Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

CHALLENGING
LOOKING IN
LOOKING OUT
ASSUMPTIONS

Co-constructing learner identities and communities

Naoki Yamaura
Dokkyo University Graduate School
Tim Murphey
Kanda University of International Studies

Reference data:

We wish to show how a class structured for intensive peer-peer interaction in a foreign language can encourage learners to identify themselves as users of the language and engender more activity and learning. As friendships and community formation increase, so does target language use. Yamaura was a participant observer in Murphey's content based instruction (CBI) 6-week class. Through pre and post surveys, interviews, video recordings, and language learning histories, the researchers analyzed how students co-constructed identities and the classroom community.

　本論は、学習者同士の目標言語によるインタラクションが、彼らの学習に対する価値観や理念、さらには学習者アイデンティティーに対し、どのように影響を及ぼすかという点に着目し論じる。YamauraはMurpheyが実施した6週間の内容中心教授法(content based instruction) で、参加・観察者としてデータ収集を行った。本研究は、第1週目と6週目に行われたアンケート調査の結果、インタビュー、ビデオ録画、言語学習経歴から、学生の学習者アイデンティティやクラスルーム・コミュニティの共同形成を分析した。

Yamaura was a participant observer in several 6-week content-based instruction (CBI) classes for first year college students in 2006 and 2007 taught by Murphey. We describe how these classes were "engineered" to make them interactive, supportive, and affectively positive. We wanted to find out whether learners would express greater identification with the target language and more desire to invest themselves in learning through intensive interaction in a supportive and affectively positive environment at least once a week. Pre and post surveys allowed a perspective of the changes in identification and investment. These are further supported by Yamaura's participant observation notes, discussions with Murphey (the

teacher), and students' action logs, videos, self evaluations, language learning histories, and final course feedback. Results generally support the idea that engineering an environment to provide more access to intensive interaction involves also creating a safe and enjoyable learning environment and that these experiences over time help students create identities as English users. We have come to see identity, community, and investment as co-constructing concepts resulting from numerous opportunities to successfully negotiate meaning, scaffold understanding, and enter into extended two-way conversations. We propose along with many Vygotskian sociocultural theorists that socializing students into cohesive groups allows them to make friends, support and scaffold each other's efforts, and intermentally internalize tools (language) that can later serve them intramentally. Finally, we see these concepts also constructing, and being constructed by, intent participation and agency.

Background

Identity and language learning

The concept of a language learner identity is related to the learner's social relationships, and has been receiving more attention in the field of SLA research. Norton (2000) uses the term 'identity' to refer to 1) how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, 2) how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and 3) how the person understands possibilities for the future. These definitions of identity are used in this study. However, the term 'identity' aims more specifically at the learners' socially constructed interpretation of the relationship between the target language and themselves.

Co-constructing concepts: Investment, near peer role models, ideal selves, imagined communities, intent participation and agency

Along with identity, there are several other co-constructing concepts that we find useful for analyzing how people change and learn. From a sociocultural perspective, Norton Peirce (1995) introduced 'investment' to refer to "the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton, 2000, p.10). Norton (2000) further explains that individual learners have a complex social history and multiple desires, which change according to the learning environments. Norton illustrates the concept of investment, using Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) term 'cultural capital', which refers to "the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms" (Norton, 2000, p.10). Norton comments as follows:

> If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources" (p.10. ibid)

Murphey and Arao (2001) describe near peer role modeling as one way that learners can get excited to invest more in learning:

> Near peer role models (NPRMs) are people who might be "near" to us in several ways: age, ethnicity, gender, interests, past or present experiences, and also in proximity and in frequency of social contact…. results show that many of these students' reported-beliefs and behaviors also change positively after seeing the video [of near peers] and they seem to remain more motivated through post observations. (p.1)

One explanation for the impact of NPRMs on investment is offered by Markus and Ruvolo's (1989) "possible selves" or Dornyei's (2005) concept of "ideal L2 self" (pp. 98-105). That is, learners see peers performing well, admire them, and imagine how they might become like them and do similar things, projecting themselves into the future and into imagined communities (Norton, 2001). These processes also provide learners with "intent participation" (Rogoff et al., 2005), i.e. they really intend to use the information and skills they are learning and this can empower them to act with more agency (see "locus of control" below).

This study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of students' complex process of cognitive development in language learning through individual students' language learning histories (LLH) before they came to university and how they change. Understanding their histories within their contexts helps explain why each student showed certain attitudes, beliefs, and self-positioning toward English at the beginning of the six-week course.Then we look at how students construct new identities in a six-week intensive CBI English course.

Setting

Yamaura (MA in progress) focused on two groups of first-year English major college students at a university in an urban area near Tokyo. The students in each group took the same six-week English CBI course, *Exploring Learning*, taught by Murphey (see also Murphey et al. in these proceedings for more information about CBI courses in Japan). The class was held once a week for ninety minutes. A great amount of *Exploring learning* consisted of videoing procedures that allow students to view themselves speaking the target language with peers and notice their linguistic habits and errors by transcribing their own conversations (Murphey, 2001; Murphey and Kenny, 1998; Murphey and Woo, 1998). During the videoing procedures, the students also learn discourse conversation strategies, such as shadowing, clarification requests, and summarizing. Murphey (1998) contends that, "[T]he procedure allows students to learn how to self-assess by using very specific, tangible data – their own recorded conversations – thus encouraging their autonomy and enhanced metacognition" (p. 193). Furthermore, the approach "incorporates both the viewing of peers and of self, which are usually positive and within the learner's capacity for replication and identification" (p. 185).

Data collection

Data were gathered through 1) questionnaires, 2) participant observations, 3) action logs with students' comments on each class, and 4) teacher interviews. For the case studies, Yamaura also collected the data through 5) students interviews both in person and through emails and 6) by

watching the students' recordings. In this paper, we focus on one case study student from a high level group, describing her investments, strategies, and beliefs in learning before and during the course.

Case study: Ayaka

Ayaka is an 18-year old Japanese female freshman college student majoring in English. She started studying English from junior HS (JHS) as most students in Japan. In addition to her regular JHS, she also attended a cram school for Juken (entrance exams), taking an 80 minute English course once a week for three years in JHS. We chose Ayaka for the case study because she was one of two students in the class who had never been abroad.

Starting point of Ayaka's language learning history

Ayaka first encountered English in JHS as a required subject at school and had no particular interest in learning English. As she said "I was studying English as a part of study at school… just following the textbook in class… like grammar check all the time.." (Personal interview translated by author, July 2nd, 2007). However, Ayaka's attitude toward learning English changed in her third year of JHS when she had a new English teacher, a possible NPRM/ideal self projection, whose English pronunciation was better and who used story telling of English Newspaper articles:

> I had a new English teacher whose pronunciation was really good in the third year. We started an English activity in class in which we listened to some stories in English. I gradually started to feel

interested in it… and I came to like English since then (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

As Ayaka found herself interested in English, she started to invest in it. For instance, Ayaka decided to apply for a high school (HS) with an English department, whereas before she had not thought of going to such a HS. Here she is showing her agency, modeling a friend, and "intending to participate" and use English:

> I was actually thinking of applying for a regular HS until at the very end of Juken season, but when I attended one HS forum with my friend, I found out that it had an English department. I thought it would be kind of boring if I went to a regular school as everybody does, so I decided to apply for that school (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

By hoping to enter a HS English department, Ayaka was positioning herself in a new imagined social network (imagined community) to practice English, imagining that she could learn more English there. In other words, she developed "intent participation", that is she imagined herself learning English for a purpose. This intent participation spurred her agency and her desire to take action and study and go to a particular HS. From that point forward, Ayaka's investment in learning English focused on passing the entrance exams for that HS, and she started to study English more seriously.

Opportunities and ways of practicing English at HS

After entering HS, Ayaka's opportunities to practice and the ways of studying English changed from JHS. For example,

Ayaka says she learned a variety of phrases and new words which were not seen in the textbook through watching various movies and reading a lot of books written in English.

> My HS was unique from other regular HSs, like we practiced listening by watching movies. We were also required to read picture books written in easy English during the summer vacation. Also, as one of the assignments for the summer vacation, we wrote essays in English, choosing topics on our own, and gave a speech about them in class after the summer break (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Students at Ayaka's HS were required to take TOEIC three times a year. Ayaka believed that studying for TOEIC enabled her to learn more natural English, so she invested herself in studying for TOEIC and improved from 420 to 630 during HS. Thus, Ayaka's investment in learning English at HS consisted mainly of reading, studying for TOEIC and watching movies.

Shift of Ayaka's investment in learning English

As she entered HS and had opportunities to practice English through watching movies and studying for TOEIC, the purpose of her investment in learning English became to get a job in which she could use her English ability.

> I was more engaged to study useful English. Because the textbooks, which we were using at JHS, didn't have many useful phrases for natural communication, I was kind of disappointed. Since I entered HS and started to study English differently from others, I decided to study more

useful English to get a job I wanted (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

As Ayaka mentioned, she started to imagine that she could use her English ability to get a certain job with airlines in the future. Thus she shifted her goal of studying English to "improving communication skills" because she found out that speaking English was necessary for her job. This is another example of how ideal selves and imagined communities can drive intent participation and agency.

At this point, however, Ayaka had less opportunity to practice speaking English and wasn't sure what she could do to improve her speaking skill. So she continued reading English books and studying for TOEIC. Moreover, since her English teacher at HS told her that vocabulary was necessary to become able to speak English, Ayaka studied vocabulary with a few books her teacher recommended.

Constraints on Ayakas imagined communities

During HS, Ayaka's school offered a short homestay program in Australia during the summer vacation, but Ayaka was a conductor of the brass band and decided to stay in Japan for the band during the summer vacation. This decision shows Ayaka is very responsible to groups she belongs to even when it may hurt her investment toward her imagined self (Dorneyi, 2005). Ayaka also gave up an internship program that her school started to offer in her third year due to Juken. However, this decision is more for her imagined self as a university student than simply as an English user.

Ayaka's positioning in the first class

The above process of Ayaka's development in learning English shows her socially constructed relationship to English through NPRMs, ideal selves and imagined communities, intent participation and her own agency. Table 1 below shows how Ayaka positioned herself in relation to the use of English and various identity descriptions in the first week of class. Ayaka's identity as an English learner, constructed through social practices in JHS and HS, shows her unique way of self-positioning at the beginning of the course. Table 2 shows the changes she made after six weeks.

Looking at her answers in the boxes of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' in the first week in Table 1, Ayaka seemed to maintain certain motives and positive attitudes toward English. On the other hand, Ayaka tended to disagree with statements which would identify her as an oral type of English user. Ayaka also reported not being comfortable speaking English with other peers:

> I can't say what I wanted to say… because I have only studied English for Juken, I don't know so many typical phrases people usually use in daily life. When I have conversations with my partner in class, say, talking about weekends, the phrase won't come out to describe what I did (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Ayaka's pervious way of learning and identifying with English was through reading and writing, which was what she felt most comfortable with. Thus, Ayaka did not have enough confidence to identify herself as an English user at this time.

However, Table 2 shows Ayaka's changes after six weeks. Ayaka seemed to see herself more as an English user and felt more comfortable speaking English with her peers. Through a great amount of speaking opportunities in the six-week course, Ayaka came to feel more confident toward her speaking ability than before:

> During JHS and HS, I didn't have much chance to speak English. So when I first saw these statements, I was like, "Huh? It doesn't fit me". But since I spoke a lot in the lecture workshop, I became to feel "well, maybe I can speak so-so" (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Ayaka's individual agency (actions) in learning also changed. For instance, No.14 '*I talk to myself silently in English*' in Table 2, changed from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. When asked to think what caused this change, Ayaka said:

> From the textbook the teacher wrote, I learned that we can improve English if we use English even when we think something in our minds. So I actually started doing this… thinking in English in my head. I think that's why No.14 changed from strongly disagree to strongly agree (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Both the questionnaire data and Ayaka's LLH show her unique developmental process in learning English, her increasing affinity for the oral and communicative aspects of English.

JALT2007 — Challenging Assumptions

Table 1. Ayaka's self-positioning (Week 1)

strongly disagree	14. I talk to myself silently in English
	15. I watch movies in English
	21. I am a bilingual speaker
	22. I am a global English user
	23. I automatically speak English in my daily life
disagree	6. I am a speaker of English
	9. I am comfortable talking to friends in English in class
	10. I am comfortable talking to friends in English outside of class
	17. I would like to stay in Japan to learn English
	24. When speaking English, I think first in Japanese
	25. In English classes I am a different person
	27. My pronunciation is good enough to be understood globally
agree	2. Speaking English is fun and exciting
	3. Listening to English is enjoyable
	4. Our class is like a small community of English speakers
	5. I have dreams in English
	7. I like talking to people in Japanese
	8. I like talking to people in English
	12. I study English not because it is required, but because I want to learn
	16. I am improving my English
	20. English is a part of who I am
	26. I wish I could find more opportunities to speak English out of class
strongly agree	1. I love English
	11. I am motivated to learn more English
	13. I talk to myself silently in Japanese
	18. I would like to live in an English speaking country to learn English.
	19. Japanese is a part of who I am

Table 2. Ayaka's changes (Week6)

disagree	22. I am a global English user
	23. I automatically speak English in my daily life
agree	15. I watch movies in English
	21. I am a bilingual speaker
	6. I am a speaker of English
	9. I am comfortable talking to friends in English in class
	10. I am comfortable talking to friends in English outside of class
	25. In English classes I am a different person
	13. I talk to myself silently in Japanese
	19. Japanese is a part of who I am
strongly agree	14. I talk to myself silently in English
	3. Listening to English is enjoyable
	5. I have dreams in English
	12. I study English not because it is required, but because I want to learn
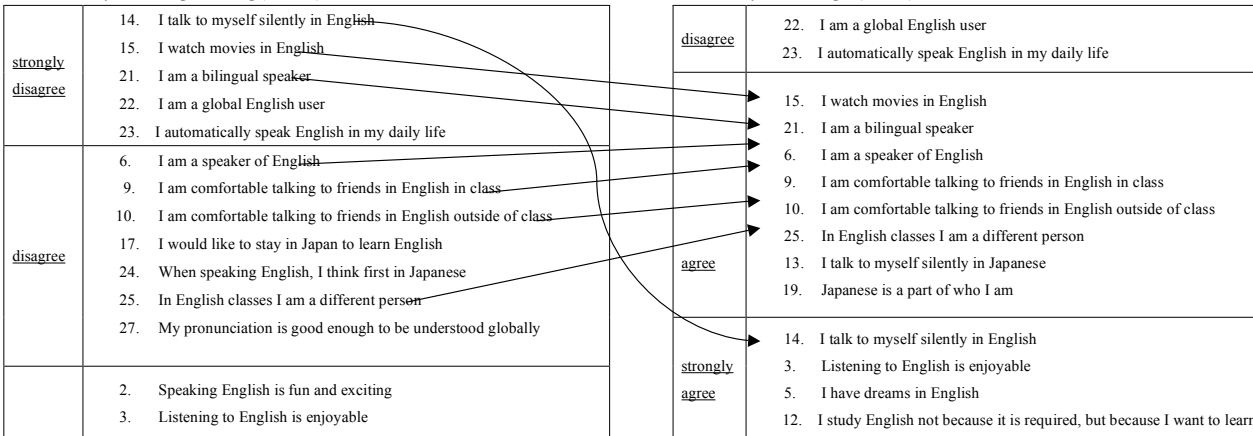
Impact on Ayaka

The major impact on Ayaka's construction of her new learner identity during the six week class seemed to be 1) peer-peer interactions, 2) videoing and self-evaluation, and 3) the course booklet. It is quite interesting how Ayaka changed through the first six-week course.

Norton (2000) found that a learner's anxiety is associated with their oral skills more than literacy skills. Norton Peirce, Swain and Hart (1993) refer to this learner's control over the rate or flow of information as "*locus of control*" in a communicative event, and explain as follows.

> [I]f learners control the rate of flow of information in a communicative event, the locus of control will be in their favour and they will be relatively more confident about their language skills than in communicative events in which the locus of control is not in their favour (Norton Peirce et al, 1993, cited in Norton, 2000, p. 123).

The notion of the learner's *locus of control* helps to explain how the course scaffolding helped Ayaka reduce her anxiety and enhance her confidence toward oral skills. Ayaka first read the textbook saying "you can talk to yourself, even inside your head", and she actually started doing it. She also had a great amount of opportunities to have peer-peer interactions in English with a lot of classmates through the structure of the class. Ayaka and the other students were given the topics beforehand, had time to think about them, and actually wrote about them as an assignment. During each class, Ayaka had the chance to repeat the same approximate conversation five to six times with different

peers. This process of preparation for and repetition of each conversation enhanced Ayaka's *locus of control*. Furthermore, remember Ayaka also took home a recorded video conversation four times and transcribed them, so she could actually see herself speaking English. Another way to put this would be to say that Ayaka gradually became more autonomous.

Conclusion

Thus, the course engineered or scaffolded Ayaka's entry into oral competency and she came to position herself more as an English speaker. And yet, she still struggles with it too. Six weeks after answering the questionnaire and taking a variety of other classes, Ayaka commented as follows:

> Since most of my classmates have been abroad and speak English like native speakers, I feel bad. I hate when I can't speak while other friends are able to speak in this group … I have a complex about that, including the fact that I have never been abroad, but also their pronunciations are good, they can speak fluently, and I don't like myself being in such a group very much (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Ayaka also struggles with the gap between her expectations of formal English classes and what she receives:

> I was expecting more like, in English classes, they will teach us phrases of English we can use in certain situations… but it is already premised that we are able to speak in most of the classes. I actually chose this English department because

I wanted to learn these phrases, but most of the classes are like, "we already know these phrases so let's practice by using them". This is different from what I was expecting (ibid, July 2nd 2007).

Ayaka's more formal past schooling also may still be weighing down her beliefs with the expectation of learning every phrase for every situation rather than seeing language use as continual adjustment and creative negotiation.

The co-construction of supportive identities through NPRMing, ideal selves, imagined communities, intent participation, and agency obviously needs more study to clarify our understandings. We would like to thank Ayaka and the other students for openly sharing their histories and thinking with us. They are, with us, co-constructing and mediating our greater understanding of how people change and learn.

Naoki Yamaura is presently enslaved to the writing of his MA thesis. He begins teaching at Kawagoe Higashi HS from April 2008. <naokiyamaura@hotmail.co.jp>

Tim Murphey has been at Dokkyo University since 2003. He will move to Kanda University of International Studies as of April 2008. <mits@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

References

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London/Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Dornyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Markus, H., & Ruvolo, a. (1989) Possible selves: Personalized representation s of goals. In L. A. Pervin (ed.) *Goal concepts in personality and social psychology* (pp. 211-241). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Murphey, T. (1998). Motivating with near peer role models. In Brad Visgatis (Ed.) *On JALT'97: Trends and Transitions*. Tokyo: JALT pp.205-209. (Refereed conference proceedings publication.)

Murphey, T. (2001). Videoing conversations for self evaluation in Japan. In J. Murphy & P. Byrd (eds.), *Understanding the courses we teach: Local perspectives on English language teaching* (pp. 176-196). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Murphey, T. & Arao, H. (2001). Reported belief changes through near peer role modeling. *TESL-EJ* 5 (3)1-15.

Murphey, T., Deacon, B., White, M., & Gage, P., (2008). Longitudinal Perspectives of Content Based Instruction Programs. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Murphey, T. & Kenny, T. (1998). Videoing conversations for self-evaluation. *JALT Journal, 20*(1), 126-140.

Murphey, T. & Woo, L. (1998). Videoing Student Conversations: Educational video's diamond in the rough. *The Language Teacher 22*(8), 21-24, 30.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational change*. London: Longman.

Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159-171). London: Pearson Education.

Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (1), 9-31.

Norton Peirce, B., Swain, M., & Hart, D. (1993). Self-assessment, French immersion, and locus of control. *Applied Linguistics,* 14 (1), 25-42.

Rogoff, G., Paradise, R., Arauz, R., Correa-Chavez, M., & Angelillo, C. (2003). Firsthand learning through intent participation. *Annual Review of Psychology,* 175-203.

Yamaura, N. (2008). Identity, investment and environmental engineering in foreign language learning. An unpublished MA thesis at Dokkyo University.