Generating Agentive TL Interaction in TBL Projects

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Reference Data:

The prevalence of task-based learning (TBL) in both EFL and ESL environments has resulted from the assumption that it can promote language learners’ (LLs’) target language (TL) social interactions. The presenter explored the sustaining attributes of LLs’ agentive attitude in the engagement of TL social interactions within the contexts of TBL projects. He conducted fieldwork for five years in a task-based English learning project named the Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP), which is specifically designed for EFL learners at a Japanese university. Findings include that the Japanese undergraduates’ agentive attitudes in TL social interactions were generated by pre-formed personal attributes and also contextually co-constructed and maintained in relation to the social nature of the program’s tasks.

Task-based learning (TBL) has been prevalent as a strong form of communicative language learning since the 1980s (Adamson, 2006). A large number of studies have provided empirical evidence of the benefits of tasks implemented in EFL/ESL classes (for a review, see Ellis, 2003). Task in the context of TBL has the following features.

1. A task is a workplan.
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.
4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.
5. A task engages cognitive processes.
6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

(Ellis, 2003, pp. 9-10)

These features indicate that in the process of completing their given tasks, language learners (LLs) are encouraged to use the four skills of their target language (TL) holistically in mean-
ingful social interactions within activities somewhat related to the real world.

Generally, tasks are presumed to be designed for classroom activities (Willis, 1996). Recent research based on social constructivism, however, suggests a potential expansion for TBL outside the classroom. Magnan (2008), for example, recommends the adoption of communicative tasks administered in the target language (TL) community outside school. Tasks in TL communities promote students’ authentic meaningful TL interactions with native and non-native TL speakers and eventually develop learners’ TL communicative competence. Grabois (2008) documents some accomplishments in such tasks which he calls “service learning” (p. 380). In service learning, participants contribute to TL communities through working on a task. In Grabois’ project, American learners of Spanish taught English to Hispanic immigrants living in the U.S. He found that the learners were able to improve their Spanish language skills and grow as people.

The tasks introduced in the above studies are quite distinct from the conventional tasks administered in classrooms. LLs engaged in this type of task, which can be called a social-oriented task, are required to use the TL in real life settings. Language-learning programs/projects adopting social-oriented tasks are especially important in environments where the TL is spoken as a foreign language since LLs in the context have rare opportunities to use their TL in their real lives, such as in the case above, where Americans were learning Spanish. In such situations learners need opportunities to use their TL for meaningful purposes to practice using their TL effectively not only on grammatical but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic levels. Another context where the TL is not in widespread use outside the classroom is in the learning of English in Japan.

One such social-oriented task-based English learning project in Japan is the Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP), which started in 2002 and is ongoing on an annual basis. The MSSP is based at Meisei University and targets the university’s EFL students. Its main task is to teach English in teams to Japanese elementary or junior high school students for one week during summer vacation. The project is student-centered and participants are asked to engage in a number of sub-tasks to manage the project including publicity, holding opening and closing ceremonies, and setting up sign boards on campus in addition to developing class schedules and teaching materials and rehearsing lessons before the actual teaching. The undergraduate participants are separated into teams and start working on these sub-tasks in early April.

In 2005, the MSSP started inviting about 10 international volunteers as Japanese participants’ teammates from both non-English and English-speaking countries/regions from around the world, with most fluent non-native English speakers in recent years. They arrive in Japan and join the Japanese university students one week before the MSSP English classes open. The international volunteers and the Japanese participants in each team work together using English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007) for two weeks in the last week of July and the first week of August while preparing for and teaching their MSSP classes.

From 2005, Japanese participants’ opportunities to interact in English for meaningful purposes have increased considerably, but the extent of their engagement in the TL interactions varies. Some Japanese participants actively participated in the TL interactions from the first or second day, while others avoided communicating with the international volunteers until the last day of the project. To maximize the Japanese students’ learning in the project, from 2005 the requirement for Japanese undergraduate participants to engage in TL interactions with agency was tacitly added to the program, with agency meaning “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Agency consists of three basic properties: (1) control over one’s
own behavior; (2) producing actions that affect other entities as well as self; and (3) producing actions that are the object of evaluation (Duranti, 2004, p. 453). Recognizing the different extent of their engagement in the TL interactions in 2005, I decided to conduct fieldwork in the project over the following five years to better understand the sustaining attributes of their agentive attitude in TL interactions. The following are the two research questions set for the present study.

**Research Question 1:**
What promotes Japanese undergraduates’ agentive attitudes in engagement of TL interactions within the context of the social-oriented TBL project, MSSP?

**Research Question 2:**
How do students maintain their agentive attitudes in engagement of TL interactions and overcome communication breakdowns within the context of the project?

**Theoretical Framework**
Japanese undergraduate participants’ engagement in English social interactions in the MSSP was analyzed using the framework of Communities of Practices (CoP) developed by Wenger (1998).

The concept of CoP is frequently utilized to explain how newcomers in institutional organizations like companies acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to work fully in the organizations. Wenger (1998) points out that the key to the successful acquisition of such skills and knowledge is participating in social practices and interactions conducted by the members of the organization aimed at accomplishing shared goals. Wenger introduces two modes of participation in the social practices and interactions, which are peripheral and full participation. Newcomers can learn necessary skills and knowledge by legitimately accessing and observing social practices and interactions from a peripheral position. However, as they gain experience they move from the periphery to a more central position in the practices and interactions, maximizing learning and their contribution to their community’s shared goals. Wenger states it is the old-timers in organizations who can lead newcomers toward full participation.

**Methodology**
In five years fieldwork in the MSSP (2006-2010) I utilized several different types of research techniques, including survey (see Appendix), unstructured informal interviews, observation, and audio-recording of English social interactions to holistically investigate the Japanese participants’ TL interactions from different perspectives.

I employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. The quantitative data collected in the survey were analyzed by basic statistical procedures utilizing SPSS 17.0. The qualitative data collected through observations, interviews, and surveys were analyzed by a coding technique utilizing NVivo 8. Participant responses to the open-ended questions on the survey were coded using semantic segments then were ranked based on frequency to grasp Japanese participants’ tendencies regarding each question. I used interview data and transcribed audio-recorded interactions to support or interpret the quantified coding results. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data enabled multi-layered analyses of the Japanese participants’ TL social interactions with the international volunteers.

**Results**
By triangulating the data collected through the survey, informal interviews, observations, and audio-recordings of the partici-
pents’ English conversations, several findings related to the two research questions were revealed. The following sections present these findings under the four headings; (1) promoting and preventing factors of agentive attitude in TL social interactions, (2) difficulty of maintaining agency in TL social interactions, (3) conquering communication breakdown in TL social interactions, and (4) old-timers’ scaffolding of newcomers’ TL interactions.

Promoting and Preventing Factors of Agentive Attitude in TL Social Interactions

The Japanese MSSP participants’ responses showed they had opportunities to interact in English with international volunteers not only in formal settings and situations such as while teaching classes or while making teaching materials but also in many informal settings and situations such as while having lunch together, while going out with them, and during parties, to name a few examples.

However, when the extent of the Japanese participants’ involvement in TL interaction was measured on a six point Likert scale (1=Not at all, 6=Very much) there was considerable variation in results. When asked whether, compared to conversations with native English teachers, to what extent participants were able to talk with international volunteers actively, participants who answered 1, 2, or 3 were labeled passive participants while those who answered 4, 5, or 6 were labeled active participants (See Table 1).

Table 1. The Degree of Japanese Participants’ Active Participation in the TL Interactions with International Volunteers (Results of the Survey, Q4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Not at all)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23.98</td>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
<td>65.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Very much)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.01</td>
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</table>

Passive participants (n=59, 34.50%) commented, when asked for the reasons and causes for not talking with international volunteers actively, that several factors made it difficult for them to participate actively in the interactions. The two most cited factors that prevented participation (elicited from 74 semantic segments of their comments) were lack of English ability (n=29, 39.19%) and lack of confidence in their English ability (n=23, 31.08%). This finding is further summarized in Table 2.
Table 2. Factors Preventing Japanese Participants from Actively Participating in TL Interactions (Result of the Survey, Q5-a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of semantic segments</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Lack of English ability</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Lack of confidence in their English ability</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Not being able to think of an appropriate conversation topic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Being shy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Not being able to have opportunities to converse with international volunteers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, of the 141 semantic segments elicited from 112 active participants when asked the reasons and causes of being able to talk with international volunteers actively, only two semantic segments indicated confidence in English ability as a factor promoting active participation. Moving beyond confidence, it was notable that Japanese MSSP participants’ agentive attitudes were based not only on factors assumed to be pre-existing before the program, such as aspirations toward communicating in and learning English (n=26, 18.44%) and past experiences (n=13, 9.22%), but also by situating themselves in the MSSP environment (n=38, 26.95%) with aspirations for mingling with international volunteers invited to the MSSP (n=34, 24.11%), and working on their given task with international volunteers and other Japanese undergraduates as a team (n=27, 19.15%). This is consistent with the argument made by Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) that learners’ agency is not only unique to individuals but is also co-constructed. The data show both the Japanese participants’ pre-existing internal factors and MSSP-related factors complexified and strengthened their agency for actively participating in the TL interactions (see Table 3).

Table 3. Promoting Factors of the Japanese Participants’ Active Participation in the TL Interactions (Result of the Survey, Q5-b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of semantic segments</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 The MSSP’s environmental factors:</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The existence of international volunteers (29):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Their friendly character (17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Their ability to understand incomplete/ungrammatical English (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Their positive attitude of trying to understand what Japanese students say (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Others (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Opportunities of having small talk/conversations (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Frequently occurring situations where there are not many other Japanese participants around them (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Others (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Aspiration toward mingling with international volunteers</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The MSSP’s task-related factors:</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The necessity of strengthening teamwork (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Matters they have to discuss to complete their given tasks (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Responsibility of leading other members as a team leader (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The need for fully understanding each team member’s opinions (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of semantic segments | N | %
--- | --- | ---
4 Aspiration toward communicating in/learning English:
• Desire of speaking English (16)
• Desire of improving English communication skills (6)
• The pleasure of having conversations in English (4) | 26 | 18.44
5 Past experiences:
• (Bitter) experience at the MSSP in previous year(s) (6)
• Experience of studying abroad (7) | 13 | 9.22
6 Confidence in English ability | 2 | 1.42
7 Other | 1 | 0.71
Total | 141 | 100.00

### Difficulty of Maintaining Agency in TL Social Interactions

During the fieldwork, I frequently observed Japanese participants had difficulty participating actively in English interactions with international volunteers even if they had strong agency. The following is a comment from a novice Japanese participant who participated in the project for the first time during a conversation in the hallway at the university during the intensive preparation period in the last week of July. She approached me and offered the following:

(Her eyes are watery) Teacher, how would I able to speak English (she started crying). Even English words do not come out of my mouth…

(Interview data: Norika [female], 2006, July 26)

Norika was not the only student who faced hardship in trying to participate actively in English interactions. Over the past five years, during the two weeks of the TBL project, I heard a lot of comments from many Japanese participants regarding the difficulty of speaking and communicating in English with international volunteers. Accordingly, when asked in Q7 of the survey whether they experienced communication breakdown(s) in which participants could not express what they wanted to say in English or could not understand what the international volunteers said, almost half said they experienced communication breakdown(s) during English interactions (Yes = 85, 49.71%; No = 83, 48.54%; No response = 3, 1.75%).

When the concept of CoP is applied, the trajectory of participants’ changing roles from peripheral to full participation is not straightforward and often requires persistent attempts to become involved, which resonates with Wenger’s CoP model (1998). Going through such struggles, many of the Japanese participants tended to swing between peripheral and full participation in the MSSP’s communities of practice.

### Conquering Communication Breakdown in TL Social Interactions

Though participants’ progression from the periphery of participation to the center in English interactions was not straightforward, Japanese participants’ agency was maintained, as when the 85 (49.71%) participants who experienced communication breakdowns were asked how they overcame them and managed to continue their interactions, their open-ended responses were classified into 132 semantic segments and coded into 13 categories, highlighting the critical function of communication strategies (Tarone, 1983) that promote engagement in English interaction. While the participants used various communication strategies to overcome communication breakdowns, the strategy utilized most was getting support from senior participants, team leaders, or persons with higher English proficiency (n=33, 25.00%) (See Table 4). With the assistance of more competent Japanese peers, most of whom are old-timers in the MSSP, Japa-
nese participants were able to reach a point they could not have reached by themselves, overcoming the breakdown in communication.

**Table 4. Strategies Japanese Participants Utilized to Overcome Communication Breakdowns**

(Result of the Survey, Q8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of semantic segments</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I asked senior participants/our team leaders/people with high English proficiency to support my English conversations with the international volunteers.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I transmitted what I wanted to say by using gestures.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I paraphrased what I wanted to say with basic vocabulary or expressions to transmit my message / I asked international volunteers to paraphrase their messages with basic vocabulary or expressions.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I asked international volunteers to repeat what they said.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I utilized a dictionary.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I confirmed what we were talking about by writing it on paper.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I let the parts I could not understand go past / I paid no attention to the parts I could not understand.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I tried communicating with words.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I said I could not understand what they said.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I tried explaining what I wanted to say from the beginning (by giving examples).</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I asked them to speak slowly.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of semantic segments</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 I stopped the conversation and confirmed if I understood it correctly.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Old-Timers’ Scaffolding of Newcomers’ TL Interactions**

In the MSSP more competent Japanese old-timers, many of whom were working as team leaders, assisted less competent novice Japanese participants in their TL interactions even without their appeal for assistance. Such voluntary assistance by more competent peers is considered scaffolding (Bruner, 1975). Such voluntary scaffolding was frequently observed. For example, the following is from observation data from one team’s mock lesson during the intensive preparation period in the last week of July, as they were preparing for their actual lessons the following week. After each member finished their mock lesson, the other members gave feedback. Two international volunteers from Spain and Hungary were included in this team and almost all of the feedback was in English.

This day, one group of Japanese participants rehearsed their lessons. Following other participants, Junko [female], who attended the MSSP for the first time this year, rehearsed her lesson for twenty minutes and received feedback from the other team members on her attitude and performance during the lesson and the activities she introduced. Two female international volunteers (Spanish and Hungarian) working in the same team also made some comments in English, but Junko was not able to understand their comments well and was at a loss for how to respond. Masato (the student team leader), who
has considerable experience at the MSSP and higher English proficiency went to her and repeated/paraphrased slowly what the international volunteers said with exaggerated gestures. While she sometimes said, “e wa-karanai (=Oh, I can’t understand),” Junko managed to continue her interaction in English and was able to understand the international volunteers’ feedback in the end. (Observation data, 2006, July 27)

In the above data example, the more competent and experienced Japanese peer, Masato, used English and non-verbal communication to ‘scaffold’ Junko’s TL interactions with the two international volunteers without her explicit verbal request.

The following conversation data shows, in more detail, an example of how a novice Japanese participant engaged in TL interactions with more competent peers’ scaffolding. This data was collected while they were teaching their English classes in the first week of August. In that week, each teaching team taught four lessons a day, and after their lessons held a meeting to reflect on each member’s attitude and performance during the day’s lessons and to discuss what they should teach in their following lessons. Again, two international volunteers from Spain and Greece were included in this team and almost the whole discussion was in English.

[This teaching team, which consisted of five Japanese participants and two international volunteers (Spanish and Greek), was holding a meeting to review each member’s lesson after their teaching. In the excerpt a novice female Japanese participant, Naoko, whose English is limited, was asked to comment on her male team mate, Shota’s lesson.]

Chie: Next Naoko, it’s your turn. Please. What’s your opinion?
Naoko: aaaah, Shota.

Chie: His class.
Naoko: Uuuuun, good. (Smile)
Everyone: hhhhhhhhhhhhh.
Hideo: That’s all? Com’on.
Kazu: What is good? What was good?
Hideo: What was good?
Naoko: uuunto(0.3) uuuuun, nandarou. (0.2) Heee he looks? [look-ed?]
Kazu: [looks like?
Hideo: Look ne
Naoko: He don’t looks- looked nervous.
Kazu: aah,
Hideo: He didn’t look nervous?
Naoko: (Smile)(4.0)
Hideo: [hhhhh
Chie: [So you mean, he- he relaxed in his class?
Naoko: Yes.
Shota: Ok, I understand.
Kazu: I think so.
(Conversation data, August 3, 2009)

The novice Japanese participant, Naoko, had been observing her teammates in the discussion and attentively listened to their opinions from a peripheral position. However, it was evident from her facial expression that Naoko had something to share but lacked the skill in English to become more agentive in the group discussion. Ending her English utterance with “Yes,” Naoko looked happy that she was able to successfully show her agency to her teammates in the group discussion.
Another novice Japanese participant, Yumiko, referring to group discussions during the intensive preparation period, commented in an informal interview that she felt comfortable and could be more confident when participating in English interactions in the presence of old-timers or other Japanese undergraduate participants.

I cannot catch well what international volunteers say in English, but I want to talk with them! Hearing Takada-kun (the student team leader)’s conversation (with international volunteers), I can figure out what they are talking about. …I feel uneasy when we (a female Indonesian international volunteer assigned to the same team and I) become alone. There’s no problem if I am conversing with her (the international volunteer) together with other Japanese participants.

(Interview data: Yoko [female], July 24, 2008)

All of the survey, observation, audio-recorded conversation, and interview data introduced in the above sections show that the MSSP as a whole and in each of its teaching teams functions as a CoP (Wenger, 1998). While several Japanese participants were marginalized and dropped out of the project, most strived to engage themselves in TL interaction to accomplish their shared common goal of completing the MSSP successfully. Not adhering to the periphery, novice or less competent Japanese undergraduates made efforts to participate centrally in TL interactions and MSSP by utilizing self-initiated communication strategies or asking for support from old-timers or more competent peers when they were unable to overcome communication breakdowns alone. Japanese old-timers or more competent peers also actively scaffolded novice or less competent peers’ participation in TL interactions when they judged it necessary.

Educational Implications

The findings of this investigation present three educational implications. First, while agency may pre-exist or be generated from within, LLs’ agency for actively participating in TL interactions can also be co-constructed through situating learners in a social-oriented TBL project. When LLs find meaning in tasks through their having a positive impact on people in society, they can share a sense of team membership with other participants, which further enhances their engagement in TL interactions. Even less agentive LLs, some of whom may be participating in the TBL project just to earn credit, could be transformed into active agents by situating themselves in the socio-cultural TL environment and gaining a sense of team membership in the project.

Second, participants’ diversity (old-timers and newcomers; people with different educational backgrounds and learning experiences; people with different levels of TL abilities; people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds) helped create a CoP within the TBL project. To explain further, intermixing old-timers and newcomers meant newcomers could engage peripherally and move to more central positions gradually through the help of scaffolding from old-timers. Also, different educational background and learning experiences among the participants meant they complemented each other’s skill and knowledge shortcomings. Furthermore, variation in English proficiency meant less competent speakers could participate more centrally through linguistic scaffolding from more competent English speakers and more competent speakers improved their TL abilities through the providing of scaffolding. Finally, including participants with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who weren’t proficient in Japanese facilitated an environment where the Japanese participants had to use English as the common language within their CoP.

Third, LLs working within the social-oriented TBL project community are expected to transform their identities into more
active TL-using participants through acquiring the task-related and TL skills and knowledge necessary to fully participate in their CoP and because they can imagine more task- and TL-proficient future selves (Markus, & Nurius, 1986). Furthermore, through positive task-engaging and TL-using experiences in the social practices of the community, the LLs’ identity transformation can be understood as an interaction between an individual learner’s three mind time frames—their past, present, and future selves. Positive task- and TL-related possible selves emerge from socially interacting with more competent peers and fluent non-native TL speakers or even through seeing more competent peers and fluent non-native TL speakers actively engaging one another. Positive task-engaging and TL-using experiences result from use of TL for meaningful purposes within the social practices of the community (see Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, 2012, for further discussion). Such identity transformation had a positive influence in the present task-based project, and could also similarly benefit other TBL projects, regular TL courses, and even TL-mediated social practices in student participants’ real lives.

Conclusion

The five years of fieldwork presented here reveals that LLs’ agentive attitude in TL interaction is generated from within themselves and also socially co-constructed in relationships with other participants through collaboratively working to accomplish common goals. Furthermore, it reveals that communication breakdowns prevented learners from maintaining their agentive attitude, but communication strategies, including appealing for assistance and more competent peers’ voluntary scaffolding, enabled learners to overcome hurdles and become more active agents in their interactions.

While offering opportunities for TL interactions for meaningful purposes somewhat related to the real world is one strong feature of TBL (Ellis, 2003), language instructors should also note that TBL projects, especially socially-oriented ones like the MSSP also have the power of creating a mutually supportive TL-speaking learning environment which facilitates LLs’ active TL interactions, while maintaining their pre-formed and contextually co-constructed agency. Of course, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all TBL projects in all contexts, and the mechanisms of LLs’ agency presented here is only a portion of their potential agencies. It is my hope this fieldwork will continue in order to further illuminate more of the complex language learning picture, with the expectation that the results and findings of this research will help more LLs become active agents in TBL projects, thereby contributing to the further development of TBL in Japanese EFL contexts.

Acknowledgment

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Bio Data

Yoshifumi Fukada is Professor in the Department of International Studies at Meisei University, Tokyo. His research interests include L2 learners’ identity, their agency in their English-learning and English social interactions inside and outside the classroom and also non-native speakers’ use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in international communities.

References


Appendix: Questionnaire used in the survey

国際ボランティアとの交流に関するアンケート調査

1. 氏名: ________________________ 2. 学年: _______ 年生
3. 学科: ________________________
4. 明星サマースクール参加経験: _________ 回目
5. 担当クラス(役): 小学生英語 ; 中学生英語 ; 中国語 ; 国際ボランティアサポート

* データ管理の為、皆さんの名前を聞いておりますが、論文執筆、学会発表の際には、実名を公表することは一切ございません。

問1. 現在、あなたの英語能力はどのくらいのレベルにあると思いますか。1から6のいずれかに丸印をつけて答えて下さい。

非常に低い           非常に高い
1 2 3 4 5 6

問2. 日頃、あなたは、授業以外でどの程度英語の勉強をしていますか。

まったくしていない       非常にしている
1 2 3 4 5 6

問3. 今回、国際ボランティアとは、どういった状況・場面でコミュニケーションする機会を持てましたか。できるだけ詳しく教えて下さい。

問4. 普段のネイティブ英語教員との交流と比較して、国際ボランティアとはどの程度あなた自身から積極的に話しかけることができましたか。

まったくできなかった       非常にできた
1 2 3 4 5 6

問5-a. 問4で1~3を選んだ方: あなた自身から積極的に話しかけることができなかった原因・理由は何ですか。どんなことも構いませんので自由にコメントして下さい。

問5-b. 問4で4~6を選んだ方: あなた自身から積極的に話しかけること
ができた理由は何ですか。どんなことでも構いませんので自由にコメントして下さい。

問6. この度、国際ボランティアとのコミュニケーションの中で、どの程度、自分の言いたいことを伝え、また相手が言うことを理解することができましたか。

まったくできなかった 非常にできた
1 2 3 4 5 6

問7. 自分の言いたいことを英語で表現できなくなったり、または相手の言っていることがまったく理解できなかったりして、国際ボランティアとまったく意思疎通がとれなくなった場面はありましたか。

はい いいえ

問8. 問7で「はい」とお答えの方は、そういった場面でどのように対処しましたか。できるだけ詳しく教えて下さい。

問9. 国際ボランティアたちと実際に英語でコミュニケーションしてみて「気付いたこと」、「学んだこと」はありましたか。どんなことでも構いませんので自由にコメントして下さい。

問10. 国際ボランティアとのコミュニケーションで大変だったこと、苦労したことはありましたか。どんなことでも構いませんので自由にコメントして下さい。