Social Discourses as Moderators of Self-Regulation

Paul Collett
Shimonoseki City University
Kristen Sullivan
Shimonoseki City University

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In this paper we address how learner perceptions of teacher-provided resources are socially mediated. In particular, we wish to consider how efforts to promote such important learning strategies as goal-setting, monitoring, and reflection are influenced by learner knowledge and beliefs about language learning. Three important factors (*catalysts*, *social discourses*, and *shared understandings*) emerged from data collected via interviews with students in a Japanese university who had used the resources in question. We argue that these factors serve as foundations underlying both our student engagement with, and attitudes towards, language learning. In this paper we focus specifically on the role of social discourses, perhaps better conceptualized as beliefs. We look at how these discourses or beliefs positively and negatively influence student understandings of study, along with their learning practices. Implications for classroom practice are considered.

本論文は、教員から与えられた教材に対する学習者の認識は社会的な影響に媒介より調整されていることについて考える。本論文で取り上げられている教材を実際に使った学習者とのインタビューから得たデータの分析により、三つの重要な要因（きっかけ、社会的ディスコース、共有の理解）が明らかになった。これらの要因は学習者の外国語学習への取り組みや外国語学習に対する意識・態度の根底にあると著者らは論ずる。本論文は特に社会的ディスコースに重点を置き考察を行う。

In an ongoing project aimed at helping our students develop as autonomous, self-regulated learners, we have been collecting data on how students perceive and respond to the resources we are using via surveys, examples of resource usage by students, and interviews. Our aim through this study is to investigate and more deeply understand how various factors contribute to student understandings of the resources presented to them in the classroom, in particular, one designed to help develop learners' self-regulated learning (SRL) ability. Specifically, we wish to consider how efforts to promote the use of strategies important for SRL—goal-setting, monitoring, and reflection—are influenced by learner knowledge and beliefs about (language) learning.

Whilst different sources of data suggest varied possibilities to account for student responses, one strong pattern that has emerged from our interview data points to the socially-mediated nature of student perceptions of the specific resource we are trialing and testing, a Study Progress Guide (SPG). In fact, we posit that three "foundations" are strongly related to student understanding and decisions: *catalysts*, *social discourses*, and *shared understandings*. In this paper, we focus on how one of these in particular, social discourses, has influenced our learn-

ers' understandings and conceptions of the SPG. It should be noted that we do not intend to assign a dominant role to social discourses here, but instead acknowledge it as one of a number of foundations, all of which seem to be linked and perhaps necessary for student readiness for SRL. However, we believe it is worth focusing on this particular foundation to stress the kinds of issues involved in attempts to promote learner development.

Another caveat is that we do not wish to assign a deterministic role to any of these foundations. Rather, we feel that they are situated, emergent properties of the learning environment. They help shape student attitudes toward language learning, but at the same time are reciprocally modified as students engage in learning activities and gain new understandings of their abilities and needs.

Research Orientation

Much of the research in SRL in the fields of education and psychology has tended to foreground the cognitive, and has "focused theoretical attention on the behavior and cognitive processes of individual people . . . and [has] treated the rest of the social, material and informational environments as contexts in which individual behavior occurs" (Greeno, 1998, p. 6). While this research has been important in advancing understanding, we feel that there is a need to give greater consideration to the social environment and how this influences the learner. Of course, we are not alone here. Bandura (1997), the main figure behind the social cognitive theory at the base of many developments in SRL, has stressed the importance of understanding human action in the light of sociohistorical factors. He has also argued strongly for recognising human agency as a socially situated part of human functioning and as operating within "a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral and environmental determinants. . . . this triadic interaction includes the exercise of self-influence as part of the causal structure. . . . in acting as an agent, an individual makes causal contributions to the course of events." (Bandura, 2006, p, 165).

More recent conceptualizations of SRL based on sociocultural theories of learning, as well as situated cognitive viewpoints, have resulted in a greater emphasis on the role of social factors in accounts of how learners come to self-regulate their learning. A perusal of recent journals and publications in the field of second language learning indicates that there is a growing body of research which draws on sociocultural theories to account for learner development and motivation. Wenden (1998), however, observed that one weakness of sociocultural perspectives is a tendency to emphasize activity or the setting, and "the knowledge/beliefs embedded in the setting or which emerge through the interaction that takes place in it is overlooked as a source of insight on learner's motives, goals and operations" (p. 530). This point about beliefs is worth considering in more detail. White (2008), in an overview of research on beliefs in language learning, supplied a definition of beliefs as "mental constructions of experiences" (Sigel, cited in White 2008, p. 121). Beliefs are seen as one factor influencing the learning strategies users employ, although from varying perspectives (White, 2008; Barcelos, 2003). Early conceptions of beliefs cast them as distinct from knowledge and somewhat unhelpful for learning (Barcelos, 2003). In metacognitive theories (e.g., Wenden, 1998, 2001), beliefs were classified as a subset of metacognitive knowledge and regarded as relatively stable and unchanging and as potentially able to help with development of learner autonomy. More contemporary conceptualizations have moved away from these views to one which sees beliefs as dynamic and shifting based on the contexts learners find themselves in (White, 2008). This is further exemplified by the work of Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) in which we see a strong emphasis on the situated, emergent, and socially-mediated nature of beliefs. Oxford (2011) has argued that placing beliefs under the rubric of metacognition is too restrictive, instead positing beliefs as a part of the learners' metaknowledge.

Gao (2010) argues that beliefs are closely linked to agency or the will or capacity to act: "language learners' motive/belief system . . . constitutes one of the most powerful parts of learner agency" (p. 158). He presents a shared metacognitive and sociocultural account to demonstrate how agency and metacognition contribute to learner autonomy (Gao & Zhang, 2011). Gao is one of a number of researchers who have outlined the importance of examining the ways learners exercise their agency so as to better understand the choices they make in their learning (see also Bown, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2001). Along these lines, we prefer to follow a realist approach as espoused by Sealey and Carter (2004) along with Gao (2010) and Mercer (2011) whereby structure and agency are regarded as "interacting in a relationship of reciprocal causality which generates emergent irreducible phenomena" (Mercer, 2011, p. 428).

Context: Study Background

Our study is an ongoing research program working on the development of an SPG, a supplementary learning resource that aims to promote SRL strategies in an English course at a university in Japan. While the creation of the SPG has been covered in more depth elsewhere (Collett & Sullivan, 2010) in brief it consists of sections where students can set semester-wide learning goals (see Appendix B. 1), reflection activities based on these goals (Appendix B. 2), and additional unit-focused sections designed to promote goal-setting and self-reflection (Appendix B. 3). As part of the study, we carried out interviews with 12 students taking classes in which we were testing the SPG resource. These classes were oral communication English classes held once a week for 90 minutes, taught by native speakers of English. The participants were all majoring in economics and took the class as their primary foreign language requirement in a medium-sized university in provincial southwestern Japan. The interviews were semi-structured and were carried out in Japanese with individual students. All students were asked the same general questions (see Appendix A), but differing responses led to differing paths of exploration. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes long and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. These recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions entered into NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2010), which was used to help with managing the coding process. At the time of writing, analysis has been completed for six of the 12 students, and this analysis forms the basis for the ideas discussed in this paper. The data reported on here come from three female and three male students. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1. Participating Student Details

Name*	Sex	Year	Department	Group
Kei	Female	1st	International Commerce	Acceptance
Mai	Female	1st	International Commerce	Acceptance
Taro	Male	1st	Economics	Acceptance
Sara	Female	2nd	Economics	Acceptance
Yuu	Male	1st	International Commerce	Rejection
Daiki	Male	1st	International Commerce	Rejection

Note. *All names are pseudonyms

From our analysis of the data we found a clear dichotomy in attitudes towards the SPG, with four of the students stating that they found it useful for their learning (the *acceptance* group) whilst the remaining two claimed that they had either not understood the point of it or that they could not perceive its utility for their learning (the *rejection* group.) We also noticed a number of commonalities across the data, which we refer to as foundations as they seem to be a basic part of student attitudes towards

the SPG. One of these foundations is the notion of some sort of social discourse playing a part in the students' positioning and understanding of the SPG as a learning device. This, in combination with the other foundations, leads the students to perceive the resource as either useful or otherwise. In the interviews with members of the acceptance group, we found that there were references to the commonly held beliefs in Japan of university as a "leisure land" and of Japanese university students as "inherently lazy." Within the rejection group we identified references to the social discourse of homework as an assessment procedure rather than as a means for learning. Both social discourses are outlined below.

Discourse 1: Views of University Life in Japan

One strong view of tertiary education in Japan relates to the belief that it is not really necessary for students to study when at university, and that all students will graduate regardless of their performance (see, e.g., Clark, 2010; Burgess, 2011). University is perceived more as a break between completing high school and entering the working world, a chance for students to engage in sporting or cultural pursuits, make friends and contacts, and have fun. Successful career pursuits are not contingent on students having graduated with high grades, and in fact most students have their future employment guaranteed before they have even graduated.

While the notions of university as leisure land and the university student as inherently lazy are common, it seems that these beliefs are not something all university students necessarily want to subscribe to nor to perpetuate. When asked what they perceived to be the meaning of the SPG, the acceptance group students typically positioned it as a useful device for helping, encouraging, or at times forcing them to study. These students all noted that while they had the best intentions to study independently at university, they, like all other (Japanese) students, believe themselves to be inherently lazy and will typically not study. Here, they position the SPG as an opportunity (or catalyst) that gives them an initial push to engage productively with their studies. This initial push is described as being crucial to gain the momentum or receive the necessary guidance that would allow them to independently engage in their studies. In particular, Kei and Sara reported they had seen the SPG as a way they could help themselves to move beyond the discourses they carried of students as lazy (see Table 2). They had their own conceptions of how they wanted to be as language learners (perhaps based on the idea of future or possible selves) and recognized that the SPG presented a course they could follow, or strategies they could use, to become more serious about their language study. Note here that while Kei and Sara argued that an element of initial compulsion was necessary, they also required and demanded a degree of independence or freedom to decide exactly how they themselves would engage with the SPG.

For students who have already begun to challenge the stereotype of the lazy student and have their own beliefs about the meaning of university study—as an opportunity for independent scholarship—the SPG is quickly and easily positioned as a useful learning device (note this is contingent on the other foundations, catalysts and shared understandings; the deeper relationship amongst these three factors are beyond the scope of this paper.) On the other hand, for the interviewees who fell into the rejection group, there was no mention of this particular discourse in their interviews. We have interpreted this as a marked absence of a potentially positive approach to interpreting and individualizing the purpose of the SPG.

Table 2. Students' Views of SPG

Interview question	Sample student responses
Why did you think the SPG was being used in class?	*I think it was to create a chance for us to be exposed to English. We were being given an opportunity to independently use English through the homework. If there was no SPG and we just went to class, we probably wouldn't revise the class work, right? I mean, I'm really lazy. For other classes, I only ever study just before the test. So, because the SPG allowed us to be in constant touch with English, I think it was helpful.* – Kei *What did I think was the purpose of doing the SPG? For the teacher to see the students' attitude and level of enthusiasm for learning. . . to measure their enthusiasm for learning, whether they are trying or not. They have to grade us, to pass at least a few people, so they need some way to do this.* – Yuu
Regarding overall use of the SPG	*Even if use of the SPG started off as something that was compulsory, as I used it and gradually got used to using it I felt that I started using it more proactively.* – Sara
Regarding Specific use of the SPG	*Sometimes when I'd think "What should I do for homework this time?" when Mr. L was my teacher he'd say "This week try doing this," and well that helped me come up with something to do. . . . And sometimes we end up doing the same kind of homework each week which is not interesting, so I would like the teacher to give us more specific examples of what we can do. . . . But, if my teacher told me "you must do this, do this this week," I would be frustrated and avoid doing the homework activity. It shouldn't all be decided by the teacher. If we are also given a say in what we do, then if the teacher suggests to me "Why don't you try this?" I would think "Okay, I'm going to be creative with this and show you what I can do."* – Kei

Discourse 2: SPG as a Teacher-Centered Assessment Device

As explained above, Yuu from the rejection group seems to be lacking a reason to position the SPG as a useful device. One reason for this could be explained by Yuu's understandings of the roles of teachers, assessment, and homework, and his conceptualization of the SPG as a teacher tool, a take on the SPG not even predicted by its creators.

When Yuu was asked to explain his understanding of the purpose of the SPG, he described it as a device for teachers to assess students. When asked to explain this idea in more detail, he said that teachers are in a position where they must assess students, which includes assessing the students' level of participation and effort put into their study. Teachers need methods to conduct this assessment, and he positioned the SPG as being such a method.

Compounding these beliefs were Yuu's ideas about homework. For the SPG students were encouraged to set their own homework activities based on areas covered in class and in the textbook that they felt needed further attention. Yuu, however, was unable to comprehend the purpose of this due to his own understanding of homework as an activity set by the teacher with specific pedagogical aims. Perhaps as a result, his use of the SPG was also problematic. While he originally used the SPG homework space to write a diary in English, after consult-

ing with other students he concluded that all he needed to do was fill up the homework space, and he did so in a way that required minimum effort. This is also an example of the consequence of (a lack of) shared understandings, another important foundation for effective engagement with SRL. Because the SPG did not fit his concept of a pedagogically sound homework activity, and because he identified it as a teacher-centered device for monitoring and assessing students, Yuu was unable to identify the usefulness of the SPG for himself as a learner, which seems to have been at least one underlying reason for his rejection of it.

Discussion

While we have chosen to operationalize these particular aspects of student responses as a foundation of discourses, it may be more appropriate for our discussion to adopt a slightly different terminology and conceptualize them as beliefs. We suggest that social discourses represent a dynamic, situated, and emergent part of the learners' metaknowledge arising from their prior experiences, but also potentially mediated by future experiences, and that these beliefs can contribute positively towards learning, as well as hinder it. Given this conceptualization, how can we account for the role of social discourses in influencing learner decisions to engage with the SPG or otherwise?

As outlined previously, Gao (2010; Gao & Zhang, 2011) shows how beliefs can play a key part in helping learners gain control of language learning, and how, for example, positioning alternative beliefs to those that are part of the social discourse of a particular community can contribute to positive self-regulation, as we have seen with Sara and Kei. Gao's findings also demonstrate the importance of the learning context and show how this mediates students' strategy use and the discourses underlying strategy use. When they are able to understand their social learning contexts, learners can act to make use of aspects that support their language learning; there is an interactional relationship between learner agency and contextual conditions (Gao, 2010). We would argue that this is what accounts for the acceptance of the SPG by Kei and Sara. Gao also suggests that without the necessary metacognitive knowledge, learners are unable to apply their agency. This may account for reports from students that they were unable to see the usefulness of the SPG. These students don't necessarily *not* hold the same beliefs as others, but they are unable to utilize these beliefs in any kind of motivating or positive way: "no matter how critical and insightful learners' understanding of contextual conditions, such understanding serves no point if learners do not translate it into action through metacognitive operations" (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 38).

To account for differing beliefs held by the students, we can also draw on the sociocultural perspective outlined by Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), "that since cognition is situated and distributed, we should not expect any two individuals to learn and develop in precisely the same way even if the material circumstances, or conditions of their learning appear similar" (p. 156). In other words, a sociocultural approach predicts different outcomes for different learners. In this respect, the motives people hold for language learning are related to the significance languages and learning hold for them; we would extend this to say the motivation they have to engage with resources is similarly linked to the significance learners place on their beliefs. It is perhaps obvious to say that learners will respond to the resources we supply in different ways due to their different histories. One role of the teacher is to discover learners' specific histories, personalities, and agency "through observation and interaction with the learners and to build upon what we find in ways that enhance the likelihood that any given person will have the opportunity to learn and develop" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 157).

A slightly different perspective comes from Bown (2009), again based in sociocultural theory. She argues for the important role of affordances, "relationships of possibility between individuals and their environments" (Bown, 2009, p. 579), and discusses how these influence agency. The learning environment affords different possibilities to learners based on, amongst other things, their beliefs. However, in keeping with Gao, she argues that if students are to regulate and manage learning, they need to be aware of their agency and believe themselves capable of exercising it.

If we accept these perspectives, then it would seem apparent that we need to help our learners to recognize and internalize the positive beliefs underpinning their language learning efforts. At the same time it is necessary to help them challenge or reformulate in constructive terms the beliefs that they may hold that are limiting their self-regulatory potential. We also need to offer students possibilities to act on their beliefs, as was the case with the acceptance group students who saw the SPG as a useful device to support their initial attempts at self-managing their learning. In our study, the social discourses can be seen as one contextual condition; by having students reflect on how these influence their learning it should work to help them to develop as better learners. Gao (2010) has also shown how societal and traditional discourses related to the value of English seem to be tied to motivation and strategy use, but at the same time, these discourses are mediated by other social agents such as parents and teachers. We believe our results allow for similar conclusions.

Yuu's response to the SPG also demonstrates how there is a potential gap between teacher intentions and learner interpretations of these intentions that can potentially impact on class outcomes, and it appears that this is related to the beliefs of the learner (see also Woods, 2003). Furthermore, in the way Yuu used the SPG we see not just the social mediation of his belief about how it should be used, but a similarity to Wood's (2003) report of students recasting a teacher-planned activity in the classroom to fit within their beliefs of what constituted a valid activity.

One element of the SPG itself that may have contributed to Yuu's belief that the SPG was a teacher-centered device was that a part of the final grade for the course was contingent on completion of the SPG. While this policy was implemented in an attempt to encourage students to seriously engage with the SPG, by enforcing its use through the means of assessment we may have promoted a performance-goal orientation in our learners, reinforcing for students who were already subscribed to discourses related to "teacher as assessor" rather than "facilitator" that the SPG was for the teacher's means, and not for those of the student.

Feedback from the teacher to students in relation to how they are using the SPG may also be problematic, especially if teachers focus (intentionally or otherwise) on the punitive outcomes of not using it rather than emphasizing its potential usefulness for helping develop learning strategies. A lack of feedback could be similarly problematic, as this would not provide opportunities for reflection or would possibly promote beliefs that the SPG is not particularly important.

Concluding Remarks

In this research, we used interviews as our main source of data. One limitation of this approach is that it "does not infer beliefs from actions, but only from intentions and statements" (Barcelos, 2003, p. 19). It may be necessary to expand our line of enquiry to include a more contextual approach (Barcelos, 2003), the aim being to gain a better understanding of how exactly the kind of beliefs that seem foundational are actually influencing students in the act of learning. Developing a strong methodo-

logical approach to achieve this is something that needs to be prioritized; an approach similar to that of Navarro and Thornton (2011), that is, observing the relationship between action and belief and understanding how learners themselves account for the relationship, seems appropriate in this respect.

What we can say, based on our findings and their relation to similar studies, is that it would seem to be helpful to encourage students to regularly engage in discussion and reflection on the classroom activities they are involved in and resources they are working with to help reset any discourses that may negatively impact on their learning. The same ideas apply to the teacher too. If students are to be encouraged to perceive resources such as our SPG as a device purposed to help with the development of learning, teachers must be active in delivering this message and also cognizant of the beliefs they themselves contribute to the learning environment.

Bio Data

Paul Collett currently teaches at Shimonoseki City University. He is interested in research methodology and epistemology, and learner and teacher motivation.

Kristen Sullivan is a lecturer at Shimonoseki City University and co-writer of *Impact Conversation 1* and 2. She is interested in the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking, as well as interactions between language learner identity and language use.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Below are the core questions asked across all interviews. As the interviews were semi-structured, in some instances these questions were expanded on or additional information was elicited.

- How did you choose your semester goal?
- Why did you choose that particular goal?
- Looking back now, are you happy with your goal?
- Did it help you with your study during the semester?
- How did you approach the Study Progress Guide homework?
- Walk us through how you did the homework each week.
- What do you think was the objective of the Study Progress Guide?
- Did using the Study Progress Guide help you in any way with your studies? If so, how, if not, why not?

Appendix B

Example Pages From Study Progress Guide

1. The initial goal-setting page students are asked to complete at the beginning of the course

Introduction to the key pages of the Study Progress Guide

Getting Started

Semester 1

Semester 2

My English goals for the Semester

(Please write this during the first week of the semester 春学期の第１週間目に書いてください*)*

The ABCD of goals: When it comes to deciding your English study goals, you need to be careful. Coming up with "bad" English goals can actually have a negative effect on your study. Here are some hints for creating "good" English goals.

Good goals should be

Achievable (reasonable for your age and strengths)

Believable (you need to believe you can do it)

Conceivable (clearly stated and measurable)

Desirable (You really want it, and others want it for you)

英語学習目標の決め方〜導入編：英語学習の目標を決める際、気をつけなければならない点がいくつかあります。「悪い」目標に決めてしまうと、学習意欲に悪影響を与える可能性があります。「良い」英語学習目標を決めるコツを覚えましょう：

良い目標は・・・

A. 達成可能なもの〜達成不可能な目標は学習意欲の低下につながってしまう

B. 信じられるもの〜達成できると信じなければならない

C. 明確である〜具体的で、計れるものでなければならない

D. 価値のあるもの〜自分が本当にできるようになりたいと思わなければならない

What are your goals for the class for this semester? Write about them below.

1

2. Mid-semester and final reflection pages

Mid-semester Reflection *(Please write this during the middle of the semester* 春学期の中間頃に書いてください*)*

Look back at the goals you set at the beginning of the semester. Have you achieved them?

Yes!	Not Really!
• Why do you think you managed to achieve them? • What did you do that helped you achieve your goal(s)?	• Why do you think you couldn't totally achieve your goals?
• Write down your new goals and how you will achieve them.	• Do you still think your goals are good? Do you still want to achieve them? If **yes**, *what do you think you need to do to achieve your goal?* If **no**, *write some new goals, and how you want to try to achieve them.*

Final Reflection *(Please write this during the last week of the semester* 春学期の最後の週に書いてください*)*

Think about the goals that you set to help you with your study (both your semester goals and your unit goals). Did they help you? Why do you think so? What are your English study goals for the future?

2

3. Page students are expected to complete as they work through the semester, incorporating goal-setting, self-study, and reflection activities

Unit 7: ***A Close Shave***	☹	☺	☺☺
1. I can tell stories (personal and/or reported) （あることについての）話をすることができる（自分の話・他人の話）			
2. I can use the phrases to begin a story 教科書で紹介されたフレーズを使って話を始めることができる			
3. I can use the "*past continuous + when + simple past*" pattern when telling stories 話をするときに、「過去進行形＋とき＋過去形」のパターンを使える			
4. I can respond to other people's stories 他人がする話に対して反応ができる			
5. I understand that /d/+/j/ = /ʤ/ /d/ の音で終わる言葉のすぐ後に /j/ の音で始まる言葉が続いてくると、その二つの音が混じりあって /ʤ/ の音になることを知っている			
6. I understand about disappearing /h/ sounds /h/ の音で始まる言葉が子音で終わる言葉のすぐ後に続いてくるとき、その /h/ の音がなくなることを知っている			
7. I know the key vocabulary items of this unit Unit 7 の重要な語彙を知っている			
8. I can understand the main points of the listening exercise Unit 7 のリスニングパッセージの内容を大体理解できる			

☹: Not at all ☺: Not bad, but need more practice or help ☺☺: I can do this quite well

It's almost time for your final reflection (page 2). Do you think you achieved your semester goals? Why or why not?

English Improvement Goals & Objectives (EI-GO!)

In this unit, I was **strongest** at: _____

And, I was **weakest** at: _____

This week, **what** do you want to improve? **How** will you do this? Write in detail:

_____

_____

This week's EI-GO! homework

EI-GO! homework reflection

14