How Effective is Interactive Learning? Investigating Japanese University Students' Language Patterns in a Collaborative Writing Task

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Abstract

According to Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman (2011), we use a language with others as a form of shared cognition, and in the process we scaffold each other. This action research investigates how students' online written output affects each other's writing. One thousand twenty online entries written by 21 Japanese university sophomore English majors were collected and analysed, specifically focusing on changes in two linguistic features: subject-verb agreement, L1 use and variant L1 spelling in L2 writing. First, all 21 students accessed a specific Social Network Service (SNS). For two months, each student took turns offering a discussion topic with a minimum of 150 words, and the rest of the class members commented online with a minimum of 20 words. The task resulted in 54 topic strands. Each student was tracked to see if his/her language use reflected the output of others. Then the linguistic developmental patterns were further investigated in a post-treatment interview. It was discovered that students lacking confidence in English learning are less likely to imitate and internalize from others. The study suggests that, in addition to scaffolding provided by peers, positively affecting the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is closely related to affective domains that give rise to particular identity formation. This paper therefore argues that the extent of languaging is significantly influenced by affective factors.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); writing; Japanese students, returnees/non-returnees; Social Network Service (SNS)

Introduction

In order to see how an interactive interface affects foreign language learners, this study examined the impact of Social Networking Systems (SNS) (in this case MySpace) on EFL writing from a socio-cultural perspective. The following two areas of difficulties that Japanese learners have in acquiring certain English features are examined:

1. Subject-verb agreement with the pronoun "everyone/everybody" which indicates a plural construct while it is singular.
2. Particular vocabularies which do not readily translate into English and their orthographic form.

The scope of this paper will be restricted to the discussions on morpho-syntactic development and lexical use in L2 among Japanese returnees and non-returnees.

The distinction between returnees and non-returnees is important, as it is often noted how returnees, who have experience living abroad, display L2 fluency whereas non-returnees' strengths are accuracy and grammatical knowledge in L2 (Sakamoto & Honda, 2008). It was hoped that this online exercise would positively affect students, as both the returnees and non-returnees will be able to scaffold each other using their strengths. In addition, SNS provides a forum for teachers to display appropriate and desirable interactive patterns and language use in the hope that students adopt and use the new patterns and forms themselves.

However, it is hypothesized that, while most would benefit from an online writing task (cf. Braine, 1997; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996), not all would. By tracing learners' changes in daily online writing, how the linguistic features in (i) and (ii) remain persistent or are corrected due to particular interaction(s) afforded by the SNS is investigated. The present study focuses in particular on two students who display insightful characteristics of "good language learners" (i.e., those who are responsive to others' writing and successfully acquire/change their vocabulary and writing style), and two students whose writing qualities do not improve from interactive online exchanges. It is hypothesized that learning is not always guaranteed in all interactions, as learner's emotional state influences the possibilities afforded by the ZPD (Swain, 2013). In this case an imagined, perceived-self that the learner has co-constructed for him/herself through interactions with others affects acquisition of linguistic features.

Literature Review

Social interaction can be described in different ways, and this paper explores social interaction from three perspectives: technological, sociocultural, and affective.

Social Media and the Evolution of Online Interaction

Through computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC; Warschauer et al., 1996), exemplified in the wide popularity of social networking and social media, the interactive patterns of language learners have altered (Thorne & Smith, 2011). These communication technologies afford interactions outside of class (Sakamoto & Honda, 2008; Sakamoto & Honda, 2009; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). This affordance (i.e., "an opportunity for use or interaction presented by some object or state of affairs to an agent" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 22) has fundamentally transformed human interaction (Warschauer, 2005; Thorne & Smith, 2011), and thus the way languages are learned. Online informal peer

feedback is suggested to foster affective dimensions in language learning by providing a collaborative, unobtrusive forum for students to explore language use (Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b), and thus positively impacting the quality of writing amongst language learners. With a "real" audience as a community, CMC provides a forum for purposeful, meaning-focused writing. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) state:

> Learning is not the taking in of linguistic forms by learners, but the constant adaptation of their linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in the communicative situation, which is, in turn, affected by learner's adaptability (p. 135).

It was hoped that CMC in this study would provide a forum for a communicative situation that demanded this meaning-making process that fostered language growth.

In addition, a CMC forum can further help to create a safe environment by prohibiting non-members of the group to have access to the forum. CMC not only enhances language learning (Warschauer, 2005), but it also brings people together. Each learner is not a mere passive consumer of information but an active and autonomous agent who seeks to link and negotiate with others (Warschauer, 2005). The teacher's traditional role as an authoritative figure is changed and his/her role becomes that of being a facilitator, one of the collaborators (Dippold, 2009, p. 34) participating in the meaning-making task online.

In Asian classrooms, students tend to be quiet and shy (Hammond, 2007). By introducing a CMC platform, the social climate of language learning may be enhanced (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b), leading to a sense of community in the classroom (Warschauer, 2005). The fear of losing face is also a grave issue in the process of language learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b), especially for Asian students (Hammond, 2007). In order to sustain a particular self-image in a semi-public forum, it is crucial that the students remain confident of their written work. For example, Sotillo (2000) found that ESL students write more syntactically complex sentences when they are engaged in asynchronous discussions. The asynchronicity of CMC allows the writers to spend ample time composing ideas and reformulating text, having opportunities to reflect on and incorporate their and others' ideas (Hewings & Coffin, 2006; Lea, 2001; Light et al., 1997; Wilson & Whitelock, 1998) in their new text.

Finally, once the written work is uploaded, the CMC forum provides updated and symmetrical exchanges among the participants (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). This is an important feature compared to the traditional forms of feedback provision, as it speeds up the pace of interaction among the participants, thus contributing to intensive, meaningful exchanges which in turn contribute to the faster establishment of collaborative community. As the aim of the study is to track the interactive patterns among the Japanese EFL learners in two months, active exchanges in written mode, documented via CMC, provided an ideal forum for investigation.

Language Learning and Socialization

Writing is not a solitary but a social activity; from a sociocultural theoretical perspective, our linguistic creations are the ventriloquated version of those which have been created in the past (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, language learners are socialized to be writers, and it is hypothesized that a safe writing environment serves to enhance the quality of student writing

by affording peer feedback in spontaneous and supportive ways. How this is done is investigated by adopting a socio-cultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1981), specifically describing the social shaping of writing via online interaction, focusing on particular morpho-syntactic and lexical features. That is, language learning via an online task is appreciated and understood as action embedded in a particular sociocultural context (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This particular sociocultural context lends itself to the shaping of a particular learning.

Vygotsky's general genetic law of cultural development holds that higher forms of thinking appear twice, on two different "planes": first on the intermental plane –that is, between individuals or between an individual and a mediating artifact–, and the second on the intramental plane – internalization by the individual. This dynamic internalization process is reflected in the term "languaging" (Swain et al., 2011) where we *language* with others as a form of shared cognition. In more specific terms, this internalization process is a "historical" one (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 50) in which what is internalized is determined by the past experiences of the learner. That is, the learner's ontological and microgenetic development contained in particular sociocultural settings give rise to a particular learning outcome. This in turn implies that the experience of the present determines the future developmental trajectory. In essence, the quality of past interactions shapes the development of the present, and in turn the present interaction shapes the future development. Therefore, provision of abundant fruitful interaction is indispensable in learning.

Bakhtin (1981) also notes that our learning entails the incorporation of the language of others, a concept he describes as "ventriloquism":

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (p. 293).

Similarly, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) note that they deem:

> [. . .] language use as a property of the discourse and not of individuals, with individuals only having latent potential for language use until they realize this in a discourse environment (p. 21).

If this were the case, then in a semi-public forum where learners can share their writings and where the instructor can provide a native-speaker (NS) model, the potential to expand one's language repertoire is immense. Similarly, Warschauer (2005) also acknowledges that CMC can provide insights into

> [. . .] how learners incorporate others' linguistics chunks (phrases, collocations, etc.) in CMC . . . and also how they refine their writing for, and with input from, an authentic audience (pp. 42–43).

Furthermore, according to socio-cultural theorists, a learner can display two levels of performance (Vygotsky, 1981, 1986). One is performance by the individual alone; the other is a higher-order performance by the same individual but assisted by another, a process known as *scaffolding*. This notion of two sets of display of knowledge is often referred to as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). By comparing the two, it is possible to determine the capacity in which an individual can benefit from interaction and mediation provided. This degree of capacity to detect and incorporate useful information for completing tasks

represents the person's cognitive abilities (Vygotsky, 1981). It is further argued that ZPD can be easily altered by affective factors (Swain, 2013), given the inseparable relationship between cognition and affect (See also Damasio, 1999). Vygotsky (1986) contends that:

> [. . .] intellect and affect. Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of "thoughts thinking themselves," segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker (p. 10).

This can be interpreted to mean that the ZPD is allowed to enact most fully when free from emotional inhibitions. Similarly, students under stress can exhibit difficulties in learning, as the ZPD is not fully enacted. ZPD is neither pre-determined nor static; it is a *phenomenon* and a degree in a *continuum* that is dependent on specific context and the learner. While interaction is always described to be conducive to learning in sociocultural theory, I argue here that the very visible, public nature of interaction could adversely affect the learner emotionally and thus inhibit the full enactment of ZPD. This interpretation makes sense when one thinks about defining possible "endpoints" of ZPD. ZPD is not just about what the learner could do with or without scaffolding. Even if you were to pair the same individuals to perform the same task, if the affective domain is altered, the ZPD that would emerge out of interactions would be very different. ZPD is appreciated as a combination of a set of repertoire that could be called upon when tapped accordingly, as well as an emergent ability that is co-constructed within an interaction (Swain, 2013). This tapping and emergence are facilitated by scaffolding; something that could be inhibited by affect.

Forming, Negotiating, and Assigning of Identity

While online interaction can afford positive outcomes (Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b), any learning involves complex mechanisms that are susceptible to affective factors. Novice learners become members of a community, more specifically a "legitimate peripheral participant" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and learning through apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1995). Through guidance provided by more capable community members, they accrue skills, knowledge and expertise that lead them to full membership in the community, and also actively construct a new identity, or rather "co-construct" their identity with fellow community members.

Specifically, Wenger (1998) explains how we form identities via three different socialization processes: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement is becoming involved in actual social activities, and as a result a particular identity is negotiated and formed. However, our identities can also be a product of our imagination; a more expanded interpretation of our sense of self that transcends time and space. This results from the accumulation of the past and present experiences that give way to a particular imagined self. Finally, alignment is a mode of belonging in which an individual attempts to tailor one's identity as to fit in with the broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises. In addition to this notion, Wenger (1998) also proposes that one's identity is not only the result of participation in communities of practice but also non-participation. The manner of a person's engagement in a community, the produced imagined self, and the particular constraints posed by the group activity cause individuals to react with participation or non-participation. Therefore, the extent of non-participation is as important as the degree of participation in communities of practice.

Moreover, Wenger (1998) notes that identity involves identification and negotiation. Identification is a process of participation and becoming, one we perform both participative and reificative process that we do to both ourselves and others. It is "relational and experiential, subjective and collective" (p. 191) and a "layering of participation and reification" (p. 193). This identification can be challenged or questioned, leading to new identification. Wenger claims that this process, negotiation, compliments the identity formation process. By negotiating, our social positions can be defined in social configurations.

Furthermore, Duff and Talmy (2011) remind us that L2 learners may willingly withdraw from participation: they may face opposition from others; may not be fully invested in learning L2; may want to retain a distinct identity; for practical reasons may be unwilling to meet community expectations and L2 demands; may feel conflicted about becoming a new L2 community member (pp. 97–98). However, in addition, my interpretation is that in many cases the learners "do" wish to become part of the L2 community, but are fearful and immobilized because they have created for themselves an imagined self-identity that hinders full community participation. This creation is the result of having participated in interactions with fellow peers.

The notions of participation/non-participation, modes of belonging as well as identification and negotiation allow us to appreciate the complexities involved in identity formation, and how these factors could impact learning. We are challenged to intervene in the construction of undesirable imagined community and imagined identity. In order to do so, socialization patterns of learners and their effects on learning need to be documented and explored. This study attempts to trace development in ESL writing and in the process identify who benefits and who does not, and explore possible ways to intervene positively in reversing negative self-perception.

Research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do students respond to the writing of others? Specifically, are there cases of learning vocabulary or grammar having been exposed to other writings, detected via imitation?
2. Are certain morpho-syntactic and lexical items more difficult to address and rectify than others?
3. Do all students show similar pattern of development? If not, do returnees and non-returnees show distinct differences?
4. Do all students benefit from online writing tasks? If not, does it have to do with returnee/non-returnee distinction?
5. What are the reasons for negative/non-response to interactions promoted via online writing, if any?
6. Does online writing affect students' identity formation as a writer? If so, in what ways? Specifically, does affective domain influence students' writing performance, in turn impacting their identity formation?

Methodology

Participants

Twenty-one Japanese sophomore English-majors at a private university in Tokyo and their instructor participated in this study. The participants in this study are composed of five non-returnees (all females) and 16 returnees (five males and 11 females) from various countries. Their personal background information, including information about time spent abroad, was collected at the beginning of the term. In participating in the online journal activity, the students were asked to select a name of their choice. Some chose a pseudonym but others kept their first names. In order to assure anonymity, the first names have been replaced with a pseudonym.

Data Collection

There are two sets of data in this study: online writing and interview transcripts. First, the group engaged in a daily English journal-writing task via the online social networking service (SNS) MySpace five times a week (i.e., Monday to Friday, except holidays) for approximately two and a half months, from April 20th to July 1st. The task resulted in 54 topic strands (ranging from topics such as plans for college years, way to reduce stress, way to bounce back from a setback, how to overcome shyness, and Japanese English education), and 1,020 entries in total. Each student took turns providing a topic of his/her choice for discussion (the schedule was pre-determined by the instructor). The individual posted a topic by 5pm the day it was assigned, while the rest of the class members were to respond by 1pm the following day. In total, each participant was responsible for setting up two topics during the duration of the task. In order to guarantee a certain length to their writing, topic entries were to be a minimum of 150 words and responses a minimum of 20 words. Furthermore, in order to prohibit access from outside, the entries were made within a community designated only for the purpose of journal writing among this particular group. This created a safe writing environment for the participants. Conveniently, MySpace features documented the exact time of the entry upload, and ordered the contributions made according to the time of upload. These features were crucial to determine the flow of the interaction among the participants, and the archived nature of all entries facilitated data collection and analysis.

Upon completion of the online writing task and after the online transcripts were analyzed (i.e., October), all subjects were invited to share orally in class their reaction towards the task. Specifically, they were asked, “What did you think of online journal writing?” and the students took turns to comment. There was no time limit to respond, although most students spoke only briefly (i.e., five minutes or so). They were allowed to give comments in English or Japanese, but all chose to respond in Japanese. The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Lastly, at the end of the semester, in a form of a course evaluation (Appendix A), a post-treatment questionnaire was also administered which asked the students to share their views on the class assignments they had completed that semester. In order to elicit honest feedback from all participants, the questionnaires were completed anonymously. In the questionnaire, no emphasis was made on the journal writing task itself; it was to see if the students would specifically mention the online task, and if so, in what capacity. As a result, 17 responses were collected. All students were also invited to comment on the task online via MySpace at

the end of the semester. Comments collected online were not anonymous. All comments were provided in English.

Method of Analysis

All journal entries were compiled into one large Microsoft Word file, and then analyzed as follows:

1) Grammatical/spelling errors as well as Japanese entries were identified by going through all entries;
(2) Identified common errors made by the participants based on (1);
(3) In order to capture every moment the error is made, the items identified in (2) above made up nodes for NVivo and were searched for all occasions where the errors were made;
(4) Based on (3), each error was examined to see what the student did to the error (i.e., whether he/she retained it or revised it).

Results

One important finding was that in some instances a form of scaffolding was discovered in peer interaction, wherein novice learners quickly internalized the features shared by the advanced learners, including the instructor, who used the forum as an opportunity to provide model sentences. This includes corrections in spelling, word usage, and grammar.

Morpho-Syntactic and Lexical Development

The following are the results obtained from the analysis of the two items that were explored in detail. The two items were specifically selected because i) they were easy to detect and ii) the varied use was prevalent compared to other features. All instances of the words "everyone" and "everybody" was detected in the writings. As for detecting all the words for "gasshuku" (retreat), "gogatsu-byo" (May syndrome) and 'kyoshoku' (teacher training), the threads containing the topics on retreat, May syndrome and teacher training were checked for all occurrences and noted in the order of appearance.

1. The Use of Singular/Plural Verb with the Pronouns "Everyone" and "Everybody"

First, all entries containing the words "everyone" and "everybody" were identified (See Table 1). Then, to see if the verbs used are singular or plural, only those that are used in the present form were extracted (Many students used the word with "hello" as part of a salutation ("Hello everyone!"), and in these cases the pronoun use was dismissed). Of the 37 entries, only six contained plural verb instead of singular, and these were dispersed instead of appearing in series. In addition, two students make the error twice whereas the error is only found once with others:

Table 1. Progression of the use of the words everyone/everybody with a singular verb.

= plural form used instead of singular

No.	Date & Time	Name (Pseudonym)	Singular verb?
1	April 23, 23:29	Azami	Yes
2	April 24, 10:37	Daisuke	Yes
3	April 29, 2:50	Jun	No
4	April 30, 5:54	Natsuko	Yes
5	May 1, 7:48	Tomomi	Yes
6	May 1, 16:22	Jun	No
8	May 1, 19:43	Azami	Yes
9	May 1, 20:41	Eriko	Yes
10	May 1, 23:09	Tomoko	Yes
11	May 2, 6:01	Natsuko	No
12	May 2, 15:46	Aki	Yes
13	May 2, 4:46	Daisuke	Yes
14	May 12, 10:04	Tomoko	Yes
15	May 13, 15:15	Mitzi	Yes
16	May 19, 1:21	Yurika	Yes
17	May 19, 16:24	Tomomi	Yes
18	May 19, 20:22	Daisuke	Yes
19	May 20, 15:55	Shiba	Yes
20	May 21, 12:35	Natsuko	No
21	May 21, 23:24	Eriko	Yes
22	May 23, 11:44	Tomomi	Yes
23	May 25, 15:14	Misaki	Yes
24	May 27, 14:01	Nana	Yes
25	May 28, 18:40	Shino	Yes
26	June 1, 22:00	Eriko	Yes
27	June 2, 21:05	Tomomi	Yes
28	June 9, 15:48	Mitzi	Yes
29	June 9, 21:22	Saori	Yes
30	June 10, 1:27	Kaz	No
31	June 10, 10:55	Minami	Yes
32	June 12, 11:52	Shiba	Yes
33	June 12, 20:25	Daisuke	No
34	June 13, 11:27	Minami	Yes
35	June 24, 23:00	Yurika	Yes
36	June 26, 20:55	Kaz	Yes
37	June 29, 2:08	Tomoko	Yes

Despite abundant availability of the correct singular form, all entries by Jun (No. 3 and 6) and Natsuko (No. 11 and 20), who are both returnees, persist in the plural form. This might suggest that the two are focusing largely on meaning and not necessarily on form. In addition, Daisuke, who is also a returnee, displays the correct form for the first three entries (i.e., No. 2, 13, 18) and uses the incorrect form in his last entry (No. 33). Hence, the only one who manages to correct his/her form is Kaz (returnee), who first wrongly uses the plural form

(No. 30) and exercises correct use in his last entry a week later (No. 36). This suggests that noticing and incorporating correct form does not occur for all learners, and this might reflect the meaning-focused nature of the task.

2. The Japanese Words "gasshuku" (retreat), "gogatsu-byo: (May syndrome) and "kyoshoku" (teacher training) which do not readily translate into English.

The Japanese word "gasshuku" means "retreat", as in *summer retreat*. In Japan, as part of their club activities, students often go away for a few days in order to concentrate on practice.

There were 25 entries that included the expressions for the word "retreat" (See Table 2). The one who begins the use of "gasshuku" is Tomomi (returnee), on April 22nd with a slightly deviant spelling "gasshyuku" (extra "y"). The word use is quickly picked up by Nana (non-returnee) on April 28th with Tomomi's original spelling "gasshuku". Three students quickly follow with the same spelling. Interestingly, Tomomi re-emerges on May 1st, this time with the same spelling as others (no "y"). However, with the re-introduction of "gasshyuku" (extra "y") led by Aki (returnee), Tomomi's spelling reverts back to her original form used on June 11th. At one point, the word even appears in Kanji, the Chinese characters used in Japanese, by two students Nana (non-returnee) and Minami (returnee) in the midst of the thread on May 18th and 19th, but it quickly reverts back to the romanized form. Unfortunately, none of the learners offers the English translation "retreat" and the use of Japanese vocabulary persists throughout the journal task.

Table 2. The use of Japanese word for retreat (The same spelling shaded with the same colour).

No.	Date & Time	Name (Pseudonym)	Entry
1	April 22, 23:19	Tomomi	Gassyuku
2	April 30, 5:54	Natsuko	Gasshuku
3	April 30, 23:28	Che	"
4	April 30, 23:55	Shiba	"
5	May 1, 0:32	Yurika	"
6	May 1, 7:20	Tomomi	"
7	May 1, 9:53	Minami	"
8	May 8, 6:48	Natsuko	"
9	May 8, 14:55	Shiba	"
10	May 9, 2:51	Misaki	Gassyuku
11	May 12, 4:46	Daisuke	Gasshuku
12	May 18, 13:45	Nana	合宿
13	May 18, 14:31	Daisuke	Gasshuku
14	May 18, 20:15	Kozu	"
15	May 18, 23:27	Yuka	"
16	May 18, 23:28	Che	"
17	May 19, 1:21	Yurika	"
18	May 19, 9:09	Minami	合宿
19	May 21, 23:56	Tomomi	Gasshuku
20	June 11, 15:40	Aki	Gassyuku
21	June 11, 16:22	Yurika	"
22	June 11, 18:01	Tomomi	"

23	June 20, 7:49	Tomoko	Gashuku
24	June 23, 15:12	Tomomi	Gassyuku
25	June 23, 19:13	Daisuke	Gasshuku

Another difficult word to come up with an English translation was the word “gogatsu-byo”. The word “gogatsu-byo”, which literally translates as “May sickness”, refers to the depression students often encounter in May, after experiencing an exciting but turbulent beginning of the academic year in April. Since this phenomenon is unique to Japan, the learners are often at a loss as to find the best English expression for the word “gogatsu-byo”.

As for “gogatsu-byo”, there is an attempt to provide the correct English translation by some students (See Table 3). Of the four entries that include the word, Nana (non-returnee) first begins to use the word in a romanized form on April 28th. Then, it is followed by Kozu (non-returnee) who provides the expression “May disease” on May 8th, and by Azami (returnee) who uses the expression “May syndrome” on May 18th. However, the word lastly appears in the Kanji form by Yuka (non-returnee) on May 18th.

Table 3. The use of Japanese word for “May syndrome”.

No.	Date & Time	Name (Pseudonym)	Entry
1	April 28, 11:23	Nana	Gogatsu-byo
2	May 8, 6:12	Kozu	May disease
3	May 18, 14:54	Azami	May syndrome
4	May 18, 23:27	Yuka	五月病

In sum, the provision of the English expression seems to be noticed and appreciated by some (e.g., Azami [returnee]) but not by all (e.g., Yuka [non-returnee]).

Finally, the word “kyoshoku” (teaching practicum) appeared in 12 entries (See Table 4). Again, as in the above, Kozu (non-returnee) offers the English translation “teaching courses” but despite her efforts, the romanized form is persistently used with slightly different spellings.

Table 4. The use of Japanese word for “teacher licensing courses” (The same spelling shaded with the same colour).

No.	Date & Time	Name (Pseudonym)	Entry
1	May 26, 13:49	Arisa	kyoshoku
2	May 26, 17:15	Shino	kyosyoku
3	May 26, 17:46	Kozu	Teaching courses
4	May 26, 18:53	Daisuke	kyoshoku
5	May 26, 19:07	Che	kyoushoku
6	May 26, 19:50	Azami	kyoshoku
7	May 26, 21:23	Saori	kyousyoku
8	May 26, 21:38	Shiba	kyoshoku
9	May 26, 23:58	Yurika	kyosyoku
10	May 27, 6:12	Tomomi	kyoshoku
11	May 27, 7:47	Tomoko	kyo-shoku
12	May 27, 9:29	Misaki	kyousyoku

Arisa (returnee) begins by using "kyoshoku" on May 26th, immediately followed by Shino (non-returnee) with the same spelling. Kozu (non-returnee) makes an attempt to offer an English expression, but the romanized version reappears immediately after. The spelling deviates to "kyoushoku" (extra "u") which is ignored by Azami (returnee) but picked up by one student, then reverting quickly back to "kyoshoku" (no "u") for four consecutive entries. However, the use ends with "kyoushoku" (with "u").

In sum, despite correct English interventions, the learners seem to adhere to the Japanese word spelled idiosyncratically. This might imply that Japanese concepts once represented by Japanese words are difficult to alter with a mere one-time exposure to the target form.

Establishment of a Sense of Collegial Community

In addition to perfecting one's English language knowledge, the writing task created an amicable atmosphere amongst the group. The exercise not only allowed the instructor to monitor and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students' writing skills but simultaneously provided a forum from which the instructor established a rapport with each student on a personal level.

The post-treatment questionnaire revealed that 13 students found the activity to be valuable, some citing that it did help their L2 to improve.

Post-Treatment Interview

A post-treatment group interview was conducted in October of the same year. In class, the students were asked to share reactions about the online writing assignment (i.e., "What did you think of MySpace journal writing?"). Each student took approximately five minutes to comment. The entire session was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The entire session was in Japanese, and the following English translations are that of the researcher's.

Reluctance to Imitate

The most prevalent notion that was shared among the participants was their reluctance to copy others. For example, Shino (non-returnee) states:

> Since I don't have a positive image towards imitating, I hesitated to use the vocabulary and idioms that others used immediately, like the next day, and didn't use them because I felt intimidated to do so.

Azami (returnee) similarly commented:

> If I write after reading everybody's comments, I unconsciously use vocabulary that was used [in the comments], and when I was writing before uploading [onto the computer] I realized how it looked similar to somebody else's, and I rewrote what I'd written.

Other participants such as Natsuko (returnee) and Tomomi (returnee) also expressed their resistance toward imitating, expressing their discomfort in using the expressions as is.

Imitation, according to Vygotsky, is "the process through which socioculturally constructed forms of mediation are internalized" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 166), an integral part of learning and development. However, for the participants, imitation is a mere "copying" of what the others have written, perhaps a deeply ingrained social perception common not just in Japan in various cultures that ascribes imitation an undesirable, negative connotation as in plagiarism.

Identifying Oneself as a Non-Returnee

However, the sentiments of the students are not so simplistic. Misaki (non-returnee) expressed her reluctance to learn from others because she does not necessarily feel on a par with her fellow classmates, such as with Eriko, an American-born student who has experienced a prolonged stay abroad: Misaki discloses:

> For example, I admire someone like Eriko who can use expressions that are characteristic of a returnee, but if I were to use it, it would be creepy (laugh) . . . I would certainly like to learn from others, but I feel a little [uncomfortable] to simply display [my copying] as is.

Here, we discover a complex array of emotions that ties belief and self-perception to language performance. Misaki expresses her admiration towards Eriko's language use, but she discredits herself for displaying similar language pattern, as indicated by her use of the term "creepy". She has created an imagined self that inhibits her from fully participating in the activity: non-participation according to Wenger (1998). Similarly, Nana (non-returnee) shared:

> But I already think about, think that I can't beat the returnees, or those who are more competent. I mean, I'm already aware of my own position, the hierarchy. So I think, like, I can stay here, in this position, and don't feel the need to improve any further, kind of . . ..

Like Misaki, Nana has already completed her identification process, creating an imagined community in which she does not excel. By observing others' performances and comparing them to her own, she does not even engage in active negotiation (Wenger, 1998) to improve her imagined social positioning. Self-perception and self-stigmatization seem to work to reduce the level of performance on the part of some learners.

Two students in particular displayed interesting effects: Yurika and Aki. Yurika quickly internalized expressions used by others, and Aki, who had expressed negative feelings towards the online writing task, managed to improve in terms of her quality and quantity of writing. The following sections provide a closer analysis of their entries.

Student 1: Yurika

In the post-treatment questionnaire Yurika wrote:

> I did learn various things not only from what I wrote but also from what the other members wrote. It can be "common errors" or expressions I've never come across before which I want to try using for myself too.

For example, she recreates a sentence using the expression, "cup of tea" which the class instructor first introduces to the group on June 2. Later on, in responding to Kozu who asks about favourite sports, Yurika responds, ". . . sport is somehow not my cup of tea, probably because I'm not good at it! lol". (Yurika, June 8)

Similarly, Yurika is ready to use other expressions such as "heartwarming" (original in Kaz April 24, used by Yurika May 12th), "in the last-minute" (original in Che May 15 at 0:04, used by Yurika May 15 at 0:32), "apparel" (original in Shino, June 2; Yurika June 4 in response to Shino), "derived from" (original in Yurika, May 19; used by Yurika June 6). These are important to mention as no other participants display similar tendency. That is, the expressions listed above are not used by others but reused only by Yurika.

Yurika also incorporates not only the expressions learned via CMC but also those learned in class. For example, the expression "drink till you feel no pain" (learned on April 27; used by Yurika on May 1st) is internalized by Yurika.

What is interesting about Yurika is not only her adaptability in learning from others. In the post-treatment interview, Yurika notes how she felt "exposed" for imitating:

> I do not enjoy reading books, so I do have a tendency to imitate and learn from others . . . so I feel that my imitation was exposed.

Her use of the word "exposed" ("bareru" in Japanese) reveals how she, much like others in class, also perceives imitation as something negative and undesirable, although this negative perception did not deter her from imitating others, perhaps thinking that her imitations were left unnoticed.

Student 2: Aki

Aki is one student who expressed her discomfort with the assignment. While she acknowledged the importance of the task, in her last entry she shared her reluctance to participate:

Aki:

> Well, this MySpace journal was a bit tough for me to tell the truth as I learnt with Mixi (Japanese SNS) and so on that I'm not really good at writing journals (even without anyone reading), much less commenting on others' journals.

She repeated her resentment and anxiety during the group interview:

> It's not so much a reflection but I want to take this opportunity to explain my situation. First, about me having a negative attitude. Like I wrote (in the journal), I feel uncomfortable (about journal writing). That's because there are many things I want to take up but can't. I was resentful of the fact that the things I wanted to express needed to be limited because everyone is reading my comments, and I could only offer things that are benign. To begin with, I felt very uncomfortable writing journals with such restrictions.

This feedback by Aki is particularly significant. First, she had the courage to disclose her true feelings towards the assignment. Secondly, while she is the only one among the participants

to offer negative feedback with respect to the online journal writing, she is one student who has displayed the most gain in terms of her writing skills. That is, while her entries are short and cumbersome at the beginning of the task, she begins to show a tremendous leap in terms of her writing quality.

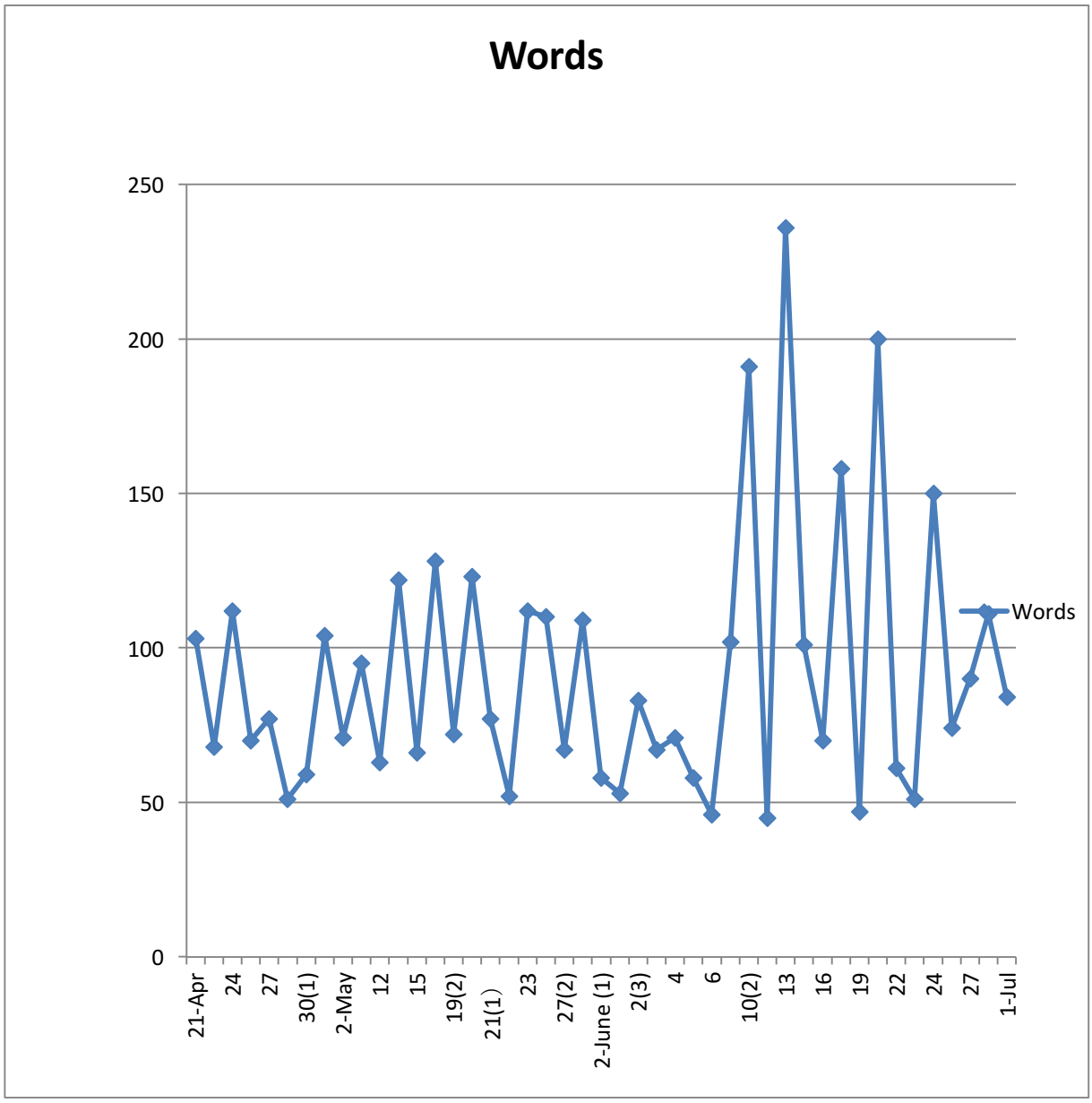

Figure 1. The amount of words in Aki's journal comments.

It should be noted here that the days Aki was in charge of leading the journal discussion were May 13th and June 11th, when she was responsible to make a longer contribution (i.e., minimum 150 words) than usual. These are removed from Figure 1. The abrupt change in the amount of writing becomes most apparent on June 10th in responding to Yurika's entry. Her entry on this day contains 192 words with seven errors.

The errors are all trivial errors, mostly simple typos, reflecting her casual attitude towards commenting. She knows that her readers will not judge her negatively by these small errors.

In contrast, her very first entry, while it is much more error-free, is much shorter (103 words) and rigid.

In order to investigate not only grammatical accuracy but also her vocabulary use, Nation's (2005) Vocabulary Range Programme was used. Table 5 describes her vocabulary use in her first entry, made on April 21.

Table 5: Vocabulary used in Aki's writing 1 (April 21).

Word List	Tokens (%)	Types (%)	Families
Base word 1	96 (88.07)	52 (83.87)	45
Base word 2	7 (6.42)	5 (8.06)	5
Base word 3	2 (1.83)	2 (3.23)	2
Not in the list	4 (3.67)	3 (4.84)	?
Total	109	62	52

The first vocabulary group, BASEWRD1.txt, includes the most frequent 1,000 words of English. The second (BASEWRD2.txt) includes the second 1,000 most frequent words, and the third (BASEWRD3.txt) includes words not in the first 2,000 words of English but which are frequent in upper secondary school and university texts from a wide range of subjects. Words that are not contained in Base word 1 through 3 are categorized in the "Not in the List" category. In Table 5 and 6, the symbol "?" appears in the last "Not in the List" category. This is due to some Japanese words that are incorporated in Aki's text.

Below is the vocabulary analysis for her later journal entry made on June 10:

Table 6: Vocabulary used in Aki's writing 2 (June 10).

Word List	Tokens (%)	Types (%)	Families
Base word 1	170 (86.73)	90 (84.91)	75
Base word 2	10 (5.10)	5 (4.72)	4
Base word 3	9 (4.59)	4 (3.77)	4
Not in the list	7 (3.57)	7 (6.60)	?
Total	196	106	83

By comparing the two, both improvements and deteriorations are observed. The most obvious is the increase in all three categories (i.e., tokens, types, and word families) in Aki's writing. This reflects that she has managed to increase her vocabulary variety considerably, making her writing more sophisticated than the first one. However, this could be explained largely by the increase in length of her two entries, where the first contained 103 words while the second contained 192 words. By closely examining the percentage of the word types in each entry, while her use of words in Base word 1 remains largely the same (i.e., 83.87% to 84.91%), she dramatically decreases the use of words in Base word 2 (8.06% to 4.72%). However, what is encouraging is that there is a slight improvement in the use of academic words, represented by Base word 3 category, increasing from 3.23% to 3.77%. A similar trend was found on her two longer pieces (i.e., topic posting on May 13 and June 11) that she was responsible for (See Appendix B).

The change in the quality in Aki's writing is also noticed by others in the group. In response to Aki's entry on May 13, Eriko writes:

> hi Aki!!
> wow, every time you talk or write something in English,
> you're getting better and better!!!:)
> I'm really ashamed of myself, since my english [sic] is getting poor:(

A recognition and celebration of other learners' writing performances can be a source of motivation. In fact, in the post-treatment interview, Aki does mention Eriko's comment:

> I remember Eriko's comment, and chances are that got me going (laugh), no that did really influence me.

Writing skills, as opposed to speaking skills, are silent skills, not readily observable by fellow classmates (McKinley & Sakamoto, 2007; Sakamoto & Honda, 2009). However, by opening a forum for a collaborative and interactive venue, learners can have opportunities to praise the performances of others. This is particularly important for non-returnees who might suffer from accented speech but may have a stronger foundation in writing skills compared to the returnees.

Discussions

Language learning has come to be increasingly appreciated not as a rigid, isolated phenomenon but rather as a fluid, temporal, contextualized, complex constellation of numerous factors. By adopting this perspective, we come to realize that language learners are not passive recipients of knowledge and instruction, but rather a "dynamic subsystem within a social system" (de Bot, Lowrie, & Verspoor, 2007, p. 14). The aim of this paper was to explore the interactions among such a subsystem within a given ecology from a socio-cultural point of view.

The findings revealed how some learners quickly adopted the new language forms introduced via an online task, and someone like Aki, who was initially reluctant to participate, nevertheless managed to increase her output significantly during the course of the semester. This could possibly be explained by the collegial, encouraging atmosphere among the writing community that ensued, which may have motivated Aki to take risks and explore her writing abilities.

However, a closer look revealed that social learning does not benefit all learners equally. Students like Nana and Misaki (both non-returnees) on the surface appear to accommodate the journal task, but their learning potential was not fully realized. Unlike Yurika who thrived by actively internalizing others' output, Nana and Misaki were reluctant to imitate others. While sociocultural theory suggests that internalization would occur via scaffolded interactions and that the learners engage in shared cognition via languaging (Swain et al., 2011), affective factors play an important role in nurturing as well as inhibiting the benefits that one can accrue from interaction (Swain, 2013). Specifically, a social learning environment such as this online writing task, given its public nature, can have unintended effects of displaying learner performance in partial and particular ways that would lead to certain identity formation, which could be conducive or detrimental to learning. Swain et al. (2011) describe ZPD as an enactment, an activity that affects cognition. If that is the case, the enactment is contingent on affective domains (Swain, 2013). In a class that is comprised of returnees and non-returnees, there is a need to be particularly sensitive to students' self-perception and social positioning that they ascribe to themselves.

In order to intervene, the instructor should realize the historicity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) behind socialization on which cognition is built, and the layering of experiences accrued from participation, with which learners construct their identities (Wenger, 1998). Students should be given ample opportunities to experience successes, and any successes from outside the classroom should also be capitalized on in class. Elimination of negative imagined identity and its replacement with a more desirable self-image should lead to better performance. This is particularly important in a class that contains non-returnees as well as returnees, as writing, which is often the strength of non-returnees, is a silent mode that often goes unnoticed by others in a language classroom.

Conclusion

The online journal writing task received overall positive appraisals from the participants, but a close examination of the data revealed that students are not always affected by others' input – in fact, there might be signs of resistance (Canagarajah, 1999). This might suggest that an overly optimistic enthusiasm and reliance on technology, as well as on interaction, is to be avoided. Rather, they must be coordinated with in-class instructions, as well as curriculum that is sensitive to the affective domains of the learners.

In sum, the study sheds light on the usefulness of SNS in an EFL classroom, but a further investigation is called for to examine the extent of its effectiveness in terms of improvements in EFL writing. Furthermore, while sociocultural theorists praise interactions and internalization that are afforded from them, the visible nature of peer-peer interactions can negatively impact identity formation and social positioning of a learner, leading to a non-participatory (Wenger, 1998), discouraged self whose ZPD cannot be fully realized and actualized. Vygotsky (1986) envisioned intellect and affect as an inseparable unit (See also Damasio, 1999). ZPD must be appreciated as an enactment that goes hand in hand with the affective domain.

Limitations and Implications

There are several limitations to this study. First, the small number of participants makes it difficult to reach a conclusive statement; this study can only suggest possible explanations that could be further researched in future studies. The varying backgrounds of the students, whether they are returnees or not, the length of their time abroad, their gender, their onset age to study English and so on are just few of numerous factors that could have impacted the way the participants behaved.

Second, some strings of exchanges were too short to gain insights into the complex pattern of interaction that the participants were experiencing. For example, a longer exchange pertaining to the Japanese expression "May disease" might have shed a different light, and more discoveries were to be found. With only four exchanges that contain expressions referring to "May disease", only a tentative interpretation could be reached.

Third, the duration of journal writing might have imposed limitations on the productions of newly learned items. In this study the participants engaged in journal writing for two months, but a longer duration, and longer writings, might have afforded more opportunities for the participants to encounter different writings of others thus explore different language use.

Fourth, while student input was solicited on a number of occasions, including a post-task questionnaire and an invitation to share their views on the task itself on the very last day of journal writing, the design of data collection was still very much limited. Individual, longitudinal interviews and in-class observations are some things to consider in improving research design. Given this limitation, we are left with more questions than answers. For example, why did Jun and Natsuko persist in using the wrong form despite the fact that others were recasting the correct form? A direct, one-to-one follow-up interview with Jun and Natsuko would have been insightful to answer this.

Fifth, with the teacher participating in the task along with the students, the interaction pattern among the participants might have been shaped in a particular way, giving rise to a pattern that is not commonly observed among student-only interactions (See Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008 for discussions on the context-specificity of language learning).

Lastly, as it is an action research, there is no comparison group in this study. What if online interactions were entirely eliminated and the students only had individual writing assignments to do? How the language use might have developed in such a case is not investigated.

While these limitations are important to note, a detailed documentation of the interactive patterns of one particular ELL group in Japan over a two-month span affords the readers a glimpse in unveiling the nature of online interactions among Japanese learners. While writing is often naively deemed as an individual activity, it is important to emphasize that social affective effects cannot be ignored for effective teaching. Moreover, while interaction is deemed to be crucial in learning, there can be unintentional repercussions which teachers should be aware of. Nevertheless, this study showed how learning afforded by scaffolding in forms of imitation, a notion often denounced in ESL/EFL writing, can actually be something that ought to be encouraged for enhanced learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Interim Course Evaluation

Please take a moment to answer the following. Please indicate the course name, but do not write your name to assure anonymity. The information will be confidential, and it will only be used for the purpose of improving the course design and delivery. Thank you for your input!

1. Please list the things which you have found to be fun/interesting/useful in this course:
_____
_____
_____

2.a. Please list the things which you have found to be useless/not interesting:
_____
_____
_____

2.b. Please suggest ways to change and improve what you have listed in (2a):
_____
_____
_____

3. Does this course meet your expectation? That is, what do you think of the content of the course? Please circle one of the following:
Easier than expected / Just right / Harder than expected / Don't know

4. Other comments (Please use the back for more space):
_____
_____

Appendix B

Table A1

Vocabulary used in Aki's writing 1 (May 13)

Word List	Tokens (%)	Types (%)	Families
Base word 1	335/87.70 (86.73)	147 (78.61)	124
Base word 2	17 (4.45)	13 (6.95)	13
Base word 3	6 (1.57)	6 (3.21)	5

Table A2

Vocabulary used in Aki's writing 2 (June 11)

Word List	Tokens (%)	Types (%)	Families
Base word 1	475 (88.79)	169 (77.17)	139
Base word 2	18 (5.10)	17 (7.76)	16
Base word 3	8 (1.50)	8 (3.65)	7