A Case Study of Learner Identity and Motivation in a Social Learning Space

Daniel Hooper, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

To cite this article

To link to this article

A Case Study of Learner Identity and Motivation in a Social Learning Space

Daniel Hooper, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

This case study represents one element within a larger ethnographic investigation into learner behaviors and identity within the English Lounge, a social learning space in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (Burke et al., 2018). Within this larger project, I interviewed Ryunosuke (pseudonym) twice as part of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted over a roughly one year period with 15 frequent users of the English Lounge. Stemming from an initial observation study of student behaviors in the English Lounge area, we were able to categorize regular users of the space into two distinct groups. The first was a core group of users who spent time at the English Lounge on a daily basis and appeared to be comfortable and 'at home' in the space. We also identified an active group of frequent users who would attend the Lounge just once or twice a week. We designated Ryunosuke as a member of the latter 'frequent user' group.

I was assigned Ryunosuke as an interviewee because he requested that his interview be conducted in both English and Japanese and I have a reasonable level of Japanese fluency. I had never met Ryunosuke prior to our interview but he relaxed quickly after some small talk and was very talkative and open both of the times we met.

At the time of our first interview, Ryunosuke was a sophomore student majoring in English. Although he was familiar with many of the central members of the English Lounge community, he did not consider himself to be a member of this group. Ryunosuke was very open and gregarious in our interviews and was keen to give me his insights into his experiences in the English Lounge and factors underlying his motivation and learner identity. This case study will explore salient issues from Ryunosuke's first interview and provide examples of how his perspectives on learning, identity, and the English Lounge shifted through a second interview conducted a year later.

In his first interview, Ryunosuke saw the English Lounge as a place where he could practice his English with international students, friends and teachers, who he perhaps

perceived as his superiors from whom he could "steal some knowledge". He also viewed it as a source of motivation that he could access by interacting with the core English Lounge users who he felt were "active" or who possessed certain highly-valued measures of English proficiency such as high TOEIC scores or participation in interpreting activities. He also stated that he viewed the English Lounge as a social, rather than merely educational, space as he would often go there to try and make foreign or Japanese friends. In our second interview, however, Ryunosuke revealed that he had stopped going to the Lounge. He gave a number of reasons for this which tied to many of the issues from his first interview. Firstly, one friend who often went to the English Lounge with him had transferred to another university which Ryunosuke claimed had affected his motivation. Another issue that he raised was that he had come to see the interactions in the English Lounge between himself and teachers/students as "superficial" and not leading to the "deeper relationship(s)" that he sought to establish.

Another reason for Ryunosuke's discontinued participation in the English Lounge emerged from one recurring characteristic of his language learning beliefs. He stated that he had stopped attending the English Lounge due to the fact he had achieved the level required by the university in the TOEFL exam and that this had decreased the perceived role of the Lounge as a place to "steal knowledge". From both of our interviews, it became clear that standardized tests and formal measurements of linguistic proficiency were key to the way in which Ryunosuke evaluated the ability of himself and others. He described the core members of the Lounge as role models in terms of their high TOEIC or TOEFL scores and admitted that he was, at times, quite competitive with other students regarding test scores. In our second interview, he elaborated on this topic, stating that test scores were a source of self-confidence for him as they provided "visible proof" of his English ability.

Ryunosuke's concern with test scores and his rather instrumental perspective on language learning may stem, in part, from two powerful role models in his life, his older brother and his uncle. Ryunosuke's brother had graduated from the same university as him and Ryunosuke described how high his English ability was, mentioned his TOEFL study, and talked about his position within "a big company". His brother, therefore, may have acted as a "near-peer role model" (Murphey, 1998), a figure similar to Ryunosuke in several ways, who Ryunosuke perceived as a success both professionally and in language learning. His uncle, on the other hand, was a more distant but still very influential figure. His uncle was American and, according to Ryunosuke, had "prestige and power" as he too held a position within a

large company. Ryunosuke stated that communication with his uncle and cousin was one of the initial motivators that drove his desire to learn English and that his uncle had also given him advice on studying abroad and financial management.

Ryunosuke's brother had guided him in terms of his plans after graduation and had arguably been influential in shaping his world view. While in our first interview Ryunosuke stated that his post-graduation ambition was to move to the US or the UK to work, by our second meeting this plan had significantly changed. He later told me that he had changed his view after his brother had advised him that moving to a less economically developed country in Asia would be good for his career and would give him a "wider view". This change in perspective, stimulated by a near-peer, also reflects a shift described by Yashima (2009) where a target or "imagined" community is not always clearly defined by learners in EFL contexts. Instead, EFL learners display an *international posture* where they orient themselves in relation to a broad sense of international community rather than a clear L2 target group. Yashima (2013) also claims that international posture consists of three key traits: 1) a desire to interact with people from outside their own ethnic group, 2) a desire to live or work overseas, and 3) displaying an interest in international affairs. Although in the interview we did not touch on whether or not Ryunosuke was interested in global affairs, we can certainly see compelling evidence of him possessing the first and second traits from Yashima's model.

Ryunosuke's identity as a language user also showed signs of transition over the one year period between our interviews. During our first meeting, Ryunosuke described how he was aware of two distinct selves he inhabited: a Japanese self and an English self. In some cases, the line between them was becoming blurred. He told me that when he spoke in English, he used a lot of gestures to express himself. However, he also claimed that he was aware that this was sometimes happening when he was speaking Japanese and that his English "identity" was appearing more. However, in our second interview, Ryunosuke told me that he felt that the two "identities" had now merged. He stated that although he didn't believe his English and Japanese identity were equal, he thought that they were "nearly the same" with each identity crossing over and having an effect on the other.

My two interviews with Ryunosuke revealed a multitude of ways in which his learner beliefs and identity had transformed over a one year period. He made the decision to discontinue his use of the English Lounge due to the loss of a motivational figure in his

learning, the achievement of certain instrumental goals related to his English proficiency, and disillusionment about the role of the Lounge as a place to build social relationships. In a broader sense, we can recognize significant developments in how he views the target L2 community and his learner identity/identities. However, despite these changes, the influence of certain powerful role models in his life and the value he places on formalized measures of linguistic proficiency remain strong constants that greatly underlie his self-confidence and his establishment of future goals.

Notes on the Contributor

Daniel Hooper is a lecturer in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. He has taught in Japan for 12 years and completed his MA TESOL at Kanda University of International Studies. His research interests include learner and teacher identity, critical applied linguistics, and the eikaiwa industry.

References

Burke, M., Hooper, D., Kushida, B., Lyon, P., Mynard, J., Sampson, R., & Taw, P. (2018). Observing a social learning space: A summary of an ethnographic project in progress. *Relay Journal, 1*(1), 209-220. Retrieved from https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/issues/jan18/burke_et_al/

Murphey, T. (1998). Motivating with near peer role models. In B. Visgatis (Ed.), *On JALT '97: Trends and transitions* (pp. 205-209). Tokyo, Japan: JALT.

Yashima, T. (2009). International posture and the ideal L2 self in the Japanese EFL context. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity, and the L2 self* (pp.144-163). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Yashima, T. (2013). Imagined L2 selves and motivation for intercultural communication. In Apple, M. T., Da Silva, D., & Fellner, T. (Eds.), *Language learning motivation in Japan* (pp.35-53). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.