

# **English-major first-year students' reconceptualization of language learning in the first semester of university life: An activity system perspective**

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## **Abstract**

The study aims to investigate students' reconceptualization of English language learning, specifically what to learn and how to learn, as they experience transitions from reading-and-grammar-focused high school English classes to communication-focused university English classes. Adopting activity systems analysis (Engeström, 2001), I conducted a qualitative case study in an English for Academic Purposes course that I taught in a university in Japan. The findings have shown drastic changes in students' perspectives on the English language since they entered the university, which shaped their learning experiences in new learning environments at university. Based on the findings, pedagogical implications are drawn for instructional practices.

## Introduction

English education in high school in Japan focuses on reading comprehension and grammar and often lacks communication activity especially in writing and speaking (MEXT, 2018). Those students who start studying in the English language department of a university often face drastic changes in their language learning contexts, because these university classes typically encourage students to demonstrate their productive skills in English through discussion, presentation, and essay and research paper writing. The transitional experience is an opportunity for learners to gain new perspectives (Engeström, et al. 1995). However, the impact of learners' transitional experiences on their language learning in a new learning context is yet to be explored. By examining the students' transitional experiences of English learning contexts, especially regarding what to learn and how to learn, the study aims to offer some ways to facilitate the students' language learning in a new learning context of a university. To explore this understudied area, this study investigates the learning experience of first-year students of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a university in Japan.

I draw on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 2012) to examine students' learning in language classes at schools, focusing on their transitional experiences from one context to another, namely from students' language learning activity in high school English classes to that of university EAP classes. Vygotsky (2012) emphasizes that the human mind develops using tools and cultural artefacts. This notion of tool mediation allows us to investigate language learning through social interactions in relation to social structures, culture, and history. I adopt the lens of activity systems (Engeström, 2001) to understand students' conceptualization of what to learn and how to learn. Activity systems analysis is one method developed based on sociocultural theory to investigate complex learning environments. In Figure 1, a learner (a subject) learns English (an object) using tools and cultural artifacts, in this study, mainly a psychological tool, language. For example,

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language exchanged during classroom interactions with others, or language in the instructions given by teachers or in the learning material or resources can be utilized as a tool to learn English. Any learning is situated in social, cultural, and historical contexts, which are analysed from perspectives of rules, the community, and the division of labour (Figure 1). Rules include any kinds of rules that mediate the learning activity. In this study, I focus on students' perceptions of how English should be learned. The community is any community that learners associate themselves as a member of. The division of labour is the task divided among the people involved in this activity. In this study, I focus on the learners' positions in interactions with other people. In other words, what kind of relationships with others, such as the teacher-student relationship, or the native speaker-non-native speaker relationship, mediate this learning activity (for the activity systems analysis of classroom activities, see Mochizuki, 2017).

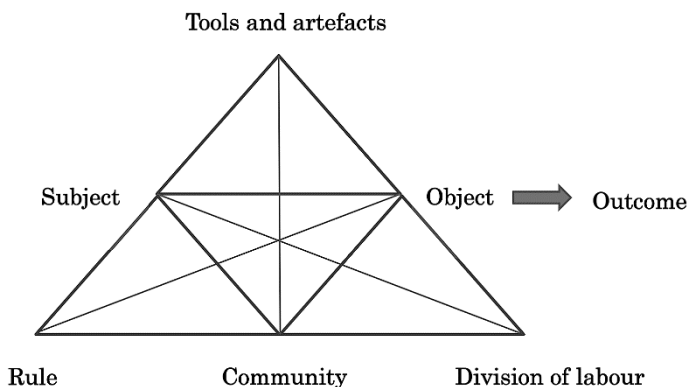
One language learning activity system cannot be detached from other activity systems. Especially, how learners learned a language in the past affects how they perceive a new language learning activity and how they engage in it. This transition from one activity to another, such as from high school English classes to university English classes, is called boundary crossing (Engeström, et al., 1995). Boundary crossing provides learners with opportunities to gain new perspectives of their learning and environments because it requires transporting ideas, concepts, and instruments from one activity system to another, and thereby leading to new mediating concepts and development. To understand students' conceptualization of what to learn and how to learn in a new university learning context, I analyse students' activity of English learning at high school and their boundary-crossing experiences.

Conflicts in an activity system could point to what changes in the activity system will lead to a different outcome of the activity. In an activity system, conflicts occur within one component, such as between different tools, and between different components, such as

between ways of learning (rules) and English ability they wish to improve (the object). As conflicts are resolved, learning is facilitated. Those conflicts are, therefore, considered as the chances of learning and development in the activity system (Engeström, 2001). Thus, the activity systems analysis can be utilized for the improvement of pedagogy or classroom tasks (Lantolf, 2000; Mochizuki, 2017). In this study, I identify conflicts in the students' English learning activity at university in order to suggest what pedagogical and instructional amelioration needs to be considered to support students' learning and development in the first year of university.

**Figure 1**

*An Activity system (Adapted from Engeström, 2001)*



To investigate the first-year students' conceptualizations of what to learn and how to learn in different English learning activity systems, I formulated the research questions as follows.

1. How do students conceptualize what to learn and how to learn in the activity system of English language learning in high school?

2. What are the relationships between students' boundary-crossing experiences and their conceptualizations of what to learn and how to learn in their activity system of English language learning at university?

## **Methodology**

### ***Context and participants***

The research site is a private university specialized in international studies located in an urban area near Tokyo in Japan. Twenty first-year students of the EAP course that I taught in 2018 agreed to participate in this study. The course is one of the required courses for the first-year students of the English language department of the university. The data were collected for the first semester, fifteen weeks. Each class met twice a week for ninety minutes. The university has quite a few English language instructors, mainly native speakers of English. The language class size is far smaller than that of high schools; each language course has around twenty students. In English classes, therefore, students are often asked to demonstrate their productive skills, writing and speaking, for communication purposes.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

An ethnographic qualitative case study approach (Duff, 2008) was adopted. I collected data in the course I taught. My emic perspective, therefore, contributed to constructing the thick description (Geertz, 1973) of students' language learning contexts. The data were collected through students' written reflections, journals, field notes, and post-course interviews with two focal students. Written reflections were assigned twice in the semester as the mid-term and the end-of-term assignments. For these written reflections, the students were asked to reflect on their language learning in the past and the present (Written reflection 1), and the changes in their perceptions of what to learn and how to learn since they entered the university (Written reflection 2). For the journals, I asked the students to

write what they noticed about language use and learning in their everyday life. I conducted post-course (approximately one year later) interviews with two students who volunteered.

The content analysis was conducted for students' writing for their perception of what to learn and how to learn, namely, the object, tools, rules, the community, and the division of labour. The field notes were utilized to contextualize the results of the content analysis. Following the steps in the activity systems analysis method (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), I formulated the activity systems of English learning at high school and university. As I iteratively read the results of the content analysis and the data, I revised the activity systems. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, I used a code number for each student as well as XXX or Y for anonymity pseudonyms for the facility and the university where the students learn English.

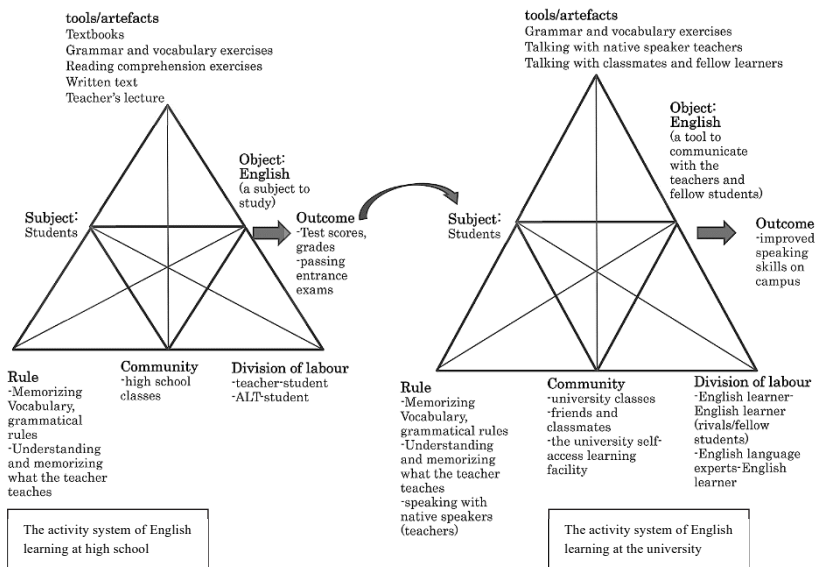
## **Findings**

Figure 2 shows the connected activity systems of English learning in high school and university. The analysis highlights the changes in students' perceptions of the object, English, from the high school activity system to the university activity system. A close examination of the university activity system has pointed to the conflicts of the activity system.

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**Figure 2**

*The activity systems of English learning at high school and at university*



***The activity system of English learning at high school***

When the students were learning English at high school, they perceived English (the object) as one of the school subjects to study. Like other school subjects, they were studying English to demonstrate their gained knowledge from the textbook or classes in the written exams for better grades in high school or higher scores to get into universities. One of the students reflected on her learning English at high school and wrote:

So I was enjoying studying English. But at the same time, I had a lot of exam of every subjects. And English was also one of them. I had to study English to get a good score on the exams so that studying English was just a study for me. But it wasn't so painful

for me because I like English. (Student 18, Written reflection 2)

The skill that the students practiced and the knowledge they were to gain by studying English at high school regarded reading, listening, and grammar and vocabulary because these were exclusively necessary for tests and exams.

When I was junior high school student, I didn't like English. Because I couldn't understand grammar. For example, I don't understand about be-verb, perfect grammar and so on. Also I didn't memorize English words. So I was not good at studying English. (Student 16, Written reflection 1)

But junior and high school English classes was just listening and just written down what teacher said on the notebooks without conversation. (Student 7, Written reflection 1).

To practice reading skills and answering grammar and vocabulary questions, the tools students mainly used in this activity system included written text from textbooks or exercise books, and the teachers' explanations both in English and Japanese.

In this activity system, the students' interactions with someone in English rarely happened during class time, and if any, they mainly happened between the teacher and students. The communication activity, especially for writing and speaking, is not what high school students regularly engage in during the English class despite the fact that the Course of Study emphasizes communication ability as the goal of the English courses in high school (MEXT, 2009). The survey results of high school students' English ability (MEXT, 2018) shows, for example, that 36.9 % of the students surveyed answered that they had given presentations or made speeches in English in class; 27.8 % for debate and discussion



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in English. One of the students in this study reflected:

Before I came here [this university], there was not a place to use English in our daily life. We just sat and studied grammar, words, etc in high school and I did a little activities in English class. (Student 17, Written reflection 2)

In the learning activity at high school, the students mainly engaged in the teacher-student relationship, and their positions in these interactions (the division of labour) were most of the time a “student” who receives and studies knowledge provided.

The community exclusively for the English learning activity was absent. The community of this activity was a homeroom in which they study school subjects, one of which was English, together in high school classrooms. In this activity of learning English at high school, students' view of learning English, how English should be learned (rules), was like that of studying other subjects: memorizing given knowledge. The students especially emphasized on the importance of memorizing words and grammar rules.

The outcome of this activity was gaining better scores in tests and exams for better grades in high school or for passing university entrance exams, which were mostly written exams to assess students' reading comprehension and the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. One of the students reflected and wrote:

When I was high school student, I thought that I want to be able to speak English. However, I couldn't study English. I didn't know how to study English. However, I studied English hard while studying for an examination. I learned to read English sentences and I got the English score higher than until now. I had confidence of English gradually. (ID 16, Writing reflection 1)

The students' success in passing the entrance exam of the university may have reinforced their view of language learning.

The students conceptualized English as a school subject in this activity at high school and studied it to get better scores in written exams. However, they also recognized the communicative purposes of learning a language. In the written reflections, the students often raised joyful experiences of communicating with people from different cultures in English, listening to and singing songs in English, playing games using English, and watching movies and videos in English as their motives for majoring in the English language at university. They had experienced most of those joyful communications outside the classroom, such as in private English conversation classes held near their homes when they were little. As mentioned above, in the high school English learning activity, the students did not experience this joyful aspect of English during the class, but they were hoping to learn to communicate in English and have joyful experiences again at university. In their journals and written reflections, the students often mentioned their excitement to find themselves in an environment where they need to speak English.

In this university, I can speak English more than past of my life. In my high school, I don't have to speak English everywhere. But, in university, I have to speak English in class and with teacher. (Student 10, Written reflection 1)

In their new activity system at university, the students "have to speak English," but that was not an unexpected environment. They knew this would happen and this was what they had aimed to get. They were overwhelmed by these affluent opportunities of speaking English on campus, but they were satisfied with what they achieved.

***The activity system of English learning at the university and the impact of boundary crossing***

**Boundary-crossing experiences and reconceptualization of English.** English, the object of the activity, was reconceptualized in the activity system of English learning at university. It was changed from English as a school subject to English as a tool to communicate with teachers and classmates on campus. English used to be just one of the school subjects, detached from their real life. Now it became a language that was essential for their daily campus life. The change in the conceptualization of English was so drastic and sudden that it caused some students to experience emotional confusions. One student reflected on her experience of changes from high school to university and wrote:

[When I entered this university] We did group works, discussions and presentations. Everything is surprising for me. ...I couldn't talk. I lost confidence. I didn't experience this things in high school. So I'm surprised, worried and nervous. I found out that it is difference that to take English scores in the exam and speak like a native speaker. (Student 9, Written reflection 1)

The students' view of the object of the activity system at university, English, was shaped as they were experiencing classroom interactions in English. A student wrote how the change occurred to her:

Our teacher won't give us an answer so easily. We have to ask and show our attitude of learning. That's what I realized in my class spending in this university. So I started asking questions to my English teacher gradually. In doing so, I also realized that my English teacher are patient and never give up on understanding our English even if our English is not perfect and hard to understand. That cheered me up so much. From

that time, English is not only study but also the tool of communication with my teacher and classmates. (Student 18, Written reflection 2)

The change in the conceptualization of English occurred to her when her instructor in a class tried to elicit students' ideas and to understand what the students were trying to get at in English. As the activity systems of English learning activity at high school above shows, what students were expected during the class time in high school was to listen to the teacher's explanations. Responding to what the teacher had said was, therefore, probably the least expected thing for her to do when she was at high school. However, in the university class, she experienced a new classroom discourse. She was asked to express her ideas and respond to what the teacher had said as "the attitude of learning." English was used to communicate with someone during class almost for the first time in her life. This experience pushed her to reconceptualize English as the essential tool in their daily life at university, as "the tool of communication with my teacher and classmates." Another student also explained the changes in her conception of English by using English in class and for chatting with friends on campus. In her written reflection, she mentioned, "Before, I thought that English was on the textbook. But, in Y university, English is over a cup of coffee. English was study for me. But now, English is communication tool for me" (Student 2, Written reflection 2). Concrete and contextualized ideas about the conception of English as a "communication tool" were still missing such as communication with whom, about what, and its significance for their language learning. That may be because they did not have concrete ideas yet about the use of English for their future life after graduation.

Their boundary-crossing experiences did not easily lead to the changes in the view of learning English, that is, how English should be learned (rules). Especially at the very beginning of the semester, the students followed their conceptions of learning the language

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from the high school activity system: “studying” given knowledge, memorizing grammar rules, and learning vocabulary. When learners move from one learning activity to another, they bring the rule from the previous activity to the new activity, which continues to affect the new learning activity (Swain et al, 2015). In the previous activity, accuracy was emphasized for gaining better scores in the written exams. At the beginning of the semester, the students said that they were reluctant to speak English because they were not sure whether their English was correct or not, although the instructors in many classes kept telling them not to be afraid of making mistakes in speaking. To achieve accuracy in speaking, many students adopted the way of learning which worked with them when they were in high school: “studying” and memorizing words and grammatical rules. In the students' journals in the early days of the semester, the students expressed their struggle over how to be able to speak. One student wrote about her experience of talking about a “big event” in class in English.

I talked about big event. But I don't speak English well. So I think they didn't understand exactly. I felt regret. I should study English more. I couldn't say my thinking. So I learn grammar and vocabulary tonight, I am going to tell teacher perfect sentences! (Student 9, Journal entry on April 16, 2018).

To be able to speak English in class is a new goal to her, but she adopted the previous way of learning, to “learn grammar and vocabulary” for the previous goal, getting good scores in written exams.

In addition to studying and memorizing, many students raised speaking with teachers and classmates as a new way to learn English at university. Among those students, very few students, however, mentioned specific ideas of how to engage in “speaking with teachers and classmates” to learn English. They simply mentioned their participation in

classes and random visits to the English-speaking space in the self-access learning centre on campus.

Unlike the high school learning activity, the community of the university activity system was formed solely for English learning. Classmates and friends played the important role in their learning activity as fellow learners, sometimes rivals, to practice speaking with. A facility on campus, the self-access learning centre, had a significant influence on making the students have a sense of belonging to this English-learners' community. In the journals and the written reflections, many students repeatedly mentioned their experience in the self-access learning centre, such as using some resources or services, talking with the teachers and other students in English, or even just studying there with friends. To improve their speaking, the first thing the students thought of doing was to go there. They also have faith in the effect of the facility on their speaking ability. A student wrote, "I will make good use of XXX [the self-access-learning centre] in order to improve my English skills.... Because I'm Y university student. I can improve my English skill with good facilities (Student 16, Written reflection 1)".

The community of this activity system was speaking-focused, and the self-access learning centre assisted in making this community a "lookalike" study-abroad community. Blommaert (2012) calls English which is absorbed and adapted to the sociolinguistic system in different parts of the world as "lookalike" English. The self-access learning centre occupies a whole building and creating an atmosphere of student lounges and cafés of a university in an English-speaking country, which I call "lookalike" study-abroad environment. The facility is mainly for the students of the English department. English language instructors' offices are in this building; many of them are native speakers of English. Various kinds of resources, courses, and workshops are available. Whenever the students go inside, they can see native-speakers of English in the open lounge areas doing their duty for workshops or other services including an English-speaking space, where

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students come and have chat with a native speaker language instructor or other students in English. This is where the English department first-year students aspired to come when they were in high school and where they spend most of their free time on campus. This lookalike study abroad environment contributes to shaping students' perspectives on studying English abroad. In fact, the two students I interviewed respectively one year later both mentioned their reluctance to go to school abroad just to learn English because they perceived that studying English abroad would provide them with the same experience as what they were experiencing on campus.

In this learning activity at the university, the oral discourses they engaged in (the division of labour) were the language learner-language expert discourse, specifically the teacher-student as well as the native speaker-non-native speaker discourses, and the learner-learner discourses. Their position in these interactions (the division of labour) was often a student or a language learner same as those when they were at high school. The difference, however, was that the students were not just receiving the knowledge provided, but in fact, interacting with someone in English. Another position in the interactions that the students experienced in the university learning activity was associated with a friendly rivalry relationship with classmates. The classmates were not only fellow learners who interacted with each other to practice speaking English but also rivals. Because of the presence of those rivals, the students put more pressure on themselves to improve their speaking skills to be as good as others. One student reflected on how she felt about her own English ability comparing it with other students' when she entered this university:

Until now, I thought I can use English but, I entered this university and realized the immaturity of my English skills with living people who likes English and who are good at English....My dream of the past is I want to success with using English in the world. But, this time I thought my dream of now I want to raise my English skill to

the same level as my classmates who can use English very well (Student 5, Written reflection 2).

Because of the peer pressure, she even shifted her focus in learning English from her long-term goal, “success with using English in the world,” to her short-term goal, “to raise my English skill to the same level as my classmates.”

As the excerpt above shows, the students’ learning activity of the first semester at university aimed to be able to speak with the teachers as well as classmates in English. The tools students utilized in this activity to improve speaking included grammar rules, vocabulary, and talking with teachers and classmates. The outcome was improved speaking skills. By the end of the first semester, the students gained fluency in speaking English in classrooms. In the course I taught, the students regularly had group discussions on social issues throughout the semester. Toward the end of the semester, those discussions went smoother than at the beginning of the semester. The students also recognized their progress themselves. One student reflected on her performance in class:

I did a lot of group works for three months. .... I didn’t say my opinions and tell my feelings in the early days. But we did it many times every lesson. Then I was able to tell my opinion gradually. I think I became close relationships with classmates and adapted the university (Student 9, Written reflection 2)

After three months, the students got used to a new class environment where they need to speak and express themselves in English.

**Conflicts in the activity system of English learning at the university.** Conflicts were identified in the activity system of English learning at the university, which could suggest some pedagogical planning to ameliorate students’ future learning activity. First,



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a conflict resides between the conceptualization of English of this activity and English ability the students may need after graduation. The conceptualization of English of the learning activity for the first semester was English for speaking with the teachers and fellow learners on campus. Their positions in the interactions were most of the time language learners. However, after graduation, English was no longer an object to study but rather one of the tools serving to achieve their wishes or aims in their life. Although their plans after graduation were not concrete or contextualized yet, many students mentioned their wishes to do something for work in Japan or overseas using English. The students' view of the English language, specifically their view of what to learn, needs to be broadened for their future.

Another conflict resides between the students' position in the interactions (the division of labour) of this activity and those in the discourses that they will experience in the future. For the first semester, as mentioned above, the students engaged in limited kinds of discourses such as the language learner-language expert and the learner-learner discourses. The students will use English in far more different types of discourses, being involved in different social relations. The oral discourse that students experience on campus needs to be diversified. However, the opposite was happening. The students seemed to believe that learning English from native speakers of English as the most effective way and went to the self-access learning centre to seek the opportunity to practice the native speaker-non-native speaker discourse. A student mentioned:

[In this university] there are a lot of native speaker and English teacher, I have good circumstances where I use English many time. I am going to make use of it. (Student 5, Written reflection 1).

To this student, to "use English," meant speaking with "native speakers".

The students' dependence on the native speaker-non-native speaker discourses was also related to another conflict associated with the students' view of how English should be learned (rules). From high school experience, the students kept a learning style that puts emphasis on learning vocabulary and memorizing grammar rules. In addition, the students adopted talking with the teachers or other students, especially native speakers, as another way of learning English at university. However, just adopting these ways of learning, which are based on their rather limited view of language and language learning, would not lead to English ability they will need or wish to have for their future life. The view of learning through interactions needs to be further developed so that the students can decide on what to do with various kinds of resources and opportunities on campus and that they can also look outside the campus for other resources and opportunities for themselves.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Previous studies have shown that learners' activities in the past affect how they engage in a new learning activity as well as how they gain new perspectives of the object of the new activity (e.g., Mochizuki, 2019; Swain et al., 2015). This study specifically highlights how students' conception of the object, English, changes in their boundary-crossing from a high school English learning activity to a university English learning activity.

The study has also shown the conflicts in the activity system of English learning at university, which, in turn, can contribute to pedagogical planning for the amelioration of students' future learning activity. The conflicts identified in this study are derived from students' conceptualization of English (object), their positions during interactions (the division of labour), and their beliefs in ways of learning English (rules).

To resolve the conflict derived from the students' conceptualization of English as a tool to communicate with the teachers and other students, students' views of the world

may need to be broadened so that they can concretise their ideas about their future use of English after graduating university. By so doing, students may gain new perspectives of the object of their learning activity at university in relation to their future goals. Teaching methods that can serve this purpose would be those which pay more attention to the content, tasks, and problem-solving in real-world, such as Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Yasuda, 2019) or Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Long, 2014), rather than solely focusing on language learning. With these methods, students are given the opportunity to think about the relations between themselves, society, and the world by learning and discussing various subject matters and social issues in English.

To resolve the conflict derived from students' positions in interactions (the division of labour), it is necessary to expose students to different discourses and making them aware of the relationships between different discourse structures, culture, and societal values and ideologies (Paltridge, 2012). Introducing students to the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) may also assist in raising their awareness of the variability of the discourses in terms of whom they speak and how. Indeed, most ELF interactions the students will experience in the future will take place among non-native speakers of English (Seidlhofer, 2005). The awareness of these will support learner autonomy and agency, enabling students to seek various opportunities for social interactions both inside and beyond the lookalike study abroad community.

Introducing students to the conception of an autonomous learner would resolve the conflict derived from students' view of language learning (rules). Autonomous learners take control of their learning process so that they can approach and choose what is best for them from the affluent resources and opportunities available on campus, especially in the self-access learning centre. Learner autonomy and agency are enacted in social activities with reflexive and reflective thinking (Gao, 2013; Lantolf, 2013). Therefore, incorporating students' reflexive and reflective thinking in the course work would lead to resolving this

conflict.

The findings of this study also have shown the students' positive attitudes toward the lookalike study abroad community. The lookalike study abroad community seems to have a significant impact on learner agency. Further studies are necessary regarding the pedagogical affordance that this environment produces.

It should be noted the findings of this study may not be generalised to different contexts because they are drawn from a case study of a small number of students, twenty students, in an EAP course. Moreover, the focused context for language learning was limited to the context of first-year students in the English language department of a university in Japan. Having said that, the thorough examinations of the relationships between the context, social interactions, and students' learning activity can offer implications for developing locally situated pedagogies. The study casts light on new aspects of university students' language learning through interactions in an EFL environment.

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