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“Learning from various directions using my eyes and my ears”: The emergence of relational agency in an affinity space

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Affinity spaces can serve as self-directed language learning environments with significant potential for learning, agency, and personal growth. This report presents the case of Hiroaki (a pseudonym), a Japanese university student whose participation in an online affinity space, centered around an interest in manga and anime, enabled him to enact agency as he successfully developed his linguistic and intercultural competencies despite his low proficiency and lack of confidence in English. Hiroaki's case supports a relational view of the agency construct and suggests that Gee's (2004) concept of affinity spaces remains useful for examining informal learning processes.

Keywords: affinity space, language learner agency, self-directed learning, language learning beyond the classroom

Introduction

Language learner agency should be viewed as an emergent phenomenon arising through our interactions with our environment rather than as a property of individuals (Burkitt, 2016). This implies that agency is best supported when EFL learners use English as a tool for engaging with the world rather than simply studying or practicing the language. Potential sites for this engagement include online communities, such as affinity spaces. These are communities arising through a shared interest, in which the informal learning that occurs is not constrained or directed by the imbalances of knowledge, ability, or power that underlie institutional learning (Gee, 2004). Affinity spaces are inclusive environments insofar as anyone can participate regardless of expertise or background. Since participation is self-directed, group members enact agency as they interact with the space and in so doing, generate opportunities

to further enhance their agency. Although it has been over 20 years since affinity spaces were first described, the concept remains useful in highlighting how social media use impacts informal and self-directed learning (Oliveri & Carpenter, 2024).

This report focuses on Hiroaki, a participant in a case study investigation of language learner agency centered on a classroom-based intervention targeting self-directed language learning. The aim of the research was to shed light on the environmental affordances and individual differences that facilitate or inhibit agency for language learning in social, digital, or physical environments beyond traditional classrooms. Hiroaki's agency was particularly impacted by his participation in an affinity space focused on members' mutual interest in manga and anime. After a brief description of the research context, interactions between Hiroaki's participation in the group and his language learning and agency are presented and discussed.

Method

Hiroaki was one of 14 participants in a study designed to illuminate how agency was enacted, enhanced, and/or validated in a self-directed learning unit (SDLU), devised to bridge classroom-based instruction and language learning beyond the classroom (LLBC) at a Japanese university. Agency was operationalized in terms of how learners aligned their learning behaviors with their feelings, beliefs, and volitions as they interacted with the self-directed learning environment. Key data sources were participants' self-directed learning portfolios, containing records of their learning activities alongside their written reflections, and semi-structured, stimulated recall interviews, which used the portfolios as the stimulus. Hiroaki was interviewed in Japanese three times over a 15-month period with each interview lasting between 15 and 30 minutes. Data were investigated through thematic content analysis, employing both inductive and deductive approaches. Following an initial round of open coding and re-examination of relevant literature, a tentative set of codes was drawn up for a cycle of hypothesis coding and subsequently revised prior to a final coding cycle. Five overarching themes of *feeling, exploring, reflecting, regulating, and relating* emerged from the data, of which relating was particularly associated with agency enactment both across the dataset and in Hiroaki's case.

Hiroaki

Hiroaki was a second-year student enrolled on a STEM undergraduate degree program. He had not enjoyed English at school and his grades had been poor. His proficiency, as measured by the university's placement test, was no higher than CEFR A1. However, he enjoyed SDLU because the freedom to choose his own learning materials enabled him to align his personal interests with his language learning by studying with animated videos in English. Moreover, Hiroaki was one of the only participants actually engaging in LLBC outside formal course requirements. This occurred through participation in an affinity space mediated via social media platforms, including Twitter (X) Spaces and Line. Participants in this community were from diverse locations, including Korea, the USA, and Indonesia, as well as Japan, and communication was typically, though not exclusively, in English.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of the data revealed how Hiroaki's participation in the affinity space allowed him to enact relational agency in various domains including language learning, intercultural competence, and critical thinking.

Firstly, although his limited English proficiency made participating in extended conversations in English difficult, he persevered because he felt personally invested. Noting that "there's a huge difference between being asked to do something and choosing to do it yourself" (Third Interview), Hiroaki's interest and motivation were more sustained than in traditional classroom contexts. He felt his learning was enhanced when he was freed from the constraints of predetermined curricula and able to focus on his own immediate needs:

At school, I was told specific vocabulary was really important, and I had to focus mainly on those words, but when I no longer needed to worry about that, I was able to learn from various directions using my ears and eyes. (First Interview)

He interacted regularly with group members, sometimes for several hours at a time, and eventually began to notice improvements in his communicative competence:

I'm much more able to understand things now ...I used to have to use online translation all the time, but recently, even though I can't understand everything, I can at least get a sense of what's being said. It feels like we can converse. (First Interview)

Becoming less dependent on technology to mediate communication made him feel more connected with his interlocutors. This enhanced his relational agency, which encompassed not only his learning behaviors but also his "sense of agency" (Mercer, 2012), that is, how agentic he feels in the moment.

Secondly, since his interlocutors were from diverse cultural backgrounds, Hiroaki experienced opportunities to develop his intercultural competence. Consistent with Gee's claim that people in affinity spaces "affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender" (Gee, 2004, p. 67), Hiroaki's participation was not motivated by a desire to improve his English but rather because he wanted to interact with people who shared his passion for manga and anime, regardless of where they came from. However, similarities and differences between participants' cultures soon emerged as a key interest and discussion topic. For example, Hiroaki was surprised to learn that certain Japanese brands of snacks were popular abroad, and he was intrigued that such cultural artefacts are "shared and appreciated in so many different places" (Third Interview). Relational agency among group members was further facilitated through their exchange of photographs of localized products sold in their respective countries.

Hiroaki was also relieved to learn that members of the group demonstrated none of the anti-Japan sentiment that he had assumed to be widespread in Japan's former war-time colonies. Although his interlocutors acknowledged that these sentiments existed, particularly among older generations, there was no sign that they shared them. Hiroaki's discovery that "we can become friends despite such historical issues," made him realize "there's a shared culture which extends beyond historical events" (Third interview). He attributed this lack of a barrier to an emotional connection that

transcended cultural differences, noting that “our feelings were similar even though our experiences and learning were quite different” (Third interview).

Hiroaki’s relational agency was further nurtured through his close and sustained friendships with other members of the group, which extended beyond the affinity space itself. He communicated directly with them regularly through social media and even in person when one of them subsequently visited Japan. These connections provided further affordances for his English development. He also expressed a desire to visit other countries, something that he had not seriously considered previously, and to study languages other than English:

Now I’m focusing on learning Korean rather than English. Korean grammar is very similar to Japanese. With just a little effort, I can master basic sentences, and I want to visit Korea, so I thought I’d start learning it. (Third interview)

Finally, Hiroaki’s participation in the affinity space also provided opportunities to develop his critical thinking skills. This was particularly evidenced through reflections on his own assumptions about how Japan and Japanese were perceived abroad:

I watched things on YouTube, such as riots in other countries and disputes over curriculum content, and so on. The things that get picked up are those that seem most shocking from the perspective of Japanese people. The more shocking they are the higher the share rate. So, I kept seeing things like that, and my prejudices just kept getting stronger. (Third interview)

This extract provides evidence of deep reflection which enabled Hiroaki to understand not only his own preconceptions, but also how the way people interact with (social) media can amplify and distort perceptions at the societal level.

Conclusions and recommendations

Analysis of Hiroaki’s case highlights how he enacted agency through his participation in the affinity space and how, in so doing, his agency was further enhanced. In addition to gains in English proficiency, his interactions with the group enriched his understanding of intercultural dynamics and facilitated the development of close personal friendships. This supports a view of agency as emergent, dynamic, and relational, rather than as an inherent property of individuals (Burkitt, 2016; Mercer, 2012; Charteris & Smardon, 2017). Finally, Hiroaki’s interactions in and around this online community, as well as the associated learning and personal growth, align closely with Gee’s (2004) claimed characteristics and benefits of affinity spaces, adding weight to Oliveri and Carpenter’s (2024) claim that the affinity space concept remains relevant.

The gap between Hiroaki’s lack of engagement with language learning in class and his high engagement outside class distinguished him from the other participants and therefore limits the generalizability of the findings. However, as Duff (2008) notes, atypical cases can be particularly helpful in exposing dynamics that may otherwise be overlooked. While these findings pertain to a single case and to learning that occurred outside the classroom, there are clear lessons for classroom practitioners. Sustained and successful learning demands that we foreground the relational

nature of agency rather than reducing it to a matter of personal responsibility or independence (Charteris & Smardon, 2017). This means learners should be encouraged always to look beyond the classroom, and activities that bridge classroom learning and LLBC are likely to pay dividends. Initiatives such as Collaborative Online International Learning offer significant benefits. Meanwhile, pop culture materials, such as social media, music, videos, sports commentaries, etc., should be embraced not merely as authentic language input but also as ways of relating to the world and thereby enhancing agency, as well as learning (see, for example, Werner & Tegge, 2021). Brevik & Holm (2023), for instance, show how learners' uses of affinity spaces can be successfully integrated into classroom-based instruction. Finally, providing space for learners to interrogate their feelings about language learning and to reframe their out-of-class activities as legitimate forms of learning can serve to validate and enhance their agency.

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