Generating agentic TL interaction in TBL projects

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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, reporting the EFL/ESL learners’ successful use of their target language (TL) within meaningful social interactions in the process of completing their given tasks (for a review, see Ellis, 2003). Past studies, however, have not provided much information on the attributes that sustain TL interaction within TBL projects. I conducted fieldwork research over five years on a TBL project to explore the mechanism of language learners’ (LLs’) active and also sustaining engagement in TL interactions within a TBL project, specifically focusing on the LLs’ agency—“the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112)—during the process.

The field of this study: The Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP)

The MSSP was selected as the field of this study. The MSSP is a social-oriented TBL project where the LLs are required to use their TL for meaningful purposes in real-life settings outside the classroom. This annual TBL project, which started in 2002, is based at Meisei University and targets the university’s EFL students. The university students’ 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: organising publicity; holding opening and closing ceremonies; developing class schedules and teaching materials; and rehearsing less...
techniques including survey (N=171), unstructured informal interviews, observation, and audio-recording of English social interactions to holistically investigate the Japanese participants’ TL interactions with the international volunteers from different perspectives. I employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. Triangulation of each type of quantitative and qualitative data enabled multi-layered analyses of the TL social interactions.

Main results
By triangulating each data set, it was found that Japanese MSSP participants’ agentive attitudes within their engagement of TL interactions were based not only on factors assumed to be pre-existing before the program, but also the MSSP’s situational factors. Pre-existing factors included aspirations for communicating in and learning English (n=26, 18.44%), past experiences (of studying abroad/participating in the MSSP) (n=13, 9.22%), and confidence in English ability (n=2, 1.42%). The MSSP’s situational factors involved Japanese participants 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%). It was notable that both the Japanese MSSP participants’ pre-existing internal factors and MSSP-related factors complexified and strengthened their agency for actively participating in the TL interactions. This result 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. In addition, I found that communication breakdowns frequently occurred during their TL interactions, which prevented the Japanese participants from maintaining their agentive attitude. However, communication strategies including appealing for assistance to peers and more competent peers’ voluntary scaffolding (Bruner, 1975) enabled Japanese participants to overcome hurdles and become more active agents in their interactions. Moreover, some novice Japanese students were more comfortable engaging in TL interactions with more competent old-timer Japanese students. These findings demonstrate how the MSSP as a whole, as well as each of its teaching teams, function as a CoP (Wenger, 1998).

Conclusion
The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all TBL projects in all contexts, and the mechanisms of LLs’ agency presented here are 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.

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References
Elementary teachers’ views on English teaching

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In 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) revised its new course of study with the introduction of English classes at elementary schools from 2011. In response to the authorization of Gimukyouiku-souzoutokku (MEXT, 2008) (a specific district for creating original compulsory education) certified in 2006, Hiroshima city founded Eigo-ka (an English course) in 2010 based on the Hiroshima-gata curriculum (an original curriculum for Hiroshima city schools). This Hiroshima-gata curriculum consists of three parts—the improvement of cooperation and connection of elementary and junior high schools, the implementation of “an integrated course for language, mathematics, and science” from the 5th grade to the 9th grade, and the enforcement of Eigo-ka in the 5th and 6th grades—with the intention of establishing children’s proficiency in language, mathematics, and science, as well as improving their powers of thinking, judgment, and expression. In anticipation of mandatory elementary school English classes, the Hiroshima City Board of Education and a private university in Hiroshima city provided teacher training for all 5th and 6th grade homeroom teachers in a three-year joint venture during 2007-2009. It was named Shou-et-juku (an English cram school held in summer vacation for elementary school teachers), and approximately 280 teachers participated in an English teaching seminar for four successive days each summer. Making full use of CALL (computer-assisted language learning), Shou-et-juku offered efficient learning from the characteristics of English vowels and consonants up to the use of classroom English, alongside the teaching plan which the Hiroshima City Board of Education prepared. According to a questionnaire survey administered on the last day of Shou-et-juku of 2009, over 90% of the teachers made positive reviews regarding the teacher training outcomes, but actually very few of them felt confident enough to begin teaching English to their young learners. In this article, drawing upon the results of the survey, I explore possible causes and solutions to various problems which elementary school teachers are experiencing in the introduction of English as a foreign language.

It seems that there is no difference between the foreign language activity in the new course of study and the Eigo-ka of the Hiroshima-gata curriculum, as far as targets are concerned. Although the latter is learned as a regular subject, unlike foreign language activities, the target is still “familiarization.” Therefore, possible factors for teachers’ concern and anxiety are as follows: “If the goal is just ‘familiarization,’ beginning earlier than the 5th grade is better”; “‘Familiarization’ is not suitable for evaluation”; or “Due to my own ability of English, I cannot instruct a child to achieve the goal of Eigo-ka (that is ‘familiarization’).” In the survey, in terms of what a teacher expects the most from a child, an overwhelming majority had chosen “the will to communicate in English” and “a positive attitude toward English learning.” This expectation is, however, not likely to be attained by “familiarization.” Therefore, it is thought that a child’s autonomous effort is crucial, as well as a teacher’s support for autonomy, which facilitates a child’s motivation to study.

As Hiroshima city introduced Eigo-ka at elementary schools from 2010, the year 2009 (when this questionnaire was administered) was a transitional period of foreign language education to Eigo-ka. Under such circumstances, it became clear
that various concerns and anxieties existed among elementary school teachers in three themes of this survey: the starting date of Eigo-ka, the evaluation of Eigo-ka, and the teachers’ responsibility for Eigo-ka. There is a generally accepted idea that it is better to begin foreign language study as soon as possible, and this served as a motive to introduce English education into elementary school. However, 44 teachers (16%) among the 270 responded, “It is too late” to start from the 5th grade in elementary school, and apparently most teachers are cautious in terms of their attitudes toward early English education. Moreover, as for the introduction of evaluation in Eigo-ka, teachers demonstrated their strong concerns that the tone of “study” is emphasized and thereby children’s volition is spoiled. It seems that their concern is especially remarkable for introducing English as a subject. Finally, the training for elementary school teachers in Eigo-ka is probably the most important issue. In fact, 217 teachers (80%) had chosen “the teacher’s own ability of English” at the head of the cause of concern. If Eigo-ka is introduced in elementary schools, considerable improvement in teaching conditions accompanying it is indispensable. In order to fully exhibit an educational effect, it is essential that a teacher has adequate training and understands clearly the target of Eigo-ka.

As a future task, I would like to investigate further how English education with no consensus among teachers is reflected in lessons, as well as what kind of difference results in actual education.

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Reference

Hertz und Pixel: Creative podcasting with adult learners of German for a Japan-wide competition

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The year 2011 marked the 150th anniversary of German-Japanese diplomatic relations. In order to support and celebrate the learning of the German language in Japan, a competition for Japanese learners, Hertz und Pixel (<hertzundpixel.net>) was initiated calling for fictional audio, audio documentary, fictional video, and video documentary entries with any kind of reference to the letter “D”.

Students of two German classes at a private language school in Tokyo produced podcasts for the Hertz und Pixel competition. These participants were, on average, in their late 50s and their language competency level was approximately intermediate to upper intermediate. The process
of producing the podcasts consisted of planning, recording, and editing. The learners involved in this study opted for presenting their topics in different forms—drama and poetry.

Audio and podcast production as language learning tools
Offering speaking opportunities to students can be a challenge for a language teacher, especially in an environment where the target language (TL) is not frequently used. Egbert (2011) demonstrated why a teacher’s “knowledge and understanding of engagement” (p. 131) with technology plays a key role in this. However, even tech-savvy students who are aware of learning technologies may reject applications that are not interactive enough (White, 2011). Therefore, when using technology, methodology and the activity types selected are particularly important (Traxler, 2008).

Producing podcasts has been found to keep motivation high and entice students (Cane & Cashmore, 2008) as it allows students to practise their language skills and use new media (Egbert, 2011). They further offer a high degree of control as they can be planned beforehand and edited after recording (Salmon, 2008). Podcasts can also be discussed directly, providing the producer(s) with constructive criticism.

Preparing the podcasts
Preparing content
First, the students compiled a list of words beginning with the letter “D” as a homework task resulting in a list of 75 words. Based on that list, students were then given the task of producing haiku (a traditional Japanese poetic form) in German in pairs. The focus of this task was on playful creative activities. After students had read their pieces to each other in small groups, some very brief trial recordings to familiarize the students with the process were undertaken. The following week the students voted for their favourite pieces. A feedback round followed where both the group and the instructor first gave positive feedback and then moved on to improvement suggestions on aspects of rhythm, stress, intonation, and pronunciation.

Planning phase for the submissions
Following the feedback session, each student selected five words from the “D” list. Then groups of two or three picked seven to nine “D” words out of these and had to come up with a format that (loosely) tied them together. One group decided to stick with the poetry format whereas two groups opted for self-developed drama. Students were asked not to script entire sentences. After finishing a draft of the story lines, students practiced the dialogues in trial runs among themselves. Once every group had received feedback, the first recording took place.

The contributions to the competition
Three pieces of audio were submitted to the Hertz und Pixel competition consisting of two fictional dialogue pieces featuring some “D” words and one contribution featuring a number of self-written haiku and poems.

Conclusions
In this project, a group of mature Japanese learners of German enthusiastically produced audio contributions to a nation-wide contest. They decided on the form and topic of the contributions themselves (one poetry and two drama submissions). Students spent most of the time during the production process on planning and recording. They developed their own creative potential and exceeded their own expectations in oral use of the TL to a considerable extent. Furthermore, in the process of creating and producing the podcasts, students were able to use German in a number of different ways, especially pronunciation and prosody, and they strengthened confidence in their speaking ability. The poetry contribution went on
to win the special Issey Ogata prize. The following haiku is an example from the winning entry:

Damenfußball Nadeshiko
Weltmeisterschaft in Deutschland
durchhalten, dominieren

[Women’s football/soccer Nadeshiko
World Cup in Germany
Prevailing, dominating]

Partaking in the contest also allowed students to work interactively through implementation of feedback sessions and interactions with the audience of the competition. In summary, the project was able to demonstrate that podcasts can be a powerful technological tool in second language education.

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The student podcasts can be found online at <radio-onichi.podspot.de>.

References
The average matriculating Japanese university student would need an estimated 1,000 additional hours of instruction before graduation to attain the necessary English proficiency for academic and professional use (Lyddon, 2011). However, as few learners have even the option of taking sufficient coursework for this many contact hours, most will likely need to exercise considerable autonomy to achieve such an ambitious goal.

Benson (2011) has defined learner autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p. 58, emphasis added). As Ushioda (2008) noted, however, learners who rely on teachers to motivate them are unlikely to exhibit the necessary efforts outside of class to sufficiently develop their communicative proficiency. To foster self-motivation, Dörnyei (2001) has suggested five categories of strategies:

- Commitment control (e.g., imagining the positive consequences of reaching one’s goal)
- Metacognitive control (e.g., reminding oneself of one’s deadline)
- Satiation control (e.g., modifying an activity to make it more fun or more challenging)
- Emotional control (e.g., encouraging oneself verbally in instances of success)
- Environmental control (e.g., eliminating sources of interference, such as noise)

This study examined the relationships between overall, categorical, and individual self-motivational strategy use and learner autonomy.

Method

Participants

The 24 participants were third- and fourth-year university students in a 15-week English elective course on learner autonomy at a small, prefectural computer science school in southern Tohoku.

Procedure

The course followed Scharle and Szabó’s (2000) three-phase cycle of raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles with respect to motivation, learner strategies, community building, and self-monitoring. In Week 8, the learners took a Likert survey of the frequency of their self-motivational strategy use in each of Dörnyei’s five categories. After the survey, applications of 31 different self-motivational strategies were modeled. From that week forward, the learners turned in weekly learning logs of their progress toward a self-selected short-term goal, along with a checklist of any self-motivational strategies they used.

At semester’s end, the learners submitted essays describing and explaining the changes in their awareness, attitudes, and actions in terms of their understanding of autonomy. The essays were ranked from highest to lowest demonstration of autonomy. The middle third were then excluded to create two extreme groups. Data were analyzed for the first, middle, and last of five collection times.

Results

The first analysis compared overall strategy use between groups. However, independent samples t-tests of mean strategy use revealed no statistically significant differences at the .05 alpha level at any time: \(t(14) = .067, p = .95\) for Time 1; \(t(14) = .052, p = .96\) for Time 3; and \(t(14) = .764, p = .46\) for Time 5.

A second analysis compared the numbers of learners using strategies in each category at each time (see Table 1). More highly autonomous learners appeared to use more satiation strategies. However, two-sided Fisher’s exact tests for use vs. non-use of this category by autonomy level were nonsignificant at the .05 alpha level \((p = 1.00\) for Time 1, \(p = .13\) for Time 3, and \(p = .28\) for Time 5). In the end, four of the eight most highly autonomous learners also indicated using strategies from all five categories, whereas only one of the least autonomous learners did, though this result was similarly nonsignificant at the .05 alpha level \((p = .28)\).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
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<td>Satiation</td>
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<td>Emotion</td>
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A third analysis compared the variety of strategy categories between groups over time. Independent samples t-tests at the .05 alpha level revealed no significant differences in the means at any of the three data collection times: Time 1 $t(14) = .000$, $p = 1.00$, Time 3 $t(14) = .798$, $p = .44$, Time 5 $t(14) = .947$, $p = .36$. Nevertheless, the mode for the more autonomous learners was two points higher in the end.

Examination of the self-motivation strategy inventory results revealed a two-point difference in frequency of positive self-encouragement for instances of success, where the mode in the low group was rarely, as opposed to often in the high group. Comparison with the weekly checklists showed frequency of self-encouragement to indeed be nominally more prevalent among the most autonomous learners, although one-sided Fisher’s exact tests at the .05 alpha level were nonsignificant ($p = .29$ for Time 1, $p = .50$ for Time 3, and $p = .16$ for Time 5).

Conclusion
The general results of this study showed no statistically significant relationships between learner autonomy and self-reports of overall, categorical, or individual self-motivational strategy use. However, close inspection of the data suggests that the most highly autonomous learners may be using self-motivation strategies from a greater number of categories and that they may also be more likely to engage in verbal self-encouragement. It is hoped that the development of a more accurate and reliable autonomy measure and a larger learner sample will allow for the exact nature of this relationship to be examined more definitively.

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References
はじめに

本研究は、1本（いっぱい）、2冊（にさつ）など、漢語1字の助数詞と数詞の組み合わせに関して、Matsuzawa (2007)の提唱した、日本語の音声学に基づいた四つの規則から不規則発音の発生を予測する方法を明示的に指導した場合の効果について論じたものである。

数詞と助数詞の組み合わせにおける不規則発音発生の理論化、類型化は多数研究されているが、日本語学習者に対し不規則発音の予測を指導した場合の効果について報告したものは見当たらない。

研究の方法

研究目的は、日本語を使用してビジネスに従事する中国人において、数詞と漢語1字助数詞の組み合わせについて、1. 現状の正確な発音の予測度は不規則発音を含めてどの程度か、2. 現状の発音の予測において何か特徴的な事象はあるか、3. Matsuzawa (2007)の提唱する、四つの規則による不規則発音の予測法を示した場合の効果があるか、を明らかにすることである。被験者は中国人107名である。

予測の測定には筆者が作成した問題を用いた。139項目の漢語1字助数詞から、発音が規則的な変動を示す助数詞と不規則発音を引き起こす助数詞の比率に従って10項目の助数詞をランダムに選び、それぞれ1から10を組み合わせた100問の発音を予測させた。問題は3組あり、講義前テスト、講義後テスト、一ヶ月後テストに使用した。講義はMatsuzawa (2007)の提唱する四つの予測規則を順番に提示し、演習によって理解の定着を図った。講義は7ヶ月間の月に渡って、月1回定員20名の教育コースとして実施した。

結果と考察

研究目的1に関しては、数詞と漢語1字助数詞の組み合わせにおいて、講義前の正確な発音の予測は82.20問であった。3組の問題には平均して80.01問の規則的な発音の組み合わせが含まれており、講義前の予測82.20問は平均2問不規則な発音組み合わせを予測できたように見える。しかし実際には規則的な発音の組み合わせにおいて不規則発音と間違って予測したケースもある。従って差の2問というのは、不規則発音を正確に予測できた数から規則的な発音を間違って予測した数を引いたものである。

研究目的2に関しては、被験者の中には独自に数詞の1, 6, 8, 10が助数詞と不規則発音を引き起こしやすいと理解していたと思われる者がいた。ただ過剰一般化して、不規則発音を引き起こさない、語音で始まる助数詞との組み合わせ、または方言、方言で始まる助数詞の組み合わせで不規則発音が起こると予測しているケースが見られた。

研究目的3に関しては、講義前の正確な予測82.20問が講義後は90.64問に有意に上昇し、一ヶ月後も89.45問と指導効果が続いた。したがってMatsuzawa (2007)の提唱する四つの不規則発音予測規則の指導は効果があると判断できる。

おわりに

日本語学習においては学習の進捗に応じて助数詞が導入される。合わせて発音学的な助数詞の不規則発音の予測法を指導するのは意味のあることと考える。

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The considerable ideological and institutional pressure placed on Japanese students in compulsory education to learn English is often at odds with their personal desire to do so. In previous research (Pigott, 2011), I conceptualized this situation through Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 motivational self-system as a gap between the ideal self (what one wants to become) and the ought self (what others want one to become). In this paper, I use it as a starting point for a discussion of the ethical dimensions of EFL policy, practice, and theory.

One pedagogical response to such a gap is to attempt to stimulate learners’ ideal selves by, for example, having them visualize themselves as fluent English speakers (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). However, before doing so we might first ask ourselves whether the discourse promoting the ought self is reasonable or feasible. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology asserts that “…Cultivating ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ is an extremely important issue for the future of our children and for the further development of our country” (in Okuno, 2007). However, there is evidence that English proficiency in Japan offers limited economic value for a relatively small elite, and that the need for English in the workforce is greatly exaggerated. In fact, the most pressing need for many may only be real-life to the extent that a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) has manufactured it into existence in the form of entrance exams and TOEIC score requirements (see Seargeant, 2012).

Fromm’s (1976) contention that, for bureaucrats “there is…[no]…conflict between conscience and duty:…[their] conscience is doing their duty” (p. 151) could also be seen to apply to those in education whose best interest is served by maintaining the status quo. Certain characteristics of mainstream pedagogy and research facilitate "business as usual" while at the same time give the appearance of principled practice.

Short-termism (Donmoyer, 1990) excludes the longer-term effects of education—potentially profound and, to an extent, unknowable—from considerations of explicit, measurable short-term goals often implemented through increasingly constrictive stipulations on teachers. Exam performance and grades, rather than an enriched life, increased happiness, the joy of learning, or a means of self-expression, are held up as goals of language learning rather than as means to an end. Combined with over-specialization, a short-term perspective offers insights into the ‘hows’ of second language acquisition rather than the ‘whys’: the philosophical, ethical, and ideological tenets upon which principled education ought to be based. Second, methodological and theoretical reductionism (Chase, 2005) leads researchers to deal with trends and numbers rather than human beings, the result being that “it is not people but their componentized sub-personal parts that are orchestrating courses of action” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 216). A casual glance through The Language Teacher or the JACET Journal illustrates the fact that such ‘scientific’ (dehumanized) conceptions of language learners are the norm. One wonders if simply listening to learners and what they want from school and life might be more worthwhile than more t-tests and ANOVAs.

Reform of the current system would presumably involve allowing students to opt out of English classes in high school, offering a wider
choice of language study, drastically reducing the dependency on testing, and reforming teaching practice away from the transmission of knowledge of English as a linguistic system—quite plainly an inappropriate approach for fostering communicative proficiency. Such reform could only conceivably happen in the context of widespread educational reform across all subjects and institutions (in other words, don’t hold your breath).

Perhaps, then, it is up to individual teachers to explore alternative approaches within their own classes to offer students a more meaningful and enriching classroom experience. A humanistic approach (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) has the advantage of making class time more rewarding and fulfilling for teachers and students alike; a critical approach (Friere, 1972; Shor, 1992) makes the classroom a site of resistance to prevailing ideology and practice—the teacher as rebel does, incidentally, hold a certain appeal for students (Gilbert, 2010). Both approaches treat the acquisition of a certain language skill as concomitant to more fundamental aims such as self-actualization and social change.

Seargeant’s (2009) contention that “For vast portions of the world’s population English remains a foreign language—often an obscure and unnecessary one—despite the prominent discourse which promotes its global reach” (p. 63) may not be comfortable reading for those of us involved in the bureaucratic push to motivate students to learn English, but by being aware of the ideologi
cal, political, and socio-cultural implications of compulsory English, we can surely approach it more responsibly as a classroom subject.

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Benefits of short-term study abroad experiences: What impact do they have on Japanese EFL learners’ oral communicative competence?

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In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) launched the “Global 30” Project to “dramatically boost… the number of … Japanese students studying abroad” (Japanese Universities for Motivated People (JUMP), n.d.; see also MEXT, 2009). An increasing number of Japanese universities offer short-term ESL study abroad (SA) programmes as an affordable and accessible means to promote the learning of English and international experiences. However, the number of Japanese students studying abroad has been decreasing steadily for the last few years. Economic recession, and the introversion and risk-aversion amongst young Japanese have been suggested as major reasons for this trend (Fukushima, 2010; Tanikawa, 2011). While these may partly explain the phenomenon, the author hypothesises that students, as well as their parents who support them, may also not be convinced of the benefits of SA experiences. Universities typically rely on anecdotes or general impressionistic remarks in advertising their SA programmes, rather than presenting empirical data, which may be more convincing.

There exists a large body of research outside Japan which investigates the effect of SA on L2 speaking (DeKeyser, 2007). However, very few studies examine Japanese EFL learners’ speech data before and after SA. These existing studies (e.g., Churchill, 2009; Wood, 2007) are extremely small-scale and have methodological problems, such as a narrow scope and the use of a non-interactive task in eliciting the data. What we need are studies of a reasonable sample size, which elicit learner data through interactive tasks and assess changes in wider areas of communicative competence (e.g., Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). This is the first of a series of such studies. The following research question is the focus of this paper:

What impact do short-term language SA experiences have on the oral communicative competence of Japanese university EFL learners?

Method

The participants were twenty-four second-year business students. They joined three-month to four-month ESL courses at two US universities in 2010. During their stay in the US, the students were asked to submit online monthly reports about their study and life in general.

One-to-one, face-to-face interviews of approximately 13 minutes were conducted before and after SA by two NS examiners. Each student was interviewed once by each examiner. The IELTS Speaking test (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2007) was selected as the basis for designing the task. The interviewers assessed each learner’s performance using the IELTS Speaking band descriptors (public version). The descriptors had nine bands and consisted of the four criteria of Fluency & Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range & Accuracy, and Pronunciation.

The interviewers were also asked to rate the negative affective impact learner performance had on them, such as irritation or discomfort felt while interacting with the learners. A 5-point
scale developed by the author (Sato, 2008) was used, which ranged from “1: very serious” to “5: none.” This subjective rating provided data on the sociolinguistic appropriacy of learner performance, which was not adequately covered by the IELTS descriptors.

Results
As a group, the learners’ band scores significantly improved after SA in the areas of Fluency & Coherence and Lexical Resource, although great individual differences were observed. Significant negative correlations were found between the pretest scores and the pretest/posttest changes in all four areas. Significant improvement was also observed in the rating of the affective impact rating. However, great individual differences were again observed.

In order to explore the possible reasons for the great cross-learner differences in the pretest/posttest changes, case studies were conducted with the three learners whose average band scores changed most among the 24 participants. Learner 21 improved in all the four areas while the other two learners regressed in all but Fluency & Coherence. As to the rating of the negative affective impact, not only Learner 21 but also Learner 5 greatly improved after SA. Only Learner 3 got a lower score on the posttest. These learners’ monthly reports showed some distinct characteristics. It seems that self-aware learners who set realistic and specific goals, and sought out-of-class opportunities to use English have improved sociolinguistically, though not necessarily linguistically.

Discussion and provisional conclusion
The group results suggest that the short-term ESL SA experiences had a positive impact on the oral communicative competence of the Japanese university English learners - at least in some areas. The significant negative correlations between the pretest scores and the pretest/posttest score changes indicate that students who got lower scores before studying abroad benefited more through the SA experiences. This is in line with the lack of significant improvement in grammar and pronunciation, in which the participants had attained comparatively high scores before studying abroad. The three case studies revealed some possible causes of cross-learner differences and the importance of considering the sociolinguistic aspect of oral communication.

Acknowledgements
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While many language teachers recognize the benefits of getting involved with classroom-based research, numerous challenges can limit the potential for successful execution of quality research, particularly if quantitative methods are employed. In an article looking at language teachers’ research engagement, Borg (2010) identifies conditions that facilitate teacher research and argues “collaborations among teachers, and among academics and teachers create productive mutually-beneficial social spaces for knowledge creation” (p. 418). Collaboration can take a variety of forms that range from joint efforts in the preparation, execution, and reporting of a study to simply bouncing ideas off colleagues. One approach to collaboration entails engaging in open discussion with peers in order to report on current activities, explore potential projects, and share past experiences. This discussion can provide a multitude of benefits including valuable feedback through unique insight and varied perspectives based on others’ research experiences. Additionally, teacher researchers can connect with peers engaged in a shared pursuit and contribute to the success of others’ work.

In order to explore this approach of research collaboration through open discussion, a workshop, Sharing Experiences with Quantitative Research, was offered at JALT2011. Workshop
organizers sought to help teachers learn from each other’s experiences with quantitative research, build community, make connections among a group of peers, and attenuate the isolation typical of the research pursuit. In this article, three of the organizers share their own experiences with quantitative research, discuss issues they encountered, and provide advice for their peers.

Beth Konomoto shares her story about how she got started with quantitative research. Despite some initial struggles to read research methods course books on her own, she was determined to contribute to her professional community through research and to better understand background information found in academic articles. By joining an online quantitative research methods class, she was able to deepen her understanding of the formulas and common procedures fundamental to quantitative research. She made use of online forums to share experiences and learn with other teachers on the same journey. With the support of the class, completing a small-scale study proved to be a great learning vehicle. She makes several recommendations for teachers looking to take a first step with quantitative research methods.

Michio Mineshima talks about a quantitative study he conducted and some of the difficulties he encountered during the process. Alarmeted by the lack of critical thinking (CT) skills evident among his college students, he decided to investigate how Japanese textbooks of English were compiled in terms of developing learner CT. He classified questions and tasks in these textbooks into seven different types according to their purposes and determined that in the textbooks, much less weight was given to CT in comparison to other skills such as text-based information retrieval. This research, however, did not go as smoothly as he had planned. He encountered several problems such as difficulties in defining key concepts and misjudgments in workload estimates. He identifies several crucial steps that can be taken during the planning stages of a research project.

Chris Stillwell discusses a project that involved using readily available data to gain experience with statistical techniques and explore quantitative research basics. He used a t-test to compare differences in university students’ English placement test scores and final exam scores for two groups: team-taught classes and non-team taught classes. The simple research design and significant validity concerns only allowed for limited conclusions; however, the process helped him to better understand how to form appropriate research questions and gave him a greater appreciation of the wealth of mitigating factors that can be encountered in the research process. In addition, the project served as a basis for valuable discussions with colleagues and provided essential experience to draw upon when considering the validity of others’ research. He discusses how others can benefit from conducting similar projects.

In small groups, the thirty workshop attendees discussed such issues as difficulties with understanding the steps behind quantitative methods, choosing correct designs, interpreting statistical findings, and being isolated during the process. Advice generated included careful selection of research topics with achievable goals, use of small-scale studies, and collaboration with co-workers. Based on the number in attendance and the level of participation, this workshop was viewed as a success and a strong indication of the interest in discussing research among language teachers involved with JALT. The article concludes with several recommendations for how language teachers, administrators, and professional leaders can encourage and provide similar opportunities for collaboration.

As Borg (2010) suggests, collaboration and dialogue with both academics and other teachers can be critical components of successful classroom-based research. Professional organizations, school administrators, academic researchers, and teachers themselves should strive to make all aspects of the research process a topic for discussion, not just the final results of successful studies.

References
Considering the relationship between course-based learning objectives and self-directed learning

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At JALT2011, Paul Collett and I conducted a workshop on Developing Resources for Self-Directed Learning. This workshop was based on our own experience of creating, implementing, and researching materials designed to develop learners’ ability to self-regulate their learning. The supplementary learning materials we have designed incorporate a self-reflective learning cycle which supports learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. The starting point for engaging with self-reflective cycles of learning is goal setting, and our resources encourage learners to embark on two simultaneous learning cycles: one based on their own semester-based learning goal, and the other based on course-based learning objectives presented to students in the form of can do statements. More details can be found in Collett and Sullivan (2010).

My proceedings article made an initial attempt to further reflect on questions and concerns raised during the discussion section of our workshop. I chose this approach as I felt the concerns raised were important issues which questioned one of the core elements of self-regulated learning: learner goals and the goal-setting phase of the self-reflective learning cycle. The key questions can be summarized as follows:

1. What if students’ own goals are different from the course-based learning objectives?
2. What if the student’s goal is to “get credit” in order to meet graduation requirements?
3. What if learners have no goals at all?

My understanding of the first question is in terms of control over learning content (and learning goals) as a critical element of self-regulated learning (Benson, 2011), and a concern that a lack of control may cause already self-directed learners to become disengaged with classroom learning. The second and third questions reflect concerns about so-called “undirected” learners at Japanese universities. These learners will no doubt continue to increase due to the declining birthrate which is reducing competition to enter university, and the combined impact of the shrinking job market and the steadfast demand among companies for university graduates which is leading to more and more students entering university without a particular purpose but to find a job and graduate.

My position is that course-based learning objectives can be useful for both types of learner.

Course-based learning objectives and self-directed learners

Benson (2011) defines autonomy as the ability to take control of one’s learning, and suggests that control over learning content in particular may be “fundamental to autonomy in learning.” I would by no means wish to deny the significance of choice of learning content; creating chances for personalization and negotiation of the classroom agenda is important. However, I do not believe this means the presentation of course-based learning objectives is detrimental to learning.
Indeed, in the current tertiary education environment in Japan, faculty development advancements are in fact calling for more attention to be paid to the setting of clear learning objectives and course outcomes.

Here, I would like to make two points to support the use of course-based learning objectives. First, I would argue that many learners lack the ability to unpack their personal goals, and identify commonalities between these and course objectives. The teachers should play a greater role in demonstrating these intersections, and indeed the connections between course objectives and the bigger picture of learning and using a foreign language outside the classroom. Second, I would also question whether only learning what one is currently interested in, or knows about, is truly beneficial. If our interests are influenced by our experiences to date, then surely wider exposure to different ideas can only help our learners to further develop. Reconciliation between learner goals and course goals can and should be achieved to help self-directed learners get more out of classroom-based learning.

Using course-based learning objectives to guide the “undirected learner”

The “undirected learner” is particularly vulnerable as goals are necessary not only to plan cycles of learning, but also to monitor progress, which is crucial to create and maintain motivation (Ushioda, 2008). Here, I would argue that the presentation of various learning objectives might work as a catalyst that guides learners to identify interests and subsequently learning goals. Our students are not linguists, and so it is understandable that they may lack the knowledge and language to identify and express their interests in relation to foreign language studies. The explicitness with which can do statements present to learners course content may help them to better understand what is involved in becoming competent in a foreign language, and this may be a necessary first step for some students to formulate their own goals.

The conclusion at this stage is that course-based learning objectives may indeed help both self-directed and undirected learners to identify and articulate their own learning goals. Here, the role of the teacher in mediating this process is no doubt crucial, and in need of further consideration.

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References


Events at JALT2012

Friday Welcome Party, sponsored by OUP

JALT, along with Oxford University Press, will be co-sponsoring the National Conference Welcome Party on Friday, October 12th from 6:30 to 8:30pm in the Congress Center, Room 31. Come to a party where you can see old friends and hopefully meet new ones as well. There will be refreshments and light food, so come and start the conference off with a hoot!

• Look for information about our other JALT2012 events on other pages of this issue of TLT.
Giancarla Unser-Schutz
Hitotsubashi University

Reconsidering visual context through comics

In recent years, the foreign language teaching community has commonly come to consider visual tools positive for learning, with authentic materials like comics seen as particularly useful for the doubled goal of gaining student interest (Kaneko, 2008). Yet it is not clear how visual tools function as the image-text relationship is far from obvious. This paper seeks to fill this gap by reviewing the arguments for visual tools and the differences between textbooks and authentic materials, while looking at data from my manga corpus project on text types in manga and word frequency from one title’s conversational lines.

Several arguments have been made for visual tools, including that they tap into the different verbal-visual learning paths (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997) and are initially easier to understand than verbal communication (Forceville, 2007). Experimental research suggests that incorporating visual has positive effects on learning (Leeming, Praver, & Atkins, 2010; Yanguas, 2009). Yet the results are not universally positive. In a study on how comics help English students, Liu (2004) found that they helped low-proficiency readers with harder texts, but seemed ineffective for advanced readers, suggesting that comics may trouble high-level learners looking for cohesive connections. Visuals thus appear useful in so far as they reflect the text. Textbooks generally appear to follow this principle closely, whereas manga today are characterized by a lack of visual-verbal redundancy (Takeuchi, 2005), thus requiring readers to bridge the visual-verbal gap.

Manga, and especially a manga corpus, could therefore be ideal for reconsidering the effect of images in authentic materials on language learning. My corpus includes the linguistic text found in five girls’ and boys’ titles, each categorized into 8 types (Lines, Thoughts, Narration, Onomatopoeia, Background Text, Background Lines/Thoughts, Comments, and Titles). Categories such as Onomatopoeia (4.59%) can be assumed to be directly related to the visual, whereas other text types like Thoughts (13.40%), the second most common type, are more abstract, as such non-vocalized texts are naturally non-redundant. As they form the majority of text (72.83%), however, the relationship between image and text for Lines has the greatest overall impact. Thus, I used a morpheme analyzer on the Lines in the manga Bokura ga ita (Obata, 2002-2012) (“Bokura” below), analyzing below the most commonly seen nouns, adjectives/adjectival-nouns and verbs, as well as related points of interest. Bokura, a popular girls’ title, is typical of the genre, with a strong emphasis on romance and the ‘psychological’ aspects characteristic of girls’ titles (Schodt, 1996), which may mean less direct visual-verbal correlation.

In total, 982 different nouns were found 3,779 times. Of the 64 nouns appearing over 10 times, personal pronouns and names were most common (17.62%, 11.25%). Object nouns—words potentially overlapping with the drawings—were uncommon, with only 5 such nouns seen over 10 times. In comparison, 139 adjectives/adjectival nouns and verbs, as well as related points of interest. Bokura, a popular girls’ title, is typical of the genre, with a strong emphasis on romance and the ‘psychological’ aspects characteristic of girls’ titles (Schodt, 1996), which may mean less direct visual-verbal correlation.

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non-sentence fragments as only 54.85% of speech bubbles included verbs. Potentially-bound verbs made up 43.37% of usages, suggesting that sentence structures are fairly complex and implying more abstraction. Of those 55 verbs appearing over seven times, potentially-bound verbs (19) were the most common, as well as verbs related to communicating or thinking and expressing opinions. Quoted text was also common, suggesting further complexity. Verbs related to communication were frequent, with Japanese quotation marks seen 44 times. Reported speech using the sentence-final expression ～date were seen 25 and 125 times respectively, which are inherently one step away from the drawings. Interestingly, they may also be more than simply reported speech: ～he can also be a topic marker, adding an emotive quality common in manga (Maynard, 2002).

I would argue that these data show that there is good reason to believe that manga—and other authentic material—fail to follow the image-text cohesion rule. This does not make them unviable in the L2 classroom, but does suggest that educators must understand the text/image relationship and set specific goals. One viable point might be emotive language. Modal forms such as sentence final particles are very common (1,135 usages), and can be difficult for learners, yet even pre-literate children show high comprehension of the emotions expressed by different text styles in comics (Yannicopoulou, 2004). While images may be unhelpful in understanding the meaning of particular vocabulary words, they also offer a sociocultural glimpse of Japan. Moving the focus to tasting the cultural background of the L2 could be one potential application.

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