked confidence in their English ability, with anxieties further amplified by social factors such as learners not feeling they belong to established user communities (Gillies, 2010), or concern about being negatively evaluated by others (Suzuki & Hooper, 2024). Conversely, agency has been associated with self-regulation processes connected to emotion regulation, such as the use of affective strategies to lower anxiety, monitor one's emotional state, and encourage oneself (Oxford, 1990).

Although agency and emotion have been framed as interrelated constructs (White & Pham, 2017), precisely how they interrelate in specific contexts remains under-researched. Interactions between learners' emotions, beliefs, and agency are highly complex (Nilsson, 2021). For example, Gkonou (2015) found that learner agency had both positive and negative effects on students' FLA, providing an instance where agency shaped emotional experience rather than the reverse. Her analysis shows that learners' emotional states were shaped not only by external conditions but by their own agentive decisions and the meanings they attached to those decisions. These findings underscore the bidirectional but context-dependent nature of the relationship between agency and FLA. Similarly, while FLA can manifest in performance problems or communication avoidance (Luo, 2013) and has been negatively associated with engagement (O'Reilly & García-Castro, 2022), Swain et al. (2011) highlighted the case of Grace, an EFL learner whose FLA had a positive impact on her language learning trajectory. Grace described how an incident in a junior school language class, in which she had been mocked for making a mistake, served as a powerful stimulus for agentive engagement with English study. Grace subsequently became an EFL teacher.

Although existing research has illuminated the range of emotions experienced by language learners and highlighted interactions between emotion, agency, and learning, our understanding of how these dynamics unfold within specific SALL environments, such as the SDLU, remains limited. In particular, little is known about how shifts in agency influence learners' uptake of the learning affordances provided by self-access centers. This study aimed to deepen this understanding by examining how learner agency and emotion interact for individual learners in the context of the SDLU, addressing the following research questions:

- How do learners' emotions facilitate or constrain their agency in the context of the self-directed learning unit?

- How do learners' emotions influence their agency in relation to their use or non-use of self-access center services and resources?

Insights into how emotions shape the exercise of agency and learners' uptake of affordances in SALL environments can help instructors, learning advisors, and administrators understand why learners may be reluctant to use SACs and, in turn, enable them to target services and resources more effectively.

The Research Context

The study was conducted at a regional university in Japan, offering degree programs in science and engineering disciplines. The students tend to have relatively low levels of English proficiency as measured by the university's placement test, with scores typically equivalent to 'Basic User' (A1/A2) in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). However, while attitudes to English and English study vary widely, many students express a desire to develop their English skills, and many view English proficiency as supportive of their future study or career aspirations (Bollen & Faherty, 2016; Edwards & Rowberry, 2021; Rowberry, 2025).

SDLU constitutes a component of the university's compulsory English Communication curriculum for second-year students. It is based around a series of what Ohashi (2018) terms *planning-action-reflection cycles*. For each of these cycles, learners spend 15 to 20 minutes setting goals, planning what to study, and searching for suitable materials, 60 minutes implementing their plan, and finally, around 15 minutes evaluating the resources used and writing a learning reflection focusing on the effectiveness of their plan. The unit also includes group and individual activities based around goal setting, resource selection, and strategy use to encourage students to reflect on themselves as language learners and to orient them to the unit, as well as peer sharing and discussion tasks. Each learner records details of work done in a *self-directed learning portfolio* alongside their learning plans and reflections, which are typically written in L1 (Japanese), though learners are free to write in English if they prefer.

SDLU sessions are conducted in established class groups under the supervision of the English Communication class teacher and clustered around a five-week period in the first semester and a three-week period in the second. Although devised as a classroom-based intervention, data for this study were collected when the university was still operating under restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, approximately half of the SDLU sessions were done on campus with the remainder done online. Once oriented to

SDLU procedures and parameters, learners are free to choose what to study, what resources to use and how to use them, as well as whether to work in the classroom or the SAC, and alone or with peers. From this point the teacher's role is focused on supporting students by, for example, answering questions, suggesting resources, and providing encouragement, both in person and in writing via the self-directed learning portfolios. Examples of the kinds of activities participants engaged in during SDLU included reading comic books and graded readers, studying vocabulary via apps or textbooks, practicing extensive listening with websites, TED Talks, or movies, and engaging with YouTube channels or Instagram sites hosted by "micro-celebrity English teachers" (Aslan, 2024) such as Rupa-sensei or Bilingirl Chika. Further details of SDLU structure, procedures, and resource selection are described in Rowberry (2022), Rowberry (2025), and Rowberry and Aslan (2024).

The SAC at the research site is a purpose-built facility occupying the entire second floor of the building in which SDLU takes place. During SDLU sessions students can borrow materials such as graded readers, DVDs, or reference books, which they can take back to the classroom or use in the SAC itself. The space includes areas designed for individual and group activities, including a Conversation Lounge, where they can talk with peers or instructors. Students can also access services such as learning advising and a Skills Center, where they can meet an instructor to practice and get feedback on speaking or writing. Because it is rarely practical to reserve these services during scheduled SDLU sessions, students are encouraged to use them at other convenient times.

Method

The data analysed in this paper form part of a broader practitioner-research investigation into language learner agency conducted for the author's doctoral thesis (Rowberry, 2025). The larger study tracked two first-year English communication classes over the course of an academic year and drew on multiple sources of data, including classroom observations, a teacher journal, learners' SDLU portfolios, and three rounds of stimulated recall interviews with 14 students. For the purposes of the present article, the analytic focus was narrowed to the emotional dimension of agency, and a smaller subset of the dataset was selected for in-depth analysis. Specifically, this current study draws on the SDLU portfolios and interview transcripts, as these sources provided the richest insights into how emotions shaped learners' agentive engagement.

From the original pool of 14 interviewees, six were selected based on the depth, clarity, and emotional salience of their data. Their selection was consistent with the principle

of purposeful sampling, in which the goal is to select cases which are "information-rich" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The focal group comprised four male students, Hiroaki, Jun, Naoyuki, and Osamu, and two female students, Sora and Yui (all pseudonyms), all of whom were second-year undergraduates enrolled on STEM programs. Exclusion of the remaining eight participants reflects the narrower analytic focus of this study and does not deny the role of emotions in their enactment of agency. However, including all 14 would have diluted the depth of the analysis without altering the core themes identified.

Three rounds of semi-structured, stimulated recall interviews were conducted, one after SDLU in the first semester, one after SDLU in the second semester, and a follow up interview approximately one year later. However, due to attrition only Hiroaki, Jun, and Yui attended the final interview. Interviews were conducted in Japanese by a learning advisor colleague at the research site using the participants' self-directed learning portfolios as the stimulus. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and the project complied with the ethical guidelines and approval procedures of both the author's doctoral programme and the host institution. Further details of the data-collection procedures can be found in Rowberry (2025).

Interview recordings were transcribed and translated by the author following protocols recommended by Thompson and Dooley (2020) for situations in which the researcher has proficiency in both the original and target languages and is directly involved in data generation and analysis procedures. All interview excerpts cited in this paper were translated into English by the author following this procedure. Consistent with a multilingual approach to research (Holmes et al., 2013, 2016), interview data were uploaded into MaxQDA for analysis in both spoken-audio and written-text form.

Data analysis followed a thematic content approach combining inductive and deductive procedures. I began by conducting open coding of portfolio entries and interview transcripts to identify salient emotional expressions, agentive learning behaviours, and contextual influences. These initial codes were then compared with relevant literature on emotions, agency, and self-directed learning, informing the development of a provisional coding framework for a second cycle of hypothesis coding. This analytical approach draws on coding procedures outlined by Saldaña (2021) and aligns with the methodology used in Ishikawa's (2023) investigation of self-regulated learning among first-year students at a vocational college in Japan. Through iterative refinement and constant comparison, this framework was consolidated into five higher-order categories: *feeling, exploring, reflecting, regulating, and relating.*

As the present article focuses specifically on the emotional dimension of agency, only data from the six selected participants associated most closely with the feeling category were analysed further. These data were then re-examined in relation to the two research questions, and a set of interpretive themes was developed to capture the ways in which emotions facilitated or constrained learners' agency, both in relation to SAC use and independently of it.

Findings

The findings are organised around the two research questions, examining how learners' emotions shaped their agency during SDLU and how these emotions influenced their uptake of affordances in the self-access center. The first two subsections address emotional experiences that facilitated or constrained agency within SDLU, beginning with positive emotions and then turning to foreign language anxiety. The final subsection focuses on how emotions and agency interacted in relation to students' use or non-use of SAC services.

Positive Affect and Feelings of Freedom as Drivers of Agency

Across the dataset, enjoyment and personal interest emerged as powerful emotional drivers that supported learners' active engagement with SDLU. Participants frequently described SDLU as enjoyable or satisfying. Sora, for example, particularly enjoyed engaging with Lyrics Training (https://lyricstraining.com) since it allowed her to use her favourite songs to develop her listening skills. As well as enjoying practicing English by singing the songs, she described a feeling of satisfaction when she could decipher the lyrics. For example, she said, "When you realize, 'Ah, so that's what they're saying'—it makes you feel pretty smart" (Sora, First Interview). This sense of enjoyment and accomplishment encouraged her to persist with the activity and enhanced her awareness of music lyrics as a tool for language learning.

In Naoyuki's case, his rejection of TOEIC textbooks in favour of sports videos as his preferred SDLU learning resource, precipitated an emotional shift which left him feeling much more relaxed about his English use. His interest in sport and familiarity with the genre of basketball commentary, in which much of the Japanese terminology is borrowed from English, served to render more of the input comprehensible and, even when it was not, he could still enjoy watching the game, creating conditions that afforded new ways of engaging with English. Moreover, by attending to the commentary, he realised there were various ways

of communicating meaning beyond the formulaic language he had been studying. “It’s like hearing things expressed in ways that are natural and thinking, ‘Oh, you can express it like that.’ You engage with it without having to worry too much about it” (Naoyuki, Second Interview). This emotional shift that accompanied Naoyuki’s decision to work with sports commentaries opened him up to new learning affordances and a more flexible exercise of agency.

For Yui, a clear association was evident between her use of TED Talk videos for SDLU and positive emotions, as demonstrated by her frequent use of the word *tanoshii* (enjoyable) when talking about her self-directed learning. This contrasted strongly with her experience of English classes at school, in which her test results had been disappointing, and she had been left with “a feeling that I’m not good at English” (Yui, Second Interview). The freedom to choose her learning resources prompted a significant shift as she discovered that “it’s easier to study and to acquire knowledge if it’s something you are interested in” (Yui, First Interview). As a result, she was able to overcome her negative emotions and enact agency to the extent that she “became more motivated to learn English” and wanted to “come into contact with English even if it’s not in class” (Yui, First Interview).

Several participants described SDLU as freeing them from the constraints of the approaches to learning they had encountered in formal English classes, and this expanded their perspective on language learning and use. Release from these constraints often generated positive emotions, such as relief, enjoyment, and renewed confidence, that played a central role in how they exercised agency in SDLU. For example, Hiroaki frequently used the word *jiyū* (free) to describe SDLU. He resented the grammar-translation approach of junior high school which did not align with his goal of communicating with people from other countries. Conversely, he revelled in the flexibility afforded by SDLU which allowed him to align his learning with his personal interests by studying with animated videos in English. Noting “there’s a huge difference between being asked to do something and choosing to do it yourself,” (Hiroaki, First Interview), Hiroaki realized he was able to sustain his motivation much longer than had previously been possible, and self-directed learning opened him up to new learning affordances:

> At school, I was told specific vocabulary was really important, and I had to focus mainly on those words, but when I no longer needed to worry about that, I was able to learn from various directions using my ears and eyes.
>
> (Hiroaki, First Interview)

SDLU also served to validate Hiroaki's participation in conversations on social media with foreign friends he had met online through their mutual interest in Japanese manga and anime, as a legitimate form of language learning. Engaging with anime in SDLU, as well as interacting in English via his online community, gave Hiroaki a feeling of liberation which positively impacted his agency. The emotions associated with exercising choice in SDLU were evident in how Hiroaki talked about his learning, and he described this sense of freedom as making it easier to choose activities he enjoyed and to continue engaging with English in ways that felt personally meaningful.

Yui experienced a similar shift. She described feeling increasingly confident during SDLU, which led her to reassess her English abilities. In her second interview she noted, "perhaps I'm not so bad at English," then in the third interview she explained that she had chosen to join a particular research team specifically because they read and discussed academic papers written in English. This transformation in her feelings about English stimulated active manipulation of her environment in order to generate further opportunities for learning. As in Hiroaki's case, positive reciprocity between emotions and agency had tangible benefits for Yui's learning trajectory. She described how being free to choose her own activities made her feel more positive about English, which in turn encouraged her to take further agentive steps.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that the relationship between emotions and agency was not one-directional. Participants described how positive emotions supported greater freedom and willingness to act, while the freedom to choose activities and act on their own initiative also contributed to more positive emotional experiences, suggesting a reciprocal, cyclical relationship between the two. Although the study was designed to examine how emotions influenced learners' agency, participants' accounts also showed that their agentive choices and the freedom to act within SDLU contributed to more positive emotional experiences, revealing a reciprocal process that extended beyond the original focus of the research questions.

Complex Interactions Between FLA and Agency

Foreign language anxiety was widespread among participants and often constrained their agency by limiting their willingness to engage with English. However, the data also revealed instances in which anxiety actually motivated learning, illustrating the complex, unstable, and non-linear relationship between agency and emotion.

Like both Yui and Hiroaki, negative experiences of formal English classes had led Jun to describe himself as "not very good at English at all" (Jun, First Interview). He spoke not only of a lack of enjoyment but also of feeling anxious and discouraged about English, and he explained how interactions between these negative emotions and his language learning behaviours acted as a vicious cycle. "Because I couldn't do it, I didn't enjoy it and I didn't want to do it, so I was steadily getting worse at it" (Jun, First Interview). In describing this pattern, Jun linked his lack of desire to engage with a withdrawal from learning activities, showing how diminished emotions were reflected in reduced agentive behaviour. This illustrates that reciprocity between agency and emotions can be negative as well as positive. However, Jun's case also demonstrated how anxiety can motivate engagement. Despite "hating English," he said, "I feel I need to work twice as hard as other people because I don't think I can keep up without putting in that extra effort" (Jun, First Interview). Although he expressed this as a "need," Jun described it as something he decided to do in order to keep up, indicating that he was taking deliberate steps to manage his learning. Further, during and following SDLU, Jun's emotional trajectory shifted significantly, a development he linked to feeling more able to engage with English on his own terms during the unit. By the third interview, he reported that he had "started to enjoy" reading in English, and he attributed this change to "feeling more invested" in his studies, a feeling he associated with the ways he had been able to engage with English during SDLU.

Unfortunately, not all participants were able to overcome FLA in this way. Osamu's account echoed that of Grace, the case described by Swain et al. (2011), insofar as he had also experienced ridicule in language classes a child. However, while Grace transformed her resulting FLA into a powerful motivation to act, for Osamu it severely constrained his agency. Ever since his elementary school classmates laughed at his mispronounced English, he had "felt quite self-conscious" about his pronunciation to the extent that he avoided speaking English aloud during SDLU, even when practicing at home alone (Osamu, Second Interview). Although he viewed English ability as a desirable attribute and cited wanting to develop his communication skills as his learning goal, he was unable to overcome his FLA to enact agency. Grace and Osamu's divergent responses to painful childhood memories serve to further highlight the complex, dynamic nature of the person-environment interactions that constitute agency.

Emotions and Agency in Relation to SAC Use

Despite being encouraged to use the SAC during SDLU, most participants chose not to do so. Emotional barriers, such as anxiety and lack of confidence, played a central role in limiting their uptake of learning affordances associated with the SAC.

A common theme that emerged from the data was a gap between wanting to communicate in English and having the confidence to do so. This gap was particularly evident through participants' reluctance to use the SAC's Conversation Lounge, even though they wanted to do so. Despite the best efforts of the SAC team to make the lounge as welcoming as possible, this psychological barrier proved too much to overcome for many students. As Naoyuki put it, "it was difficult for me to go there. I think everyone wants to speak English at some point but can't take the first step" (Naoyuki, First Interview).

On the other hand, SAC interactions also provided moments where emotions and agency interacted productively. When Naoyuki needed to ask SAC staff to photocopy some pages from a textbook, he "felt quite anxious" about it, but he resolved "to be more confident next time," noting that this was a good opportunity to "engage in more natural conversation" (Naoyuki, SDLU Portfolio Reflection 1). This illustrates how small, emotionally charged encounters can shape future agentive behaviour.

Jun was one of the few participants who did endeavor to practice speaking in the SAC. Following encouragement from his SDLU teacher, Jun booked a conversation practice session with an instructor in the SAC's Skills Center. However, he felt anxious during the session and his concerns about being overheard constrained his participation in the conversation. As he put it, "there's a part of me that's embarrassed for some reason" (Jun, First Interview). Despite these anxieties, Jun expressed regret about not using the SAC's Conversation Lounge or Skills Center more. He recognised that "there are a lot of opportunities for conversations" in the SAC, and he said, "I wish I'd used it a bit more" (Jun, First Interview). This demonstrates how emotional vulnerability in semi-public SAC spaces can curtail agency by denying learners access to desired learning opportunities.

Discussion and Implications

The following discussion is structured around the two research questions. In each case, the analysis is presented first, with practical implications outlined subsequently to highlight the relevance of the findings for teaching, advising, and SAC provision.

RQ1: How Emotions Facilitate or Constrain Agency in SDLU

Analysis of the data highlighted several instances of reciprocity between emotions and agency, sometimes in a positive direction, such as in Yui's enjoyment and Hiroaki's feelings of liberation, but also in a negative direction, such as Osamu's reluctance to vocalise English because of an embarrassing incident many years previously. These findings show how emotions can both facilitate and constrain learners' agentic engagement in SDLU. This supports White and Pham's (2017) view of agency as situated and emotionally constituted and aligns with Gkonou's (2015) argument that interactions between emotion and agency are complex, dynamic, and bidirectional. Particularly encouraging were cases such as Yui, Hiroaki, and Jun, who successfully overcame their FLA and dislike of English study, and who continued engaging with LLBC long after SDLU had finished, for example, by reading English materials, interacting with online communities, and using English language media. This demonstrates that it is possible for learners to overcome their negative emotions and discover (or rediscover) the joy of language learning and that this joy can in turn facilitate agency.

The freedom SDLU afforded for participants to choose their own resources was associated with positive emotions and allowed them to enact agency by aligning their personal learning goals with their feelings and learning behaviours. When learners select resources that align with personally meaningful goals, they experience positive emotions that support agentive action (Murray, 2014; Ushioda, 2009). Meanwhile, learning environments that support agency can generate enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction (Reinders, 2012). The findings show that interventions such as SDLU can stimulate this positive reciprocity between emotions and agency by helping learners connect emotionally with language learning processes, primarily through the freedom to choose activities and resources, but also through the legitimacy and supportive structure the unit provided for their self-selected engagement. This resulted in enhanced awareness and increased uptake of learning affordances. However, interactions between emotions and agency are complex and vary considerably from learner to learner. For example, while most participants valued the openness of the SDLU environment, Naoyuki found it overwhelming and said he would have preferred more explicit instruction about how or what to study.

The practical implication of this finding is for instructors to encourage learners to identify resources and approaches that they are likely to enjoy. Although this may seem obvious, it is surprising how many participants initially resisted using materials which were not specifically designed to target language learning. For example, Naoyuki's agency-

emotion trajectory shifted significantly only after he abandoned studying TOEIC textbooks and started working with sports commentaries. For many participants, the use of everyday cultural resources, such as songs, animated films, and manga, allowed them to align their interests with their learning, and this was strongly associated with feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction. This supports previous research highlighting virtuous interactions between pop culture as a resource for language learning and learner emotion, identity, and agency (Werner & Tegge, 2021). However, leaners may hesitate to use such resources out of concern over their legitimacy (Lai et al., 2015; Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Sockett, 2014). It is therefore important to reassure learners about the pedagogic value of informal resources and to normalise their use within language learning. Moreover, since it can be challenging to make effective use of informal resources, students may benefit from opportunities to critically engage with potential applications of such materials as tools for language learning both in and beyond classroom settings. They may also benefit from participating in peer sharing activities as opportunities to showcase their own uses of resources and to receive information and support from their peers. Such activities were included within SDLU and appeared to provide additional sources of ideas and encouragement for learners.

RQ2: How Learners' Emotions Impact Their Agentic Use of SAC Resources

The analysis highlights that, while SACs offer rich affordances for learning, they are emotionally charged environments and this impacts whether and how learners enact agency within them. Echoing previous research by Gillies (2010), Kushida (2018), and Suzuki and Hooper (2024), a salient finding was the apparent durability of the psychological barrier which prevented participants from using the SAC for communication practice. Although the SAC provided a scaffolded environment in the form of its Conversation Lounge, and several participants directly expressed a desire to talk with instructors there, few of them actually did so. This demonstrates that negative emotions, such as FLA and fear of negative evaluation, can prevent learners acting on their intentions even when affordances are visible and valued. When discussing this failure to act during their interviews, they expressed negative emotions such as frustration or regret which, given the reciprocity between emotions and agency, likely served to further constrain their agency.

More encouragingly, encounters such as Naoyuki's simple interaction with SAC staff regarding photocopying highlight how SACs can provide a safe, low-stakes environment in which learners can enact small acts of agency and experience corresponding boosts in confidence. Such moments can help counter the feelings of uncertainty or anxiety that

Japanese students may experience, having typically been "conditioned" to learn English in a way that is conducive to the specific context of the high school classroom (Curry et al., 2017, p. 19). Learners' assumptions about agency vary considerably between their places of learning, and traditional classrooms constrain the expression of both emotion and agency (Stanfield, 2013). It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that participants who were most successful in enacting agency in SDLU were those who seemed most willing and able to break free of learning behaviours associated with traditional classrooms.

SAC instructors, administrators, and particularly student staff can play a valuable role in helping learners manage the challenging transition from instructional to LLBC contexts (Thornton, 2018). Working with near peers can significantly reduce language learning anxiety, and low-stakes opportunities for confidence-building interactions with staff may help learners bridge the gap between intention and action (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Suzuki & Hooper, 2024). Student staff can also foreground everyday cultural resources and provide structured opportunities for learners to share and discuss how they use them, helping to normalise these practices and validate their pedagogic value. Jun's fear of being overheard in the Skills Center also suggest that careful consideration also needs to be given to the physical layout of SACs to ensure learners feel safe and minimize FLA.

Conclusions

Findings from this study support previous research highlighting both positive and negative reciprocity between learners' emotions and their agency. There was evidence that shifts in learners' emotions arising through their interaction with SDLU enhanced their agency and positively impacted their learning trajectories. However, some learners struggled to overcome their FLA during SDLU, and this constrained their use of SAC resources and services. Moreover, because the ways emotions and agency interact can support one learner yet inhibit another, instructors and SAC administrators face significant challenges in designing agency-enhancing learning environments.

A severe limitation on the findings was the fact that pandemic restrictions were in place while the research was conducted. This meant that some SDLU sessions had to be conducted online and social distancing measures constrained SAC use. This may have discouraged learners from using the SAC entirely or impacted which services or resources they chose to use. In addition, the study's small sample size and focus on a single institutional context limit the generalisability of the findings. The analysis also relied heavily on self-reported data, which may not fully capture learners' actual behaviours, and the

researcher's close involvement in data generation and interpretation may have resulted in interpretive bias. Future research, therefore, might target other self-directed learning contexts, with different populations and using alternative research designs.

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