

Exploring and Supporting Self-Access Language Learning Communities of  
Practice: Developmental Spaces in the Liminal

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research was to provide more detailed insights into the functioning of student-led learning communities (SLCs) in self-access learning centers (SACs) and the individual, social, and institutional factors that contribute to their maintenance and development. Through an ethnographic case study approach, this study drew upon multiple data sources over a one-year and a half period and adopted abductive and narrative analysis to investigate the community of practice within one SAC SLC and how individual learner trajectories across a broader landscape of practice impacted each member's framing of that community. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks of communities/landscapes of practice and the concept of liminality have been blended in this study to address certain critiques of the communities of practice theory - namely the role of power and the role of the individual. This study shows how this SLC community of practice was a site of simultaneous reproduction and disruption of existing power relations such as native-speakerism and seniority-based hierarchies. Further, it is argued that the liminal or "in-between" status of both the SAC and the SLC afforded a culture of autonomy-support and hybridity where "common-sense" assumptions about language learning could be challenged. Finally, based on the analysis of learners' individual learning trajectories, it is shown how multimembership in a range of past, present, and future imagined communities greatly influence their beliefs and participation in relation to the SLC. This study illustrates how SLCs within SACs can, with institutional support, create "safehouses" where they can disrupt established norms and customize learning conditions congruent with their perceived affective and educational needs. By integrating SLCs with established self-access practices such as learner advising, this study argues that these communities represent a valuable new direction in the development of accessible and egalitarian social environments within SACs.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of my original research work.

External contributions of others to the research are all acknowledged.

The work was done under the guidance of Professor

Kazuyoshi Sato, at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.

(Signed)

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ALL	Advising in Language Learning
ALT	Assistant Language Teacher
CoP	Community of Practice
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
IRD	Intentional Reflective Dialogue
JTE	Japanese Teacher of English
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LC	The Learning Community (the focus of the current study)
LPP	Legitimate Peripheral Participation
LLH	Language Learning History
LoP	Landscape of Practice
NPRM	Near-peer role model
SAC	Self-Access (Language Learning) Center
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLC	Student-led Learning Community
SLS	Social Learning Space
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

## Glossary of Japanese Terms

*akogare* (憧れ)

According to Goo Jisho (<https://dictionary.goo.ne.jp>), *akogare* is a feeling of being strongly drawn to something as an ideal (translation mine). Nonaka (2018) expands on this definition by adding that *akogare* is particularly a feeling of something being just out of one's grasp - an ideal that is "tantalizingly out of reach" (p. 4).

*eigo* (英語)

Translated into English simply as "English." This commonly refers to academic English primarily learnt for taking standardized tests rather than as a communicative tool. Classes focusing on *eigo* generally center around comprehension and memorisation of grammatical structures and vocabulary.

*eikaiwa* (英会話)

Literally translated as "English conversation" and understood by most people as "English for communication." Developing oral English proficiency is the primary goal of *eikaiwa*-oriented classes. *Eikaiwa* classes often feature an English-only approach and are predominantly taught by non-Japanese teachers.

*eikaiwa gakkou* (英会話学校)

Private extracurricular English conversation schools

*ibasho* (居場所)

"Place to be" or "place to belong"

*ikoku* (異国)

Foreign country

*jouge kankei* (上下関係)

The hierarchical system underpinning *senpai/kōhai* relationships in Japan. This system defines (senior and junior) relationships in Japanese society based on social status or age (Wang, 2020).

*keigo* (敬語)

Honorific language in Japanese

*kōhai* (後輩)

Translated as the “companion that is behind” (Rohlen, 1991, p. 21) - the *kōhai* is the junior in a *jouge kankei* relationship. In exchange for respectful deference to their *senpai* (seniors), *kōhai* are given knowledge and socialized into group practices.

*kokusaika* (国際化)

Simply translated as “internationalization,” this term refers to a broad policy of internationalization within Japan during the 1990s aimed at enhancing its citizens’ global outlook in order to maintain Japan’s international economic standing (Rear, 2017).

*nihonjinron* (日本人論)

A nationalist ideology and related genre of literature that emphasizes the “uniqueness of Japanese culture and society” (Sato, 2019, p. 1116).

*ryuugakusei* (留学生)

International exchange students

*senpai* (先輩)

A senior figure within a *jouge kankei* relationship. A helpful definition provided by Rohlen (1991) is “a person who proceeds or leads, with the implication that those that follow are his or her companions in the same pursuit, career, or institution” (p. 21).

*yakudoku* (訳読)

Literally translated as “translate and read,” this is a local form of grammar translation teaching that has been widely used in Japanese English education for just over a century (Noda & O’Regan, 2019).

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Rationale of the study

From at least the time of the Meiji Restoration in the mid-nineteenth century, English education in Japan has been arguably characterized by dichotomy (Shimizu, 2010; Smith & Imura, 2004). On one side there is *eigo* - English being learned primarily for the purposes of passing high-stakes standardized tests with instruction implemented by Japanese instructors utilizing grammar-translation or *yakudoku* methodologies. On the other side lies *eikaiwa* - English learned to develop speaking skills and primarily taught by non-Japanese (usually “native speaker”<sup>1</sup>) instructors through “Western” approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Lowe, 2020a, Saito, 2019). From the initial *seisoku* and *hensoku* (early forms of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*) around 150 years ago (Smith & Imura, 2004) to the current ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*, rather than a singular endeavor, English learning within Japan can be regarded as two distinct forms of knowledge and educational approach (Hiramoto, 2013; Nagatomo, 2016). There are various conflicting perspectives as to the underlying causes of the divide and over which ideology is dominant within Japanese ELT with the power balance seemingly fluctuating throughout modern history. However, it can be confidently stated that the *eigo/eikaiwa* ideological divide is ubiquitous across almost all public and private educational sectors in Japan (Hiramoto, 2013; McVeigh, 2004; Nagatomo, 2014, 2016). While the forces, such as native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006; Lowe, 2020b), that have forged this ideological division are indeed worthy of attention, it is the impact that the *eigo/eikaiwa* divide has on English learners that catalyzed this study. In addition to the more universal struggles of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language, Japanese English learners often find themselves on unsteady ground in a divided educational landscape. Being forced to essentially study two subjects (*eigo* and *eikaiwa*) rather

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<sup>1</sup> The term “native speaker” is displayed in quote marks throughout this article due its socially-constructed and contestable nature (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016; Moussu & Lurda, 2008).

than one (English), learners frequently find themselves caught “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967) opposing *spheres of experience* (Zittoun, 2006). Furthermore, the forms of competence developed in each individual educational community of practice are often not easily transferable when learners cross boundaries throughout their learning careers (e.g., from high school classes into tertiary education) (Tinto, 2020; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b; Zittoun, 2006).

One example of boundary crossing that forms the focus of this study is the transition from secondary to tertiary English education and, more specifically, transitioning into self-access language learning environments. A self-access language learning center (SAC) can be defined as a purpose-built social environment that promotes and supports autonomous language learning (Mynard, 2016b). The presence of SACs in Japanese higher education has been steadily growing in recent years, in part due to a desire to counterbalance the predominantly eigo-oriented focus in secondary education and provide more opportunities to develop competence in eikaiwa (Mynard, 2019a). Furthermore, SACs often feature an international atmosphere where students are afforded opportunities to develop ideal L2 selves and participate in an international imagined community of English users (Gillies, 2010; Murray & Fujishima, 2016b; Mynard et al., 2020a). In this sense, the autonomy-supportive and pseudo-foreign nature of SACs represents a considerable shift from the largely teacher-led environments found in secondary institutions. As a consequence, SACs behave as liminal (in-between/transitional) environments (Stenner, 2017) between Japan and overseas and “spaces of possibilities” (Murray, 2018, p. 110) where traditional hierarchies (such as teacher and student) or social norms may be temporarily suspended and new hybridized identities may be formed (Kurokawa et al., 2013). This sense of liminality, however, is a double-edged sword. In-between or transitional states engender instability and identity threat (*displacement*) (Murray & Fujishima, 2016c) just as easily as they open up new possibilities for growth. This

displacement has been reported in several studies where students transitioning into self-access environments have experienced feelings of anxiety, alienation, and reduced self-efficacy (Fujimoto, 2016; Gillies, 2010; Kushida, 2020a; Kuwada, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020a). One recent development in the field of self-access intended as a response to learners' culture shock as they transition into a foreign-styled eikaiwa-dominant environment is student-led learning communities (SLCs) (Lenning et al., 2013; Murphy, 2014; Watkins, 2022). Learning communities have already been advocated for within US universities as a means of scaffolding students' transition between secondary and tertiary education and sources of *social resources* (Zittoun, 2004) and co-constructed knowledge (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Tinto, 2003, 2020). SLCs are also congruent with the autonomy-supportive mission of SACs and a small number of studies in this area have highlighted numerous ways that SLCs foster positive group dynamics such as the presence of near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998), having shared goals, and fulfillment of members' motivational needs (Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Watkins, 2021, 2022).

Due to SLCs being a relatively recent development within the field of self-access language learning, there have been to date a limited number of studies examining how they function and the value they bring to learners and institutions. A pilot investigation (Hooper, 2020c) preceding this ethnographic study focused on the ways that members of a SAC SLC called the Learning Community (LC) (pseudonym) constructed situated identities through participation in its community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). The LC is also the community that the current study is based on and the current study can be viewed as an extension on the groundwork conducted in my pilot study. Drawing on a *modes of identification* framework (Wenger, 2010) and positioning theory, interviews with several LC members offered insights into how they viewed themselves as community members and language learners. Their actions and beliefs within the LC were analyzed in terms of

*engagement* with the regular practices of the LC, *imagination* about the position of the community relative to other CoPs, and *alignment* with both established and negotiable community norms (Wenger, 2010). This study highlighted the prevalence of learner anxiety in regard to certain SAC CoPs and the pivotal role of learner affect in possibilities for sustained engagement in self-access SLCs. Consequently, one implication of this pilot study was the necessity of social support for students transitioning from secondary education into eikaiwa-centric self-access environments. One suggested means of addressing this issue was the fostering of SLCs with relaxed language policies that prioritize accessibility over English immersion or “foreign” experiences. Such SLCs can act as venues for students in transition to negotiate the tension between peripherality and legitimacy (Wenger, 1998) within SACs. In this way, it is hoped that SACs may effectively serve the majority of Japanese English learners rather than just the few outliers already comfortable in English-only environments.

Although the findings from my pilot study led me to believe that SAC SLCs may be a promising focus of study and valuable addition to self-access environments, the study was limited in a number of critical ways. The first limitations of my pilot study could also be criticisms leveled at other previous CoP-based research that I have conducted (Hooper, 2020c) and indeed much of the broader body of existing CoP studies. While a CoP-driven analysis of a learning community offers a useful perspective on its internal functioning through its goals, human connections, and repertoire of tools, it generally tends to overlook the issue of structural power (Handley et al., 2006; Mutch, 2003) and often portrays CoP members as monolithic rather than nuanced individuals (Billett, 2006; Hughes et al., 2007). By adopting a landscapes of practice (LoP) (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015) analytical lens and foregrounding the experiences of community members, I attempt to address this blind spot in the existing literature and highlight how the interplay between individual agency and structural forces influence a given CoP. The other key limitation was a methodological one. I realized that

while the participant interviews I conducted offered detailed and nuanced interpretations of the LC and its members' experiences, I was essentially relying on second-hand information. In order to construct a fuller ethnographic account of the LC, I would need to conduct detailed participant observation of the same community and extensively collect community artifacts while taking care not to disrupt their practice. In response to Mynard's (2020a) call for ethnographic studies in self-access that pull back the curtain on "actual experiences of everyday engagement" (p. 86), this study was designed to add to the growing discussion on SAC users' lived experiences so that they can be better supported in the future. Both Murray and Fujishima (2016b) and Mynard et al. (2020a) are examples of ethnographic research that have aimed to explore the dynamics and educational roles that emerge inside social learning spaces and the communities that form within them. However, while these studies offer insights into the lived experiences of self-access users and provide valuable implications for self-access managers or staff, it could be argued they still leave space to explore the ways in which multiple communities of practice across a broader educational landscape *influence* and *are influenced by* learner experiences within SACs. Furthermore, as previously stated, SAC SLCs represent a new area of SAC development and thus have received scant attention to date. In this study, I hope to contribute to ongoing discussions about self-access language learning, SAC SLCs, and their place within the broader landscape of English language education in Japan.

## ***1.2. Research questions***

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does the LC function as a language learning community of practice?
2. What does participation in the LC represent for its members in relation to their individual learning trajectories



### ***1.3. Research aims of the study***

The aims of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate students' participation in the LC, a learner-led SAC learning community, over an eighteen-month period in order to understand how the *domain*, *community*, and *practice* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) of the community formed and evolved.
2. To analyze learners' past and present learning experiences, and their future goals in order to understand how their participation in the LC influences and is influenced by their learning trajectory across a language learning landscape of practice.
3. To learn about the position and role of the LC relative to other CoPs within and outside of the university SAC.
4. To understand how the LC is currently supported and managed within the larger SAC/institutional setting and learn what practices have been effective from the perspectives of different stakeholders.

### ***1.4. Overview of the thesis***

This thesis consists of nine chapters. This introductory chapter has outlined the rationale underpinning this study and its potential value in relation to English education in Japan. The research questions and aims are also included in this initial chapter. Chapter 2 is a context chapter providing a macro perspective on English education in Japan and some of the broader contextual factors relevant to this study including *eigo/eikaiwa*, native-speakerism, *senpai/kōhai* relationships, and *akogare*. In Chapter 3, I narrow the scope to focus on the meso (institutional) setting in which this study was conducted - SACs and learning communities. As this context is markedly distinct from traditional classroom settings, the theoretical and practical considerations related to social learning in SACs have been reviewed in detail.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the primary conceptual framework for the current study incorporating three distinct but related theories - Communities of Practice (CoP), Landscapes of Practice (LoP), and the concept of liminality. In this chapter, I describe how these theories have been utilized in the existing literature, particularly within studies into out-of-class social learning spaces. In Chapter 5, I outline the research methodology guiding this study. This chapter includes information on my philosophical presuppositions, methodological choices, researcher positionality, ethical considerations, and detailed accounts of data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 6 presents findings and discussion relating to my first research question - *How does the LC function as a language learning community of practice?* Chapter 7 presents five participant case studies that form the basis of analysis and discussion of my second research question - *What does participation in the LC represent for its members in relation to their individual learning trajectories?*

In the eighth and final chapter, I summarize the findings and analysis for this study, address their practical implications regarding the effective cultivation and support of future SAC learning communities, and discuss this study's limitations as well as future avenues for inquiry.

## Chapter 2: English Language Learning in Japan

### 2.1. Introduction

One of the fundamental assumptions of this study is that a CoP's practice exists in interaction with the wider environment it is situated within. Although the community possesses agency to craft its own response to external factors and create something unique all of its own, one must also recognize that, as Roberts (2006) claims, "communities of practice do not exist in a vacuum" (p. 634). Furthermore, the psychological, emotional, and ideological baggage that members accrue throughout their learning histories shape what they regard as legitimate or illegitimate practice and what goals are desirable or otherwise. Just as an abductive approach to analysis assumes researchers cannot be viewed as *tabula rasa*, this study also argues that the participants in a community should not be viewed in the same way. In order to truly understand the foundations of a CoP, we need to understand the historical and environmental factors that led to the formation of the bedrock it was constructed upon. This does not mean that I assume a fatalistic view, such as Bourdieu's (1977) theory of *habitus*, that assumes individuals (or communities) do not deviate from predetermined patterns of behavior or beliefs. It also does not represent an essentialist view of culture ala Hofstede (1986), where overarching cultural traits are emphasized over the agency and dynamism of individual human agents (Guest, 2002; Kubota, 1999). It means that I view a CoP's practice as a constant negotiation and renegotiation of structure and agency where learners are neither "ideological dupes [n]or autonomous subjects" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 120). Therefore, the sociocultural and institutional background and themes that I will present in this chapter represent, not unquestionable molds in which learners are cast, but elements in a landscape of practice that they engage with and that are likely to influence the construction of their own unique learning trajectories.

In this chapter, I start by discussing the historical background of English education in Japan and the dual ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* that have arguably permeated the field in various forms over the last 150 years. Next, I will direct my attention to a number of prevalent and persistent issues affecting Japanese ELT including the ideological divide of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*, native-speakerism and the related notion of *authenticity*, and the nationalist ideological influence of *nihonjinron*. I then move on to a brief discussion of *senpai/kōhai* and *akogare* - two sociocultural phenomena relevant to the findings of this study. Due to the focus of this study, particular attention will be paid to the topic of self-access language learning in Japan and the sociocultural factors that influence its implementation.

## **2.2. A background of English language education in Japan**

The ongoing saga of English language education in Japan has been viewed by many as a “struggle” both against and for imperialism (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006, p. 261) marked by undulating waves of enthusiasm and fear as well as deeply entrenched divisions within it. In fact, I argue, as do many others (Aspinall, 2013; Grandon, 2018; Hiramoto, 2013; Law, 1995; McVeigh, 2004; Nagatomo, 2016, 2022; Yoshino, 2002), that English in Japan is not a unitary concept but two distinct entities representing starkly different forms of knowledge, values, and even worldviews. In this section, I aim to provide a brief historical overview of Japanese English education and some themes relevant to this study.

Even around the time of the first “English boom” in Japan (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006, p. 264) following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, its study had already branched into two distinct camps. The first was *seisoku* or “regular English” focusing on English-medium instruction and concentrating on pronunciation - *seisoku* was primarily taught by foreign teachers and missionaries (Shimizu, 2010). *Seisoku*’s counterpart was *hensoku* - “irregular English” - taught by Japanese instructors and based on the approaches utilized previously in the study of Chinese and then Dutch during the Edo period (Shimizu, 2010; Smith & Imura,

2004). These approaches were based on what is now known as yakudoku (literally “translate and read”), a form of grammar-translation where sentences are directly translated into Japanese whilst retaining Japanese word order (Hino, 1988b; Law, 1995; Nagatomo, 2016, 2022; Noda & O’Regan, 2019; Smith & Imura, 2004). An interesting point relating to yakudoku and the political climate of the time lies in the distinction between yakudoku and European models of grammar-translation. According to Smith and Imura (2004), while the European approaches advocated translation both ways (L2 to L1 and L1 to L2), yakudoku only required translation from the foreign language into Japanese, signifying a focus on “gaining information *from* English texts, not on encoding into English” (p. 30, emphasis in original). This was likely influenced by the need for rapid Westernization in the face of ongoing colonization of Asia by technologically-advanced foreign powers (Duke, 2008) and the related fear of an encroachment of Western values that would threaten Japanese culture and uniqueness. Yakudoku offered a means of acquiring Western knowledge while simultaneously reducing the risk of cultural hybridization within Japan’s borders and the positioning of Japan as a cultural colony of the West (Bouchard, 2017; Shimizu, 2010). This explains the shift towards *hensoku* during the end of the Meiji period that saw a backlash against the earlier “English boom” and a significant rise in nationalist sentiment (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). Despite recent challenges to its role within English education (Noda & O’Regan, 2020), the impact of yakudoku has endured. Indeed, Nagatomo (2016) argues that despite its demonstrable lack of efficacy in developing communicative competence in English, it has been “the most prominent and enduring means of teaching foreign languages in Japan” (p. 10). Another development during this period that has become a pillar of English education in Japan was *juken eigo* (examination-oriented English). *Juken eigo* focused on testing English vocabulary and grammar as opposed to communicative proficiency and marked the inception

of a salient role of English within Japan - a means of stratifying students for induction into various tiers of the workforce (Entrich, 2015; McVeigh, 2002).

After the Second World War, influenced by the American presence, English education in Japan was the target of reform and calls for more oral-based approaches based on Harold Palmer's Oral Method, which emphasized pronunciation practice and speaking proficiency (Nagatomo, 2016; Smith & Imura, 2004). These proposed changes did not materialize on a wider scale, however, due to a post-war lack of qualified teachers and a general lack of English proficiency among the populace due in part to drastic reductions in English education in Japan during the war. This meant that both *yakudoku* and *juken eigo* managed to weather the onslaught of attempted Western educational upheaval and secured their place in Japanese English classrooms in the decades that followed.

Following the 1964 Olympics and stimulated by Japan's growth as a global economic powerhouse, the utility of English language proficiency was also increasingly being recognized by governmental and business institutions. More and more people, facilitated by ever-increasing disposable income, began to enroll in private English conversation schools (*eikaiwa gakkou*) as an escapist leisure activity and to address the communicative shortcomings of the *juken eigo* that dominated mainstream public education (Nagatomo, 2016). Furthermore, in 1987, the Ministry of Education turned once again to the West for a fresh injection of *seisoku*, in the form of "native speaker" assistant language teachers (ALTs). ALTs were university graduates (but generally not certified teachers) from Inner Circle countries (Kachru & Nelson, 1996) such as the US, UK, and Australia that were brought over through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program to supposedly provide opportunities for greater intercultural exchange and a more communicative focus in secondary school English classrooms. In reality, the JET program was primarily a diplomatic move to address tensions over US-Japan trade at the time and to boost Japan's soft cultural power by providing

ALTs with a positive image of Japan that they would bring home with them (McConnell, 2000; Metzgar, 2012). Despite ALTs' presence in the English classroom, *juken eigo* still largely took center stage due to the looming presence of entrance examinations (Gorsuch, 2002; Nagatomo, 2016; Sakui, 2004). Furthermore, although the impact of the JET program has been regarded by many as positive (Galloway, 2009; Gorsuch, 2002; Koike & Tanaka, 1995), there continued to be a sense of confusion for both Japanese English teachers (JTEs) and ALTs over their respective roles and how to effectively team teach (Hiratsuka, 2013; Johannes, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Just as in the case of the JET program, a sense of dissonance between the stated goals of educational authorities and the realities of classroom practice is a constant theme in contemporary Japanese ELT. Despite a series of MEXT guidelines (Fujieda, 2018; MEXT, 2014, 2017) that introduced a range of measures to encourage more communicatively-focused English classes including English-medium instruction and a move away from rote learning, this has arguably not yet led to any substantial changes in teaching approaches (Sato, 2002a).

### ***2.2.1. Previous studies***

Through an ethnographic investigation of the “technical culture” of English instruction within a Japanese senior high school, Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) explored the relationship between in-service teachers' classroom practice and government-mandated syllabi emphasizing communicatively-oriented instruction. In this study, the researchers investigated the practices and experiences of 20 teachers (15 Japanese, 5 non-Japanese) over roughly one academic year through surveys, interviews, naturalistic observations, and document collection. It was discovered that, despite top-down dictates to teach English in a communicative way, many teacher participants conformed to a *yakudoku*-focused teaching approach designed to meet a hidden goal of preparing students for standardized university entrance examinations. Furthermore, the norms of this school's technical culture were reinforced through pressure to

keep pace with colleagues' progression through the set textbook as well as a tendency for novice teachers to emulate the instructional practices of their senpai (senior) colleagues. In addition, a salient element of the school's culture was the eschewing of external sources of knowledge or innovation like workshops that might challenge the reproduction of established professional practices. Sato and Kleinsasser's study provides a detailed snapshot of how community norms may be historically reproduced in Japanese schools and how locally-formed conceptions of professional competence can represent resistance to MEXT-endorsed pushes for communicatively-oriented English classes.

In order to understand teachers' attitudes towards CLT and their perceptions regarding its viability in high school classes on a broader scale, Nishino (2011) collected questionnaire data from 139 Japanese high school English teachers. From the teacher responses, Nishino found that although many teachers appeared to believe in the potential benefits of CLT, there were few who actually used a communicative teaching approach. Additionally, due to a lack of training, experience, and confidence regarding the use of CLT, few teachers felt comfortable with aligning their classroom practice with the MEXT-based push for CLT-style lessons. Additionally, the *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975) that they had previously gone through as students learning *juken eigo* as well as a number of practical contextual factors such as large class sizes were also reported by some teachers as influencing their aversion to adopting CLT. Nishino's study implies, therefore, that the adoption of CLT within Japanese secondary education may be hampered by numerous issues on multiple scales from the policy level (e.g., lack of training, class sizes, testing requirements) to the individual level (e.g., apprenticeship of observation, lack of confidence). Furthermore, similar findings to both Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) and Nishino's (2011) studies are visible in more recent research by Bartlett (2016, 2020) that highlights how Japanese high school teachers still appear to be struggling to implement CLT in their classrooms despite new curricular reforms



from MEXT (2016, 2020). Reasons cited for the resistance to move away from yakudoku or juken eigo towards a CLT-based approach included a desire to maintain face with colleagues, pressure from senpai teachers resistant to change, lack of confidence and training relating to CLT, and exam washback from university entrance exams. Bartlett's research suggests that while MEXT policy and, indeed, the actions of certain individual teachers (Sato & Takahashi, 2008) have attempted to innovate the technical culture of yakudoku in secondary English education, the English instructional practices that teachers engage in at a grassroots level may not have changed to any significant extent since the early 2000s.

There are a myriad of contextual factors that have contributed to the resilience of yakudoku and juken eigo and the lack of coherence regarding formal policy and grassroots practice including test washback, the technical culture of schools, hierarchical senpai/kōhai teacher relationships, classroom management issues, insufficient English proficiency, and lack of teacher training (Cook, 2009, 2012; Nishino, 2008, 2011; Sakui, 2004; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Sato, Mutoh, & Kleinsasser, 2022; Underwood, 2012a, 2012b). The table below (adapted from Burke & Hooper, 2020) provides an overview of commonly-cited obstacles to the implementation of communicative teaching approaches in Japanese secondary education.

**Table 1***Perceived Obstacles to Communicative English Teaching in Japanese Secondary Education*

<b>Perceived obstacles to communicative approach</b>	<b>Studies</b>
Senpai-kōhai relationships Research on Japanese secondary English education has found that there can be pressure on junior (kōhai) teachers to teach using a grammar-translation/yakudoku approach from senior teachers (senpai).	Bartlett (2016, 2020); Cook (2009, 2012); Sakui (2004); Sato & Kleinsasser (2004); Underwood (2012a); Sato (2002b)
Language anxiety in Japanese English teachers Many teachers stated that they were worried that their English proficiency was insufficient for teaching communicative lessons.	Glasgow (2013); Humphries & Burns (2015); Machida (2019); Nishino (2011); Suzuki & Roger (2014)
Concerns over testing speaking proficiency Teachers expressed concerns over the time and staff required to effectively test students' oral proficiency in English.	Bartlett (2016, 2020); Nishino (2008, 2011)
Classroom management Teachers have expressed concerns that utilizing less structured communicative activities may lead to classroom management problems.	Sakui (2004); Underwood (2012a, 2012b)
Worries about student passivity It is believed by teachers that Japanese students did not have sufficient proficiency in English to learn using a communicative approach and instead preferred more passive, teacher-led activities.	Cook (2009, 2012); Kurihara (2008); Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt (2001); Suzuki & Roger (2014)
Stakeholder expectations Teachers feel that they were under pressure to satisfy students' or parents' expectations of class content that will prepare students for examinations.	Cook (2009); Underwood (2012a, 2012b)
Teacher training Both JTEs and ALTs do not receive sufficient training and information on communicative language teaching and practical ways of utilizing it in class.	Cook (2012); Nishino (2008, 2011); Sakui (2004),

Test washback Concerns exist that CLT will not adequately prepare students for high-stakes entrance examinations.	Cook (2009, 2012); Nishino (2008, 2011); Sakui (2004); Suzuki & Roger (2014); Underwood (2012a, 2012b)
Time limitations Prevalent beliefs exist among teachers that communicative activities require too much time to implement in 45–50-minute classes.	Nishino (2008, 2011)
Size of classes Due to the high numbers of students in some secondary school classes, some teachers believe that communicative activities are not suited to their context.	Nishino (2008, 2011); Underwood (2012b)
Insufficient lesson planning time Because of the pressure of extensive responsibilities outside of their regular teaching hours, some teachers argued they lacked the time to plan communicative activities.	Sakui (2004); Sato & Kleinsasser (2004); Sato (2002a)
Textbook requirements Teachers claimed that the state-mandated textbooks required for classes are incompatible with communicative teaching approaches.	Cook (2009, 2012); Sato & Kleinsasser (2004); Sato (2002a); Underwood (2012a, 2012b)

As this brief retrospective account of English education in Japan has shown, the field can perhaps be best described as being marked by division. Beginning with *seisoku* and *hensoku* and moving up to present-day English education and the ongoing challenges of balancing *juken eigo* with more communicative approaches, one realizes that when we discuss English in Japan, we are in fact discussing two entities rather than one unified concept. In addition to this methodological division is an arguably more troubling racial component to the English dichotomies in Japan. In the following section, I will discuss the racialized ideological divide of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* within Japanese ELT as well as the essentialist belief systems that underpin this divide— native-speakerism and *nihonjinron*.

### **2.3. A dichotomized field**

As is observable from the historical roots of *seisoku* and *hensoku*, English education in Japan has been built on two distinct methodological approaches - the learning of the language as an object in itself, often for the purposes of passing examinations, and the development of English as a communicative tool. This distinction is not solely limited to Japan as Holliday (1994) describes a similar demarcation in a number of countries between a BANA (British, Australasian, and North American) approach emphasizing “Western” communicative goals, and approaches originating from countries in which English is taught as a foreign language and generally focusing on a grammar-translation teaching methodology. Japan’s equivalent of this duality, *eigo* and *eikaiwa* has its own unique ideological underpinnings and is influenced by competing discourses (native-speakerism and *nihonjinron*) that are both complementary and contradictory in nature. In the following section, I will provide a background to the *eigo/eikaiwa* distinction, the ideological forces that feed it, and its implications for Japanese English learners.

#### ***2.3.1. Eigo and eikaiwa***

Simply translated as “English” and “English conversation” respectively, the dual ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* have arguably existed in some form or another since the previously discussed *seisoku* and *hensoku* of the Meiji period. In contemporary ELT, *eigo* is recognized as the teaching of English for entrance examinations using *yakudoku* or other derivatives of grammar-translation methodology. Conversely, *eikaiwa* is in keeping with a “Western” model of language teaching, focusing on the development of oral communicative skills through the use of CLT, TBLT, or other similar approaches (Hiramoto, 2013; Lowe, 2020b; Nagatomo, 2016). The difference between *eigo* and *eikaiwa* runs deep as it is concerned with how English is viewed at a fundamental level. Stephens (2002) illustrates

these diverging viewpoints as “how speaking the language [eikaiwa] is regarded as being separate from the language itself [eigo]” (p. 89).

Just as in its earliest form where *seisoku* was predominantly taught by foreign missionaries and *hensoku* by Japanese educators, this distinction appears to also be one not only of pedagogy, but of ethnicity. In the view of McVeigh (2004), this assigning of roles based on racial lines has endured and is in fact a central element of each ideology with *eigo* being essentially “for Japanese” and *eikaiwa* representing a “non-Japanese version of English” (p. 215). The performative roles for Japanese and non-Japanese educators bound to *eigo* and *eikaiwa* have arguably been pervasive within almost every sector of Japanese ELT. One can observe this distinction in the team teaching between JTEs and ALTs in secondary education, the varying foci within the private sector of *juku* (cram schools generally focusing on *juken eigo*) and *eikaiwa gakkou* (English conversation schools generally employing non-Japanese “native speaker” teachers), and the differing roles of Japanese and foreign faculty within tertiary education (MacDonald, 2020; Miyazato, 2009; Nagatomo, 2016).

It has also been posited by a number of researchers (Houghton & Rivers, 2013; McVeigh, 2004; Nagatomo, 2016; Whitsed & Wright, 2011) that these racialized roles and their associated ideologies are by no means on an equal footing in terms of the power and influence they are afforded within the field. Within both public and private education, a complex power struggle exists between the legitimacy of knowledge enacted within and produced by the spheres of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*. Due to the importance of *eigo* for *juken* (examination preparation), it is often given priority within the school system (Nagatomo, 2016, 2022), English conversation practice provided by ALTs is sometimes viewed as lacking academic value (Geluso, 2013), and that within tertiary education, classes based on *eikaiwa* are seen as purely for fun and are generally held in lesser esteem than classes taught by Japanese faculty (Whitsed, 2011; Whitsed & Wright, 2011). At times, classes based on

English communication are derided by Japanese teachers as simply “playing games” as can be seen in the case of a Japanese *juku* owner creating an advertising campaign attacking a nearby foreign-owned eikaiwa gakkou: “He actually advertises that we are NOT the [NAME] English *gaijin* (**foreigner**) school. We [the other school] don’t play. We teach PROPER English with proper grammar. We know how to teach because we are Japanese” (Nagatomo, 2016, p. 134).

McVeigh (2002) has claimed that eikaiwa actually represents a type of “fantasy English” that “bears no relation to reality” and that merely represents an escapist fantasy that students can consume as leisure after enduring the hardships of “Japan-appropriated English” (*eigo*) (p. 166). This consumptive fantasy view of the non-Japanese eikaiwa sphere is also observable in Kubota’s (2011) research into eikaiwa gakkou, in which she argues that students in eikaiwa classes are doing so for *casual leisure* where they can participate in an imagined community of foreigners (Western Caucasians) rather than for language acquisition. Linked to these claims is a frequent assertion that many students expect foreign instructors in language classrooms to be “entertaining”, “funny,” or “*genki*” (energetic), whereas these expectations do not exist in regards to Japanese educators.

The *eigo*-dominated Japanese English education system has been the target of intense criticism for decades (Saito, 2019). Since the start of the Heisei period (1989-), MEXT has been constantly attempting to enact top-down reform in order to promote more communicatively-oriented classes with measures including introducing more classes being taught in English and with an increased focus on learner autonomy and critical thinking. Despite some expressing a desire to adopt more communicative teaching practices, in-service teachers are often not consulted on how these reforms might benefit their students and are not provided training on how they would practically implement methodological changes within the current system (Nishino, 2011). Student perspectives on the *eigo/eikaiwa* divide have been mixed. Although some studies highlight markedly negative attitudes of Japanese students to

classes focusing on eigo/juken eigo (Falout et al., 2008; Matsuda, 2011; Miyahara, 2015; Mynard et al., 2020a; Turnbull, 2017), research from Benesse (1998, cited in Kobayashi, 2018) revealed that many high school students were in favor of English lessons focusing on juken eigo and a further study by Kobayashi (2018) found that a great many high school students deemed eigo-oriented classes to be beneficial to their development. One student from a study found in Kobayashi (2018) stated, “I think what we are learning at school is useful. Juken eigo is a part of eigo and juken eigo’s grammar is useful for learning English conversations or correct English usage” (p. 5). Such student voices call into question blanket judgements relating to eikaiwa-oriented educational approaches being somehow superior to the old-fashioned eigo/yakudoku teaching styles.

Another flipside to the eigo/eikaiwa power dynamic is the linguistic authority that “native speaker” teachers possess (Miyazato, 2009). Cases have been reported in secondary education where, due to self-efficacy issues stemming from feelings of linguistic inferiority (Pinner, 2014), Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) have slipped into a more passive interpreter role with the (largely untrained) “native speaker” ALT taking control of the class (Miyazato, 2009; Pinner, 2018). This is arguably one manifestation of a wider *gaikokujin konpurekkusu* (foreigner complex) or *seiyō konpurekkusu* (Western complex), the idolization of countries such as the US and the UK based on perceived cultural superiority (Hiramoto, 2013; Mizuta, 2009), that exists within Japanese society and is inseparable from native-speakerist beliefs.

This section has provided a brief description of the competing ideologies of eigo and eikaiwa. It has been shown how the distinction between the two is rooted in essentialized and racial rather than solely methodological terms and that the interaction between the two in society represents a larger struggle between nationalist and Western power structures. In the following section, I will outline in greater detail the presence and impact of native-speakerism

in the Japanese ELT and discuss the impact of this ideology on the learning experiences and beliefs of Japanese English learners.

### **2.3.2. Native-speakerism and “authenticity”**

The local ideology of eikaiwa and who is recognized as its “owner” are shaped in large part by the wider global ideology of native-speakerism. Native-speakerism is based on the principle that ““native-speaker” teachers represent a “Western culture” from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday, 2006, p. 385). Key to the essence of native-speakerism are Phillipson’s (1992) concepts of the *native speaker fallacy* and the *monolingual fallacy*— the belief that English is best taught in a monolingual environment by a “native speaker.”

Within Japan, approaches adhering to this belief are commonplace in many schools, particularly within the eikaiwa gakkou industry where the presence of “native speakers” and the utilization of an English-only method often featured at the forefront of promotional campaigns (Bailey, 2006; Hooper, 2020b; Kubota, 2011). Other tangible manifestations of native-speakerism in Japan (and indeed globally) include discriminatory hiring practices where only “native speaker” teachers are considered for employment or, in some more extreme cases, candidates exhibiting certain racial phenotypes such as blond hair and blue eyes were explicitly requested (The Japan Times, 13 February 2007, cited in Seargeant 2009, p. 56). Along with the positioning of “native-speakers” as the ideal English teachers and the knowledge they possess representing the standard model of language and pedagogy, it has been argued that native-speakerist perspectives often “Other” and essentialize “non-native” pedagogical approaches as ineffective and backwards (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009). Congruent with this viewpoint are ingrained beliefs in ELT that the West represents the site of respected TESOL research and effective teaching methodology and that experts from this



sphere must be imported to various countries to “fix” the local systems already in place. This can be seen in the belief that postgraduate degrees from Western institutions denote *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1991) and superior knowledge and the presence of systems, such as in South Korea and Japan, where “native speakers” are brought in to address perceived deficiencies in local English education (Jenks, 2017; Miyazato, 2009).

Lowe (2020b), through his concept of the *native speaker frame* takes Holliday’s original conceptualization of native-speakerism further by highlighting the extent of the ideology’s surreptitiousness in Japanese ELT. In his ethnographic study of a Japanese university English department (Lowe, 2020b) and in a narrative reflection on teaching experiences in an eikaiwa gakkou (2020a), he illustrates how a native-speakerist orientation has become invisible and common sense in many educational settings. “Native speaker framing” is observable through a number of prevalent discourses within Japanese ELT including assumptions about “ideal” Western “native speakers,” educational methodology from the West being normative as opposed to “inferior” local alternatives, English only approaches, and derogatory cultural stereotypes of students (i.e., “passive” or “collectivist”) (Lowe, 2020b). Lowe argues that while the use of “Western” teaching methodologies such as PPP (present, practice, produce) was not fundamentally a cause for concern, the underlying rationale for their adoption was framed by “a chauvinistic attitude to local educational practices, based on discourses in which these were assumed to be problematic and in need of correction” by “native speakers” (p. 131). The native speaker frame highlights the depth to which discourses promoting unequal and disempowering statuses have infiltrated the practices of English language learning and teaching in Japan and is a valuable perspective on the field as a whole.

Native-speakerist beliefs are reportedly propagated by both “native” and “non-native” educators and learners alike. A number of studies (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016; Moussu &

Llurda, 2008; Reves & Medgyes, 1994) discuss the issue of *self-discrimination*— “non-native” teachers due to the influence of the native speaker fallacy coming to view their own English as deficient and a poor imitation of the genuine article. This self-flagellation is further fueled by their students who, through socialization into the discourses of the ELT field, have also come to see instruction from anyone other than a “native speaker” as second best. This, of course, has implications on how they then regard themselves as legitimate or illegitimate users of the language. In Japan, self-discrimination and beliefs congruent with the native speaker fallacy are arguably intertwined with the aforementioned *seiyō konpurekkusu* (Hiramoto, 2013) as many Japanese learners of English tend to gravitate towards an essentialized “Western” standard of English. Two significant impacts of this phenomenon are the disregarding of non-standard Englishes that deviate from a BANA norm and a persistent sense of *haji* (shame) underpinning their own English use resulting from their inability to achieve the unattainable goal of “native” English (Hiramoto, 2013; Honna & Takeshita, 1998). Matsuda (2003b), Saito and Hatoss (2011), and Saito (2012) conducted studies exploring Japanese high school and junior high school students’ attitudes towards different “native” and “non-native” varieties of English and found in both cases a clear tendency to favor “native” English varieties.

The students believed that although English is used all over the world, it does not belong to the world. Rather, English is the property of native English speakers (Americans and British, more specifically), and the closer they follow the native speakers’ usage, the better. (Matsuda, 2003b, p. 493)

Despite the number of “non-native” speakers of English being overwhelmingly higher than the number of “native speakers,” it was found that students clearly regarded the English “target speech community” to be associated with a “native speaker” model rather than with “a global transnational community” (Saito, 2012, p. 1077). Konakahara (2020), focusing on Japanese university students, examined student attitudes towards “native English speaker”

(NES) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) varieties of English and investigated the efficacy of a classroom intervention designed to challenge native-speakerist beliefs. Her findings reinforced the presence of a significant bias for NES English with the majority of students claiming that “native” varieties (particularly American) of English to be desirable and legitimate and held self-discriminating views regarding Japanese people’s English. An example of this phenomenon can be observed in the following statement from one of Konakahara’s participants: [I’d like to acquire] **native-like pronunciation** [...]. [My English] is still **poor**. [...] I have trouble being understood in English due to my **bad pronunciation** (Konakahara, 2020, p. 195) (emphasis in original).

A concept prevalent in global TESOL that is in many ways analogous with a native-speakerist view of English learning is *authenticity* (Lowe & Pinner, 2016). As can be observed from the *seiyō konpurekkusu*, the ideological bedrock of native-speakerism is not simply dictating what is best, but actually attempts to define what is real or authentic. McVeigh (2002) discusses the prevalence in Japan of *fantasy English*, a variety of “Japanese appropriated English”— a simulacrum of the language based on socially-constructed essentialist notions of “Western” culture. When describing the English conversation school industry in the sixties, an early critic of this phenomenon was Lummis (1967), who perceived the study of *eikaiwa* to be built on assumptions of Western cultural superiority and surrealist, idealized depictions of the “Other” bearing little resemblance to real life in the US. Assumptions of “real” English being exclusively connected to Inner Circle countries (Kachru & Nelson, 1996) has been widely noted to exist throughout virtually every sector of Japanese ELT. Secondary school textbooks (Hino, 1988a; Shirahata, 2018; Yamada, 2010), the performative roles of ALTs (Miyazato, 2009), promotional campaigns focusing on foreign university instructors (Nagatomo, 2016; Whitsed & Wright, 2011), and the *eikaiwa gakkō*

industry (Bailey, 2006, 2007; Hooper, Oka, & Yamazawa, 2019; Seargeant, 2009) have all been noted as furthering discourses relating to authentic English and the culture it represents.

Through a native-speakerist lens, “non-native” varieties of English that fail to meet the narrow “native” criteria are fundamentally “inauthentic.” If one then considers how native-speakerism (and *eikaiwa*) is also bound to national and racial, rather than purely linguistic, categories, it becomes clear that these beliefs about English learning inevitably doom Japanese students to failure. Both Matsuda (2003a) and Honna and Takeshita (1998) recognize this issue in their problematization of Japan's adherence to a “native speaker” model of English. Congruent with Cook's (1999) assertion that emphasizing a “native” model for students will merely reinforce their unshakeable status as “failed native speakers” (p. 204), Honna and Takeshita argue that by striving to reach the manufactured “perfection” of “native English”, Japanese students usually hesitate to converse with other English speakers “until,” as they often are heard to say, “they develop complete proficiency in the language” (p. 119).

Although the literature on native-speakerism in Japan paints a rather somber picture of disempowered Japanese English learners beholden to structural forces, there are also reports of students engaging in actions that question and challenge the validity of the native speaker frame. A mixed-methods study by Nguyen and Sato (2016) based on a seven-week course aimed at developing Japanese university students' learning strategies found that some of the student participants came to explicitly question their beliefs about the primacy of “native speakers.” Stemming from the use of extensive group work and teaching materials that emphasized the value of “non-native speaker” conversation partners, Nguyen and Sato provided evidence of participants embracing near-peer role models (their classmates) as ideal English interlocutors and challenging prevalent native-speakerist beliefs within Japanese ELT.

I used to think that talking with native speakers is the best [way] to learn [a] target language. I was surprised to know that [talking with] non-native speakers is [a] better

[way]. Now I understand that it is important to talk with my classmates. I will try to talk with my friends in English outside of the classroom. (Fukiko, RL 3) (Nguyen & Sato, 2016, p. 57)

In an ethnographic study of Japanese university students studying critical issues in ELT, Lowe (2022), highlighted a number of ways in which Japanese English learners created *counter frames* that stood in opposition to the native-speakerist *master frame* in Japanese ELT. Examples of counter framing in Lowe's study included students regarding the term "native speaker" as being a sociolinguistic construction rather than an objective "truth," recognizing the legitimacy of world Englishes, and diverging from deficit views of "non-native" teachers. However, it must be stated that, just as the structural influence of native-speakerism was challenged by counter framing, the divergence from the master frame could not be regarded as pure agentic freedom. Lowe illustrates how the hopeful glimmers embodied in counter framing practices were ultimately limited by the impact of the master frame in the students' learning histories and, indeed, the sociocultural environment outside of that classroom CoP. In Lowe's study, then, we can observe the interplay of structure and agency within a learning community and an indication that although ideologies like native-speakerism can be called into question by individuals, their pervasiveness and surreptitious influence across an educational landscape of practice cannot be discounted.

A considerable amount of discussion of native-speakerism and ELT in general in Japan is colored by the concurrent influence of the Japanese nationalist ideology of *nihonjinron* and the related policy of *kokusaika* that many argue reinforces a divide between Japanese and "Other" (Bouchard, 2017; McVeigh, 2004; Rivers, 2020; Yoshino, 2002). There is a convincing case for the claim that *nihonjinron* and native-speakerism mutually bolster each other, contributing to an educational landscape marked by division and essentialized roles.

### 2.3.3. *Nihonjinron* and *kokusaika*

Nihonjinron, translated as “discussions of the Japanese” or “theories of the Japanese” (Bouchard, 2017; Sugimoto, 1999; Yoshino, 2002), is a commonly-used catch-all term for several theories on the supposed characteristics of Japaneseness including *nihonbunkaron* (Japanese culture), *nihonjinron* (Japanese people), *nihonshakairon* (Japanese society), and *nihonron* (Japanese nation) (Befu, 2001). One of the central pillars of nihonjinron is what Sugimoto (1999) terms the “N=E=C equation” (p. 83). This describes a tripartite notion of (N)ationality, (E)thnicity, and (C)ulture as mutually defined — Japanese nationality is determined by a homogeneous Japanese ethnicity, which in turn accompanies an innate understanding of “true” Japanese culture. From the perspective of nihonjinron, if any of these elements are absent, the equation simply does not work. Relevant to the field of language learning is the related concept of *kotodama* (the spirit of language) (Befu, 2001; Liddicoat, 2007; Miller, 1977). Nihonjinron constructs strong ties between “Japaneseness” and the Japanese language that consequently lead to claims of the difficulty of the Japanese language for non-Japanese and even claims that those not of Japanese blood are fundamentally unable to achieve linguistic mastery of Japanese (Befu, 2001; Sugimoto, 1999). An additional claim argued to be a pillar of nihonjinron is the supposed homogeneity of the Japanese people. Nihonjinron essentially denies the existence of ethnic diversity among its populace (Kubota, 1999), instead promoting “a belief in homogeneity, regardless of how heterogeneous the reality of Japanese racial makeup may be” (Befu, 2001, p. 69). This essentialist narrative extends to “the West,” the de facto “Other” against which nihonjinron contrasts Japanese “uniqueness” (Kubota, 1998). Kubota (1999, 2002) argues that nihonjinron was operationalized by certain elements of the political and business elite in Japan in order to combat the threat of Westernization encroaching upon Japanese culture and identity. The ideology therefore positions “Japaneseness” as representing what “the West” is not:

collectivism vs. individualism, social obligation vs. individual rights, harmony vs. conflict, and emotion vs. rationality (Rear, 2017). Nihonjinron, therefore, acts as a means of *self-Orientalism* (Iwabuchi, 1994) that both resists and supports the creation of an essentialized image created in the West of the “Other” (Bouchard, 2017). Although the impact of nihonjinron has arguably waned since the height of its popularity in the 70s, Befu (2001) claims “most Japanese are themselves very much interested in their national identity and have articulated their interests in a variety of ways, notably in published media, so much so that nihonjinron may be called a minor national pastime” (p. 3). Through her analysis of Japanese junior high school English textbooks, Shirahata (2018) illustrated the influence of nihonjinron through a lack of in-group diversity in depictions of Japanese people. Furthermore, Shirahata asserts that differences between Japanese characters and characters from other countries within the textbooks were emphasized in order to foreground the uniqueness of Japanese culture while also pigeonholing characters with differing cultural backgrounds into seemingly homogeneous groups such as American English speakers or people from non-English speaking countries. Indeed, even now some researchers argue that the assumptions that underpin the ideology of nihonjinron remain within the *banal nationalism* (Billig, 1995) observable in the Japanese media (Doering & Kong, 2021; Perkins, 2010; Tajima & Thornton, 2021b) and within the field of language education through both native-speakerist practices and the policy of kokusaika (internationalization).

Due to shared assumptions of the inseparability of language and race, it is unsurprising that a number of scholars have identified a relationship within Japanese ELT between native-speakerism and nihonjinron (Bouchard, 2017; Cater, 2020; Kubota, 2002; Kubota & Fujimoto, 2013; McVeigh, 2004; Schmeer, 2007; Seargeant, 2009; Shirahata, 2018; Yoshino, 2002). Just as native-speakerism defines ownership of English to a mythological and monolithic Western Caucasian “native speaker,” nihonjinron conjures up a “pure” Japanese person who through

*nihonjin no chi* (Japanese blood) (Yoshino, 1992, cited in Bouchard, 2017) has exclusive access to the accumulated wealth of Japanese language and culture. In both ideologies, hybridity (Okinawan speakers of Japanese, Ainu, Asian Americans, returnee students, Outer Circle varieties of English, and the like) is downplayed, obscured, or made illegitimate. One might in fact describe native-speakerism and *nihonjinron* as dancing partners with one ideology buttressing the other for their mutual benefit. *Nihonjinron*'s self-orientalism reinforces essentialist narratives within native-speakerism of backwards, collectivist educational styles rather than Japanese people as individuals with agency (Kubota, 1999; Lowe, 2020b). In addition, the proliferation of a homogenized archetype of Western education and values provides a mirror through which *nihonjinron* may contrast Japan's "uniqueness." Furthermore, just as the concept of *kotodama* makes mastery of the Japanese language essentially inaccessible to non-Japanese, "non-native" English teachers or learners are fundamentally cast (by themselves or by others) in deficit terms (hence the nuance of the term "non-native speaker" = "not a native speaker").

Japan's policy of *kokusaika* (internationalization) that began in the 1980s is viewed by many as a clear intersection between *nihonjinron* and certain practices, including native-speakerism, that are central elements of Japanese ELT (Hashimoto, 2000; Kubota, 1998, 2002; Liddicoat, 2007; McVeigh, 2004; Rear, 2017; Schneer, 2007; Seargeant, 2009; Yoshino, 2002). *Kokusaika* emerged alongside the growth of Japanese economic power on the global stage during the Bubble Era and thus represented a means of further developing Japan's identity as a world power through the use of English. Despite a seemingly enthusiastic approach to developing English proficiency in the Japanese populace, it has been argued that the policy of *kokusaika* engineered English education policy so that it reinforced, rather than weakened international boundaries and deepened nationalist assertions relating to the uniqueness of the Japanese. Through *kokusaika*, English becomes a tool for boosting Japanese



power and spreading Japanese culture and perspectives throughout the world (Hashimoto, 2013; McVeigh, 2004; Rear, 2017). Furthermore, by positioning “Japaneseness” in polar opposition to a mythologized West inhabited by a homogeneous populace of Caucasian “native speakers,” it prevents the risk of intercultural exchange (in its true sense) and a belief in cultural or racial hybridity.

Viewed from the inside, the diversity of other languages and cultures is often simply collapsed into the uniformity of what is not-us, outside, strange-mukô or “over there.” The world becomes a binary choice of us and them. The USA can stand for that which is not Japan. Non-European cultures and languages can be largely erased from popular consciousness-the term *gaikokujin* (foreigner) is frequently only used to refer to Westerners. According to this mythology, the Japanese and English languages can stand as opposites, as self and other. (Law, 1995, p. 216)

From this perspective, *kokusaika*, and indeed the role of English in Japan, can be regarded as contributing to the building and fortification of walls between cultures rather than enhancing intercultural exchange and understanding.

These discourses have the potential to greatly impact the ways in which Japanese learners of English define both themselves and the language they are learning. In line with both *nihonjinron* and native-speakerism is the belief that a language is wholly owned by a homogeneous racial group possessing a “fixed biological essence” (Bouchard, 2017, p. 59) inseparable from correct usage of that language. Following this assumption, it is therefore natural to assume that attempts to communicate in that language by a “non-native” will result in negative or deficit framing of that person within the target culture (Bouchard, 2017; Miller, 1977). The prevalent assertion within *nihonjinron* that Japan is fundamentally a monolingual culture also implies that Japanese people are supposed to be monolingual and therefore poor language learners (Bouchard, 2017; Kawai, 2007; Seargeant, 2009). Hashimoto (2013), in her

examination of government documentation relating to English medium-of-instruction courses in higher education, found that the foreign language skills of Japanese citizens, such as *kikokushijo* (returnees), are not acknowledged and most references to bilingualism apply to non-Japanese. As Hashimoto concludes, “bilingualism is an attribute that belongs exclusively to foreigners or Others” (p. 29).

The above subsections dealing with *eigo/eikaiwa*, native-speakerism, and *nihonjinron* have been included so as to provide a theoretically- and empirically-grounded account of the ideological pressures and challenges that Japanese learners of English may be required to negotiate over their lifelong learning trajectories. As can be observed from these themes, Japanese ELT is in many ways characterized by division and polarization. I therefore believe that many students English learners in Japan are essentially trapped between two equally constraining and potentially harmful ideological camps. Native-speakerism positions them as deficient speakers of a language that they are unable to fully attain on cultural and racial grounds while the nationalist influence of *nihonjinron* serves to reinforce the native-speakerist narrative by cementing their status as genetically-defined monolinguals and positioning all non-Japanese as their mirror opposite. Numerous other researchers have also recognized the negative impact that this ideological background can have for Japanese English learners and have made various suggestions to address these issues. These suggested approaches include greater awareness raising and legitimization of Japanese and other World Englishes (Honna & Takeshita, 1998; Konakahara, 2020; Matsuda, 2003a, 2003b), using near-peer role models to provide students with plausible visions of future L2 selves not based on a “native” model (Brown, 2008; Murphey, 1998; Walters, 2020) and a reconciliation of the spheres of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* (Nagatomo, 2014, 2022). In my approach to this study, I too recognize the impact of sociocultural factors but do not view them as immutable or in a fatalistic sense where they necessarily dictate or predetermine individuals’ experiences and beliefs. Rather, they represent

the terrain of the landscape that learners may, through agentic action, circumvent, negotiate alone or with the help of others, or indeed be bogged down by as they make their way towards their goals. These goals in turn are also subject to a process of constant revision and evolution based on the experiences and discourses they are exposed to on their learning journeys.

## **2.4. Local phenomena relevant to this study**

In the following section, I will outline two local sociocultural phenomena that, through the data analysis process, I deemed to be highly relevant to the LC community. The first of these is the *senpai/kōhai* dynamic — a vertical seniority-based system prevalent in both educational and professional spheres in Japan. I will then move on to discuss the concept of *akogare* or longing/desire, the various interpretations of its scope and essence, and how it manifests itself within a range of different settings. As well as providing basic descriptions of *senpai/kōhai* and *akogare*, I will also highlight salient links to the existing literature on TESOL, self-access language learning, and social learning spaces.

### **2.4.1. *Senpai/kōhai***

The relationship between *senpai* (senior) and *kōhai* (junior) is one that has been heavily influenced by the Chinese moral principle of *chō yō no jo* (elder over younger) (Nakane, 1970) and Confucian beliefs relating to loyalty and familial hierarchies (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). In broad terms, within these “vertical relationships” (Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Nakane, 1970) *senpai* are expected to take a paternal role as they socialize *kōhai* into the practices of their community/organization and arguably wider Japanese society (Cave, 2004; Enyo, 2013; Haghirian, 2010). In exchange for this guidance, *kōhai* are in turn required to follow the directions of their *senpai* and display their respect to their seniors through deference and the use of honorific linguistic forms such as *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language) (Davies & Ikeno, 2004; Enyo, 2013; Nakamura, Fujii, & Fudano, 2010). *Senpai/kōhai* relationships can sometimes represent a

lifelong connection that endures even after leaving the community in which they were formed (Haghirian, 2010). Connected to this interdependent relationship are the concepts of *amae* (dependence) and *giri* (obligation) (Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Sano, 2014)—*kōhai* are socialized into a dependence on their seniors for guidance and both *senpai* and *kōhai* are obliged to fulfill their respective educational roles. The *senpai/kōhai* dynamic, it has been argued, is largely introduced to adolescents through *bukatsudō* (club activities) in secondary education (Cave, 2004; Nakamura, Fujii, & Fudano, 2010; Van Ommen, 2015). A number of studies of *bukatsudō* claim that they are a primary site for the development of *senpai/kōhai* relationships because, unlike in regular classrooms, they include members of different age groups and community standing (Cave, 2004; Enyo, 2013; Nakamura, Fujii, & Fudano, 2010; Van Ommen, 2015). Furthermore, it has also been posited that students' experiences in *bukatsudō* represent a key strand of preparation for their transition into the corporate world and Japanese adulthood in general (Cave, 2004; Miller, 2013). Indeed, Cave (2004) argues that *bukatsudō* contributes to the construction of Japanese social order “through combining an appeal to individual enthusiasm and agency, opportunities for intense relationships, and demands for disciplined commitment” (p. 384).

Based on much of the literature on the vertical relationships found in *bukatsudō*, it could be surmised that the *senpai/kōhai* dynamic represents a form of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) — the internalization of social structures that we accrue throughout our lives (Miller, 2013). However, rather than viewing *senpai/kōhai* and *jouge kankei* (hierarchical relationship often based on seniority) in general as transferrable identities that endure across all situations” (Enyo, 2013, p. 139) in a supposedly homogeneous Japanese cultural field (congruent with *nihonjinron*), several studies have emphasized the variation in the structure of Japanese group dynamics (Cave, 2004; Enyo, 2013, 2015; Van Ommen, 2015). In order to examine how *senpai/kōhai* relationships and identities are enacted in actual practice, Enyo (2013, 2015)

investigated how members of a college movie club utilized certain linguistic forms in interactions depending on their seniority and other micro-contextual factors. Enyo found that rather than being a uniform phenomenon within the movie club, the salience of members' senpai or kōhai identities differed substantially depending on whether they were engaging in *on stage* (in their community role) or *off stage* (outside of community duties) talk. By analyzing members' usage of honorific language, address and reference terms, and self-framing, Enyo's findings illustrated the context-dependent nature of senpai/kōhai identity enactment and the impact of individual agency.

Numerous studies on language learning both inside and outside Japan have highlighted the impact of senpai/kōhai relationships on learner identity and affect. In terms of the positive impact of senpai/kōhai, several studies have suggested a number of ways in which a senpai/kōhai relationship may facilitate affective support for language learners. In a case study of three Japanese adult English learners who had studied the language solely within Japan, Murray (2008) utilized a narrative inquiry approach via detailed life history interviews in order to explore his participants' complex language learning journeys. Murray's criteria for participant selection were rather broad – that “the individual had learned to speak English without having studied or lived in an English-speaking country” (p. 132) – and his three participants were fairly varied in terms of background and demographic. Mable was a secretary at a university in her fifties, Francis was a professor in his late forties, and the last participant was Yuichi, a hotel desk clerk in his late twenties (all names are pseudonyms). Due to the depth and highly personal nature of narrative data, this study involved conducting two interviews with each participant. The first interview was designed to help participants relax, build rapport with the researcher, and build a more general picture of their language learning histories and experiences. Transcription and multiple rereading of this data informed the creation of the interview protocol for the second stage of participant interviews. Data from

both interviews was then thematically analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which created codes/categories upon which the researcher based his narrative interpretations. Finally, Murray held member checking sessions with each participant where he was able to clarify points of ambiguity and gain additional insights if necessary. Based on Francis's experiences in an English-speaking social learning community, Murray emphasizes the valuable scaffolding role of senpai and the opportunities this affords less experienced learners for legitimate peripheral participation in language learning CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). He also posits that as senpai are not authority figures in a formal sense, they may facilitate a sense of belonging in a low-pressure and trusted community akin to Canagarajah's (2004) concept of a "pedagogical safe house." Thompson and Mori (2015) utilized a Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) framework to analyze the experiences of Peter, an Australian college student of Japanese, who gradually progressed to full participation in a community of Japanese users. Based on observational data collected over his entire enrolment at the university, Thompson and Mori found that Peter's initial near-peer role model (Murphey & Arao, 2001) was a senpai student who he met in his first year of study and who afforded him access to both material and social resources that contributed to his linguistic development. The researchers also described how as Peter attained a senpai role in relation to other students in the program, he developed a greater sense of responsibility to his kōhai. This, in turn, stimulated heightened commitment to both their learning and his own development. Thompson and Mori's study highlights the cyclical and potentially reciprocal nature of senpai/kōhai relationships as Peter actively participated in prosocial acts in order to support the next generation of junior learners in the Japanese program. In a roughly two-year ethnographic study of a self-access social learning space in a Japanese foreign language university and 15 of its members, Mynard et al. (2020a) utilized observational, interview, and language learning history data in order to build as complete a picture as possible of the

multifaceted and dynamic nature of the social learning space community and the interpersonal relationships that existed within it. They discovered a number of instances where senpai acted as relatable “near-peer role models” (Murphey, 1998) that provided guidance, encouragement and motivation for freshman students. Furthermore, some of these freshmen then indicated that they intended to undertake the same supportive role for their new kōhai in the following academic year thus echoing the cyclical prosocial dynamic apparent in Thompson and Mori’s (2015) study and, indeed, the broader sociological literature on senpai/kōhai (Cave, 2004; Haghirian, 2010). Conversely, some studies revealed that a senpai/kōhai dynamic may also have led to negative side-effects such as increased student anxiety over being positioned as a knowledgeable role model (Ishikawa, 2012; Hooper, 2020d) and kōhai behaving passively or feeling unable to express themselves openly to senpai because of a perceived need for *enryo* (restraint) (Johnson & Ochitani, 2008; Takeuchi, 2015).

#### **2.4.2. Akogare**

The meaning of the word akogare has evolved from originally referring to “a person physically or psychologically leaving from a place they once belonged” (Nonaka, 2018, p.1) to the modern sense of the word denoting an individual’s desire/longing for or infatuation with someone or something. In her detailed analysis of akogare, Nonaka (2018) argues that the essence of akogare is its position as just out of one’s grasp and therefore essentially unattainable. Based on this claim, the definition she provides for akogare is “a sentiment in which we desire to pursue our dreams whether they be a person or an object (tangible or intangible) that is tantalizingly out of reach from us” (p. 4). Akogare is therefore tied to imagination but also implies a sense of permanent liminality as we can never reach the idealized object of our desire. In some anthropological studies, akogare has been (broadly) referred to when describing the ideal image that certain Japanese women may strive for in terms of owning or wearing a kimono (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005) or becoming a housewife

(Goldstein-Gidoni, 2017). The concept is also frequently present in pop culture such as manga (comics) and TV dramas where talented or attractive figures and escapist fantasies are the target of *akogare* for the other characters or the audience (Jacobsen, 2020; Nonaka, 2018; Takeda, 2011). Within TESOL and the majority of existing academic research referring to *akogare*, however, the scope of the concept is a considerably narrower one than Nonaka suggests — namely a desire by Japanese women or girls for the West and, more specifically, for Caucasian Western men.

One of the most influential academic works that marked the specific perspective on *akogare* now prevalent in TESOL and applied linguistics research was Kelsky's (2001) anthropological study of Japanese women's desires for the West and Western men. Kelsky argued that, to many Japanese women, the West represented the exotic as well as the possibility of change and freedom from the patriarchal norms of Japanese society. More specifically, the West was encapsulated to Japanese women in the image of the middle-class Caucasian white man.

Indeed, the white man in his ubiquitous normativity and his hegemonic (in)visibility, is impossible to ignore in the Japanese popular imagination. Just as in the West, Japan is embodied in the Japanese woman, he is the West, and all roads lead to him.

(Kelsky, 2001, p. 134)

The notion of white “native speaker” men as objects to be sold and consumed within the English language industry has been explored in numerous academic studies focusing on almost every sector of public and private education in Japan (Appleby, 2013, 2014; Bailey, 2006, 2007; Kubota, 2011, Nagatomo, 2016; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Takahashi, 2013). As can be inferred from much of this existing research, the concept of *akogare* has been predominantly framed as a gendered idea with women as the “consumers” of *akogare* and with men as its embodiment. In many ways related to this research is an assertion that *akogare* can



be also focused on a desire to gain membership to an idealized *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983) of international (Western) English speakers. Kubota's (2011) study of eikaiwa gakkou revealed how "native speakers" were commodified as "linguistic and racial categories" (p. 486) that in many cases drove the profitability of these schools. Linked to the privileging of these categories was students' desire for escapism from Japanese everyday life as they pay for the "enjoyment of being included in an English-speaking world" (p. 484). Findings from Bailey's (2007) study of eikaiwa schools were in many ways congruent with Kubota's as he described how female students' *akogare* for idealized male "native speaker" instructors was often accompanied by essentialist views of the West as an "egalitarian, meritocratic employment environment" (p. 595). The liminal (in-between/transitional) environment of the eikaiwa gakkou allowed these women to shed the rules of *seken* (self-monitoring of social norms as "the internalization of [Japanese] society's gaze" (McVeigh, 2002, p. 103)) and frame Japanese men as an oppressive antagonist mirroring the chivalry and kindness of the Western man. Within this imagined foreign community, English represented a *buki* (weapon) (Kelsky, 2001) that could be used to free Japanese women from their chains and pursue their *atarashii jibun* (new self) (Takahashi, 2013). At the same time, however, it must be noted that several studies, women were not found to be mere ideological pawns but often exhibited considerable critical awareness towards the problematic nature of these idealized images of the West and Western men (Kelsky, 2001; Takahashi, 2013).

Despite the field being dominated by an extremely narrowly-defined, gendered (and often sexualized) view of *akogare*, in recent years several researchers have attempted to reframe the concept within academia. More in line with the original Japanese usage of the word, Nonaka (2018) and Kitano (2020) define *akogare* in a far more multifaceted and potentially facilitative light rather than simply as another exemplification of Western hegemony in TESOL. While Nonaka (2018) recognizes the value of the extant research into

akogare, she argues that by conceiving of it as something more than simply romantic or sexual desire (as has been the case in many studies), akogare can “generate a snapshot of how we position the self in relation to our desired person (or object) in a given context” (p. 26). This has far broader implications for the field and is largely congruent with other theories such as the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and “discursive space” (Miyahara, 2015). There is also a link here to the senpai/kōhai relationship. Nonaka herself provides a personal example of a female senpai that she had akogare for during junior high school and described how “day after day [she] fantasized about blossoming into a perfect girl like her” (p. 5). The senpai/kōhai dynamic is arguably an apt fit for the notion of akogare as, due to the dynamic being fundamentally grounded in seniority, one’s senpai is permanently so and therefore “tantalizingly out of reach.” Nonaka’s akogare “lens” also recognizes the changing “scapes” of Japan (p. 30) and the numerous factors that have contributed to an evolving sociocultural landscape that has arguably challenged some of the dichotomous ideological standpoints over race and ethnicity that characterized much of early kokusaika. One example that she provides is the growing presence of *hafu tarento* (mixed-heritage media personalities) and the case of Elaiza Ikeda, a *hafu* model who has become a target of akogare for many Japanese people in part due to her position as a near-peer role model who is at once both relatable and enchanting. This mix in relation to akogare of “just the right amount of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Nonaka, 2008, p. 136) indicates that near-peer role models may represent rich and facilitative sources of motivation for future self-construction. In a study revealing similar implications, Kitano (2020) investigated the experiences of seven Japanese university students prior to, during, and after a four-week study abroad program in the UK. Prior to departure, Kitano identified three distinct types of akogare that the students exhibited: (1) towards an idealized English “native speaker”, (2) towards other English speakers regardless of “native speaker” status, and (3) towards things (material objects or

physical environments). Furthermore, although akogare of a romantic/sexualized nature was present in some students, it did not represent a dominant overarching theme in the data and was not limited to female students as has been suggested in the majority of existing research. Another key point of interest is that Kitano found that rather than representing a fixed belief system, akogare in some cases had evolved based on experiences in the students' lives such as in the case of Sumire, who, stemming from a study abroad experience in Mongolia, came to question the legitimacy of a Western-centric model of English.

One example of this change in beliefs can be seen in the following statement, "Like, I don't want to have the idea that it (the West) is the best. Japan has its good aspects too and Europe also has its good aspects and bad aspect" (Sumire in Kitano, 2020, p. 207).

During the study abroad period, Kitano discussed a stark contrast between the experiences and behaviors of those students with akogare for idealized "native speakers" and those who expressed akogare for simply "English speakers." The former were found to be dismissive and intensely critical of "non-native" English speakers they encountered — essentially engaging in "self-discrimination" (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). Furthermore, the gap that existed between their idealized image of "native speakers" or "the West" and the reality of life in the UK caused many of these students to become disillusioned and reluctant to take advantage of opportunities for English interaction during their stay. Conversely, the latter group viewed other "non-native" speakers as legitimate English users and near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998). Kitano describes the impact of this more facilitative strand of akogare on these students' motivation during the study abroad period:

None of these students viewed the English language as static, with one "single, idealized register" (Saniei 2011:75). Therefore, they were not compelled to regard 'other' non-standard Englishes as wrong or inferior. Each occupied an ambiguous

position somewhere between that of a legitimised English speaker and the various positions that other ELL English speakers had made for themselves, and this functioned as a “potentially empowering position” (Jackson 2008, p. 55 as cited in Kitano, 2020, p. 212-213)

In this way, Kitano viewed study abroad as a liminal experience between current and desired self or a Third Space (Bhabha, 1994) in which these students could craft new legitimate identities for themselves as English users. Bhabha (1994) describes the Third Spaces as “‘in-between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration” (p. 1). Both Nonaka’s and Kitano’s studies reveal *akogare* to be both multifaceted and malleable, something far broader and potentially facilitative than the dominant understandings of it in the field. These newer perspectives on *akogare* suggest that it has not only the potential to reinforce, but also subvert hegemonic discourses within English language education in Japan and become a means of fostering self-efficacy and positive self-concept rather than undermining it.

## **2.5. Summary**

In this chapter I have outlined some key issues in English education in Japan that I deem relevant to the experiences of LC members, the formation of the LC’s unique community of practice, and the overall focus of the current study. I will summarize below the key takeaway points from this chapter below:

- Starting from the opening of Japan to foreign powers in the 19th century, English education in Japan has been marked by division both in terms of linguistic and methodological focus (largely defined along racial lines as *hensoku* and *seisoku*) and in regards to balancing a desire for Western knowledge whilst maintaining Japanese

national identity. These divisions have in many ways endured up until the present day in the form of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*.

- Inseparable from the split in Japanese ELT are the ideologies of native-speakerism and *nihonjinron* that tie cultural understanding as well as linguistic ownership and legitimacy to notions of racial or ethnic purity. These ideologies arguably reinforce each other and frame positions of hybridity or border-crossing in deficit terms (as “non-native” or “non-Japanese”). They also serve to create simplistic “us” and “them” dichotomies between supposedly homogeneous groups. English learners in Japan are often caught in the middle — unable to reach “native” status due to it being a mere apparition constructed along racial lines while simultaneously being exposed to nationalist narratives framing Japanese as “genetically” unable to learn a language belonging to “the Other.”
- The *senpai/kōhai* dynamic is a cultural phenomenon of seniority-based vertical relationships that is introduced to students in secondary education through *bukatsudō*. It is viewed by many as a form of socialization into Japanese corporate culture and sometimes extends across entire lifetimes. Although individual agency and micro-contextual factors must be taken into account, in general *senpai* provide guidance and support to *kōhai* while they acclimate into a new community of practice, while *kōhai* reciprocate by deferring to *senpai*. This phenomenon has been described in both positive and negative terms by researchers in terms of its potential contribution to language learning.
- *Akogare* represents a desire or longing for someone or something that is “tantalizingly out of reach from us” (Nonaka, 2018, p. 4). In the majority of studies in TESOL, *akogare* has been framed in somewhat negative and narrow terms as Japanese women romantically or otherwise desiring Western Caucasian men due to the exoticism and

emancipatory freedom they represent. However, in recent years a number of studies have attempted to reframe akogare as an evolving phenomenon with the potential to disrupt as well as sustain hegemonic beliefs about English and the West.

This chapter has provided a broad overview of the sociocultural (macro) setting in which the LC's community is situated. The following chapter will narrow the focus to examine the literature on self-access learning—the institutional (meso) setting for the LC—and subsequently provide a summary of existing research on the specific micro level of language learning communities.

## Chapter 3: Self-access language learning, space, and community

### 3.1. Introduction

In the following chapter, I will move beyond relevant considerations within a macro context (English language learning in Japan) discussed in the previous chapter and narrow my focus to the particular educational setting in which this study was conducted—self-access language learning centers (SACs). The justification behind this chapter is that SACs represent an educational setting clearly distinct from classroom learning in Japan. Mynard (2019a) argues that SACs are regarded as educationally innovative in Japan due to prevailing beliefs that learning essentially occurs within a classroom where teachers “*deliver* content to learners” (p. 190, italics original). The SAC in which this study was conducted arguably represents a unique meso-level culture which must be clarified in order to fully understand the nature of the LC and the experiences and motivations of its members.

In this chapter, before providing some basic information on SACs and their common features, I will outline the underpinning concept of learner autonomy and how it has been defined and theorized. I will then illustrate some examples of SACs within Japan and learner engagement with them. From there, I will discuss the role of learner advising within SACs and its congruence with the overriding mission of the institution in which this study took place. Finally, I will explore some recurring points of interest or issues identified in the existing literature related to community-based learning in self-access environments and narrow the attention of this chapter to the specific case of learning communities within SACs. In conjunction with the macro-focus of the previous chapter, this meso-perspective illustrates the multiscalar cultural setting in which the LC community is nested as well as the factors that may influence its developing practice.

### 3.2. Language learner autonomy

In order to fully understand the SAC context in which this study was conducted and indeed the theoretical foundations of self-access learning more broadly, one must first examine the underpinning concept of language learner autonomy. Perhaps the most well-known definition of learner autonomy comes from Holec (1981), who describes it as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Holec’s groundbreaking work at the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) is still frequently cited and discussed three decades later (Edsall, 2020; Palfreyman, 2021) despite having been critically examined and expanded on in that time. One prominent update to Holec’s original definition comes from Benson (2011b), who terms learner autonomy “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p. 58). Benson’s definition is intentionally imprecise as he recognizes autonomy to be “a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times” (p. 58). Huang and Benson (2013) later analyze in greater depth two key terms of Benson’s (2011b) definition: *capacity* and *control* (See Table 2) and highlight key sub-categories that they include.



**Table 2***Huang and Benson's (2013) capacity and control learner autonomy model and sub-categories*

<b>Capacity</b>	What it is possible for someone to do (as opposed to their actions)
Ability	Having study (metacognitive) and language (metalinguistic) skills
Desire	The degree of intention to acquire a language or engage in a particular learning task
Freedom	How much learners are allowed to manage their own learning based on various external (contextual) factors
<b>Control</b>	The ability to make and act according to choices
Learning management	Ways in which learners manage where, when, and how they learn
Cognitive processing	The cognitive considerations of language learning such as attentional/ analytical processes and metacognition/reflection
Learning content	Choosing what is focused on within a broad body of knowledge (e.g., English) based on a learner's needs and goals

One misconception concerning learner autonomy is that it is synonymous with independence or learning in isolation. Benson (2011b) states that this may have resulted from a misreading of the notion of self-directed learning opportunities being wholly sufficient for autonomy development rather than just one important prerequisite (p. 14). This in turn arguably contributed to simplistic dichotomizing of learning environments, with autonomy viewed as incongruent with classroom learning, and purely the realm of individualized study or specialized spaces such as self-access centers (Benson, 2011c; 2017a). This misconception discounts the considerable role of social interaction in autonomy development that has been

discussed in a range of academic work over the last two decades (Dam et al., 1990; Little, 1999; Murray, 2014a, 2014b).

Drawing upon established principles from Vygotskian developmental psychology, Little (1999, 2003, 2004) discusses how a social-interactive view of learning is closely tied to the development of learner autonomy. Little (2004) argues that the interaction between autonomous cognitive processes and social interaction, and the role of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in extending learning are applicable to the development of language learner autonomy. He uses the term *autonomisation* (Little, 2003) to describe how teachers or self-access professionals can play a key autonomy-supportive role by facilitating students' capacity for reflection, providing opportunities for empowerment, and “maintain[ing] a learning environment in which learners can **be autonomous** in order to **become more autonomous**” (emphasis in original). This perspective highlights the dangers of cutting learners adrift and assuming they will become autonomous as it ignores the crucial role of scaffolding and interdependence in the gradual process of learner autonomy development.

In the introduction to an edited volume on the role of collaboration and interdependence in autonomy development, Murray (2014) argues, in line with Goffman's (1959) work on dramaturgical performance, that even in the case of seemingly independent learning, we are indirectly monitoring and communicating with others. Autonomous learning is therefore likely to be, at least in part, influenced by social dynamics even if these are not immediately visible.

### ***3.2.1. Previous studies into the role of the social in learner autonomy***

Taking a longitudinal ethnographic approach, Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka (2014) attempted to illustrate the role of social interaction and agency in the autonomous language learning of participants in a social learning space within a university self-access center. This study was carried out over the course of four years and focused on eleven users and staff

members of the self-access center sampled in order to provide a wide range of perspectives on the SAC's role and practice. The data for this study was initially limited to written language learning histories and interviews but was later expanded to incorporate participant observation and monitoring of their TOEIC scores. From the accumulated ethnographic data, the researchers posited that the SAC represented a place of affordances where learners could "act in accordance with [their] agency" (p. 96). This took the form of three key areas: (1) Having a safe environment where learners felt comfortable with risk-taking behaviors associated with language use, (2) The SAC staff actively promoting inter-student networking so that they could collaboratively and autonomously address ongoing issues, and (3) Affording opportunities for social interaction with peers that fell within learners' ZPDs. Based on these three areas of autonomy support, Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka argue that the students in this study were able to exercise their agency in collaboration with others in the space while learning English, making friends, while "speak[ing] as themselves" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 17). These learners were, of course, not discrete islands acting purely on their own terms, but rather members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Within their community, the members and SAC staff members supported each other, and through a Vygotskian ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), actually increased the degree to which they were able to develop and exercise their autonomy. This study highlights the importance of recognizing both individual and social elements of autonomy and in Benson's (2013) terms, "neither treat the social context as background nor erase the individuality of the learners within assumptions of social and cultural conditioning" (p. 89).

In line with a view of autonomy as "socially produced, but appropriated and made one's own" (van Lier, 2004, p. 8), Murray and Fujishima (2013) assert that among members of a social learning space that they studied, autonomy emerged from social interaction. By promoting social networking and allowing learners to help each other rather than adhering to a

top-down model of control, Murray and Fujishima claim that the social learning space management created an environment conducive to the emergence of autonomy. However, they also take this a step further by arguing that autonomy subsequently fosters enhanced awareness among learners of the potential affordances of their learning environment (physical, social, and the like) and mediates their actions thereafter. Essentially, by providing learners with an environment to build social connections and exercise their agency, one creates a situation where autonomy begets autonomy—a positive and empowering feedback loop.

In another illustrative study that foregrounds the key role of the social in autonomous language learning, Yashima (2014) adopts a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) theoretical lens in order to analyze the motivational, affective and attitudinal states of Japanese high school-age learners of English over an approximately-two-and-a-half-year course that led up to a Model United Nations project. This mixed-methods study drew upon multiple data sources including questionnaires measuring degree of intrinsic motivation and the degree of Basic Psychological Need (BPN) satisfaction (N=119) and later semi-structured qualitative interviews with seven volunteer participants from the same group. Based on the results of both the interview and questionnaire data, Yashima asserts that relatedness to others and autonomy were strongly correlated. Several of the participants freely elected to rely upon trusted others such as cram school teachers and were often stimulated by knowledgeable classmates to step up their study efforts in a manifestation of Dörnyei's (2005) *ought-to L2 self*. By comparing themselves with peers and by deriving pleasure from the practice of communicating with others in their L2, Yashima posits that learners' motivation and autonomy development could be stimulated by what she refers to as "autonomous dependency" (p. 60). Yashima's findings suggest a valuable role for autonomous dependency derived from a learner's agentic decision to rely on a trusted other while also possessing their own personal goal for language learning. In summary, this study adds more weight to the argument that autonomy and independence are

a false equivalency and frames autonomy development as a process potentially enriched by social interaction and interdependence.

This section has highlighted some basic definitions of learner autonomy and has foregrounded the prominent role of the social in its emergence and development. In the following section, I outline the role of SACs in the field of learner autonomy. I will describe how the changing nature of SACs has mirrored the evolving understanding of learner autonomy and the ways in which they currently reflect a recognition of the considerable impact of social interaction on autonomy development.

### **3.3. Self-access language learning**

As one might expect, definitions of self-access language learning centers have evolved along with developments in the field of self-access learning and, more broadly, learner autonomy. Early definitions framed SACs as sites for learners to find and use learning materials for their self-study. Sheerin (1991, as cited in Thornton, 2021b) represents a clear case of this in which SACs were even termed as the materials themselves—“a way of describing materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own” (p. 143). As the interdependence and social mediation inherent in learner autonomy became increasingly recognized (see the previous section), SAC facilities and understandings of what a SAC is also evolved. There was also a more practical catalyst for SAC evolution in that, due to the rapid development of web and mobile technologies, the provision of physical learning materials at a fixed site was becoming an increasingly antiquated concept (Reinders, 2012; Thornton, 2021b).

Mynard (2016b) provides a clear example of a contemporary definition of a SAC as a “person-centered learning environment that actively promote[s] learner autonomy both within and outside the space” (p. 9). The phrase “within and outside the space” in Mynard’s definition also situates SACs within a larger learning ecology. This is congruent with

Benson's (2017a) call for self-access environments to be viewed as "one of many settings for language learning that potentially make up the language learning environments of its users" (p. 142). As opposed to the positioning of SACs as "an optional extra" (Benson, 2017a, p. 135) or a replacement for traditional classroom settings, Benson asserts that SACs and the opportunities for informal or interest-based language that they provide represent a valuable site within a broader language learning landscape that complements classroom instruction. Given the increased recognition within the field of learning settings beyond the classroom (Benson, 2017a; Benson & Reinders, 2011), it is indeed surprising that the majority of learner autonomy research appears to be focused on classroom settings and teacher-fronted instructional practices (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Adopting a learner (rather than teacher) perspective on teacher autonomy (Benson, 2008) and exploring the ways in which learners exercise autonomy across a landscape incorporating multiple learning sites is to date underrepresented and something that SAC-oriented research can indeed contribute to.

As implied by Mynard's (2016b) updated SAC definition of "person-centered learning environment," modern SACs tend to be focused less on materials and more on social learning and affective support for learners (Mynard, 2019a, 2019b; Tassinari, 2017; Thornton, 2021b). Mynard and Navarro (2010) discuss how dialogue underpins practice within their SAC as learners are supported and develop autonomy through written and spoken interaction with learning advisors and via regular interaction with peers. Tassinari (2017) also foregrounds the role of social support and exchange within SACs as she advocates for involving not only SAC staff, but also teachers and learners in the development and management of the facility and facilitating sustained dialogue between all parties with the hope that a community of practice will emerge.

This paradigm shift (SAC as materials repository to SAC as social learning community) within the field of self-access is described well by Everhard (2012) as she refers

to a change in emphasis from *access* (provision of materials and resources) to *self* (developing autonomy as “a way of being that has to be discovered and rediscovered” (p. 379)). This concept of autonomy both as a capacity (Huang & Benson, 2013) and also something that must be discovered leads us to another key facet of contemporary SACs—the role of learner training or advising.

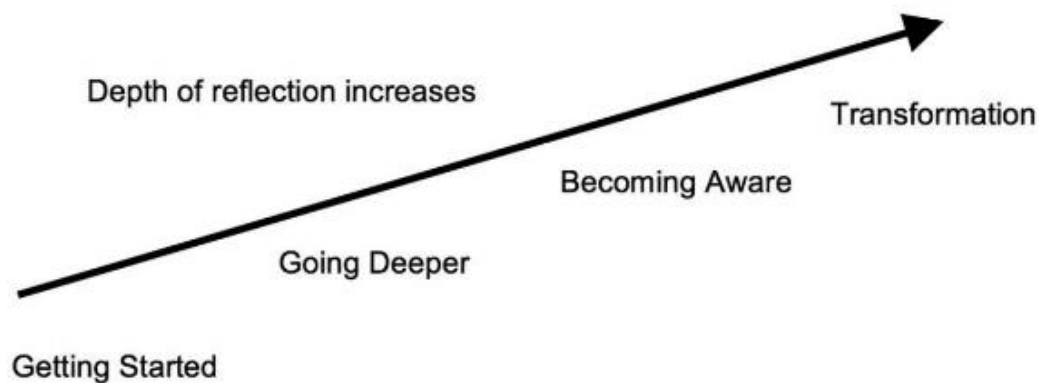
The importance of some type of learner training in developing learner autonomy has existed since Holec’s first work at CRAPEL where counselors supported the learners at the center. Gremmo and Riley’s (1995) analysis of the history of self-access also emphasized the “crucial” role of learner training in effective SACs (p. 160), stating that without it and by simply focusing on materials provision, SACs would simply follow the same fate as the unsuccessful language labs that preceded them. Advising in language learning (ALL) (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mynard & Carson, 2012) has grown from the trailblazing work of CRAPEL’s counselors in the 1980s and now draws upon insights from the fields of humanistic counseling (Mynard & Carson, 2012), life coaching (Kato & Mynard, 2016), and mainstream psychological theories such as SCT and self-determination theory (Mynard, 2021). Furthermore, some SACs in Japan have implemented peer-mentoring or peer-advising programs in which students are given ALL training and offer one-on-one advising sessions to support other students with issues such as anxiety management and goal setting (Curry & Watkins, 2016; Takahashi & Fukumura, 2021). Peer advising taking place within a classroom setting has also been found to offer similar types of learner support. Kao (2012) reported that the top three skills exhibited by (untrained) peer advisors in a remedial English course were “guiding the advisee to think about learning needs,” “showing empathy,” and “encouraging the advisee to exploit the learning resources in their learning surrounding” (p. 93). In addition, the peer advisors appeared to have been positioned by some students as near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998) as they were able to relate to and gain encouragement from hearing about

their advisor’s language learning history. This can be seen in the following comments from one of Kao’s participants: “Our advisor is really cool. She always told us her own learning stories that I found extremely useful... Although I think my English did not improve that much, I no longer dislike English that much...” (p. 99).

Kato and Mynard (2016) describe ALL as being based on intentional reflective dialogue (IRD) which differs from naturally occurring dialogue and promotes deeper reflection and self-analysis. Through this intentional dialogue with a learning advisor, learners are supported as they progress along a transformational trajectory (see Figure 1) in which they gradually develop into “autonomous language learners who are aware of themselves and their language learning processes” (Mynard, 2021, p. 54). At the first stage (Getting started), learners are largely unaware of how to manage their own learning and may still view advisors as someone with all the answers. However, through continued IRD with the advisor and by using various tools such as reflective journals or learning plans, learners can progress to the final stage (transformation). At this stage they “have full ownership of their learning” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 15) and are able to effectively self-analyze while setting and managing their own learning goals.

**Figure 1**

*The learning trajectory (Kato & Mynard, 2016)*





One concept within ALL that has particular relevance to this study is the *aha moment* (Kato & Mynard, 2016). An *aha moment* is a crucial point during an ALL session at which “a learner (or advisor) suddenly reaches a deep sense of understanding about a significant factor” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. xxi). IRD is a predominantly non-directive mediational tool that scaffolds advisees’ awareness of their own learning and helps them to “put the pieces of a puzzle together” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 156) thus laying the groundwork for *aha moments* to occur. *Aha moments* can sometimes come in the form of viewpoint switching where learners are encouraged to form alternative interpretations of a given learning experience or situation and then reflect on it from different perspectives. These various examples of ALL may be interpreted as social resources (Zittoun, 2008) that mediate learners’ transitions into unfamiliar autonomy-supportive environments like SACs that may bear little resemblance to the teacher-fronted classrooms that students commonly experience in junior high and high school (Mynard, 2019a). In this sense, ALL’s mediational role is not simply limited to the development of linguistic knowledge, but extends to the scaffolding of transition between educational spheres of experience (Zittoun, 2006). Benson (2017a) supports these claims as he asserts that individual learners have varying degrees of agency and experience as autonomous learners as they enter a SAC. He states ALL is one autonomy-supportive pedagogical approach that can encourage learners to proactively engage with the learning resources available to them across various learning environments.

### ***3.3.1. Previous studies relating to self-access language learning and ALL***

Numerous studies have investigated learners’ perceptions of self-access learning and their patterns of SAC usage (Acuña González et al., 2015; Adamson & Fujimoto-Adamson, 2012; Gillies, 2010; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Mynard et al., 2020a; Shelton-Strong, 2020; Takahashi & Fukumura, 2021; Thornton, 2020). In this section, I will introduce some examples of existing research that offer valuable insights relevant to the current study

regarding the various ways in which self-access language learning may serve language learners' developmental needs.

In a study of a SAC within a large public Japanese university, Hughes, Krug, and Vye (2012) collected survey data over a one-year period from 30 regular undergraduate users (average 22 visits per academic year) of a self-access center. The survey instrument utilized was designed to collect data based on five key areas: (1) what led to initial discovery of the SAC, (2) what factors led to their initial SAC usage, (3) what influenced continued SAC usage, (4) what they valued about the SAC, and (5) what they felt could be done to improve support for future SAC users. Some of the key findings that are of particular relevance to the current study pertain to what motivated learners to initially use the SAC and what subsequently stimulated their continued use of the center over time. While learners initially visited the SAC based on self-oriented factors, such as simply developing their language skills, it was found that it was other- or peer-oriented factors like socializing that led them to continue attending. One respondent stated that “[g]ood atmosphere is one of the reasons why I continue to come to the [SAC]. I can have very good time. I can make friends with a lot of people and talking with them is very fun!” (p. 175). Conversely, it was also discovered that a number of students experienced discomfort upon initially entering the SAC and several respondents advocated for increased affective support or scaffolding for SAC newcomers. Furthermore, of the social resources available to users of the SAC featured in this study, the majority of respondents claimed that peer-advising was more valuable than advising from staff in terms of learning support, social support, and provision of content/knowledge. In sum, these findings suggest a considerable role for social factors and peer-learning within self-access as well as the importance of considering affective support for SAC users.

In a more recent and in-depth analysis of a SAC environment utilizing a Self-Determination Theory framework, Mynard and Shelton-Strong (2020) examine the degree to

which a Japanese university SAC satisfies its users' Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The study, situated within an interpretative perspective, collected data from both student SAC users and learning advisors that worked at the SAC in order to gain a well-rounded perspective from as many institutional stakeholders as possible. Data was collected from structured interviews with 108 students, online survey responses from 280 students, survey responses from 11 learning advisors, and one final focus group discussion based on survey responses that included all 11 learning advisors. This data was initially analyzed inductively as the researchers examined and coded the survey and interview data for emergent themes. These themes were then analyzed during a second stage in which the themes were examined typologically (Hatch, 2002) in relation to the three BPNs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The student data revealed that opportunities for social interaction in English within the SAC with peers, teachers, and learning advisors appeared to support all three BPNs for student users. However, it was also evident that student competence was at times negatively affected by numerous factors including lack of competence and perceived lack of English ability. Although there existed many chances for social interaction in the L2 within the SAC, it was apparent that these negative affective factors may have been preventing students from actually making use of these opportunities. Based on both the student and learning advisor data, Mynard and Shelton-Strong assert that many students "continue to feel ill-prepared to interact casually in the [SAC] with other speakers of English" (p. 106) and that using positive examples of successful near-peer role models who have flourished within the SAC may be a promising means of addressing this issue. In addition, student-run learning communities and naturally-emerging student CoPs are noted by the researchers to be potentially promising venues for the promotion of learner leadership and for relatedness-supporting socialization of new students into a SAC environment.

As discussed in the previous section, ALL is a key element of self-access language learning that can greatly contribute to learners' self-awareness and understanding of their learning lives. To explore the potential impact of ALL on learner development, Watkins (2015) carried out a one-year case study of one language learner, Rin, a Japanese university student who had been participating in advising sessions with the researcher within the university's SAC. Based on their advising sessions, the written reflective journals that Rin kept, and one final reflective report written at the end of the academic year, Watkins analyzed the data via an internally-developed self-directed language learning assessment rubric based on established learner autonomy principles from leading authorities in the field (Benson, 2011b; Holec, 1981). Watkins found that Rin gradually developed a greater sense of control over her learning over the course of the year. From the assessment rubric, it was discovered that Rin had increased in her awareness of effective goal-setting practices, awareness of appropriate learning resources, and had managed to develop more effective learning strategies for vocabulary study and speaking practice. Through IRD, the learner was given indirect guidance that facilitated her identification of learning obstacles and her work to resolve them autonomously. Watkins states that the learning advisor's role was to *plant seeds* by posing reflective questions for the learner to consider, but that [h]ow fast the seed grows, or whether it grows at all... is entirely dependent on the learner" (p. 457). In Watkins' study, one can observe how through ALL, learners can be helped to enhance their awareness of the various learning resources (physical, social, cognitive, etc.) that they have available to them in a SAC while at the same time ensuring their ownership of their learning.

The previous sections have demonstrated how social interaction and dialogue have become central conceptual pillars in terms of learner autonomy in a broader sense, and also perspectives on how learner autonomy should be fostered within self-access environments. In line with the "social turn" in not only self-access but SLA in general, one component of

modern SACs that has grown in prominence and attracted attention from researchers in recent years has been the social learning space. In the following section, I will describe what social learning spaces (SLS) are, their benefits, existing research findings relating to community formation within SLS, and prominent recommendations for SLS management.

### **3.4. Social learning spaces**

#### ***3.4.1. Definitions and concepts***

Although originally emerging from the concept of library learning commons or the broader field of self-access learning, social learning spaces are more specifically designed to develop language learning through interaction in an informal setting (Kushida, 2020b; Murray & Fujishima, 2016a). In a more concrete sense, SLSs tend to be informal, comfortably furnished spaces (often within a self-access center) where students can come and interact in their target language. From a theoretical perspective, SLSs are grounded in social constructivism. They provide users with opportunities to interact with others, which in turn facilitates them “mak[ing] sense of new information as they negotiate meaning and incorporate it into their existing schemata” (Kushida, 2020b, p. 13). Several studies have also highlighted an intercultural component of SLSs as they function as a venue for both exchange and local students to learn together in a hybridized “third-space” (Kramersch, 2009)—a liminal environment simultaneously inside and outside of the home culture (Kurokawa, Yoshida, Lewis, Igarashi, & Kuradate, 2013; Murray & Fujishima, 2016c; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2022). This “in between-ness” (Turner 1967; Van Gennep, 2019) has led some to describe SLS as *heterotopias*, Foucault’s (1986) term for “a place that is capable of juxtaposing several spaces in a single real space and that creates an illusion of other places that are not there or nowhere” (Igarashi, 2016, p. 51). SLSs are often characterized by their multicultural and multilingual users with decoration and atmosphere that conjures an image of otherworldliness or liminality.

We see this in a quotation from Nakamoto (2016) relating a story about the L-café, an SLS at Okayama University.

“L-café is like an airport to me,” one of my friends described the L-café to freshmen who were interested in going there. “Everybody is from different countries, all different languages are spoken, and all this makes the atmosphere so special that L-café seems to be anywhere but Japan.” (p. 81)

As a heterotopic setting, an SLS can represent both anxiety and possibility to its users. Igarashi (2016) discusses how the liminal atmosphere of the L-café that was at the same time familiar and unfamiliar to students contributed to a sense of *displacement* and discomfort. This sense of displacement and the classification of an SLS as heterotopic appears to be congruent with several existing studies that highlight the difficulty involved for students initially trying to enter an SLS (Fujimoto, 2016; Gillies, 2010; Hooper, 2020c; Kushida, 2020a; Kuwada, 2016; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2019). Although an SLS is superficially open to all students regardless of status, it has been reported that many feel excluded and uncomfortable about entering these spaces. Heterotopias, according to Foucault (1986, as cited in Murray & Fujishima, 2016c), may feature “pure and simple openings” but then reveal “curious restrictions” (p. 26). This sense of not belonging is perhaps further enhanced by the ideological gap between *eigo* and *eikaiwa* discussed in Chapter 2. Students largely educated within an *eigo*-dominant system may be suddenly faced with a heavily *eikaiwa*-driven environment inhabited by both non-Japanese students and Japanese students fluent in English (Mynard, Burke, Hooper, & Sampson, 2020). The instability of a heterotopia, however, also offers opportunities for carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) behavior where standard social dynamics, rules, or hierarchies can be disrupted and new selves may be experimented with (Kurokawa et al., 2013; Murray & Fujishima, 2016c). In this way, SLSs represent imaginative “spaces of possibilities” (Murray, 2018, p. 110) where learners can “expose [them]selves to

the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations” (Wenger, 1998, p. 185).

Expanding on Benson’s (2011a) four-dimensional model (location/formality/pedagogy/locus of control) for analyzing out-of-class learning (see Table 3), Chik (2014), in her study of autonomous language learning through video games, proposes that an additional dimension of *trajectory* be added to any analysis of an out-of-class learning environment such as an SLS.

**Table 3**

*Benson’s (2011a) four dimensions of learning beyond the classroom (adapted from Benson, 2011a; Murray & Fujishima, 2016c)*

Location	The setting where learning takes place (both inside and outside of school), e.g., public speaking competitions, online gaming, private conversation schools, tutoring, English clubs, etc.
Formality	How much learning is tied to institutional courses that in turn lead to acquiring formal/recognized qualifications.
Pedagogy	The degree or manner in which instruction is carried out in a learning environment, e.g., instructed/self-instructed/non-instructed/naturalistic.
Locus of control	The extent to which the learner is in control of their own learning. “[W]ho makes the major decisions about learning and teaching—the learner or someone else?” (Benson, 2011a, p. 12)

By *trajectory*, Chik (2014) is referring to how, in her study, learners progressed from one game to another in a series/genre, or how linguistic development facilitates progression across a learning landscape by affording learners access to more specialized games that

include more complex language. Trajectory represents the temporal or spatial dimension within the study of out-of-class learning and thus gels well with Benson's (2017a) and Mynard's (2016b) ecological perspectives of self-access centers as existing as but one location within individuals' language learning landscapes. Chik incorporates Goffman's (1968) notion of *career* to illustrate how L2 learners utilize experiences and resources accumulated through participation in different communities over time in order to sustain and manage learning effort and development. Murray and Fujishima (2016c) assert that when examining participation in SLSs, one ought to consider both the individual (and their historical/spatial trajectory) and the social networks in which they are participating. Rather than solely focusing on the SLS in isolated terms as a space of possibilities, it makes sense to regard SLSs as one point of contact for a "personal learning system... traveling across "a landscape of possibilities" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 49)" (p. 133). With this conceptualization in mind, I will proceed by providing some relevant examples of studies centered on social learning spaces and their users.

### ***3.4.2. Previous studies of SLSs***

Through ethnographic data collection (language learning, histories, participant observation, and interviews) within a three-year longitudinal study, Balçıkanlı (2018) examined the perspectives and experiences of ten adult English learners participating in the English Café, a non-institutional social learning space in Turkey. Balçıkanlı was interested in how the notion of a "place" is socially constructed and why learners autonomously elect to use a particular learning space. The findings of this study can be categorized into five main areas. Firstly, the researcher argues that the repeated actions (or in Wenger's (1998) terms, *practice*) of the SLS users – practicing English due to a perceived lack of opportunities to do so during formal language classes – came to shape the identity of the English Café. Essentially, space and practice became entwined. The second point foregrounded the central role of socializing



in the community and how social interactions also contribute greatly to the way the SLS is framed by its users. Linked to this was the third finding: the importance of members sharing their life histories and therefore learning more deeply about each other. Balçıkanlı's next finding echoed Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka's (2014) earlier research (see section 3.2.1) as she claims that the interaction occurring within the SLS between higher and lower proficiency English users led to the creation of a ZPD that stimulated linguistic development. Finally, the fifth finding focused on the central role of emotions and confidence within the English Café. Balçıkanlı asserts that the SLS featured a low-pressure environment that subsequently encouraged learners to take risks and more actively participate in the group's practice.

I have always been concerned about my English. Whenever I open my mouth to say something, I feel nervous that I will make grammar and pronunciation mistakes, which prevent me from speaking. The first time I came here, I was quite nervous. My English would not be enough to practise English. As time went by, I got used to it thanks to other participants' help. I started to feel very relaxed to try out new things I learned from my peers. (Deniz, in Balçıkanlı, 2018, p. 69)

In summary, Balçıkanlı's study highlights the potentially facilitative impact of belonging and sense of community within less-formal educational settings such as SLSs. Furthermore, one salient and recurring point within this study is the closely-knit relationship between emotional wellbeing, the development of belonging through social relationships, and the development of autonomous language learning practices.

In a more recent study, Polo-Pérez and Holmes (2022) add a perspective on SLS informed more by multilingualism and the creation of heterotopic spaces for emotion and identity work. In line with much of the existing research into SLS, this study utilized an ethnographic approach. The research was conducted over a three-year period and analyzed data from researcher journals, audio recordings of naturally-occurring participant

conversations, semi-structured interviews (17 participants), and written participant reflections (8 participants). Two Language Cafés (LCs) were the research sites. The first (LC1) was a multilingual SLS within a UK university and participants were domestic and international students who came to practice a wide range of different languages. The other SLS (LC2) was situated in a pub and was a place where adults from varying backgrounds came to practice speaking French. All of the analysis was inductive/data-driven and carried out via thematic analysis. Polo-Pérez and Holmes identified three salient areas that formed points of commonality between both LC1 and LC2. These were 1. Ongoing emotion work, 2. Temporarily inhabiting an *otro mundo* (another world), and 3. Sharing the enjoyment of language learning via metalanguaging. In terms of the first point, the researchers highlight the intense and often negative emotions that were experienced before and while initially entering an SLS. This was eventually replaced by feelings of relief and a sense of safety, just as in Balçıkanlı's (2018) study, that served to both facilitate and be facilitated by social interaction with other members. As to the second theme, a number of participants described how the LCs represented a space "outside of the dominant culture" (p. 204) where they could temporarily inhabit in order to experience different things and step into a more multilingual identity. This is in essence an example of the heterotopic nature of many SLS, a concept that was previously introduced in Section 3.4.1. The final theme that was drawn from the data was participants' shared experiences and identity as language learners and the way that they regarded learning languages not simply as an instrumental endeavor for social mobility or professional advancement, but rather something that they derived great pleasure from. Participants often emphasized the fun of analyzing the intricacies of language and the fulfilment of using it to interact with people throughout the globe. This in turn contributed to a sense of shared identity within each of the LCs. Polo-Pérez and Holmes conclude by echoing Benson's (2017a) perspectives as they foreground the role of SLS as a complement to, rather than a replacement

for, classroom-based learning. They further argue that one potentially fruitful avenue for future inquiry would be a more critically-oriented analysis of SLSs that examines broader power structures and how they influence what elements of practice or voices are regarded as more or less legitimate within an SLS.

One final study that merits attention here due to its similarity to the current study in terms of participants and research setting is a qualitative study by Kurokawa et al. (2013). This research investigates what motivates student participation in the Plurilingual Lounge, an SLS at Keio University in Japan, what benefits do users feel that they obtained from participating in the Plurilingual Lounge, and what staff and users feel could be done to improve the SLS in the future. This study was based on data acquired from focus groups involving 24 participants that included both domestic (17) and international (7) students. Data was analyzed inductively through a grounded theory approach and thematic analysis. One of the key findings of the study was that many of the Plurilingual Lounge's Japanese users regarded it as a place where they could temporarily disregard cultural norms such as *jouge kankei* and interact in a more flattened power structure. This is one more manifestation of the heterotopic *otro mundo* described in Polo-Pérez and Holmes' (2022) study as well as in other SLS-based research (Hooper, 2020c; Igarashi, 2016). Conversely, there were some participants who emphasized the considerable emotional labor and anxiety that was associated with initially entering the SLS.

I don't want to have to come alone, because I have to speak in English and speaking in English is so difficult for me, because I don't speak correct English. I'm gonna care about grammars and tense, and everything. Or there are many people who speak better English than I am, and I am so scared to talk to them, because they are gonna think, 'ha, she doesn't speak anything!' (Kanae, in Kurokawa et al., 2013, p. 123)

Based on the studies outlined above, there appears to be a number of relatively consistent themes that are potentially relevant to the current study. Namely, that SLSs tend to represent informal and heterotopic environments. Through an atmosphere that facilitates risk taking and social interaction with people differing backgrounds and levels of linguistic proficiency, learners seem to be able to enjoy the process of language learning while also pushing themselves to grow as autonomous learners. However, particularly within the initial stages of entering an SLS, many learners appear to experience considerable emotional stress stemming from language anxiety and a lack of belonging due to the unfamiliar nature of the environment. In the following section, I will further highlight the variegated roles that SLSs have been found to have within the existing literature along the benefits that they have reportedly afforded language learners.

#### ***3.4.3. Roles and benefits of SLSs***

Just as individual learners enter a SAC with differing levels of agency and experience of autonomous learning, students enter SLSs with complex and varied perspectives on how they wish to use the space and its potential role in their development. Taking an ecological perspective inspired by van Lier (2004) on the learning affordances provided by an SLS (The L-café), Murray and Fujishima (2016c) propose that the L-café afforded its users the following possibilities:

- Learning language in a structured or unstructured format with more experienced peers in their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978)
- Boosting their motivation by surrounding themselves with other motivated people similar to themselves in some way (same interests/goals, etc.)
- Engaging in intercultural exchange and gaining interest about cultural differences
- Making friends from their home country and abroad
- Being provided with (or providing) encouragement and emotional support

- Operationalizing language knowledge through conversation practice
- Giving and receiving advice on a range of different topics
- Developing teaching skills
- Having fun with friends and participating in enjoyable events (Halloween Party, Christmas Party, cherry blossom viewing, etc.)

In this section, I will focus on a number of these affordances that language learner participants in other SLS-focused studies over the last decade have identified as being notable benefits of SLS participation.

#### *Learning and using the target language*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the primary perceived benefits of SLS use is tied to its role as a venue for conversation practice. Although a number of study participants recognize the value of building knowledge of language in structured classes, many believe that this alone lacks affordances for skill and fluency building (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Hooper, 2020d; Mynard et al., 2020b). Furthermore, in EFL contexts such as Japan, exposure to the target language is largely limited to classroom instruction. Some learners view an SLS as a means of gaining more sustained contact with the languages they wish to learn, be it receptive or productive (Kurokawa et al., 2013; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; Murray & Fujishima, 2016b).

#### *Boosting language learning motivation*

In a case study based on semi-structured interviews over a two-year period with Ryunosuke, one frequent SLS user, Hooper (2019) found that Ryunosuke would often attend the SLS in order to get motivation from being around senior users of the space that he regarded as “active” (p. 119). The impact of this type of near-peer role model (Murphey, 1998; Wang, 2020) on language learners’ motivation and community participation has been discussed in a range of SLS-based studies (Acuña González, Avila Pardo, & Holmes Lewendon, 2015; Hooper, 2020a; Kuwada, 2016) as well as more broadly in language

learning psychology research (Muir, Dörnyei, & Adolphs, 2021; Murphey & Arao, 2001; Pham, 2016; Walters, 2020). As communities form within SLSs, this motivational support can take the form of a sense of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018)—"a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). An example of this can be found in an account by Kuwada (2016), who describes how contact with a community of successful near-peers sustained his motivation for learning English:

When I was talking with those Japanese students in English, I was amazed by their English skills just as I was by my teacher in junior high school. There was a wooden board on a wall of the English Café where Japanese students attached notes with their TOEIC scores. Every time I looked at notes on the board with the score of 990 written on them, I could uplift myself. (p. 122)

#### *Intercultural exchange and interest*

A further role of SLSs that has been raised in numerous studies is as a site for intercultural exchange and exposure to different cultural perspectives (Bağcıkanlı, 2018; Kurokawa et al., 2013; Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Mynard et al., 2020a). Murray and Fujishima (2016c) argue that although feelings of displacement that students experience within the foreign-like heterotopic environment of an SLS can be uncomfortable, they also eventually bring about personal growth. Tied in part to another heterotopic characteristic of dominant social norms being challenged and overturned, Kurokawa et al. (2013) and Murray and Fujishima (2013) describe how the presence of exchange students and an international atmosphere meant that students could discard certain Japanese social practices in an SLS. Some students reported that being exposed to a variety of worldviews allowed them to discuss controversial topics that would have been taboo in Japanese society and also led them to downplay hierarchical social dynamics such as senpai/kōhai relationships. Furthermore, the

comparatively free-form conversations that students participate in within an SLS tend to deal with a far wider and more diverse range of topics than students tend to experience in language classrooms based on textbook content (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014). We may also view “intercultural” in a number of different ways. For example, an SLS is a venue for students to meet people from different regions of the same country, age groups, (Balçıkanlı, 2018) or different *technical cultures* (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004) with students studying other major subjects having the chance to learn about one another (Taw, 2020).

### *Making friends*

Related in part to affordances for international exchange is the ability for SLS users to make friends. The ability to form new friendships with other students appears to be an important role of an SLS as it helps to fulfill certain social and psychological needs for students who are, in many cases, living away from home for the first time in their lives (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Murray et al., 2014). Previous research has shown that the benefits of SLS participation regarding making friends were recognized by both local and foreign exchange students and was perceived by students to stimulate L2 development and sustain language learning motivation (Kurokawa et al., 2013; Miura, 2016; Murray & Fujishima, 2013). Lyon’s (2020) case study of Kokon, a Japanese SLS user, illustrated the considerable impact that friendship can have on SLS participation. Kokon described how making friends was one of her main motives for originally coming to the SLS, and remained a key reason why she continued to frequent the space, often multiple times per day: “I have classes and almost every lunch time I come to the [SLS] and I ate lunch and after classes and if I have time after school I just sitting around” (Kokon, in Lyon, 2020, p. 52).

### *Emotional and psychological support*

As mentioned in the preceding section, language development alone does not account for why students choose to frequent an SLS. Through affordances such as the ability to make

friends, an SLS may also act as a site for emotional or psychological support. Several studies have reported that students regarded SLSs as “safe” places, in that they were sites where they could openly express their insecurities about language learning, ask for advice, receive encouragement, and freely celebrate their successes (Murray & Fujishima, 2013). Murray et al. (2014) argue that in this sense, an SLS may represent a *safe house*—an “extrapedagogical” free space “relatively free from surveillance, especially by authority figures” (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 121). In such a space, students were able to openly air their grievances, critiques, or any other points that mattered to them without fear of censure or reprisal from teachers and other people in authority. Here again, we see the heterotopic nature of an SLS. While the liminality or “in-betweenness” of an SLS can indeed bring about displacement and feelings of discomfort, Murray and Fujishima (2016c) also state that this can also bring about personal growth. Being “in between” can therefore be seen as a double-edged sword. Initial unfamiliarity and confusion may be replaced by disruption to existing social norms and a willingness to take more risks and express oneself more freely. A further way that emotional support may be fostered within an SLS is through the presence of near-peer role models who engage in *prosocial behaviors*— “intentional actions that help or benefit others” (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010, p. 222)—and wish to support future generations of SLS users. From cases such as in Hooper (2020d), Miyake (2016), Tanimoto (2016), and Kuwada (2016), we see established SLS members expressing a desire to contribute to the SLS. One explicit example of this can be observed in Miyake (2016) in which she states, “The L-café gave me a lot of things. Thus, at this time, I would like to return something nice to the L-café as a token of my appreciation, such as working there and helping newcomers” (p. 90).

Murray and Fujishima (2016c) state that this type of *reciprocity*—“contexts of mutual exchange or benefit in which people support or help each other in similar ways or to more or less the same degree” (p. 143)—often came in the form of a willingness to help newcomers to



the SLS. Hooper (2020d), taking a CoP perspective, highlights prosocial behavior as an example of *community* in Wenger et al's (2002) terms. He illustrates how students' memories of their own hardships when initially entering the space may have catalyzed their desire to help socialize new students into the SLS community.

The previous section has outlined the varied definitions of SLSs, noted some relevant theoretical concepts (heterotopia, displacement, and trajectory) and discussed some of key affordances that they offer language learners. In the following section, I will introduce some recurring factors that have been found to facilitate or constrain participation in social learning within out-of-class or self-access settings.

### **3.5. Issues relating to SLS participation**

In this section, based on the existing literature on SLSs, I will focus in more detail on four issues that have been found to influence students' participation in self-access social learning spaces. The four issues that this section is centered around are (1) language policy, (2) near-peer role models, (3) student ownership, and (4) accessibility.

#### **3.5.1. Language policy**

In the most simplistic sense, the discussion over language policy in SLSs and self-access language learning in general is based on whether or not to implement an English-only policy in a learning space. Regarding the benefits of an English-only policy, the provision of a space where students (particularly within an EFL context such as Japan) are encouraged to use their target language in a communicative way is likely to be of benefit to many students—particularly those that are unable to enter a study abroad program (Barrs, 2010). Furthermore, according to survey data collected to inform the creation of a new SAC at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Imamura (2018) showed that over 50% of students desired an English-only policy in most areas of the SAC, with approximately 70% of respondents stating that at least some English-only spaces should be included. Gillies (2010) reported that several

student SAC users felt that an English-only environment contributed to the SAC's pseudo-foreign atmosphere. This, in turn, related to their ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2005) and stimulated their motivation for language learning. Indeed, some SLS users have been found to strongly support an English-only policy, even to the point of policing it by encouraging other students to avoid L1 use (Hooper, 2020d; Lyon, 2020).

Conversely, there are also perspectives that question the widespread adoption of an English-only policy in SACs or SLSs. As SACs are, for the most part, concerned with the cultivation of learner autonomy, both Kushida (2020b) and Mynard (2019a) discuss how imposing a strict top-down language policy onto SAC users may be viewed as incongruent with a center's principles. Furthermore, in line with developments in the broader field of applied linguistics regarding the promotion of multilingualism or translanguaging, Imamura (2018) asserts that SACs should consider establishing multilingual SLSs where learners can use multiple linguistic resources to scaffold their target language development. A closely related issue that will be discussed in more detail in section 3.5.4. is accessibility. A number of researchers have shown that an English-only policy may add to the anxiety that many lower-proficiency English users experience when initially trying to participate in a SAC or SLS (Adamson & Fujimoto-Adamson, 2012; Barrs, 2010; Gillies, 2010; Sampson, 2020b; Thornton, 2018, 2020). As discussed in section 3.4.1., participation in an SLS may be a departure from familiarity for many students and the "foreignness" of the space (Gillies, 2010; Jones, 1995) can represent both opportunity and threat (displacement) (Murray & Fujishima, 2016c). In Japan, this is arguably heightened in the case of a strict English-only policy as it diverges dramatically from the *eigo*-oriented English instruction that many Japanese students have received in secondary education (see section 2.3.1.). Adamson and Fujimoto-Adamson (2012), Thornton and Noguchi (2016), Werner and Von Joo (2018), and Wongsarnpigoon and

Imamura (2020) are all examples of SACs that have adopted a translanguaging or more relaxed language policy in order to mediate new students' acclimatization to a SAC or SLS.

In an attempt to move beyond a simple dichotomizing of the language policy issue (English-only vs. translanguaging), Mynard et al. (2020c, p. 175) present varying positions as existing along a continuum (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*SAC language policy continuum*

A	B	C	D
<b>A. Strictly enforce the TL use</b> - Staff give constant reminders - Students are asked to leave if policy is not followed	<b>B. Encourage the TL</b> - Some opportunistic reminders - Staff and visitors are asked to use TL - Scaffolding/ interventions - Clear signage	<b>C. Gently encourage TL</b> - Some signage - Some scaffolding - Staff praise students for using the TL	<b>D. Students are fully responsible</b> - No signs or interventions - Rely on student role models / peers to promote TL use
Believe that we need to enforce the policy because students are unable to take responsibility.	Believe that we have a responsibility to help students to follow the policy for their own benefit.	Believe that if students do not follow the policy, it's their choice, but we should try to help them.	Accept that if students do not follow the policy, it's their choice.

Further approaches include, just as in the case of the SAC at KUIS (Imamura, 2018; Wongsarnpigoon & Imamura, 2020), inviting student perspectives on language policy, having a variable policy depending on different areas of a SAC, and providing practical or motivational support for students who may be struggling with an English-only setting. One important point to note is that while the issue of language policy is a major area of consideration within Japan-based SACs, it does not appear to feature as prominently in other settings with relatively few studies addressing the issue (Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2022; Zaragoza, 2011). One can only speculate on why this is the case, but it may conceivably be related to the issue of the “English allergy” (Kubota, 1998) and the reportedly high degree of

anxiety tied to English proficiency and use within the country. Furthermore, transitioning into eikaiwa-oriented environments (like many SACs) is likely to be challenging for students who have encountered few opportunities for communicative practice in English within ego-dominated junior high and high school classes (see sections 2.2. and 2.3.1.).

### ***3.5.2. Near-peer role models***

Near-peer role models (NPRMs) are “peers who are close to our social, professional and/or age level who for some reason we may respect and admire” (Murphey, 1998, p. 201). The argument for the value of NPRMs is partially grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997) as it relates to the concept of “vicarious experience” and its influence on self-efficacy beliefs—if one sees someone similar to themselves successfully performing an activity (e.g., L2 use), they are then more willing to believe that it is possible for them to also succeed in the same activity (Bandura, 1997). As Muir (2018) clearly describes, “Near peer role models allow us to imagine, ‘if they can do it, why can’t I?’” (p. 2). The role of relatable role models can also be understood through the perspective of possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as seeing those similar to us in a desired position or inhabiting a desired identity (e.g., college student) create an expected rather than a simply hoped-for possible self (Pizzolato, 2006). In terms of English learning in Japan, NPRMs arguably take on a more important role in response to contextual considerations as well as some of the ideological issues raised in Chapter 2. A number of researchers (Brown, 2008; Hooper, 2016; Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murray, 2011; Walters, 2020; Yashima, 2009) have argued that rather than the widespread native-centric focus of much of Japanese ELT, students could benefit from exposure to relatable Japanese speakers of English. Both Murphey, Chen, and Chen (2005) and Yashima (2009) discuss how NPRMs may represent a “bridge of self-representations” (Yashima, 2009, p. 10) linking learners’ present selves with an imagined ideal L2 self or membership in an imagined community of English users. Walters (2020)

echoes these assertions as he argues that the current native-normative model in Japan simply serves to deepen the divide between us (Japanese) and them (“native speakers”). He states that “by presenting culturally distant role models as the “picture of success” in English speaking” (p. 112), we are simply furthering the framing of Japanese learners of English in deficit terms (Cook, 1999).

Within several studies focusing on SLS use, the presence of NPRMs have been identified as a potentially facilitative factor in sustaining learners’ motivation and SLS participation. Both Miyake (2016) and Kuwada (2016) described how the presence of Japanese role models both inside and outside of the L-café, an SLS at Okayama University, motivated them by acting as examples of desirable but potentially attainable future selves.

I met a super great student there [the L-café]. She had gone to Australia to study abroad. I saw she was speaking English fluently. She was also kind to everyone and always wore fancy clothes. She was totally sophisticated. I started respecting her, and I thought that I wanted to be like her in the future. It motivated me to study English harder. (Miyake, 2016, p. 88)

As one part of a two-year ethnographic study of the English Lounge SLS at KUIS, Hooper (2020d) reported that the presence of Japanese NPRMs appeared to motivate certain student attendees. In particular, students remarked on other Japanese students’ English proficiency and active dispositions despite many of them never having studied overseas. In this way, attending the SLS was akin to a motivational well that students would dip into from time to time to remind themselves of what achievements were possible for them through “effortful coping behaviour” (Bandura, 1977, p. 197).

K: *Uh... [pera] pera da shi...* [Uh, she speaks fluently and...]

Interviewer: *Uh, gambatta kara?* [Because she tried hard?]

K: *Nanka*, [Like,] she go to Yellow Sofa [the SLS] every day. *Ryuugaku shita koto ga nai no ni sugoi [pera] pera kara* [Because even though she's never studied abroad, she speaks so fluently]

(Hooper, 2020d, p. 118)

In relation to a CoP perspective on SLS participation, these senpai NPRMs represent “old timers”—core CoP members that may help to socialize newcomers into the practices of the community. Also, in expressions of reciprocity, some of the SLS members from Hooper’s (2020d) study reflected on their own learning trajectories within the SLS and resolved to help reduce the sense of struggle that they may have felt when initially attempting to enter the SLS for future generations of students. Lyon (2020) presents a detailed case study of one such student who would proactively work to encourage new students to enter and actively participate in a university SLS. The student in Lyon’s study stated that “...if some freshman [first-year students] come to [the SLS], I said like, “Please join us” and I just start conversation and they can’t run away. (laughs)” (p. 53).

This altruistic attitude, based in part on their own historical learning experiences and a sense of responsibility as a CoP member, has a potentially pivotal role in whether or not new members will continue to attend an SLS. Furthermore, what these NPRMs arguably represent in a broader sense are possible selves other students perceive as achievable through continued SLS participation.

### **3.5.3. Student ownership**

In an overview of self-access in Japan, Mynard (2019a) asserts that the development of social learning communities in SACs is vital, and that one key element of this is active student involvement. Mynard states that the empowerment of students in SAC social spaces “promotes ownership and engagement in the space” (p. 199). Student ownership of an SLS can be fostered in a number of ways. One key manifestation of student ownership is SLS

attendees being given leadership roles and other positions of responsibility within the space. Uzuka (2016) outlines how, in her role as an SLS manager, she viewed students as “assets of the [SLS]” (p. 25) through encouraging them to act as teaching/administrative staff and involving them in decisions on space design. She argued that assigning students teaching roles was effective as they became near-peer role models (see section 3.5.3) to other SLS attendees.

Students feel closer and more comfortable talking to their peers as opposed to teachers.

Students talking to other students who are close in age have the same background knowledge and can understand each other without having to explain themselves.

(Uzuka, 2016, p. 25)

Uzuka states that due to the SLS being a heterotopic or “exceptional” (p. 26) place, the student staff tended to inspire and be respected by other learners regardless of any senpai/kōhai dynamic that may have existed in other social settings in Japan. Student leaders have been found in other self-access studies both inside and outside of Japan to be motivational factors for other students and also drivers of bottom-up innovation in terms of pedagogy and space management (Acuña González et al., 2015; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Sigala Villa et al., 2019). Chen and Mynard (2018) present a case of how students can be both the researchers and subjects of grassroots research aimed at the development of an SLS. The two researchers (one SAC director and one exchange student) interviewed a number of SLS users and were able to discover several usage patterns and recurring problems that existed in the space. From there, they drew on both the SLS users’ perspectives and research on learning space design (Edlin, 2016) to redesign the SLS’s layout so as to increase student accessibility. Chen and Mynard highlight the importance of involving student “stakeholders” in research into SAC (or SLS) management and building a sense of shared social responsibility.

I think everyone should think about the SALC (self-access learning center) more. Only students can improve the SALC because we are the ones who use this facility. Instead

of just coming and enjoying, maybe they should think about what we can do to make the SALC better. That's what I'm thinking right now. — Participant A (Chen & Mynard, 2018, p. 231)

Taking a theoretical perspective influenced by complex dynamic systems theory, Murray (2017) analyzes several features of the L-café, the SLS described by Uzuka (2016) previously in this section. Murray argues that Uzuka's style of management and student empowerment exemplified *decentralized control*, *neighbor interactions*, and *randomness*—conditions for complex emergence of learning affordances and autonomy. By transferring decision making, teaching, and administration to students, it increased a sense of belonging and represented *decentralized control* of the L-café. This transfer of responsibility in turn also afforded the Uzuka the opportunity to put students in contact with each other (*neighbor interactions*) as they all had different responsibilities within the space and could therefore help each other complete a wide range of tasks. In this way, power and knowledge were shared in the SLS among students rather than being simply handed down by Uzuka. The knowledge being shared within this community of peers “enable[d] them to act on their own in the future and, hence, be more autonomous” (Murray, 2017, p. 188). Another emergent phenomenon from these neighbor interactions was a sense of reciprocity, whereby SLS users came to value each other more and felt a desire to contribute to the community in the future. Finally, these factors of decentralized control, neighbor interactions, and reciprocity came together to create what Murray describes as “a space of possibilities” (p.189). This refers to the *randomness* and flexibility that is necessary for adaptation to the ever-changing circumstances and needs of a dynamic space like an SLS. Rather than adhering to a rigid, hierarchical administrative structure, the autonomy and agency afforded to the student staff allowed them to tailor the L-café to evolving patterns of participation. This served to ensure that the SLS remained relevant and popular to the student body as time went on.



### **3.5.4. Accessibility**

As discussed in section 3.4., an SLS often represents a dramatic departure from the learning settings that Japanese learners have experienced in secondary education, and the “in-betweenness” of an SLS may engender feelings of displacement and discomfort for students new to the environment. It stands to reason, therefore, that one of the primary concerns for those involved in SLS management is that of accessibility for newcomers. The heterotopic nature and the liminal culture (not Japanese, not foreign, but somewhere in-between) of an SLS offers at once both threat and possibility. Uzuka (2016) states that in the case of the L-café at Okayama, some students claimed that “it’s as if there is a national border so that you need a passport to go in” (p. 29). Within SLS in Japan, it can also be argued that students also experience a marked dissonance in terms of educational ideology as they enter an SLS. The dramatic eikaiwa-oriented experience (communication-focused, often English-only, “foreign” atmosphere) may be jarring in comparison to the largely eigo-oriented English education (test-focused, often L1 instruction) that they may have received in secondary schooling (Mynard et al., 2020b).

These feelings of cultural dissonance can be further exacerbated by the issue of language anxiety. Numerous accounts of learner hesitance to enter an SLS setting referred to their preconceptions of participation requiring an advanced level of English proficiency (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Gillies, 2010; Hooper, 2020a; Hughes et al., 2012; Kurokawa et al., 2013; Kuwada, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020a). These beliefs appear to be reinforced by the pseudo-foreign atmosphere and the presence of exchange students in SLSs as can be seen in the following quote from Kuwada (2016):

I walked toward the [SLS] by myself and looked inside through the glass doors. There were a few foreign and Japanese students. They were sitting at a round table and talking to each other. I suddenly got a little scared about whether it was appropriate to

join them. I thought I didn't have English skills good enough to talk to them. (Kuwada, 2016, pp. 120-121)

Even if one puts aside linguistic concerns, social dynamics within an SLS may also heighten the difficulty of participation for newcomers. The sense of belonging that frequent SLS users generate and experience through shared participation may become a double-edged sword as it can create psychological barriers for new members seeking to enter the space. This became an apparent issue in both Okayama University's L-café (Fujimoto, 2016; Fukaba, 2016; Hino, 2016; Kuwada; 2016) and the English Lounge at KUIS (Lyon, 2020; Sampson, 2020a; Mynard, 2020b; Mynard et al., 2020b) where the formation of cliques or a broader community of practice was identified by students and staff as deterring others from SLS attendance. Fujimoto (2016), a manager of the L-café, recognized the "closed" nature of the SLS and how this could lead to newcomers feeling "alienated" (p. 32). However, she notes the importance of striking a balance between "mak[ing] the sense of comradeship [between established members] less visible without destroying the sense of belongingness experienced by the regular visitors" (p. 33).

Concerning ways of addressing these issues and heightening a sense of accessibility and openness within an SLS, several measures have been proposed in the existing literature. One important contribution is actively welcoming new SLS users to the space and making efforts to involve them in group activities. In many cases, this is an example of reciprocity as more senior students recall the difficulties they experienced as new members and seek to offer emotional support to future generations (Hooper, 2020d; Lyon, 2020; Miyake, 2016; Tanimoto, 2016). Receiving support from near-peer role models in the form of student staff or senpai in general has been marked as having positively impacted newcomers' willingness to inhabit an SLS. This scaffolding by established *old timers* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) allows uninitiated students a way into a community. It affords them opportunities for legitimate

peripheral participation whether or they desire an inward-bound trajectory ending in full participation or whether they are simply “passing through” (Fenton O’Creevy et al., 2015a, p. 44).

A further measure that has been advocated by Mynard et al. (2020c) to complement SAC SLSs is the fostering of interest-based language learning communities (Gao, 2007; Hooper, 2020d; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; McMahill, 2001; Watkins, 2022). These communities often offer a more structured learning environment that students may view as less threatening compared with the openness of an SLS (Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Kurokawa et al., 2013). Furthermore, interest-based learning communities allow members to draw upon shared interests and thus potentially reduce the anxiety experienced when conversing in the target language (Mynard et al., 2020c). All of the previously discussed issues are congruent with a growing trend in recent years towards accessibility within self-access and an increased focus on inclusivity for neurodiverse students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students (Thornton, 2021a). In the following section, I will summarize some of the existing literature from general higher education that acts as the foundation for these learning communities and illustrate some relevant examples illustrating how these communities have been encouraged and analyzed within a SAC environment.

### **3.6. Learning communities**

According to Lenning et al. (2013) a learning community is “an intentionally developed community that exists to promote and maximize the individual and shared learning of its members” (p. 7). The concept of learning communities is already a reasonably established and well-one one within higher education in the US, where they have been used to respond to growing problems related to changing student demographics and students struggling with the transition from secondary to tertiary education (Laufgraben & Shapiro,

2004). Tinto (2003) claims that learning communities in higher education have three common elements:

- *shared knowledge* as students studying together generally come from classes in related fields
- *shared knowing* as members spent significant amounts of time together, co-construct knowledge, and come to appreciate diverging perspectives
- *shared responsibility* as students become responsible to and interdependent with one another

This has marked overlap with Wenger's (1998) CoP model and in particular two of the three core elements of a community of practice—*joint enterprise* (shared knowledge) and *mutual engagement* (shared knowing and shared responsibility). The links to CoPs do not end there, as Lenning et al. (2013) assert that in order for a learning community to “support powerful learning” (p. 91), it should form into a CoP incorporating *meaning* (relevance in relation to members' experiences), *practice* (learning through action), *community* (learning and belonging as interrelated), and *identity* (learning and identity formation as inseparable) (Wenger, 1998).

Focusing on not only learning, but also emotional and psychological support for learners, Tinto (2020) makes a case for learning communities being effective in mediating students' transitions between the two spheres of experience (Zittoun, 2006) of secondary and tertiary education. Drawing upon a number of theoretical perspectives including self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), Tinto states that the first year of university is a crucial period in terms of students' self-efficacy beliefs and their sense of belonging. Congruent with Zittoun's (2004, 2006) research on *rupture*—feelings of instability or uncertainty—during life transitions, Tinto argues that many students struggle a great deal during their first year of university and that, in many cases,

existing institutional support is insufficient or underutilized. Furthermore, according to existing research on student self-efficacy in university and beyond (Gore, 2006), future academic success is more likely to be influenced by self-efficacy perceptions at the end of their first year of tertiary education than their self-belief at the point of university entrance. This means that students' experiences in their freshman year and how they positively or negatively impact self-efficacy beliefs is seemingly crucial in their long-term trajectory as learners. Learning communities, Tinto claims, offer transitioning freshman students opportunities to engage with both peers and faculty and enhance self-efficacy by building a sense of belonging and mutual support while co-constructing knowledge about topics that are relevant to them. One student learning community participant highlighted the emotional and education support she received:

In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had discussions about everything... it was like a raft running the rapids of my life.  
(Tinto, 2020, p. 19)

This quotation illustrates a learning community and its members as *social resources* (Zittoun, 2004) that can be drawn upon to mitigate feelings of anxiety and confusion that come along with the rupture of life transitions. In the case of freshman EFL learners in Japanese universities, the metaphor of rushing or precarious rapids is an apt one. Transitioning not just between two different educational cultures, but also in many cases the two ideological perspectives of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* (see section 2.3.1.) is likely to create feelings of insecurity, reduced self-efficacy, and disorientation that may negatively affect the ability for students to make use of present (and even future) learning affordances.

One type of learning community particularly relevant to this study is what Lenning et al. (2013) term a student learning community (SLC). These are small intentionally-created

communities of students that aim to enhance learning in a particular area for both individual participants and the group as a whole. Moreover, congruent with a CoP perspective, the interaction and shared practice within these groups tends to eventually lead to a sense of community identity that may further increase the group's capacity for learning (Lichtenstein, 2005; Priest, Saucier, & Eiselein, 2016).

In terms of language learning, and in particular out-of-class language learning, SLCs are a relatively new and scarcely-researched phenomenon. However, a number of studies (Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Magno e Silva, 2019; McMahon, 2001; Murphy, 2014; Mynard et al., 2020c; Takada, 2018; Watkins, 2022) have provided insights that suggest one area that warrants further exploration is that of interest-based SLCs. In particular, Watkins (2021, 2022) has been undertaking pioneering research into supporting the emergence of student-led learning communities in self-access centers. In a recent study, Watkins (2022) examined the experiences of student members from different interest-based SLCs that she had helped to support in a university SAC in Japan. Using an analytical framework based on Ryan and Deci's (2017) Basic Psychological Needs Theory, a sub-theory falling under the broader umbrella of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), Watkins analyzed both survey and interview data about the learning community members' experiences of their respective communities. BPNT states that *autonomy*—"the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10), *competence*—"our basic need to feel effectance and mastery" (p. 11), and *relatedness*—the feeling of social connectedness, are essential requirements that are directly connected to motivation, productivity, and wellbeing. Watkins (Mynard et al., 2020d; Watkins, 2022) found that students' participation in the SAC SLCs satisfied each basic psychological need in different ways. Students experienced *autonomy* as they were the locus of control (Benson, 2011a) in terms of what, when, how, and with whom they learned. *Relatedness* was fostered by students having a shared domain of interest

(Wenger et al., 2002) and common goals. In addition, Watkins' findings echoed Murray and Fujishima's (2016c) findings from the L-café as the learning community members demonstrated a degree of reciprocity and desired to support other community members through effortful actions.

In my community, I don't only look up things that I cannot say but also things that others can't say. We solve problems together as a group. I don't feel that I "have to" speak in English. I want to speak English because everybody in the community is doing their best. (Miyu in Watkins, 2022, p. 198)

In terms of *competence*, the community members endeavored to create low-stress learning environments where students felt safe to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as productive L2 use. Furthermore, the SLC leaders sought to enhance members' feelings of competence by distributing power and affording them opportunities to actively contribute to the community. This fostered a sense of purpose among members as they helped to support their peers and created community artifacts (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Wenger, 1998) such as PR pamphlets. In line with Tinto's assertions regarding the value of learning communities in higher education, Watkins' research illustrates how SAC SLCs may represent a valuable approach for enhancing student learning opportunities, socializing first-year students into tertiary education, and maintaining psychological and emotional wellbeing.

### **3.7. Summary**

In this chapter I have summarized issues relating to the meso-level (institutional) setting in which the LC is situated—a self-access language learning center. Background information on self-access language learning and the theoretical principles that it is grounded in is essential to understanding the educational culture of the LC. By examining the existing literature on the social components of learner autonomy, the resulting growth of SAC social learning spaces, and the potential role of learning communities in supporting students

transitioning into higher education, I have aimed to illustrate and contextualize some of the rationale behind the LC CoP's historical development. Below, I highlight some of the main foci from this chapter:

- Learner autonomy is a concept addressing a learner's capacity (skills, desire, freedom) to take control (approach, cognition, content) of their own learning (Huang & Benson, 2013). Learner autonomy is widely recognized to be grounded in interdependence rather than independence. The social dimension of autonomy—how learners' autonomy may be influenced by or develop as a result of social interaction—is now regarded as an important theoretical and pedagogical consideration.
- Self-access centers (SACs) are “person-centered learning environment[s] that actively promote[s] learner autonomy both within and outside the space” (Mynard, 2016a). Learner autonomy and its “social turn” (Block, 2003) underpins the field of self-access language learning. Technological developments as well as recognition of the importance of both the individual and the social are reflected in the evolution of SACs and the services they offer. Learner training has been regarded as an essential facet of self-access centers since their inception and dialogue-based approaches to learner training, such as advising in language learning (ALL) have become central elements of modern SACs.
- Social learning spaces (SLSs) also reflect the social-orientation of many modern SACs as they offer an informal environment for social interaction in the L2. SLSs may represent a heterotopic or in-between space that can cause feelings of both liberation or unease for students. Depending on the learner, an SLS may fulfill a wide range of different roles including a place for language use, a motivational boost, an opportunity for intercultural exchange, a venue for making friends, or a safe place where they can receive emotional support. From existing research, we can see that SLS participation



may be facilitated or constrained by a number of internal or external factors such as the presence of near-peer role models or learner anxiety over initially accessing the space.

- Originally designed to aid students transitioning between secondary and higher education, learning communities have in recent years been examined as a means of addressing the accessibility issues concerning initial SLS participation. A number of SAC-based studies have highlighted student-led learning communities as an accessible and autonomy-supportive approach that could positively contribute to the future of self-access language learning.

## **Chapter 4: Conceptual framework—From communities to landscapes and liminality**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical frameworks that underpin my investigation into the LC learning community and how they can be situated within broader macro (English education in Japan) and meso (the university's SAC) contexts. I will initially describe some fundamental elements of the communities of practice (CoP) theory, provide a brief account of the evolution of the theory since its origins, and present some examples of how the theory has been applied to self-access language learning research. From this point, I will discuss some common criticisms of CoP perspectives relating to how the impact of broader contextual factors, power, and the individual has been insufficiently taken into account. Relating these points of criticism to my ongoing abductive analysis (see chapter 5 for more detail) of the LC community, the final section of this chapter will focus on my expansion of the CoP framework and on two additional theoretical frameworks/concepts—landscapes of practice and liminality. These additional theoretical perspectives will be explained and discussed in relation to my experiences and findings throughout my data collection and analysis.

### **4.2. Communities of practice—Basic concepts**

The communities of practice framework has remained a widely respected and frequently-cited theory of learning since Lave and Wenger's (1991) book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* was published<sup>2</sup>. Although the theory has been subject to criticism and evolution over the last thirty years, many of the principles that underpin it have been regarded as valuable in understanding or fostering social learning. This has resulted in the CoP framework in its various iterations being utilized in a broad range of research in diverse fields including education, business, linguistics, sociology, and psychology. In this

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<sup>2</sup> As of March 2023, Google Scholar displays just over 170,000 citations for perhaps the three most well-known CoP texts - Lave & Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002).

section, I will outline some of the central concepts or assumptions that characterize CoP.

These are: key characteristics of CoPs, practice-based vs. transmission models of learning, and identity in CoPs through *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*.

#### **4.2.1. Definitions and structure**

A recent and rather simple description of what communities of practice are comes from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) who describe them as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” However, if one considers the ubiquitousness and considerable impact that CoP has had in both academia and the business world, one may conceivably be surprised about the apparent confusion and criticism over even basic definitions of the term. Lave and Wenger first used the term in their 1991 book and provided a rather broad definition—“a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Lave and Wenger set out to illustrate what CoPs looked like by giving concrete examples of apprenticeship models and by describing how “learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning community of the ambient community” (p. 100). Around the same time, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) established a useful and more concrete definition of a CoP that also differentiated the concept from the general idea of community (a point of contention for some who view the term *community* to be conflated with notions of harmony and is therefore arguably unsuitable to describe the complex and often conflictual interpersonal relationships within CoPs - see Jewson, 2007) as they stated:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social

construct from the traditional notion of community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (p. 464)

This is undoubtedly a helpful guide for one seeking to understand the nature of a CoP. However, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) raise issues with how clearly scale is delineated within existing CoP conceptualizations. They discuss CoP as being framed in two distinct ways:

1. As a broader view that “we need to belong to learn, and whatever it is that we belong to, can be called a community of practice” (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004, p. 5)—this allows a lot more flexibility in terms of what scale we can define CoPs. For example, from this perspective the field of TESOL could be labeled a CoP.
2. As a narrower perspective (present in Wenger’s 1998 book and his work from that point on) that defines CoPs as tighter-knit groups and a structural model featuring three distinct characteristics—*mutual engagement*, a *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire*.

While recognizing each concept has its own merit, Hodkinson and Hodkinson argue that utilizing identical terms to refer to both of them causes confusion and ambiguity. Consequently, they elect to refer to the former broader concept as *situated learning* or *learning as social participation* and the latter as “communities of practice” (p. 7). The use of the term communities of practice in this study is congruent with this distinction as I am analyzing the structure and functions of one specific and highly-situated CoP—the LC—rather than attempting to unpack or interrogate any broader concept of social learning.

One additional key issue is whether CoP should be treated as a heuristic for the analysis of existing communities or as a blueprint for improving how learning should be done.

In Lave and Wenger's (1991) original anthropologically-oriented work examining groups such as Yucatec Mayan midwives, Liberian tailors, and Alcoholics Anonymous members, the emphasis appears to be on the former. However, Hughes (2007) argues that even in this early work, an incongruity existed between arguments for what learning "should be" and "what [it] actually is" (p. 34). Wenger's later (1998) book and the more consultancy-focused work (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) took this further still. Communities of practice were being more explicitly positioned in contrast to "school learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 267) and with a focus switching to cultivating CoPs (Wenger et al., 2002) rather than simply analyzing them. Wenger (2010) openly addresses these critiques and describes his struggles with balancing perspectives from both academic and practitioner camps. He recognizes that the CoP theory may have gotten "out of control" (p. 192) with people using it in an unprincipled way or as a "solution" designed for the reproduction rather than transformation of institutional norms. Despite these concerns about the tensions between "analytical and instrumental perspectives" (p. 193), Wenger regards this meshing of foci as an emergent hybrid discipline with potential value to those in both spheres.

As previously discussed in Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2004) proposed clarification of CoP terminology, a community of practice is defined by Wenger (1998) as featuring three structural characteristics: *mutual engagement*, a *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire*. These terms were eventually simplified to the much simpler "*domain*", "*community*", and "*practice*" (Mercieca, 2017). These will be explained in more detail below.

### *Domain*

A CoP's domain is a shared interest, focus, or agenda within the community. This "common ground" (Li et al., 2009) may also manifest itself in a "shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a). For a TOEIC study group, this might be the development of test-taking strategies, whereas in the

case of a street gang, this might be increasing their territory or simply survival. Congruent with CoP theoretical presupposition that learning is not simply accumulating knowledge, but rather “it is becoming a certain person” (Wenger, 2010, p. 181), a CoP’s domain determines not just what members *do*, but also to a certain extent what they *are*.

### *Community*

Community relates to the social structure of the CoP—the relationships and interactions between members, the ways in which they learn from each other, and the manner in which they position themselves relative to one another. Mercieca (2017) argues that while the domain is the bedrock of a CoP, “it is undoubtedly the feature of community that sustains it, ensuring that members keep participating” (p. 10). Through their shared engagement within the community, members ideally develop mutual trust and feel more comfortable to express their ideas freely without fear of derision. Pure harmony within a CoP is, however, unlikely and the concept of community does not imply pure homogeneity. In fact, members bringing individual diverse perspectives together while engaging in the shared domain “creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 34). A further important characteristic of community is reciprocity. CoP members often feel that contributing to the community is an act that will provide benefits to both the community and to them as an individual. In this sense, Wenger et al. (2002) describe this as “a reservoir of social capital” (p. 37).

### *Practice*

Wenger et al. (2002) define practice as “the specific knowledge the community shares, develops, and maintains” (p. 29). As CoP members work together towards their mutually negotiated goals, they are likely to encounter challenges along the way or come to realize certain parts of the CoP that could be improved. This is where the practice comes into play. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) describe practice as featuring “a shared

repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems.”

These resources or *artifacts* can be viewed as the CoP’s knowledge and experiences becoming “crystallize[d]” (Mercieca, 2017, p.11) or reified (“giving concrete form to experience by producing “things” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58)). Reified practice can represent a discernable CoP output which can then be distributed at the broader institutional level to other communities. This may then lead to opportunities to receive feedback from those outside of the community which may in turn stimulate CoP growth (Mercieca, 2017). One concept highly relevant to the current study is that of “noncanonical” knowledge or practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Noncanonical practice is knowledge or approaches to learning or working developed by CoP members that may diverge from top-down institutional dictates, guidelines, or normative assumptions (canonical practices). Noncanonical knowledge emerges from experiences of hands-on practice and responds to situated challenges faced by a CoP in a way that abstract rules cannot hope to. In the context of this study, I extend the notion of noncanonical practice to practices such as counter framing (Lowe, 2020b, 2022) where learners may elect to disrupt commonplace assumptions and practices such as traditional hierarchical structures, “native”-normativity, or English-only policies based on their local needs.

Each of these characteristics (domain, community, and practice) are not mutually exclusive and should be thought of as interrelated. Strong interpersonal relationships (community), for instance, are likely to lead to the active development of CoP artifacts and a coherent sense of shared purpose. Conversely, if one of these characteristics is disproportionate to the others, this may create problems for the functioning of the CoP. For example, if the community is focused on at the expense of domain, the CoP may become fractured and gradually dissolve due to a lack of coherent direction (Mercieca, 2017). That being said, it is possible for individual members to identify with or value one characteristic more than another. While one individual may see benefit in engaging in interpersonal

communication within the CoP but may feel suffocated if too much structured reification (rules, guidelines, procedures, etc.) takes place. It is also important to remember that these characteristics are not set in stone, but instead dynamic and constantly being negotiated and renegotiated among the CoP membership. A brief outline of the features of domain, community, and practice can be found below in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Domain, community, and practice*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Practice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shared competence between members</li> <li>● A common interest that members share</li> <li>● Common experiences that members bring to the community</li> <li>● A common identity that members inhabit or wish to develop</li> <li>● Mutual accountability to community interest/goals</li> <li>● Collectively “negotiated response to their situation” (Wenger, 1998, p.77)</li> <li>● Dynamic and responsive process tied to members’ evolving needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “The social fabric of learning” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28)</li> <li>● Members building trusting and open relationships by doing things together</li> <li>● Members negotiating meaning with one another (Wenger, 1998, p. 73)</li> <li>● Having opportunities to interact with one another (face-to-face or online)</li> <li>● Positioning of roles in relation to one another</li> <li>● Continuous “community maintenance” by contributing to the community (Wenger, 1998, p. 74)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “A set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that community members share” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 29)</li> <li>● Community-created means of dealing with emergent or recurring issues they face</li> <li>● Development of the practice requires “time and sustained interaction” (Wenger-Trayner &amp; Wenger-Trayner, 2015a)</li> <li>● Can allow creation of reified artifacts that may link the CoP to the outside world</li> </ul>

**4.2.2. Practice vs. transmission**

One fundamental element of CoP and its origins lies in the notion of learning through *practice*. In much of the early literature on practice-based learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave, 1993, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff,



1994), this perspective was framed as standing in opposition to “traditional” or “transmission” models of learning in which knowledge is transferred from teacher to student as a decontextualized and uniform entity. One can observe connections with certain Deweyian (1922, as cited in Wenger, 1998) concepts—thinking as engagement in action—as descriptions of practice-based learning include “learning-in-working” (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 41) or the development of “know how” (as opposed to the “know what” of declarative abstract knowledge) (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32). Another key distinction between transmission and practice-based learning models is the latter’s recognition of the importance of interpersonal interaction as it builds upon Bandura’s (1977) research and the Vygotskian tradition (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizing the importance of learning as a social process. In her early practice-based *community-of-learners* model, Rogoff (1994) describes learning as “a process of transforming participation in shared sociocultural endeavors” (p. 210). Members participating in these endeavors are “working together with all serving as resources to the others, with varying roles according to their understanding of the activity at hand and differing responsibilities in the system” (Rogoff, 1994, p. 214). Brown and Duguid (1996) echo Rogoff’s characterization of social actors as learning resources in their focus on the value of “stolen knowledge” (p. 48)—the active appropriation of knowledge that learners encounter in “authentic social practice.” Although the social is regarded as central to CoP theory, the social does not eclipse the individual. Within a CoP the individual and the social are in interplay. As Wenger (2010) states, CoP is “a perspective that locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world” (p. 179).

The claim that learning is fundamentally social subsequently connects to several other key assumptions of practice-based learning theories. The first is that knowledge is highly-contextualized rather than objective, universally-applicable, or inert (Barap & Duffy, 1998;

Brown et al., 1989; Dreier, 2003; Lave, 1996). Dreier (2003) criticizes the “traditional” models of learning where knowledge is assumed to be first transmitted from a teacher to a student, who then internalizes said knowledge, and finally unproblematically transfers and applies it to other situations. Conversely to this model, Dreier conceptualizes learning as occurring across “a personal trajectory of participation across structures of social practice” (p. 4) and that people “face different learning problematics in different contexts and that this introduces [...] a richness as well as a complexity, into personal learning” (p. 6). From this perspective each community of practice that learners come into contact with throughout their learning lives adds threads of nuance and meaning to a growing tapestry of knowledge and identity that they carry with them into each new community that they will enter. Congruent with this perspective, the second assumption of practice-based learning and its social nature, more tied to the CoP perspective specifically, is that participation, competence, and identity are inseparable within the learning process (this will be discussed in greater detail in section 4.2.4.).

The “participation” metaphor used to describe the practice-based learning occurring within CoPs has, however, attracted a number of critics. Edwards (2005a) claims that CoP and the related participation model have not adequately recognized the complex relationship between themselves and the “information processing model of mind” (p. 50) underpinning cognitivist perspectives. She argues that a binary view regarding “acquisition” or “participation” would be an unhelpful simplification of incredibly complex learning processes and that the “participation” metaphor was in fear of becoming “a blind non-cognitive alley in the study of learning” (p. 51). Haneda (2006) shares Edwards’ concerns as she cautions against wholesale criticism of traditional classrooms as can be found in Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the role and benefits of schooling. This is an issue that is particularly important to this study as it may lead

one to suggest that the discussion of traditional and practice-based education models above is advocating an eikaiwa approach over an eigo-oriented classroom and in essence furthering a prevalent deficit view of local educational practices in Japanese ELT (see section 2.3.2.). This is not the case. In this study, I take the perspective of Brown and Duguid (1996) who argue for the reconciliation of both explicit and implicit knowledge claiming that while implicit knowledge developed by practice is dynamic and evolving, abstract knowledge (such as declarative grammatical knowledge) “like signposts, can provide crucial clarification and direction in confused situations” (p. 49). Furthermore, eigo is itself a situated social practice, developed in a particular context in order to achieve a certain shared and meaningful endeavor within learners’ lives (e.g., to pass an entrance exam). Therefore, rather than framing eigo in deficit terms, within this study I view both eigo and eikaiwa as different sides of the same coin, each with value to offer Japanese English learners.

#### ***4.2.3. Participation and reification***

Wenger (1998) describes practice as being “a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (p. 51). *Negotiating meaning* within practice refers to how, through our everyday lives, we give birth to our own meanings that may reject, confirm, or modify historically- and contextually-situated pre-existing meanings we encounter. This process is bi-directional in that it implies “the mutual ability to affect and to be affected” (Wenger, 1998, p. 53)—we create meaning ourselves as active agents while also being molded by established structural meanings and experiences in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When we engage in the practices of a CoP, Wenger argues that we draw upon two concurrent and mutually constitutive processes—*participation* and *reification* in the negotiation of meaning. This section will provide a brief explanation of these concepts and how they impact meaning negotiation in CoPs.

## *Participation*

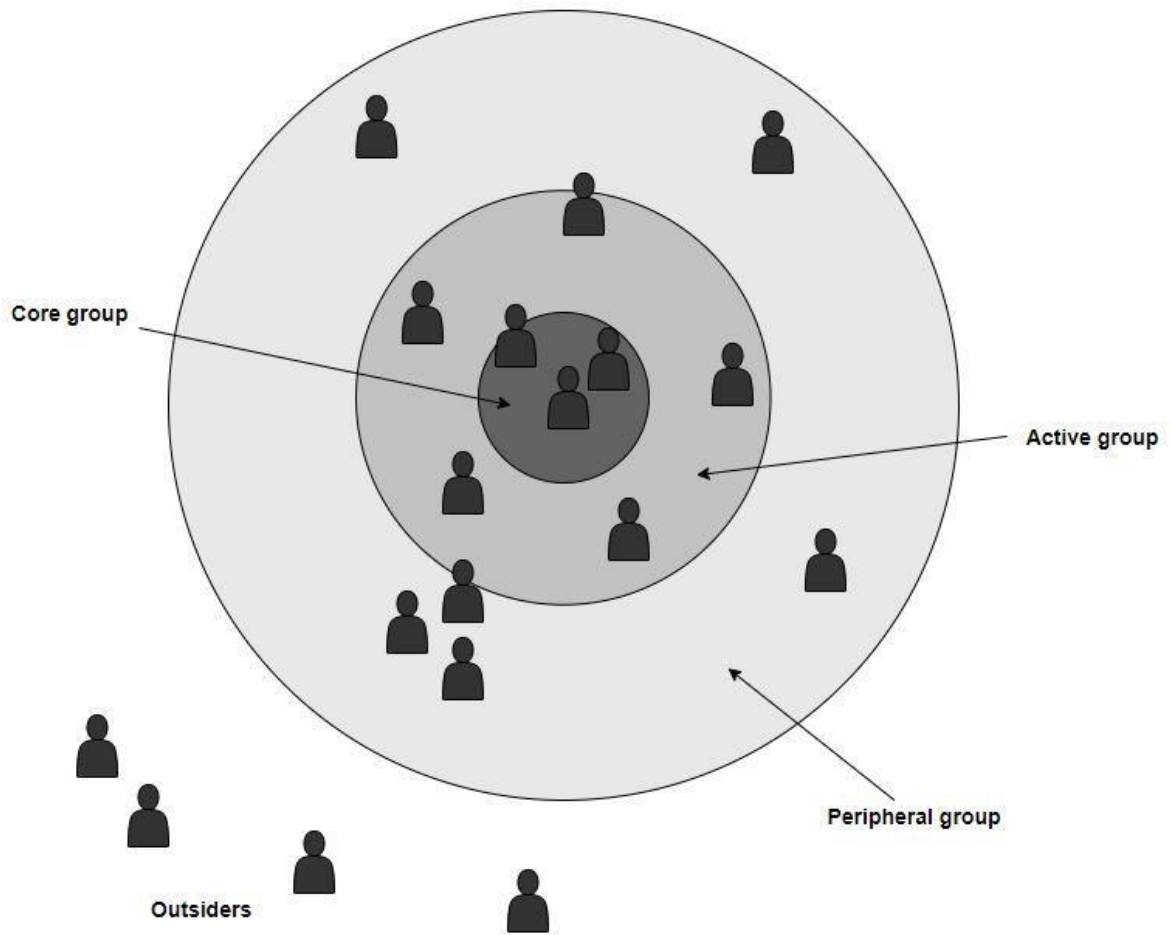
Wenger (1998) defines participation as “the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises” (p. 55). One key characteristic of participation is that it features an interaction (and mutual recognition) between the individual and the social. This stands in contrast to *marginalization* where an individual is not recognized by a certain group and is essentially barred from participation in negotiation of meaning. At the same time, however, Wenger (1998) cautions us not to conflate participation with collaboration as the latter carries connotations of harmony, whereas participation is just as likely to be based upon conflict as it is on acquiescence. Furthermore, he states that CoP members’ participation is not simply restricted to the actual engagement within a CoP but instead it represents a facet of their identity that they take with them wherever they go.

Another key concept is the existence of different levels of participation within a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) earlier work described the notion of *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP), where through interaction with near-peers, neophyte community members were afforded access to peripheral participation in the CoP’s practice. Through continued LPP, members gradually develop both community knowledge and identity, eventually progressing to *full participation* in the community’s practice (should they desire it). Although Wenger (1998) moved away from the term LPP in his later work, he continues to discuss the importance of “peripherality” and “legitimacy” of new CoP members as well as access to the “old timers” (p. 100) who afford them access to the community’s practice. Wenger et al. (2002) illustrates the differing levels of CoP participation by categorizing them as core, active, peripheral, and outsider (see Figure 3). The *core* group is a small collection of individuals who often take on leadership roles and essentially represents the “heart” of the CoP (p. 56). Next, the *active* group is another group, relatively limited in

size, made up of regular participants who enthusiastically engage in CoP events. The *peripheral* group makes up the largest portion of the CoP's membership and are characterized by occasional, more passive participation. Finally, there are individuals outside of the CoP who may nevertheless have some interest or stake in the community such as community sponsors. Although divisions between these groups have been drawn for clarity, Wenger et al. (2002) emphasize that these boundaries are "fluid" (p. 57) and that members often migrate between them over time depending on their own individual situations and needs.

**Figure 3**

*Levels of CoP participation (adapted from Peeters & Pretorius, 2020 and Wenger et al., 2002)*



### *Reification*

The Cambridge Dictionary defines reification as “the act of changing something abstract (= existing as a thought or idea) into something real” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). More in relation to its role within a CoP, Polin (2008) defines it as “the freezing of knowledge in a concrete artefact” (p. 281) as opposed to the diverse and even conflicting interpretations

of meaning that can arise from participation. Wenger (1998) articulates the purpose of reification as “creat[ing] points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized” (p. 58). One example of reification in a community might be the creation of a list of guidelines for its members that is posted on their website, or perhaps the use of a particular set of classificatory terms to describe something. Reification may also come from outside of the CoP, like from a larger institution, but it is not until it has been adopted and accepted into the practices of the community that it generates meaning (Wenger, 1998). Reification is a powerful thing, but also harbors potential danger. As we crystallize nuanced and dynamic meaning into a concrete object such as a rule or a policy, we sever it from “the richness of lived experience” (Wenger, 1998, p. 61). Furthermore, we lose control of how that reification is interpreted by others, thus creating the fear that others may misread its original intention. Although this may result in the evolution of the meaning of a reification, it may also bring about its loss.

Within a CoP participation and reification interact as “two intertwined but distinct lines of memory” (Wenger, 2010, p. 180). The dynamic and diverse knowledge brought into the CoP through the participation of its different members works in tandem with the concreteness of reified community artifacts in what Polin (2008) refers to as a “vitalizing mechanism” (p. 282). While reification helps to maintain a coherent community domain of practice that can be engaged with over multiple generations, participation provides the impetus for the CoP to constantly reinvent itself and stay relevant to its membership. Practitioners occasionally require guidance but even an artifact as seemingly prescriptive as an instruction manual, there is always scope for different interpretations emerging from participation (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger, 2016). These two complementary elements, then, come together to form what Wenger (1998) terms a “regime of competence” (p. 136)—a sense developed within the CoP of what does or does not entail competent practice. This regime of

competence underpinning the CoP is not static but instead dynamic and constantly renegotiated between individual members and social forces.

#### ***4.2.4. Identity construction in CoPs***

One of the defining characteristics of CoP theoretical perspectives that distinguished them from other practice-based learning models such as *practice fields* was their focus on the inseparability of learning and identity (Barap & Duffy, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) state that “identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another” (p. 53), describing how individuals develop multiple and complex relationships with different communities that they come into contact with in their life and how these relationships collectively define that person. However, at the same time, taking a relational view in terms of structure and agency, in a similar vein to other theorists such as Giddens (1991), a CoP perspective posits that identity is “constitutive of and constituted by the social environment” (Block, 2007, p. 30). In this section, three key concepts relating to identity construction in CoPs will be outlined—identities of participation and non-participation, identity trajectories, and modes of identification.

##### *Identities of participation and non-participation*

Identity construction through participation in the practices occurs in a myriad of ways. Community members can develop an identity of competence as they become more proficient in its regime of competence. Their identities are also molded in the negotiation between how others in the community view them versus how they project their own sense of self. According to Wenger (1998), however, these reified images are still only part of the puzzle. Just as meaning is negotiated through both reification and participation (see section 4.2.2.), so too is identity. Identity construction, then, is “a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other” (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). In other words, the labels that others assign us and we assign



ourselves (reification) shape our identity, but so too does the way we frame our participation in different communities in relation to ourselves as “whole persons” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53) located within a broader social world (Farnsworth et al., 2016). Another key point to take in account is that we define ourselves not simply by what we are but also by what we are not (Wenger, 1998). In our lives, identities of non-participation may be just as powerful as identities of participation. As we journey through our lives, we come into contact with communities that we are afforded legitimate peripheral participation in, that we do not identify with at all, or those that we may desire entry to but are marginalized from. This notion of non-participation does not work solely at the individual level, but also in terms of a CoP as a whole. Within a larger institution or “field” (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992, as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998), a community of practice might find itself in a marginalized position and in turn identify in those terms (for example, a community of disempowered workers within a large company).

### *Identity trajectories*

As can be surmised from his conceptualization of identity negotiation as “the ways we experience ourselves through participation” (p. 145), Wenger (1998) considers identity as a non-finite and temporally-situated entity, a “constant becoming” (p. 154). Trajectories of identity form both within and between CoPs as our past and present experiences are linked with our future fears or desires. Concurrently, we as individuals are negotiating our identities based on the past, present, and future practices of one or many CoPs. One example of this is through the telling of community stories. Brown and Duguid (1991) describe how, through sharing stories, CoP members pass on knowledge but also influence individual members’ identities and increase their legitimacy in relation to the practices of the community. As their engagement with the CoP’s practices, history, tools, and ways of being increases, their identity as a legitimate member develops. Of course, this is all premised upon the assumption that the

individual has the required social capital to negotiate their legitimate identity within the CoP (as opposed to marginalization and therefore being unable to engage at all). Wenger (1998) identifies several different types of trajectory that individuals may experience including *peripheral* (through choice or otherwise never leading to full participation), *inbound* (newcomer is invested in and moves towards full participation), *insider* (continuing to evolve even after full participation), and *outbound* (learning within the community but with the goal of moving on to what comes next in their life). Within a CoP the structural element of community and the relative positioning of community members (see section 4.2.3) is an important consideration for the formation of identity trajectories. *Old-timers* (experienced CoP members) (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56), “journeyfolk” (relative old-timers) (p. 57), and new members experience an “interlocking of identities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 157) where individuals’ identities are shaped. While in the case of NPRMs (see section 3.5.1.), newcomers may experience *akogare* (longing) and desire to follow in the footsteps of their seniors, it is also possible that new members’ beliefs or desired identities may clash with the old timers. In these types of generational encounters, the byproduct could be innovation rather than a simple transmissive baton-passing of community norms.

### *Modes of identification*

Modes of identification (Wenger, 2010) (formerly termed “modes of belonging” in Wenger, 1998) are ways in which individuals may identify or belong in a CoP. The three modes of identification—engagement, imagination, and alignment are outlined briefly below:

### *Engagement*

According to Wenger (2010), this is the most direct relationship to a CoP’s practice as it concerns the active engagement in “activities, doing things, working alone or together, talking, using and producing artifacts” (p. 184). By mutually engaging in the domain, community, and practice of a CoP, members strengthen their sense of belonging with it.

### *Imagination*

Imagination is a “process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (p. 176). Through imagination one may position their practice (and perhaps the practice of a whole community) in relation to a broader imagined community (Kanno & Norton, 2003). The mode of imagination has been influential in studies of language learners and has underpinned several perspectives on learner identity and motivation (Miyahara, 2015; Murphey et al., 2012; Murray, 2008; Norton, 2001).

### *Alignment*

Alignment refers to “a two-way process of coordinating enterprises, perspectives, interpretations and contexts so that action has the effects we expect” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner., 2015b, p. 21). Adopting a certain style of discourse or one’s beliefs being coherent with a CoP’s domain would be examples of identification through alignment. Wenger (1998) states that, unlike engagement, alignment may transcend a fixed time and space as members may align themselves with a bigger code of conduct or belief system beyond the physical or temporal confines of a CoP.

#### ***4.2.5. Cultivating CoPs***

As has been previously discussed in section 4.2.3. Etienne Wenger-Trayner has received criticism for the shift that had taken place in CoP theory from it being a purely academically-oriented heuristic describing learning processes, to a more practice-focused concept that can inform knowledge management in a variety of different fields. He argues that his work is “written with both the theoretician and practitioner in mind” (Wenger, 2009, p. 216) and that he feels his theory has value in informing learning practices in different levels of organizational structure. With this in mind, this section will outline some of the key assertions and findings relating to how CoPs can be successfully cultivated (Wenger et al., 2002) and supported within different organizations.

Perhaps the most important distinction that needs to be made is between the notion of *cultivating* versus *creating* a community of practice. Wenger et al. (2002) argue that, much like a plant (hence the cultivation metaphor), a CoP will often develop and even thrive on its own. One cannot force a plant to grow but by providing nutrients, space, and protection from threats, one may encourage a tiny sprout to develop into a towering tree—conversely, if we interfere with it too much, it may wither and die. Similarly, they argue that an institution can do a great deal to increase the likelihood of a CoP being successful so long as they are careful not to interfere too much with its domain, community, and practice. McDonald, Star, and Margetts (2012) created a useful taxonomy of different models of CoP within organizations—organic, nurtured/supported, and created/intentional—that differentiated between the degree of directiveness they were subject to (see Table 5). While organic CoPs seem to be more in line with the examples found in Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) in that they did not receive any broader organizational support or recognition, the perspective advocated in Wenger et al. (2002) appears to be congruent with a nurtured/supported CoP.

**Table 5**

*Varieties of CoP (McDonald et al., 2012, p. 22)*

Type of CoP	Organic	Nurtured/supported	Created/intentional
<b>Structure</b>	Bottom-up	Modified bottom-up	Top-down
<b>Support level</b>	Minimal	Subsidised	Provided
<b>Membership</b>	Voluntary	Voluntary/suggested	Encouraged
<b>Themes</b>	Discipline-related	Discipline or issue related	Guided issues and cross discipline
<b>Agenda</b>	Self-determined	Self-determined/steered	Guided theme
<b>Timing for outcomes</b>	Self-determined	Self-determined and funding-related	Short-term rather than long-term

Corso, Giacobbe, & Martini (2009) analyzed real world examples of business CoPs and, based on this data, argued that while it was vital for a CoP to maintain its autonomy and not be subject to top-down institutional dictates, there were certain “levers” that could be initiated by an organization in order to create favorable conditions for a CoP’s vitality. The

study discussed “animation levers” (p. 84) that create favorable conditions for a CoP’s emergence and maintenance such as stimulating interpersonal connections, supporting any evolution of the CoP’s domain, and recognizing the value of the CoP’s practice within the wider organization.

Several other studies (Akkerman, Petter, & de Laat, 2008; Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Bishop, Bouchlaghem, Glass, & Matsumoto, 2008; Iverson & McPhee, 2002; Pyrko, Dörfler, & Eden, 2017, 2019) have reported the need to simultaneously afford both autonomy and support for CoPs. While attempts to “create” or “manage” CoPs often result in failure, these studies highlight productive ways in which bridges may be constructed between a CoP and a larger institutional culture through organizational support structures or via individuals “championing” (promoting) communities (Saldana, 2017, p. 285) or acting as “brokers” between multiple communities (Wenger, 1998, p. 255).

One relatively under-researched but potentially crucial area concerning CoP support and maintenance is that of CoP leadership or facilitation (Borzillo, Aznar, & Schmitt, 2011; Pedersen, Boyd, Rooney, & Terkes, 2017; Saldana, 2017; Tarmizi & de Vreede, 2005; Tarmizi, de Vreede, & Zigurs, 2006). Saldana (2017) discusses leadership as “a mediating influence” (p. 283) that impacts a CoP’s domain, community, and practice as well as its evolution over time. Saldana argues that leadership expressions are likely to vary depending on the CoP’s developmental stage along its “lifecycle” (see Table 6) and that leadership is an influential factor in “the capacity that communities of practice have to socialize, develop sense of common purpose, and create solutions to everyday problems” (p. 307).

**Table 6**

*Stages of CoP development and leadership expressions (adapted from Kazlauskas, 2014 and Saldana, 2017)*

<b>Development stage</b>	<b>Potential</b> The community has not fully formed and is a vaguely defined group of people with similar interests or needs	<b>Coalescing</b> A CoP has been launched as a shared domain, community, and practice are established and knowledge sharing begins	<b>Maturing</b> The CoP develops its own identity and ensures it remains focused on the domain while also exploring new areas of focus. Maybe defines its role within a larger field	<b>Stewardship</b> Now the CoP is established and it is focused upon maintaining its relevance within a larger field
<b>Leadership expression</b>	Developing connections between group members and identifying core members as leadership candidates	Creating an environment where members trust each other and feel comfortable sharing knowledge	Starting community initiatives or projects and enhancing focus on domain	Maintaining space for innovation (through new members' voices) while also maintaining membership/domain

In this section, I have attempted to outline some of the fundamental concepts that define a CoP perspective on learning and the primary theoretical lens that initially influenced this study. In the following section, I will provide a number of concrete examples of how researchers within the fields of general education, second or foreign language learning, and out-of-class language learning/self-access language learning have utilized a CoP framework to understand the experiences of learners. In this way, I hope to illustrate ways in which this theory has merit in helping us to understand how language learners develop knowledge and identity beyond the classroom.

#### ***4.2.6. Previous studies of CoPs in general education***

The following section will feature a number of studies from the field of general education that have utilized a CoP-influenced theoretical perspective. These research examples highlight a number of themes relevant to the current study including the role of autonomy, peer learning, community situatedness, and structural power in relation to CoPs.

Countryman (2009) utilized a narrative inquiry approach to examine young adults' music learning experiences in Canadian secondary education. She interviewed 33 participants (23 individual interviews and 10 pair interviews) over a six-month period and subsequently analyzed the transcribed data both inductively (critical grounded theory) and deductively (CoP) in order to develop codes and themes. One of the key themes that was identified was that of "fun" or "enjoyment" within their music classes. However, Countryman determined that this was not a singular concept, but rather manifested itself in two forms: (1) "positive emotion or pleasure" (p. 100) – based on happy memories or shared enjoyable experiences like trips, and (2) a deeper "personal engagement in action" (p. 100). The researcher interpreted the presence of this second concept of engagement as a sign that these students were truly participating in a CoP and had been given some degree of autonomy in terms of their music education. This autonomy affordance was viewed by Countryman to have existed in three main forms: (1) musical creativity, (2) musical independence, and (3) musical leadership. The first form, musical creativity, related to the control students had over *what* they did in their CoP. This came in the form of musical improvisation, song composition, and the creation of their own musical arrangements. Musical independence largely referred to *who* students engaged with in classes and the freedom they had regarding those choices. Two examples of this were students being free to cooperate with peers on various projects and also collaboratively making decisions regarding public musical performances (that were afforded legitimacy by the institution). Countryman argues that these manifestations of musical

independence served to create a sense of ownership among the students in these courses. Finally, musical leadership essentially represented the control students had over the *how* of learning. This theme was based on times when students had chances to directly impact the running of the music program at their school and step into an authentic leadership position. One participant, Paige, described the enjoyment and fulfilment that she received from genuine leadership responsibilities.

That music program was my life during high school. It consumed me! In Grade 12 I got to coach a junior vocal group. They were my responsibility for the whole year. I planned the rehearsals, taught the music, chose the soloists, rehearsed with the rhythm section and conducted the performances. It was such a challenge, such an accomplishment—just so much fun!

(Countryman, 2009, p. 103)

Based on her participants positive experiences within music education, Countryman asserts that through autonomy-supportive approaches to education, where students shared authentic decision-making responsibilities and felt accountable to each other, they were able to derive personal satisfaction and a sense of belonging in a CoP. However, she also cautions that, although the majority of students seemed to view their music CoPs as accessible to all, educators should be mindful of the fact that the stronger a sense of belonging to an in-group is, the more chance there is that others may be excluded from CoP participation for numerous reasons.

The issue of belonging within a CoP is paramount in Maskia and Jones' (2016) study of first-year business management students at a US university and their responses to the What Works initiative, a plan to “enhance student belonging, engagement, and success” (p. 144) so as to improve student retention. Maskia and Jones collected data from two stages of focus group discussions focusing on students' perspectives and experiences of the What Works



initiative's blended face-to-face and online resources. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently thematically coded deductively. Wenger's (2009) notions of CoP learning as belonging, doing, experiencing, and becoming formed the theoretical framework upon which the deductive codes were based. A key finding from this analysis was the important role of both online and face-to-face communication with peers in fostering a sense of security and belonging among the freshman students. Studentfolio, the online platform utilized in the program, allowed students to help one another, ask questions, and engage in discussions within a lower-pressure, low-stakes environment compared to the classroom.

So, if you don't understand something and you ask a question, they don't make you look like you're stupid or make you feel like you're stupid. Everyone kind of just help[s] each other out. So that's quite nice. (FG1, Student 1)

(Maskia & Jones, 2016, p. 149)

In addition to the practical benefits of exchanging explicit knowledge about their subject matter and course content, some participants recognized the value of developing implicit knowledge and "soft skills" such as learning how to collaborate and being supportive of others. This was accentuated due to the less-hierarchical power dynamic that came from peer interactions that in turn encouraged freer exchanges of opinions and a greater sense of commonality and empathy. However, despite the promising findings regarding the impact of the What Works initiative on fostering CoPs and student belonging, the researchers also highlight the considerable tensions that come with transitioning into new CoPs. Maskia and Jones argue that due to each new group member bringing with them personal histories, beliefs, and value systems formed across multiple CoPs throughout their lifelong learning trajectories, sociality within a CoP can also result in intermember conflict. It is through the ongoing processes of peer interaction, identity negotiation, and shared goal attainment that these

conflicts may be better understood and, hopefully, reconciled. In summary, this study focuses on some practical implications of the study, stating that providing opportunities, such as the What Works initiative, for community peer engagement can address issues such as staff shortages in higher education. Furthermore, developing a sense of belonging in peer CoPs can contribute to supporting an increasingly diverse student body and develop group coping resources that increase the chances of student retention in the face of a multitude of social and academic stresses.

The concept, briefly discussed in Maskia and Jones (2016), of one CoP being influenced by members' histories in other communities and by other social networks was focused on in greater depth in a study by Orsmond, Merry, and Callaghan (2013) of UK-based university students majoring in biological sciences. The researchers collected semi-structured interview data from a total of 30 students at different stages of time in their studies. One group of participants had just entered the course, the second had just completed their first year, the next group had just completed their second year, and the final group was preparing to graduate. The interview content was primarily based upon who the students talked to about their coursework, why they chose those specific people, and how these interactions contributed to their understanding of course content. Inductive thematic analysis of this data was carried out by two of the researchers independently with themes later being decided through collaborative dialogue. One of the central foci of this study was students' stages of participation in student-managed out-of-class CoPs that supported their in-class progress. The research team found that norms of peer interaction during their secondary education helped to facilitate members' entry into the student-run communities and enhanced their buy-in as regards to the notion of peer learning. As students reached the end of their first year, they developed more organized and reified peer meetings to discuss specific points they studied in class, and they showed signs of adjusting their identity or interactional style for each specific

student group that they engaged with. There were also indications that students were simultaneously drawing upon social capital (knowledge, experience) from their external social networks (friends, family, and the like.) that subsequently allowed them to bring new knowledge into their local CoPs. At the end of their second year, students displayed greater reflection on and awareness of interpersonal relations and came to understand the relative weaknesses and strengths of themselves and others more deeply from their interactions in the CoPs. Furthermore, the CoPs came to be important venues for both motivational support and information/resource sharing in the face of increasing course demands. Finally, as they neared graduation, participants described developing identities in their field which was enhanced by both a sense of belonging within their local CoPs and a sense of difference between them and members of their external social networks. One of the key takeaways from this study is the interactional relationship between the domain, community, and practice of a given CoP and outside communities and social networks. The interactions students in this study had with “outsiders” reinforced their sense of identity and belonging within the CoP, while at the same time providing experience and knowledge that they could then bring back to their community and potentially enrich and innovate its practice. These brokering practices between CoPs and networks highlight the far-reaching impact that a CoP’s situatedness (institutionally/socioculturally) can have on its internal ways of doing.

The impact of a CoP’s situatedness and the related structural power dynamics it may be affected by are foregrounded in Solomon’s (2007) study of learners’ experiences, beliefs, and identities within a mathematics course CoP. This research was based on data from semi-structured interviews with 12 undergraduate mathematics students at a UK university. The students were interviewed halfway through their first year of study and were asked about their learning histories, how university compared to their secondary education, their identity as a mathematics learner, and their perceived future in the field. This data was subsequently

analyzed via deductive thematic coding based on the categories of *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* (see section 4.2.4.) from the modes of identification framework (Wenger, 2010). The manifestation of alignment within the CoP was found to have a frequently negative impact on the participants' identities. Many students felt marginalized due to the fact that they were forced to simply follow stated mathematical rules rather than being able to actively apply and manipulate them. This represented a lack of control within the CoP felt by the majority of participants, and this prevented them from feeling legitimized within the community, ensuring their position as "rule-followers, not rule-makers" (p. 84). This perceived lack of agency or control relating to the CoP's regime of competence (Wenger, 1998) also meant that engagement in community practice was generally restricted to superficial levels. The other key insight from Solomon's study was the impact of broader institutional and political power on what a CoP deems legitimate and, consequently, the experiences and identities of its members. Solomon argued that a culture of fixed ability beliefs – that some people are simply naturally predisposed to be successful mathematicians whereas others are not – was to some extent perpetuated by an institutionally-reified pedagogical approach that prioritized rule following and restricted student ownership of course content.

I don't know whether I've got to the stage where I think it's too difficult or I'm not bothered any more or if I don't really see the point of doing it any more. I think with maths, you're good at it or you're not particularly good at it ... you can struggle for years and years to understand maths and never grasp the concept, I think it is an all or nothing subject.

(Solomon, 2007, p. 89)

Another facet of structural power and its influence on feelings of marginalization among some students in Solomon's study was related to gender. Solomon cites research from mathematics education (Becker, 1995; Willis, 1995) that shows how teaching styles that prioritize speed

and accuracy of answers over discovery and discussion of mathematics concepts tend to have been unfavorable for female students. As the institution in Solomon's study also reinforced this culture of the correct answer being paramount, this influenced the local practice of the CoP and caused the female members to be more passive in interactions and more hesitant to share questions or insights. These findings represent a stark example of broader power dynamics and patterns of marginalization permeating the borders of a CoP and ultimately coloring its regime of competence.

#### ***4.2.7. Previous studies of CoPs in second or foreign language education***

Arguably, one of the most important pioneering studies within language education that drew upon CoP theory was Toohey's ethnographic research (Toohey, 1996, 2000; Toohey & Day, 1999) into six children's ESL learning in a Canadian kindergarten and elementary school. Over a three-year period, Toohey observed the participants' classes once per week from kindergarten until the second grade of elementary school and collected extensive data through observational field notes, audio recording, videotaping, and interviews with teachers and the children's families. Toohey's analysis focused a great deal on the opportunities that each child was afforded for participation within the CoP of the classroom and the access that they were able to secure to learning resources. These learning resources included peers who were proficient English speakers and who could afford them access to spoken English. However, it was found that through factors such as the layout of furniture in the classroom and certain classroom management practices, the ESL learners in this study were at times restricted in terms of opportunities to obtain expertise from peers or chances to productively use English. These instances of marginalization also restricted the identities that were made available to them in the classroom, and this led to some of these children being ascribed deficit identities as ESL learners (Lamb, 2013). However, one interesting side effect of the marginalization that some of the ESL learners experienced was that moving outside of the

teacher's focus could have also been interpreted as an act of resistance to the power dynamics of the classroom CoP. In this outside position, some of these participants gained autonomy and allowed them to engage in the target language in a manner in which they felt comfortable.

In truth, being on the margins, farther from teacher surveillance, in some ways could put a child in a more powerful position; one had more autonomy in choosing one's own activities and verbal participation than when one was more centrally located with regard to the teacher.

(Toohey, 2000, p. 91)

Toohey's study is not only important due to its role in foregrounding the potential applicability of CoP in the field of language education, but also due to its keen awareness of both internal and external power dynamics on how a CoP operates. In this way, even this early research began to flag what became a commonplace criticism of CoP theory: insufficient attention to role of power in community practice (see Section 4.4.1).

Perhaps one of the best-known and most-cited studies in language education utilizing the CoP framework was conducted by Morita (2004), which examined the experiences of six L2 learners as they attempted to socialize into the academic practices of a Canadian university. Adopting an ethnographic multiple case study approach over a one-year period, Morita drew on numerous ethnographic data sources including weekly student self-reports, interviews with both students and instructors, classroom observations, and document collection in order to triangulate her findings and paint a fuller picture of her participants' lived experiences. Her six participants were all female students from Japan ranging in age from 23 to 42 and who were in their first year in various Master's degree programs at the university. This study in many ways built upon the work that Toohey had done a decade prior as Morita explicitly addressed the various positionalities and ascribed identities that each of her participants had to negotiate within the academic CoPs that they had entered. Many of the participants had to engage in

*identity work* (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002) where they resisted or managed broad generalizations attached to socially-constructed identities such as “Japanese women” and attempted to craft their own desired identities within the highly-situated context of the classroom. What Morita shows us here is not only the interplay between structure and agency within CoPs, but also the importance of individual historical experience on how this interplay is managed. In the case of Rie, as a Korean citizen with a history of negotiating minority status in Japanese schools, she was able to draw upon that individual experience and work to carve out an identity as a valuable member of the classroom who could provide important information about foreign educational systems. In this way, each participant’s unique history impacted to some degree the manner in which they could influence or were influenced by the CoPs they participated in. This process was a complex one and Morita emphasizes that “the co-construction of learner agency and positionality is not always a peaceful, collaborative process, but is often a struggle involving a web of power relations and competing agendas” (p. 597).

One further study foregrounding the interplay of structural power and individual agency within language learning CoPs is Norton’s (2001) research into the construction of *identities of non-participation* (Wenger, 1998) among two adult immigrant language learners in Canada. Norton collected longitudinal data from interviews, participant observation, and participants’ diary entries over a one-year period and examined this through a CoP theoretical lens. This study showed how the two participants framed their investment in the language classroom in terms of their personal histories, desired identities, and the imagined communities that they aspired to. When they came into contact with community practices or teacher behaviors, such as dismissiveness towards immigrant communities or what they saw as inappropriate teaching methods, that threatened their desired identities or access to their imagined communities, they developed identities of non-participation (Wenger, 1998) and

withdrew from the courses. In a similar vein to Toohey and Morita, Norton's study emphasizes the underlying power dynamics acting on CoPs from both inside and outside. She also highlights how individual learner histories had considerable impact on how learners reacted to the domain, community, and practice of the CoP. We also get early hints at links between Norton's notion of investment and imagined communities and Wenger's later evolution of CoP theory in which he discusses learners seeking to develop knowledgeability across a Landscape of Practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b) (see section 4.5).

Zheng and Chai's (2019) ethnographic investigation of the peer-learning practices of Chinese university students is one more recent example of research building upon the groundwork laid by Toohey, Morita, and Norton's studies. In order to explore learners' identity negotiation through participation in a language learning community of practice, Zheng and Chai observed one group of four Chinese writing students engaging in peer-editing sessions based on one member's work. The researchers triangulated this data with both audio recordings of their peer-feedback sessions and various drafts of writing they had produced. These data sources were subsequently analyzed utilizing a microgenetic approach to discourse analysis where utterance/sentence level language was dissected in depth and through a CoP theoretical lens. The ethnographic data suggested that the negotiation of both meaning and identity among group members was a constant and fluid process somewhat akin to monetary flow within an economic system. Members had both horizontal responsibility to one another within the micro context of their group interactions, and this contributed to an environment where they had agentic space to reposition themselves "from a person of ignorance to a knower" (p. 236). However, in contrast to this, members would also at times actively position themselves hierarchically in relation to a broader imagined community of "foreign" English users.



[Fang: Can foreigners understand this sentence?]

287 王：我自己没感觉，这句话。

[Wang: I'm not sure about this sentence.]

288 卢：中国人啊。（笑）

[Lu: What an odd English sentence we Chinese students may write (laughing)!]

289 方：一看就是中国人写的。（笑）

[Fang: It's obvious that the sentence was created by a Chinese student (laughing).]

(Zheng & Chai, 2019, p. 231)

Another interesting observation was that members of the group simultaneously felt accountability not only to this international imagined community, but also the historic imagined community of their past language learning groups. The identities and notions of legitimate practice the students developed in their secondary education were carried with them into the peer-editing sessions and served as a bedrock for the negotiations they were engaging in as they were sharing feedback on their writing. To summarize, their participation in this CoP was based on an interplay between the historical influences they brought with them as individuals and their perceived accountability to an imagined community of international English users. Finally, Zheng and Chai argue that one of the implications of this study was that although participation in a language learning CoP certainly afforded members the ability to develop explicit linguistic knowledge through interaction with others, it also stimulated the development of implicit knowledge that facilitated fruitful social learning and growth as “a whole person” (p. 237).

One final contemporary study of note by Teng and Bui (2018) represents a nod to the evolution of the theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, 2015b) that more prominently featured the notions of boundary crossing between

multiple CoPs and the power dynamics involved in these transitions. Teng and Bui state that this research was designed to address a lack of inquiry into the experiences of language learners transitioning into a new CoP and, in particular, those who may not be positioned as “legitimate speakers” (p. 2) in such a community. As with the other studies cited above, this research was ethnographic in nature. The participants were nine Thai fourth-year university students majoring in Chinese and who were participating in a one-year study abroad program in China. Data was collected in the form of four semi-structured interviews and five to seven diary entries per participant and was subsequently subjected to discourse analysis. A key focus of the study was the process of identity negotiation prior to, during, and after their study abroad experiences and the variegated factors that affected how each participant perceived themselves and the Chinese language. Just as in Norton (2001) and Zheng and Chai’s (2019) research, Teng and Bui understand learners’ engagement in CoPs to be based as much in terms of imagination/imagined communities as it is with the concrete, micro-level interactions taking place within a given group of learners. The findings of this study were categorized into three distinct categories of (1) pre-departure imagination, (2) experiences of CoPs during study abroad, and (3) future imagination. In the first category, participants expressed excitement about their future engagement in an imagined community of “authentic” Chinese users and appeared to include Chinese proficiency/identity as a component of their desired future selves. However, during their study abroad period, many participants encountered a number of sociocultural norms or structural barriers that called into question their legitimacy within the imagined community they sought access to. This, in turn, caused them to renegotiate their identities and, in some cases, actually reject a Chinese speaker identity and develop an “identity of non-participation” (Wenger, 1998).

Fluency in Chinese is the result of blood, sweat and tears, not a consequence of studying in China. I learned a lot. But later I found that Chinese is too difficult. It is

also difficult for me to join the Chinese community because of the lack of cultural understanding.

(Teng & Bui, 2018, p. 14)

While increased opportunities to engage with L2 speakers did appear to strengthen some more linguistically-proficient students' sense of competence, for lower-proficiency students, the stresses that came with boundary crossing were merely exacerbated. One important implication of this study is the considerable variation in each participant's individual history, beliefs, linguistic proficiency, personality, and level of confidence impacted their identity negotiation and, ultimately, their ability to develop a sense of legitimacy in their immediate/imagined community. Furthermore, despite facing a number of cultural, linguistic, or political barriers to achieving a sense of inclusion in their imagined linguistic community, there were also signs that these structural obstacles could indeed be negotiated. Teng and Bui found that some participants were able to draw on elements of physical (geographical) and social (socioeconomic, cultural) proximity between them and members of the host culture that allowed them to sustain their identities within their imagined community. Teng and Bui's research is relevant to the current study in that the transition for students into a self-access environment is regarded by some as analogous to study abroad due to the "foreign" or heterotopic nature of many SACs (Kurokawa et al., 2013; Murray & Fujishima, 2016b; Mynard et al., 2020a). Furthermore, the boundary crossing and related anxiety that many students face when attempting to participate in SAC CoPs could perhaps be mediated by affording students with opportunities to engage with others with similar backgrounds and levels of linguistic proficiency.

The five studies cited in this section reflect the gradual evolution of how CoPs are understood and represent important contributions to the understanding of language learner experience as community participation. Also, in a more far-reaching sense, this research

highlights some of the potential blind spots of CoP theory such as the importance of context/situatedness, the role of the individual, and the role of power that other CoP critics would come to focus on years later. In the following section, I narrow my focus even further and examine how the CoP framework has been utilized to interpret learner participation in SACs and other out-of-class settings.

### **4.3. Communities of practice in self-access or out-of-class language learning**

#### **4.3.1. Existing CoP-oriented studies in self-access or out-of-class language learning**

As part of a larger longitudinal (approximately two-year) ethnographic study (Mynard et al., 2020a) drawing upon observational, interview, and language learning history data investigating 15 SLS users within a SAC in a Japanese university, Hooper (2020d) adopted a CoP perspective to examine the dynamics of SLS participation. In this study, Hooper utilized the criteria of domain, community, and practice (Wenger et al., 2002) to examine the structure and functioning of a SAC social learning space called the English Lounge. It was found that, in the English Lounge CoP, a small group of core users had formed and had developed an identity as old timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the SLS. These core members were often intensely invested in the CoP's *domain* of developing conversation skills and socializing using only English. In some cases, examples of identity via alignment were observable as some core members sought to maintain horizontal accountability—mutual engagement in maintaining standards of practice (Wenger, 2010) —by ensuring that other English Lounge users kept to the English-only language policy. The core CoP group were also aware of recurring problems in the community, namely the issue of accessibility for younger or low English proficiency students, and worked in collaboration with the institution to develop tools (*practice*) to address these issues and offer increased avenues for LPP to new members. Furthermore, *community* was expressed through the roles of the core group as NPRMs to other regular Lounge users and also through the evolving identity trajectories of regular members as they became more

comfortable in the space and displayed the intention (congruent with a senpai/kōhai dynamic) to help support and socialize new members into the CoP.

In his study of the Blue Rain Café, an out-of-class adult English learning community in China, Gao (2007) draws upon a CoP perspective as he describes how members strategically enacted their agency to overcome structural constraints and create a space for learning and practicing English without the need for “native speakers.” This research primarily examined roughly 29,000 messages from Blue Rain Café members posted from 2004 to 2006 on an online message board and also supplemented this with four direct observations of the community over a six-month period. Gao illustrates how certain Blue Rain Café members had a clear sense of the community’s domain—“mak[ing] friends with other participants through using English together” (p. 263). He also provides examples of the interplay between individual and social described in CoP theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as individual learners’ learning histories influenced the CoP while they simultaneously evolved as learners because of their participation in the group. A further implication from Gao’s study is the powerful impact that CoP leaders can have as they describe how the two coordinators represented powerful role models for many of the other members and had a key role in creating an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that would not scare away new members. Finally, as an example of the Blue Rain Café’s practice, it was found that the community utilized their shared linguistic and cultural background as a community tool. L1 use was accepted as part of the regime of competence and helped to scaffold English conversations making them more enjoyable and less stressful.

In a pilot for the present study, Hooper (2020c) explored identity construction within the LC CoP utilizing Wenger’s (1998, 2010) modes of identification (*engagement, imagination, alignment*) as a theoretical framework. By examining interview data and language learning histories from five LC members, Hooper found that engagement,

imagination, and alignment were overlapping categories of identity construction. Engaging in community practices such as everyday conversation in English as well as maintaining a supportive and welcoming environment (*engagement*) was tied to members' positioning of themselves and the LC in relation to other SAC CoPs and a wider imagined community of international English users (*imagination*). Furthermore, members expressed a determination to adhere to the LC's historically-established regime of competence and markers of English proficiency based on "native speaker" models (*alignment*). In each of the modes of identification, one could also observe (just as in Gao's (2007) study) a negotiation of the CoP's regime of competence based on an interaction between reproduction (continuation of CoP's historical norms) and innovation (individuals attempting to evolve practice based on their personal experiences and beliefs). Overall, this study presented the LC as a dynamic and constantly evolving entity where power (from within and outside), individual agency, and past, present, and future all converge.

Yamamoto (2017) and Murray (2011) both conducted studies in self-access that focus a great deal on Wenger's (1998) concept of *imagination*. Yamamoto (2017) via a narrative study of one self-directed language learner, Sakura, highlights how individuals can develop identities of participation or non-participation within a self-access environment based on their desired future imagined communities. Yamamoto conducted three interviews with Sakura, a Japanese university student, over an approximately two-year period in the L1 (Japanese) that were transcribed and translated by the researcher at a later date. Sakura was found to develop an identity trajectory that changed from her desiring legitimacy in a SAC social learning space, to then disengaging with that space as a "safe zone" (p. 225), removed from the realities of an imagined community of "real" English conversation overseas. Yamamoto states that, for Sakura, the SAC and the learning community there represented only one facet of her identity and just one area within a "nexus of multimembership" (Wenger, 1998) made up of different

CoPs that continually evolve and appear or disappear over time. Furthermore, Sakura's investment in these communities was not purely based on learning in itself, but also on emotional reasons such as reducing language learning anxiety, building friendships or developing a sense of belonging, what Norton (2001) terms "affective investment" (p. 166). Murray (2011) conducted a mixed-methods study that utilized a language beliefs survey, written language learning histories, and interview data to examine the experiences of 269 members of a SAC self-directed language learning course in a Japanese liberal arts university. Murray's study also drew upon Wenger's (1998) concept of imagination but did so to show how his participants appeared to identify with "imagined communities" that "are not immediately accessible or are diffuse or distributed over a widespread geographical area" (p. 77). Murray's participants drew upon movies, TV shows, and international news to obtain information and knowledge that supported an international posture (Yashima, 2002) and could potentially afford them access to future English-speaking communities. Another important finding was that several of the participants stated in their language learning histories that they were positively influenced by English-speaking Japanese teachers who acted as relatable role models for them. Murray argues that these findings challenge the value of highly "native speaker"-centric models of English education in countries like Japan. All of the above studies suggest that a key role of out-of-class or SAC-based CoPs is tied to affective support for language learning and the negotiation of learner identity through processes of social interaction and imagination. As will be evident in later chapters, these themes indeed represent central pillars within the current study.

#### ***4.3.2. Cultivating CoPs in SACs***

Based on in-depth examinations of SAC-based CoPs, a number of studies have attempted to provide more practice-based insights that can serve to guide those wishing to

cultivate CoPs within self-access learning environments. In this section, I will provide some relevant examples to the current study and their implications for practitioners.

Based on an ethnographic study of the English Café, a university SAC's social learning space, Murray and Fujishima (2013) offer a wealth of practical implications that may inform those interested in fostering community emergence. They noted the value of providing options for differing levels of participation in communities, the role of events as opportunities for students of various backgrounds to enter a social learning space, and argued that making friends and developing language skills went “hand-in-hand” (p. 147). Perhaps the most important takeaway from their findings was the importance of autonomy support for communities. The SAC manager in their study facilitated CoP emergence by adopting an approach based on distributed leadership. Rather than dictating practice or creating groups in a top-down fashion, she worked to build networks between students who could benefit from each other's knowledge and then allowed them to develop autonomously. This, however, did not mean that the students were simply left to work things out by themselves. The SAC was constantly offering suggestions to community members and providing them with resources when necessary. Murray and Fujishima (2013) argue that autonomy and dependence are complementary terms. They state that as affordances were provided by the SAC administration, the students were able to “mak[e] decisions and choices in response to possibilities” (p. 153), thus allowing them to influence the SAC environment and create the groundwork for the emergence of their community.

The role of SAC-based student-led CoPs and the potential value of institutional support for community development was explored in a Japan-based study by Watkins (2022). This study focuses on the development of interest-based SAC communities and analyzes narratives from six community members. Additionally, Watkins outlines her role in facilitating the emergence and continued support of these communities in an autonomy-



supportive fashion. Congruent with techniques derived from language advising (Mynard & Carson, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016) the approach that she utilizes (see Table 7) allows her to “show the learners possibilities, expand their visions, and offer support with administrative work; while fostering learners’ ownership of their community by encouraging them to make their own decisions and take responsibilities” (p. 7).

**Table 7**

*Techniques for autonomy-supportive learning community support (adapted from Watkins, 2022)*

Planting seeds	Initial advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Help learner(s) explore their interests and needs</li> <li>- Connect individuals with similar interests and needs</li> <li>- Encourage their intentions to form a community</li> </ul>
Fertilizing the soil	System support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assist the new community to complete an online application form</li> <li>- Reserve space for the community’s meeting</li> <li>- Draft and create a poster with the community members for advertisement</li> <li>- Advertising</li> </ul>
Watering	Casual advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce new members</li> <li>- Provide ideas to enhance their activities and organization</li> <li>- Facilitate the needs of the community</li> </ul>

Many of the community members’ insights from Watkins’ study are congruent with practical implications from Murray and Fujishima’s (2013) research such as the value of providing time and space for casual interaction and the importance of balancing structure and autonomy. However, in this case this occurred on a micro, rather than institutional or managerial level, as community leaders elected to avoid top-down leadership in favor of a model where authority was distributed among all members. A further implication of Watkins’ study is the impact of community alignment to a wider organizational culture. A belief in

autonomy-supportive learning underpinned the SAC in this study and in some cases community leaders had been officially trained as peer advisors and worked in this role within the SAC. A belief in autonomy-supportive learning cultivated in this role and other forms of active participation in the SAC appeared to color these community leaders' organizational style and the domain, community, and practice that developed within their CoPs. Many of the practical implications noted in the two studies discussed above have been echoed in similar CoP-oriented research into SACs and SLSs. Acuña González, Avila Pardo, and Holmes Lewendon (2015) assert that social learning and CoP development within SACs should be based on an environment of autonomy and interdependence where learners have the choice of “when, how and who they want to practice their English with” (p. 320). Mynard, Hooper, Lyon and Taw (2020) state the need for greater facilitation of student ownership relating to SAC CoPs by providing more networking opportunities via events and optimization of the SAC space. They also advocated for the interest-based communities described by Watkins as they may scaffold English interaction for lower proficiency English users and enhance a sense of community ownership as the domain is essentially defined by the students. Finally, through SAC staff such as learning advisors (see section 3.4.) helping learners to negotiate affective barriers through reflective dialogue, they argue that peripheral members of SAC CoPs could develop the self-efficacy to transition to full, active CoP membership should they desire it.

Another examination of the role of reflection in CoP development, and in particular CoP leadership, can be found in Sigala Villa, Ruiz-Guerrero, and Zurutuza Roarao's (2019) investigation into a CoP formed by conversation club leaders within a Mexico-based SAC. The community meetings were explicitly framed as opportunities for joint reflection and utilized Farrell's (2004) model of reflection in action as a guiding framework. It was found that through face-to-face and online interactions the leaders had opportunities to externalize their thoughts and beliefs on their practice in their respective conversation clubs and

collaboratively negotiate mutual understandings and definitions of sound practice and developed a shared repertoire of tools and approaches. A link to Watkins' advising-based method of community support and the potential supportive role of language advising put forward by Mynard et al. (2020c) was also observable in this study as the researchers suggested that “[m]apping users’ perceptions...gave direction to the objectives that the CoP aimed towards, and thus meaningful changes could be made... to enhance their practice and performance” (p. 175). In a parallel fashion, this suggests that autonomy-supportive reflective dialogue where CoP leaders may vocalize and explore their beliefs on leadership in collaboration with peers or trained learning advisors may be a valuable avenue of CoP support in SACs.

#### **4.4. Criticisms of CoP perspectives**

As opposed to the preceding sections, where I establish some basic foundations relating to how CoPs can be understood or cultivated, the following section points to some issues that the theory arguably fails to adequately address. The two areas of existing critiques that I will discuss below are the role of (particularly external) power in CoPs and the influence of the individual in CoPs. These two foci emerged as central considerations in my study as my iterative data analysis of the LC progressed and became the stimulus for the abductive analytical orientation that I eventually adopted in this study (see sections 4.5 and 5.8.1. for a more detailed discussion of this).

##### ***4.4.1. The role of power***

One of the key points of contention concerning the earlier iterations of CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is over whether or not issues of power are addressed sufficiently. Wenger (1998) explores the idea of internal community power dynamics through his concepts of *regimes of competence*, *peripherality* versus *marginality*, or *economies of meaning*, where he describes how “different meanings are produced in different locations...

and compete for the definition of certain events, actions, or artifacts” (p. 199). That being said, a number of researchers (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Handley et al., 2006; Haneda, 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007; Kanno, 1999; Mutch, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Yanow, 2004) have claimed that the CoP model fails to adequately account for the impact that external or historical power inequalities existing at meso or macro contextual levels may have on a CoP.

Brannan (2007) provides one illustrative example of a study that highlights the reproduction of existing power structures impacting concepts of legitimate peripheral participation and marginalization within a CoP. This 13-month ethnographic study centers on the professional practices of customer service representatives (CSRs) in a UK-based call center. The researcher acted as a participant-observer by gaining employment at AceCall, a call center in the West Midlands providing IT support for clients. During his time at AceCall, ethnographic data in the form of a fieldwork journal, participant observation, and follow-up interviews with several of the AceCall CSRs was collected and then analyzed. Brannan interpreted that the AceCall CSRs did indeed represent a CoP as once new employees’ formal training had ended, they were socialized into the community and afforded access to ways of non-canonical practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991) and informal mentoring by community “old timers” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). One concrete example of this was the use of sexualized, flirtatious interactions with clients of the opposite sex in order to facilitate “relationship building” (p. 126) and thus mitigate the emotional labor workers experienced in a high-pressure work environment. Although it could be argued that this relationship building emerged as from the CoP naturally and responded to the needs of its members, there were also a number of ways in which it reproduced broader structures of domination/marginalization. There were instances when an open culture of machismo resulted in homophobic remarks becoming normalized and those employees who did not want to engage in “relationship

building” were subject to bullying. These behaviors were reinforced by CoP old timers, as can be seen in the following exchange between Tina, a team leader, and another employee.

Tina: Right. Venkat, Rajesh, Matt and Ben, by the end of the day I want to know how many phone numbers you’ve got, and I want new ones as well. Venkat, darling, that means Sally P. from Swindon doesn’t count.

Rajesh: What does the winner get?

Tina: A list of women’s phone numbers, idiot. Are you thick, or just queer?

(Brannan, 2007, p. 126)

In addition, it was found that distinct gendered roles developed among male and female CSRs in AceCall that mirrored stereotyped images of men and women existing in wider society. If these performative roles were not adhered to, it would likely jeopardize a team member’s legitimacy within the CoP. Through Brannan’s ethnography of AceCall, we can recognize the validity of Roberts’ (2006) warning regarding viewing CoPs as existing “in a vacuum,” (p. 634) as the reproduction of marginalizing power relationships can occur within a CoP just as easily as it can within any social group.

In order to address the apparent insufficient attention to the influence of wider power structures, such as those discussed in Brannan’s study, on participation in CoPs, several theorists (Handley et al., 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Mutch, 2003) have drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1977) and his concepts of field, habitus, and capital to conceptualize a relationship between what goes on within a CoP and societal and historical power structures. Mutch (2003) argues that a tension exists between Wenger’s “compartmentalism” and Bourdieu’s “fatalism” (Handley et al., p. 7). While Wenger’s perspective depicts “knowledgeable actors” (Giddens, 1991) who through a CoP’s practice have the agency to disrupt and modify historically-acrued experiences, Bourdieu’s more fatalistic concept of *habitus* involves the unconscious reproduction of existing social structure and power relations.

Mutch (2003) proposes the need for theoretical perspectives that focus on “not the either/or of agency and structure, but the both/and, recognizing not only their mutual constitution but also the need to examine the inter-relationships between them” (p. 397). Wenger (2010) recognizes that as communities of practice is a theory of learning rather than power, it may not extensively address wider political issues such as social class, ethnicity, or gender. However, in some more recent articles (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 2010; Wenger-Trayner, 2013), he has proposed a *plug-and-play approach*, in which other complementary theories that deal with issues like power more explicitly such as Giddens’ (1984) Structuration Theory or Bourdieu’s (1984) habitus/field theory may be “run through” the CoP concept (Wenger-Trayner, 2013, p.4). In discussing the integration of Bourdieu’s habitus/field with a CoP perspective, Wenger-Trayner (2013) appears to also recognize the value of habitus in addressing the “subconscious aspect of identity” (p. 7) whereas his view is perhaps useful in “add[ing] an aspect of agency to habitus” (p. 8).

There are several existing studies in the field of language learning that address wider-scale power dynamics or successfully run other theories accounting for power through a CoP perspective (Han, 2009; Hooper, 2020c; Kim & Kim, 2015; Morita, 2004). Morita’s (2004) influential study of Japanese graduate students’ socialization experiences in Canadian higher education was carried out using a CoP framework but focused extensively on the ways in which her participants were afforded or denied legitimacy due to their positioning based on race, nationality, or gender. In this study, Morita was partly influenced by “resistance theories” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 22) that examine how individuals strategically construct alternative positionalities in the face of exclusionary hegemonic power structures in order to succeed. Morita’s study represents a good example of how one may plug-and-play theories of power into the CoP theory in order to achieve a more comprehensive account of the structure/agency interplay in communities of practice.

#### *4.4.2. The role of individuals*

In contrast to the aforementioned concerns over the seeming absence within CoP perspectives of wider social categories like ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or class and the power relations connected to them, is the claim that the individual has also been underrepresented (Billett, 2006, 2007). Whereas the previous section discussed how the role of structure has perhaps been underplayed, here we will address how individual agency too may have been overlooked, particularly in later iterations of CoP.

Billett (2007) argues that Lave and Wenger (1991) do indeed address the importance of the interaction between individual personal experience and the influence of membership within a social milieu like a CoP. However, Billett also suggests that despite their warning that “including the social world as the core of the analysis only seems to eclipse the person” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 52), in CoP’s growth to international popularity the vital role of the individual has been underrepresented or, in some cases, forgotten entirely. In a perspective on migrant communities, Olwig (2002) cautions against the use of broad categories of community members such as “Caribbean” or “migrants” as they often obscure diverse and complex lived experiences and desires. She instead encourages focusing attention on the life-history narratives of individuals, as by examining these detailed personal histories, we may get a better understanding of how “individuals interpreted and imagined...more abstract and generalized categories of being” (p. 143). In an earlier discussion into social and individual agency in the workplace, Billett (2006) emphasizes the relational interdependence between individuals and the social situations that they encounter throughout their life histories. He describes how instead of a CoP member each person’s unique past history (ontogeny), present, and future interact and shape their idiosyncratic intentions, desires, and ways of being within communities. It is also important to note that individuals’ ontogenies or antecedent conditions (Fukuda et al., 2011) are not simply shaped by but in fact can actively shape a CoP’s regime of

competence. Billet (2006) and Hughes et al. (2007) argue that a key consideration, then, relating to the place of the individual in a social theory of learning is the way in which learners' trajectories not just within a single CoP, but across multiple communities, shape and are shaped by their experiences, knowledgeability, and identity.

One example of a study highlighting the potential impact of an individual learner's ontogeny on their participation and identification with a CoP is a case study by Kojima and Thompson (2019) who analyze the experiences of Joanna, an Australian student learning Japanese. This study detailed how Joanna felt marginalized within her Japanese class, which was designed based on a participatory learning model informed by CoP literature. Joanna's unique perspective on the Japanese classroom CoP was influenced by her learning history (past) and the style of class appeared to have been incongruent with her goals and expectations (future). Consequently, she exhibited "unengaged alignment" (Kubiak et al., 2015a, p. 72) and participated superficially whilst not investing in the class CoP's domain or practice. Conversely, Joanna did seem to actively engage in some elements of the CoPs community as she joined an online chat room about Japanese study and chatted with some past friends in the group. An additional important point addressed by Kojima and Thompson related to the format of the class and the fact that the notion of a social participatory classroom CoP had essentially been "impos[ed]" (p. 73) on students. This relates to the CoP "is" versus "should be" argument raised by Hughes (2007) (see section 4.2.3.), the notion of CoPs being "cultivated" rather than "created" (see section 4.2.5.), and the need for CoP membership to be voluntary/autonomous. It also highlights a concern from Quinn (2010) that promoting the use of CoPs as a learning model under a veneer of inclusivity may in fact contribute to the ostracization of certain students.

During the data collection and analysis process, I gradually came to feel that a number of issues existed within the LC that were inextricably tied to both wider power



structures in Japanese ELT and also individual LC members' learning histories. Due to this realization, I felt that a CoP perspective alone would not be sufficient in detailing the complex situation within the LC community. As a result, through an abductive analytical approach I attempted to expand my original theoretical framework in order to address the “breakdowns” that I had encountered in my study. After extensively reading alternative but conceptually congruent theoretical perspectives, I discovered two theories that I felt would complement and adequately account for the phenomena that I was encountering in my data from the LC. The first—landscapes of practice—was rather straightforward as it was a more recent expansion or evolution of the CoP model based on concepts from Wenger's 1998 book. The second theoretical concept was that of liminality, an idea emerging from anthropology and congruent in many ways with concepts of boundary crossing from Wenger (1998) and the aforementioned landscapes of practice framework. In the following sections, these two concepts and the rationale underpinning their adoption for this study will be explained in detail.

## **4.5. Landscapes of practice**

### ***4.5.1. What are landscapes of practice?***

The conceptual development from focusing primarily on the internal dynamics of a CoP to examining the relative positioning of multiple CoPs within a landscape of practice (LoP) took place in Wenger's 1998 book. It was here that he first introduced the term LoP, describing it as a “complex social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters” (p. 118). One point emphasized in this early description of LoP is that the scope of these landscapes is not necessarily congruent with reified institutional boundaries. As a CoP is fundamentally formed through the joint engagement of its members within a domain that they value (rather than coming together through institutional dictate), Wenger (1998) argues that while it is possible that an LoP may

correspond to a larger institutional structure, this is certainly not always the case. Partly in response to some of the critiques of CoP discussed in section 4.4., a “ground switch” (Omidvar & Kislov, 2013, p. 270) took place where Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) shifted their theoretical focus to individuals’ membership across (rather than simply within) CoPs and concurrently their learning and identity construction as a trajectory through an LoP (Omidvar & Kislov, 2013). In Table 8, the fundamental differences in foci between the CoP and LoP theoretical iterations are briefly summarized.

**Table 8**

*CoP and LoP distinctions (adapted from Pyrko, Dörfler, & Eden, 2019, p. 486)*

<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Focus</b>
CoP	Discrete local communities	Members connected via local domain, community, and practice	Negotiated local practice developing <i>competence</i>
LoP	A landscape of multiple local communities	Complex interplay between boundaries and peripheries of multiple related CoPs	Developing <i>knowledgeability</i> and identifying with a wider “body of knowledge” through engagement in multiple CoPs

Accompanying a focus on participation across communities comes a concern with developing the local *competence* existing within individual CoPs as well as a broader sense of *knowledgeability* across an LoP. Wenger-Trayner states that while competence is constantly negotiable within a CoP, the concept of knowledgeability is essentially determined by the individual learner in their relationship with the landscape as they progress through their learning trajectory (Omidvar & Kislov, 2013). Furthermore, it is unlikely that a person will be able to claim competence in every CoP they encounter within an LoP. This means that individual agency is central to knowledgeability as the onus is on the individual to decide

which types of competence or identity they will invest their time and effort in developing as they construct their own unique blend of knowledgeability in the landscape. In the case of a language learner, they may invest a huge amount of time in developing competence in CoPs that are congruent with their personal goals or desired identities (i.e., a group of Japanese English learners who meet and chat with foreign exchange students each Thursday to develop casual spoken English proficiency). Conversely, they may participate in other CoPs passively or reluctantly as they do not value their regime of competence in relation to the balance of knowledgeability they desire. Simultaneously, a claim to knowledgeability is not a foregone conclusion as it still needs to be recognized by others. For instance, one may be a fluent English speaker, but if they have not achieved a high TOEIC score or cannot write a well-structured essay in English, others in the landscape may question their claim to knowledgeability. Wenger-Trayner states that it is, therefore, important to strike a balance between competence and knowledgeability—locally-constructed competence is vital, but not at the expense of myopia within the broader landscape (Omidvar & Kislov, 2013).

As previously stated, the LoP model arguably addresses a number of criticisms leveled at the CoP framework. One of the most relevant of these to this study is the issue of power. Whereas it has been claimed by many that CoP perspectives failed to adequately account for the impact of outside power dynamics on the internal practice of CoPs and the legitimacy members are afforded, an LoP perspective explicitly addresses these issues. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) build on the idea of CoPs' internal regimes of competence by extending it to the power dynamics "colonizing a field of practice" (p. 15) as hierarchies will inevitably exist between different CoPs who have negotiated or been conferred varying degrees of legitimacy. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, then, make the case that "[t]he landscape is political" (p. 15) as it is comprised of "competing voices and competing claims to knowledge, including voices that are silenced by the claim to knowledge

of others” (p. 16). A further characteristic of the LoP model that addresses the question of power and the role of structural influence is its complementary nature in relation to Bourdieu’s concepts of *field* and *habitus*. Wenger-Trayner (2013) suggests that a field could be defined as “a landscape of different practices that constitute it” (p. 7) but also that there is a distinction between Bourdieu’s perspective (concerning itself with social stratification) and his own (focusing on learning). Bourdieu’s *habitus* involves largely “embodied dispositions” (p. 7) formed by historical and social forces for the purpose of reproduction of power structures and are largely outside of individuals’ consciousness. Wenger-Trayner’s concept of LoP, on the other hand, ascribes more agency to people, claiming that although we are indeed shaped by our historical trajectories through a landscape, we also are engaged in actively discovering and making decisions over what communities and practices that we value and wish to participate in (Pyrko et al., 2019). Based on his plug-and-play principle, however, Wenger-Trayner (2013) states that there is also the need for a recognition of habitus as “the subconscious aspect of identity” (p. 7) and therefore running a field/habitus perspective through a LoP framework could indeed be valuable. Furthermore, this would in many ways satisfy the calls from several CoP critics (Handley et al., 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Mutch, 2003) to find a middle ground between Bourdieu’s and Wenger’s theories. Additionally, the LoP model recognizes the unique historical learning trajectories of individual learners and the influence that these histories have on the agentic actions that they take in constructing their own brand of knowledgeability. This arguably goes some way to address the criticisms from Billett (2007) regarding the erasure of the individual in CoP perspectives and is congruent with a *person-centered view* in modern SLA and language learner autonomy (Benson, 2017b).

#### **4.5.2. Identity in LoPs**

Just as in CoP theory, identity construction from an LoP perspective is argued to be inseparable from learning. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) state that a learner’s

historical journey across an LoP is in essence “the becoming of a person” and a reflection of how their sense of self is shaped. They describe this dynamic process of identity construction as such:

This journey within and across practices shapes who we are. Over time it accumulates memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places. It provides material for directions, aspirations, and projected images of ourselves that guide the shaping of our trajectory going forward. In other words, the journey incorporates the past and the future into our experience of identity in the present. (p. 19)

Concurrent with the CoP perspective on intra-community identity construction, learner trajectories across an LoP are shaped by the learner agency in terms of what competencies/identities they value or desire and social/structural forces that may allow or deny legitimate membership. This means that in an LoP also, identities of participation or non-participation may exist—our trajectories represent communities we are rejected by just as much as by those that welcome us in. In addition to this is the notion of *accountability*. From a CoP perspective, a CoP’s community involves members being mutually accountable to each other in terms of adhering to the domain, supporting each other, and using the CoP’s tools in line with its established practice (Wenger, 1998). In an LoP, however, it is possible that an individual may be simultaneously accountable to multiple CoPs and it is this complex web of interrelations that leads to the development of knowledgeable, accountability, and identification unique to that person. In order to provide some explanatory structure to how individuals locate themselves at several different scales (micro (CoP)—meso (institution)—macro (LoP)) and form their own sense of self, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner utilize the three modes of identification from the CoP model (see section 4.2.4.)—*engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. In one’s trajectory across an LoP, *engagement* involves the most concrete

relationship existing with the different regimes of competence we encounter. In coming into contact with these different communities we may experience a feeling of belonging or marginalization and we may also desire membership or be ambivalent about them (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b). All of these diverse encounters through engagement contribute to our continuing process of becoming. *Imagination* relates to the way that one, through interpreting images that they encounter across the landscape, understand their own unique position within it and create visions of what we might (or might not) become. These images could come from stories, media, visits to different CoPs, role models that we are exposed to and can contribute to us conceptualizing ourselves as members of broader imagined communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001). Finally, *alignment* from an LoP perspective describes how our practice generally needs to be negotiated in respect to generally-held standards across a wider body of knowledge or LoP. This can include things like codes of conduct, professional measures of competence, ethical guidelines, and established methodologies. However, as previously alluded to, this is not a top-down dictate, but rather a “two-way process of coordinating enterprises, perspectives, interpretations, and contexts so that action has the effects we expect” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b, p. 21). As in the case of modes of identification in CoPs, *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* should not be viewed as exclusive and there is likely to be a convergence or blending of the three in the individuals’ learning trajectories (Burns, Howard, & Kimmell, 2016; Kubiak et al., 2015a; Wenger, 1998).

#### **4.5.3. Boundaries and boundary crossing**

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) define a boundary as “a socio-cultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction” (p. 133) and argue that boundaries represent both sameness (a shared relevance to a field or body of knowledge) and difference (varying perspectives or identities). As a CoP is characterized by the establishment of localized

meaning through participation and reification as well as the development of a domain, community, and practice that members draw upon to work together and solve problems, it stands to reason that there will be boundaries that demarcate who is and is not a member. Pyrko et al. (2019) state that CoP members develop tacit knowledge by “think[ing] together” (p. 484) that may be largely inaccessible to outsiders and that as the CoP continues, *epistemic boundaries* emerge. These boundaries are constantly being negotiated in line with the development of the CoP’s practice and should not be simply considered as a concrete definition of who is an insider or outsider, but also a means of highlighting the CoP’s domain and allowing members to focus on it (Wenger, 1998). As learners journey through an LoP, they will inevitably come into contact with the epistemic boundaries of other CoPs and may engage in boundary crossing. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) frame boundary encounters as “learning assets” and opportunities to develop one’s knowledgeability within an LoP. They argue that a course curriculum may obscure the existence of epistemic boundaries and present itself as a source of universally applicable knowledge. Furthermore, parallel to their perspective on competence versus knowledgeability (see section 4.5.1.), they claim that CoPs and individual CoP members can benefit from boundary crossing as it prevents narrow-mindedness and encourages reflexivity in terms of their practice and development.

In terms of mediating boundary crossing, Wenger (1998) identifies two points of connection that may bridge CoPs. The first (in line with reification) is *boundary objects*—“artifacts, documents, terms, concepts... around which communities of practice can organize their interconnections” (Wenger, 1998, p. 105). Boundary objects are likely to be used in different ways by different CoPs based on their mode of participation, but they represent a structure that is recognizable across different communities (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). The second bridge between CoPs is *brokering*—the participatory counterpart to reified boundary objects where “connections [are] provided by people who can introduce elements of one

practice into another” (Wenger, 1998, p. 105). Brokers are people with multimembership in a number of different CoPs who can introduce practices from one community to another, thus enhancing possibilities for increased inter-CoP encounters and developing the knowledgeability of CoP members within an LoP (Kubiak et al., 2015b). Just as reification and participation are complementary processes in a CoP’s negotiation of meaning, boundary objects and brokering are most effective when supporting each other. A boundary object may be misinterpreted or hard to understand without the guidance of a broker, whereas a broker’s subjective perspective may be unreliable without a concrete boundary object to serve as a semantic anchor (Wenger, 1998). Transitioning across boundaries can be viewed as a form of *rupture* (Zittoun, 2006) and an uncertain and emotional endeavor (Kubiak et al., 2015a). Coming into contact with perspectives that may challenge and destabilize one’s knowledgeability and sense of self may lead to boundary encounters becoming a site for identity work in which individuals renegotiate a coherent sense of identity in relation to regulation from social forces (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). Therefore, boundary objects and brokering can provide scaffolding for individuals renegotiating a sense of continuity in regards to who they were, who they are now, and what type of person they will become.

#### ***4.5.4. Why an LoP perspective?***

As discussed in the previous sections, the integration of an LoP lens into studies on CoPs allows one to more substantially address issues such as power, inter-CoP relationships, individual agency, and historical identity trajectories. However, in the following section I intend to outline my rationale for the inclusion of LoP in regard to the current study into the LC and describe what “breakdowns” in my abductive analysis led me to supplement the base CoP framework.

The initial catalyst for the conceptual migration to the LoP model was a realization that a focus solely on the LC CoP would not adequately account for the historical processes



that were fundamental to the community's domain, community, and practice. Furthermore, through my pilot study (Hooper, 2020c) and my ongoing data analysis, it became clear that even since its inception in 2017 (and arguably within related iterations of the LC that existed even earlier) many LC members positioned their CoP in relation to other communities that they had come into contact with in an LoP. These communities were language classrooms in secondary and tertiary education, private conversation schools, and other SAC learning communities. Furthermore, it became clear that the antecedent conditions of the learner (Fukuda et al., 2011) experienced throughout their past learning trajectories framed both what they felt they needed from the LC in the present and what return they desired from their investment in the LC in their future. This emotional and ideological “baggage” (Falout, Fukuda, Murphey, & Fukuda, 2015, p. 247) that LC members brought with them was central to their motivation for membership in the CoP and, therefore, their trajectories across the broader Japanese ELT LoP could not be overlooked in this study. This steered the focus of the study away from the LC as a seemingly homogeneous group to recognizing the unique histories and sometimes conflicting desires that each member brought along with them. In this way, I intended to present “fully fleshed-out portraits of identifiable individual learners” (Benson, 2017b, p. 7) who were acting autonomously at the intersection of social forces and personal agency.

A further affordance from the integration of an LoP lens was an increased focus on power dynamics across the macro landscape of Japanese ELT. As I examined LC members' beliefs emerging from their language learning histories, I became aware of a number of ways in which different forms of knowledge produced in certain communities that they had encountered or that they aspired to were viewed in hierarchical terms. These power differentials sometimes appeared to be congruent with eigo versus eikaiwa language learning ideologies or based on prevalent “native”-centric views on English learning (discussed in

section 2.3.). These power structures occasionally took the form of habitus-like dispositions that learners had internalized throughout their learning lives, while at other times were more malleable concepts able to be consciously recognized and challenged. In whichever case, I found that a multiscale perspective that recognized power imbalances manifesting themselves at the micro (CoP), meso (institutional), and macro (LoP) levels was important to better understand how the LC was positioned within a larger educational field.

In this section, I have briefly outlined the theoretical presuppositions of the LoP theory, how it addresses existing criticism of the CoP perspective and the reasoning behind its inclusion in the current study. In the following section, I will discuss the final theoretical elaboration that emerged from my continued abductive analysis—the concept of liminality.

## **4.6. Liminality**

### **4.6.1. What is liminality?**

The term “liminality” is derived from the word “limen” (threshold) and refers to a “period of margin” or “an interstructural situation” (Turner, 1967, p. 234). Although the concept of liminality has arguably informed early sociological studies discussing the French Revolution and the broader concept of transition (Szakolczai, 2015), the concept of liminality as it is known today largely stems from the work of van Gennep (2019) and Turner (1967), two anthropologists that examined the rites of passage of tribal societies. In van Gennep’s (2019) “Rites of Passage,” he identified three distinct stages within tribal rites of passage—*separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation* (Sibbett, 2008; Turner, 1982). The middle *transition* stage represents the liminal state as initiates have ended their former lives (e.g., as children) but have not yet reached their eventual state of becoming (e.g., as adults). People in a liminal state therefore exist “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967) two distinct states of being or positions and, as a result, may find themselves in a “social limbo which has few... of the

attributes of either the preceding or subsequent... social statuses or cultural states” (Turner, 1982, p. 24).

Liminality can be directed to the analysis of a wide range of objects or phenomena. In terms of “subjecthood” (Thomassen, 2009, 2012), we may conceive of liminal individuals, social groups, or even whole civilizations. Concurrently, another key dimension that may be explored through liminality is temporality. We can experience liminal moments or periods of liminality ranging from hours to generations (Thomassen, 2012) and one may even experience “perpetual liminality” (Ybema, Beech, & Ellis, 2011) in particular social positionings (e.g., temporary workers or those spanning multiple concurrent CoPs). Turner (1982) later expanded on his and van Gennep’s original concept of liminality by introducing the concept of a *liminoid state* that he argued was more congruent with manifestations in modern societies (Thomassen, 2009). Turner makes a distinction between liminality within the bounded cultural rites he examined previously (Turner, 1967) and the liminoid existing as an “independent domain of creative activity” (Turner, 1982, p. 33) more akin to play or leisure. Turner argues, then, that whereas the liminal is tied to obligatory social rites of passage, the liminoid is based on both *freedom from* (obligations, routinized work, etc.) and *freedom to* (enter into entertainment, play around with structural limits, etc.). Put simply, “[o]ne works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid” (Turner, 1982, p. 55).

This notion of “in between” status being tied to leisure or play is explored in an analysis by Shields (1991) of the beach as both a liminal area and a site for Bakhtin’s concept of the *carnavalesque*—“[a] temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank [which] created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). Shields highlighted how UK beach resorts in places such as Brighton represented liminal and carnivalesque places where social norms could be sidelined or destabilized temporarily for leisure purposes. Shields’ work (1991) is building on the

concept of *liminal places* (Shortt, 2015; Thomassen, 2012), based on van Gennepe's (1919) original conception of in-between spaces and his discussion of the role of "territorial border zones or border lines, thresholds or portals" (p. 29) in transition rituals. Shortt's (2015) study of liminal spaces within hair salons found that "dwelling places" bridging formal and informal areas such as corridors, bathrooms, and stairwells were sites in which "arguably a more autonomous non-corporate identity can be created and permitted to emerge" (p. 653). Whitsed (2011) combined Japanese architectural concepts with liminality when he discussed the concept of the *genkan*—a place at the entrance of a Japanese home "where the boundaries of interior and exterior blur" (p. 14). He uses the metaphor of the *genkan* as he describes the liminal position (both inside, while simultaneously excluded) of foreign adjunct teachers in Japanese universities and also echoes Tsuda (1993) by describing Japanese universities as themselves liminal in nature (existing both within society but also outside of mainstream societal expectations).

Murray and Fujishima's (2016c) claim that a SAC can be a heterotopic space is congruent with what Stenner (2017, 2021) refers to as a *liminal affective technology*—a means of inducing experiences of liminality in others. This *devised* or *staged* liminality differs from *spontaneous* liminality (caused by events such as illness or political instability that throw one into an in-between state) in that it has been created intentionally to signal or even catalyze some change in experience or being. As can be seen from the case studies in Murray and Fujishima (2016b) and Mynard et al. (2020a), a SAC arguably represents a site of devised liminality and identity transformation for some of its users. Liminal states, even devised ones, however, are not simply emancipatory. Liminality can represent a no man's land just as soon as it can a path to leisure and freedom. Stenner describes how someone initially encountering a liminal experience may experience an "uh oh" moment—a negative reaction to the disruption of normality. Clear parallels can be drawn here to the sense of displacement (Murray &

Fujishima, 2016c) that many learners experienced as they entered the hybridized, pseudo-foreign space of the SAC. Although “uh oh” moments can engender anxiety and discomfort, just as with displacement they can also facilitate personal growth and the creation of new perspectives. Stenner (2017, 2021) terms this transformational potential of liminality an “ah ha” experience. Zittoun (2006, 2008) describes the “uh oh” moments experienced while transitioning into new worlds—such as in the case of students entering a SAC for the first time—as *rupture*. Rupture is a period of “uncertainty-transition” (Zittoun, 2006, p. 5) where one may experience either anxiety or excitement as they move from one world into another where taken-for-granted norms are called into question. Just as in the case of “uh oh” and “ah ha”, this instability can be an inhibitive or facilitative process. In order to avoid a rupture or liminal state leading to isolation and perpetual limbo (non-developmental change) (Zittoun, 2008), an individual may draw upon various resources that may be cognitive (e.g., previously-acquired practical knowledge), social (people acting as socializing agents and providing affective support), and symbolic (cultural elements like books or movies that engage imagination and affect an individual beyond space and time).

Another manifestation of social resources in which those in liminal states negotiate potentially detrimental feelings of isolation or powerlessness is through a deep sense of commonality or *communitas*. Turner (1969) illustrates *communitas* as how “[the] passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness” (p. 361). He later expands the concept by making a distinction between three different varieties of *communitas* (spontaneous, ideological, and normative). In the case of normative *communitas*, arguably the most relevant to a CoP perspective, Turner (1982) states that a group will at times try to “foster and maintain relationships or spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis” (p. 49) and that this is often enacted in response to feelings of vulnerability stemming from their relative position to other institutions or groups surrounding them. Normative *communitas* could, in a

sense, be viewed as an element of a CoP's practice as the members "develop protective institutional armor... which becomes the harder as the pressures to destroy the primary group's autonomy proportionally increase" (Turner, 1982, p. 49).

In the following section, I will provide some examples of how the concept of liminality has been applied to existing research within TESOL, applied linguistics, and general education.

#### ***4.6.2. Liminality, language learning, and education***

As might be expected due to a focus on boundary crossing, one of the foremost areas of study where liminality and related notions of socialization and hybridity have been drawn upon is that of study abroad and immigration experiences (Baynham & Simpson, 2010; Gamboa, 2018; Jackson, 2008; Ting Toomey & Dorjee, 2019; Williams, 2001). Jackson (2008) utilizes liminality to extend a CoP framework as she investigates the impact that study abroad has on the identities and attitudes towards English learning of Chinese university students. In this study, students' experiences often reflect a "liminal, transitional state" (p. 88) as they negotiate a new hybridized identity in the *third space* (Bhaba, 1994) between two cultural borders. Jackson also noted that the students' status as liminal personae tended to be accompanied by a sense of identity vulnerability where they doubted their own abilities as L2 users, thus leading to a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 205) of linguistic and cultural struggle. These findings echo Gamboa's (2018) research into the transitions of immigrant language learners enrolled in a college ESL program in the US. The participants in this study, it was argued, were in a liminal state as the ESL program represented a no-man's-land or "rite of passage" that immigrants needed to clear before they could attempt to assimilate into mainstream society. Furthermore, Gamboa posited that by enrolling in the course, the learners were engaging in "self-imposed liminality" where they started from zero and aimed for

complete mastery in English while “shedding previously-held knowledge, self-identities, and norms in the process of transitioning and becoming” (p. 79).

In more recent years, there appears to have been a greater recognition within TESOL and applied linguistics research of the hybridity and “in-betweenness” of identity construction as learners engage with a globalized world. In an article including an interview with Adrian Holliday, Zhou, and Pilcher (2019) critique the sometimes-uncritical manner in which liminality or third space have been deployed to paint an overly positive picture of hybridity that downplays certain structural hierarchies. In their discussion with Holliday, he describes third space as a place where one can, even just for a brief moment, be “deCentered” from hierarchical power structures and “stand back and see things in a different way” (p. 3). That being said, he states that as one is raised and socialized within structural systems where certain types of knowledge are deemed superior or inferior, seeing things from this liminal perspective is likely to be difficult and unexpected. Additionally, in an autoethnographic account of her historical trajectory as a language user, transnational, practitioner, and academic, Jain (2021) draws in part on a CoP/LoP lens to describe her lifelong learning trajectory. By constructing “in-between” translingual, transnational, and pracademic (practitioner/academic) identities across and between CoPs that she encountered, she resisted dichotomous or constrictive identity positioning. Jain argued that her chapter represented one “agentive space” (p. 144), through which she could question and renegotiate the terms by which she was categorized by others.

Just as explored in Jain’s autoethnography, the practice of translanguaging or language mixing often overlaps with discussions of liminality in language learning/teaching research. Several studies have addressed the “liminal discursive zones and contested ideologies” (Sayer, 2013, p. 85) that accompany code switching or translanguaging both inside and outside of the language classroom. Sayer (2013) investigates the use of Spanish, English,

and “TexMex”, a local hybridized vernacular, within an elementary class in Texas and reports that, despite a prevalent stigmatized view of bilingual education, translanguaging fulfilled a wide range of pedagogical functions. Furthermore, aside from the practical communicative scaffolding that translanguaging allowed for, Sayer found that this practice also helped to legitimize students’ identities as bilinguals and allowed them to draw upon knowledge from other CoPs they belonged to. In a Singapore-based study, Stroud and Wee (2007) explore liminality through the use of both code switching and informal “off stage” talk among secondary school students. The researchers found that, just as in Sayer’s study, while language mixing was marginalized in favor of monolingual pedagogical approaches, code switching allowed students to engage with and combine knowledge produced from their local CoPs outside of formal schooling. Stroud and Wee argue that code switching allows students to temporarily suspend the “stratified orders of indexicality” (Blommaert, 2005) present in formal classroom practice and creates a liminal space. Furthermore, feelings of *communitas* in these liminal spaces can manifest in pedagogical safehouses (Canagarajah, 2004; Murray, 2008) where learners can receive support from relatable peers and subvert formal classroom power structures.

Finally, from the field of general higher education, Palmer, O’Kane, and Owens (2009) investigate students’ experiences as they inhabit the liminal space marking their transition into university life. This practically-focused study highlights the potentially negative effects of liminality for freshman students as the researchers reported that several students felt a lack of belonging in their new environment. A sense of loss regarding their former lives and uncertainty about their new environment (often exacerbated by distance/ online learning) meant that some students were at risk of mental strain and even withdrawal. This study also stated that there appeared to be few formal measures from the institution that could effectively mitigate this sense of uncertainty and that family, friends, or peers who have actual first-hand



experience of this liminality may play a more significant role in managing this. One other key finding was that in the initial few weeks of freshman life, many students experience positive or negative “turning point[s] in the betwixt space” (p. 41) that greatly influence their trajectory from that point onwards. Regarding the potentially negative iterations of this, the researchers discuss the notion that early initiatives to promote strong inclusion in university communities may, in fact, contribute to feelings of exclusion or marginalization for those who were unable for whatever reason to participate from the outset. In this way, one can see how “the same strong ties that help members of a group often enable it to exclude others” (Engrand & Stam, 2002, cited in Palmer et al., 2009, p. 50).

#### ***4.6.3. Why focus on liminality?***

The integration of theories of liminality into my conceptual framework was catalyzed by two themes that emerged through my ongoing data analysis. The first was the seemingly ambiguous position of the LC in relation to various dichotomies—eigo and eikaiwa, “native” and “non-native” speakers, Japanese and foreign, etc. —that I became aware of throughout my data analysis. A key theme that I became interested in was how their practice appeared to span the two ideological categories of eigo (word-level L1 translation, L1 explanation of grammar/vocabulary) and eikaiwa (“native” language models, conversation practice, leisure-oriented) and combined elements of both. Furthermore, due to the fact that the majority of LC members entered the community as they were making the uncertain transition from their largely eigo-oriented secondary education into the strongly eikaiwa-framed English-only university classes, the ideologically-hybridized nature of the LC seemed interestingly liminal. Additionally, LC members’ relationships with the notion of the high-proficiency learner or “native speaker” often seemed ambiguous and even conflicted due to a complex interaction between their past learning experiences and their future goals or *akogare* (longing). Many desired legitimacy in an imagined international community but at times felt marginalized by their position in

relation to “native” standards. This contributed to the manner in which many members positioned themselves and the LC in contrast to the Chat Space, a strongly eikaiwa-oriented area of the SAC, which they viewed as a place for only advanced English speakers (Hooper, 2020c). On a broader scale, my data analysis led me to conceive of the SAC itself as a liminal space as many LC members stated that they were drawn to it due to its pseudo-foreign nature, a place simultaneously inside and outside of Japan. As I repeatedly moved iteratively between data collection and analysis while constantly engaging with academic literature and discussions with fellow researchers, I discovered that the notion of liminality was indeed congruent with a CoP/LoP perspective (Jackson, 2008; Jain, 2021) and felt that it warranted further exploration within my study.

#### **4.7. Summary**

In this chapter I have provided a description of communities of practice (CoP), the primary conceptual framework for this chapter. I have also illustrated how my CoP perspective evolved through an abductive analytical process and led to the integration of landscapes of practice (LoP) and liminality lenses that informed my analysis of the LC and its members. Listed below is a brief summary of the key points highlighted in this chapter.

- CoPs negotiate meaning via participation and reification and develop their own local *domain, community, and practice*.
- CoP members develop their identity in part through *engagement, imagination, and alignment* as they participate in community practices.
- There are ways in which CoPs can be cultivated by institutions. Cultivating CoPs involves a balance between autonomy and support. Leadership is a key factor in CoP sustainability.
- However, CoP alone is limited in its ability to account for individual agency and the impact of external macro or meso power structures.

- An LoP perspective accounts for individual historical trajectories across a field of knowledge. Within this landscape certain forms of knowledge are deemed more legitimate than others.
- Learners bring individual “baggage” of experiences and socioculturally constructed beliefs with them which may then influence and be influenced by a CoP’s local regime of competence.
- As travel through an LoP is a process of both learning and becoming, learners are developing identities as they move through and between CoPs.
- During their life trajectories, learners may find themselves in an “in-between” state as they transition between CoPs and negotiate epistemic boundaries.
- Learners within a liminal space in the landscape are opened up to new possibilities for “agentive space” where they may renegotiate or reconcile past, current, and future identities.
- Liminality offers opportunities for experimentation but may also cause emotional strain or uncertainty. These strains may be mitigated through a sense of *communitas* with other similarly liminal personae.

#### **4.8. Research issues**

In terms of the major research issues that the current study addresses, these can be categorized into three general areas:

1. Research focus and setting
2. Methodological issues
3. Theoretical issues

In the following section, I will discuss the research space that this study fills in regard to the above categories. Through doing so, I hope to highlight the contribution that the current

study makes in terms of the field of self-access language learning and the evolving use of CoP as an analytical framework.

#### ***4.8.1. Research focus and setting***

First and foremost, the focus of this study, a student-led language learning community, represents a comparatively recent development in the field of self-access language learning. Consequently, there exists a marked paucity of research into these student-led communities with only a handful of Japan-based studies to date examining their potential role within self-access learning (Kanai & Inamura, 2019; Watkins, 2022). By examining the structure and nature of these communities through Huang and Benson's (2013) framework of learner autonomy (discussed in section 3.2.), it becomes evident that student-led learning communities represent a highly autonomous manifestation of language learning. In the case of the LC, the focus of the current study, the community was managed and attended on a purely voluntary basis by the students, thus satisfying all of the sub-categories of the *capacity* for autonomy (ability, desire, and freedom). Furthermore, the LC was wholly created and managed by students throughout its roughly two-year history. In terms of the *control* criteria within Huang and Benson's framework, although determining the cognitive processing ability of the LC members is beyond the scope of this study, it can be confidently asserted that the student members were able to control where, when, and how they learned (learning management) as well as the type of knowledgeability they developed (learning content). In comparison to other venues for social learning within SACs such as social learning spaces which tend to have institutionally-defined language policies or learning philosophies (Murray & Fujishima, 2016b; Mynard et al., 2020a), the practice of the LC is arguably a freer and more learner-led environment. In addition, a number of studies have identified the struggles that new students experience entering SACs as a recurring theme (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Gillies, 2010; Hooper, 2020a; Hughes et al., 2012; Kurokawa et al., 2013; Kuwada, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020a) and

this has arguably contributed to a recent movement among self-access researchers and practitioners focusing on enhancing the accessibility of SACs (JASAL, 2022; Thornton, 2021a). Due to their highly student-centered nature and their potential for offering affective support for lower-proficiency or less-experienced students, student-led learning communities have been posited to be one potential way of responding to the accessibility issue present in many SACs (Mynard et al., 2020c). As a result, student-led learning communities like the LC have been highlighted as a potentially fruitful area for future development and research within the field of self-access (Mynard, 2022; Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022; Watkins, 2022). One major aim, therefore, of the current study is to significantly contribute to the developing understanding of student-led learning communities for SAC researchers and practitioners alike.

#### ***4.8.2. Methodological issues***

In terms of its methodological orientation, this study adds to the recent trend of ethnographic research investigating self-access learning environments. The increase in interest in SAC-focused ethnographic perhaps reflects the “social turn” (Block, 2003) in both applied linguistics and the field of self-access language learning in which practitioner-researchers have developed a more holistic view of language learning focusing on “the agentive, motivational, social, and emotional factors associated with learning the language, the implications for learning the language, and so on” (Mynard, 2020a, p. 86). Perhaps the most influential ethnographic study conducted in a SAC context is Murray and Fujishima’s five-year study into a university SAC in Okayama, Japan. This research, featuring a variety of ethnographic data, led to a number of frequently cited papers and book chapters (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Murray et al., 2014) (see sections 3.2.1. and 4.3.2.) as well as an edited book (Murray & Fujishima, 2016b) with chapters contributed by researchers, SAC staff, and student users that provided a rich and nuanced cultural portrait of that SAC’s ecology. This book acted as the

stimulus for a four-year ethnographic study conducted at Kanda University of International Studies (Mynard, 2020a) (see Section 4.3.1.) that examined “The English Lounge,” a SAC social learning space and the patterns of participation that existed within it.

Mynard (2020a) suggests that ethnography is a potentially valuable but still as yet underutilized avenue of research within the self-access learning field. She argues that as part of a social turn in self-access learning research, ethnographies are likely to have an important role to play in illustrating the “actual experiences of everyday engagement with self-access language learning” (p. 86). This recognition of the growing role of ethnography in the self-access learning field is symbolized by the addition of a new column in the journal *Studies in Self-Access Learning* dedicated to ethnographic research (Mynard, 2020a).

It is hoped that the ethnographic approach of the current study will contribute to the growing body of self-access ethnographies. In particular, I hope the learners’ voices in this study will offer those seeking to increase the accessibility of self-access environments (JASAL, 2022; Thornton, 2021a) additional insight into the complex experiences and struggles of learners initially entering SACs. By examining the complex lived experiences of learners like the LC members who may have felt isolated or marginalized within a SAC, we can gain clues that can help us respond more effectively to these challenges as SACs continue to evolve.

#### ***4.8.3. Theoretical issues***

Theoretically, this study responds to calls from CoP critics, and indeed Wenger-Trayner himself, to address a number of blind spots and questionable assumptions that have been identified in relation to CoP theory. The first of these is the relative lack of attention to power structures and how they manifest in CoPs. As highlighted by both Mutch (2003) and Handley et al. (2006), a middle-ground that recognizes both the surreptitiousness of the reproduction of power structures based on factors such as race, social class, gender, and so on,

and also the potential for agentic action within CoPs where social actors can innovate new practices or manipulate “common sense” norms. Furthermore, the term “community” in itself implies a sense of internal harmony that arguably fails to relate the realities of internal power dynamics and instances of marginalization or alienation with CoPs. Based on a recognition of these concerns, Wenger-Trayner (2013) advocated for a plug-and-play approach in which CoP theory could be utilized in a complementary fashion with other theories that address structural power such as Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (1977). Driven by these considerations and influenced by studies like Solomon (2007), Toohey (2000), Morita (2004), and Norton (2001), this study integrates theories relating to native-framing (Lowe, 2020b, 2022) with a CoP framework in a plug-and-play manner. Furthermore, resulting from the abductive analytical approach described in the previous section, this study sought to more thoroughly address the issue of CoPs being viewed “in a vacuum” (Roberts, 2006, p. 634), instead attempting to foreground the influence of the institutional and sociocultural environments on the manner in which a CoP functions. Consequently, an additional category of *situatedness* was added to Wenger et al.’s (2002) original triad of domain, community, and practice (see Chapter 6). The situatedness category allowed me to draw more attention to how the LC CoP was supported by the university and explore how the SAC’s technical culture (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004) permeated the LC’s domain, community, and practice. Additionally, explicitly focusing on situatedness highlighted the interplay between what *antecedent conditions* (Murphey et al., 2012) members bring to a CoP and how these are reproduced or challenged as the community develops. By drawing more attention to the notion of a CoP’s situatedness, we more clearly understand how a given community both influences and is influenced by the social and political world in which it is embedded.

The final issue that the current study aimed to address was criticism directed at CoP theory over the role of the individual. A number of researchers have questioned the apparent

tendency in CoP theory to deemphasize the individuality of CoP members, instead framing them more as homogeneous entities (Billett, 2006, 2007). As a result, this study drew upon two complementary theoretical perspectives that would allow me to analyze both the LC CoP as a whole and also the learning trajectories of individual LC members as they progressed through their lifelong learning careers. While the analysis of the LC as a group was undertaken using my aforementioned adapted CoP framework (domain, community, practice, and situatedness), I realized that I also needed to draw upon an additional framework. This led me to LoP, a theory that was coherent with CoP but would also focus on the experiences of individuals that the original theory did not adequately address. By utilizing the LoP framework while conducting in-depth case studies of individual learners (see Chapter 7), I was able to draw more attention to the unique circumstances that brought each learner to the LC, the variegated experiences and challenges they had as LC members, and how their participation in the community was linked to the individual identities and knowledgeability that they wished to develop. Put simply, the addition of LoP helped me to address the complexity of individual experience and its influence on community practices that past CoP-oriented studies had arguably neglected. In summary, from a theoretical perspective, the current study responds to three key issues raised in response to existing CoP research: (1) the need to recognize both structural power and agentic action, (2) the situatedness of CoPs in institutional or sociocultural environments, and (3) the interplay between individual experience and CoPs. By utilizing a plug-and-play approach integrating additional theories such as LoP, liminality, and native-framing, it is hoped that this study will provide a richer and more complete picture of LC members' participation in the CoP and the place of the LC within the broader sphere of Japanese English education.



#### ***4.8.4. Research questions***

In this ethnographic case study, I therefore aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How does the LC function as a language learning community of practice?
2. What does participation in the LC represent for its members in relation to their individual learning trajectories?

## **Chapter 5: Methods**

### **5.1. Introduction**

Having given a broad overview of the existing research related to self-access social learning spaces and learning communities and outlined the conceptual framework for this study, in the following section I describe the research design and procedures that I adhered to. I firstly explain the philosophical underpinnings and chosen methodological approach. Following this, I give a description of the research site, my positionality and background, and relevant ethical considerations, and I provide a detailed account of the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I discuss the primary limitations of this study.

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which the LC functions as a learner-led community of practice and its relevance to individual learners as they move through lifelong trajectories of learning. Based on these findings, through this study I also aim to provide insights into how institutions might support and cultivate successful learning communities within self-access learning environments.

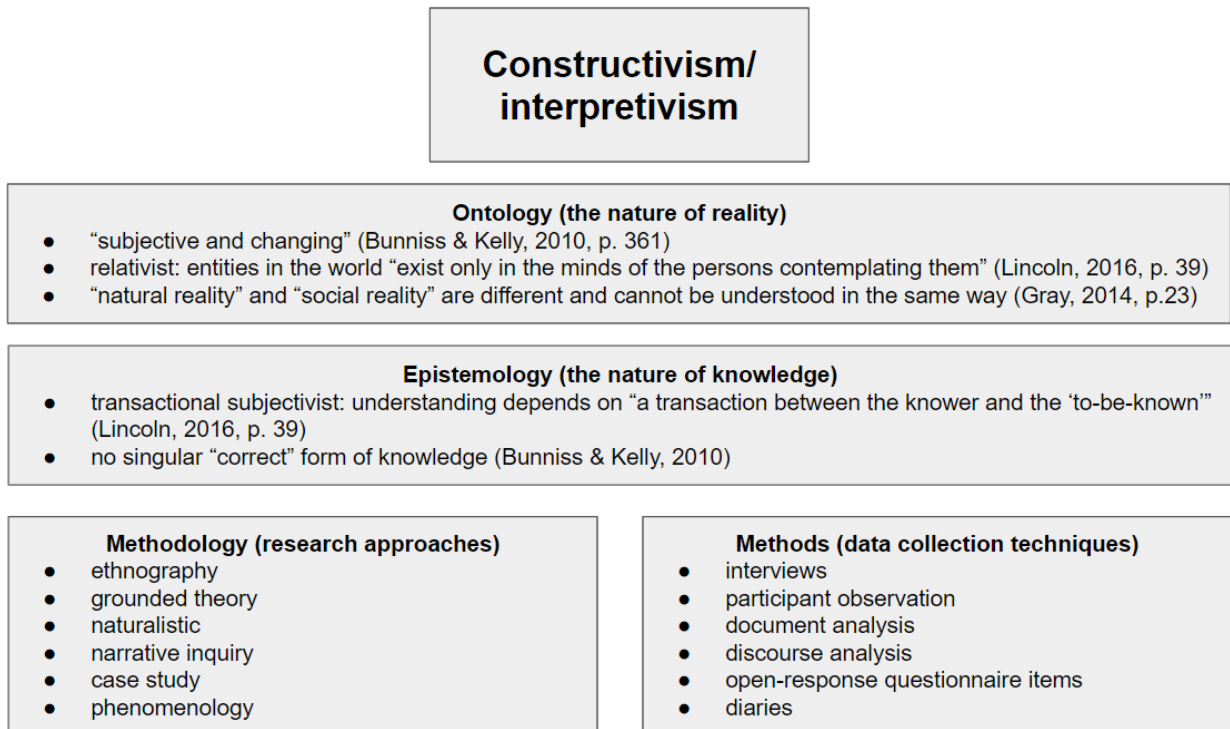
### **5.2. Philosophical foundations**

Based on the central concept within a CoP perspective of both knowledge and identity being created in an interaction between the individual and the social in a highly-situated way, it is unsurprising that I have adopted a constructivist/interpretivist approach within this study. Within constructivism's relativist ontology and transactional subjectivist epistemology (see Figure 4), both reality and knowledge are regarded as malleable and constructed within an interaction between the individual and "the time/space framework in which it is generated" (Lincoln, 2016, p. 40). In terms of my first research question, I endeavored to construct in tandem with my participants a snapshot of the LC as "a person-, context-, and time bound experience" (Croker, 2009, p. 7) congruent with qualitative research within a constructivist paradigm. Furthermore, as individual experiences of participation

within the LC CoP were paramount in my study, and in particular my second research question, a constructivist approach was apt as “individual perspectives or constructions of reality” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15) formed the focus of inquiry.

**Figure 4**

*Outline of constructivist/ interpretivist orientation*



This philosophical orientation naturally influenced the study’s qualitative nature, its research methodology (ethnographic case study), and the data collection methods that I selected (semi-structured interviews, participant observation, artifact collection) (Gray, 2014). As constructivism deals with knowledge creation rather than the uncovering of one “ultimate truth” (Bunniss & Kelly, 2010), it is important to recognize and foreground my positionality as a researcher and the impact that this is likely to have on this study’s portrait of the LC and its members. I take the position that objectivity in any type of research is essentially “a chimera” (Lincoln, 2016, p. 41) and fundamentally unattainable. Assuming that transparency and reflexivity related to the research process is maintained along with data triangulation to

increase trustworthiness, my subjectivity need not be viewed in deficit terms. Rather, my contribution to the knowledge co-construction with my participants can offer an experientially-and theoretically-informed unique perspective “like light hitting a crystal” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6) that can hopefully resonate with other researchers and practitioners in the field. As will be expanded on later in greater detail (Section 5.5.), my beliefs, grounded in over fifteen years of experience as an educator in Japan, indeed shaped both the *why* (rationale) and the *how* (methodology) of this research in many ways. This brief section has illustrated the constructivist philosophical underpinnings of this study and the rationale behind them. In the following section, I provide some background into ethnographic case studies, a blended qualitative methodological approach that forms the basis for the current study.

### **5.3. Methodological approach**

Due to my focus in this study being on the LC’s nature as a CoP, its situatedness within a wider LoP, and the interplay between the individual and the social within the CoP, I decided that an ethnographic case study approach would be a viable methodological choice. I will expand my rationale for this in detail later in this section, but first, in order to clarify this hybridized approach (ethnography and case study), I feel it is important to examine its constituent parts separately.

#### **5.3.1. Ethnography**

Ethnography is viewed by some as the most fundamental type of social research as it is perhaps closest in nature to how we analyze the world around us and make sense of it in our everyday lives (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). In terms of a research approach or methodology, ethnography tends to focus on groups rather than individuals (Heigham & Sakui, 2009) and is “based upon sharing the time and space of those who one is studying” (Ó Riain, 2009, p. 291). It is the nature of group culture and how it is formed that ethnographers

direct their attention to. Heigham and Sakui (2009) offer a clear definition of the purpose of ethnography as “learn[ing] enough about a group to create a cultural portrait of how the people belonging to that culture live, work, and/or play together” (p. 92). In order to gain deep and nuanced insights that allow them to create this cultural portrait, ethnographers tend to spend extended periods of time in the field (the culture they are studying), making recordings, taking field notes, asking questions, and collecting documents, photographs, or other artifacts (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Hatch, 2002; Heigham & Sakui, 2009). Drawing on these multiple sources allows ethnographers to triangulate data to improve trustworthiness of findings (Starfield, 2016) and provide a vivid picture of the culture to readers via thick description (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, if time in the field is insufficient, it is likely to result in only superficial impressions or caricatures of a culture—what Rist (1980) terms *blitzkrieg ethnography*.

Within an ethnographic study, the emic (insider) or etic (outsider) position of the researcher has a profound influence on the nature of the study with benefits and drawbacks to both (Richards, 2003). Although the goal of ethnography is to understand and analyze “the cultural member’s own, or emic perspective...in their daily lived experience” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576), the ethnographer as a potential participant observer brings with them their own assumptions and beliefs into the culture and may simultaneously become influenced and an influencer. In the case of the former, a researcher may “go native” (Kanuha, 2000) and become overly familiar with the culture they are studying, resulting in them overlooking points of interest as obvious and not worth reporting. In line with a qualitative paradigmatic perspective, when describing ethnographic interviews, Blommaert and Jie (2020) state, “[y]ou are part of the interview” (p. 48) as the data you collect is not *found*, but rather *co-constructed* in dialogue between yourself and your informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016). Additionally, one’s positionality as researcher also connotes a sense of authority that is likely

to affect the way that our informants react to us or present themselves. This means that one's positionality and active role in the construction of meaning through ethnography, or indeed any qualitative research, must be openly expressed and made as transparent as possible (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Miyahara, 2019). Not only is this subjectivity unavoidable, but Hegelund (2005, as cited in Heigham & Sakui, 2009) argues, “[i]t is exactly the particular, individual point of view, with all its subjective biases, idiosyncrasies, and distortions, that gives the ethnography its edge, its enlightening effect, its power” (p. 660).

A further benefit of ethnography is that the thick description (Geertz, 1973) that it features can be used to present findings in the form of narratives that are more accessible to teachers and other practitioners than primarily quantitative studies. Within TESOL and applied linguistics, ethnographic approaches have been utilized successfully in a number of studies (Canagarajah, 1993; De Costa, 2014; Duff, 1995; Toohey, 2000) and due to the holistic focus of ethnographers, this research tends to examine not only specific approaches to language acquisition, but also “the agentive, motivational, social and emotional factors associated with learning the language” (Mynard, 2020a, p. 86).

### **5.3.2. Case studies**

What constitutes a case study is not often clearly defined (Hatch, 2002; Hood, 2009; Richards, 2003) and some would even argue that trying to find a neat definition is “a fool's errand” (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 604). There are, however, a number of constants that appear to offer some guidance in delimiting what a case study tends to involve.

These include:

- (1) The study of a bounded “social system” or “phenomenon” (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Stake, 1995)
- (2) The case study is “not a methodological choice, but an object to be studied” (Stake, 1995, p. 14)

- (3) The case is contemporary (not historic) and in its natural context (Yin, 2003)
- (4) A focus on providing a multifaceted and “in-depth” understanding of the case being studied (Crowe et al., 2011; Richards, 2003; Schwandt & Gates, 2018)
- (5) Utilizes a wide range of data sources in order to highlight the complexity of the case (Hood, 2009; Schwandt & Gates, 2018) and for data triangulation (Suryani, 2008)

Within educational research, and in particular TESOL and applied linguistics, Chapelle and Duff (2003) offer a useful definition of a case that highlights the notion of its boundaries being determined by the researcher based on their understanding of the phenomenon being studied. They state that “[i]n TESOL a case typically refers to a person, either a learner or a teacher, or an entity, such as a school, a university or a classroom... In language policy research, the case may be a country” (p. 164).

Although not necessarily agreed on by all in the field, Duff (2012) argues that case study research must feature a conceptual framework relevant to the goals of the study featuring existing research findings as well as certain presuppositions within the field. This assumption was congruent with my abductive approach to data analysis (see Section 5.8.1.) that incorporated both deductive and inductive elements and that underpinned this study.

### ***5.3.3. Ethnographic case studies***

One issue that needs to be addressed before progressing to a description of an ethnographic case study is the differences between ethnographic and case study research. Duff (2008) states that while case studies focus on the “behaviors and attributes of individual learners or other individuals/entities” (p. 34), ethnographies attempt to “understand and interpret the behaviors, values, and structures of collectivities or social groups with particular reference to the cultural basis for these behaviors or values” (p. 34). Although this distinction appears to neatly delimit the boundary between the two (case study: individual focus, ethnography: broader group/cultural focus), if one examines the definition of what constitutes

a “case” from the extant literature, ambiguity begins to creep in. Indeed, Chapelle and Duff’s (2003) claim that a case may range in scope from an individual to a country depending on the focus of the study may lead one to question what is meant by “other individuals/entities” (Duff, 2008, p.34). If an entity can be something as broad as a country, one might also define a community of learners in the same terms. That being the case, how would one define an in-depth study into a contemporary learning community (bounded system) using participant observation, interviews, and document collection (triangulation of multiple data sources)? Would this be a case study or an ethnography? Perhaps the distinction, then, is between the individual and the cultural/social. This also, however, may be a gray area, particularly if we are examining that community through the conceptual lens of CoP. Rather than focusing on individuals or on social practice (or culture) as separate entities Lave (1988) and later, Lave & Wenger (1991), argue that they are inextricably linked, and that “agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Despite this recognition in their early work, however, some scholars (Billet, 2006, 2007) have claimed that the CoP theory does not emphasize this point enough and have called for greater attention to the influence of individual agency on a community’s culture or on how community participation is constructed. Other studies utilizing a CoP framework have effectively highlighted the interplay between individual and social (Kojima & Thompson, 2019; Morita, 2004; Toohey, 2000) and Wenger has arguably given more attention to the role of the individual in his more recent work (Wenger, 2010; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Within this study also, the individual is regarded as shaping the social and vice versa implying that both individual and culture must be concurrent foci.

Some voices within the social sciences have also discussed an apparent overlap between ethnography and case study research. Ó Riain (2009) argues that there was “an intimate tie” between the two found in “an ethnographer burrowing into the social



relationships of a specific local social world and revealing at least some of its internal dynamics and layers of meaning” (p. 289). Additionally, according to Ó Riain, some criticism leveled at ethnographic studies, such as unrepresentativeness and issues related to sampling decisions, can equally be directed at case studies. He therefore claims that “ethnography and the case study are intimately related—for both practitioners and critics” (p. 291). White, Drew and Hay (2009) suggest that instead of viewing ethnography and case studies dichotomously, researchers may benefit from a hybridized combination of the two approaches. The ethnographic case study represents one example of this.

Armstrong et al. (2019) claim that what sets ethnographic case studies apart from other types of case study design are their selection of data sources (participant observation, interviews, artifact collection), their extended duration, and their focus on community and group culture. Schwandt and Gates (2018) provide a similar definition, describing them as case studies “employing ethnographic methods and focused on building arguments about cultural, group, or community formation or examining other sociocultural phenomena” (p. 344). Considering the standpoint of the novice researcher with limited time and funding, Fuchs et al. (2017) advocate for what they term “mini-ethnographic case studies.” They claim that an ethnographic case study approach allows the researcher to utilize ethnographic tools such as observation and interview but “bounds the research in time and space” (p. 926). Fuchs et al. also argue that it is possible for researchers to achieve saturation with only a limited number of participants over a fixed period of time through methodological triangulation and “rich and thick data” (p. 933).

#### ***5.3.4. Rationale for the current study***

My rationale behind utilizing ethnographic case study as the methodological approach for this research is in part based on the need to examine in detail the “cultural portrait” of the LC while also making in-depth observations into the ways in which individual members shape

and are shaped by the practice of the community. This involved direct, repeated observations of the LC over an approximately one-year period as well as regular recording of descriptive and analytical field notes on observed phenomena. My decision to take a longitudinal approach in this research was based on the importance of observing instances of cultural reproduction or innovation within the community over time and also a desire to document key community events such as leadership succession and their effects on the LC's practice. To supplement the observational data of the community as a cultural entity, I also conducted interviews with individual members of the LC to facilitate additional and more nuanced insights into their perceived role in the community and the personal significance that it held for them. Taking this further still, these members were also asked to describe their individual language learning histories (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008). These narratives were important in allowing me to construct cases that featured more longitudinal, holistic views of each member and provided clues relating to how their participation in the LC was situated related to their ontogenetic histories (Kojima & Thompson, 2019) and their learning trajectories across a broader landscape of practice (Wenger et al., 2014). I also collected artifacts created by the LC community such as documents, vocabulary lists, feedback surveys, and promotional materials over the course of the study as these represented examples of the LC's practice according to the CoP framework (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger, 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a).

In terms of practical considerations of the study, the bounded nature of case study research allowed me to delimit the phenomena and target of study, which was essential in that I was conducting the study alone and with limited funding while also teaching full time. However, rather than strictly restricting the focus solely to the LC members, opposed to a traditional ethnographic orientation where particular contexts were viewed in isolation and as "self-constitutive" (Ó Riain, 2009, p. 291), I felt it was important to explore the links between

the LC and larger institutional or sociocultural structures. The importance of recognizing the organizational or sociocultural structures that CoPs are situated in has been widely recognized by both proponents and critics of existing CoP research (Candlin & Candlin, 2007; Corso et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2007; James, 2007; McMahill, 2001; Morita, 2004; Roberts, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002) as it is now clear that CoPs “[do] not develop and function in a vacuum” (Roberts, 2006, p. 634). In much recent case study research, the connections between cases and meso-or macro-level structures have been recognized (Ó Riain, 2009) with empirical extensions viewed as one way of seeking a broader contextualized understanding of a case. In utilizing empirical extensions, researchers experiment with the empirical boundaries of a case, be it via extensions across time (historical ethnographies) or institutional/ cultural extensions (studying the larger social structures cases exist within) (Ó Riain, 2009). In this study, I extended the empirical boundaries of the LC learning community as I am also investigating the institutional and sociocultural landscape in which the LC is embedded through interviews with SAC staff and management. I hope that by empirically extending the case study in this way, this research will provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the LC and also provide more practically-oriented implications for practitioners in the field of self-access language learning.

#### **5.4. Research setting**

As the wider context of English education in Japan has already been addressed in Chapter Two, in this section I will focus on the specific, “bounded” setting for this ethnographic case study, the LC learning community and the SAC in which it is located.

##### **5.4.1. *The SAC***

The site of this study is a small, private university located in the Kanto region of Japan. The university has a strong international orientation, and most classes are focused on learning various international languages. The primary language studied, however, is English,

and every student is required to take at least one compulsory English class in their first and second years. Two departments in the university focus solely on English and a considerable amount of the English instruction students receive is from English Language Institute which comprises approximately 60 (predominantly non-Japanese) teachers.

Within the university, one of the most modern and well-known locations is the SAC. The first SAC was established around 20 years ago and was pioneering in that it was one of few such facilities in Japan at that time. The first iteration of the SAC was a single room on campus where students could come to access learning materials and to engage in out-of-class English conversation practice. It has continued to grow over the years, both physically and in terms of influence in the fields of language education and self-access. The SAC's official mission is based on fostering learner autonomy among its learners by helping them to reflect upon and self-regulate their own learning. Some of the ways in which it attempts to address this mission are providing language learning advising sessions for students with a team of 11 full-time learning advisors from a range of inner, outer, and expanding circle countries and a smaller team of student "peer advisors." Moreover, the SAC has a wide range of self-access learning materials such as DVDs, graded readers, and study guides, holds regular workshops on topics such as strategies for TOEIC and what to expect when studying abroad. A further key area of the SAC relates to the provision of social learning spaces for students to communicate with each other in the target language. One of the main social learning spaces within the SAC is the Chat Space. This SLS has been a key focal point of the SAC for many years and is characterized by its English-only policy and the frequent presence of international exchange students. In order to support students wishing to practice English conversation, predominantly foreign lecturers are also on duty in the Chat Space. This, in addition to the aforementioned exchange students and free format with no set conversation topics, contributes to a prevalent perception among students that the Chat Space is an "foreign-like" part of the

SAC and that learners with a high-proficiency in spoken English often spend time there. As has been documented in previous research on other SLSs (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.), Keiko and Amy (see Table 9, p. 134) found that this resulted in a hesitancy among some students to participate in the Chat Space sessions due to a lack of confidence in their oral English proficiency.

#### ***5.4.2. SAC learning communities and the LC***

In the following section, I will explain about SAC learning communities and the LC, the target learning community that I selected for this research. Learning communities are groups of students who, based on shared academic objectives or general interests, meet and learn collaboratively. Before the COVID-19 pandemic caused all classes and SAC services to move online, at the university where this study was conducted there were 12 learning communities meeting in the SAC on a weekly basis. These communities were based on learning languages (English, Spanish, French) and on other areas of interest (LGBTQ+ issues, Disney, sci-fi movies, TED talks). The COVID-19 pandemic naturally had a significant impact on the ability of these communities to maintain contact and as of July 2020, only six learning communities had been continuing to meet online. The foundations of the SAC learning communities were established by Keiko as part of her role as a principal learning advisor in the SAC, and she continued to support them over time in a number of different ways including helping them to procure resources, assisting them in promotion, and negotiating administrative obstacles on their behalf. Keiko advocated for the establishment of student learning communities in part due to her experiences as a learning advisor. As previously discussed, in her advisor role, she often dealt with students who lacked the confidence to enter the Chat Space due to the international or elite image that many students had of it. Keiko consequently sought to promote more accessible communities like for those who found the Chat Space intimidating.

The LC learning community is the specific target of the current study. The LC was initially established by Kei and two other students in 2017. At this time, Keiko advised these students on the running of the community and helped them by providing resources, encouraging other students to attend LC meetings, and by ensuring the community had a set timeslot and venue within the SAC where they could regularly meet. The stated purpose of the LC is “improv[ing] **speaking** skills in a **friendly atmosphere**” (emphasis in original). In their Japanese blurb, they also provide information about the community’s language policy and an apparent orientation towards learners with lower proficiency or confidence with English.

*[LC] de tanoshiku eigo no **supiikingu** wo nobashimasenka? Nihongo to eigo wo mazete hanasu koto ga dekiru no de supiikingu ga nigate demo tanoshiminagara manaberu ba desu! Zehi kite kudasai!*

(Why don’t you improve your English **speaking** in the LC? You can speak in both Japanese and English, so if you aren’t great at speaking it’s a place you can have fun while learning! Please feel free to visit!) (emphasis in original)

The LC is an entirely student-managed community that focuses on practicing English conversation with other students in a relaxed and fun environment. No teachers or learning advisors are regular participants in the community and all administration and management decisions are undertaken by the student LC leaders. The community meets once a week during lunchtimes. Based on my observations of the LC, each meeting was generally attended by the three leaders (Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara), roughly six to eight regular members who attended almost every week, and a more fluid population of approximately 10 to 15 students who would attend sporadically. I selected the LC for my study due to it having the largest membership of all of the SAC learning communities. This was based on the longitudinal design of my study as, based on my consultations with Amy, Keiko, and other SAC staff, it was determined that the LC was stable and popular enough to remain an active community for the foreseeable

future. This meant that there was relatively little risk of the community disbanding halfway through my data collection period. This was to be an important decision as the LC continued to function as an active community even after changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. From April 2019 to January 2020, the LC met in the SAC, first in an open area called “The Work Area” and then later in a more secluded space. From the spring semester of 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19, all LC meetings were held online via Zoom. In 2018, the LC leaders also created a shared group on the social networking application, LINE, where they can share information about meeting schedules/content and lists of vocabulary they have learned during the meetings.

Each LC meeting had a clearly-defined structure that had gradually been developed over the community’s two to three-year history. At the start of the meeting, one of the leaders would spend five minutes greeting the members, reviewing the structure, principles, and rules of the community, and introducing the daily conversation topic. Conversation topics featured in LC meetings included “Let’s share your ideal future residence!” (June 16, 2020), “Where do you want to go most after COVID-19 goes away?” (May 19, 2020), and “What is the best memory of school festival?” (October 20, 2020). The opening stage of the meeting was generally conducted bilingually with the leaders frequently switching between Japanese and English in their explanations. As can be seen in Figure 5 (below), the following main portion of each LC meeting consisted of three distinct stages. Members would first be placed into smaller groups of three to four members in which they would first discuss the designated conversation topic bilingually for roughly six or seven minutes. After this warm-up stage, each member would then consult DMM Eikaiwa, an online English support website for approximately five or six minutes. During this stage members would research words and phrases that they did not know in English but that were necessary to express the ideas they touched on in the first bilingual chat. Once this research stage had ended, the members would

then take turns re-expressing themselves but only in English, utilizing the language that they had just researched using DMM Eikaiwa. Altogether these three stages lasted roughly 20 minutes (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*LC meeting structure*

**—What to do?—**

Break out Session(3-4 people)  **【20 min】**

**①English and Japanese Time**   
Let's talk in both **English & Japanese!**

**②Searching Time**

**③English Time**   
Let's talk in **English** with vocabularies that you found!

**→Back to the Main Session and  
share vocabulary with us!**

For the final ten to fifteen minutes of the meeting, the entire group would come back together and would share the new words and phrases they had learned as a whole group via a shared document (see Appendix L). During this stage, the leaders nominated different members to contribute knowledge/ideas and ask questions. Finally, at the very end of each meeting, the leaders would relate any pertinent information about the LC or the SAC and would also ask members to complete a weekly online questionnaire where they could give anonymous feedback about the community.



### 5.4.3. Participants

Below (Table 9) is a summary of the participants in the current study. All participant names are pseudonyms.

**Table 9**

*List of study participants*

<b>LC participants</b>		
Commenced participation in study in autumn 2019		
Ryoya (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade university student)	English major	LC leader from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Yuki (3 <sup>rd</sup> year university student)	English major	LC leader from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Harumi (3 <sup>rd</sup> year university student)	English major	LC member from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Tenka (1 <sup>st</sup> year university student)	International communication major	LC member from Sept. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Mizuki (1 <sup>st</sup> year university student)	International communication major	LC member from Jun. 2019 to present
Commenced participation in study in spring 2020		
Sara (4 <sup>th</sup> year university student)	English major	LC leader from Apr. 2019 to Jan. 2021
Riri (2 <sup>nd</sup> year university student)	English major	LC member from Apr. 2019 to present
Hinako (2 <sup>nd</sup> year university student)	English major	LC member from Apr. 2019 to present
Natsuko (2 <sup>nd</sup> year university student)	English major	LC member from Apr. 2019 to present
<b>Former LC participants and SAC staff (commenced participation in autumn 2019)</b>		
Kei	High school teacher	LC leader from 2017-2019
Keiko	SAC learning advisor	Holds MA in Applied Linguistics/TESOL
Yukiko	SAC administrator	Holds BA in English
Amy	SAC director	Holds PhD in Applied Linguistics

*LC participants*

In this subsection, I provide some basic information about each of the study participants. For clarity and to give a sense of the longitudinal nature of the study, I will

organize the (LC member) participants according to the time they were initially started participating in the study.

#### *Autumn 2019*

Ryoya was an organizer of the LC community from April 2019. At the time of the first interview, he was a junior and graduated from the university in spring 2021. He had attended the LC since September 2017. He was a SAC peer advisor from 2019 and was an active member of several learning communities within the SAC. He stated that he felt relaxed in the LC and that he initially joined with his friends because one of them had recommended the community.

Yuki was also an organizer of the LC from April 2019. She was a junior at the time the study began and graduated in spring 2021. She transferred to the university from another institution in April 2018 and became an LC member soon after that. Like Ryoya, she was also an active member of several learning communities and was a trained SAC peer advisor from 2019. Her stated reason for joining the LC was that she wanted to make friends as she was new to the university and that one of her friends invited her to go there.

Harumi joined the LC in spring 2019 and was a junior at the time of our first interview. She was good friends with both Ryoya and Yuki and this influenced her decision to join the LC. She graduated from the university in spring 2021. She stated that she attended the LC every week and that she felt comfortable and relaxed in the community.

Tenka was a freshman student at the time of our first interview and had just joined the LC in September just prior to the start of this study. She first came to the LC with friends and stated that she already felt comfortable in the group. Her stated reason for coming to the LC was that she wanted to talk with people in English more.

Mizuki was a freshman student when the study began and she had been an LC member since June 2019. She attended every week and felt comfortable there. She originally came to the LC with friends because she wanted to use English outside of class more.

*Spring 2020*

Sara became the third LC organizer along with Ryoya and Yuki in April 2019. She was a senior at the time of our first meeting and had been an LC member since April 2018. She graduated university in spring 2021. She was also a SAC peer advisor from ... until winter 2020. She stated that she initially came to LC because she desired a low-pressure environment to practice speaking English.

Riri was a sophomore student at the time of our first interview and had been an LC member since just after she entered the university in April 2019. She attended every week and felt comfortable there. Initially, she came to the LC with three other friends (including Hinako and Natsuko) because they had quickly built a friendly relationship with Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara.

Hinako was another sophomore student who joined the LC in April 2019 with her friends, Riri and Natsuko. She attended every week and stated that she felt relaxed in the community. Her senpai (senior) recommended the LC to her and this was the main reason that she chose to join the community initially.

Natsuko joined the LC in April 2019 with her friends, Hinako and Riri, and was also a sophomore student at the time of our first interview. She said that she first decided to come to the LC because she was invited by her friends and that she now attends every week. She stated that one reason that she attends the LC is because she does not belong to any circles (clubs) at the university and that she likes being able to ask questions about university life to her senpai in the LC.

*Former LC participants and SAC staff*

Kei was one of the founders of the LC and was the community organizer from spring 2017 until winter 2019 when he graduated from university. Kei was also a SAC peer advisor for three years. Kei maintained contact with Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara after he left university and occasionally visited the LC and discussed the community with the three organizers. Upon graduation he became a high school English teacher. I met Kei in the SAC and asked if he would be willing to participate in this study. We held three online video interviews from March to August 2020.

Keiko is the principal learning advisor in charge of the SAC learning communities. She has been working as a tenured Principal Learning Advisor since 2017 specializing in social learning initiatives in the SAC including managing a tandem learning program and promoting and supporting student-led learning communities. Keiko holds a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics/TESOL and is a fluent bilingual speaker of Japanese and English. She has worked as a full-time certified learning advisor since 2013. Some of Keiko's additional duties relating to her current position include conducting advising sessions with students, acting as an intermediary between university administration and the learning communities, and teaching a credit-bearing leadership course for SAC users. Keiko is also an active researcher who has published a range of articles on learner psychology and self-access management.

Yukiko has been an administrative SAC staff member since 2018 and acts as an intermediary between the LC (and other learning communities) and the SAC's administrative wing. She frequently visits the LC to disseminate information from the SAC office and also occasionally participates in LC sessions with other students.

Amy is a tenured professor and the director of the university's SAC. She is British "native speaker" of English and has lived and taught in several countries around the world. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is a leading researcher in the fields of learner

autonomy, language learning psychology, and self-access language learning. She has worked in the field of self-access language learning for over 25 years and has worked in the SAC since 2008. As the current director of the SAC, Amy supervises virtually every facet of the SAC's management. One of her key roles is as a liaison between the SAC and the university administration.

### **5.5. Researcher positionality**

It is assumed within most views of social research, that the researcher's identity, values, and the previous experiences shaping their perception of the world around them will have an effect on the research they choose to engage in and their interpretation of that research (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Greenbank, 2003; Miyahara, 2019). Questioning the supposed "objectivity" of certain types of research, Chiseri-Strater (1996) argues that

researchers are positioned by age, gender, race, class, nationality, institutional affiliation, historical-personal circumstance, and intellectual predisposition. The extent to which such influences are revealed or concealed when reporting data is circumscribed by the paradigms and disciplines under which we train, work, and publish. (p. 115)

For those conducting ethnographic studies, our positionalities are central to our research and essentially represent a key source of data (Chiseri-Strater, 1996) as this defines the degree to which we provide an emic or etic perspective or some combination of both. Additionally, revealing one's background, beliefs, and assumptions contributes to methodological transparency, therefore enhancing the *trustworthiness* (Loh, 2013) of the subjective interpretations in a qualitative study (Miyahara, 2015). In this section, I briefly disclose my background and worldview in order to inform readers of how these influence my perspective on this study and its value. I feel it is also important to address some inherent strengths and weaknesses related to this study that stem from my unique researcher positionality.

### ***5.5.1. Personal and professional background***

I grew up in a working-class family in a small, rural village in Cornwall in the UK until I left in 2005 to come to Japan immediately after graduating university to start work as an Assistant Language Teacher in elementary and junior high schools in Saitama prefecture. I had wanted to come to Japan since I was about nine or ten years old and certainly had a kind of *akogare* (longing) towards Japan from that age up until I actually moved here to live. Due to my rather sheltered upbringing in the monocultural “bubble” of a small Cornish village, I initially struggled a great deal with culture shock and learning enough Japanese to survive by myself in my new home. I strongly understood the “stomachache” of anxiety that many of my students felt when trying to use English in class and this recognition of the affective side of language learning became central to the type of learning environment I tried to create as a teacher.

I feel my working-class background and my awareness of the concept of unearned privilege influenced, to a certain extent, my attitude towards the way “native speaker” teachers like myself were perceived in Japan. Being exposed to others who I saw as having been “given everything on a plate” perhaps made me more keenly aware of the authority that myself and other “native speakers” had been assigned within Japanese English education. Despite many of the “native speaker” teachers around me lacking any professional qualifications and often expressing open disinterest in their professional duties, I felt that we were still held up as the focal point of many classes. This focus was at times, however, more in the sense of living *realia* where all “native speaker” teachers, regardless of qualifications or experience were reduced down to a crass, totemic foreign artifact. These conflicting feelings were amplified as I engaged in my MA TESOL where I was exposed to research by Holliday (2006), Kubota (2011), and Houghton and Rivers (2013) that stimulated me to look further into the

“fluctuating systems of privilege and marginalization” (Nuske, 2014, p. 126) that “native speaker” teachers participated in.

Linked to the issue of the “native speaker” standard in Japanese ELT was my growing awareness of a self-defeating mindset based on a Japanese/English “native speaker” dichotomy that I repeatedly noticed coming from my students regarding their ability to communicate in English. I viewed this as a pernicious psychological obstacle that I had witnessed primarily in junior high school classes and eikaiwa (private English conversation) schools. Resulting from this, I tried to promote activities in class that promoted peer learning/teaching and opportunities to have contact with near-peer role models (successful Japanese English speakers) so as to lead students to examine what I perceived to be an unhelpful Japanese/“native speaker” distinction.

My interest in the LC learning community was in many ways shaped by these experiences and evolving personal beliefs. I viewed the LC as a supportive community where learners could come and spend time using English together without the need for “native speaker” guidance. I had also recently completed a group research project about SAC communities, and was interested in the idea of community formation within these social learning spaces. As I began to initially conceptualize and plan this study, I viewed the LC in quite idealistic terms, even sometimes imagining it as an “antidote” to what I viewed as an overemphasis on “native speaker” models in Japanese English education. As the study progressed, however, I was surprised at the extent to which my preconceptions of the LC were challenged and the complexity of the identity and practice of this learning community. As I spent more and more time interacting with the LC members and observing their weekly meetings, I became increasingly aware of how, despite my initial impressions, native-speaker framing was indeed embedded in numerous facets of the community’s practice. Although the “native speaker” was not physically present, from my ongoing analysis of the LC’s domain,

community, and practice, I became cognizant of the “native speaker’s” symbolic presence. Although my idealistic vision of the community had been shattered, I found the interaction between structure and agency within the LC fascinating and endeavored to tease out the nuances of social and individual participation within the community.

## **5.6. Ethical considerations**

As I describe the ethical considerations related to this study, I will be categorizing them in two distinct ways, *procedural ethics* and *ethics in practice* (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Procedural ethics refers to the formal ethical guidelines that are recognized within the professional or academic field or that are required within a particular institution. Examples of procedural ethics would be applying to an institutional review board (IRB) to gain approval to conduct research or ensuring one’s research project adheres to widely stipulated procedures from the field (i.e., psychology, anthropology, clinical research, and the like.). Ethics in practice refer to the “everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263). Whereas procedural ethics may be viewed by researchers simply as hoops they must jump through to get their research proposal approved by an IRB, ethics in practice often involve ethical decisions in the moment that are based on the researcher treating their participants humanely and not exploiting them in the pursuit of knowledge.

### **5.6.1. Procedural ethics**

I submitted a detailed description of this project (including my pilot study), its methodology, aims, potential risks, and data storage procedures to my institution’s IRB, which was subsequently approved in August 2019. All members of the SAC’s learning advisor team were also given access to the research proposal (Appendix A) in order to highlight any unforeseen problems with the study and to stimulate constructive feedback on the research design. I informed the head of the SAC and research lab of any alterations to the project that occurred as it progressed, and I endeavored to maintain full transparency throughout the study



period. The naturalistic observations of the LC sessions were unobtrusive, with care taken to reduce the impact of my presence during data collection (see Mynard et al., 2020a for another example of this approach). Based on discussions with SAC staff about the open access nature of the LC and the extremely fluid nature of its membership, it was decided that obtaining informed consent from all members would be impractical during the observation sessions. Following consultation with the head of the SAC and research lab, I adhered to ethical guidelines on naturalistic observation from both the American Anthropological Association (2018) and the American Psychological Association (2022) where it is stated that informed consent may be waived in the following cases:

where research would not reasonably be assumed to create distress or harm and involves (a) the study of normal educational practices, curricula, or classroom management methods conducted in educational settings; (b) only anonymous questionnaires, naturalistic observations, or archival research for which disclosure of responses would not place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation, and confidentiality is protected. (APA, 2022)

In order to ensure that no significant risk of harm occurred as a result of the naturalistic observation, all LC members apart from the key participants in the study (in which case oral consent was obtained and pseudonyms were used) were completely unidentifiable from the field notes that were taken. In addition, no audio or video recordings of the LC were made during the observation period.

In the case of the language learning histories and interviews, informed consent was received as participants were provided bilingual (English and Japanese) plain language statements (see Appendix B) describing the aims and purpose of the study and their role within it. I informed them that the findings of the study had no bearing whatsoever on their

grades or standing in the university, that they would be given a pseudonym (if they desired) to maintain their confidentiality, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. I distributed these forms to be signed at the start of each of the three semesters that the study spanned. Also, as a small token of appreciation, I gave participants a 500-yen (\$5) book voucher for participating in each interview or survey in line with the university's research policy. In the case of the SAC staff members that were interviewed, I distributed bilingual or English plain language statements and consent forms (Appendices B and C) (depending on the participant's first language) that were signed before each interview. Regarding artifact collection, the LC leaders agreed to allow me access to the slides they used for each meeting and the minutes from their leader meetings, and shared the vocabulary sheets that they created each week. None of these sources featured any personal information from any LC members. I also collected public access materials such as promotional posters and, when necessary, members' faces, names, and email addresses were blurred out in the images and in the SAC newsletter articles in order to maintain confidentiality.

### ***5.6.2. Ethics in practice***

In many ways, the notion of ethics in practice is analogous to researcher reflexivity. Inquiry is fundamentally “a moral, political, and value-laden exercise” (Denzin, 2010, pp. 424-425) and researchers are required to interrogate not only *how* but also *why* they are conducting a study. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) also emphasize the importance of reflexivity in raising awareness of “ethically important moments” (p. 273) over the course of a study and encourage reflection on issues such as the ultimate purpose of the research and micro-level interpersonal interactions between researcher and participant.

Throughout the study, I attempted to be as open and honest as possible to my participants based on an *ethic of care* (De Costa, 2014; Rallis & Rossman, 2009). I earnestly tried to create a warm and caring relationship with each of my participants and they would at

times ask me for advice about their classes or tell me about other events in their lives unrelated to the study. I constantly considered the potential positive or negative effects that my interactions with my individual participants might have on them or the LC community and I endeavored to make sure that they were being supported rather than simply investigated. One way of approaching this was to maintain transparency by keeping them informed of the progress of my study and my findings wherever possible in both English and Japanese. This also manifested itself in regular member checking sessions with all of the main participants where I encouraged them to give me their perspectives on my ongoing analysis. Of course, even though I was not directly teaching any of my participants, my position as a teacher alone is likely to have had an effect on how direct they were during these sessions. However, as I endeavored to create a casual, friendly atmosphere in which we communicated bilingually, I am reasonably confident that my participants were comfortable enough to raise any major incongruities between our perspectives. Another consideration was the impact of participation in the study on their workload as university students. Many of my participants had demanding schedules with multiple assignments that they were required to complete. Based on discussion with members of the SAC team and the participants themselves, I tried to provide them choices (i.e., the option to do oral rather than written language learning histories, provide flexible scheduling for interviews, etc.) that would mitigate the negative impact that participation in the study might have on their academic or personal lives.

My priority in terms of my approach to data collection and “the ethics of consequences” (Rallis & Rossman, 2009) was to avoid causing disruption within the LC. Because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the community had been forced to go online and was in a potentially precarious situation regarding whether it was feasible to continue or not. Furthermore, my pilot study revealed that perhaps one of the main traits of the LC was the low-pressure environment they had created through studying with other Japanese

students similar to them in linguistic proficiency. At the start of the study, I therefore felt that my overt presence in the community could have a potentially detrimental effect to the low-pressure environment that they had cultivated and may also cause learners to defer to me due to my position of authority as a “native speaker” and a teacher. For these reasons, I strongly felt that an unobtrusive, naturalistic approach to community observation was crucial and would not result in any harm to my participants or the community as a whole.

One additional ethical facet that I continually attempted to address throughout my research was the issue of utility. I constantly evaluated the ethical considerations regarding what benefit this project might have to the LC community or the SAC as a whole. Rather than conducting the study in isolation, leaving the research site, submitting my thesis, and then continuing with my career, I made efforts to maintain open lines of communication with current and former LC members, SAC staff, and other members of the broader self-access learning field in Japan in order to update them on my findings. I shared, wherever relevant, information that I felt could support the LC and the other learning communities in the SAC. Rather than theorizing for the sake of theorizing or taking an extreme instrumental approach that discontinued contact with the SAC and the LC as soon as my data was collected, I felt it was important to view this study as one tool that may contribute in some way to helping the future members of the LC and other communities like them.

### **5.7. Data collection**

Collecting multiple sources of data is a hallmark of case study research and contributes to the overall trustworthiness of the findings as researchers are able to triangulate data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Furthermore, in the ethnographic tradition, combining several different data sources allows thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomena or culture being investigated also contributing to the rigor of the study by providing readers with a vivid picture of the research site and participants. In this study, I utilized four data sources; (1)

observational data of the LC community, (2) semi-structured interviews with community members and SAC staff, (3) community members' language learning histories, and (4) community artifacts collected in the field. These data sources are summarized in Table 10.

**Table 10***Ethnographic data sources for the current study**LC participants*

	2019 (Fall semester)	2020 (Spring semester)	2020 (Fall semester)
Ryoya	LLH, Int1, Int2	Int3, Obs	Int4, Obs
Yuki	LLH, Int1, Int2	Int3, Obs	Int4, Obs
Harumi	LLH, Int1, Int2	Int3, Obs	Int4, Obs
Tenka	LLH, Int1, Int2	Int3, Obs	Int4, Obs
Mizuki	LLH, Int1, Int2	Int3, Obs	Int4, Obs
Sara		LLH, Int1, Int2, Obs	Int3, Obs
Riri		LLH, Int1, Int2, Obs	Int3, Obs
Hinako		LLH, Int1, Int2, Obs	Obs
Natsuko		LLH, Int1, Int2, Obs	Int3, Obs

*Former LC participants and SAC staff*

	2019 (Fall semester)	2020 (Spring semester)	2020 (Fall semester)
Kei	LLH, Int1	Int2	Int3
Keiko	Int1, Int2, Int3	Int4	Int5
Yukiko		Int1	
Amy		Int1	

Notes. LLH (Language Learning History), Int (Interview), Obs (Observation)

Artifact collection	October 2019 - July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collected materials (slides, vocabulary lists) from LC meetings</li> <li>Meeting minutes from LC leaders' weekly planning meetings</li> </ul> Collected promotional materials (posters, newsletter columns) from the SAC/ SAC website
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In the following sections I will explain in detail the procedure for collecting each of the data sources listed above and the rationale for their inclusion in this study.

### 5.7.1. *Observational data*

Although my pilot study of the LC (Hooper, 2020c) did not have an observational component due to the potential obtrusiveness of my presence and its potentially harmful impact on the atmosphere of the community, it became clear that interview data, while rich, would not provide adequate insight into the actual practice of the LC community. Rather than relying on my participants as intermediaries regarding what happened in the LC, I felt that first-hand observation of LC meetings was necessary. Consequently, from May 2020 to January 2021, I conducted a total of 20 observation sessions (11 observations in the spring semester and 9 observations during the fall semester) (Table 11) whilst taking field notes on what happened during LC meetings.

**Table 11**

#### *Observational data collection*

<b>Spring semester</b>	<b>Fall semester</b>
May 12, 2020 (31 participants)	September 29, 2020 (20 participants)
May 19, 2020 (23 participants)	October 6, 2020 (8 participants)
May 26, 2020 (23 participants)	October 13, 2020 (9 participants)
June 2, 2020 (21 participants)	October 20, 2020 (10 participants)
June 9, 2020 (21 participants)	November 3, 2020 (6 participants)
June 16, 2020 (12 participants)	November 17, 2020 (10 participants)
June 23, 2020 (18 participants)	December 1, 2020 (13 participants)
June 30, 2020 (15 participants)	December 15, 2020 (14 participants)
July 7, 2020 (22 participants)	January 12, 2021 (17 participants)
July 14, 2020 (14 participants)	
July 21, 2020 (18 participants)	

After consulting with the LC leaders and SAC staff, I had initially planned to sit in a slightly separated area of the space where the LC met to conduct several observations over the course of a semester with the hope that members would become “bored” with me and gradually forget my presence. However, in the spring of 2020, it was decided that due to the COVID-19 crisis, the university and therefore the learning communities would be taking an online format. It was decided that the LC meetings would be held on Zoom and I used this as an opportunity to conduct naturalistic observations of the community in a far more unobtrusive manner. After discussing this with SAC staff and the LC leaders, it was decided that I would use my teacher Zoom account to open the Zoom room for LC meetings each week. This meant that I would be able to give the leaders’ host status and I would disable my camera and microphone. The LC leaders requested that I change my profile picture to a plain black screen and change my profile name to “Researcher.” This meant that I would be able to remain relatively unobtrusive through each meeting and also easily take field notes by speaking into my smartphone and using a dictation application that transcribed my observations and thoughts. An additional benefit of this was being able to record my field notes in the moment instead of relying on recollection of events without any negative impact on the community that might come from someone writing down observations. These observation notes (Appendix D) were then edited and checked for transcription errors later in a word processing program as I listened back to my spoken observations and thoughts. The observational notes were both descriptive and analytical as I tried to document the events I witnessed as concretely as I could but also naturally used my own *interpretative frames* to make sense of what I was seeing and make connections between past and present events (Blommaert & Jie, 2020). The notes from the first three meetings were organized according to Spradley’s (1980) “nine dimensions of descriptive observation” —space, object, act, activity, event, time, actor, goal, and feeling (see Appendix D). This framework assisted me in making



sense of the patterns of participation and behavior in LC meetings and allowed me to narrow down my focus to specific themes or phenomena as the observations progressed. Apart from the LC leaders and the main participants of the study (who were informed of the observations in accordance with American Anthropological Association (2018) guidelines), I used no names (even pseudonyms) of other LC members during the observation data collection and made no recordings of the Zoom session itself at any time.

### **5.7.2. Interviews**

I viewed interviews as a central element of this study as it allowed me insight into “meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds” (Hatch, 2002, p. 91). While the observational data provided interesting insights into the LC community as a whole and provided “flickers” of individuals motivations and values within the community, in order to get more of an understanding of causality and how the LC was situated for them in their histories and learning trajectories, in-depth interviews were key. The interview protocols for the current study were adapted from protocols used in a former study of a SAC learning space (Mynard et al., 2020a). These existing protocols were further developed and additional interview questions were added in an iterative process through dialogue with two senior researchers at my institution. I utilized semi-structured interviews for this study as I deemed them to provide a coherent set of themes and suggested questions for me to cover while also affording me freedom to probe unclear or ambiguous points and detour down new avenues of interest if they arose (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016; Richards, 2009). In addition, the reactivity afforded by semi-structured interviewing where the researcher may alter the direction of the interview based on the interviewee’s insights creates a slightly more balanced power dynamic through the reciprocity between both parties (Kallio et al., 2016). Congruent with an abductive approach to data analysis (see section 5.8.1.), developing a semi-structured interview protocol is also an iterative process where events in the

field may call for adjustments to be made to parts of the interview based on emergent phenomena or problems that occur (Adams, 2015). A key consideration when adopting interviews as a data collection method is the manner of knowledge they produce. In order to illustrate the two dominant perspectives on this subject, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) use the metaphors of *the miner* and *the traveller*. The former understands knowledge to be something that the miner “unearths” in the interview, whereas the latter views it as being co-constructed with the participant through “conversations” on their journey together potentially influenced by the traveler’s home culture (positionality) (p. 48). In line with an interpretivist perspective, this study takes the view that although interview data is co-constructed dialogically between interviewer and interviewee, this does not mean that the insights revealed have no utility or meaning beyond the particular interview context (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Yeo et al., 2014). Interview data can indeed be used to contribute to warranted assertions (Dewey, 1941/2008) as long as researcher reflexivity underpins data collection and analysis (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Mann, 2016).

#### *Sampling procedure*

I utilized stratified purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ritchie et al., 2014) to select participants regularly attending the LC with varying degrees of experience in the community. I conducted sampling procedures via a simple questionnaire (see Appendix E) that I administered in either paper form or in a Google Form depending on whether the community was online or not at the time. The questionnaire contained multiple choice and open-ended questions based on respondents’ duration of participation in the LC, how comfortable they felt in the community, and their initial rationale for joining the LC. Also, I asked potential participants to provide their email address if they would be willing to participate in an interview for the current study (a simple bilingual plain language statement explaining the research was provided). Upon identifying suitable participants, I contacted

them via email and acquired informed consent for their language learning histories (see 5.7.3.), the main interview and one shorter follow-up interview. I conducted sampling three times (September 2019, February 2020, and September 2020) in order to get a range of participants representing different generations of the LC community. The first round of interviews with Ryoya, Yuki, Harumi, Mizuki, and Tenka that were conducted in fall 2019 formed the basis of my pilot study (Hooper, 2020c) which was later expanded on to form the current study. For this main study, I also chose to interview other participants (former LC members and SAC staff) from outside of the immediate LC community—Kei, Keiko, Yukiko, and Amy—were selected because of their historical knowledge of the LC or because of their institutional perspectives on the community. I contacted these participants directly face-to-face or via email, distributed the plain language statement, and obtained written informed consent.

#### *Interview procedure*

I conducted interviews either face-to-face in reserved private study rooms on campus or online via Zoom or Line. The interview protocols (Appendices F, G, and H) I developed were informed by the existing literature on learner identity, communities of practice, and social learning spaces. Upon completion of the first drafts of the protocols, I held consultations with experienced academics in these fields who worked at my university in order to gain feedback on the questions and refine the protocols. In total, I constructed three protocols; the first was for the current and former LC organizers (Ryoya, Yuki, Sara, and Kei) and focused on both community participation and leadership experiences and beliefs (see Appendix F), the second was designed for regular LC members and focused primarily on community participation (see Appendix G), and the final protocol was designed for participants outside of the community but were linked to it via their institutional positions (Keiko, Yukiko, and Amy) (see Appendix H). Of course, being semi-structured interviews, the protocols underwent iterative development over the course of the study in order to fit with the study's developing

abductive analysis (see 5.8.1). After the initial round of interviews, subsequent interview sessions were guided by the participants' responses from the previous meetings and research notes I took based on emergent points of interest (see Appendix I). These follow-up interviews allowed me to clarify any points of ambiguity, expand emergent points of interest via probing questions, or simply provide an up-to-date perspective on their current experiences in the LC.

All interviews with LC students and Japanese SAC staff were conducted in either English or Japanese depending on the interviewee's preference. I audio recorded all interviews using my iPad or, in the case of online interviews, using a PC. I then stored the audio files in a private folder in my Google Drive account. I transcribed the audio data as soon after the interview as possible (see Appendix J for a sample transcribed interview) so as to increase the chances of a clearer recollection of the interview (Azevedo et al., 2017). In the case of Japanese transcription and translation, any unclear segments of speech were crosschecked with a bilingual Japanese colleague. Interviews were generally kept to no more than an hour in length and I assured participants that they could stop for a break at any time if they required it. All participants were also assured that they would be asked to member check my final analysis of their interview data before it would be included in my thesis.

### ***5.7.3. Language learning histories***

Language learning histories (LLHs) are personal autobiographical histories of language learning and a "rich source of data on student beliefs and perceptions" (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008, p. 17). Autobiographical narratives of language learners have been recognized by many in the field as offering "insights into people's private worlds, inaccessible to experimental methodologies, and thus provide the insider's view of the processes of language learning, attrition, and use" (Pavlenko, 2007, pp. 164-165). As I was interested in the historical learning trajectories of individual members of the LC community, their situatedness in a larger sociocultural context, and the influence of both of these factors on their current

participation in the LC, their language learning histories were a key source of knowledge. Indeed, a significant amount of existing research into community membership, communities of practice, and imagined communities has incorporated individual informants' autobiographical histories as a central pillar of analysis (Barron, 2010; Carpenter & Murphey, 2009; Lamb, 2011; Morita, 2004; Murphey et al., 2005; Murray, 2008, 2011; Olwig, 2002). More specifically relating to communities of practice, the use of LLHs addresses, in part, criticism directed towards CoP theory in that it fails to adequately address the impact of the individual on the community (Billet, 2007). Examining the historical and social construction of individual learner beliefs via LLHs also recognizes the assertion by Handley et al. (2006) that CoP is often viewed in a "compartmentalist" sense (p. 10) with no consideration given to *habitus* and the "development of dispositions to learning over time" (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000, p. 590).

In this study, I adapted the LLH template from a model utilized in Murphey and Carpenter (2008) (retrieved from [http://www.veramenezes.com/nar\\_tim.htm](http://www.veramenezes.com/nar_tim.htm)) that was also used with Japanese university students. Some minor changes were made to the wording and some additional questions were added while collaborating with one of the authors of the original model (see Appendix I). Following consultation with SAC staff, I decided that, due to students' demanding workload from classes, all participants should be given the option to choose between completing their LLHs in either oral or written form. All but one participant (Kei) elected to do the LLH orally. In order to allow participants of all levels of L2 proficiency to express themselves freely, I allowed participants to choose whether to give their LLHs in English, Japanese, or a combination of the two. In the case of both the oral and written LLHs, I informed participants that the questions on the LLH template were merely there as a guide to stimulate reflection and that they were not required to answer all of them. I conducted the oral LLHs in a loosely structured way, where questions from the template were asked as guides but

participants were free to discuss other topics that they felt were relevant (see Appendix L). The oral LLHs ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length. All of the oral LLHs were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. In the case of both the interviews and oral LLHs, the excerpts that appear in this study have been edited for word economy (for instance, false starts and repetitions have been deleted).

#### **5.7.4. Artifact collection**

In their attempts to “get as rich a picture as possible of the environment in which the field work was done,” Blommaert and Jie (2020) explain that ethnographers tend to collect “rubbish” (pp. 57-58)—this could be documents, advertisements, photographs, audio or video recordings—anything that paints a more detailed picture of the research site. Hatch (2002) terms these artifacts as “unobtrusive data” as their collection does not interfere with the culture or phenomenon being investigated. Additionally, Hatch states that these data sources are “nonreactive” (p. 116) as they are not relayed via the “perceptions, interpretations, and biases” of the people we are studying. Looking through the theoretical lens of CoP, artifacts are vitally important in understanding a community’s practice. Artifacts or *reification* in Wenger’s (1998) sense of the term are not necessarily concrete objects and include stories, unwritten rules, turns of phrase, etc. In general terms, reification can be defined as “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (p. 58). Physical or digital documents created by the community clearly fit within this definition and represent one manifestation of the LC’s *practice*—“a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, p. 2).

#### *LC session materials*

At the start of the spring 2020 semester, I received permission from the LC leaders to have access to the materials that they developed for each LC session over roughly one year of

meetings. The main document was a slideshow that was updated on a weekly basis that included descriptions of each stage of an LC session, some suggestions and community rules, and the conversation topic for each week. The slides were written in both Japanese and English and featured a consistent visual design throughout the year. Each week, I would take a screenshot of the slides and save it in a private Google Drive folder in which I stored all of my observation data. Another document that the LC leaders allowed me access to was a shared text document that the community used to record all of the new vocabulary and phrases that members contributed during each session (see Appendix J). This was also saved within the same private Google Drive folder.

#### *LC leader meeting minutes*

In the autumn semester of 2020, the three LC leaders also gave me permission to access a document (see Appendix N) containing the minutes from meetings that they had been conducting on a weekly basis from May to December 2020. In these meetings, the leaders discussed ideas for future LC meetings, future conversation topics, and recurring issues that they felt needed to be addressed. In these meetings they also addressed the anonymous feedback that they had received from the weekly survey they distributed to members via a Google Form. This document was also saved within my private Google Drive folder.

#### *Promotional materials*

Over an approximately eighteen-month period, I collected a range of promotional materials for the LC community including posters, screenshots from the SAC website, and interviews with LC members in a newsletter produced by the SAC. I deemed these materials as valuable for my study as they represent both *the projected identity* (Benson et al., 2013) of the LC community from its leaders and the tacit support for the LC from the larger organizational structure of the SAC. I collected these images via computer screenshots, photos taken by smartphone or tablet, and physical copies of documents. In cases where images were

to be used in the written study, I obscured all visible email addresses or names and all photos of current participants were made unrecognizable in order to maintain confidentiality (see Appendix O).

## **5.8. Data analysis**

This section will outline the analytical process I conducted having compiled the data from observation field notes, transcribed interviews, and language learning histories, as well as assorted documents collected from the research site. These multiple data sources served to triangulate my findings (see 5.10 for more detail) and provided the basis for thick description of the LC community and the wider environment they were situated in. Initially, I will briefly describe abductive analysis, the broader analytic approach that developed over the course of the study and how this shaped my research goals and relationship with theory and data. Then, I move on to an explanation of the reflective thematic analysis that I utilized to develop codes and themes that I continually revisited in an iterative process that spanned the entire research period. Finally, I describe the narrative approach that underpins the individual learner case studies used to address my second research question.

### ***5.8.1. Abductive analysis***

At the outset of this study, my perspective towards data interpretation was more situated in the realm of deductive reasoning. I had already conducted research using a communities of practice theoretical framework (Hooper, 2020d), and found it to be valuable in making sense of the way a social learning space operates. Therefore, coming into this project with my “favorite theory” (Burawoy, 1998, cited in Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) was reassuring and led me to focus my reading predominantly in that area. As mentioned in my positionality section, I also initially perceived the LC in a rather idealistic fashion, framing it as a progressive educational development and even a potential antidote to the “native speaker” worship in Japan that I regarded as a significant psychological obstacle to the development of



many English learners. As my data collection and subsequent analysis for my pilot study progressed; however, I became aware of a number of points of disjuncture from the neat theoretical framework and positive framing of the LC that I had aligned myself to. If I were to stay true to a deductive approach to these “anomalies,” I may have simply seen them as a “bothersome hiccup” (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p. 2) that could be de-emphasized or even hidden. Conversely, if I were to adopt a truly inductive approach such as the early iterations of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I would need to enter the study as *tabula rasa* (as impossible as that might be) and approach the phenomenon before me in a completely data-driven fashion, disregarding the potential value of pre-existing theoretical insights.

After much deliberation and wide reading into the problematic choice between theory-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) approaches, I found an alternative approach with its foundations in pragmatism and the work of Charles S. Pierce—abductive analysis (Reichert, 2007; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Where deductive analysis is driven by theory and inductive analysis by data, abductive analysis is “breakdown-driven” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, as cited in Brinkmann, 2014) in that it is stimulated by surprises or things within the data that “don’t fit.” In order to address things that I perceived to be occurring in the LC I could not explain within the neat confines of the communities of practice theory, I found an abductive analysis to be an appropriate analytical orientation. It allowed me to foreground the incongruities within my data and encouraged me to seek out additional theories that I could use to explain what I was experiencing in the field. This rationale is in keeping with Tavory and Timmermans’ (2014) who claim that:

Abduction occurs when we encounter observations that do not neatly fit existing theories and we find ourselves speculating about what the data plausibly could be a case of. Abduction thus refers to a creative inferential process aimed at producing new

hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. Abduction produces a new hypothesis for which we then need to gather more observations. (p. 5)

When related to data analysis methods, abductive analysis still values the recording and coding of detailed field notes or interview transcriptions. This, in part, guards against problems with transparency, selective memory, or other biases creeping into our recollections of the phenomena we are examining, what Tavory and Timmermans (2014) refer to as a *mnemonic* function. More specifically to the abductive approach, a further role of detailed data documentation is to facilitate what is termed *defamiliarization*—the act of taking time away from the data so as to allow us to come back to it once more with an altered perspective. The benefit of this is that it allows us to “mull over aspects we took for granted, and revisiting allows us to return to the same observation transsituationally” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 177). In the final step of *revisiting observations*, we recursively analyze the “problem” within our data based on either other existing theoretical accounts we have discovered or a theory of our own creation. In this way, abduction is the interplay between “multiply theoretically cultivated ways of seeing the world and the resistance of the object [data]” (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p. 58).

In the context of this study, the “anomaly” that I noticed was in the conflicting perspectives that I encountered among LC members relating to their framing of their own value as English speakers and the way they viewed “native speakers.” These seemingly contradictory dispositions surprised and puzzled me as they challenged my preconceptions of what the LC community represented. Furthermore, these wider issues of sociocultural ideological conditioning did not seem to be adequately addressed in the existing CoP literature that I had been exposed to. I therefore decided to read more widely in a number of different areas, exploring concepts such as landscapes of practice, liminality, and habitus. These theoretical perspectives then informed my careful and cyclical re-reading of the data where I

repeatedly tested whether my evolving theoretical interpretations could be deemed as plausible “warranted assertion” based on empirical evidence. These interpretations are also shared with a relevant “community of inquiry”—knowledgeable peers in our field—who represent a “simultaneously disciplining and enabling context” (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p. 124) in which our theories can be critiqued and perhaps expanded. Therefore, sharing my findings with the community of researchers and practitioners in the SAC where this study was conducted was a crucial part of the abductive route that my analysis took. Of course, this community also provided essential learning opportunities, emotional support, direction, and motivation that allowed me to navigate the peaks and troughs of my research journey (Cornwell & McLaughlin, 2005; Sato et al., 2007). Recognizing the centrality of detailed data sources and data- and theory-driven coding in abductive analysis, the following sections will explain the reflexive thematic coding approach that was adopted for this study.

### ***5.8.2. Reflexive thematic analysis***

Thematic analysis (TA) is a widespread but often poorly-defined method of qualitative data analysis and, as a result, its implementation often leads to a great deal of incoherence and confusion (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020). Fundamentally, TA is a method of analyzing qualitative data through a process of “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes)” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). TA is not linked to one specific theoretical orientation or method and its flexibility can be seen as one of its major benefits to researchers. However, one recurring point of confusion is that TA is atheoretical or that “anything goes” in terms of its implementation (Braun & Clarke, 2020). TA, while flexible, needs to be implemented in a way that is coherent with a researcher’s ontological or epistemological assumptions, and what they want to learn from the study. In line with the constructivist orientation of this study and my recognition of the influence my positionality and theoretical perspectives have on meaning

construction, the method that I have selected for data analysis is *reflexive TA*. Braun and Clarke (2020) provide the following concise definition for this method;

“Reflexive” TA captures approaches that fully embrace qualitative research values and the subjective skills the researcher brings to the process – a research team is not required or even desirable for quality. Analysis, which can be more inductive or more theoretical/deductive, is a situated interpretative reflexive process. Coding is open and organic, with no use of any coding framework. Themes should be the final “outcome” of data coding and iterative theme development.

(pp. 6-7)

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a six-stage process for TA that I also deemed to be coherent with an abductive approach to data analysis. Their proposed stages for TA are as follows; (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Braun and Clarke emphasize that these stages are guidelines rather than dictates and encourage researchers to adapt them flexibly according to their needs. A further point relevant to my abductive approach is their understanding that “analysis is not a linear process where you simply move from one phase to the next. Instead, it is a more recursive process, where you move back and forth as needed, throughout the phases” (p. 16). One important distinction to make here is the difference between a *code* and a *theme*. According to Braun & Clarke (2020), while a code “capture[s] (at least) one observation [or] display (usually just) one facet,” a theme is broader and more complex “captur[ing] multiple observations or facets” (p. 13).

In the current study, both theory-driven and data-driven codes were developed in line with my abductive analytical approach. Upon collecting and transcribing data, I carried out initial coding across all data sources using Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020), a

qualitative analysis program and continuous free-form analytical notes were recorded in a word processing program. Gradually over the course of the study, themes were developed in a continuous, iterative and recursive process moving back and forth between the data, the theoretical literature, and feedback from member checking sessions and my academic community of practice. The final constructed set of themes discussed in research question 1 (Chapter 6) are as follows:

1. Accessibility
2. Flattened hierarchy
3. Leadership
4. Linguistic focus
5. Community support

### ***5.8.3. Narrative analysis***

In order to be able to adequately address my second research question and explore the learning trajectories of individual LC members, I decided that it was necessary to adopt a separate analytical lens. Rather than solely analyzing the LC as a coherent language learning CoP with a consistent domain, community, and practice, I sought to illustrate the complex and idiosyncratic ways each member perceived and engaged with the community. This led me to adopt a narrative inquiry approach (Benson, 2018; Murray, 2009), as it would allow me to both produce “fully fleshed-out portraits of identifiable individual learners” (Benson, 2017b, p. 7) and shine light upon the interplay between individual, social, and environmental factors (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021) that forms the whole person. By drawing upon narrative-based data sources such as interviews and language learning histories, my intention was to obtain a better understanding of how each LC member “situate[d] themselves and their activities in the world” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 2)—or in this case, the landscape of practice. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that several studies based on an LoP framework (Fenton-

O’Creevy et al., 2015a; Fenton-O’Creevy et al., 2015b; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Kubiak et al., 2015a) have focused primarily on learner narratives. This existing literature indicated that a narrative approach was indeed coherent with a LoP perspective and would be able to effectively express the complexity inherent in trajectories across multiple CoPs.

Within the umbrella term of narrative inquiry, chapter 7 in this thesis more specifically takes a *narrative analysis* approach in that stories may not only be the source, but also the analysis of data, as well as the manner in which findings are later presented (Benson, 2018). In the case of my study, biographical case studies of three individual LC members were constructed based on data from language learning histories, interviews, and participant observation. The members (Kei, Sara, and Tenka) were selected because they represented a cross section of generations of LC membership over a three-year period. Each member’s experiences were first thematically analyzed abductively leading to the creation of both data-based and theory-based codes. Subsequently, historical narratives of their learning histories and trajectories were reconstructed or “restor[jied]” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) based on the analyzed data. The “restorying” process also represented a further level of analysis as additional points of interest were identified as each individual’s lived experience was formed into a coherent historical narrative. From here, I conducted a “cross story analysis” (Murray, 2009) coding for themes across all three members’ histories. These themes were then discussed in a final thematic interpretation based on the LoP framework and other relevant literature.

At this point, it is important to recognize that, as previously discussed regarding interview data in section 5.7.2., narrative analysis represents a co-construction of meaning between two participants—study participant and researcher (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Murray, 2009; Mynard et al., 2020a). Therefore, it must be restated that my individual researcher positionality (see section 5.5) will have impacted the “restorying” process and

indeed my later stages of thematic analysis. In narrative studies, however, we are not seeking objectivity as we might in quantitative research, but instead “well-crafted subjective interpretation of data” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 89). That being said, as will be discussed in the following section, methodological rigor and trustworthiness is still a major issue in narrative analysis and through measures such as maintaining transparency/ reflexivity and member checking, one can improve the quality of narrative studies (Murray, 2009).

## **5.9. Trustworthiness**

Rather than the quantitative-oriented concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability, the qualitative nature of this study has led me to consider this research in terms of its “trustworthiness” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this section I will briefly outline four measures I took within this study to enhance its trustworthiness and, therefore, potential value to the field.

### ***5.9.1. Prolonged engagement in the field and thick description***

Although my time in the field may have been relatively limited in comparison with other pure ethnographies, I consistently observed LC meetings over one academic year and took extensive descriptive field notes throughout that period. Furthermore, due to my position as a covert observer, I was able to take extensive notes about the LC sessions without any fear of disturbing the community. This meant both the credibility and transferability of this research were strengthened as I was able to construct a detailed and long-term description of the LC’s practice that other researchers and practitioners can picture and potentially relate to. Additionally, the longitudinal nature of my study meant that I was able to build closer relationships with many of my participants over time, thus making it more likely that they would share deeper insights with me despite my relative outsider status (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Finally, the longitudinal nature of the study afforded me numerous opportunities to

corroborate my analysis from my observations with my participants during follow-up interviews which in turn developed the credibility of my findings.

### ***5.9.2. Triangulation of data***

As I was able to compare my analysis across a range of data sources, i.e., field notes, interview transcripts, language learning histories, artifacts, and member checking sessions (methods triangulation) and different points in time (data triangulation), this increased the credibility and dependability of the assertions I made (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Loh, 2013). Although these do not point to an objective “truth” per se, it does suggest that certain coherent patterns of practice, behavior, or beliefs are likely to have existed within the LC and the wider institutional environment. Triangulation also allowed me to identify certain recurring themes or areas of overlap that guided my ongoing analysis of the LC and the data collected through interviews or member checking sessions would often facilitate deeper understanding of observational data (Rallis & Rossman, 2009).

### ***5.9.3. Member checking***

Member checking involves the researcher presenting an interim or final report or analysis to participants so that they have “an opportunity to provide context and an alternative interpretation” (Patton, 2002, p. 561). Within the current study, I conducted member checking in both an ongoing and summative fashion to improve the credibility of my assertions. I informed participants in follow-up interviews of my perspectives on the ongoing analysis and asked them probing questions about any ambiguities or discrepancies I noticed during the research period. Considering my positionality, however, this approach is not free of problems. The authority that I possessed as both teacher and researcher in relation to my participants is likely to have affected this process and I had to be constantly mindful of the LC members simply acquiescing to my perspective on the data because of the uneven power distribution. I tried to mediate this as much as I could by repeatedly stating that their direct and honest



perspectives on my analysis were important to me and would actually help my study. Even in this case, however, the member checking sessions had to be viewed critically and reflexively.

#### ***5.9.4. Peer checking and audience validation***

Although member checking with participants is likely to provide emic insights into the phenomenon being studied, it is most often the case that they are not capable of providing a theoretical perspective on the research. Rallis and Rossman (2009) suggest that engaging with one's academic community of practice in order to share "emerging ideas, tentative hypotheses, and half-developed ideas" (p. 269) is a recommended strategy for strengthening the credibility of the theoretical facets of one's research. As illustrated previously, a continuous interaction with one's community of inquiry is a crucial part of the abductive analytical process (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) and from the outset of my research until its eventual conclusion, I constantly engaged in critical conversations with experts in self-access learning, sociocultural theory, group dynamics, native-speakerism in Japan, and communities of practice so as to deepen my understanding of these theoretical perspectives, stimulate creative leaps in my analysis, and enhance the credibility of the claims I was making in this study. Additionally, due to my intention that my research provides utilizable findings for SAC staff, I deemed audience validation – feedback from the "primary intended users and readers" (Patton, 2002, p. 561) – as an important element of my study. During the research period, I presented preliminary findings to SAC staff, published my pilot study in a peer-reviewed journal within the self-access field, and attempted to discuss my study as much as possible with my colleagues in the SAC.

#### **5.10. Limitations**

In this section I outline and discuss what I deem to be the two major limitations of this study in terms of its trustworthiness and applicability to the wider field. These are (1) the

impact of my outsider status and relative authority on data collection and, (2) concerns of the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

### **5.10.1. Researcher status**

One significant limitation that must be recognized stems from my positionality as a *double outsider*, (Folkes, 2018) in that I was not a member of the community and had a different ethnic and racial background to my participants. There is also a cultural facet to this outsider status through the Japanese concepts of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside). Whitsed (2011) provides a detailed and nuanced description of *uchi/soto*, explaining the ubiquitousness of these concepts as “a major organisational focus for Japanese self, social life, and language” (p. 85). As a non-Japanese teacher and non-member of the LC, it is almost certain that I would be positioned in *soto* space in relation to the community (*uchi*) by my participants (Whitsed, 2011). This recognition of the way in which I was positioned in relation to my participants is important as it highlights the subjective and dialogic nature of ethnographic research (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Kincheloe et al., 2018) and “allows researchers and participants to come together from varying points of reference to make sense of the “reality” under study” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 444).

Despite being comfortable communicating in both English and Japanese, I was also a linguistic outsider as Japanese is not my mother tongue. As the LC is a bilingual community, although I was able to understand virtually everything that was being said during their meetings, there were occasions when members made cultural references that I did not understand, and this is likely to have had an impact on my understanding of the community’s practice. Furthermore, as Nonaka (2018) states, it is almost impossible to obtain perfect translations of some concepts between different languages. Although I attempted as much as possible to confirm my translations with the participants and other bilingual speakers of

English/ Japanese, there is still a fear of some of the intended nuance being lost in the translation process.

In addition to my double outsider status, a further consideration is an unequal power dynamic that existed throughout all of my interactions with LC members. Despite not directly teaching any of the participants, as a teacher, in a position of relative authority in comparison with the LC participants, this may have affected how willing or comfortable they felt sharing certain opinions or information with me. Furthermore, my positionality as a “native speaker” of English, a status that some members of the community appeared to have *akogare* (longing) towards, may also have affected some participants’ willingness to participate in the study and their manner of interaction with me. Regarding the interviews I conducted with SAC staff members, although no discernable power differential existed between us, the fact that we were colleagues within the same institution may have also influenced our interview dialogue during the course of the study.

#### ***5.10.2. Generalizability/transferability***

Due to the small sample size and intensely contextualized nature of this study, there are likely to be concerns about the extent to the findings from this study are appropriate for inferential generalization, i.e., the findings from this study can be generalized to other settings (Lewis et al., 2014). Rather than the positivist-oriented term of generalizability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) choose to reframe the concept as *transferability*, a term that places more onus on the *receiving context*, where the reader finds a way to apply the findings to their own situation, rather than the *sending context* in which researcher produces generalizable “truths” (Brown, 2009; Lewis et al., 2014; Shenton, 2004). Thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the research context can be one way of facilitating transferability of qualitative research findings as it provides the reader a vivid picture of the phenomena or point of interest, which may then resonate with their own experiences (Loh, 2013).

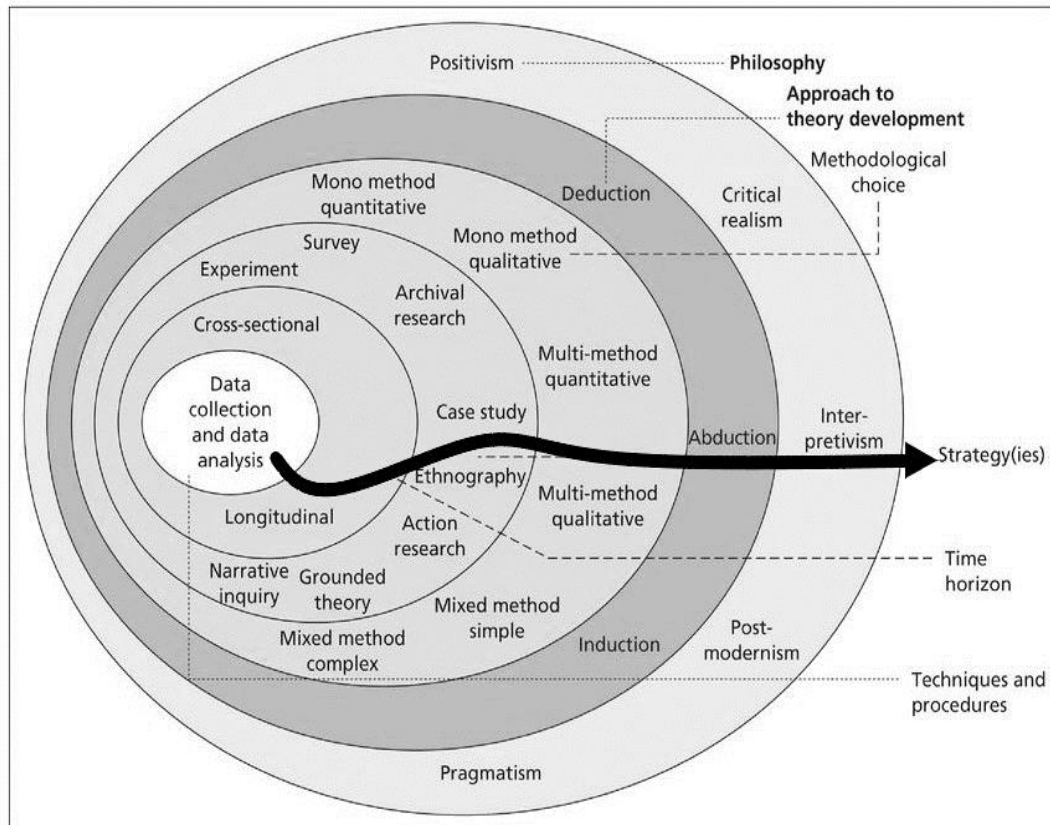
Another arguably concerning issue is with the particular case of the LC. This type of learner-led learning community is a relatively new concept in TESOL, particularly within Japan, which may lead some to question the value of focusing on such an idiosyncratic case with few contemporary equivalents in the field. As Richards (2003) suggests, however, “in seeking the reassurance of the general, we miss the eloquence of the particular” (p. 289)—I argue that one of the central goals of this research is to highlight the complexity and potential value of this type of social learning approach in self-access learning. Considering the relative lack of attention in the existing research for these learner-led groups, the LC’s innovativeness and particularity can serve to influence and inform current practitioners of new avenues to explore in the ever-evolving field of self-access language learning.

### **5.11. Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the philosophical assumptions and methodological choices that guided this study and the rationale behind them. I argued that a constructivist interpretivist philosophical perspective was appropriate within this study due to its recognition of the temporal-, situated-, and sociocognitive construction of both reality and knowledge. Furthermore, I determined constructivism to be congruent with the theory of CoP and with an ethnographic case study approach, it has allowed me to explore the interplay between social/individual factors within the LC. My position within and rationale for the study was also clarified along with ethical considerations related to protection and treatment of participants that ran through the entire research process. Next, I explained in detail methods of data collection/analysis and the rationales for these particular decisions. At this point, we can summarize the methodological construction of this study visually through the research onion by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2018) (Figure 6) and observe the orientation of my study in terms of philosophy, theory development, methodological choice, strategies, temporal focus, and data collection/ analysis procedures.

**Figure 6**

*The “research onion” for the current study (adapted from Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019, p. 130)*



In the next section of the chapter addressing issues of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I argued that the use of multiple ethnographic data sources facilitated thick description of the community and allowed for triangulation of findings, thus enhancing the rigor of the study. Finally, I discussed the main limitations of this study, focusing mainly on the impact of my outsider/*etic/soto* status within the LC community, the potential impact of an uneven power dynamic, and concerns relating to the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. In the following chapters, I present the findings of this study and discuss their implications in relation to both the LC and self-access learning communities in a broader sense.

## Chapter 6: How does the LC function as a language learning community of practice?

### 6.1. Introduction

In line with much CoP-oriented research to date, my first research question is concerned with the internal dynamics of a CoP and its membership. In the following chapter, my analytical focus is on the LC CoP and the themes that I determined to be most salient in terms of their relevance to its *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. As was discussed in the previous chapter, I developed five themes from my reflexive TA and abductive analysis of data from interviews, participant observations, language learning histories, and artifact collection. These five themes will form the main structure of this chapter and are listed below:

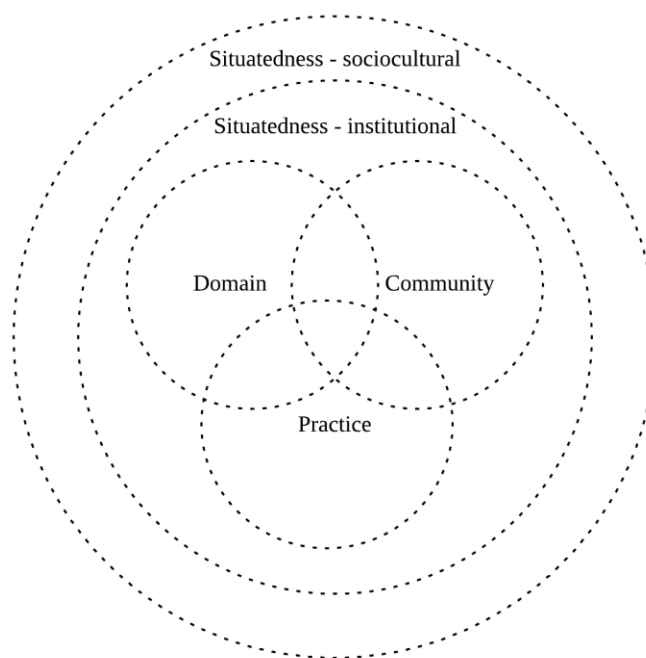
1. Accessibility
2. Linguistic focus
3. Flattened hierarchy
4. Leadership
5. Community support

As previously stated, I will analyze these broad themes in relation to the categories of *domain*, *community*, and *practice* due to their prevalence in the CoP literature (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger, 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a) and their utility in examining the internal functioning of a CoP. However, based on the codes and themes that I constructed from my data, I felt a degree of dissatisfaction with these three categories alone in explaining how the LC CoP functioned. The theme of community support, in particular, required in my mind an additional category that would represent the situatedness of the LC in meso (institutional) and macro (sociocultural) environments. Consequently, I added a fourth category of *situatedness* to my framework in order to reflect the interplay or *duality* (Wenger, 1998) between internal practice and external influence. Through the inclusion of *situatedness*, I attempted to address the problem of decontextualization of CoPs (Handley et al., 2006;

Mutch, 2003; Roberts, 2006) that may have occurred in some previous studies. I present the four categories of *domain*, *community*, *practice*, and *situatedness* as a pattern of overlapping spheres (Figure 7) due to my view of them as *overlapping co-constructing concepts* (Murphey, 2016) that mutually reinforce each other. In addition, the borders between these spheres are dotted to reflect the porous and negotiable nature of concept boundaries within the dynamism and complexity of social learning.

**Figure 7**

*Overlapping analytical categories—domain, community, practice, and situatedness*



All the data and analysis included in this chapter should be understood as co-constructed between participants and the researcher as well as being highly situated within both space and time. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is not to present generalizable truths that may be uncritically applied to other contexts, but rather to present a nuanced view of a microculture born out of the lived experiences of self-access users. It is therefore hoped that

this snapshot of the LC can provide instructive points to consider and reflect upon for other practitioners within the field of self-access learning.

## 6.2. Accessibility

One key area of importance that appeared to consistently permeate the LC was accessibility for new members. As will be illustrated in this section, this was operationalized in a number of different ways and seemed to be born out of members' historical learning experiences both inside and outside of the SAC. The first area in which the prioritizing of accessibility is visible is in members' efforts to maintain a fun and friendly atmosphere within the LC. I asked each participant to provide five words that they felt best represented the LC and from this data, I created a word cloud in order to get a sense of which ideas were most salient in terms of the shared CoP *domain*. As can be seen in Figure 8, words such as “friendly”, “fun”, and “warm” were most common and give a sense of the environment that members wished to create.

**Figure 8**

*LC members word cloud*



This focus on friendliness was also emphasized in the promotional materials for the LC as the community was described as a place to “develop speaking skills in a friendly



atmosphere” (LC brochure, 2019; LC brochure, 2020). The close relationships and the bridging of senpai and kōhai that they strived to foster were also foregrounded by the leaders perhaps as a recognition that seniority could potentially represent a barrier (in terms of *community*) to new members feeling comfortable in the CoP.

In an interview for the SAC’s newsletter, two of the LC leaders foregrounded the point that “...we have freshmen and senior students together. So we can cooperate with each other and the seniors will always talk to new students. It’s that kind of friendly place, where it becomes a community for all students.” (SAC Newsletter, 2019).

This focus on a warm and friendly atmosphere was also frequently observable in interviews with LC members. Kei, one of the founders of the LC, stated that the idea of the community being a place that would decrease students’ anxiety and where they could speak freely was one of the central reasons for its formation. Many of the other members supported this notion and felt that the LC represented a place where they could focus on practicing their spoken English but without the fear of making linguistic errors.

Indeed, Mizuki stated that the core principle of the LC was “just enjoy talking English and don’t worry [about] making mistake[s]” (Interview 4, November 27, 2020).

From the LC sessions I frequently observed, the LC leaders described the community as a place to “learn English for fun” or “just enjoy speaking English” and members would frequently joke or lightly tease each other in either English or Japanese in order to lighten the mood. To illustrate examples for certain conversation topics, the leaders would often provide humorous and self-deprecating examples from their own lives to make the new members laugh and relax. Yuki also modeled her own experiences to the newer members and highlighted how the LC helped her in her own learning trajectory. Furthermore, she stated that she hoped that the LC could also help to relieve some of the stress that students were feeling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yuki said she's happy that her juniors could come and said that speaking English became enjoyable for her. Yeah, she also said that now because of Coronavirus and stuff, people are stressed out but the LC can help people with their stress as well. (LC Observation 20, January 12, 2021)

The feedback that was discussed in the LC leaders' meetings was also often based on how enjoyable the LC sessions were and how they could experience the fun of speaking English with their peers. Several of the feedback comments foregrounded the notion of the enjoyability of the LC being important to them through comments like, "I felt all people in a group could enjoy talking, so it was so much fun!" (LC meeting minutes, October 1, 2020) and "the space is lively, so it was so fun!" (LC meeting minutes, November 17, 2020).

Through these various data sources, it became clear that there existed a clear focus on maintaining positive affect within the LC CoP and using the warm and friendly atmosphere that they attempted to cultivate to attract and secure future members. A further way that accessibility was through artifacts (*practice*) that scaffolded new members' ability to actively participate in the LC's activities. Perhaps the most fundamental of these was the bilingual language policy. The decision to offer a bilingual community within the SAC had, in fact, even preceded the LC. Due to her seeing students struggling with the English-only policy of the Chat Space, Keiko decided to set up a community with a more relaxed approach to L1 use outside of the SAC. This decision was also grounded in her personal pedagogical beliefs as she stated she "...was always not that kind of person who strictly pushed English-only policy. [The students] want to improve something and they need to use Japanese and that was fine to me." (Interview 1, October 23rd, 2019).

Kei had also noticed a similar phenomenon of student anxiety related to the English-only policy and consequently, the bilingual policy was reified early on in the LC's lifecycle. In later promotional materials, the mixing of Japanese and English in the LC was specifically

highlighted as a tool for alleviating language anxiety among its members and allowing learners a wider range of levels of proficiency to participate.

This later became formalized further as a community artifact designed to draw in new members. This can be observed in some of their promotional materials in which they emphasize these elements of the LC's practice: "*Nihongo to eigo wo mazete hanasu koto ga dekiru node supiikingu ga nigate demo tanoshiminagara manaberu ba desu!*"

(You can mix Japanese and English so even if you aren't comfortable speaking, it's a place where you can enjoy learning!) (LC brochure, 2020).

In the participant interviews, several members also supported the provision of L1 scaffolding within the LC, claiming that it allowed them to better formulate their ideas in English and cooperate more with other community members. Some survey responses discussed in the LC meeting minutes also appeared to show members' approval of the bilingual policy, with one member claiming the LC had a "*yurui funiki*" (a relaxed atmosphere) and that "*eigo ga wakaranakatta toki mo nihongo de kiketa no ga yokatta desu.*" (I could ask someone in Japanese when I didn't understand something in English and that was good.) (LC meeting minutes, October 1, 2020).

Attitude towards the language policy was also, however, a point of incongruence between different members. While some participants were wholly in favor of mixing Japanese and English use, others expressed concern that the group could come to rely too much on the L1 and would lead to a derailing of the group from a key element of its *domain*—the development of *eikaiwa* proficiency. The issue of to what degree L1 use was desirable in the LC was in actuality linked to larger issues of divergence in the community—the linguistic versus the social facets of the *domain* and, in a broader sense, a dialectal relationship between accessibility and belonging.

The LC was arguably formed, at least in part, as a response to other communities in the SAC that some students found difficult to enter. Consequently, Kei stated that his role as a leader, and indeed the role that he wanted other members to take on, was that of someone who could mediate anxious newcomers' transition into the community. Kei did this by making a concerted effort to focus specifically on new members and proactively engage them in conversation so as to create a welcoming environment for them and increase the likelihood of their long-term participation in the LC.

*“...ano atarashii hitoga kitara sonohitoga ichiban huandakara orega  
hanashikakerunjanakute minnaga hanashikakete make our community better  
nishitehoshii to iu koto wo hanashimashita.”*

(... I told everyone that when those new people come, they are the most anxious, so I want not just me, but everyone to speak to them in order to make our community better) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

Later in the LC's lifecycle, however, concerns were raised by some participants that the close bonds and common interests that existing members shared may have led to the creation of a social barrier that may have been discouraging outsiders from entry. In a sense, the LC had arguably become analogous to the SAC communities that it had been originally designed to act as an alternative to. Its strength (its fostering of close interpersonal bonds within a relaxed atmosphere) had in fact weakened its sustainability and a key facet of its original *domain*—accessibility to newcomers.

One or twice time I had experience to that I couldn't say something or I couldn't say much, speak much because when the group was consisted of three people, two of them were already made friends, very good relationships. So they talk too much and I could just listen. So it was challenge for me and I tried to talk with them, however, I couldn't. (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019)

Through her indirect monitoring of the community Keiko became aware of this issue and conducted informal advising sessions with the leaders in which she helped them to reflect on areas for evolution in the LC elicited from them ways in which they could address these types of problems. One way that the LC leaders responded was to create a feedback survey for members where they could anonymously evaluate how the LC was performing. The survey results confirmed that the belonging/accessibility issue was one that some members wanted to be addressed.

But we got one negative answer, so we have to think about it. Cause, you know, the student who felt that [it was] difficult to join the LC atmosphere. ‘Cause we have two or three really recent participants. So maybe some of them felt that. ‘Cause almost [all] students join from April. So we already have the kind of atmosphere... (Ryoya, Interview 2, January 14, 2020)

The concerns over the accessibility of the LC were further mitigated, perhaps counterintuitively, by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to public concerns over the sharply rising number of infections, all face-to-face SAC services were canceled and the LC was forced to move to an online format. Despite the obvious drawbacks to conducting conversation sessions online, some members claimed that the shift to this format served to lower some of the in-group/out-group barriers that existed during the previous year.

Because last year, we are so getting close, so yeah, maybe others think it is hard to join and the atmosphere *toka* (and whatnot) ... This year we can just join them and or [click the link in the] LINE group and then just join. (Natsuko, Interview 3, December 4, 2020)

Furthermore, from my observations, the online format and the ability to mute their microphones or turn off their cameras afforded increased opportunities for new members to gradually move at their own pace towards increased participation in the group. The practice of

conducting member surveys was also maintained and actually increased to a weekly system as the use of Google Forms allowed the leaders to engage in a form of “action logging” (Murphey, 1993). This resulted in a constant stream of feedback that facilitated reflective practice among the leaders during regular meetings and ensured that the weekly sessions were aligned with the LC’s *domain*.

Another important consideration when discussing the focus on accessibility in the LC is its historical and experiential foundations. Keiko’s idea for her original conversation club that preceded the LC as well as Kei’s “concept” (a place for people who want to study English but have no *ibasho* (place to belong)) for the LC were both calculated responses to a phenomenon that they had noticed during their time in the SAC. Both of them (Keiko indirectly and Kei first hand) felt concern over the Chat Space (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1.) and the way that they felt it marginalized certain SAC users. This appeared to be based largely on the high eikaiwa proficiency of its core users and a “closed” atmosphere which led to many students hesitating to enter the Lounge despite expressing a desire to practice their spoken English.

So the reason why I wanted to start up the LC was, uh, when I was in freshman year [the] Chat Space was really closed. [It] was really hard to join the conversation... and nobody tried to involve me in the conversation. So I felt really difficulty. (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

This sense of intimidation was also apparent in many other participants in the study (Ryoya, Yuki, Sara, Harumi, Mizuki, and Riri) and, in many cases, was one of the key factors that led them towards joining the LC.

Riri: I tried [to] join and I walked around the Chat Space. But they speak really good English so I felt nervous and I back to...

Researcher: Ah, okay. Okay. So the gap was... you felt it was too much?

Riri: Yeah.

(Riri, Interview 3, January 8, 2021)

These negative experiences engendered empathy towards new members entering the SAC and highlighted the need for the more structured and scaffolded environment that the LC offered. Members' histories in terms of experiences of marginalization from the Chat Space appeared to contribute to their adherence to the accessibility facet of the LC's *domain* and their responsibilities supporting new members entering the community. This emergent role of the LC as an *ibasho* (place to belong) for those students struggling to adapt to the all-or-nothing (English-only) *eikaiwa* format of the Lounge was also recognized by Keiko and the SAC as an institution. Through informal advising sessions with the LC leaders, Keiko was able to simultaneously monitor the progress of the community, stimulate reflective practice through IRD, and increase the legitimacy of the LC's domain within the SAC.

A lot of students there wouldn't go to the Chat Space but they go [to the LC] because they want to use English and they allow them to use Japanese and I think they don't feel bad about speaking. I mean, like at the Chat Space, a lot of students feel bad about their English skills, like I'm not proficient enough. Oh, my senpai speaks a lot better, da, da, da, but learning community, it's a more welcoming atmosphere that they don't have to compare themselves with others. They say [it] quite often. Actually, when I was talking to Sara today, that's one thing she told me, how she noticed the student group, they used to be scared. Like when they came first time, they were kind of afraid of speaking and talking in a small voice and stuff. But when she attended today, they were really talking. Participating more proactively, so she was actually very happy to see that."

(Keiko, Interview 2, November 29, 2019)

Thus, accessibility and affective support for new members, it could be argued, was just as crucial to the LC's *domain*, *community*, and *practice* as its more linguistically-oriented goals. A shared understanding within the group of the need for belonging and, conversely, the pain of exclusion stimulated the roles and responsibilities that they took on interpersonally. This was further mediated by tools (IRD, surveys, Zoom) that they adopted, both intentionally and as victims of circumstance, that created increased opportunities for reflection and facilitated community contribution from all members, regardless of seniority.

### **6.3. Linguistic focus**

Despite the clear prioritization of accessibility for newcomers as a key facet of the LC's *domain*, one must not discount the fact that this learning community was developed to a certain degree for an instrumental purpose—as a venue to develop English proficiency. However, as illustrated in Chapter 2, the notion of what constitutes English proficiency within Japanese ELT is a malleable and contested concept stemming from a confluence of global and local ideological forces. In the following section, I will examine how the LC's linguistic focus appeared to exist between worlds in a third space (Bhaba, 1994)—partially beholden to structural power while also allowing for the expression of individual and collective agency—where they negotiated for their own *ibasho* (place to belong).

#### **6.3.1. Member beliefs and goals**

In order to understand the LC CoP's approach to English learning, we must first unpack what beliefs, motivations, and future goals LC members bring into the community and how they contribute to a coherent *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. Perhaps the single most salient example of a shared trait among LC members was a strong international posture (Yashima, 2009). International posture is based on the three aspects of *intergroup approach tendency* (willingness to interact with people from other countries), *interest in international vocation and activities* (desire to travel, live, or work overseas), and *interest in foreign affairs*



(Yashima, 2009, p. 146). As the study participants discussed their language learning motivations and their desires to interact and make friends with foreign people in the future, it became clear that an international posture was a consistently shared trait among LC members.

My purpose is that I want to use English daily in the future. So because I want to work with foreigners in Japan or another country. So for working and I want to make good relationship with people who speak English. (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020)

This prevalent international posture within the LC was linked to a common understanding among LC members that they were “active”, “motivated”, and had “*koujoushin*” (desire to improve). This shared feeling among all the participants I spoke to created an atmosphere where they were able to motivate each other and work towards similar goals. Mizuki stated that she felt, “people who join the LC are really motivated, and different from my [other classes]. All of the people want to learn and daily conversation. Yeah, so it is a good atmosphere” (Mizuki, Interview 3, June 12 2020).

In relation to a CoP perspective, this element of the LC’s *domain* was a manifestation of *imagination*—a desire for membership in an imagined international community of English users that “transcend[ed] time and space” and that “creat[ed] new images of the world and [them]selves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). The internationally-oriented elements of the CoP’s domain naturally also impacted its *community* and *practice*. In terms of *community*, there was some indication that interest in and knowledge of foreign things such as Disney and foreign dramas would lead to both cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2011) within the LC. This was even at times a point of controversy for members like Kei and Tenka who felt that an excessive focus on Disney would alienate some members who did not share the majority of members’ enthusiasm for it. Additionally, as might be expected due to the strong international posture of the LC, students who had experienced study abroad were viewed as a valuable

resource for the community as they represented a conduit to the “real” English that was believed to exist overseas.

Yuki: In my opinion, the students who went to study abroad is the most valuable.

Researcher: Okay. Why is study abroad experience the most valuable do you think?

Yuki: Because one of senior went to study abroad last year. Yeah. He has a very good knowledge about some phrases or slang and how to...Because he gave us the new knowledge.

Researcher: So he has kind of useful knowledge from foreign countries and people your age?

Yuki: Yes.

(Yuki, Interview 3, June 18, 2020)

Students like the senior that Yuki described were not only useful sources of external knowledge for the LC but also acted as near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998) for its members. By coming into contact with fluent Japanese speakers of English similar in cultural background and age to them, other LC members could interact with and learn from possible future selves and perhaps come to indirectly question limiting ideological meta-narratives such as native-speakerism and nihonjinron.

I think that’s one of the best things about it, because I think that actually challenged their beliefs, that they can learn English with a Japanese student. Yeah. A lot of them don’t think that. They always think I have to talk to native speaker, and they challenged their beliefs. So I loved that. (Keiko, Interview 5, June 19, 2020)

There did exist some evidence of some LC members potentially engaging in counter framing (Lowe, 2020a) and redefinition of terms relating to “native”-centric beliefs in the LC. Although it could certainly be argued that “native” English represented the ultimate form of legitimate knowledge that members aspired to in the LC, there were also signs that this had

evolved in some cases into a slightly more complex phenomenon than pure “native speaker” worship. Riri and Tenka stated that they defined the term “native speaker” in a more fluid way than is often reported in the academic literature by including people like *kikokushijo* (foreign returnees to Japan) in the category. Mizuki also stated that she wanted to interact with people from many different countries and showed a respectful attitude towards varieties of English beyond a narrow inner circle (Kachru & Nelson, 1996) range.

I think [this university’s] international student has a various background, so they have each accent. I’m Japanese. I have a Japanese accent, so Chinese student have their own accent in English. So it would be a good opportunity to know and to feel the difference. (Mizuki, Interview 4, November 27, 2020)

The *practice*—the repertoire of tools and artifacts—of the LC simultaneously emerged from and further stimulated international posture and imagination within the CoP. The LC leaders would sometimes share YouTube videos featuring successful polyglots and would occasionally integrate foreign dramas like *Gossip Girl* or Disney videos in the group activities.

Researcher: What kind of things do you learn from other LC members?

Tenka: Of course the phrase, or useful phrase, or English language, but also sometimes people share their favorite things. For example, dramas or CDs or, of course YouTube channel. And the last time we checked the people who can speak various languages.

Researcher: Yeah. The old guy? Yeah. My wife watches him as well sometimes. Yeah. What did you think when you watched that video?

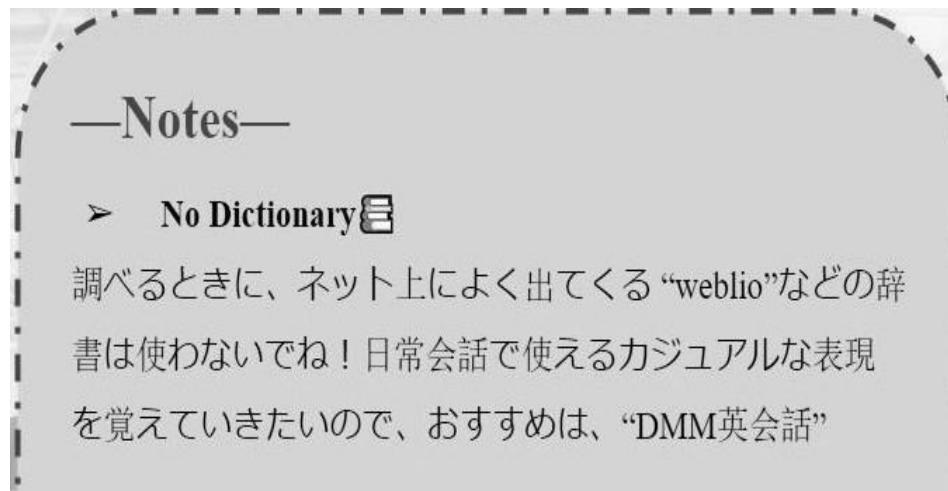
Tenka: Yeah, I was surprised. I didn’t know him, but maybe it stimulate me, and my motivation was a little bit improved. (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020)

However, perhaps the most central tool that was adopted by the community was the website “DMM Eikaiwa” (<https://eikaiwa.dmm.com/uknow/>). This free-to-use website offers a service where “where experts, native speakers, and other professionals answer questions

about English phrases” (*Eigo no iimawashi no shitsumon ni senmonka ya neitibusupiikaa nado no purofeshonaru ga kaitousuru muryou Q&A saito desu.*) (DMM Eikaiwa, n.d.). On a regular basis the LC leaders would emphasize the importance of DMM Eikaiwa due to their perception that it focused on casual English and slang more than other sources of knowledge like online dictionaries. This was even reified in the rules featured on slides shown during each LC meeting in order to explain the nature of the community to new members (see Figure 9).

### Figure 9

*DMM Eikaiwa/dictionary rule on LC slides (Translation: When you look up (words), don't use dictionary sites like Weblio that come up often online! We want to learn casual expressions that we can use in everyday conversation, so we recommend DMM Eikaiwa.)*



All but one participant (Kei) marked slang as an important type of knowledge within the LC. Although there was some practical reasoning behind this—slang phrases were not focused on in regular classes in favor of more formal vocabulary that would appear in standardized tests—the focus on slang was essentially tied to their desire to participate in a particular imagined L2 community.

Researcher: Okay. Are there any other reasons apart from conversation why you want to learn slang?

Riri: Hmm.... Ah, I want to say some jokes, like native speakers.

Researcher: Okay.

Riri: Japanese joke, and American, like English joke is completely different, so I want to be like close friend to natives, natives, so... (Riri, Interview 1, July 15, 2020)

From my observations of LC sessions, it was clear that slang, and in particular American slang phrases, were focused on a great deal (see Table 11). The majority of these phrases came from DMM Eikaiwa or from the highly respected students who had experienced study abroad and had gained access to this kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011).

**Table 12**

*Examples of slang phrases included in LC vocabulary share sheets*

Date	Phrase
May 19th 2020	“crash at someone’s house”
May 26th 2020	“sick” as in great - “That song was sick!”
June 2nd 2020	“freak” as in nerd or otaku - “I’m a video game freak.”
June 30th 2020	“(be) crazy about something,” “(be) hooked on something”
July 7th 2020	“ditch (class),” “skip (class),” “ditch day”
July 14th 2020	“eye candy,” “banging” - “You have a banging body!”

As a community tool and source of slang, DMM Eikaiwa was symbolic in several ways within the LC. It acted as a surrogate “native speaker” within the community that they could mine for knowledge of “real” English while also avoiding the marginalization or unfavorable judgment that they feared receiving through interacting with advanced English speakers or “natives” in places like the Chat Space. In addition, one can also detect ways in

which native-speakerist discourses are further reinforced symbolically through the DMM Eikaiwa website itself. As can be seen in Figure 10, with each respondent's profile there is a flag icon indicating their nationality. Some LC members such as Ryoya, Riri, and Tenka stated that this icon was important to them as it determined to what degree they could trust the content of the response.

Ryoya: Um, sometimes have Japanese English teachers or Japanese in overseas answered the question, but I sometimes like try to escape the Japanese.

Researcher: So you go to the native speakers' answers.

Ryoya: Yeah. Because I want to know the way of native speakers use. (Ryoya, Interview 3, June 16, 2020)

## Figure 10

*Example post from DMM Eikaiwa*



In summary, through the use of DMM Eikaiwa, the LC CoP could work towards their shared goal of developing proficiency in eikaiwa and increasing knowledge of slang without

the need to engage in identity threatening encounters. In this way, they were able to exercise their agency by constructing an environment with a controlled amount of exposure to the imagined community they had *akogare* (longing) for. However, through their predispositions towards what entailed legitimate cultural capital or linguistic knowledge within the broader field of English users, this element of the LC's *practice* could also be interpreted as reproducing the marginalizing power structures (native-speakerism) that stimulated the creation of the community in the first place.

One final tool that I found to have been related to LC members' international posture and the notion of controlled or scaffolded participation in an imagined foreign world was the immediate environment that surrounded them—the SAC. The interior of the SAC was an example of “designed liminality” (Stenner, 2017) intentionally devised to convey a sense of foreignness within the campus in order to create an atmosphere where students could experience something different from the rest of the university campus and, indeed, something simultaneously inside and outside of Japan.

You know, even right from the beginning, we wanted [the SAC] to look, even before my time, you know, somewhere that looked a bit different, somewhere a bit foreign-looking. (laughs) So you can sort of question your own beliefs and just be someone different if you want to, and just do something a little bit outside the ordinary, but it's absolutely intentional. (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020)

This feeling of foreignness was also recognized and favorably evaluated by many LC members. Some participants described the SAC as “*ikoku*” (a foreign country) and claimed that it motivated them in their language learning and afforded them opportunities to “try on” more hybridized international identities.

Ryoya: Especially when [I'm in] the SAC I feel it's in university in America or Britain. I'm gaining my motivation. Yeah. More like foreign person. Foreign like American or yeah.

Researcher: And that's desirable for you? You like feeling like that? Do you feel the same way when you're working in Disney?

Ryoya: Yeah. Yeah. Maybe I am a different person. Yeah. In Disney because it's totally Disney casting.

Researcher: Yeah. You are literally, you have to be a different person, right?

Ryoya: Yeah. I always say imagination or happiness or magic, yeah. (Ryoya, Interview 3, June 16, 2020)

Ryoya's work as a Disney staff member is particularly relevant due to the liminal status and carnivalesque atmosphere that both settings (Tokyo Disneyland and the SAC) share. Both are at once inside and outside—spanning the boundary between everyday life and fantasy and afford those people who visit an opportunity to adopt “in-between” identities. Just as DMM Eikaiwa scaffolded LC members' access to the “foreign” knowledge that they desired alignment with, the ikoku (foreign) environment of the SAC provided a softened “in-between” discursive space that bridged their current and hoped-for future selves. Even when the LC sessions transferred to an online format, Ryoya continued to use photos of the SAC as his screen background as a means of maintaining the SAC as a *symbolic resource* (Zittoun, 2008) for new students transitioning into the community.

Ryoya's talking about his (Zoom) background. "Kanjite hoshii" (**I want you to feel it.**) So yeah, he says he wants everyone to feel it. That's why he's using it. Oh, okay, and that's why. Yeah. So he wants them to feel what it's like to do it in the SAC. (LC Observation 6, June 16, 2020)



From the above data, it is apparent that *domain*, *community*, and *practice* within the LC CoP were determined in large part by its members' internationally-oriented goals and their beliefs as to what constituted both local competence and legitimate knowledge in a broader sense. Furthermore, the community's situatedness within both meso and macro contexts appeared to be both mediating and mediated factors in its ongoing processes of participation and reification. This interplay with sociocultural situatedness will be explored further in the following section as we turn our attention to the LC's relationship with the ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*.

### **6.3.2. *Eigo and eikaiwa***

Due to the original rationale for the creation of the LC being the creation of an accessible and beginner-friendly alternative to the Chat Space, it is perhaps useful to examine the LC in terms of an "identity of non-participation" (Wenger, 1998). As Wenger (1998) states,

Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. To the extent that we can come in contact with other ways of being, what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves. (p. 164)

The negative experiences or impressions of the Chat Space that many LC members, including Kei, seemed to have deeply influenced the formation and evolution of the LC's *domain*, *community* and *practice*, even to the point where it could be argued that without the Chat Space, the LC may not have come into existence at all. The reactive nature of the LC in relation to the Chat Space is clearly observable in the linguistic domain and, more specifically, in regards to the ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*. As was discussed in section 2.3.1., an *eikaiwa* approach features a prioritization of communicative competence, English medium instruction, and an arguably "native-centric" perspective. With its English-only policy, the presence of largely "native speaker" teachers or exchange students, and a largely unstructured communicative approach, one could make a convincing case that the Chat Space represented

eikaiwa in its purest form. In contrast, however, from participants' language learning histories, it was clear that in most cases LC members' experience in eikaiwa-oriented educational settings was limited to early childhood or completely non-existent. Despite their shared *akogare* (longing) towards the world outside of Japan and international English users, most LC members' English proficiency until their transition into tertiary education had been developed in accordance to *eigo* rather than *eikaiwa*. Furthermore, many LC members were highly critical of the *eigo*-orientated English education they had received in junior high or high school due to their perceptions of it as passive, boring, or too difficult.

Yeah, I thought that English was very enjoyable subject but I couldn't get a good grade. Like, junior high school students always want to get the high score to pass the exam or something. Yeah, but I couldn't get that kind of high score so I came to think English is difficult for me. Like I came to dislike, not dislike... Yeah. Oh, I am not the kind of person for English. (Ryoya, LLH, October 25, 2019)

Despite these participants' misgivings about the value or practicality of their English education prior to entering university, the fact remained that as they transitioned into higher education the *eigo*-oriented knowledge they had developed in their secondary education largely represented the sum of their linguistic competence (*cognitive resources*) (Zittoun, 2008). What participants encountered upon entering university and the SAC, however, was a void between the knowledge that they had accumulated up to that point (*eigo*) and what was marked as legitimate knowledge in their new setting (*eikaiwa*). Furthermore, the international posture or *akogare* towards "native speakers" that many of them exhibited served to heighten the pressure they felt when attempting to join a community like the Chat Space. Fear of making mistakes, not being understood, or disturbing the atmosphere and conversational flow were commonly cited reasons for the LC members' anxiety when they initially attempted to enter the Lounge.

Researcher: Okay. So, is the Chat Space the same as the LC or is it different or, you know, how do you feel about that?

Hinako: I think that is different because the LC can go more easily, but I think Chat Space is a little difficult to go there.

Researcher: Okay. Why? What is difficult about the Chat Space?

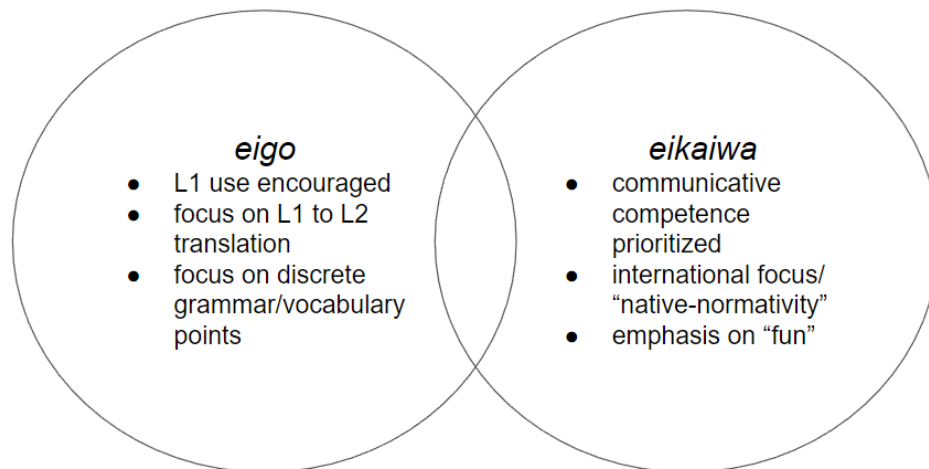
Hinako: I think the people who use the Chat Space can speak English very fluently.

(Hinako, LLH, May 29, 2020)

If we examine the LC's practice in terms of eigo and eikaiwa, we can see that rather than adhering solely to one of these educational approaches, the LC CoP is nested between (ideological) worlds. Although the LC CoP clearly aligns itself with an imagined community of English users (eikaiwa) and foregrounds communicative use of casual English (eikaiwa), it also maintains accessibility by allowing L1 use (eigo) and utilizes sentence or word level L1 translation (eigo). Furthermore, although relying on "native-normative" sources of knowledge, some members in the community expressed ambivalent attitudes towards inviting "native speakers" to the LC due to the stress that this might cause for members with low confidence. In the formation and gradual development of the LC, the CoP has created a hybridized third space between eigo and eikaiwa (see Figure 11) based on the psychological and educational needs of its members.

**Figure 11**

*The LC's hybridization of eigo and eikaiwa*



The designed liminality of the LC in regard to *eigo* and *eikaiwa* afforded members a more scaffolded environment to produce spoken English in a number of ways. Firstly, the inclusion of different stages in LC sessions—bilingual conversation, vocabulary research time on DMM *Eikaiwa*, English conversation—gave members time to engage in translanguaging and gradually develop the complexity of their utterances in English at their own pace. (see Figure 5, Chapter 5). This stood in contrast to the Chat Space where participants were often required to produce spontaneous utterances in English with no L1 safety net. Furthermore, the fact that elements such as the bilingual language policy were reified as community rules meant that when “native speakers” visited the community, interactions with them were based on a more egalitarian premise of language exchange rather than students feeling pressured to solely adjust to “native speaker” exchange students’ mother tongue. In the LC some students reported positive experiences with exchange students as they were able to converse at a relatively equal status and even feel a sense of control and competence as they taught each other their respective languages.

Tenka: She (exchange student) loves Kyoto, she is interested in Kyoto and she knows about *manga*, Japanese *manga*. So I love Japanese manga, so we could talk about it.

Researcher: Oh, you had a common interest.

Tenka: Yes, yes. So it's fun for me. And she wanted to study Japanese more and I wanted to study English more and we could teach each other. (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019)

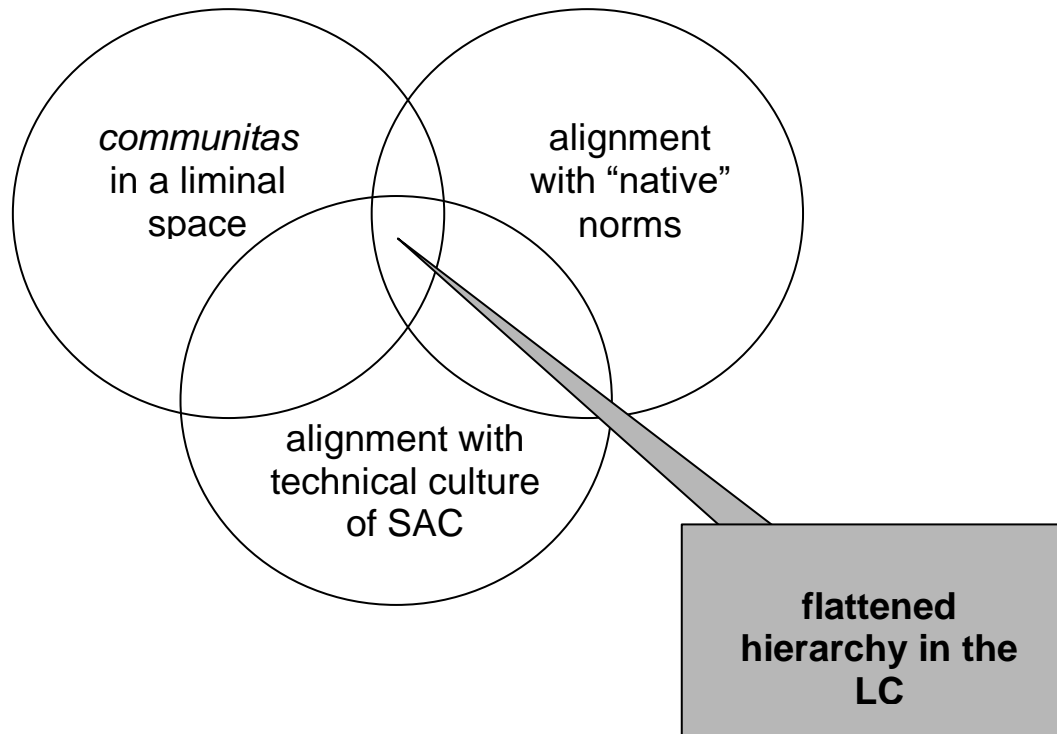
In this section, I have illustrated the manner in which the practice of the LC was constructed in a liminal space between the ideological spheres of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*. Based on members' transitional experiences between *eigo*-oriented and *eikaiwa*-oriented communities, the LC CoP developed examples of both participation and reification that fused elements of both ideologies in order to meet their local needs. This fusing of ideologies represented a compromise aimed at bridging the void members experienced between the knowledge they desired and that was legitimized at the institutional level (*eikaiwa*) and the cognitive resources most LC members had developed in their language learning histories prior to university (*eigo*).

#### **6.4. Flattened hierarchy**

In the following section, I will explain how the LC CoP was frequently characterized by a flattened power hierarchy distinct from seniority-based hierarchical structures such as *jouge kankei* that members had experienced in their learning histories. I argue that this flattening of status within the LC, which meant that members were afforded relatively equal access and rights to participate and make decisions in the CoP, was stimulated by three major influences: feelings of *communitas* in a liminal space, shared subservience to “native” English, and alignment to the technical culture of the SAC (see Figure 12). I will now move on to examine these three influences in greater detail.

**Figure 12**

*Influences on flattened hierarchy in the LC*



#### **6.4.1. *Communitas***

As discussed in section 4.6.1., *communitas* refers to “a limbo of statuslessness” (Turner, 1969, p. 361) that often exists within groups of individuals experiencing transition and liminality. Rubenstein (1992) describes how a sense of *communitas* emerging from liminal experience is “characterized by equality, immediacy, and the lack of social ranks and roles” (p. 251). From my investigation of the LC, the notion of the community residing within a liminal space between worlds (*eigo/eikaiwa*, Japanese/foreign, within the heterotopia of the SAC, and the like.) was supported as the interpersonal dynamics of its membership appeared to be characterized at times by an erosion of status. However, stemming from the influence of the broader sociocultural setting in which then LC was situated and each member’s learning histories, it could certainly not be claimed that a sense of pure statuslessness existed within the CoP. In this section, I will highlight the ways in which traditional hierarchies were both

challenged and reproduced within the LC and how this was also tied indirectly to the institutional setting of the SAC.

Perhaps the most frequently observable expression of status erosion within the LC was in relation to *jouge kankei*—the seniority-based structure of *senpai* and *kōhai*. As discussed in section 2.4.1., *jouge kankei* is a widespread system of social hierarchy in Japan that permeates many young people’s educational lives through *bukatsudō* (club activities) in secondary education. While hierarchical power relations in past *senpai/kōhai* relationships experienced by some LC members were reported to be strictly enforced and sometimes highly restrictive in terms of behavior, this element of interpersonal relations (*community*) in the LC appeared to contrast this. The LC leaders and leaders-to-be on several occasions claimed that a flattened power structure represented one of the central tenets of the community.

*Senpai kōhai toka English only mitaina hajimeteno hitoga sukoshidemo “E?” tte omotteshimau rule wo ireyouto shitara sorewa mou chigau. “LC ja naidesu.” tte iimasu.* (If people tried to introduce rules like *senpai kōhai* and English only that would make first time members think “Huh?”, that would be different. People would say “That’s not the LC.”) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

This intentional push to minimize the impact of seniority on the interaction between students in different grades was also observable during my observations of the LC sessions as the leaders would occasionally adjust their wording in order to deemphasize *jouge kankei*. This was observable in a number of fairly subtle but rather telling instances of rephrasing from the LC leaders such as "*senpai to iu ka, kyonen kara kita hito.*" (rather than *senpai*, someone who came last year) (LC Observation 10, July 14, 2020) and "*senpai tachi to iu ka, member...*" (rather than *senpai*, member) (LC Observation 7, June 23, 2020).

Despite this apparently representing a central element of the LC’s *domain, community, and practice*, there were also clear indications that the group and individual agency within this

CoP had not simply nullified the historical and sociocultural predispositions or *habitus* that members brought with them as they entered the group. During my observations of the LC there was often a marked difference between new entrants to the community and those who had become more accustomed to participation in the LC.

Okay, so [the freshman students] are introducing themselves with their *gakunen* (school year) as well. So that's interesting. Okay, so one of his students is muted still. So they give themselves their school year, their major, and then their name. That's quite formal really, to be honest. (LC Observation 2, May 19, 2020)

It seems like Mizuki is very, very comfortable with them. They're joking together. There doesn't seem to be a difference in terms of power dynamic. Maybe if there is, perhaps Ryoya is in more of a leadership role. But yeah, generally they all seem to be fairly even in terms of relationship.

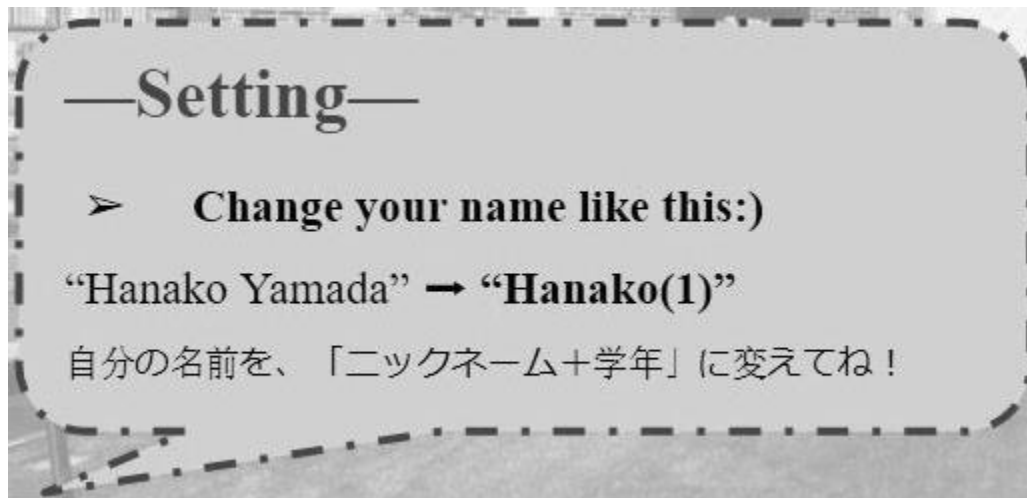
(LC Observation 1, May 12, 2020)

However, while there appeared to be a general consensus that *jouge kankei* was incoherent with the LC's atmosphere and style, some behaviors within the community arguably reinforced seniority-based hierarchies. One example is a rule introduced when the LC moved to a Zoom format was that all members were required to include their *gakunen* (school year) in their screen name as follows: Ryoya Ishizaki 4 (This shows all other members that Ryoya is in his 4th (senior) year) (see Figure 13).



**Figure 13**

*LC name and school year rule*



When I asked the leaders about the rationale behind this rule, they explained that this system allowed them to ensure that at least one experienced member would be in a breakout room with newcomers. In this way, senpai/kōhai relationships were recognized and utilized in a more autonomy-supportive way that facilitated distributed leadership within the community. Additionally, some sophomore students at times expressed discomfort with being the most senior student within a breakout room and felt insecure without a senior student being there as a guide. The LC’s sometimes contradictory relationship between jouse kankei and their commonly stated desire for a flattened power dynamic potentially paralleled a similar phenomenon that may have existed in a broader liminal environment—that of the SAC. Arguably representing an “in-between space” lying both inside and outside of the formal institutional structure of the university, the SAC’s explicit focus on autonomy-supportive management and educational practices challenges the top-down nature of jouse kankei. However, just as was visible in the LC, Amy stated that while the SAC’s domain was grounded in principles antithetical to seniority-based power, due to deeply-ingrained

sociocultural predispositions, there was an unresolved interplay between their agency as a community and broader structural forces.

So (expectations of hierarchical relationships) won't go away I think, you know, it's ingrained in Japanese society, but I do wonder about the learning communities because they'll probably take this on as well, because they know about hierarchies as well. They're probably getting it in other ways. But, yeah, they're getting our autonomy-supportive approach as well. (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020)

Through these two multiscalar examples of liminal communities of practice (the SAC and the LC), one can observe how the “in-betweenness” of their position affords them agentic space to create their own *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. However, it is also evident that they exist not in isolation, but rather in negotiation with socioculturally and historically constructed predispositions or power structures.

#### **6.4.2. Alignment with “native” norms**

An additional manner in which a reduced power differential manifested between LC members was through the community working to construct knowledge consistent with the linguistic focus of its domain. As was discussed in section 6.3.1., the predominant goal of the LC relating to language acquisition was the development of communicative competence in what they termed “natural”, “casual”, or “everyday” English. To this end, “native” varieties of English and, in particular, slang phrases and forms of language commonly used in Western dramas or movies, were defined as markers of the LC CoP's local competence by the participants in this study. To this end, the DMM Eikaiwa website was one of the central tools utilized by the LC to support their practice. In the final part of each LC session, all members would share any new vocabulary that they had used in their conversation and record it in a document that was later posted on Line (for face-to-face sessions) or saved as a shared online document (for Zoom sessions). The creation of these vocabulary lists was a shared endeavor

that facilitated the fusing of external (DMM Eikaiwa) and internal (members' existing linguistic repertoires) knowledge. An example of one such vocabulary list can be seen below in Figure 14.

**Figure 14**

*LC vocabulary share sheet*

❀2020. 06.02

***“If you are allowed to watch either movies or dramas in your lives, which one would you like to choose?”***

Phrase	Meaning	How to use (Example sentence)	Note
too curious	めっちゃ気になる	I'm too curious what's gonna happen next! 続きがきになる～！！	
a complete story	完結	Each story is a complete story. 一話完結	
be tired of	飽きる	I'm tired of work. 仕事飽きた...	
episode	(ドラマの)一話	This TV show has six episodes in total. このドラマは6話までであるよ！	
part	(映画、本の)シリーズ	This series has six parts in total! この映画6シリーズあるのよ！	
binge + verb/noun	～をやりすぎる	I binge-eat when I'm depressed. 落ち込んだ時は食べまくる！！ She is a binge drinker. 彼女は酒豪だよ。	「binge: 度を超えて何かをすること」 Bingeだけでも使える！ “She binged on chocolate.” 彼女はチョコを食べすぎた

This combination of external and internal knowledge impacted the local power dynamics of the LC in several ways. Firstly, the reliance on DMM Eikaiwa and the previously

discussed focus on Western “native” casual phrases and slang meant that each member, as Japanese English users, framed themselves as consumers of DMM Eikaiwa’s “natural” English. Viewed in a more pessimistic light, the group’s *akogare* (longing) for America-centric “native” varieties of English positioned them as unquestioning and powerless “non-native” recipients of this knowledge. Conversely, this shared reliance on “native” norms reinforced an atmosphere of equality within the LC—all were essentially on the same playing field, consuming but never producing the knowledge they desired.

[The other members are] making fun of Mizuki, saying that she knows everything. She apparently always says, "Yeah, I know." in Japanese. And Mizuki is saying that, yeah, well, I'm in the same position as everyone else because we're all using DMM Eikaiwa. (LC Observation 14, October 13, 2020)

The co-construction of knowledge in the LC was, however, not simply based on pure subservience to outside authority, but also involved a substantial amount of active cooperation and meaning making among its members. During the vocabulary share portion of LC meetings, the leaders would ask other members to explain the words that they had found and added to the list and teach the group how to use them in a sentence and any nuance that they might have. Although, as previously discussed, much of this knowledge came from an outside source (DMM Eikaiwa), this gave all members, regardless of seniority, an opportunity to contribute to the shared knowledge of the community. Furthermore, when the leaders or other senior members asked questions about the words that were introduced, they were referential (genuine) rather than display questions (the asker already knows the answer).

So the freshman’s struggling with the word “*gaikan*,” “*tatemono no gaikan*” (building’s exterior), the word “exterior”, it seems like she was struggling with the pronunciation but no one else knew it either, so Sara expressed genuine, like, "Oh,

wow, really?" "What's that word?" Again, not display questions. I guess that's another word that she learned from DMM Eikaiwa. (LC Observation 15, October 20, 2020)

Through the combination of shared reliance on external sources of knowledge and the genuine co-construction of internal understanding of that knowledge, it can be argued that the linguistically-focused *domain* of the LC contributed further to the erosion of status within the community.

#### **6.4.3. *Aligning with the technical culture of the SAC***

Finally, one additional external influence on the LC's sense of *communitas* was the SAC's technical culture and how it shaped leadership expression. Through the LC leaders' brokering role spanning the meso (SAC) and the micro (LC), they are likely to have experienced *dual loyalty* (Iverson & McPhee, 2002) to their CoP and the organization in which it was located. The LC's coherence with the SAC's autonomy-supportive mission was, arguably, to be expected due to the fact that Kei, Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara were all trained and employed as peer advisors in the SAC. Consequently, they had already been exposed to some of the same training that learning advisors like Keiko had received. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Keiko and the LC leaders enjoyed a close relationship within the SAC that even continued after each of them had graduated from university. Furthermore, in her role as learning communities support, Keiko would often monitor how the LC was functioning and would create opportunities to engage with the leaders in IRD in order to encourage them to reflect on their practice.

A lot of times, the first time when I'm helping leader[s], what's common is that they say, "I don't know. I'm not, I don't know how to be a team leader. I don't know how to teach. I don't know how to lead." And then I basically go through advising and how it's okay not to lead people, not to know the answer or not even teaching people. I

guess that's the kind of advising training or autonomy training. (Keiko, Interview 3, January 10, 2020)

Keiko's ongoing dialogue with the LC leaders represented an autonomy-supportive animation lever (Corso et al., 2009) for the LC CoP as she helped them to recognize ongoing challenges that needed addressing in the community. She also provided access to academic theory and knowledge relevant to community management that they could then, if they desired, operationalize in their expressions of leadership in the LC. The support that Keiko provided to the learning community leaders was later reified and formalized as an optional course offered within the SAC on autonomy-supportive leadership. Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara all enrolled in this course when they were LC leaders and stated that the course content had influenced their perspectives on their roles as leaders and what they defined as desirable *practice* within the CoP.

Researcher: Okay, that's interesting. So you kind of see people not depending on you as a positive thing.

Ryoya: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because for, kind of autonomous I guess.

Researcher: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ryoya: Community should be autonomous, you know? So I shouldn't be a teacher.

Researcher: Why do you feel that?

Ryoya: Because Keiko gave me a paper about the autonomous align, and yeah. It says learning communities should be autonomous and they encourage students to join and spontaneously, so yeah. So yeah, I feel I should make [a] more autonomous atmosphere. (Ryoya, Interview 3, June 16, 2020)

Within the course, students were encouraged to periodically reflect on how their community was functioning and to what degree they were seeking out members' feedback, meeting their motivational needs, and maintaining transparency in their decision-making as

leaders. Figure 15 is an example of one of the reflection activities that enrollees were required to complete and represents a boundary object (Wenger, 1998) that bridges the boundary of the LC and the broader community of the SAC.

### Figure 15

#### *Leadership course autonomy-support\* challenge*

\*Reeve, J. (2016). Autonomy-supportive teaching: What it is, how to do it. In W. C. Liu, J. C. Wang, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Building autonomous learners* (pp. 129-152). Springer.

### 1. Autonomy-support challenge

Check  the one(s) that you want to focus on this week:

- Take other members' perspective
  - Invites, ask for, and incorporates their inputs
  - Notice others' needs, wants, goals, priorities, and emotions
- Make effort to increase members' inner motivation
  - Provide interesting activities
  - Enhance their autonomy, relatedness, and competence
  - Incorporate members' intrinsic goals
- Explain reasons for requests, rules, procedures, & uninteresting activities
- Use non-controlling pressuring language
  - Be flexible, open-minded, and responsive
  - Provide choices and options
- Acknowledge and accept members' negative emotions
  - Listen carefully, non-defensively, with understanding
- Display patience
  - Allow them to work at their own pace in their own way
  - Wait for their initiative, input, and willingness
- My chosen CoP facilitation task(s)

Keiko's advising approach acted as an example of *light-touch support* (Bishop et al., 2008) where the internal practice and competence of the community are supported and, as much as possible, coherence is maintained with the mission of the institution (Wenger et al., 2002). In the case of the LC, the autonomy of the CoP leaders as to their leadership expressions was respected and maintained while simultaneously affording them access to external forms of knowledge that allowed them to consider a less top-down leadership style. In

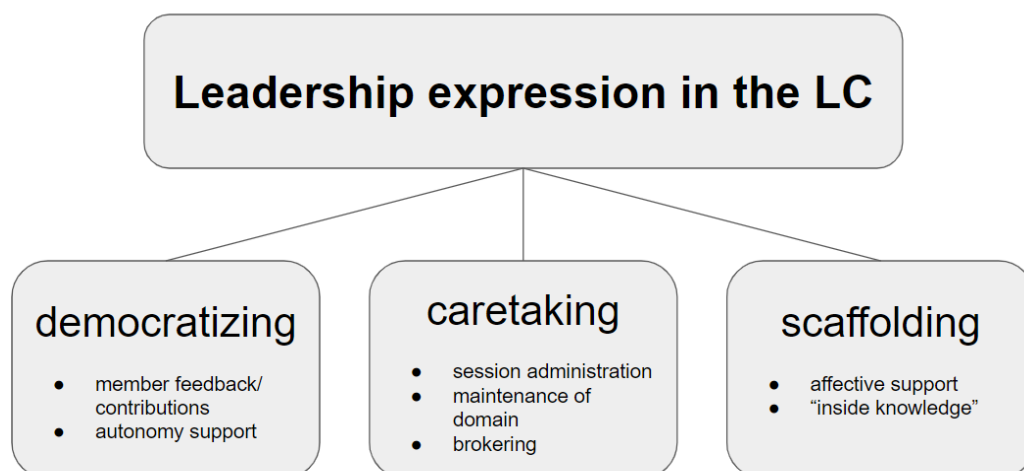
this way, IRD and the leadership course helped to bring the CoP's *domain, community, and practice* into greater alignment with the more flattened and autonomy-supportive hierarchical structure of the SAC.

## 6.5. Leadership

Congruent with Saldana's (2017) assertion that leadership represents a mediating influence (p. 283) in the development of a coherent CoP, in the following section, I illustrate the multiple ways in which leadership expressions in the LC shaped its domain, community, and practice. The expression of leadership in the LC was a dynamic and complex phenomenon that was at times difficult to pin down and categorize. That being said, for the purposes of clarity and utility to practitioners, I was able to sort frequently observed leadership expressions into the three broad classifications of democratizing, caretaking, and scaffolding (see Figure 16). It must be noted, however, that the boundaries between these three categories are often blurry and reflective of the complexity of social learning processes.

**Figure 16**

*Categories of leadership expression in the LC*





### 6.5.1. Democratizing

In line with the LC's flattened hierarchy discussed in Section 6.4., numerous expressions of leadership were associated with soliciting feedback from the general membership relating to the regular running of the CoP. The foremost tool that the leaders adopted to this end was the weekly survey that was distributed at the end of each session (from the time that the LC moved to an online format). During the sessions that I observed, the leaders appeared to consistently emphasize the importance of the survey and, by extension, members' opinions in maintaining the health of the LC.

Then Ryoya asked Yuki to share the Google form for the *ankeeto* (survey) so, "Please tap the link and answer the Google Form questionnaire. It's quite a short questionnaire, so please just tap the link and fill it in, because it will help our community." "There's a question about reflecting your experience, so please honestly just reflect on your experience." Sara said "*Kono Google Form no kotae wa mainichi miru no ga tanoshimi.*" (Every day we look forward to seeing your answers to this Google Form.) So they look forward to it every week, so now they're saying that next week is the last LC in the semester. (LC Observation 10, July 14, 2020)

The feedback that the leaders received in the survey influenced the choice of conversation topic in subsequent sessions, the time distribution between each stage (Japanese/vocabulary search/ English) of the sessions, and also provided information on recurring technical difficulties that needed to be addressed.

If it is possible, I want to talk about one's favorite or recommended classes in [university]. (*Minnasan no okiniiri no jyugyou ya osusume no jyugyou ni tsuite kiitemitai desu! Konna koto ga atte omoshirokatta tte iu omoidebanashi nado dekitara ii na! tte omottemasu!* 😊)

(Member feedback from LC Meeting Minutes, October 1, 2020)

In the following sessions, if member topic suggestions were used, the leaders would then announce this to the whole group thus empowering those who had given feedback and proving to other members that their voices were indeed being listened to and that they possessed agency within the LC.

Now Sara's talking about the questionnaire as usual. So saying that, we always ask but we need your feedback to make the LC better. They're saying they got so many good ideas from last week's. And they got the topic from the questionnaire and that there's only two LCs left this semester. (LC Observation 9, July 7, 2020)

Furthermore, there were also a number of instances where the LC leaders would use certain functions in Zoom to give members the ability to vote on which type of activities they would do in a given session. Examples of this included voting on whether to hold discussions in breakout rooms or the main room and also what types of activities they would like to try if extra time was remaining.

As previously discussed in Section 6.4., much of this democratization appeared to be related to the technical culture of the SAC. Affording LC members decision-making power within the CoP was congruent with the autonomy-supportive mission of the SAC and this was consistently reinforced through IRD sessions with Keiko and the content of the leadership course they were enrolled in. In particular, one key takeaway that several of the LC leaders had internalized from the leadership course was the notion that leadership could manifest in a number of legitimate ways and was not limited to a traditional top-down, authoritarian model (Lewin et al., 1939). As the leaders realized that there was not simply one leadership style and that more democratic and nurturing expressions of leadership were regarded by others as sound practice, they stated that they were able to gain confidence in their roles.

Researcher: Did [the leadership course] influence the way you manage the LC?

Sara: Yeah yeah yeah. And there are many kind of leaders so I learned that. So, *nanka a korede iinda mitaina kouiu jibunwa* (So, like, being like this is okay, kind of, me being this kind of...) I'm this kind of leader *mitaina* (that kind of thing). *A korenanda mitaina* (Like I'm this kind of leader). (Sara, Interview 2, July 16, 2020)

In sum, the flattened hierarchy of the LC appeared to be in no small part a result of democratizing leadership expressions born partly from leaders' individual beliefs and partly from the technical culture of the SAC.

### **6.5.2. Caretaking**

On the most fundamental level, the caretaking duties of the LC leaders involved ensuring that sessions progressed smoothly be it in a face-to-face or online format. The leaders stated that time management was a significant part of their organizational duties and this was also referred to by Mizuki, one of the next generation of leadership candidates, as an area she felt she needed to develop in. In concrete terms, time management in the LC took the form of the leaders informing members of when each stage of the session started and ended while also giving them light nudges to move on if necessary.

Okay, so Harumi said that they're gonna go back at 12:45, so kind of hinting that maybe they should start the final section of the breakout session. So yeah, that was an indirect kind of nudge, now Ryoya is in too. He says, "Hey." They're checking the time with him. So he talks in a really funny, kind of voice. Yeah, keeping it light. (in a funny voice) "*Yukkuri dozo!*" (Please go ahead!) (LC Observation 10, July 14, 2020)

The leaders were also in charge of managing all of the reified tools of the LC such as the slides that explained the flow of the sessions, explaining community rules, managing the vocabulary share sheet and looking up new words, distributing links for the feedback survey, and running an after-study chat session. They also shared weekly links to the Zoom sessions

and vocabulary documents in a LINE group that all participants had signed up to. Fulfilling all of these duties required a high degree of organization and cooperation between Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara for the majority of the year and finally between the new leadership candidates (Hinako, Riri, Mizuki, and Natsuko).

From a more theoretical perspective, one could also observe a salient caretaking role as the maintenance of the CoP's domain (congruent with the Maturing stage of a CoP's lifecycle described in Section 4.2.5.) across time. One could argue that the previously discussed leadership expression of democratization falls under this umbrella as the flattened hierarchy it engendered contributed to the accessibility facet of the LC's domain. Other manifestations of domain maintenance were the leaders periodically restating the goals and "concept" of the LC (domain) to all members at the start of each session. Ryoya would often remind members of the group's domain at the start of and throughout LC meetings through statements like, "The LC is a community to speak English and enjoy. Just enjoy speaking English. Be confident." (LC Observation 20, January 12, 2021). In addition, newer leadership candidates occasionally expressed intentions to bring the LC's conversation topics more in line with the linguistic domain ("everyday conversation") of the community.

Researcher: Are there any changes that you would make in the LC?

Mizuki: Uh, I wanna plan more useful phrase or daily conversation. We have done, the theme is, "Let's go to hospital.", like this. So yeah, I wanna try to make more useful phrase or expression for daily life. (Mizuki, Interview 2, January 17, 2020)

The democratizing elements of the LC leadership also contributed to *domain* maintenance as the leaders were able to monitor member feedback and determine how the needs of the community were evolving and what they could do to increase coherence between the *domain* and *practice*. One final example of the LC leaders taking on a caretaking role was in the management of the relationship between the local (CoP) and the institutional (SAC).

This brokering work undertaken by the leaders involved promotion of the LC in the SAC through a community fair, newsletter articles, and promotional posters as well as regular meetings with Keiko and Yukiko to discuss how the community was progressing. The leaders were also crucial in value creation by the LC within the SAC by disseminating official announcements and promoting university events. In this way, the leaders acting as institutional brokers likely contributed to the active role of the LC in the university.

Mizuki is also promoting [an event] too, so they're all jumping in. Being quite positive actually, it's cool. So another junior student is giving some SAC announcements too. So yeah, the students are promoting an event in January that's going to be happening. (LC Observation 19, December 15, 2020)

The leadership expressions of caretaking described above represent how the LC was able to practically meet its members' needs while striking a balance between maintaining a consistent domain and remaining open to innovation. In addition, caretaking was not limited to intragroup practice but rather extended to the relationship between micro and meso spheres and the complementary value that the SAC offered the LC and vice versa.

### ***6.5.3. Scaffolding***

The final key expression of leadership that was frequently observable in the LC was the scaffolding of newer members' community participation and their more general transition into university life. Much of this scaffolding came in the form of affective support and was consistent with the accessibility facet of the LC's domain. First and foremost, leaders made certain to devote special attention to new members who were entering the community for the first time. This practice was something that Kei had emphasized from the very start of the LC due to his past experiences of marginalization in the Chat Space and it was clear that this practice was also reproduced across later generations. During the LC sessions I observed, it was common for leaders to make a point of asking new members about themselves in the main

session or requesting that they explain a word that they had added to the vocabulary share document. In this way, they were ensuring that new members' presence was being recognized and that they were afforded opportunities to actively contribute to the community from the outset.

So actually one of the new members, one of the first year members answered that [question], and you could see by her reaction, she was smiling. She gave something back to the community and everyone kind of learned something from it. And again, they're moving in between English and Japanese as they're talking, they say but if you're not comfortable, they can share things later if it's too high pressure for them maybe. (LC Observation 1, May 12, 2020)

In order to maintain a fun and lighthearted atmosphere that would mitigate the “*fuan*” (unease) that some members were likely to be experiencing, an entertainer role was also evident from both my observations and interviews with leaders and regular members. The LC leaders would often make jokes, use funny voices, and tease each other during the sessions in order to lighten the atmosphere. Kei compared his role to the Japanese entertainer Akashiya Sanma due to his ability to elicit contributions from other people and make them feel more entertaining and legitimate.

Kei: Akashiya Sanma san ni narita kattakamo. (Maybe I wanted to be like Akashiya Sanma.)

Researcher: Oh really? Why him?

Kei: *Nanka datte anohito tte sono jibunga omoshiroi koto iutokajanakute sonohitono hanashiwo omoshiroku surujanaidesuka. Nanka sonohitoga waraitotta tte kanjiga sugoku hikidasundesuyo...* (Like, you know, with him he doesn't say entertaining things himself, but instead makes what other people say seem more entertaining, right?... *Sou dakara kare no wa nanka participants sugoi yariyasuito omou kara*

*souiu fuu ni naroutowa shitetakana souiu performance kana.* (Because I think his way makes it really easy for participants to participate, I may have tried to do things that way, that kind of performance maybe.) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020)

Relating more to the linguistic focus of the LC, a frequent role of the leaders or more experienced members was conversational scaffolding. This came largely in the form of backchannelling, expansion questions, complimenting on contributions, L1 support, and paralinguistic gestures such as clapping and exaggerated reactions. These actions helped newer members to feel comfortable and more engaged with as they attempted to express themselves in English.

A freshman jumped in, talking about the Wi Fi connection. So, when the freshman speaks, like, Sara's really nodding and backchanneling, so it's very active. So yeah, Sara is also saying, "Yeah, there's things we might miss the teacher saying because of the WiFi connection", so that's another point as well, kind of expanding the conversation topic. (LC Observation 9, July 7, 2020)

One final form of scaffolding in a broader sense came from the LC community, and more specifically the leaders, acting as a repository of practical knowledge about university life. Natsuko in particular stated that because she was not a member of any university clubs or circles, her relationship with the LC leaders was a vital source of information for her about classes, future career choices, and study tips.

Researcher: How do [the leaders] help you?

Natsuko: They, they give me some information about class or also sometimes they help my homework or if I ask or... Yes, and also they are friendly and they are friendly so ah, when I *aki jikan hitoride iru toki toka nanka attara nanka "oide" mitaina kanji de itte kureru kara* (like when I have free time and am by myself or when something is going on, they will say like "come over here" to me). (Natsuko, LLH, June 30, 2020)

This socializing role of the LC was heightened further due to the widespread sense of isolation among students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students could no longer come to campus and the LC was an invaluable source of belonging and practical information about how to negotiate the stresses and challenges of the uncertain situation. An after-study chat session was established by the leaders so that new members could chat in Japanese with them and other LC members after the regular session about any topic they wished. This provided an invaluable opportunity to get to know each other better and find out more about university life. Conversation topics in the LC (e.g., “What makes you frustrated when you take classes on Zoom?”, “Where do you want to go the most after COVID-19 goes away?”) were also reifications of this phenomenon as LC members could pool their lived experience and both vent their stresses and generate coping measures from the tacit knowledge of the CoP. Furthermore, tied to this grassroots knowledge and the liminal position of the LC, the role of the CoP at times resembled that of a pedagogical safe house (Canagarajah, 2004) where frank opinions could be shared about the quality of online classes or the questionable teaching practices of certain teachers. The “in-between” space of the LC afforded the freedom to express the inexpressible and engendered a sense of camaraderie and shared struggle among its members.

Be honest, are there any people who slept in their class? One person said they slept in [one class] because it wasn't useful. Mizuki said she was put in a breakout room for 50 or 60 minutes. She said that she had to work individually and just quietly in the breakout room and just ask a question if they needed to. So they're silently in this breakout room for an hour. And now Ryoya is saying that each professor has their own way of teaching. So sometimes it's unproductive, the teachers kind of struggle to organize online classes, and I'm afraid to say but elderly professors are struggling to teach online. (LC Observation 11, July 21, 2020)



In this section, I have outlined the numerous ways in which leadership was expressed within the LC and the internal and external factors appeared to catalyze the emergence of democratizing, caretaking, and scaffolding behaviors. The next and final results section will explore further the *situatedness* of the LC by examining the ways in which the community was supported by the immediate environment of the SAC and the multi-scalar manifestations of autonomy that made the LC's emergence and success possible.

## **6.6. Community support**

The final central theme that I identified based on the LC's functioning as a CoP was the importance of the support the community received from the SAC. I determined that this support stemmed from three key areas: the influence of advising and intentional reflective dialogue, Keiko and Yukiko's roles as community "champions," and the multi-scalar autonomy that existed throughout the SAC. In the following section, I will explore these three areas in relation to their impact on the past, present, and future of the LC CoP.

### **6.6.1. Advising**

The first rumblings that signaled the creation of the LC came from advising as Keiko would often hold advising sessions with students who would frequently try and fail to practice speaking at the Chat Space. It was this phenomenon that led to her conversation club and later her helping Kei and his co-leaders to set up the LC. Through my ethnographic data, it was clear that the influence of advising and IRD had indeed remained a constant factor in the development of the LC throughout its life cycle. The most direct manifestation of this was Keiko periodically conducting advising sessions with the LC leaders and helping them to reflect on recurring problems within the community. These interactions later became more formalized through the creation of Keiko's leadership course in which individual advising sessions represented a fundamental element (see Figure 17).

**Figure 17**

*Advising sessions within leadership course*



### **Make an appointment with your learning advisor!**

Please be ready to talk about your vision and anything else that you want to talk about:) If you are just starting the community and don't know how to plan activities and hold meetings, no worries! Your advisor should be able to help you plan them. Go to: [http://\[REDACTED\]](http://[REDACTED])

### **Comments from your advisor**

The advising that Keiko engaged in with the LC leaders often took the form of reflective questions intended to stimulate their deeper exploration and nudge them towards autonomy-supportive practices and actions that would make the community more self-sustaining. There was a balance that needed to be struck between being directive based on academic knowledge Keiko had of learner autonomy (referred to by her tongue-in-cheek as “brainwashing”) and ensuring that the leaders came to decisions by themselves and maintaining their sense of ownership. One concrete example of this was at the end of 2019 when the LC members had become friendly with each other and had inadvertently created a closed atmosphere for newcomers. Through asking reflective questions, Keiko raised the importance of keeping the community open and the need for member feedback.

[I asked them]...[h]ow do you think those people think about these communities? I don't remember exactly the questions, but raising the awareness of them being these good friends, and then they realize[d], “Oh, we have to do something about it. How can we help, the leaders help?” They decided to create this [feedback] form. (Keiko, Interview 5, June 19, 2020)

Another way that advising had impacted the LC was that its leaders (as of January 2021) had all been SAC peer advisors and had thus received formal training in advising. Many of the leaders discussed the utility of their experience as peer advisors in relation to their role in the LC and sometimes framed their leadership in similar terms.

Ryoya: I think it's close to counselor, but advisor. Yeah. Yeah.

Researcher: Could you explain more?

Ryoya: Um, like if some participants have difficulty or problem or questions, I cannot solve the problem directly but I can listen to their problem, questions and I can help them to lead to solve the problem. So, yeah, it's like, yeah. So, leader should be that.

Researcher: So, supporting them more indirectly...

Ryoya: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. (Ryoya, Interview 1, November 26, 2019)

There are a number of ways in which advising appeared to positively contribute to the LC and its development. Keiko's IRD with the leaders struck a balance between autonomy and support (Corso et al., 2009) as her reflective questions provided guiding frames within which the leaders could come to their own informed decisions. This stood in contrast with other SAC learning communities that had been previously managed by teachers and had quickly disintegrated due to the top-down management style prevalent in classrooms preventing student members from feeling a sense of ownership and belonging within the CoP. Amy reaffirmed that the autonomy-supportive style and training of learning advisors was well-suited to the needs of student-led learning communities—a claim that was also supported by the LC leaders. It was clear that the leaders appreciated the light touch approach of the learning advisors and that this freedom contributed to their feelings of attachment and ownership within the LC.

Researcher: So when you went to the learning advisors, did they give you lots of advice or did they kind of let you manage it?

Ryoya: Um, they didn't give so many advices, but they listened to our, you know, feeling or, you know, experience... but they always say it's up to you. It's your group so you have to decide, you have to organize.

Researcher: How did you feel about that system?

Ryoya: I think that's good. And yeah. This makes me, makes us more, how can I say? Um, more, ... real organizer, right?

Researcher: Oh, so more, like, authentic?

Ryoya: Yeah. Authentic. (Ryoya, Interview 1, November 26, 2019)

The light touch support that Keiko provided through reflective dialogue and the leadership course helped to mitigate stagnation in the community by encouraging the leaders to democratize the LC and create avenues for member feedback. Through this, the LC was able to avoid solely reproducing existing forms of practice by gaining a mixture of external (academic insights from Keiko/ leadership course) and internal (member feedback, individual reflections) knowledge. This knowledge was then operationalized by the leaders with Keiko's guidance to stimulate continued innovation within the CoP.

### **6.6.2. Community allies**

Within a complex formalized institutional structure like the SAC, it is conceivable that without “buy-in” (Thomas et al., 2010) from key stakeholders, any student-led CoP would struggle with maintaining—and much less increasing—its presence over any significant period of time. In the case of the LC, the community was fortunate enough to have a number of key *allies* or *project partners* (Akkerman et al., 2008) who engaged in important tasks that helped to enhance the status of the LC and facilitate its relationship with other neighboring SAC CoPs. In this section, I will examine how the LC's institutional allies contributed to its success in terms of both *enhancing visibility* and *brokering practices*.

Perhaps the most rudimentary way that the LC's visibility in the SAC was increased was through the one-on-one recruiting practices that Keiko engaged in through her role as a learning advisor. Just as the creation of the LC was stimulated in part by advisees' stories about struggling at the Chat Space, Keiko's advising sessions often put her in contact with students who were having trouble adjusting to the SAC and lacked an *ibasho* (place to belong). Knowing that the domain of the LC was expressly designed to meet the needs of such students, she would often direct these students to LC meetings. This practice acted as an effective form of recruitment for the LC as it was being given a tacit stamp of approval by someone in a position of authority within the SAC.

On a broader scale, more formalized promotion of the LC within the SAC was marked as a need by all of the leaders including the new leader candidates. Due to the four-year time limit on membership (due to university graduation), there was a practical need to ensure a steady influx of freshman students to replenish the LC ranks. In order to satisfy this need, Keiko established a learning community fair that was held at the start of the academic year to help recruit newly enrolled students and generally increase support for the learning communities. In addition, Keiko appeared to take a hands-on approach throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as she offered the LC support in creating digital promotional materials to attract new members.

Researcher: How have you guys been promoting in this situation? Because obviously, no learning communities fair. How have you guys reacted to that?

Ryoya: Yeah. Keiko always help us and yeah. Making poster and post it on Instagram and yeah, actually we don't, do like actual action. We don't take action to advertise the LC but we just made, made poster and yeah. And SAC did a lot of things for us. Yeah.

Researcher: Okay, that's cool.

Ryoya: It's quite helpful. Yeah. (Ryoya, Interview 3, June 16, 2020)

One other way in which Keiko contributed to the LC's visibility was by helping the community to secure an appropriate physical location within the SAC. The visibility of the LC's venue was marked by several of the leaders as crucial for drawing foot traffic towards the community and creating an open, friendly atmosphere. However, many of the most suitable spaces in the SAC were in high demand during lunchtimes meaning that the LC was not always able to secure them. In such situations Keiko worked closely with the LC leaders and acted as an intermediary between the SAC admin and them in order to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

So, the workshop wasn't available anymore because other learning communities, so we talked about it and we booked one place, [Area 1] and they tried it out and it was too loud, they didn't like it, and then we talked about it, we had to kind of like, it's kind of like advising session process. What kind of needs [do they have] and then they talk about it, they thought about it and they moved to [Area 2] and they decided to give it a try. And then I asked them, what else do you need to make that place more comfortable, or make the activity more effective? (Keiko, Interview 1, October 23, 2019)

Keiko's intermediary role in securing the LC with a place that met their local needs serves as a useful transition into the second focal point of this section—the role of CoP allies as inter-community brokers. Both Keiko and Yukiko represented distinct CoPs—learning advisors and administrators—within the SAC with which negotiation was necessary in order for the LC to maintain a long-term institutional presence. Keiko and Yukiko would often work together and with the LC leaders in order to devise ways in which the LC could maintain their autonomy and continue to innovate while also adhering to the administrative or legal guidelines of the university. At times these requirements were at odds with each other as the SAC's prioritization of autonomy and free expression represented a culture clash with what

Keiko and Amy regarded as a “Japanese” administrative mindset. While respecting administrators' hard work and the necessity of aligning the SAC with the university as a whole, the learning advisors believed that in order to maintain an autonomy-supportive environment in which communities like the LC could flourish, at times they needed to resist some of the administrative pressure on learning communities.

It's a bit of give and take. Sometimes you're just like, "Really? Are you gonna make us do this? Do you realize how much this is going to, like, crush someone's enthusiasm and creativity, if we make them fill out a form to explain this, this, and this? Can't we just go with it for a while?" But yeah, that's a challenge. (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020)

As a member of the administrative staff, Yukiko also recognized this culture clash and strived to maintain institutional standards while taking care not to overly impinge on the LC's sense of autonomy.

For learning communities, it's really important, autonomy is important so student try to do many things. They have many idea. But from admin side we have to adjust many things with other department also in the SAC. So I want to encourage students to do many things, but sometimes I have to stop. And I can't, *kanaete agerarenai* (can't grant their wishes). (Yukiko, Interview 1, May 28, 2020)

Another way in which the allies of the LC facilitated its ongoing survival was by highlighting its value to the SAC and to the university as a whole. As an experienced researcher in the field of educational psychology, Keiko often drew upon academic knowledge in order to legitimize the LC's practice and make a case for the importance of the community to the student body. One area in particular that she highlighted was the LC acting as an accessible venue for those students without a place to belong or that have been struggling with the transition into university life.

This book talked about student learning, community outcomes. But these outcomes definitely fit the LC. Like the supportive community aids retention of [freshmen] students... I like to send them to the LC because then they're going to get those relationships, a sense of belonging, and they start using English.

(Keiko, Interview 4, March 17, 2020)

Keiko's close professional relationship and shared academic interests with Amy strengthened the LC's position further as Amy gave Keiko complete support in her work with the learning communities and believed them to be "a really important part of the SAC" (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020). Also from the administrative sphere, Yukiko legitimized the LC by frequently visiting the community and even occasionally joining sessions as an active participant. Additionally, Yukiko recognized the value that the community provided stating that "it's one of the SAC's face[s]" (Yukiko, Interview 1, May 28, 2020). She also highlighted the LC's role in foregrounding social expressions of learner autonomy and providing positive role models like Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara for other students.

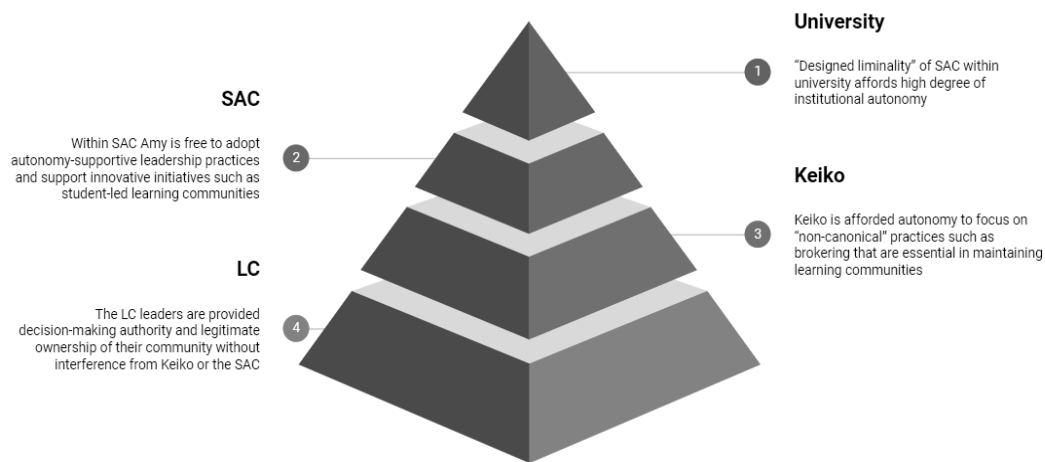
### ***6.6.3. Multi-scalar autonomy***

While the previous sections have focused on the ways in which the local environment of the SAC contributed to the health of the LC CoP, here I will illustrate how autonomy manifested in multiple scales (university—SAC—Keiko—LC) allowed for this community support to exist in the first place (see Figure 18).



**Figure 18**

*Multiple scales of autonomy and the LC*



On a macro scale, the position of the SAC within the university was arguably liminal in nature due to it being regarded as a symbolically separate entity while remaining physically and administratively within institutional borders. In addition to the previously mentioned decorative ikoku design of the SAC, Amy did not discuss SAC matters in regular faculty meetings, and almost all of the day to day running of the SAC, unlike the rest of the university, was conducted in English. Amy recognized that this status meant that the SAC was trusted and respected but also represented a space of possibilities (Murray, 2018) in terms of the freedom they were afforded in its management.

Yeah, I'm quite happy to work outside the Japanese system, because it gives us a lot of freedom that a lot of the Japanese departments don't have. I know this because I'm in the English department and there's no freedom. You know, it's all laid out for years in advance and there's no creativity. It's not their fault. They're really great people, very dedicated educators. But you know, this is, this is what we do, you know, whereas I felt with the SAC we're able to grow and, you know, really develop and make our mark on the field and just we're so, we're so lucky we've got this freedom. And it was

intentional, the university was smart. Because if they put, you know, a more traditional structure in place, we wouldn't have grown how we have, we need this freedom in order to innovate. (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020)

The freedom that Amy had secured from the university regarding the running of the SAC was then passed down via her autonomy-supportive leadership style to the next scalar level that involved Keiko's professional responsibilities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, from an early stage, Amy aimed to create a working environment that was more egalitarian and deviated from seniority-based power structures. In addition, she legitimized Keiko's efforts related to facilitating and supporting learning communities and recognized the importance of the specialized community-focused tasks she was required to focus on. These included maintaining contact and holding advising sessions with student leaders, acting as an intermediary with admin on behalf of learning communities, and helping to boost learning communities' visibility through promotional materials and events.

Amy: If I had to report to the faculty, you know, everything I did and what we decided, I feel like that would crush our creativity as a team, we wouldn't innovate like we do. So it's fine. I see that as actually absolutely fine.

Researcher: In your role, is that what you're trying to do for Keiko?

Amy: Yeah, always. I'm always trying to promote autonomy within our team, yeah, trying to encourage people to grow and feel, you know, that they can grow within the space they define for themselves. (Amy, Interview 1, June 26, 2020)

Keiko's autonomy within the SAC as to learning community support meant that she did not feel pressured to demonstrate quantifiable results from the learning communities as a teacher might in terms of test scores or grades. Supporting the learning community members' autonomy and wellbeing was the aim in itself meaning that students could "grow at their own pace" without the need for Keiko to be "breathing down their necks" (Amy, Interview 1, June

26, 2020). This aspect of the SAC's technical culture distinguished it from the atmosphere in students' regular classes and allowed autonomy-supportive practice at the micro scale (e.g., within the LC) as learning communities were given space and time to develop their own local practice without interference.

There (laughs) students are fine, but when the teachers get involved, it's a completely different... I think it's a nature of teachers that they want to educate people. They want people or students to learn most effective, efficient way, but a learning community is not that. They don't have to learn most effective way, efficient way. They should learn or they should find a way how to learn and they should decide. (Keiko, Interview 2, November 29, 2019)

In this section, I have demonstrated how the health and development of the LC CoP depended considerably upon a range of local contextual factors including opportunities for IRD, the presence of community allies engaging in intercommunity brokering, and a multi-scalar culture of autonomy support. These factors based on the geographical and temporal *situatedness* of the LC cannot be isolated from an understanding of the CoP itself as they are intertwined with how its *domain*, *community*, and *practice* developed over its entire life cycle. In the following section, I will discuss what the five previously-examined themes tell us about the nature and functioning of the LC CoP through the categories of *domain*, *community*, *practice*, and *situatedness*.

## **6.7. Discussion**

### **6.7.1. Domain**

In order to clarify the following section, a CoP's domain is the "common ground" and "common identity" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27) of CoP members or, put differently, "shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a). Domain, therefore, includes the type of competence the CoP chooses to

develop, creates its epistemic boundaries (Pyrko et al., 2019), and identifies shared traits of its members (Hooper, 2020d). Of all the facets of the LC CoP—domain, community, practice, and situatedness—that I analyzed, it was the community’s domain that I found the most complex and most difficult to pin down. The first point of interest was that the LC appeared to have a dual domain—one based on developing a specific area of linguistic competence and another focused on affective support for other students similar to themselves. Furthermore, as I will later discuss in greater detail, one could argue that these two domains were in some sense dialectal in that the linguistic domain was largely tied to the very issues that originally necessitated the LC’s creation and the formation of its affective support domain.

Perhaps the most salient shared characteristic among LC members was a strong international posture (Yashima, 2009). Apart from the basic fact that all participants had chosen to enter an internationally-oriented university, members would often discuss foreign movies or dramas that they liked and often expressed a desire to travel and even live overseas. Due to their *intent participation* (Yamaura & Murphey, 2008) regarding English (they actually intended to later use what they learned in LC conversing with foreign people), LC members regarded themselves as having high levels of motivation for learning English and felt that this shared trait contributed positively to the CoP’s atmosphere. Related to members’ “intent participation” was a strong sense that imagination comprised a significant part of the LC’s linguistic domain. Based on their desired ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2005) and what they viewed as legitimate membership in an imagined international community of English, they chose to focus on the types of English competence that they felt would serve them best in the pursuit of their goals. Within the LC, this “regime of competence” (Wenger, 1998) generally took the form of “casual” or “everyday” English that was based largely upon Western-centric (and particularly US) colloquial language and slang. This was influenced to varying degrees by members’ love for Western pop culture such as Disney and US movies and dramas and

these were even incorporated in LC sessions on certain occasions. The focus on Western “native speaker” forms and standards of English represented the “economy of meaning” (Wenger, 2010) within the LC as members who had experienced study abroad, consumed a great deal of Western media, or just generally possessed knowledge of slang were the recipients of cultural capital within the CoP. The LC leaders also tacitly reinforced the focus on “native-centric” linguistic norms by requiring the use of DMM Eikaiwa as a reified community rule and framing it as a source of desirable “native” knowledge. This, as well as the focus on US slang, arguably disempowered the LC to a certain extent by locating the source of knowledge and competence outside of its borders. The linguistic domain of the LC, therefore, exemplifies a CoP reproducing power structures that arguably contribute to its own delegitimization within the world. This was in turn tied to the community’s domain of affective support and its historical relationship with the CoP of the Chat Space.

From my analysis of their language learning histories and the values that they emphasized within the community, many of the LC members exhibited an identity of non-participation in relation to the Chat Space. This was observable in the explicit focus on actively engaging with and eliciting contributions from new members, the relaxed language policy, the relative absence of international students, the aversion to ranking people by English proficiency, and the focus on friendliness over English level for leadership candidates. This was in line with Kei’s original “LC concept” of an *ibasho* (place to belong) for students who wanted to study eikaiwa but felt intimidated and marginalized at the Chat Space because of its extreme manifestation of eikaiwa (English-only, “native” norms, free conversation). It could be argued, therefore, that the LC was from the very start designed as venue for students who were structurally invisible (Turner, 1967) —floating in the liminal space between the *eigo* that they had focused on in secondary school and the eikaiwa that they both desired and were unable to participate in without scaffolding. In this sense, I believe that the LC and its

“concept” represents a pedagogical safehouse formed in response to members’ struggles with the ideological divide of eigo and eikaiwa. Canagarajah (2004) argues that safehouses involve “strategic mobilization and collaboration for marginalized groups to construct an oppositional culture” in order to “nurture the dream of alternate possibilities in educational and social life” (p. 134). Within the autonomy-supportive culture of the SAC, students were afforded agentic space to create a hybridized alternative (translanguaging) to the English-only policies in classes and the Chat Space while also focusing on “developing competence in non-standard discourses” (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 133) such as slang words that were not recognized in institutional syllabi. Here we can see that while the LC’s linguistic domain reproduced certain disempowering forms of habitus, there were also expressions of agency that responded to structural power. The LC’s “concept”, therefore, may be viewed as “a crack of agency in the concrete of social structure” (Wenger, 2010, p. 190) as the CoP engaged in counter framing (Lowe 2020b, 2022) by calling into question the appropriateness of the pure eikaiwa approach of the classroom and the Chat Space.

The prosocial facet of the LC’s domain was strengthened due to several other members having experienced the same struggles as Kei, Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara at the Lounge and due to Keiko also recognizing this as an ongoing concern within the SAC due to her advising sessions with students experiencing similar problems. Keiko’s recognition of the value of the LC’s prosocial domain to the rest of the SAC and her work as an institutional ally also meant that Amy, Yukiko, and other SAC stakeholders afforded the LC’s domain legitimacy within the institutional landscape. This buy in from SAC stakeholders was crucial in the LC’s survival and development as it has been claimed that CoPs tend to flourish “when the goals and needs of an organization intersect with the passions and aspirations of participants” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 32). Keiko’s recognition of the LC’s value as an accessible learning community also helped the leadership to maintain focus on the CoP’s domain during its

maturing phase (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.5.). From the data, it was apparent that there was a dialectical relationship between belongingness and accessibility within the LC that Keiko was able to mediate. When there was a fear of members' increased sense of belonging and closer social bonds creating an exclusive atmosphere (Li et al., 2009) akin to what they originally experienced at the Chat Space, Keiko engaged in IRD with the members and helped nudge them back into alignment with the accessibility-focus of the domain.

### **6.7.2. Community**

Wenger et al. (2002) characterize community as “the social fabric of learning” within a CoP constituting “interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust” (p. 28). If we understand the domain as a CoP's *raison d'être*, then one could argue that the social bonds of community are what hold it together over time (Mercieca, 2017). If LC members had not formed social connections and come to trust each other, it is unlikely that they would have been willing to mutually engage in the potentially face-threatening process of language learning for any significant length of time. Wenger et al. (2002) argue that learning is a process “involving the heart as well as the head” (p. 29) and here we will discuss the ways in which the LC developed a community that facilitated trust and opportunities for all of its members to negotiate their own roles.

Mutual trust is recognized as a vital element of a healthy community (Mercieca, 2017; Wenger, 2010; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger et al., 2009) and one can observe various ways in which an atmosphere of mutual trust was engendered in the LC. First and foremost, the LC leaders and experienced members had, for the most part, experienced relatable trajectories into the LC. This was, of course, linked to the affective support facet of the LC's domain and their identity of non-participation relating to the Chat Space. This led to a commonplace sense of empathy from the senior members towards newcomers and the development of a prosocial culture that emphasized encouragement and aimed to lower language anxiety. This culture

within the LC appeared to value prosocial behaviors as more desirable than English proficiency to the point that a highly fluent speaker was sometimes even viewed as undesirable due to the intimidating effect they might have on members with low confidence. Behaviors related to these prosocial tenets were frequently performed in LC sessions through senior members praising new members' contributions, engaging in positive linguistic and paralinguistic backchannelling (clapping, smiling, etc.), and showing interest in newcomers' personal interests. The experience and insider knowledge of senior students also served as valuable social resources (Zittoun, 2008) that mediated newcomers' transition into university life. This role was especially valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic and for students like Natsuko who did not belong to any sports clubs or university circles. Congruent with Mercieca's (2017) notion of *fellowship activities*—opportunities for informal interaction outside of fixed CoP meetings—the LC's after-study chat sessions were developed to strengthen social bonds with new members. Linked to this measure and the development of trust in general was the LC's role as a pedagogical safehouse (Canagarajah, 2004). As both students and teachers were struggling to adjust to the transition to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the LC became a site where members could vent their frustrations with their online classes and vocalize their disappointment over their current isolation. This served to further enhance the atmosphere of empathy and commonality within the LC among all members regardless of seniority.

Within the LC CoP we can also observe a number of examples of participation and reification that mediate the possibilities for engagement in and negotiation of the community's practice by all members. The relatively flattened hierarchy of the LC that arguably stemmed from its liminal status, its subservience to externally-located "native" knowledge, and the technical culture of the SAC influenced members' capacity to shape the CoP. Although manifestations of habitus that reinforced seniority-based power relations were noticeable, the



democratizing efforts of the leaders and the IRD that reinforced those efforts did appear to have had a discernible impact on the potential for negotiation of practice. As the LC matured, both external (leadership course) and internal (Zoom format, member survey) artifacts existed that distributed power more evenly among its membership and allowed all members avenues to contribute to the CoP's evolving practice. A number of members claimed the later online format of the LC lowered barriers to contribution as newcomers could simply click a link to join the session and turn off their camera or microphone during the LC session if necessary until they gained in confidence. Furthermore, the interesting dynamic of "native speakers" being physically absent while also symbolically present (DMM Eikaiwa) created an egalitarian shared reliance among every member, regardless of seniority, on this community artifact. From a negative perspective, this represented shared disempowerment and subservience to knowledge owned by the "Other." However, a side-effect was a shared sense of camaraderie and fallibility that meant every member had the potential to contribute something to the community. The prevalence of referential, rather than display, questions from the leaders regarding vocabulary that newcomers had researched was one concrete example of this. There did, however, as suggested in the previous section, exist a local economy of meaning that conferred social and cultural capital to those who had links with "native speaker" knowledge such as those who had studied abroad, had gained knowledge of slang, or were familiar with cultural artifacts from inner-circle countries. However, the presence of such Japanese near-peer role models in the LC who were competent English users also served as symbolic challenges to essentialist discourses such as native-speakerism and nihonjinron. These role-models acted as concrete examples of attainable future selves for new members (Bandura, 1997; Murphey, 1998; Walters, 2020). Here too we are presented with a duality (Wenger, 1998) of identification—with certain imagined communities reproducing established

power structures (native-speakerism) —and negotiation through individual and collective agency in order to create a community that meets the local needs of its members.

### **6.7.3. Practice**

Wenger et al. (2002) describe a CoP's practice as "a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that the community members share" (p. 29) meaning that one could interpret it as a crystallization of the domain and community (Mercieca, 2017). Hooper (2020d) focused more specifically on Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015a) view of practice as including "ways of addressing recurring problems" and I would like to expand this somewhat to focus on how the LC's practice allowed it to respond to ongoing issues throughout its lifecycle. In the following section, I will first outline what these issues were and then examine what manifestations of practice were produced by the CoP to address them.

One could argue that the most practical issue to be addressed by the LC was that of sustaining its membership. Each member having a four-year limit on their time in the community due to the fact that they would eventually graduate from university meant that ongoing recruitment from the next generation of students was imperative for the LC's long-term survival. This was congruent with the affective support facet of the CoP's domain in that the creation of an accessible and friendly environment would naturally appeal to other students like them who might feel intimidated by places like the Chat Space that they experienced as hard to enter. However, the success of the LC in fostering belonging and close interpersonal bonds actually became its weakness as this led to a divergence from the affective support domain and created a marginalizing clique-like atmosphere for new members. In order to ensure replenishment of their membership, the core members needed to work towards once again aligning with the original "LC concept" that had underpinned Kei's original vision for the community. Another key issue was related to the LC's linguistic domain. The community

was, due to its identity of non-participation vis-à-vis the Chat Space, in an interesting position. The linguistic knowledge that it desired (eikaiwa) stood in contrast with members' lack of confidence in CoPs grounded in that particular competence (such as the Chat Space) due to the relative incompatibility of the cognitive resources (eigo) they had historically acquired. They needed, therefore, a means of maintaining contact with their desired international imagined community and the knowledge associated with it while also incorporating linguistic and affective scaffolding that would allow them to draw upon their existing repertoire of cognitive, social, and symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2008). The boundary between the linguistic and affective support domain was, of course, blurry as the need for scaffolding also related to the construction of an accessible environment that mitigated language anxiety.

In order to address needs stemming from its linguistic domain, the bilingual language policy was a reified central element of the LC since its inception. This stood in contrast with the pure eikaiwa approach of English-only within the Chat Space that reduced the scope for linguistic scaffolding and aligned with a native-speakerist framing of language acquisition (Lowe, 2020b). The bilingual policy provided an affective “safety net” for LC members and allowed them to engage in collaborative bilingual *linguaging* as members worked together to construct meaning via the vocabulary share sheet. This represented a bridge between ideological spheres as members could operationalize the eigo competence they had accumulated in secondary education (Nagatomo, 2022) in service of developing the eikaiwa competence that was linked to their desired future selves. Furthermore, through other community tools such as DMM Eikaiwa and cultural artifacts such as Western movies, animation, and dramas, LC members could draw upon symbolic resources that mediated their transition from their present selves to potential future selves. The function of these symbolic resources was that they sustained the akogare (longing) towards the “tantalizingly out of reach” (Nonaka, 2018) international world they longed for without the fear of identity threat

that could occur from unsuccessful interactions with “native speakers.” The vocabulary share sheets that were added to in each session represented a repository of the specific linguistic knowledge the LC valued—“everyday” English and slang—and reinforced the domain through the reification of aligned collective practice. DMM Eikaiwa also functioned as an “external benchmark” (Wenger et al., 2009) that LC members believed provided the community with “native speaker” legitimacy based on underlying “native-centric” predispositions that had been formed throughout their language learning histories.

Regarding the issue of sustaining membership, the LC developed a number of tools that aided them in maintaining accessibility for future generations of members. Firstly, in order to attract new members from the broader environment of the SAC and the university, the LC leaders created promotional materials such as posters, social media posts, and interviews in SAC newsletters in which they highlighted the key elements of the LC’s domain and in particular the accessibility and flattened hierarchy of the community. These external expressions of the LC’s tenets were also mirrored in steps that the leaders took to successfully integrate newcomers into the CoP. The leaders’ modeling of prosocial and democratizing behaviors was respected and mimicked by other experienced members who acted as journeyfolk (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57) —mid-level members of the community who could assist newcomers with their transition into the CoP. Furthermore, reified expressions of inclusiveness and democratization such as the weekly feedback survey, the after-session chats, and linguistic signals that de-emphasized *jouge kankei* (seniority-based hierarchical relationships) were designed to lower psychological barriers to belongingness within the LC. Furthermore, as an unexpected but fortunate side effect of the LC’s move to an online format, the Zoom sessions also afforded enhanced opportunities for less-face threatening entry and passive participation in the community. Finally, these crystallizations of the LC’s domain and community were all catalyzed to varying degrees by important brokering practices and

boundary objects such as IRD, the leadership course, and institutional allies respecting the LC's autonomy. These boundary encounters (Wenger, 1998) bridged the local and the institutional meaning that both were consistently in cultural alignment and creating value for one another.

#### **6.7.4. *Situatedness***

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the interrelation between the internal practice of the LC and the institutional and sociocultural environments in which the CoP was situated became a central point of focus in my analysis. As I continued to examine its domain, community, and practice, it became clear that a failure to address meso and macro cultural influences would sap my portrait of the LC of meaning, leaving behind only a pale and superficial facsimile of what was in fact nuanced, rich, and simultaneously troubling and hopeful. In the following section, I will discuss the sociocultural and institutional influences on the LC CoP and what they contributed to its formation and gradual evolution.

Based on the themes explored in this chapter, it is perhaps unsurprising that I regard the ideological divide of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* as a central catalyst for the LC's formation and key facets of its domain, community, and practice. The anxiety that many of its members experienced when attempting to join the *eikaiwa*-oriented environment of the Chat Space arguably stemmed from a culture clash due to the knowledge that had been fostered in their learning histories (*eigo*) not being recognized as legitimate. Despite this harsh reality, however, LC members had a shared internationally-oriented *akogare* (longing) that tended to frame interaction with foreign (and often "native speaker") people as an important part of their desired future selves. This meant that the identity threat that could potentially occur from unsuccessful attempts to engage in *eikaiwa* was all the more terrifying for many LC members due to it representing a symbolic disconfirmation of their hoped-for futures. The gap of power and competence that they encountered at the Chat Space was seen as too wide to negotiate and

resulted in dejection (Higgins, 1987). These experiences thus led members like Kei, Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara to develop a shared identity of non-participation (as to the Chat Space) within the LC where a hybridization of eigo/eikaiwa that embraced bilingual scaffolding and a proactive focus on accessibility for newcomers were created. However, the LC's expression of agency in the creation of their domain was not "in a vacuum" (Roberts, 2006), as members ACLs and accrued habitus were brought with them into the community and acted as guidelines for the development of the LC CoP's internal "economy of meaning" (Wenger, 1998). The influence of mass media and prevalent beliefs about the ownership of English within Japanese ELT meant that the "native framing" of what entailed legitimate knowledge in the LC was apparent. "Native speaker"-oriented tools (DMM Eikaiwa, Western dramas and movies) and language (slang) were deferred to as authentic English (Lowe & Pinner, 2016) and acted as surrogate authority figures in lieu of the "native speakers" who frequented the Chat Space. However, despite this seeming deference to structural narratives, the presence of Japanese near-peer role models and some members' implicit questioning of the value of an English-only eikaiwa approach suggested that subconscious counter framing practices may also have existed within the LC.

The ideological divide of eigo and eikaiwa is also conceivably tied to the SAC as an institutional setting as Mynard (2019a) suggests that the establishment of SACs may be viewed as in opposition to eigo-oriented viewpoints within Japan and argues that self-access facilities contribute to the development of the country's "practical English skills" (p. 190). This outward-looking focus (as opposed to eigo as "Japanese English") is also reflected in the SAC's liminal or heterotopic nature—an *ikoku* where learners can develop hybridized identities in the limbo between "Japaneseness" and "foreignness." While this liminality can engender carnivalesque play and open up new possibilities for the development of new selves and knowledge, it can also induce feelings of displacement and rupture. In this sense, one of

the LC's roles within the SAC is as a site where students transitioning into the liminal environment can mitigate rupture with cognitive (L1/eigo), social (friends, near-peer role models), and symbolic (DMM Eikaiwa, cultural artifacts) resources. Another crucial institutional impact on the LC was the SAC's autonomy-supportive mission and the boundary encounters that generated value to both the SAC and the LC. In terms of the CoP's continued survival, Keiko's role in the LC must not be understated. Her work with Kei and others contributed to the LC's establishment, her leadership course and ongoing advising sessions were vital influences in the creation of community artifacts and the maintenance of the CoP domain, and her brokering work with Yukiko helped to mitigate the encroachment of administrative demands on the LC's autonomy. Furthermore, Keiko's IRD with the LC leaders increased the likelihood of the LC's practice being in alignment with the SAC's autonomy-supportive mission. The fact that the SAC's mission was based on autonomy support is important in that, short of any harmful practices taking place, the LC was afforded complete control over their domain, community, and practice. Keiko's work was made possible by a broader culture of autonomy-supportive leadership that Amy had developed in the SAC that afforded agentic space for innovation and "noncanonical practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991) both inside and outside of the formal university structure. By examining the institutional environment and its impact on the LC's internal culture, one can observe how liminality and autonomy reinforce one another on a multiscalar level. The liminal nature of the SAC, outside of the system, allowed Amy to create a flattened hierarchy within an autonomy-supportive ikoku that lay both inside and outside of Japan. This technical culture in turn facilitated Keiko's engagement in unorthodox practices such as her light-touch support of the LC and her intermediary brokering work with administration. Based on the autonomy-supportive culture that Keiko fostered, the LC was then able to construct itself as an "in-between" space where

its own *noncanonical practice* straddling both *eigo* and *eikaiwa* scaffolded its members' needs for knowledge development and identity work.

## 6.8. Summary

In this chapter, I examined how the LC functioned as a CoP through the analysis of its domain, community, practice, and sociocultural/institutional situatedness. The main points from this chapter that were instrumental in my understanding the nature of the LC CoP are summarized below:

- The LC's domain consisted of affective support and linguistically focused components. These two facets of the CoP's domain were formed in response to environmental factors at an institutional and sociocultural level. Both the affective support and linguistic foci of the domain subsequently influenced elements of both the community and practice of the LC.
- The LC's affective support domain and its hybridization of *eigo* and *eikaiwa* were formed as part of an identity of non-participation in relation to the Chat Space. Members' past experiences and their future prosocial desires to support students "like them" contributed to this sense of shared identity.
- The LC represented a manifestation of learner agency in the face of ideological norms (*eikaiwa*) but simultaneously featured ways in which disempowering structural power relations such as "native framing" infiltrated the CoP and were reproduced through its practice.
- The liminal or heterotopic nature of the SAC provided LC members symbolic resources (*ikoku* environment) used in identity formation, and also contributed to an autonomy-supportive technical culture that allowed advisors and staff to engage in noncanonical light touch support.



- Autonomy was a multi-scalar cultural entity that “trickled down” from the macro level of university administration to the local internal practice of the LC.
- Through boundary encounters such as brokering, community allies, and boundary objects, the local practice of the LC both contributed to and was enriched by the institutional environment of the SAC. These regular boundary encounters also maintained alignment between the LC’s domain and the SAC’s mission.
- Intentional reflective dialogue through advising sessions acted as an autonomy-supportive animation lever (Corso et al., 2008) that stimulated innovation in the LC and helped to sustain coherence between leadership practices and the CoP domain.
- As it allowed access to or operationalization of members’ cognitive, social, and symbolic resources, the LC acted as a means of scaffolding students’ transition between worlds (secondary/tertiary education, face-to-face/online classes, eigo/eikaiwa).
- Leadership expressions were found to have a profound effect on practically every facet of the CoP and due to the influence of boundary encounters such as Keiko’s leadership course and ongoing IRD. The democratizing, caretaking, and scaffolding roles that leaders engaged in enhanced the CoP’s alignment with the SAC’s institutional values of enhancing student wellbeing and autonomy.

In this chapter, I have presented a snapshot of the LC CoP and the complex nature of its structure, power dynamics, situatedness, and continued evolution. In the following chapter, my focus will move from the CoP as a social unit to the experiences of three LC members as I examine their individual learning trajectories across a landscape of practice.

## **Chapter 7: What does participation in the LC represent for its individual members in relation to a broader landscape of practice?**

### **7.1. Introduction**

The following chapter, through three biographical case studies of individual LC members, will provide the basis for the answer to research question two: What does participation in the LC represent for its individual members in relation to a broader landscape of practice? The first three sections will be based on each learner's language learning trajectory and its reciprocal relationship with the LC CoP. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of some themes I identified across all three cases based on the landscapes of practice framework and from my cross story analysis (Murray, 2009).

The three participants featured in this chapter are Kei, Sara, and Tenka. They were selected for analysis due to them representing three generations of the LC's membership and because their stories highlighted a range of different experiences and beliefs relating to the LC's domain, community, practice, and situatedness within a broader LoP. Kei was one of the original founders of the LC in 2017 and was the primary community organizer for two years. He was an extremely active SAC user and worked as a peer advisor there. He has been working as a high school English teacher ever since he graduated from university in spring 2019. Sara joined the LC in the spring of 2018 and eventually took over as LC leader (along with Ryoya and Yuki) when Kei graduated. Sara was also involved in several activities in the SAC and served as a peer advisor for a year. She graduated from university in spring 2021 and is now working on her future career in entertainment. Tenka represents the newest generation of the three and first joined the LC in September 2019. Tenka was an extremely motivated English learner and participated in LC sessions to seek out more opportunities to develop her speaking skills. At the time of writing, Tenka was still an active member of the LC and continued to regularly attend meetings.

Through the following stories, I will highlight the impact of two areas that have been arguably underrepresented from a CoP perspective: the role of external influences such as power structures and the role of the individual. Through Kei, Sara, and Tenka's learning trajectories I present a more nuanced picture of how the LC CoP is situated within the LoP of English education in Japan and how its practice shapes and is shaped by both the individual and wider sociocultural or political forces.

## **7.2. Case study 1: Kei**

Growing up in rural surroundings in central Japan, as an elementary school student Kei enjoyed the novelty of meeting foreign people at his local eikaiwa gakkou (English conversation school). It was at this school that he first discovered “the joy of speaking English” (Kei, LLH, June 25, 2020). All interactions between him and the teacher were done in English, and he clearly remembered learning how to ask to go to the bathroom in this new language, although due to his lack of grammatical knowledge at that time, “it was just like a sound” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). Upon entering junior high school, Kei's knowledgeability was expanded as he began to focus on explicit grammar instruction in largely eigo-orientated classes. Despite not particularly enjoying the class format with “no chances to speak except for when repeating what teachers wrote on the black board” (Kei, LLH, June 25, 2020), Kei still enjoyed studying English as he was able to finally understand what “May I go to the bathroom?” through grammar-focused instruction. As he was able to integrate the eigo he was learning with his existing eikaiwa knowledge, he was able to largely appreciate his junior high school English lessons. High school, however, was a low point for Kei. For Kei, if study is not enjoyable, he finds it “really hard to keep learning” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020), and his high school English classes were not at all fun for him. Classes consisted of learning difficult grammar for test-taking that he couldn't see as having any practical use for conversation. Conversational use of English (eikaiwa) was highly

valued by Kei due in part to his early experiences in the eikaiwa gakkou— “because the beginning of my English was from conversation, like using it” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). Furthermore, English conversation was linked to akogare (longing) he had developed as an elementary school student towards the actress Cameron Diaz.

Kei: I had a dream that I talk with, you know, Cameron Diaz?

Researcher: Yeah, sure. Of course.

Kei: I wanted to talk with her in English, so...

Researcher: Okay. Why her specifically? Just cause....

Kei: ‘Cause she has blonde hair... and blue eyes. She was my ideal person. (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

Kei had seen Cameron Diaz in a commercial for the telecommunications company, Softbank when he was an elementary school student and this sense of akogare towards his “ideal person” was one of the decisive factors in him wanting to develop communicative ability in English. Kei claimed that this longing also extended to not only “many other beautiful ladies”, but also to foreign people in general, as he grew to enjoy traveling overseas alone as a young adult and “communicat[ing] with others from foreign country (sic)” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). This desire to develop eikaiwa proficiency led to him entering the university featured in this study due to its international focus.

Kei’s transition into university represented a marked clash in comparison to the educational culture he had experienced in junior high and high school. The crux of this culture clash was the concept of learner autonomy. From his perspective, Kei’s secondary education had been a largely passive endeavor with his teachers controlling both the content and method of his learning. At university, however, he found that while teachers provided students with ample opportunities to use English through tasks such as presentations and discussions, they avoided instructing on *how* the language should be learned. At first this rupture (Zittoun,

2006) in educational expectations “confused” Kei (Kei, LLH, June 25, 2020). However, it was these feelings of uncertainty that led him to a learning course administered by the SAC. This appeared to be a defining moment in Kei’s learning trajectory as it was here that he encountered the community of learning advisors and, in particular, his future role model, Keiko. Kei stated that the non-judgmental dialogue that he engaged in with the learning advisors stood in contrast to his high school experiences and that the empowerment he felt from having control over his actions stimulated him in his learning.

...in high school, teacher tells us the way to study, so I didn’t have choice. But in SAC teachers and learning advisors didn’t tell me anything but they more likely to support what I like to try. ...So my motivation was high. (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

It was also at the SAC that Kei’s decision (along with two other students) to form the LC emerged. Keen to develop his eikaiwa proficiency, as a freshman Kei, along with some other friends from the same major, attempted to practice speaking English and make friends at the Chat Space. However, he described the environment as “really closed” at that time with most people there having a far higher level of spoken English than him while also seeming oblivious to involving others in their conversations. This “hard time” for Kei “affect[ed] [him]... really a lot” and led him to initially construct an identity of non-participation for himself in opposition to the Chat Space users. He claimed that those students “didn’t care about people like [him]” because he would “[take] too long to speak out something” in English (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020).

Eventually, due to his perseverance and sociable nature, Kei was able to continue visiting the Chat Space by himself (his friends stopped going with him due to the atmosphere) and was eventually able to build connections within the group there thanks to a senior student who he became friends with. However, despite having acclimatized to the Chat Space, as well as developing his eikaiwa proficiency and identity as a competent member of that group, Kei

never forgot his initial experiences there. He discussed his reservations about the accessibility of the Chat Space with Keiko and when it became clear that she had the same concerns, Kei decided that he wanted to create a place for those who felt intimidated by the Chat Space. He believed that although an English-only area was important within the SAC, there should also be alternatives for students with varying levels and needs. Thus, the LC was born.

So, the [Chat Space] or [SAC] should be the place that English beginners learn English, right? So, I wanted to make a community like that and Keiko told me they can do something with me. So, I made the LC. (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

The LC began as Kei and a small group of four or five students (who were introduced by Keiko) who met with no clear goal other than to practice English conversation together. One element that Kei hoped would enhance the accessibility of the group was a relaxed bilingual language policy— “I wanted to make a group that English beginners feel relief to join.” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). The language policy partially emerged from Kei’s past language learning experiences as he stated that when his proficiency was still comparatively low, he often felt that it would be useful for him to learn in an environment where he could scaffold his English use with his mother tongue. When the LC started, the language policy, however, was not reified as a rule, but rather he simply conversed while translanguaging and others copied him. The LC in its early days could be defined as being a CoP in its “developmental stage” (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.5.) as the domain, community, and practice had yet to be fully defined. Kei and the two other founders essentially decided everything in the LC and Keiko did not intervene in the group except for the occasions Kei specifically asked her for assistance or for her perspective on a given issue. Later, as the LC attracted new members, Kei decided to reify the language policy as he was no longer practically able to monitor all members’ interactions simultaneously and was concerned that the relaxed nature of the group needed to be secured through an explicit bilingual approach.

Furthermore, the original concern that Kei had over the “closed” atmosphere of the Chat Space gradually evolved into a coherent mission statement or domain that lay at the center of the LC’s practice. Kei asserted that the LC and its domain had an important role within the SAC that up until that point was not being fulfilled by any existing communities.

[SAC] *dewa eigowo hanashitaikedo chotto nanka hairizuraina toka omotteru hitokara shitara sugoi ii community dato omoukara souiu eigowo benkyou shitaikedo ibasho ga nai tteiu hitono tameno ibasho ga LC no roru na kiga shimasune.*

(The LC is a really great community for people who want to speak English in the SAC but feel it’s hard to enter. I feel like the role of the LC is a place for people who want to study English but have no place to belong.) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

Both the reification of the language policy and the emergence of a coherent LC “concept” (that he believed should never be changed) were representative both of Kei’s development as a leader and of the developmental stage of the LC CoP. In fact, Kei’s role as a leader and the way that he perceived himself in relation to the other community members was a particularly interesting point as it simultaneously revealed empathy and distance within a broadly altruistic mission. One important element of Kei’s identity as an LC creator and leader is that despite the hardship he experienced upon attempting to enter the Chat Space as a freshman, Kei did not appear to view himself as being like the other LC members. When asked to describe the typical LC member, he answered that people like him did not attend the LC— “*Watashi mitai na no wa konai.*” (People like me wouldn’t come) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). Kei believed that the typical LC member would not continue to attend the Chat Space alone as he had done and felt that they required more social support in order to participate in a social language learning community. In addition, he believed that also he wasn’t able to learn a great deal in terms of language at the LC. Instead, Kei felt that a metaphor for his leadership was akin to standing at the top of a mountain and looking back

over the territory with the sun shining behind him. He described how this metaphor represented his learning journey, the role of the SAC learning advisors, and his hope that forming and leading the LC could draw on his experiences and contribute to others.

*Daigakude ima made [hoka no gaikokugo] to eigo benkyou suru toka sono [eikaiwa no renshuu], volunteer de ironna hitoga umaku kou ryuugakusei tomo shabereru youni tte iufuuni hitoto kakawattari iroiro keiken shite kouyatte benkyou shite yamawo nobotteiku wakejanaidesuka. De yama nobotte LC wo yattandesukedo LC de atarashii koto manandatteiu kanjiwa anmari nakute, nanka, imamade yatte tsumikasanetekita koto wo tamatama [learning advisors] ga orega ikiyasui tokorowo ponte tsukutte kurete nanka minnana needs, needs ni kotae raretatteiu kanji.*

(In university studying [other foreign languages] and English, also through [English conversation practice] and volunteering many people could communicate well with exchange students and experience lots of different things. Through these things it's like climbing a mountain, right? I climbed the mountain and started the LC, but I don't feel like I'm learning new things. Because learning advisors helped me to use the experience that I have gained to meet everyone's needs.) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020)

Therefore, Kei seemingly felt a sense of duty to use the knowledge he had accrued to support other SAC users and those students (unlike him) that perhaps lacked the mental fortitude and outgoing nature that he drew upon to work his way into the Chat Space. In addition, he viewed "typical" LC members as being similar to the average student at the university in terms of both demeanor and eikaiwa proficiency. Thus, he believed that the LC should be expanded to multiple time slots across the week so as to serve the needs of more of the student body and further reduce the pressure of beginners attempting to enter a sole already-established group. In this way, the LC according to Kei's vision could perhaps take on



a wider mission within the larger landscape of the university. Conversely, in contrast to the apparent distance that Kei regarded as existing between himself and other LC users, there were other occasions where he underplayed his elevated status and the very notion of hierarchy in the LC. Kei often highlighted his fallibility as an English user and related that through reflective discussion with learning advisors in the SAC, he became more comfortable discussing his failures with others. He also seemed open about gaps in his knowledge when he led the group stating that “everyone are beginners” and “*ore mo wakaranai*” (I don’t know either.) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). Through these examples of dialectalism within Kei—his simultaneous distancing and belonging in relation to the LC’s membership—we can observe Kei’s leadership role as being somewhat akin to a broker. Kei’s concomitant insider and outsider status as regards his perception of other LC members meant that he felt a duty to support them while also maintaining ties with those who were often framed as being outside the domain of the LC. One example of this brokering in action was when Kei invited a number of ryuugakusei (foreign exchange students) to participate in LC sessions. Due to his connections with the Chat Space and the larger SAC community, he was able to bring ryuugakusei to the LC and stated that it was like a new wind entering the community—“*atarashii kaze mitai*” (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). During these LC sessions, despite himself and the other LC members enjoying the experience, he also noticed another trend that concerned him—the passivity of LC members in the presence of ryuugakusei. It was due to this power differential between the Japanese LC members and the foreign ryuugakusei, and the disempowered role of the former, that led Kei to question the suitability of this type of “boundary encounter” (Hutchinson et al., 2015) in relation to the LC’s domain.

*Tada nandarou soreni naruto omottanoga ryuugakuseiga sugoi hanasundesuyone.  
nihonjintte kiki, zutto kouyatte “un, un” tte tanoshisouni kiiteirundesu. Dakara*

*tomodachini naru toka kaomishirini naru kikai no ba toshitewa yokattakedo eigowo  
issyoni benkyou suru tteiu purpose niwa sotte nakatta kamoshirenai desune.*

(But in that situation, I thought that the exchange students spoke a lot. The Japanese members just listened, nodded, and seemed like they enjoyed listening. So for making friends or getting acquainted with each other it was a good opportunity, but for the purpose of studying English together maybe it didn't work.) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

Although the intention behind this boundary encounter was to enhance LC members' familiarity and knowledgeability across a range of communities, Kei stated that this may have been counterproductive. He also inferred that this divergence in perspectives may have represented a tension within his liminal (between the worlds of the Chat Space and the LC) broker role.

My goal was decrease the anxiety for speaking English *nanoni* (but) I was 100 percent happy, *tteiuka* (or more like), convinced [to] invite foreign students. *Tabun* (Maybe) that's the reason. My purpose [for inviting them] would happen if I invite exchange students *ga ano kenka shichattetandesuyone* (but that clash occurred). Opposite effect *wo motteta kara iwakan ga attanokamo* (It had the opposite effect so it didn't feel right maybe). (Kei, Interview 3, August 1, 2020)

Perhaps due to the influence of these experiences and his history as a neophyte at the Chat Space, Kei attributed a great deal of value to Japanese English learners practicing *eikaiwa* with other Japanese people. He claimed that shared cultural background and a more manageable gap in proficiency meant that conversing in English with their near-peers might be easier and less anxiety-inducing. Kei indicated that he had in fact reified this concept into a distinct element of the LC's domain. He asserted that although foreign exchange students may represent a fun experience or a "new wind", the LC's "concept" was "*nihonjindoushi de*

*dekiru kagirino shizenna eigowo manabu*” (Japanese peers learning natural English together as much as they can) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020). Kei stated that there was a prevalent tendency among students at the university to frame “native speakers” as the “ideal” interlocutors for English study and therefore believed the LC’s domain represented an “*atarashii* (new) perspective” (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020). One way in which Kei’s perspective on this facet of the LC’s domain led to divergence between his opinion and future iterations of the LC was his view on learning slang. While other members like Sara and Tenka (see sections 7.3. and 7.4.) regarded slang as a desirable component of knowledgeability, Kei was fundamentally unenthusiastic about focusing on it in LC sessions.

Slang? Slangs is something that I don’t have to learn. That’s how I think... Because like slangs is for natives. If the English beginners are using slangs that’s, like, trying to be *natural na* posture *ga chotto*... (natural posture is a little bit...) (Kei, Interview 3, August 1, 2020)

Despite Kei having seemingly experienced powerful *akogare* (longing) towards “native speakers” in his early language learning history, his later statements indicate that he had possibly come to take a slightly more ambiguous position on the value of the “native speaker” as a learning resource and a learning goal. This ambiguity was then reflected in what became the “concept” (or domain) of the LC during his time as leader. Kei’s focus on peer-learning also had a practical component. Just as was reported in Gao’s (2007, 2009) research into English learning communities in China, Kei believed that groups like the LC represented a way for local people wishing to develop their communicative English proficiency to do so without needing to rely on the presence of foreign speakers of the language.

*Sono gaikokuno hitoto hanashite eigowo manabutteiuono daijidatowa  
omoundesukedo, sono nihonwa attoutekini nihonjinga ooikara eigowo benkyoushiteru*

*nihonjin doushite dou eigowo yokushiteikuka tteiuonoga sugoi daijidato  
omotteitandesu.*

(I think learning English through speaking with foreign people is important, but in Japan there are far more Japanese people so I think trying to improve your English with other Japanese English learners is really important.) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020)

An ability to create opportunities without over-dependence on “native speakers” that represented the “*atarashii (new)* perspective” of Kei’s LC could be interpreted as an expression of autonomy. Indeed, another central tension within the LC during Kei’s leadership was that of the desire to foster autonomy versus the practical realities of managing the community. Learner autonomy was marked by Kei as one of the definitive factors separating his negative experiences in high school and his growth within university. Keiko supported him in his work as a peer advisor in the SAC and also supported the LC from the sidelines and watched over him while also maintaining a hands-off approach throughout. Kei viewed Keiko as a role model for him, both in terms of her English ability and her autonomy-supportive educational approach. This influence (and indeed the influence of learning advisors more broadly) was observable from Kei’s perspectives on effective leadership. He stated that one crucial facet of a good leader is a “coach” role, a role that he likened to that of a learning advisor.

*Coaching to learning advisor tte kanari nitemasuyone... dakara sono hitono jiritusei  
tokawo chanto sonchou shite agerareru hito ga coach janaidesuka. Dakara  
sonohitowo sonchou shite ageru shiten daiji dakara coach daiji dato omoimasu.*

(Coaching and learning advisor are pretty similar... because someone who properly respects that person’s (learner’s) autonomy and so on is a coach, right? The point of

respecting that person is important so I think a coach (role) is important.) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020)

Kei's experience with learner advising (as both advisor and advisee) and autonomy-supportive leadership manifested itself in a number of ways during his time as LC leader. As previously described, the domain of the LC was at least partly grounded in the notion of creating a space for eikaiwa practice that was not dependent on "native speakers" and that gave students the freedom to choose the degree of target language and L1 use they felt most comfortable with. Kei was also adamant that if future leaders of the LC felt that they needed to copy his leadership style or if managing the community became a burden, then it should be abandoned. Although he admitted that he thought it would be a sad thing if the community disappeared, he strongly believed that he didn't want the LC to "steal their time" (Kei, Interview 3, August 1, 2020).

In contrast to his beliefs in cultivating autonomy, however, the realities of facilitating a newly-formed CoP meant that Kei often tended to manage the LC in a rather top-down fashion. As the LC grew in size to over 15 members after its initial formation, Kei began to feel unsure as to whether or not the community was meeting the needs of its membership. As the sole leader, he felt the entire weight of decisions related to the LC fell on his shoulders and, although he was able to consult with Keiko at times, he was understandably apprehensive about making any drastic changes to the "concept" of the community. Consequently, reflecting on his time as a leader, Kei expressed regret that he had not sought out feedback more from other members and felt that distributing decision-making and minor leadership roles may have led to a more autonomy-supportive environment— "*mou sukoshi autonomous na group ni natta kamoshirenai*" (maybe it became a more autonomous group) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020). He believed that the reluctance to delegate responsibility to other members and accept feedback on the LC's practice was because he was afraid of major change and was

wary that any innovation arising from member feedback might alienate the original domain that drew members to the community when it was initially formed. When viewed from the perspective of CoP developmental stages and the leadership expressions based on each stage (see section 4.2.5.), Kei's actions at this time are understandable and are arguably natural signs of CoP development. As the LC CoP was in its early (coalescing) stage, a leader's focus is likely to be primarily on creating an atmosphere of trust and comfort. Any innovation or evolution in terms of leadership or community domain is often prioritized at a later stage in the CoP's lifecycle, where domain, community, and practice have been established (Wenger et al., 2002). Kei was essentially laying the groundwork for the LC during his tenure there and, despite his beliefs in the value of learner autonomy, felt anxiety over distributing control throughout the membership before the LC was on solid ground. As we see in Sara's example (section 7.3.), later generations of LC leaders were far more open to distributed leadership, and upon visiting the LC in spring 2020 after his graduation, Kei remarked that authority was more decentralized than when he was a facilitator and that regular members had "more leadership [and] motivation" (Kei, Interview 3, August 1, 2020).

The final pivotal transition to be discussed in this section was Kei's movement out of university and into the sphere of high school teaching. Just as crossing the boundary between high school student and university student/SAC user represented a culture clash for Kei, his movement back into secondary education also featured rupture in terms of educational beliefs and what was defined as legitimate knowledge. Despite having reentered a high school setting in a different role (teacher rather than student), Kei maintained that the culture of high school education stood in stark opposition to what he had experienced in the SAC. He described the high school he was working at and the SAC as "*magyaku*" (complete opposite) cultures (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020) in terms of their domain (purposes), community (interpersonal relationships, hierarchies), and practice (educational approaches and technologies). One

example of these divergences was the power dynamics maintained both between staff members and between teacher and student. Stemming from his experiences in the SAC, Kei attempted to create a more autonomy-supportive learning environment in his high school classes and reduce the power differential between him and his students. However, he found that this was met with resistance from the students who may have been accustomed to a top-down leadership style within which a “wall” existed to maintain a hierarchy of teacher above learner. Furthermore, Kei was, as a new teacher, simultaneously positioned at the bottom of a *jouge kankei* (seniority-based hierarchical) relationship, meaning he possessed practically no authority to legitimize his SAC-influenced knowledgeability within the school’s “technical culture” (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004).

*Demo* [students] still see me as a teacher *nandesuyo*. *Dakara karerawa watashiwo ueni misugichaukara issyoni jyugyou wo yaru tteiu kankaku wo zenzen motte kunnakute. De sorega sugoi taihen, dakara kabewo minna tsukucchau kara saisyo. De watashimo sono gakkou nonakade hataraiterukara jyugyouwa lecture style ni shinaito ikenaiishi de oshieru kotoga ooikara karerani nanikawo kimesaseru tteiu kotoga mada dekite naindesuyo. Ikkaimo. Dakara sono LC mitaina kankyoga tsukurenakute.*

(But students still see me as a teacher. So because they look at me as being above them too much, we do not have the feeling of us doing the lesson together at all. That is really hard and it means that everyone puts up a wall from the start. Then working in that school, I need to teach in a lecture style and there is so much material to teach that I have not been able to let the students decide anything. Not once. So I haven’t been able to create an atmosphere like in the LC.) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020)

The rupture created through his boundary crossing into this new CoP came with emotional labor. Kei stated that, in particular, the lack of respect shown to those at the bottom of the hierarchy was hard and indicated that he was indeed struggling with this transition. He

revealed that within the technical culture of the high school, “*shitawo sonchou suru kangae hitotsumo nai*” (There has not been one thought of respecting [the students]) and that this for him was “*ichiban kurushii desu*” (the hardest thing) (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020).

In contrast to this, however, he also asserted that what he had experienced in the LC and the SAC more broadly had been invaluable for him and remained at the core of his beliefs. In fact, Kei regarded his confidence in the principles of learner autonomy as unwavering—“*Daigaku ga machigatteru towa ikkaimo omottakoto naikara* (I have not for one moment thought that [what I learned in] the university was wrong, so), I keep believe in what I believe.” (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020) —and even a source of confidence or comfort for him in a community whose practice ran counter to those ideas. Without his convictions in his desired knowledgeability, he felt that he would be “fragile” and stated his intention to create a more autonomy-supportive environment for his students in the future. The fact that it was high school, the setting that Kei experienced his lowest motivation and engagement in his language learning history, that he chose as the destination for his teaching career is perhaps telling. In this next stage of his journey across the landscape, one may view his efforts to integrate the knowledge he acquired in the SAC as continuing to work towards supporting other students “not like him” and offering them new possibilities, just as he did in the LC.

### **7.3. Case study 2: Sara**

For Sara, her journey as an active learner of English began in high school. Before that she had experienced English classes in elementary school and junior high school, but she had participated in them passively and, at times, even begrudgingly. The songs and games of elementary school English had not appealed to her— “*sonna ni hikarenakatta*” (I wasn’t that drawn to it) (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020) —and her junior high school classes were negatively framed by her because of a strained relationship with her homeroom teacher (who also taught their English classes). As an extension of her antagonism towards this teacher, she “really



hated English” (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020). Sara claimed that these classes were boring as they included almost no speaking practice and focused primarily on “just reading the textbook and learning grammar from the textbook.” Furthermore, she perceived the teacher’s English proficiency as “not so enough [*sic*]” (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020). Therefore, Sara felt no desire to invest time or energy into developing her English ability at that time. Things changed as she entered high school as she developed good relationships with all of her English teachers. Although she was initially streamed into the lowest tier English class due to her dislike of the subject, she was gradually able to move up to the highest tier class in the school. One of the key factors in her increase in English ability was a book and video series called Study Sapuri (スタディサプリ) that she watched every day and that became “so fun” for her. It was in high school as she was starting to see noticeable improvements in her English that Sara started learning English “*honki de*” (seriously) (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020). This was also stimulated by a transformative experience she had when she was 17. While attending an open campus event at a strongly English-orientated university, she watched a speech given by a Japanese student majoring in English who represented a desired ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005) for her.

Sara: There’s one student who majored in English, did a speech at the university and I don’t remember exactly, but what she said is very amazing for me and she really motivated me and so, *sugoi, eigo hanaseru koto ga sugoku subarashii mitai...* (amazing, being able to speak English is really great) (laughs) *Sore de...* (Therefore...)

Researcher: Her English was really good?

Sara: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I thought it’s cool and I want to speak English someday. (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

This near-peer role model (Murphey, 1998) became the focus of *akogare* for Sara and, based on the recommendation of a friend, she decided to apply for an international-focused university (where the current study was conducted) and continue to develop her English

proficiency upon graduation from high school. Upon entering university Sara was proactive in seeking out opportunities to further develop her spoken English proficiency. The ability to produce spoken or written English is particularly valued by Sara for a number of reasons. A huge part of her life involves artistic expression. She has been active in the entertainment industry for several years both acting and singing. She identifies herself as an expressive person and this is reflected in her desire to act overseas in the future and a pastime of writing song lyrics in English. She claims that English allows her to express herself in ways that she is unable to in her mother tongue— “I could find, *seikaku ni kou nihongo de sura itai koto ga ienai toki ni English no vocabulary wo tsukaeba chotto chikaku nattari shite, "Ah, sore!" mitai na koto ga atte...*” (when I can’t even express accurately what I want to say in Japanese, if I use English vocabulary, it seems closer, like I feel “Ah, that!”) (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020). This desire to express herself (rather than simply learn) English meant that Sara became more drawn towards eikaiwa-centric CoPs in her journey across the Japanese ELT landscape. Her decision to enter the university featured in the current study with its English-only teaching policies and internationally-oriented teaching staff and atmosphere also reflects the eikaiwa-dominant knowledgeability that she aimed to cultivate. Conversely, Sara described “academic style” English study aimed at passing standardized tests (*eigo*) as something that was not effective for her and that she lacked competence in. Although she stated that she respected people who were good at that type of study, she positioned herself in contrast to them framing *eigo* as something that she had to do but was not engaged in.

*Nanka, kanzen ni mo sutete...* (Like, I completely discarded it...) (laughs), *tanoshii tte omotteiru yarikata dake yatteiru kedo* (I am only using methods that I think are fun, but), but I think I have to do that again for TOEIC, *TOEIC no tensuu wo chotto toritakute, mata yaranakucha ikenai kana tte omoteriu tokoro de wa arimasu* (laughs) (I want to get a better TOEIC score so maybe I have to try it again).

(Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

This represents an example of unengaged alignment (Kubiak et al., 2015a) in terms of Sara's relationship with eigo-oriented CoPs or knowledge. She appeared to regard eigo as something that was necessary to satisfy certain institutional requirements but that she regarded as in opposition to her learner identity and lacked legitimacy in terms of the knowledgeability she wished to cultivate throughout her journey across the learning landscape. This ambivalence towards eigo was also visible in her attitude towards her junior high school classes and her beliefs about the English ability of Japanese people more broadly.

Researcher: *Nihonjin wa eigo ga anmari jyouzujanai imeeji ga arimasu... nande da to omoimasuka?* (It seems like you have an image of Japanese people being bad at English. Why do you think that?)

Sara: *Eeto nandarou kyouiku? Eigo no jyugyouga mou shaberu koto, umakuwa ienaikedo shaberukoto eikaiwa wo anmarikou shinai kara nanka mou tango oboete bunpou oboete mondai toku mitainano bakkari dakara, dakara yappari kou ichiban minitsuku jikini korewo yatterukara kankakutekini shaberu ttekotoga dekinaiishi...* (Uh, let me see, education? English lessons are, I can't explain well but, speaking, English conversation isn't really practiced so remembering vocabulary and grammar, solving questions, that kind of thing, is done all the time so... So, as one would imagine, during the main learning period we are focusing on those things, so I feel like we can't speak English...) (Sara, Interview 3, December 15, 2020)

On a number of occasions Sara appeared to frame Japanese people as a homogeneous group and in deficit terms in relation to spoken English proficiency and expressiveness. The aforementioned encounter with the student role model during her open campus visit presented a conflicting perspective on this topic. The student represented a fluent and confident English speaker who Sara aspired to emulate and who, due to her proximity to Sara in terms of nationality and age, seemed to be a plausibly attainable target for her. Conversely, Sara positioned this student as atypical of Japanese people as a whole, citing her English ability and confidence with public speaking as quintessentially “un-Japanese” traits. Another instance of essentialist beliefs regarding Japanese as English learners was when Sara compared her perceptions of Japanese English inferiority with what she saw as more proficient speakers from countries like South Korea and China.

*Kuwashikuwa naikedo yoku sono eigo tte sugoi kuchino kinnikuwo ippai tsukau mitaini iujanaidesuka. De nihonjinno, nihongotte kuchisakidakedemo shaberechau gengo dakara kou bosoboso tte ittemo tsukaechau. Sono bero toka anmari tsukawanakutemo shabereru gengo dakara yappa eigo tte nanka mou okumade tsukau tteiuka dakara yappa butsuritekini muzukashii tteiunomo aruto omoushi...*

(I don't know in detail, but [speaking] English often uses a lot of muscles in the mouth, doesn't it? Japanese people, Japanese can be spoken by using just the front part of the mouth, so you can speak even if you're muttering. Even if you don't really use the tongue, you can speak the language so, as one might expect, English uses the inner mouth and so I think it is physically difficult [for Japanese people].)

(Sara, Interview 3, December 15, 2020)

Sara regarded pronunciation as a major point of focus in her development as an English user due to the imagined community to which she desired membership in the future. As previously stated, Sara was a professional actress in Japan and one of her dreams was to

pursue an acting career in the US. Much of her imagined future English use was situated within the context of the foreign entertainment industry and she mentioned a number of Japanese actresses who had successfully formed careers in the US such as Yonekura Ryoko (who performed on Broadway) as role models for her. When asked to imagine who she saw herself speaking English with in the future, Sara talked about how she envisioned speaking with a director during filming overseas.

Sara: *Dare to hanashitai ka... dare darou?* (Who do I want to speak with? Who, I wonder?) *Muzukashii... kedo,* (That's difficult, but) *maybe* director or something (laughs).

Researcher: Okay.

Sara: Yeah, director of movies or, yeah, I want to take conversation between them and...

Researcher: In Japan or overseas?

Sara: Overseas. (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

Sara regarded “perfect” pronunciation as a fundamental goal due to her desire for membership in the imagined community of actors and actresses “*mukou de*” (over there, i.e., the US). She pictured herself needing to read scripts and submit audition videos to different studios and worried about people considering her pronunciation to be strange and unnatural.

*De sono tokini* (At that time) of course I can read English but, I was not sure, my pronunciation is not perfect and accent, intonation? *Kanjouno intonation toka ga nanka chotto are?* (The intonation when expressing emotion was a little like, huh?) (Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020)

Here one can see how through her aspirations within the entertainment industry, Sara positions American English as the benchmark for “perfect” English and “native speakers” from America as having the authority to judge what is and is not defined as acceptable

linguistic proficiency. Sara was also influenced not only as a potential participant, but also as a consumer of American entertainment. She had strong *akogare* (longing) for New York in particular (hence the Yonekura Ryoko connection), and stated that she desired to work in that city if she had the opportunity. When I asked Sara why she felt a connection to New York in particular, she told me that this was linked to *Gossip Girl*, a drama depicting the lives of wealthy teenagers in Manhattan's Upper East Side. Sara viewed *Gossip Girl* as a source of "natural" English from which she could learn casual phrases or slang that she could eventually use when she made her own journey to New York in the future. Slang was a key element of the "natural" English that Sara marked as central to the broader knowledgeability she aimed to develop across her historic learning trajectory. She framed the study of slang phrases as knowledge that was acquired outside of a formal classroom setting.

*Sou dakara* the story is little bit *nanka ma arienai, sugoi doramachikku dakedo, demo*, (So therefore the story is a bit unbelievable, really dramatic, but) there are many phrases, natural phrases, I thought. So, *jyugyou toka de manabenai youna casual na phrase dattari toka ga sugoi manabeta kara*, (because I could really learn things like casual phrases that I cannot learn in class) if I was take acting class in US or something so it might be useful, I thought. (Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020)

*Gossip Girl* was one influence in her life that acted as both knowledge source (as characters used slang phrases) and focus of *akogare* (Sara wished to use these phrases herself as a member of different imagined communities). The world of *Gossip Girl* represented two overlapping imagined worlds for Sara—the idealized fantasy depiction of New York life and the US entertainment industry. Upon becoming a leader of the LC, Sara brought her interest of *Gossip Girl* into the community as she prepared an activity in which attendees would watch clips of the drama and attempt to learn "natural" phrases from the dialogue. These *Gossip Girl*

activities received a largely favorable reception from attendees and represented one way that Sara's broader interests and desires influenced the community's domain.

Although this world was seemingly alluring to Sara, her relationship with the image of the international "native speaker" was complex and at times even conflicted. Rather than being purely enamored with the "native speaker" as a linguistic or cultural ideal, a number of critical events led her to develop a sense of resistance towards interaction with "native speakers", particularly for the purposes of language learning. The first of these was her attempts in her first year of university to use the SAC's social learning space, the Chat Space. Sara emphasized that when she entered the university, she had not spoken English before due to the eigo-oriented nature of her junior high and high school classes. Despite being "scared to speak English" due to a lack of directly transferable experience to the starkly different eikaiwa-dominant nature of the Chat Space, Sara had a strong desire to develop her knowledgeability in this area. However, while she did indeed have some positive experiences in her first year, she also frequently experienced anxiety at the Chat Space due to what she perceived to be a significant gap in speaking proficiency between her and others who spent time there.

Sometimes, uh, it seems hard to go because *sugoi* (amazing) students who are really good at English or like, *sugu mou perapera na hito to ka ga kou tanoshisa ga moriagatteiru to "Ah, ima ikenai na" to ka iu kanji ni naru to ka...* (soon if people who are already great at English get carried away and are having fun, I feel like "Ah, I can't go there now.") (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

The fear of high proficiency speakers or exchange students "find[ing] out [her] mistakes" (Sara, Interview 2, July 6, 2020) or being left behind when they got excited or carried away in conversation was something that caused Sara to avoid situations similar to that she experienced at the Chat Space. Perhaps the most emotionally painful event that Sara related to me in this vein was one occasion when Kei had invited her to chat with him and

some exchange students. Sara felt overwhelmed by their linguistic proficiency and isolated by cultural references that she did not understand. This symbolic event, signifying her perceived inability to enter the international community that she had such *akogare* (longing) for, was emotionally crushing for Sara. This traumatic incident had a profound impact on her attitude towards language learning and, indeed, the way she framed the role of the LC when she became a leader.

Sara: *LC ga owatta ato ni*, (After the LC finished) I was with Kei-san and some exchange students came into SAC and *Kei-san ga*, like, "hi" *tte itte, nanka, kou hanashitete minna de* (Kei said "Hi", and like they all started speaking like this). *Ryugakusei to Kei-san to, de wa watashi mo ita kara "Ah, hanasanakucha" to omottan da kedo, kaiwa ga mou supiidi da shi, nanka topiku mo kou, sono karera no kou ima hayatteiru, sou nihonjin no wakamono no aida ja nakute, karera no hanashi to ka de...* (The exchange students and Kei and I were there so I thought "Ah, I need to speak." but, they spoke so fast and the topic was about something popular among them but not something known by young Japanese people, so their conversation...) but I couldn't follow it.

Researcher: Oh, it was some, like, American drama or some, yeah.

Sara: And, uh, it was a big chance for me to improve my English skill, but I was really scared and *hontouni mo nakisou datta*, (I was really about to cry) (laughs) so I told (Keiko) and "*hontou ni watashi eigo ga shaberenai kamo!*" *to ka itte... Hontou ni tsura... are wa sugoku tsurakatta...* ("Maybe I really can't speak English!" and so on... It was really painful... that was so painful...). (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

This event, along with her attempted (and abandoned) entry to the Chat Space community, can be interpreted as critical points that signaled Sara's liminal identity within the SAC and, more broadly, in terms of the two ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*. Through her



secondary education, she had developed a sense of competence in eigo that afforded her access (through standardized testing) to an institution that promised to cultivate the eikaiwa-centric knowledgeability that she desired. However, upon entering the environment of the Chat Space and the international atmosphere of the SAC, she was thrust into a situation where her previous knowledge (eigo) was not immediately applicable. Other forms of knowledge (eikaiwa) that she was unfamiliar with were defined as legitimate, leading Sara to feel incompetent, vulnerable, and isolated. In addition, Sara's international mindset and her akogare for "native speakers" meant that this represented a symbolic rejection from her desired community and intense rupture in terms of what was her desired future self. Sara was, in essence, a liminal entity, caught "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1967) two worlds—one in which she was comparatively knowledgeable but not emotionally engaged (eigo), and another (eikaiwa) that underpinned her future desires but from which she felt shut out of.

Perhaps one of Sara's characteristics that emerged from these experiences was an aversion to hierarchies or ranking within communities, particularly in relation to language proficiency. This was one factor that initially drew her to the LC as she found the community to be based on a mutual understanding of acceptance and fallibility regardless of English proficiency.

Sometimes of course I feel scary or afraid of speaking English. But after joining (the LC), I got to know it's okay to make mistakes and it was good to learn together. We are all students and our English is not perfect. *Minna kanpeki ja nai kara...* (No one is perfect, so...) (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

This more comfortable atmosphere was fostered in large part by Kei, who Sara viewed as an empowering figure due to both his fallibility and his impact as a near-peer role model. Sara stated that Kei would sometimes make mistakes in English in front of the LC members and instead of attempting to cover them up, would draw attention to mistakes and bring a

sense of levity to them by self-deprecatingly joking. She felt that this modeling contributed to an environment where language mistakes were viewed by LC members as natural occurrences rather than aberrations. Furthermore, despite his considerable communicative competence in English, Kei was not majoring in the language and had never studied abroad during his time at the university. Sara interpreted this vicarious success as a rekindling of the future possibilities for her in terms of her desire to become a member of an international community of English speakers.

*Ah, konna ni jibun no yari wo shidai de, konna ni mo jishin wo motte, yarerun da" tte omotte. Sore de dondon LC ni hamatteitan desu.*

(I thought, “Ah, this much, by one’s own efforts, you can build this much confidence, and I felt I could do it.” Because of that, I gradually got more and more into the LC)  
(Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

Even after becoming a leader of the LC, Sara continued to foreground the importance of egalitarianism and openness within the community. In fact, she perceived this to be a shared belief held by her and her two co-leaders, Ryoya and Yuki, due to their comparable unfavorable past experiences as regards to the Chat Space and their struggles with language learning anxiety. Therefore, Sara felt that one of the primary responsibilities as a community leader was to create an atmosphere that stood in contrast to her experience of the Chat Space where learners did not feel ranked or judged due to their eikaiwa proficiency and where they could enjoy practicing English “*kowagarazuni*” (without fear) (Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020). Much of Sara’s focus as LC seemed to be on the experiences and perceptions of newcomers. One example of this is her desire to portray to new attendees a realistic and nuanced picture of language learning achievement and motivation. She drew directly upon her and her co-leaders’ language learning histories when emphasizing the importance of shared experience and *communitas* within the LC. She felt that one central purpose of the LC was to

appeal to and support “*nita you na... joukyou no hito*” (people with similar circumstances [to her]) or “*teikou ga aru hito*” (people with resistance [to eikaiwa]) because “I was one of them” (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020). Sara recognized the leaders’ roles as near-peer role models for the next generations who might be suffering with anxiety from their transition into the SAC (and perhaps their resulting liminal identities). She believed that the leaders represented proof that it was possible to overcome the initial “*teikou*” (resistance) or anxiety of being faced with new demands for eikaiwa proficiency and that language learning could once again be rewarding and enjoyable.

Sara: *Ryoya mo Yuki mo, sono senpai tachiga mo sono michi wo tootte kiteiruto omotteite* (Also Ryoya and Yuki too, my senpai also walked that road), we, when we were freshmen when I was a freshman, I like you know, I hesitated to speak English in front of people or something so...

Researcher: Yeah, you said you didn’t go to [the Chat Space] or something.

Sara: Yeah, so I understand their feelings so *dakara nanka sugoku wakaru kara sore wo koetara tanoshii yo mitaina koto wo wakatte hoshikute sugoi itumo sore wo hanashiaimasu minnade* (so I really understand, so I want them to grasp things like the fun of overcoming [those challenges], and I’m always talking to everyone about that).  
(Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020)

Sara believed that if the LC was filled with a large number of high proficiency learners with seemingly unfaltering motivation, it may lead to new members being intimidated and discouraged just as she was in her freshman year. When discussing future LC leadership candidates, Sara argued that people with extremely high English proficiency may not necessarily be the best options as it would heighten the pressure already felt by new visitors.

*Sono gyakuni ryuugaku itte mashita perapera mitaina koniwa anmari yattehoshikunaina tte omou.* Pressure *ni...* pressure *tteiuka, soshitara tabun mouchotto*

leader *chuushinno LC ninacchau kimosurushi. So, souiuhitoga itemo mochiron iikedo soujanai ko ga atte isshoni manabukara ano funikiga dekirushi.*

(In the opposite way, I don't think I want someone who has studied abroad and is really fluent. Pressure... not really pressure, but I feel like maybe the LC will become too focused on the leader. So, of course it's okay if that type of person is [in the LC], but if someone not like that is there, they can all study together and create that [more equal] atmosphere.) (Sara, Interview 3, December 15, 2020)

Sara, therefore, felt it was important for all members, and especially leaders to highlight their fallibility and work towards creating an environment where new attendees can feel comfortable about actively contributing to the community as soon as possible. These beliefs did not simply emerge from her experiences as a language learner, but rather from a multitude of different CoPs that she had participated in throughout her historical life trajectory. Stemming from her experiences in a university circle that engaged in volunteer work, Sara stressed the importance of actively working to provide newcomers with opportunities to contribute to a community's practice in order to foster a sense of belonging. She related that she had been on the verge of quitting the volunteer circle until she had been given the chance to participate in an overseas volunteer event. In this event, members of the volunteer circle traveled to Thailand to help rebuild and develop a rural village. Although prior to the trip Sara felt isolated and disconnected to other members, through shared engagement in community activities such as physical labor and acting as cultural ambassadors for Japan, Sara developed a sense of belonging within the circle. This event gave her a way in to engage actively and contribute to the circle's practice, thus leading to the establishment of bonds with other members. Sara's facilitation of opportunities for beginners to actively participate in the LC CoP's practice was visible from my observation sessions. Sara would frequently call on new members to give information about themselves, react in an

exaggeratedly positive fashion when they made comments, and praise them enthusiastically for any contributions they made to group discussions.

One additional community that appeared to have affected Sara's participation in the LC and her perspectives on its CoP was the institutional community of the SAC. Following her aforementioned traumatic incident with the exchange students, Sara confided in Keiko and saw her not just as a learning advisor but also as a role model whom she greatly respected.

Researcher: Okay. Um, alright, so you mentioned, um, Keiko. What, what role has Keiko had in your learning, your life in (university)?

Sara: Eh... she's too big for me.

Researcher: Too big?

Sara: (laughs) Too big *to iu ka, nante iun darou* (not really, how can I say). Big role. (laughs). (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020)

Keiko was a Japanese learner of English who had reached a remarkable level of fluency to the point where she was producing research papers in English. Sara was taking advising sessions with Keiko every Saturday and she claimed that these sessions had helped her to "find (her) strength and (her) progress" (Sara, LLH, June 7, 2020) when she was having negative feelings or was low on motivation. Sara eventually became a peer advisor in the SAC in 2019 and continued in this role until winter 2020. In this way Sara had experienced learner advising from the perspective of both advisor and advisee. This experience meant that she was acutely aware of motivational and affective struggles that students experience and there are many indications that this awareness influenced her perspectives on the role of the LC.

Sara (along with Ryoya and Yuki) also enrolled in an optional module course in 2020 that Keiko ran within the SAC on Autonomy-Supportive Leadership. This course, as well as the advisor training she undertook, was grounded in the concept of learner autonomy. Indeed, the entire culture of the SAC was built upon a mission of encouraging self-directedness and

learner autonomy among the student body. From my observations of LC meetings and her opinions on the ideal structure and direction of the community, Sara showed signs that she had internalized beliefs relating to the fostering of autonomy-supportive practices. The evolution of the LC from Kei's generation to Sara's leadership tenure reflects a shift to a more autonomy-supportive environment that Sara appeared to be cognizant of. Sara described how although Kei's LC was overwhelmingly positive, there were also certain characteristics, including Kei's magnetic personality, that meant he became the central focus during the LC at that time. Sara expressed a desire to hand more power over to LC members and exercise a more distributed-leadership model in which every member felt they could contribute to the community and shape its evolution.

*Autonomy mitaina, sono jiritusei ga ano minnaga* (Like autonomy, that autonomy is, everyone...), I think it's good, good for every member to feel they contribute to the community... "I am part of this community" *mitaina koto wo kanjiru nowa sugoku iikoto dana tte omoushi, ano watashi mo ichinensei toka no tokini* "Ah, *kakawareteru!*" *to iu kanji ga shite sugoku sono community ga suki ni natta kara ano LC mo soudashi ano (volunteer circle) mo soudatta kara sugoku sono contribute wa sugoku daiji dana tte* (I thought that feeling something like, "I am part of this community" is a really positive thing, and like when I was a freshman, I felt "I'm involved!" and I began to really like that community. So, in the LC is the same too, and the volunteer circle was the same so I really think that contributing is so important). (Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020)

She also frequently stated that she hoped the next leadership candidates would create their own LC once she, Ryoya, and Yuki had graduated. This was often visible during my observation sessions as she began to step back from an active leadership role in the final month of her time in the LC so as to facilitate a transfer of ownership from one generation to

the next. When considering what her legacy was in the LC, Sara hoped that she would be remembered as someone who made the community brighter—“*akarukunaru*” (Sara, Interview 3, December 15, 2020) and made it an enjoyable place for students to learn English. In terms of what knowledgeability she carries with her from the LC into the next stage of her life, Sara told me that the “*komyuunikeeshon nouryoku*” (communicative competence) that she had developed would likely be beneficial (Sara, Interview 1, June 23, 2020). In addition, she thought that the capacity to listen to others’ perspectives and help socialize newcomers into a team or project would be something that will be extremely helpful to her in the next stage of her learning career.

#### **7.4. Case study 3: Tenka**

Tenka’s fascination with the world outside Japan was kindled and encouraged by a deeply influential figure in her life—her mother. Tenka’s mother had been interested in American culture since she was young and, due to an obsession with watching Hollywood movies, developed her ability to understand spoken (and particularly casual) English to an impressive degree. Her mother’s interests and achievements as a language learner had a marked impact on Tenka, and she often expressed respect for her as one of her role models.

Tenka: But my mother is just Japanese clerk. Yeah. So, but when she was young, she want to say slang, *iitain desu... hamatteita, muchuu shiteita*. (wanted to say... [she] was into it, really into it)

Researcher: Yeah, she was really interested in, really into foreign things?

Tenka: Yeah, foreign things and she loves foreign movies and she has two brothers and one of them [is] also interested in foreign movies. So, they always watch the movie with. So, she loves American cultures. So, I’m always surprised and I respect her because she can understand what I say or English speaker said. (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019)

This *akogare* (longing) for foreign media transferred to Tenka as she began a lifelong interest in foreign animation. Tenka loved watching “Cartoon Network,” an American animation channel. From childhood, when she would watch “The Powerpuff Girls,” to her adult life watching “Steven Universe” and “Adventure Time,” these shows would act as both a method for improving her listening comprehension and an impetus for her desire to “experience foreign lifestyle” (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019). Tenka’s developing international posture, as well as her mother’s encouragement, led her to join a local *eikaiwa gakkou* when she was in the 3rd grade of elementary school. At the school they would mainly play English card games and study using CDs and textbooks with the aim of passing the *Jidou Eiken* (a popular standardized English test for children) exam. Although Tenka did not enjoy doing the homework that was set, due to her love of English and the influence of her mother, she was able to have a rewarding experience at the school. Apart from her extracurricular *eikaiwa* classes, Tenka’s experience of English in elementary school was basically non-existent, limited to learning *romaji* (romanized characters) in Japanese classes, and she began her formal English studies in earnest as she entered junior high school. The competence that she had developed from her *eikaiwa gakkou* classes meant that English lessons in junior high were “easy” and “fun” for her (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019). Furthermore, her homeroom teacher acted as an early near-peer role model for Tenka and further deepened her love for the language.

Tenka: *Shinnen wo motta hito de* (She was a person with conviction), so she really, she is, she was really well to, to teach English, so very good.

Researcher: *Nanka, sugoku nesshin...* (Like, really enthusiastic...)

Tenka: *Nesshin!* (Enthusiastic!) So good. *Shinmi ni natte kureru sensei de, mo... sugoku suki* (She was kind to me so I really liked her) (laughs).

Researcher: *Ah, sou...* (Oh, really...)



Tenka: *Sono sensei ga suki dakara, eigo mo motto suki ni natta* (I liked that teacher, so I came to like English more). (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019)

Her junior high classes consisted mainly of grammar study, listening practice, and a few writing drills. Tenka found grammar practice “effective” for her, and she was able to do well in these lessons. She did, however, feel that she wanted to do “more attractive activit[ies]” (LLH, November 24, 2019) like presentations or speaking practice. High school was much the same as junior high for her as she found the classes easy and based primarily on grammar, reading, and writing. However, during her 3rd year of high school, Tenka found the pressure of *juken taisaku* (exam preparation) classes to be a hardship for her, even to the point that cracks were apparent in even her seemingly unshakeable love of English. Regarding her high school experiences, she described how, “I always love[d] English, but sometimes I became not like English because high pressure. And some teachers said to study more and more, so I didn’t like it...” (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019).

Despite the intense pressure she was under, Tenka was able to successfully complete her university entrance examinations and was able to enter the university of her choice. As to why she chose that particular university, Tenka stated that it was different from other “normal” universities as, rather than being simply a continuation of the grammar, reading, and writing classes of secondary education, it focused on “practic[ing] speaking and more effective way to tell something with English” (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019) or “*jissentekini*” (through real practice) (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). So why did Tenka wish to develop this particular type of knowledgeability at this stage in her learning career? Although the influence of her mother, foreign media, and her past *eikaiwa gakkou* classes are likely to have contributed to this, Tenka’s plans for the future and her ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005) also offer a great deal of insight into her individual perspective.

When asked what her future goal was, Tenka stated her intention to become someone “who can go abroad without a guide, tour guide, or translators” (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019). Her wish to travel overseas, perhaps predictably, came in part from her love of foreign media. One place she wished to go to was the US— “I always watched the American style, so lifestyle through their Cartoon Network cartoons” — and another was the UK, a country she wanted to visit since her childhood because of the influence of Sherlock Holmes books and TV shows (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019). Another overlapping imagined CoP that further bolstered Tenka’s desire to travel beyond Japan was the world of drama and stage. Tenka believed that when compared to Japan, where she felt that opportunities to study or practice drama were limited, foreign countries were “*susundeiru*” (progressive) (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2020), and places where she could engage in this passion more fully. While in high school, Tenka was a member of the drama club, and it was here that she met another role model that would further color her worldview and potentially shape her lifelong learning trajectory. Her drama teacher had in fact traveled overseas to countries like France, the UK, and the US in order to visit different theaters and experience various styles of play. He told Tenka about these experiences and gave her advice about buying same-day tickets in order to see plays for lower prices. This example of someone similar or familiar to her participating in an exotic world of international drama enthusiasts served to motivate Tenka even more and lead her further into a world of English users.

He is actually drama class teacher, drama club’s common *sensei*. So, *shinmitsu* (close), he is familiar to me. So maybe one of big things to lead me into that English world is teacher. Pretty big. Big *sonzai* (existence/presence). (laughs) (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019)

Due to her fascination with foreign media and drama, it is perhaps unsurprising that, just like her mother, Tenka expressed a great deal of *akogare* towards the world and people

outside Japan. On many occasions Tenka stated that she felt *akogare* not only towards foreign people, but also towards Japanese peers who had studied overseas or had high spoken English proficiency. When asked if she did in fact have *akogare* (longing) for foreign things in general, she responded, “Of course I have a lot!” and recalled that she and her mother would “sometimes pretend [to be] foreign people with jokes” (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19th 2020). In terms of linguistic role models, however, Tenka was far more specific than “foreign” when describing her goal for English learning stating, “I want to speak English like native speaker and I want to talk with them” (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020). Just as the media that she enjoyed primarily originated from inner-circle countries like the US and the UK, Tenka wished to acquire “natural” or “casual” language like slang phrases (just as her mother had) used by so-called “native speakers” of English. Furthermore, she would often record and listen to herself speaking English in order to finetune her pronunciation— “I wanna get close to the native speakers.” (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020). In a number of her university classes, her teachers had promoted the idea of intelligibility and communicative competence being desirable as opposed to the notion of complete mastery of “perfect” grammar or spoken English. However, while she objectively saw the value of these perspectives, Tenka revealed that she was not able to internalize them in reality due to the considerable influence of her preformed desires or preconceived notions of language learning success.

It's my kind of stereotype. Yeah. Maybe because I took *Bunka Komyuunikeeshonron* (Intercultural Communication [class]) and I could learn, we can contact each other and communicate with people without perfect grammar or talking, yeah, I learn, but (laughs) I care about that. (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020)

Tenka’s desire to “*chikaduketai*” (want to get closer to) the “native speakers” of English that she “adored” (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020) was one decisive factor in

her choice to come to the university featured in this study. She came with her mother to an open campus visit before enrolling and found that it was like “*gaikoku*” (a foreign country), thought the SAC was “new and amazing” (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019), and was attracted by eikaiwa-oriented facilities like the Chat Space where she could improve her speaking with foreign teachers.

Tenka: I thought when I was a high school student, I thought, wow, it’s very *gaikoku mitai* (like a foreign country).

Researcher: Why, why did you think that?

Tenka: When I saw first time?

Researcher: *Koukou no toki* (When you were in high school). Why did you think [the university] is like a foreign country?

Tenka: Because when I participated in summer touring, open campus... and there were some English teachers, native speakers and senpai lead people, students and parents, a lot of things. (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020)

However, when Tenka started her university classes, she was shocked to find that many of her classmates did not share the enthusiasm that she had towards improving English proficiency. She expressed disappointment and frustration that students would often attempt to subvert the English-only policy in class and would try their best to interact in Japanese without the teacher noticing. Additionally, in the SAC, she would find students continuing to speak in Japanese despite them being in the English-only area on the second floor. This led to feelings of disillusionment within Tenka regarding what she had originally viewed as a *gaikoku* (foreign) environment. In an effort to increase her opportunities to practice her spoken English, Tenka visited the Chat Space a number of times in her first semester and largely enjoyed her experiences there. However, due to her busy schedule, she found that she was unable to go there on a regular basis. It was due to these scheduling issues that Tenka looked

for an alternative place to practice eikaiwa. Eventually, in her second semester at the university in September 2019, Tenka decided to try out the LC.

The domain of the LC was perceived by Tenka to be compatible with her desire to “use English daily in the future” and her akogare for foreign things and “native speakers” of English. She believed that one of the main goals of the LC members was “to talk with native speaker very casually” (Interview 2, January 15, 2020) and that this was reflected in the community’s focus on learning casual or slang phrases. Tenka found that this desired knowledge (slang) was not generally focused on in a classroom setting and instead determined that she needed to learn it from friends who had similar interests. This was an additional reason for her respecting those who had studied abroad as they had gained experience in “something related to foreigner(s)” (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020) and were more likely to have come into contact with what she saw as “natural” English. The fact that the LC leaders also encouraged the use of the DMM Eikaiwa website also contributed to an environment where Tenka thought she could develop her knowledgeability in this area. This website gave her access to knowledge of “casual” language from “native speakers” that stood in contrast to what she saw as the more academically-framed knowledge found in regular dictionaries.

So, at the first time I thought we have to use dictionary because there are exact sentence or exact definition. So but Ryoya said, if you want useful or casual [English] or we often using language from DMM [Eikaiwa] or other books or some Internet pages. So yeah. Now I can understand why he said so. Maybe we can learn from native speaker or people who live in other countries with their experiences of their life. (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020)

Thus, from Tenka’s perspective, both the particular knowledge that was sought out and constructed in the LC and its apparent community goals were very much in alignment with

both the past influence of her mother and her internationally-oriented goals for her future. It followed, therefore, that Tenka seemed to value the LC's practice and wished to establish her legitimate membership within the community.

On her first visit to the LC, Tenka found that other members could speak English well and was, of course, impressed that many of them had experienced study abroad. She also had a favorable impression of the LC leaders in terms of their kindness, their accessibility, and the knowledge that they were able to provide to younger students like her. As near-peers she compared the LC leaders favorably with teachers on duty at the Chat Space as she found the reduced power gap meant that she could ask them questions more easily and speak with them more "roughly." In addition to the reduced power gap, Tenka highlighted the value of commonality between herself and the LC leaders due to the fact that "the leaders have experienced the university life, at this university and other students. I'm also student so we can share the same opinions or different thing" (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020).

However, despite her initially positive view of the LC as a place to develop her conversational English, Tenka soon came to find that the nature of the community created stresses for her based not on linguistic proficiency, but rather on social relationships. On her first visit to the LC, she noted that friendship groups had already largely been established between members and that this made it hard for her to participate. Furthermore, Tenka found that almost all members had already experienced study abroad, a target of *akogare* for her—"I want to do this so bad" (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019), and that her lack of common knowledge in this area meant that she felt socially isolated in the LC. Furthermore, because most students were English majors (unlike her), she lacked the wealth of chances that they had to further strengthen their social connections outside of the regular meetings. Tenka also stated that her personality played a part in these issues. She viewed a typical LC member as "*sekkyokuteki*" (proactive) and "positive," but also stated that she felt many students were "too

strong” for her (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019) and hinted that they did not behave in a manner that she was accustomed to in her experiences up to that point.

Tenka: Yeah, but to be honest, some of them was kind of too strong for me. How can I say?

Researcher: In what way?

Tenka: They are, their type is not same of us, of me. So sometimes it’s hard to talk with them. (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019)

This sense of displacement was compounded by the way that some students would not use *keigo* (honorific language) when conversing with their *senpai* (e.g., the LC leaders). She indicated that this atypical behavior was initially a shock for her but also something she saw as desirable as she felt it allowed those students to “make good relationships” (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019). However, she stated that she could not bring herself to speak to her *senpai* in this manner and that using honorific language in the LC was her “*kuse*” (habit) that made her feel more comfortable (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020). Tenka would also frequently refer to herself as “*shoushinmono*” (a timid person) or “*hikaeme*” (reserved), meaning that she felt uncomfortable expressing herself or exercising her agency in the LC initially. This sense of powerlessness when compared with other “strong” members of the community meant that although she desired a more central future role in the LC, there also existed in her mind the possibility that she would remain perpetually on the periphery or even leave the community altogether. Tenka’s rupture related to the LC’s social dynamics was compounded by aforementioned frustrations over student violations of English language policy in the university. Similar to what she had witnessed in her classes and in the English-only areas of the SAC, Tenka found that some LC members would stop speaking English during conversation practice time and revert to casual chat with their friends in Japanese. She viewed this as “kind of a bad thing” (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019) but stated that

her personality and peripheral position in the community meant that she was for all intents and purposes unable to affect change in this area. Tenka believed this situation was “difficult to solve [and] I’m very *shoushinmono* (timid) so it’s kind of hard to move positively. But I can just use English and just talk with them” (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019).

Despite her critical view of this behavior in the LC, Tenka clarified that it was not the practice of using Japanese per se that caused her discomfort, but rather that it represented a breach of the LC/class/SAC rules. In fact, on other occasions she indicated that she did recognize and appreciate the value of L1 support for language learners and, indeed, its more localized role in the LC CoP. When Tenka discussed introducing one of her friends to the LC, she specifically referred to the bilingual language policy as a beneficial or attractive characteristic of the community.

You can practice speaking English and vocabulary or grammar because in that group they can use English, they can use Japanese also. So, if you can’t understand, you can use Japanese and you can check each other or you can ask senior students. So, you don’t have to be more nervous or need not hesitate. (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019)

Therefore, as opposed to seeking an English-only policy for the LC in principle, it appeared that Tenka was perhaps just experiencing frustration over what was from her perspective the failure of some members to align with the domain and reified rules of the community. In addition, her self-ascribed status as “*shoushinmono*” (timid) and the lack of agency within the LC that she felt partly stemmed from this, contributed to how keenly she felt about these breaches of community norms. Furthermore, as one can see from her negative perception of L1 use in her English classes, Tenka’s perspective on the LC’s practice was also colored by her experiences in a number of different CoPs that she was participating in simultaneously. One influential example of a CoP that framed Tenka’s perspective on the LC



was a public-speaking class that she was enrolled in during her first year. During the time of her initial rupture upon entering the LC, Tenka spoke highly of this class, stating that it was “the best for me now” (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019). In contrast to the LC, Tenka was able to enter this CoP at the same time as the other members and therefore found it far easier to build social connections with them. Furthermore, she positioned the members of this class (as “friendly” and “polite”) in opposing terms to the LC members/social atmosphere (“too strong” and “*hairizurai*” (hard to enter)) (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). She also commented that the public speaking class gave her many opportunities to practice speaking English while also providing an environment that she felt more comfortable in.

If I can talk with students in public speaking class, I feel good. However, if I couldn’t speak or I couldn’t talk well in [the LC], I compared with them. I prefer public speaking class maybe to [the LC], but I want to [participate more]. I’m so shy maybe. (Tenka, Interview 1, December 4, 2019)

Tenka’s relative positioning of these communities, however, evolved over time due to several different factors. The first change that occurred was that she found that the teacher in charge of the public speaking class chose to create an environment that emphasized competition among students and told each of them that they should “won (sic) the first place” (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020). Tenka felt that this increased pressure created anxiety that in turn negatively affected her motivation for the course. She also stated that her “*shoushinmono*” (timid) identity began to manifest in the class due to her tendency to compare herself with her “fluent” classmates. Conversely, this caused Tenka to view the LC in a more favorable light, highlighting the fact that while there was pressure from social relationships, as an environment for language practice, the LC was preferable to her. This was largely because “we can talk about anything, any topic and not high pressure” and “if I make mistake...they never mind” (Tenka, Interview 2, January 15, 2020).

Just as her perspective on the role or value of the LC changed over time, so did her perspective on language policy and more specifically the role of Japanese both inside the community. Although during her first year in university Tenka had indicated that she saw the utility of L1 use in certain situations, she held predominantly negative views of Japanese use in class and at certain times in the LC. However, in her second year she stated that Sara advised her that language practice did not have to be conducted “so seriously” and that there were benefits to using Japanese “to help or to build our opinions” (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). From this point, Tenka took a softer line on Japanese use and she frequently codeswitched in later LC meetings, especially in order to scaffold freshman members’ understanding of English phrases and encourage them to participate more actively in conversation. Congruent with these actions, she believed that Japanese could help her to express terms or concepts with no appropriate English translation or to scaffold interactions if “friends or people or classmates seems or sounds not understand what I want to say” (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). As suggested in the previous quotation (“classmates”), this increased tolerance of L1 use was not limited to the LC, and, indeed, Tenka stated that Sara’s perspective had even impacted her view of classroom Japanese use. Due to the aforementioned interactions with Sara, Tenka stated that, “...I feel it’s okay to use Japanese in class. It’s very helpful. Sometimes very helpful for students to understand what I wanna say” (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). One can observe here how Tenka’s experiences and evolving beliefs emerging from her participation in the LC were seemingly modifying her perspectives on practice occurring in other communities in which she claimed membership.

With Tenka’s growing familiarity with the LC and her evolving learner beliefs came a change in her self-perception within the community. She gradually became more and more comfortable with her position in relation to other members and this was, perhaps counterintuitively, due to the necessary shift of the LC to an online format as a result of the

COVID-19 pandemic. For Tenka, the LC being conducted on Zoom signified a flattening of what she regarded as barriers created by existing friendships and cliques. She described how seeing members on their own individual screens was “easy to start conversation” for her (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020). In addition, she saw her new position as senpai in relation to new freshmen as helping her to relax and enjoy interactions more.

Because when I participated at [the university face-to-face], there were awkward students and some of them are already became friends, many friends. So sometimes I couldn't participate in their talking. But online maybe I think it's kind of equality to talk each person. So maybe all of the student pay attention [to] each students, so it's very easy to talk and, and also there were freshmen, new students so yeah, I'd be more comfortable and easy to talk with them. (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020)

The presence of new freshmen LC members also stimulated altruistic tendencies in Tenka as she expressed a strong desire to “help them in many ways”. In most LC sessions, Tenka would behave proactively in this regard as she would animatedly react to what freshmen were saying, clap them, ask follow-up questions, and compliment them on their ideas. This may have even influenced her plans for the future as Tenka explained how she was considering not only a career in drama, but also teaching because she loved her *kōhai* (juniors) and wanted to “tell my knowledge or experiences to *shita no sedai* (the next generation)” (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020). This desire to support new members accompanied Tenka's growing sense of competence within the LC. She stated that due to her English improving through her regular classroom studies and her experience in the LC, she felt that she was not “learn[ing] new things so much” (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020). However, she expressed her desire to continue attending the weekly sessions as she recognized that although things were easier for her, new freshmen were bringing new ideas and topics with them that she found interesting. Finally, Tenka's role as guiding senpai and

her developing identity as a competent English user were accompanied by a growing confidence and self-acceptance. The aforementioned equality of the interpersonal relationships brought about by the Zoom format was further enhanced as community artifacts like the online feedback survey allowed Tenka to actively contribute to the content of meetings (she proposed one conversation topic via the survey that was well received by attendees). Of course, there were still occasions when Tenka experienced a lack of confidence or motivation. At these times, she found that reflective dialogue with learning advisors or teachers allowed her to “*mochinaosu*” (recover) (Tenka, LLH, November 24, 2019), examine her own feelings, and regain a more positive perspective on the learning process.

All of these internal and external factors contributed to Tenka eventually abandoning her “*shoushinmono*” (timid) persona. She felt that she became able to say whatever she felt to other LC members and grew into someone who could appreciate rather than regret the differences between herself and others relating to her personality or hobbies.

Tenka: And also, I can accept myself. I am kind of positive, outgoing, but I, for example, I love drawing pictures, reading books, it’s kind of not so outgoing, but I accept now and not compared with people negatively.

Researcher: Oh, great. That sounds like a positive change.

Tenka: (laughs) Yeah, positive change. (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19th 2020)

Her attitudes and “unconscious custom” relating to senpai/kōhai relationships and the use of honorific language were an example of Tenka’s growing self-acceptance as she viewed the topic in a far more nuanced and balanced fashion. While before she had *akogare* (longing) for those who did not use *keigo* (honorific language) with the LC leaders and other senpai—viewing it as a means of building close social ties and an expression of “foreignness”—she came to “accept [her]self” and realized that using *keigo* also has positive aspects.

However, now I don't mind those things. Yeah, maybe I could accept myself. Yeah.

Better than last time and past time. And also, maybe I realized some people don't care about using keigo. So, if people use keigo or not use keigo, that's okay for them, or maybe those senpai or those teachers don't mind. (Tenka, Interview 4, November 19, 2020)

Through these areas of growth as both a community member and as a person, Tenka appeared to be exercising her agency within the LC by internalizing the facets of its practice that mattered to her while also possessing the confidence to accept that she need not align with every norm that she encountered within it. Tenka's experiences in the LC thus represent examples of the community having the potential to simultaneously shape and be shaped by each individual within it according to its relevance in their individual lifelong learning journeys.

#### **7.5. Discussion: What do Kei, Sara, and Tenka tell us?**

The experiences of Kei, Sara, and Tenka represent complex and dynamically shifting learning journeys across an educational landscape of practice. Their unique lifelong trajectories and how they influence and are influenced by the LC further call into question the notion of CoP participation as stable or monolithic. However, one is also able to identify a number of analytical themes running through each member's story that can contribute to a richer understanding of some key ways in which individuals identify or are accountable to a CoP. In this section, I will be examining four salient themes that I identified from my abductive analysis of these three learning journeys:

- External influences on the LC
- Influence of multimembership
- Boundary crossing and rupture
- Reciprocity

### *7.5.1. External influences*

In line with Roberts' (2006) claim that a CoP "[does] not exist in a vacuum" (p. 634), in this section, I explore Kei, Sara, and Tenka's trajectories across an English learning landscape of practice and also analyze the position of the LC in those trajectories. To this end, I illustrate how their actions were mediated by sociocultural (macro) and institutional (meso) factors and a confluence of influences from their pasts, presents, and futures.

Each learner's experience across space and time reveals a multitude of ways in which sociocultural factors underpinned their desire to join the LC and subsequently shaped how they evaluated its practice. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the influence of mass media. From Kei's childhood dream of talking with Cameron Diaz, Sara's fascination with the idealized New York lifestyle of *Gossip Girl*, and Tenka's lifelong love of Cartoon Network, we can observe how Western media facilitated each member's international mindset and a sense of *akogare* towards "native" varieties of English. Arguably, this was also connected with a shared "native-centric" perspective on English use where these learners (in particular Sara and Tenka) appeared to feel accountable to American or British standards of English. This was manifested in their investment in acquiring knowledge of slang phrases and attempting to "get close" to "native" pronunciation. Furthermore, in Sara's essentialist and self-discriminating presuppositions about the physical or behavioral limitations of Japanese to become confident speakers of English, one can arguably detect the marriage of *nihonjinron* and native-speakerist ideologies (see sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3.). However, the power imbalance (if "native" English was "natural," their English was by definition unnatural and flawed) entwined with these ideological positions sometimes led to an unexpectedly conflictual and problematic relationship with the focus of their *akogare*—the realm of the "native speaker." Because of the comparatively "foreign" nature of the Chat Space, difficulties they had interacting with *ryuugakusei* (foreign exchange students), and the deficit-framing of themselves in relation to

their linguistic and cultural “native” ideal, both Kei and Sara saw the “*atarashii* (new) perspective” (Kei, Interview 2, March 14, 2020) of the LC as an alternative to learning from “native speakers.” Although mainly responding to practical realities (need for interlocutors in an EFL environment), Kei also regarded the passivity of LC members in the presence of “native speakers” as a debilitating phenomenon and was critical of the desire to learn slang in the LC. Furthermore, Sara’s traumatic experience talking to *ryuugakusei* and her aversion to environments like the Chat Space, where people were ranked or judged by “native speakers” were key reasons for her growing identification with the LC CoP. These reactions may be understood as instances of counter framing where Kei and Sara responded to “conflicts or crises between their experiences and the dominant framing” (native speakers are the ideal means of developing English proficiency), and “construct[ed] alternative interpretations of their situation” (Lowe, 2022, p. 242) based on their practical and/or psychological needs. In contrast to Tenka who appeared to have fully embraced an *akogare* towards “native speakers,” the importance of near-peer role models like Keiko and Yonekura Ryoko for Kei and Sara also arguably represented “frame transformation.” Kei and Sara’s desire to emulate other Japanese people who were proficient English users indirectly challenged some of the other self-discriminating or native-speakerist beliefs they may hold or have held in the past. Additionally, despite her strongly “native”-centric *akogare*, Tenka’s more positive attitude towards L1 use within English learning that came out of her experiences in the LC may also be interpreted as an example of counter framing in the face of English-only, *eikaiwa*-oriented discourses in her regular classes and the university more broadly. Consequently, through these case studies, one can understand how the antecedent conditions of different learners and the sociocultural or ideological baggage they bring with them (Falout et al., 2015) can lead them to desire membership in different imagined communities, come to resist or question these desires, or indeed take both positions simultaneously.

If sociocultural influences represent a *macro* framing of the LC, then further observable external influence emerged at a *meso* or institutional level, i.e., the SAC. The local technical culture (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004) of the SAC permeated the LC's borders in various ways and had a hand in shaping its domain, community, and practice and even its members' lives after having left the CoP. Perhaps the most fundamental expression of the SAC's autonomy-supportive culture was the fact that the leaders were essentially left to decide every facet of the LC's development by themselves while also being offered resources and support. These learners' stories reveal that the LC was a nurtured community with legitimate student ownership but also with access to opportunities for reflective dialogue with institutional allies like Keiko if they needed it. The concepts of IRD or advising may then be termed as a reified boundary object (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b) that at times spanned the boundary between the local (LC) and the broader landscape of the SAC. While IRD within the SAC acted as a means of supporting students and fostering their enhanced reflection and autonomy, for Kei, Sara, and Tenka it represented a mediational means to unpack and make sense of their experiences and related anxieties within the community. In the cases of Kei and Sara, their training and experience as peer-advisors in the SAC and the impact of Keiko as their role model appeared to have influenced them in advocating for autonomy-supportive leadership styles and a deemphasizing of *jouge kankei* (seniority-based hierarchy) within the LC. Both were also firm in their belief that each generation of the LC leadership or domain should be given space to innovate and develop autonomously rather than merely reproducing the culture of previous iterations of the community. Thus, they can be defined as brokers (Wenger, 1998) —able to grasp both the local needs and competence of the LC while also drawing upon knowledge produced at the meso level (within the SAC) and at the macro level (academic theories underpinning learner advising and learner autonomy). These expressions of leadership in the LC were therefore



coherent with the SAC's overall mission and represented an example of the community's alignment with a broader institutional culture. Another way that the institutional setting influenced the LC CoP was the perception of the SAC as a pseudo-foreign space. In this way, we see the sociocultural and the institutional as inseparable with the heterotopic and liminal nature of the SAC (both and neither foreign and Japanese) reflecting the broader *akogare* (longing) for foreignness that these learners experienced through mass media. In addition, Kei and Sara frequently positioned the LC in relation to another community within the SAC, the Chat Space. In essence, if there were no Chat Space, it would be unlikely that the LC would have been created, as the language policy, focus on accessibility, and its flattened power structure that formed its "concept" were all arguably developed to contrast what Kei, Sara, and the other leaders had experienced when attempting to enter the Chat Space. These learners' historical experiences within the Chat Space had profound effects on their learning trajectories and the LC for them can be seen to represent a hybridized approach (elements of both *eigo* and *eikaiwa*) and an "identity of non-participation" (Norton, 2001; Wenger, 1998) in response to the pure *eikaiwa* approach of the Chat Space.

The knowledgeability that each learner hoped to develop across their "learning careers" also represented a blurring of past, present, and future. The competence that was developed or required in the concrete and imagined communities that they participated in or sought to participate in was internalized or disregarded based on their own evolving personal goals and identities. As previously discussed, an international mindset or *akogare* for foreign things or people appeared to drive their participation in the LC. This was further stimulated by the presence of near-peer role models (Kei's *senpai*, Keiko, Kei and the other LC leaders, Tenka's mother, Tenka's drama teacher, etc.). These figures acted as evidence that language learning success or membership in their desired future imagined communities was indeed possible for someone like them (Bandura, 1997; Murphey, 1998). Furthermore, Japanese near-

peer role models who were fluent English users and successful members of imagined international communities such as Keiko and Yonekura Ryoko challenged assumed dichotomies such as “Japanese” (lacking in English ability) and “native speaker” (owners of English proficiency). The *akogare* that Sara and Kei had towards these figures “transgress[ed] or undermine[d] such traditional dichotomic boundaries” and sustained their language learning efforts by embodying “just the right amount of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Nonaka, 2018, p. 136). Conversely, past negative experiences in certain communities also appeared to shape their sense of desired knowledgeability by creating identities of dissociation or non-participation. In the case of Kei and Tenka, the pressure and perceived impracticality of their *juken*-focused high school classes had a marked impact on their perceptions of desirable or “attractive” learning (local competence). Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Sara’s and Kei’s experiences of the English-only environment of the Chat Space had a similarly powerful impact on their trajectories across the landscape and led them to create a third space between the ideologies of *eigo* and *eikaiwa*. In the case of Kei and Sara, their sense of knowledgeability was further expanded in the present as they internalized the autonomy-supportive competence of the SAC. The training they received as peer advisors and the support they gained as advisees and LC leaders expanded their knowledgeability beyond the scope of language learning and afforded them a meta-awareness of group dynamics and motivational processes. In Kei’s case, upon becoming a high school teacher, this expanded knowledgeability would represent both a point of conflict with that school’s local competence and a source of strength for him during this period of rupture.

Kei, Sara, and Tenka’s experiences reveal to us the necessity of viewing a CoP not as existing within a bubble, but instead as a point of convergence in terms of both structure and agency, the individual and the social, as well as the past, present, and future. Within the LC, meaning and competence are constantly evolving and being renegotiated based on both

internal and external forces. If we ignore these forces, we wholly fail to grasp the essence of the community.

### ***7.5.2. Multimembership***

A further dynamic that appeared to color these learner's perceptions of the LC CoP was that of multimembership. As opposed to the external influences explored in the previous section, my discussion of multimembership relates to the multiple communities that Kei, Sara, and Tenka participated in alongside their time in the LC. I will illustrate the reciprocal relationships (affected by and affecting) between the LC and other CoPs and how they were not fixed, but rather appeared to evolve over time. I will also explore the role of Kei as a liminal figure and broker between the LC and other communities across the landscape of the SAC.

One example of membership in other CoPs influencing the practice of the LC can be seen in Sara's membership in her volunteer circle stimulating her desire to create more opportunities to actively contribute to the community for peripheral members. This resolve was further strengthened by the leadership training that she participated in through the SAC. Sara's status as a peer advisor and the resulting ties that formed with learning advisors such as Keiko meant that she became part of the institutional fabric of the SAC and thus led her to align more closely with its autonomy-supportive domain. Furthermore, Sara's experiences from both sides of the advising desk (due to her weekly sessions with Keiko) further contributed to a heightened awareness of the stresses and emotional needs of other learners. Kei's story is perhaps an even clearer case in point as he essentially created and fleshed out the foundations of the LC in collaboration with his co-founders and the SAC as Keiko acted as an autonomy-supportive mentor for him during the CoP's early stages. Although Kei struggled to enact a more distributed or autonomy-supportive style of leadership due to the fledgling nature of the LC, his membership in the institutional CoP of the SAC arguably helped to lay

the foundations for the evolutions that were to happen in the generations of LC leadership that followed. A particularly interesting case of the dialectical relationship that can exist across multiple CoPs can be observed from Tenka's early fraught experiences in the LC and her related perspectives on her public speaking class. Tenka's shock over the seemingly low motivation among her classmates to adhere to the English-only policy in her compulsory English classes was compounded when she experienced similar behavior in the LC. She, therefore, became rather disillusioned with the LC from the outset and this was compounded by the social barriers that she felt existed due to friendship groups already having been formed. Contrarily, Tenka framed the public speaking class as the antidote to the problems she had experienced in these other CoPs. Language policies were strongly enforced, her classmates were extremely driven to develop their English proficiency, and because they had all joined at the same time, she did not feel socially excluded. The public speaking class came to symbolize what the LC and her regular classes were not—a welcoming environment with a common goal shared by her peers. Due in part to the impact of the public speaking class, Tenka's participation in the LC represented *engagement without alignment* as she took part in the activities but felt resistance to the casual bilingual setting. As Tenka's view of the public speaking class changed, so too did her framing of the LC and, more broadly, the role of the L1 in language learning. Both evolving experiences (public speaking class and LC) coalesced and constructed a new perspective on translanguaging that extended to her participation in other CoPs like her regular English classes. Through this example we can observe how the framing of CoPs in an LoP may be mutually constitutive while also remaining fluid and subject to dramatic multiple reframings over time.

One final manifestation of multimembership in relation to the LC comes in the form of Kei's slightly ambiguous identity within the LC and his brokering attempts between communities. As previously highlighted, Kei did not necessarily regard himself as a typical

LC member due to his inward trajectory within the Chat Space and his high communicative competence and confidence in a wide range of settings in the SAC. Put differently, within the context of the LC, Kei saw himself not as “a man of the people” but rather “a man for the people” (Scott, 2000, 1:49:12) as he wanted to use what he had learned to better support those who could not do as he had done. One way in which Kei was able to use his membership in communities beyond the LC’s purview was to invite ryuugakusei (foreign exchange students) that he had met in other capacities within the SAC to join LC sessions. The presence of foreign students was likely to have had considerable symbolic weight to students like Sara and Tenka with strong international mindsets. However, these boundary encounters between the LC and communities like the Chat Space (where ryuugakusei and foreign teachers were frequently present) were viewed by Kei as not wholly facilitative as he felt this served to heighten the passivity of LC members. This brokering event, therefore, highlights the difficulties that power imbalances between CoPs within an LoP can cause and foregrounds the notion that boundary encounters may be simultaneously learning asset and point of dissonance. It is not the case that an authoritative figure from another CoP within the landscape would necessarily take over the practice of another (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b). However, one must also recognize the political nature of a landscape—such as “native-centric” practices in Japanese ELT (Lowe, 2020b)—and the impact of boundary crossing on local practices.

### ***7.5.3. Boundary crossing***

Upon reading these three learner’s stories, one might argue that the central theme of their experiences in relation to the LC is that of transition. Sara sought to gain membership in a community in which she could experience a sense of acceptance and competence while working towards her goal of becoming an international actress. Tenka’s experiences centered around the gradual process of accepting and situating herself within the broader university

environment and the micro context of the LC. Finally, Kei's transition was first from a student to a leader and then later experiencing rupture as he transitioned out of the sphere of the SAC and into the professional world of high school teaching. What all of these stories share is the struggle of transferring locally-formed competences and identities across boundaries, the liminal states that emerge from these transitions, and the different resources that mediate individuals' journey across this landscape.

As discussed in the previous chapter and in section 7.5.1., the LC can be interpreted as a liminal third space where *eigo* (L1 use, word/sentence level translation) and *eikaiwa* (conversational practice, "native-normative" focus) co-exist. From Kei, Sara, and Tenka's stories, however, we can understand that the LC is not only a site of liminality, but also a response to it. On a meso-scale, the university as a whole, and in particular the SAC, represents a liminal space or "a world between worlds" (Stenner, 2017) in that the technical culture is both inside and outside of Japan. It was, in fact, partly for this reason that these three learners chose to enroll there as it was compatible with their international mindset and their accountability to "native" or *eikaiwa* oriented models of English learning. In this sense, the SAC represented a form of devised liminality (Stenner, 2017) that Kei, Sara, and Tenka entered of their own volition. In this sense, both the practices (or rituals) of the SAC (meso) and the LC (micro) could be defined as "liminal affective technologies" in that they "[produce] *moving* experiences that are conducive of psychosocial transformation" (Stenner, 2017, italics original). However, upon entering the university, all three learners all experienced rupture due to the "in-between" nature of the environment. In the case of Kei and Sara, they initially struggled to adapt to the culture of the Chat Space with its English-only policy and seemingly closed atmosphere. The competence they had developed in the *eigo*-focused CoPs that they had largely participated in up to that point did not translate into the Chat Space's (*eikaiwa*/internationally oriented) regime of competence and this led to feelings of

displacement and identity disconfirmation. It was due to these “*tsurai*” (hard) experiences that Kei decided to create the LC and why both him and Sara believed its domain should be heavily weighted towards accessibility for other “*ibasyo ga nai... hito*” (people with nowhere to belong) (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020). Those students who Kei and Sara regarded as falling between the cracks in the SAC and were in essence structurally invisible (Turner, 1967, cited in Beech, 2010) became the perceived focus of the LC’s practice. In Tenka’s case the liminality of the university and the SAC affected her in a different way as she experienced a number of “uh oh” moments (Stenner, 2017) due to the tendency of other students to subvert the English-only policies in classes and the SAC. At the SAC Tenka sought out an international environment within Japan where as a surrogate for study abroad she could develop the *eikaiwa*-oriented knowledgeability she desired. However, she found that the SAC and the LC were instead “in between worlds” and experienced displacement as a result (Igarashi, 2016). Tenka’s feelings of discomfort were exacerbated within the LC due to the carnivalesque nature (Bakhtin, 1984) of the LC where traditional *jouge kankei* hierarchical relationships had often been challenged by a flattened power structure. Paradoxically due to its departure from Japanese cultural norms, the *communitas* among LC members whether they were *senpai* or *kōhai* was unfamiliar and jarring to Tenka, symbolizing another way in which she felt a disconfirmation of identity (Fenton-O’Creevy et al., 2015b) within the CoP.

As with many instances of liminality, boundary crossing, and transitional rupture, there exists the potential for either personal growth and identity redefinition or alienation and constraint (Fenton-O’Creevy et al., 2015b; Kubiak et al., 2015a; Zittoun, 2008; Ybema et al., 2011). Just as the devised liminality of an SLS can represent a “space of possibilities” (Murray, 2018, p. 110), it also has the potential for displacement and anxiety (Igarashi, 2016; Stenner, 2017). The potentiality of forming new knowledge, and ultimately a new self, must necessarily come with a decoupling from the comforting familiarity of the past. In Kei, Sara,

and Tenka's stories we see a number of occasions where cognitive, social, and symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2008) are utilized in order to mediate the rupture they negotiate as they experience transition and liminal states throughout their journeys. In certain elements of the LC's domain (e.g., language policy, intentional vocabulary study, word/sentence translation) the previous competence that they had developed from ego-oriented CoPs (cognitive resources) was legitimized and operationalized in order to facilitate more active participation from new members transitioning into the community. Peers, community leaders, and learning advisors (social resources) provided them with affective support, acted as role models they could aspire to, and allowed them to develop roles that afforded opportunities to contribute to the day-to-day practice of the LC. Finally, the influence of mass media (movies, dramas, animation, books, etc.) and academic concepts such as learner autonomy or autonomy-supportive leadership offered them a window into imagined communities that they saw the LC as coherent with (symbolic resources). We see these resources deployed both as they transitioned into the university/SAC/LC (Kei, Sara, and Tenka) and also as Kei transitioned out of higher education into the sphere of high school teaching.

#### ***7.5.4. Reciprocity***

The fourth and final theme that I will address here is that of reciprocity in relation to the LC and other imagined communities. Through these learners' stories we can observe a number of instances where they express a desire to return the support that they received at meso (SAC) or micro (LC) levels. However, I also feel that this represents but one side of the story as we arguably also encounter a number of examples where Kei, Sara, and Tenka express the desire to contribute to broader missions across the landscape, beyond the physical communities they have participated in and into the realm of the imagined. In addition, I regard the reciprocity of these acts as cyclical. The contributions these learners made are not simply



paying back benevolent acts from others and setting things even, but rather further contributing to their sense of personal value and competence.

Throughout Kei, Sara, and Tenka's stories, we can observe multiple occasions where they express a desire to support "beginners," "kōhai," or "*ibasyo ga nai... hito*" (people with nowhere to belong). Their beliefs and actions throughout their time in the LC appear to be largely consistent and coherent with the LC's reified "concept" of accessibility and openness. At the most fundamental level, one could argue that the LC itself is a reification of reciprocity. Kei formed the community as a reaction to the hardships he expressed in the Chat Space as a freshman and due to his perception that a considerable proportion of SAC users were being marginalized within the status quo at that time. Although he had, in fact, developed a level of proficiency and social capital within the SAC that would allow him to comfortably participate in the Chat Space (and indeed any other CoP in the SAC), the LC was created seemingly out of a sense of obligation to the SAC as an institution and to future generations of its users. Both Kei and Sara's multimembership in communities like peer advisors and the leadership course and their powerful *akogare* to their near-peer role model, Keiko, contributed to a sense of alignment with the autonomy-supportive mission of the SAC. Kei's desire to expand the community to multiple time slots so as to better serve the wider user base of the SAC highlights the mission-based perspective and his vision at an institutional scale. Furthermore, his assertion that the "*atarashii* (new) concept" of the LC (Kei, Interview 1, February 15, 2020) represented an important way for Japanese students to develop independently of "native speakers" indicates that he regarded the LC as having even broader implications for a (macro) imagined community of Japanese English learners.

The intentions that these learners expressed to address perceived problems or repay kindness was, understandably, tied to their language learning histories. There was often a sense that Kei, Sara, and Tenka sought to remedy past problems that they had experienced and

make sure that the next generation did not have to endure the same degree of negative affect. As previously discussed, the initial creation of the LC symbolizes a response to Kei's memories of initially feeling excluded within the Chat Space. Sara's conviction to emphasize the fallibility of each LC member (especially the leaders) and dissolve the myth of the perpetually-motivated language learner whilst creating a laid-back and fun atmosphere stemmed directly from her own experiences as a freshman. Finally, Tenka came to actively work towards socializing newcomers to the LC and create an atmosphere where they felt listened to and included—in this way Tenka was clearing the path for future “*shoushinmono*” (timid people) so that they did not need to struggle as she had done. This reciprocity was not limited, however, to their present actions within the LC, but instead extended to their future trajectories across the landscape. Sara's intention to use the competence developed in the LC to help orient newcomers into teams and Tenka's emergent desire to perhaps guide the “*shita no sedai*” (next generation) (Tenka, Interview 3, June 13, 2020) via a career in teaching represent examples of reciprocal actions binding past, present, and future. Kei's case, however, is particularly interesting in that he can be seen attempting to extend the knowledgeability that he constructed throughout his journey through the SAC and LC—namely creating accessible and autonomy-supportive environments—to high school English teaching. Although one should certainly not assume that high school English education is homogeneous, from the descriptions Kei provides, it appears that his current environment is comparable to the passive classrooms he inhabited as a high school student. In a sense, his journey across the landscape is symbolic as he moves full circle and attempts to fulfill what he regards as his duty to future versions of himself.

## **7.6. Summary**

In this chapter I have presented three in-depth case studies of three past and present members of the LC. By examining their individual learning trajectories, I have foregrounded

each unique way that structure and agency have influenced the construction of their multifaceted and constantly evolving identities— “multiplied through [their] trajectory across the landscape” (Kubiak et al., 2015a, p. 79). Concomitant with this understanding is the recognition that the LC CoP is inseparable from the influence of each member's ACLs (Falout et al., 2015) and is also undergoing a process of constant innovation and reconstruction. Thus, at micro, meso, and macro scales within a landscape of practice, the existence of the LC is dialectal in nature - both capable of impacting and responding to external forces and the needs of the individuals that compose it. Furthermore, the LC's position is located not only spatially (within a learning landscape) but also temporally (along members' lifelong learning trajectories) —a “discursive space” (Miyahara, 2015) sitting at the intersection of past, present, and future.

So, what does this all mean in practical terms? What is the role for learning communities like the LC, and what insights can be operationalized in order to create conditions for these CoPs to thrive within self-access environments in Japan? In the concluding chapter, I will examine the implications of this study's findings for educators and SAC managers who wish to foster and support such “space[s] of possibilities” (Murray, 2018, p. 110) for learners transitioning across (and often existing betwixt and between) educational worlds. I will also outline the inherent limitations of this study and offer suggestions for expanding on the work done in this thesis.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will start by summarizing the main findings relating to each research question and to the study as a whole. I then discuss the implications of this study for SAC practitioners and researchers and continue by outlining the study's specific limitations. I then conclude the chapter with suggestions for future directions in the areas of both research and practice.

### 8.1. Summary of findings and contributions of this study

In this section, the key findings in relation to Research Question 1 (Chapter 6) and Research Question 2 (Chapter 7) will be summarized and discussed in relation to the contributions that this study makes to the fields of self-access and second language education. Finally, I will turn my attention to the study as a whole and provide an overview of the major insights and points of interest that this ethnographic case study of the LC has developed.

#### *8.1.1. Research Question 1: How does the LC function as a language learning community of practice?*

The first research question focuses on the characteristics and functioning of the LC CoP. By examining the LC through an in-depth ethnographic account of its structure, purposes, challenges, and historic evolution, this study sheds light on an emerging area of SAC participation and management: the student-led learning community (SLC). As discussed in Section 4.8.1., as the facilitation of such SLCs in SACs has been a relatively recent movement within the field, there is a paucity of studies in this area. Consequently, detailed ethnographic accounts are likely to be beneficial in ascertaining what benefits they can offer to both learners and institutions, as well as the challenges that their development is likely to entail (Mynard, 2020a). This study adapted the framework developed by Wenger et al. (2002) of *domain*, *community*, and *practice*, and added the category of *situatedness* in order to account for the far-reaching impact that sociocultural factors and the technical culture (Sato &

Kleinsasser, 2004) of an institution (in this case, a SAC) has on the development of a CoP. It was found that numerous elements of the SAC's technical culture facilitated the LC's creation, survival, and evolution. Firstly, the support provided by Keiko in her official capacity as learning advisor and SAC learning communities coordinator greatly contributed to the emergence of the LC in response to student-perceived problems with the inaccessibility of the Chat Space. With Keiko's administrative support, the original LC members were able to create their own solution to what they saw as an enduring unaddressed problem in the SAC that they had also experienced first-hand when they had attempted to join the Chat Space in the past. A further supportive element was a culture of autonomy support at multiple levels. As the LC continued through different development stages, the multiscalar autonomy (see Section 6.6.3.) of the SAC allowed each level of management (SAC– Amy – Keiko – LC) to engage in light touch facilitation that struck the balance of autonomy and support (Corso et al., 2009) necessary for the cultivation of healthy CoPs. Keiko's role in particular vis-à-vis the LC reinforced this balance of support (providing opportunities for IRD with the LC leaders, offering leadership training, assisting in promotion, mediating administrative issues, securing space and resources) and autonomy. Furthermore, on a meso-level, both Keiko's actions and the LC's practice were in alignment with the autonomy-supportive mission of the SAC. Manifestations of this alignment at the micro-level of the LC's day-to-day practice could be observed in the movement away from *jouge kankei* (seniority-based hierarchical relationships) towards a flattened power dynamic between members, and reifications such as feedback surveys that encouraged distributed leadership. This study, then, offers data-grounded support for Roberts' (2006) assertion that CoPs "do not exist in a vacuum" (p. 634) and highlights the multitude of ways that influences from boundary encounters within an institution's technical culture may permeate the culture of a CoP. In addition, accounts from both LC members and

SAC staff provide concrete examples of how a SAC's technical culture may be engineered in order to increase the likelihood of effective support for SLCs.

The findings from the current study also lend support for the necessity of the recent movement within the field of self-access learning focusing on accessibility for SAC users (JASAL, 2022; Thornton, 2021a). Accessibility was found to be a central element of the LC's domain and perhaps the key underpinning of the community's initial creation. Several participants exhibited signs of an identity of non-participation (Wenger, 1998) in relation to the Chat Space having developed based on historical experiences in which they felt marginalized or excluded. The experiences and skill-building in eigo that the majority of members brought with them as they transitioned into university life did not translate into competence within the eikaiwa-oriented Chat Space with its strict English-only policy. The fractal nature of English learning in Japan meant that the participants of this study were essentially required to learn English as not one, but two subjects (eigo and eikaiwa) with little practical crossover. Consequently, English-only policies and strong eikaiwa-orientation in the Chat Space and their regular university English classes meant that they lacked an environment where they could adequately draw upon the cognitive resources (eigo) that they brought with them from their secondary education. The LC founders and Keiko realized the negative impact that this lack of transitional scaffolding had on many students, and the LC along with its relaxed language policy were primarily created to partly remedy this situation. In addition to the linguistic scaffolding of its hybridized eigo/eikaiwa approach, the LC was also shown to prioritize affective scaffolding and prosociality among its members. A great deal of focus was on acting as social resources (Zittoun, 2008) to reduce anxiety and facilitate feelings of belonging for newcomers and these prosocial behaviors were modeled by both the LC leaders and the other active members. The LC's domain, born in part from their language learning histories, came with a sense of shared identity among other students like them who struggled

with liminal identities (in the transition between secondary education/eigo and tertiary education/eikaiwa). Therefore, this study highlights the need to recognize and support students who may have found themselves structurally invisible (Turner, 1967, cited in Beech, 2010) and stuck between differing conceptualizations of competence as they transition into a new educational sphere. In sum, the hybridization of eigo and eikaiwa and the focus on affective support that the LC CoP developed represent valuable points of reference to those within SACs who hope to mitigate the anxiety and accessibility issues that have been widely reported in the existing self-access literature (Fujimoto, 2016; Fukaba, 2016; Gillies, 2010; Hino, 2016; Hooper, 2020a; Hughes et al., 2012; Kurokawa et al., 2013; Kuwada, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020a).

***8.1.2. Research Question 2: What does participation in the LC represent for its individual members in relation to a broader landscape of practice?***

My second research question shifted its analytical focus from the LC CoP as a coherent whole to its individual members and the ways in which they perceived the community and their participation in it. The rationale behind this analytical decision was to address the erasure of the individual that some (Billett, 2006, 2007; Hughes et al., 2007; Olwig, 2002) have claimed may exist in relation to community studies and CoP theory. Furthermore, by focusing on the particular experiences of individuals rather than simply characterizing them as “LC members,” I hoped to gain insight into the complex feelings of belongingness, isolation, or even conflict that they may hold in relation to the LC. This aim was motivated by perspectives by Kojima and Thompson (2019) and Quinn (2010) (see Section 4.4.2.) that suggest that the supposed harmony the term “community” implies may in fact be masking realities of conflict and ostracism. Therefore, I viewed this section of the study as a complement to the first research question (focusing on seemingly coherent, largely shared traits of the LC CoP), by uncovering the messier, complex details that come with individual experience in social

learning. Therefore, the narrative inquiry approach and the LoP-oriented analytical lens were chosen in order to foreground the rich historical learning trajectories of three past and present LC members (Kei, Sara, and Tenka) across multiple CoPs. Perhaps the key finding from this part of my study was the dialectal relationship between Kei, Sara, and Tenka's framing of the LC CoP's practice in relation to multiple other communities across an LoP. In many cases, the participants' multimembership in various other communities strongly influenced how they perceived meaning they attached to LC participation and how they viewed their own identity as LC members. Conversely, in the opposite direction, their experiences in the LC often impacted how they engaged with other CoPs across an LoP. It must also be noted that these dialectal relationships were constantly in flux and were being frequently renegotiated based on the meaning-making processes taking place simultaneously across multiple CoPs. Seeing the LC's benefits or shortcomings was dependent in part on the constant individual reframing of other communities' practices and the degree of identification of the LC member with each of these CoPs. This finding adds weight to the idea that, in order to truly understand CoP participation and eschew overly-simplistic accounts of community-based learning, it may be beneficial to simultaneously focus on both social (CoP) and individual (LoP) frameworks.

A further point of interest that this section of the study revealed was the role of historical influences on CoP participation. Through the learning trajectories of Kei, Sara, and Tenka, we can observe how habitus or experiences from their past including the presence of role models, demotivational experiences, sociocultural norms, and influences from mass media had far-reaching impacts on how they perceived the LC CoP and their identity within it. These antecedent conditions of the learner (Falout et al., 2015) were found to have had tremendous influence on how they regarded the LC and the extent to which they valued its domain. In fact, one could argue that if it were not for Kei's experiences within the Chat Space, the LC would likely not have been created in the first place. Conversely, Tenka's



strong akogare towards “native” standards of language use stimulated in part by her mother and her love of Western media meant that she often exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards the relaxed language policy and atmosphere of the LC when she first joined. Such framing of LC participation was not restricted to past and present experience, but also was found to be tied to participants’ imagined futures. Tenka and Sara’s akogare for membership in an international imagined community underpinned their continued investment in the LC’s practice. Kei, on the other hand, attempted to apply the learner-centered and supportive environment he had endeavored to create in the LC to liberate future generations of high school students.

The issue of the “baggage” that individuals brought with them to the LC is also tied to a further contribution of this study to the understanding of CoP-based learning – the place of structure, agency and the related issue of power. For example, it can be observed that throughout their language learning trajectories, the participants in this section of the study were all, to varying degrees, influenced by mass media reinforcing a perception of stereotypical Western English speakers and inner-circle varieties of English as representative of “standard” English. This manifested itself not only in the use of DMM Eikaiwa and slang within the LC (see Section 6.3.1.) as part of its domain, but was also found to significantly feature in the past experiences, present perceptions, and future desires of individual members. In Sara’s case, her akogare towards the idealized New York lifestyle of *Gossip Girl* was arguably partially responsible for the deficit “native-framing” (Lowe, 2020b, 2022) of her own pronunciation and her desire for what she perceived as a “natural” or “perfect” English in order to gain membership in an imagined acting community in the US. Such examples highlight how established power structures do not simply dissolve when they reach the borders of a CoP. Because of the two-way street of CoP participation, —each member simultaneously changes (and is changed by) participation—reproduction of power structures may continue

surreptitiously through a community's practice. As this study integrated the concept of "native-framing" (Lowe, 2020b, 2022) as part of a plug-and-play approach (Wenger-Trayner, 2013), I was able to identify concrete incidences of power structure reproduction in individual learners' learning trajectories and gained greater insight into how the native-normative elements of the LC's domain may have formed. This, however, is not the complete picture, and this study contributes data to support the arguments made by Mutch (2003) and Handley et al. (2006) that CoPs should not be viewed in an overly-pessimistic way as groups of learners beholden to power structures and incapable of agentic action. Throughout their time in the LC, we also witness incidences where Kei, Sara, and Tenka appear to question or counter-frame certain "native-centric" practices that potentially disempowered them. For example, Kei realized that relying on "native speaker" interlocutors created a tendency towards passivity among LC members, and this contributed to his concept of the "*atarashii* (new) wind" of the LC where Japanese learners could simply support each other in their language learning. Although one can certainly not claim that the liminal and autonomy-supportive environment of the SAC and the LC CoP represented a compartmentalist (Handley et al., 2006, p. 10) environment free from the impact of established power structures, it did afford possibilities for learners to interrogate certain "common-sense" practices that alienated them and hampered their development as language learners and respond to them as they saw fit. Therefore, one key contribution of this study is the potential role it suggests for SAC-based student-led learning communities as venues for the questioning and renegotiation of established language learning ideologies in order to maintain a sense of competence and well-being.

### ***8.1.3. Conclusions of the current study***

The findings of this study have demonstrated the potential value of a dual-perspective (CoP/LoP) towards CoP-based research. While a CoP framework can indeed offer a great deal

in terms of understanding the nature of participation and reification across a shared domain, community, and practice, the stories from Kei, Sara, and Tenka suggest that this is but one facet of a complex phenomenon. By adopting an LoP lens and focusing on the historical development of individuals, the multitude of different communities they participate in, and the baggage that they bring with them into a CoP, we gain access to valuable new perspectives on the nature of social learning. One element of this is the role of structure and agency. As discussed in the previous section, by examining individual learner narratives we can observe how influences such as mass media, schooling, critical incidents such as traumas, and language ideology are brought with learners into communities and shape their framing of a given CoP. As each CoP member conceivably has an influence on a community's practice, these influences or expressions of habitus may also lead to a shift in the nature of the CoP which results in the reproduction of power structures such as native-speakerism. By contrast, the LC's practice, and indeed the renegotiation of meaning observable in the experiences of individual members, also reveals the potential for agentic action challenging such established "common-sense" structures. Therefore, the example of the LC lends support to the claims made by Mutch (2003) and Handley et al. (2006) that it is neither the pessimism of Bourdieu or the over-optimism of Wenger that characterize learning in CoPs, but rather a middle-ground with the potential for both control and freedom.

The topic of a middle-ground is particularly apt in regards to this study due to the prevalent role that liminality inhabited within it. As discussed in Section 7.5.3., the LC can be viewed as both a site of liminality (eigo/eikaiwa hybridization, foreign/Japanese, jouge kankei being challenged, etc.) and also a response to liminality (transitioning from secondary to higher education, from classroom to SAC, from Japan to heterotopia, from eigo to eikaiwa). In many ways, the LC can be viewed as a means of support for those in transition and in several instances in this study, it was suggested that the LC was a key factor that made the difference

between whether students experienced “uh oh” and “aha” moments in the liminal. Spaces like the Chat Space with its English-only policy and marked foreign atmosphere represented feelings of “uh oh” liminality from many of the LC participants. However, in the LC they were afforded access to social resources (friends, nurturing leaders), cognitive resources (L1 support, ability to draw upon eigo competence), and symbolic resources (near-peer role models, DMM Eikaiwa as surrogate “native speakers”). These transitional resources were recognized as valuable by the LC members due in part to their own historical experiences and were expressions of prosocial behavior aimed at supporting future generations of students. Indeed, as discussed in Section 7.5.4, the LC itself could be regarded as a reification of reciprocity – designed to prevent future generations of learners from experiencing the “uh oh” moments that senior LC members had. This study, then, builds on the Murray and Fujishima’s (2016c) perspectives on heterotopia and displacement and highlights the potential role of student-led learning communities, along with ALL, in directing transitional experiences toward being “aha” moments of developmental change.

## **8.2. Implications**

The findings of this study, while highly contextualized, have a number of implications for both practitioners and practitioner-researchers within the field of English education, and in particular, self-access language learning both within Japan and beyond its borders. In the following sections, I will discuss five implications that I believe can inform future practice in the aforementioned fields.

### ***8.2.1. Mind the gap: Transition and liminality***

Based on the CoP that developed in the LC and the factors that led to its initial formation, it can be argued that Japan-based SACs, and indeed other ELT contexts, need to more deeply consider the impact of the “competing ideologies” of eigo and eikaiwa (Nagatomo, 2022) on learner development. If SACs or classrooms disregard the disjuncture in

terms of local competence across different educational CoPs, we risk exacerbating the alienation felt by students transitioning between them. Students who have focused on building competence in eigo during their secondary education are likely to feel marginalized and lacking in self-efficacy when transitioning into SACs that are aligned solely to a strict eikaiwa approach. Without scaffolding provided for these students in the form of multilingual spaces, learning advisors, peer advisors, or learning communities like the LC that embrace hybridity, it is likely that the majority of students will remain on the edges of a SAC community with no place to belong. SAC staff, be it administrators, advisors, or teachers must be aware of the fact that in the case of English learning in Japan, we are dealing with not one entity, but two. By assuming that students instructed in eigo for the majority of their learning lives will seamlessly attain legitimacy and competence in an environment where there is little to no opportunity for the application of their existing knowledgeability, we are setting them up for failure. That being said, it should not be argued that English-only SLSs like the Chat Space are problematic elements within SACs, but rather that these “extreme” eikaiwa-aligned spaces be one option of many *ibasho* (places to belong) (including multilingual SLSs) rather than being framed as the default model for communicative practice. It is my hope that as SACs continue to develop, they will become more accessible environments that add to learners’ development across the LoP while also acknowledging the knowledgeability that they bring with them.

Another consideration for SAC practitioners is the liminal or heterotopic nature of such spaces and the impact that this may have on learners. The creation of a liminal “world within worlds” (Stenner, 2021) can be seen in the heterotopia of Murray and Fujishima’s (2016b) L-Café, the *otro mundo* (another world) of Polo-Pérez and Holmes’ (2022) Language Café, and indeed, the *ikoku* (foreign) atmosphere of the SAC featured in this study. As discussed at numerous points in this thesis, liminality offers a space of possibilities where the rulebook may be temporarily discarded and noncanonical (Brown & Duguid, 1991) practices may

flourish. Furthermore, in terms of learner identity, the devised liminality of SACs may “propel [learners] out of the commonality of [their] daily lives” (Cabra, 2021, p. 108) and contribute to their transformation into a different person (Stenner, 2021). The transition into the liminality of a SAC is further compounded by the liminal nature of the lived experience of the college student. In university, students transition through a rite of passage where they are commonly temporarily separated from their home community and live and study alongside “transitional others” before they enter the world of work (Beckstead, 2021, p. 88). However, just as Murray and Fujishima (2016c) discussed regarding the *displacement* some students experienced in the L-Café, liminality is a double-edged sword that ought to be handled with care. Transitioning between worlds—be it eigo to eikaiwa, Japan to the international community, or school to university—involves shedding one’s past self and stepping into unfamiliar territory. Such transitions are likely to be accompanied by rupture (Zittoun, 2006) and experiences that may be disappointing or even disturbing (Morgan et al., 2021). We see these “uh oh” moments (Stenner, 2017) in LC members’ feelings of marginalization as to the Chat Space, Tenka’s experiences of social exclusion, and Sara’s traumatic encounter with ryuugakusei (foreign exchange students). Without the ability to draw upon cognitive, social, and symbolic resources in the negotiation of such rupture, there is a fear that this will result in non-developmental change (Zittoun, 2008) where learners feel isolated, fail to take advantage of the affordances around them, and may ultimately discontinue SAC use altogether. Consequently, it is imperative for SACs to both embrace and mediate learners’ transitional liminality by providing opportunities to interact with NPRMs (social resources), access to symbolic resources such as media and learner stories, and spaces in which they can draw upon their existing cognitive resources (eigo/L1). In particular, as can be seen in the experiences of Kei, Sara, and Tenka, the holistic approach of ALL and IRD has a valuable role in mediating the uncertainty of transition. In advising sessions, learning advisors or peer advisors understand

where learners are coming from (their ACLs), listen non-judgmentally to their problems and anxieties, and help them manage their own continued identity and skill development. In this way, ALL can mitigate the displacement of an “uh oh” moment and even transform it into an “aha” moment (Kato & Mynard, 2016) signaling a positive shift in how learners in transition view themselves and the world around them.

### **8.2.2. “Trickle-down” autonomy**

As discussed in Chapter 6, the liminal nature of the SAC facilitated the emergence of a multiscalar autonomy-supportive culture. The importance of this technical culture at multiple points of engagement in relation to the LC cannot be overstated and was in no small part responsible for the continued survival and success of the LC CoP. Brown and Duguid’s (1991) early work on CoPs framed them in counter-culture terms—sites for noncanonical knowledge that contrasted with top-down dictates. Relating to this notion, the case of the LC and the SAC is interesting as the top-down institutional mission of the SAC is grounded in principles of autonomy support. This created a situation that I referred to as “the SAC paradox.” This was based on the question, “How can there be noncanonical practice if autonomy-support is canonical?” In contrast to the corporations in Brown and Duguid’s study, as the SAC’s mission was essentially to foster expressions of autonomy, there were practically no examples of learner initiatives (apart from maybe political/ religious extremism or acts that could endanger others) that were seen as off-limits or noncanonical. This meant that community alignment with the SAC’s principles was practically assured, which in turn contributed to a healthy relationship between institution and CoP. Furthermore, the fact that Keiko, an experienced learning advisor, was the institutional caretaker of the learning communities meant that a light touch approach (this will be expanded on in the following section) afforded these learner-led CoPs the particular blend of autonomy and support (Corso et al., 2009) that they required. At a higher scale, Keiko was given the freedom by Amy to respond to

community needs flexibly and engage in (from the university's perspective) non-standard professional tasks such as brokering practices that mitigated pressure and demands from administration. These tasks in essence cleared obstacles for the LC that might have otherwise impinged on their creativity and autonomy.

The case of the LC highlights the potential value of a multiscalar culture of autonomy within SAC management. This starts with the importance of creating a coherent mission statement congruent with principles of autonomy support that trickles down from management all the way down to the local practice of individual CoPs. If the mission had not been grounded in autonomy support or if one link (SAC mission—Amy—Keiko—LC) had not been aligned with that mission, then it would have been substantially more difficult to support the innovative and hybridized practice that the LC's "concept" was based upon. Just as the LC's local norms featured a duality of reproduction (LC "concept") and innovation (leadership training, enhanced opportunities for member feedback, etc.), the findings of this study suggest the benefit of a SAC's "technical culture" being based on a similar dialectal relationship. An overarching set of autonomy-supportive principles—reified in the form of a mission statement (Mynard, 2016a)—provides a roadmap for a SAC's long-term practice, while maintaining flexibility and eschewing dogmatism ensures management, staff, advisors, and learners have agentic space to innovate based on emergent needs. Furthermore, just as in the case of the LC leaders and Keiko, students and staff acting as institutional boundary crossers or broker may also provide value to both meso and micro levels of practice within a SAC. Keiko's academic knowledge and experience as a language advisor enriched the LC by stimulating evolution in the LC leaders' leadership expressions. On the other hand, Kei's creation of the LC based on his troubling experiences at the Chat Space stands as a powerful example of how SLCs can represent a "barometer" within a self-access environment, raising awareness of surreptitious, unaddressed problems.



### 8.2.3. *Cut them loose (but not adrift)*

In addition to the previously discussed mediational role of ALL as a social resource for learners in transition, this section will suggest the value of ALL as a means of institutional support for SLCs. Corso et al. (2009) emphasize the necessity of “communication tools, incentives, motivation, organizational and managerial mechanisms that, without being intrusive, follow and guide Community life and evolution” (p. 74). The non-directive light touch support role (Bishop et al., 2008) that the IRD with Keiko represented in relation to the LC highlighted how a balance may be struck between maintaining authentic student leadership and providing animation levers that helped to enhance members commitment to the CoP domain and prevent stagnation. The support that Keiko offered to the community from the sidelines was referred to on several occasions as a source of comfort and reassurance for the LC leaders regardless of how often they actually needed her direct assistance. Moreover, boundary encounters with advisors can also symbolize a tacit legitimization of the community by the SAC, essentially providing SLCs with an institutional stamp of approval that may draw in new members from the student body. In this sense, ALL can also be a promotion lever—a lever that enhances “commitment from the organisation” (Corso et al., 2009, p. 85)—as such advising sessions increase an SLCs institutional visibility.

One concrete example of an institutionally-reified animation lever related to the LC was Keiko’s leadership course that Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara completed. This boundary encounter was significant to the health of the LC in a number of ways. Firstly, it functioned as a site where *external benchmarks* (Wenger et al., 2009) in the form of academic knowledge could inform and even enrich the local experience and knowledge that the LC leaders brought with them into the course. This marrying of outsider and insider knowledge was also based on ALL principles of reflectiveness and autonomy support, meaning that although academic theory was offered to the leaders for consideration, it was ultimately their decision over

whether it actually added value to the LC and, if so, in what manner it should be applied. Furthermore, the relationship between CoP and institution ought to be a symbiotic one as the local knowledge that the leaders brought with them can also inform the evolution of the course's content and format over time. From the observational and interview data of the LC's leadership, it was clear that the leadership course did indeed have a discernible impact on the community's evolution and the democratizing expressions of leadership in particular (see Section 6.4.3.). Given the powerful influence that leadership expressions were seen to have on numerous facets of the LC CoP, it seems plausible that ALL-related initiatives such as the leadership course have promising potential for SLC support.

An additional sub-role of advising sessions and boundary objects such as the leadership course was to deepen alignment between the LC and the SAC. Corso et al. (2009) assert that organizational commitment to CoP support can be enhanced by “hav[ing] a cultural foundation that allows the organization to pursue its core values” (p. 86). In this sense also, ALL acts as a promotion lever by exposing CoP members to autonomy-supportive concepts and behaviors that are highly-congruent with a SAC's mission. Through both the medium and content of ALL, autonomy support is modeled by advisors, who then have the potential to influence local practice within SLCs. However, once again, it must be emphasized that learning at the boundaries is not a one-way process (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Through ALL boundary encounters with SLC members, advisors gain a fuller picture of the SAC and receive grassroots knowledge of learner needs which may subsequently lead to innovation of the SAC's “technical culture” (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004).

#### ***8.2.4. Cracks in the concrete***

The following section will discuss implications concerning the interplay of structure and agency that I perceived to exist within the LC and the potential role of SLCs as “safe houses” for ideological counter-framing. As stated in Chapter 5, in contrast to my initial naive

impression of the LC as an antidote to essentialist discourses like native-speakerism and nihonjinron, I came to view the CoP as a site of dynamic interplay between adherence and resistance to these ideological forces. In response to the alienating impact of the pure eikaiwa of the Chat Space, Kei, with the support of Keiko, sought to create a hybridized *ibasho* (place to belong) that spanned ideological borders in order to better serve the needs of a certain subsection of SAC users. In some sense, the creation of the LC signified the creation of “liberatory routes” (Lowe, 2022, p. 254) for many of the participants in this study as they discovered a viable alternative to a prevalent English-only or “native-centric” narrative. Furthermore, catalyzed by its liminal and autonomous status, the flattened hierarchy and focus on accessibility reified in the LC’s “concept” contributed to the creation of a pedagogical safe house (Canagarajah, 2004) in which knowledge or opinions could be shared with little to no fear of institutional sanction. However, perhaps with the exception of Kei, who appeared to develop a more conscious resistance to the reliance on “native-speakers” as L2 interlocutors, most of the counter-framing that occurred in the LC seemed to be subconscious and, for the most part, relatively limited in scale. Therefore, I do not believe that SLCs should be regarded as hotbeds for revolutionary activity aimed at undermining and toppling power structures. Indeed, ample evidence for a CoP’s potential for reproducing existing power relations has been provided in both Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. Rather, I argue that SLCs may be viewed as liminal “cracks of agency in the concrete of social structure” (Wenger, 2010, p. 190) where learners can bend the rules and play with “commonsensical” notions—such as the principles of native-speakerism (Lowe, 2020)—based on their individual and collective needs.

Furthermore, along with ALL’s role as a social resource (Zittoun, 2008) for transition, it can also facilitate the questioning of certain ideological “truths” if they appear to be detrimental to a learner’s development. Viewpoint switching activities (Kato & Mynard, 2016) encourage learners to view a given learning decision, challenge, or obstacle from multiple

perspectives and can broaden their view of what language learning approaches are best for them. Within the SAC, ALL was connected with Keiko raising awareness of learner marginalization stemming from the Chat Space's "common sense" approach, helping to support alternative spaces like the LC and directing struggling learners to these new *ibasho* (places to belong). Furthermore, Japanese advisors like Keiko, who acted as an NPRM for many participants, represent an "authentic" linguistic benchmark that implicitly questions the value or relevance of "native" norms. Any response within a SAC to ideologies like native-speakerism must, however, be handled extremely carefully. In line with a SAC's autonomy-supportive mission, the role of an advisor must not become that of a revolutionary activist preaching to learners about the evils of ideological manipulation. Just as this study suggests the importance of humility in terms of valuing grassroots learner needs and perspectives, one must extend that same humility to the respect of what learners aspire to and how they choose to learn. Although the "native-centric" *akogare* (longing) that could be seen in many of this study's participants may not sit well with some more critically-minded educators, the role of the advisor is that of autonomy supporter, not emancipator. This does not mean that advisors or community supporters should avert their gaze completely if certain beliefs seem developmentally maladaptive. Instead, it involves respecting learners' decisions, offering additional viewpoints for them to consider (and potentially reject), and ultimately supporting them in aligning with *their* (rather than an advisor's) view of a desired future self.

#### ***8.2.5. Doing well by doing good: Leadership and community culture***

By examining the manner in which the LC's practice evolved across its lifecycle, one can confidently assert that leadership expressions and the lived experiences that underpinned them were hugely influential across *domain, community, and practice*. The challenges that Kei, Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara faced throughout their learning histories in no small part shaped the accessibility that they strived to maintain and the proactive scaffolding of new members

they engaged in in every LC session. Therefore, in line with findings from existing CoP research (Borzillo et al., 2011; Pedersen et al., 2017; Saldana, 2017; Tarmizi & de Vreede, 2005; Tarmizi et al., 2006), this study suggests that leadership expression is one of the main ingredients determining the nature or flavor of a community. It, therefore, stands to reason that a valuable use of time for practitioners wishing to foster successful SLCs in their SAC would involve ensuring that community leaders are given the right balance of support and autonomy so that their CoP may maintain its authenticity while also aligning with the institutional mission. ALL's role in offering animation and promotion "levers" to the LC is one way in which this delicate autonomy/support balance may be managed. In addition, more-structured boundary encounters such as Keiko's leadership course appeared to strike this balance as it fused theoretical insights with personal reflections from the CoP leaders. Based on the leaders' comments and my observations of LC sessions, the leadership course and IRD sessions did in fact increase their confidence in their roles and gave them new practical (member survey, after-chat session) or conceptual (regularly stating community domain, emphasizing member contributions) avenues to explore in terms of the hands-on management of the group. Linked closely with leadership expressions in the LC was the prevalence of reciprocity and prosocial behavior. The culture of affective scaffolding—especially in relation to new members—that Kei, Ryoya, Yuki, and Sara as core members (Wenger et al., 2002) created was influential for other participants in terms of the respect that they held for the LC leaders. Rather than simply being linguistic role-models, it was the leaders' care for others and friendliness that seemed to impress the junior members. Furthermore, from the observational data it was clear to me that this prosociality was "contagious" as other experienced members modeled the leaders and actively attempted to reassure and support new attendees. Based on these observations and on the literature on autonomous prosociality in relation to humans' Basic Psychological Needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), the findings of this study indicate that if

enhanced learner wellbeing within SACs is desired, then fostering prosocial leadership expressions may be a worthwhile path for both future research and practice.

One final point that is worth considering in terms of the cultivation of SAC-based SLCs is the numerous types of value that the LC offered on both local and institutional levels. The authentic community management that Keiko's light-touch support fostered afforded the LC leaders the opportunity to develop practical skills in interpersonal skills, collaboration, management of people and resources, time management, and inter-CoP brokering. Through a strictly-regimented curricular approach to learning, these practical skills are often sidelined in favor of subject knowledge within educational institutions. This subsequently leads to a gap between "canonical practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991) and the practical demands of the workplace (Mavri, Ioannou, & Loizides, 2018). The caretaking, scaffolding, and democratizing that the LC leaders engaged in were recognized by all of them as being applicable to their post-university lives and, in Kei's case, represented a credo that he held onto during the rupture he experienced transitioning into the professional sphere. These experiences, then, may be understood as having *applied value*—the "application and integration of knowledge into practice" (Mavri et al., 2018, p. 8)—for their post-university lives. Furthermore, there were various instances of the LC adding value to the university as it acted as a hub for the dissemination of safety and promotional information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the LC was recognized as one of the important faces of the SAC as it represented an *ibasho* (place to belong) full of social and symbolic resources for students struggling with the transition into the *ikoku* (foreign) world of the university. The value of mediational resources or sites like the LC, especially within Japan due to the enduring nature of the *eigo/eikaiwa* rift, warrants increased attention from SAC managers and researchers due to the risk of non-developmental change (Zittoun, 2008) stemming from transitional rupture.

### 8.3. Limitations

It should be noted that this study has been primarily concerned with providing a snapshot of the LC CoP in a specific time and space as well as how certain learners' LC participation was situated within a broader LoP. Therefore, its highly contextualized nature will naturally limit the degree to which the findings of this study are generalizable across other educational contexts. The sample size of 13 participants, although appropriate for a qualitative study, must be acknowledged as a limiting factor in terms of the ability to apply this study's findings more broadly. Also, the nature of the LC (a language learning community with non-compulsory attendance) and its institutional environment (a SAC within an internationally-oriented university) immediately sets it apart from the majority of ELT contexts in Japan. In addition, the participants of this study were mostly regular LC attendees who all volunteered to participate in an academic study. This means that the experiences of learners who did not continue LC participation for whatever reason were not heard. Furthermore, part of the reason that the LC was selected for this longitudinal study was its stability and relatively high number of members, meaning that some insights from this study may have limited applicability to other student-managed learning communities. In summary, it could be argued that both in terms of LC participation and, in a broader sense, the experiences of English language learners in Japan, this study may only provide insights based on a narrow slither of motivated individuals. However, despite this fact, due to the reported ubiquity of the *eigo/eikaiwa* divide within Japanese ELT (Hiramoto, 2013; Nagatomo, 2016), one could conceivably expect similar phenomena to that discussed in this study to manifest in other formal and informal educational environments in Japan. There is also a convincing argument that the anxieties and challenges caused by transitioning from *eigo*-oriented to *eikaiwa*-oriented environments that stimulated the LC's creation and domain are likely to be felt even more keenly by learners with comparatively lower proficiency and confidence in productive English use. Furthermore,

due to the growing number of SACs being established within Japanese higher education institutions (Mynard, 2019a), insights into the lived experiences of students transitioning into these liminal environments could presumably have value on a wider scale in the years to come.

Regarding the data collection process, there are a number of potentially problematic issues that must also be considered. First and foremost was the conceivable impact of my positionality and related power dynamic that existed during all of my interactions with the LC member participants. As a teacher and white “native speaker,” it can be assumed that, despite my reassurances, ethical procedures, and rapport building, for both institutional and ideological reasons some participants most likely would have felt a degree of pressure to give or withhold certain answers to me during interviews. Furthermore, during observations it is reasonable to assume that my presence, although unobtrusive as possible, would likely have affected the behavior of some participants and particularly the LC leaders. In spite of these concerns, however, it is likely that the length of the observation period (one academic year) would have reduced the effect of the *observer’s paradox* (Cowie, 2009, p. 177) over time. Another related issue is that due to the high degree of institutional support that I received and the kind cooperation from Keiko, Yukiko, and Amy, I occasionally felt pressure not to include information that would paint the SAC in an undesirable way. However, through member checking and frank ongoing discussions with these “institutional” participants, I was satisfied that the impact of such ethical issues was kept to a minimum and did not affect the integrity of the study to any perceivable degree. One final concern about data collection was its format and duration. Although weekly observation of the community provided a great deal of detailed insights on the LC, the fact that the observations were only conducted while the community was in an online format must be recognized as a significant limiting factor. Due to the obtrusiveness of my physical presence or video recording equipment, observation of face-to-



face LC meetings would have been a challenging and potentially disruptive endeavor but would have also contributed to a more comprehensive portrait of the community.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this ethnographic case study of the LC offers both considerations for practitioners within Japanese ELT and self-access learning, as well as opening up new avenues for future research foci. These will be discussed in the concluding section of the thesis.

#### **8.4. Future directions**

Due to the continued growth of SACs within the country, a number of Japan-based journals such as *Studies in Self-access Learning* (<https://sisaljournal.org/>) and *The Japan Association for Self-access Learning's journal* (<https://jasalorg.com/jasal-journal/>) have been established and have a valuable role in the development of the field. That being said, there remains significant room for innovation and more in-depth research exploring the role and function of SACs in Japan. One area ripe for future exploration raised in this study is the issue of transition into SAC environments and the rupture that students may experience. In particular, as discussed in the previous limitations section, research that draws upon the perspectives of students with varying levels of linguistic proficiency and motivation would help to build a more comprehensive picture of student experience in SAC environments. If accessibility and inclusivity is indeed to be a future emphasis in SAC management (Thornton, 2021a), further research into how practitioners can alleviate feelings of displacement and identity threat that SAC newcomers may face would appear to be fruitful. One example of such research could be exploring how student ownership in SACs could contribute to a richer knowledge base in which both top-down (canonical) and bottom-up (noncanonical) perspectives are combined to inform SAC policies and projects. Murphey et al. (2009) state that by passing the torch and facilitating students' emergence as researchers and practitioners in their own right, we plant the seeds for both their growth and ours.

“More than surveying student attitudes, we are encouraging students themselves to participate in educational research, deliberations, and decision-making for proactive transformation of their own education. Including more student voices in ELT can increase the value of what we do professionally--teach and learn.” (p. 211)

The LC is, of course, one example of this, but it is only the start. Through initiatives such as Keiko’s leadership course and IRD support of student-managed communities, a positive snowball effect can form in which student empowerment and leadership becomes a part of the SAC’s technical culture that is then passed down through generations of student users. Linked to these innovations in self-access is research focusing on learner wellbeing and prosocial behaviors. Reciprocity and prosocial acts formed a substantial part of the LC CoP’s domain, community, and practice and the fostering of such behaviors as well as how they contribute to the fulfillment of SAC users’ Basic Psychological Needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Shelton-Strong, 2020; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Yarwood et al., 2019) is also an area that merits more attention. Hirosawa and Murphey (in press) categorize the type of prosociality observable in the LC as *well-becoming*—“add[ing] agentic intention to “well-being” to show pragmatically that we do not usually wait for “well-being” but that we often make it happen with purposeful well-becoming actions”—and draw a parallel with ALL and the role of IRD in autonomy development. The autonomisation discussed by Little (2003)—not simply cutting students adrift and expecting them to transform into autonomous language learners—can be seen as analogous with well-becoming. Through student-led, institutionally-supported initiatives like the LC, we can open up possibilities for an active culture of well-becoming being fostered within SACs not only in Japan, but across the globe.

One final area in which I believe the liminal nature of the SAC (and the balance of autonomy and support that characterized the LC’s position within it) can be beneficial to English learners in Japan is through the creation of opportunities for counter-framing practices

(Lowe, 2020a, 2022). As discussed in this study, the liminal and autonomy-supportive environment of the SAC acted as a site for hybridity to be embraced, rules to be questioned, and a pedagogical “safe house” to be created in which learners could challenge the value of ideological conventions. It is imperative that we recognize the dialogic (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 33) nature of dominant (native-speakerism or nihonjinron) and counter discourses (translanguaging or eigo/eikaiwa hybridity) within the LC and understand that such “crack[s] of agency in the concrete of social structure” (Wenger, 2010, p. 190) may represent liberatory routes (Lowe, 2022) for learners burdened with debilitating, self-discriminating beliefs (see Section 8.1.4). This potential role of SACs as liminal sites in which taken-for-granted perspectives of what “should be” can be played with and challenged seems apposite in relation to the growing emphasis on inclusivity within the field and is a fruitful area for further investigation. I hope that this study as well as my future work in this area will contribute in some way to the future innovation of SACs across the globe as *ibasho* (places to belong) for student empowerment and well-becoming where all can understand their own legitimacy and potential as language learners and users.

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## Appendix A: Research Proposal Sample

### PROJECT DETAILS

#### 1. Please describe the aims of the project \*

The aims of this project are to: 1. Investigate how a student-created learning community ( the LC ) functions as a community of practice and explore learners' varying trajectories within the community over time. 2. Analyze the experiences of newly established core community members during leadership succession when a community facilitator leaves the community.

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#### 2. Research Design and Methods: Give a description of the proposed research design and the methods to be used (qualitative, quantitative...etc) for both data collections and/or analysis if appropriate. Please include all data collection procedures and all groups of participants. \*

- Qualitative
    - o Initial questionnaire will be distributed to all members of the LC for the purposes of recruitment and purposeful sampling.
    - o Semi-structured interviews (bilingual if required) with community members (peripheral, active, core) and support (community organizer) carried out over 4-5 rounds (once per semester) to generate longitudinal data
    - o Written language learning histories (bilingual if required) (by email) from community members (peripheral, active, core) before initial round of interviews
    - o Written community learning histories (bilingual if required) (by email) from community members (peripheral, active, core) before each successive round of interviews
    - o Short written reflections on each interview (bilingual if required)
    - o Typological analysis will be conducted (open coding) informed by the Communities of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
    - o Member checking will be conducted during successive rounds of interviews.
    - o Researcher will also be keeping an ongoing reflective research diary over the course of the study.
-

**3. Use of Existing Stored Data: Please list any existing stored data that you plan to use as part of the project (SALC survey data, module records, etc)**

Please include in your answer: - The type and number of records being accessed - Whether the records identify individual people - How you will obtain permission to use them (consent from individuals or permission from custodians of non-identifiable data).

N/A

**4. Give a summary of the expected benefits of this project. \***

This may include benefits to the broader community, the participants, people with whom the participants identify or the researcher.

It is hoped that this project will provide clearer insights into the structure of a student-created language learning community and the modes of participation that go on within it. This will hopefully draw more attention to both the benefits to learners of engaging in this type of autonomous language learning and any recurring problems or issues that occur. This information can inform the SAC of ways in which student-created learning communities can be more effectively promoted and supported in the future and can foreground/clarify the value of these communities existing within the institution. Focusing more specifically on the issue of leadership succession is beneficial in that it allows the SAC community coordinator (and the SAC as a whole) additional insight into the affective journeys new community facilitators go through during transition to a leadership role. Leadership succession is an important issue as the sustainability of a community of practice often hinges on the health of its leadership and how well new leaders acclimatize to their role. This research may therefore illustrate whether or not there is a need to provide student leadership training and support as one facet of the SAC's work in the future.

**5. If anticipated, give a summary of the expected risks of this project and how they will be managed.**

This should include any risks to participants, researchers, to the environment or to the SAC or other organisations.

Some participants may be critical of other members of the community, SAC members, or teachers but all participant identities will be confidential. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review their responses during member checking sessions and will be informed that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time.

**6. Monitoring: If appropriate (e.g. ongoing project) as the researcher, comment on how you will monitor the progress of the research.**

As this is a longitudinal study, repeated interviews and member checking sessions will be held in order to update participants on the progress of the analysis/research. Periodically, meetings will also be held with the head of the SAC to update them on the progress of the project.

## Appendix B: Plain language statements

### DESCRIPTION of RESEARCH for PARTICIPANTS

#### 研究についての詳細

Researchers' Names: Daniel Hooper

研究者名：ダニエル・フーパー

**Research Project Title: Exploring and supporting sustainable language learning communities of practice**

研究課題名：言語学習コミュニティを持続可能なものにするための支援と模索

*Participants: please read the brief descriptions below (in English and any other language) and, if you would like to offer your consent to take part, please sign the accompanying Consent Forms.*

参加者：下記の概要をお読みください（英語、または多言語）。参加に同意される場合は、添付の同意書に署名をお願いします。

Brief Description of the Research:

研究概要：

For most foreign language learning learners, their contact with the language they are learning is usually in a classroom focusing on a teacher. This teacher is often a “native-speaker” of the language who is thought by many to be the best source of knowledge and learning. Student-created language learning communities present an interesting alternative to this established

model where learners can create their own community in which they choose the area/method of study that interests them, organize the community according to their needs, and deal with any challenges that arise by themselves. In this study, the researcher will investigate the experiences of LC members for the purpose of better understanding how the community works and helping the SAC to provide better support for the LC leaders and other members in the future. This will be achieved by interviewing willing LC members. Interviewees will be asked to talk about their language learning experiences before and during their participation in the LC as well as their ideas and opinions about how to sustain the community in the future.

多くの外国語学習者の場合、学習中の言語による交流は通常、教師が中心となったクラス内で行われます。教師はおおむね「ネイティブスピーカー」であり、学習の最良なリソースとして考えられています。学生が構築した言語学習コミュニティは、このようすで確立されたモデルに代わる興味深い代替えとして成り立っています。学生は興味深い分野や学習法を選ぶことができ、学生のニーズに基づいた自身のコミュニティを編成し、自らの挑戦に臨むことができます。本研究では、研究者はコミュニティがどのような働きをしているのか認識度を高める目的で、また今後 LC のリーダー、メンバーがより良いサポートを提供するための SAC のヘルプを目的とし LC メンバーの経験を検証します。インタビューを受ける学生は、LC 参加前及び参加中に言語学習の経験や、今後コミュニティを維持する方法に関するアイデア、意見について共有するよう求められます。本研究は参加を希望する LC メンバーのインタビューにより完了します。

#### Brief Description of Participant's Proposed Involvement:

参加者への提案概要：

Subjects will be interviewed by the researcher/teacher, who will ask them a range of questions about their experiences in the LC. This research will be used in my PhD thesis.

Interviews/language learning histories are voluntary and their names will be kept confidential.

Choosing whether or not to participate in this study will have no bearing on students' grades, and participants may withdraw their consent to their data being used at any time.

For those who agree to participate in this interview, we have prepared a small gift as a token of appreciation. I/We will get in touch with you as soon as it is ready.

Some students may be asked for more follow-up interviews; however, in such a case, separate consent forms and research descriptions will be provided to students, and there will be no obligation to take part.

Any participants, after reading this description in both English and Japanese, will also read a consent form in both languages, and sign their names if they give their consent.

参加者は研究者、教師からインタビューを受けます。研究者、教師は参加者に LC での経験について様々な質問をします。本研究は、博士論文に使用されます。

インタビューの受理、言語学習経験の共有は任意であり、参加者氏名の機密は保持されます。本研究への参加の可・不可は、学生の成績に影響しません。参加者はいつでもデータ使用の同意書を取り消すことができます。

本インタビューへの参加に同意された方には、感謝を表するささやかなギフトを用意しています。準備が整い次第こちらから連絡します。

学生たちの中で、フォローアップ・インタビューを求められる場合があります。このような場合、学生に別途、同意書、研究概要が渡されますが、参加は義務ではありません。

同意する場合、全参加者は英語、日本語の本概要に目を通した後、両言語の同意書を読み、署名することになります。

## Appendix C: Participant consent form

### Research Consent Form 2020

研究課題名: Student language learning communities project

- 私（参加者）は、研究概要を読み、この研究の目的と方法について質問する機会がありました。
  - 私（参加者）は、この研究に無償で参加します。また、いつでも処分無しに参加を拒否または取り消すことができます。
  - 研究者は、専門的な判断で私（参加者）の参加を取り消すことがあることに同意します。
  - 研究課題から得たいかなる情報も、法律で義務とされない限り、私（参加者）の承諾をなしに開示または公表されることはありません。
  - 研究に関する質問や関与について、いつでも研究者と連絡を取ることができます。
- 研究者のEメールアドレス：  
研究者のオフィスの電話番号：
- 研究方法や、研究を行う上で私（参加者）の権利について意見や懸念があるときには下記まで。

私（参加者）は、研究目的のための録音、録画を \*  
(どちらかにチェックして下さい。)

- 承諾します。
- 承諾しません

私（参加者）は、研究目的のために文書の使用を \*  
(どちらかにチェックして下さい。)

- 承諾します。
- 承諾しません。

25/04/2020

Research Consent Form 2020

私（参加者）は、この研究に参加することを同意します。 \*  
署名と日付をご記入してください

\_\_\_\_\_

Google Forms

**Appendix D: Observation notes (May 12th 2020) based on Spradley's (1980) "nine dimensions of descriptive observation"**

<b>Space</b>	First real on-task exploration of online functionality on Zoom, struggled with navigating the virtual space due to issues relating to host status and breakout rooms - two of the three organizers had to stay in the main room (Yuki couldn't manage breakout rooms at all due to iPad issues), discussed how much easier face-to-face scenario was, SAC still 'present' through Ryoya's Zoom background of the SAC and the slides background of the [meeting area], the main Zoom room and the chat function still allowed all members to throw out ideas to the whole group, discussed the importance of not meeting up in person (institutional rule)
<b>Object</b>	Objects are essentially linked to iPads and maybe computers, but the organizers also used cell phones to contact each other when they had a crisis with the breakout rooms, requested members to use online search engines (eikaiwa sites?) rather than dictionaries, they shared all vocabulary from the chat in a separate document on Line later in the week, they gave out a survey at the end of the session to request members' feedback and ideas for potential topics
<b>Act</b>	Before the session, the organizers were assigned different roles (mainly by Ryoya), my observation was limited to the main room but the session started with general housekeeping and an explanation of the group's aims, flow in terms of stages (Japanese discussion/research of English/English conversation/group share), and introduction of the topic - everything was done in Japanese or bilingually by Ryoya, the organizers moved members into breakout rooms and took turns to go through monitoring their progress, another organizer broadcasted messages to the breakout rooms informing members of when each new stage should begin, when everyone came back to the main room, members wrote in their phrases into the chat, the organizers picked out certain phrases and asked the members to describe/explain them, the organizers also offered supportive comments, asked questions, joked, and tried to relate the phrases to everyday life
<b>Activity</b>	I couldn't see much of the activity as it was going on in breakout rooms, in the main room the organizers were discussing issues related to management of the session and considerations about topic choice, technology, etc. in Japanese together, before the start of the meeting, more established members joked and chatted with the organizers in casual Japanese



<b>Event</b>	The main events in the session appeared to be - a) pre-session (chatting, joking, organizing, setting up), b) greetings, housekeeping and introducing the community, c) Japanese conversation in breakout rooms, d) English (online) research in breakout rooms, e) English conversation in breakout rooms, f) whole group sharing time, and g) final housekeeping and greetings
<b>Time</b>	Yuki is in charge of time management. The organizers arrived about 15-20 minutes before the session started (12:00), other established members started showing up (12:10), session starts at 12:20, introduction to session (12:20 -12:30), breakout rooms from 12:30 - 12:45, some members showed up late (around 12:28 and 12:42), session ends at around 13:00
<b>Actor</b>	Ryoya appears to inhabit ‘main’ organizer role - he takes lead on all explanations and delegates roles to other organizers, Yukiko (SAC liaison) is also present throughout to offer support and monitor session (?), Yuki is given time management role and Sara is in charge of managing breakout rooms, each organizer takes turns (except Yuki due to technical issues) to move between breakout rooms, 31 members in total for this session, each member has a number next to their name to denote year in university (how about senpai-kōhai?), Tenka shares vocab in whole group stage, so does another 2nd year student (regular) and another 3rd year student (seems like regular), Ryoya and Sara offer supportive comments and ask questions during this stage, a first year student also explains a phrase to the group, one more (2nd year?) student explains another phrases, Ryoya has a very active role during this stage and is often at time akin to an entertainer, finally organizers and Yukiko have a short debriefing chat after other members have left
<b>Goal</b>	According to Ryoya’s explanation and slides, the LC is to “Enjoy talking in English” and “Find useful vocabulary for daily conversation”, comfort seems to be a thing because of the language policy, their concern over the appropriateness of the topic (marriage), and the numerous disclaimers about only showing their camera or offering an explanation in the session if they’re comfortable, I noted that affect seems to be a big consideration, laughter was a big part to providing a fun and relaxing atmosphere appears to be key, Ryoya states that it doesn’t matter what year they

	are (thus challenging senpai-kōhai) but he also asks the older members to help the newer ones (maybe this is senpai-kōhai lite?), not only the topic and phrases, but the language they all use with each other (both English and Japanese - “later”) is casual/slangy and this appears to be part of the domain
<b>Feeling</b>	I guess the feeling I got from the session was structured but casual. They appear to have a clear idea of what they want to do but try to do in an accessible way, laughter was a common thing - lots of jokes in both Japanese (mainly) and English being cracked, I guess the other thing would be relatability - they link all of the phrases to everyday life and even their own experiences - the language policy also appears to assist them in this, Ryoya and Sara in particular appeared to be almost entertainer-like in their management of the group and often made jokes and humorous comments during the latter stages, they would also sometimes make comments about the members they already knew establishing familiarity with each other, finally one thing that struck me was how active the sharing session was and how engaged members seemed when they were analyzing vocabulary and its nuances (lots of smiles and laughter)

## Appendix E: Sampling Questionnaire

### LC research project

Form description

Name (名前) \*

Short answer text

How long have you been coming to the LC? あなたはいつから LC 参加していますか? \*

Short answer text

Why did you first decide to come to the LC? 最初に LC に参加しようと思った理由は何でしたか? \*

Short answer text

Did you first come to the LC alone or with friends? 最初に LC に来た時、何人で来ましたか? \*

Alone 一人

With friends 友達と

How often you usually attend LC meetings?  
を教えてください。

LC に参加する頻度 \*

- Every week 毎週
- 2-3 times a month 月 2 - 3 回
- Once a month 月 1 回
- Once every two months 2か月1回
- Less than once every two months 2か月1回以下
- I'm a new member 新しいメンバーです

How comfortable/relaxed do you feel in LC meetings?  
てどう感じますか？

LC につい \*

- Very comfortable/relaxed とてもリラックスできる
- Comfortable/relaxed リラックスできる
- Slightly uncomfortable/nervous ちょっと緊張する
- Very uncomfortable/nervous とても不安

Please briefly tell me about what happens in a typical LC meeting. 普段 LC での活動が行われていますか？

Long answer text

Would you be willing to participate in an interview about your experiences in the LC ? \*  
Interviewees will be given a gift card as a token of appreciation. インタビューで自分の経験について話す事を承諾してもらえますか？ インタビュー参加者にはギフトカードを差し上げます。

Yes はい

No いいえ

If you answered Yes, please write a contact email address below. もし承諾して頂けたら、下に \*  
連絡可能なメールアドレスをご記入ください。

Short answer text

## Appendix F: LC leaders initial interview protocol

**Leaders** (core members in leadership positions in the community)

### Interview procedure and questions:

#### 1. Preliminaries

1. Greeting / ice-breaker /

Ask them to read the statement about the research and sign the consent form.

“Thank you so much for helping me with my research. I really want to hear students’ honest opinions as it will help us to support the learning communities”

#### 2. Warm up

(This can vary, the purpose is to help the student relax - these questions might not be needed)

Could you just talk me through a typical LC meeting for you? (Warm up)

#### 3. Characteristics of the CoP (domain)

- *Transition: “Okay, let’s talk about why you come to the LC.”*

#### Key questions:

1. What is the purpose of the LC for you?
2. How would you compare the LC to your regular English classes in university/JHS/HS?
3. Please describe to me your image of a typical person who comes to the LC.

#### 4. Characteristics of the CoP (community)

- *Transition: “Right, let’s talk about some of the other people in the LC.”*

**Key questions:**

- 1. What did you think when you first met other LC members? Has your relationship changed at all over time?**
- 2. Who do you usually interact with in the LC? Is it always the same people? How do you usually interact?**
- 3. Is there anyone in the LC who you look up to or who helps you? Do you help anyone in the LC?**

Optional questions:

1. Do you see the LC as a community? Why?
2. Who is in your closest circle within the LC? What do you all have in common?
3. Have any newer members joined your close group this year? How did it happen?

**5. Characteristics of the CoP (practice)**

- *Transition: “Alright, shall we talk about the challenges of being in the LC?”*

**Key questions:**

- 1. Have you experienced any difficulties or problems in the LC?**
- 2. What do you see as the biggest strength or weakness of the LC?**

Optional questions:

1. Were any of these difficulties/issues addressed? How?
2. Do you have any ideas for how you could make the LC better?

**6. Leadership succession**

- *Transition: “Okay, could we talk about your first semester in charge of the LC?”*

**Key questions:**

1. How did you become a leader in the LC? How did you feel at that time?
2. Please describe your first month as leader in the LC last semester.
3. Have you experienced any challenges or worries in your position? If so, what were they?
4. If you could go back in time, what would you have done to prepare better for your new role in the LC? What skills would you like to have learned?
5. Did you feel supported in your new leader role? If so, what kind of support did you receive and was it helpful?
6. If you were going to introduce a new leader to the LC next year, what would you do to prepare or support them in that role?
7. Can you think of a metaphor for your first semester as leader in the LC?
8. Have you changed as a leader from May until now? If so, how?

## 7. Leadership roles

- Transition: Alright, shall we discuss leadership in general?

### Key questions:

1. Could you tell me a little about the previous leader(s) of the LC?
2. What do you think makes an effective leader?
3. Have you met any good leaders in your life? Please describe why you thought they were effective.
4. Which of these words do you think is closest to what a leader should be in the LC? If you have another idea, please tell me as well. Please explain your choice.
  - a. energizer
  - b. counselor
  - c. coach
  - d. teacher



**e. organizer**

**f. big brother/sister**

- 5. What goals do you have for the LC this year? What are you planning to do to achieve them?**
- 6. Do you think your experiences as an LC leader will be useful for you in the future? How?**

## **Appendix G: LC regular members initial interview protocol**

**Regular members** (members of the community outside of the core leader group)

### **Interview procedure and questions:**

#### **1. Preliminaries**

1. Greeting / ice-breaker /

Ask them to read the statement about the research and sign the consent form.

“Thank you so much for helping me with my research. I really want to hear students’ honest opinions as it will help us to support the learning communities”

#### **2. Warm up**

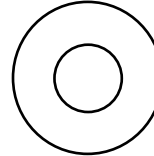
(This can vary, the purpose is to help the student relax - these questions might not be needed)

Could you just talk me through a typical LC meeting for you? (Warm up)

### **Key questions:**

- 1. What is the purpose of the LC for you?**
- 2. How would you compare the LC to your regular English classes in university/JHS/HS?**
- 3. Please describe to me your image of a typical person who comes to the LC.**
- 4. What did you think when you first met other LC members? Has your relationship changed at all over time?**
- 5. Who do you usually interact with in the LC? Is it always the same people? How do you usually interact?**
- 6. Is there anyone in the LC who you look up to or who helps you? Do you help anyone in the LC?**

7. Have you experienced any difficulties when entering the LC?
8. What do you see as the biggest strength or weakness of the LC?
9. You come to the LC often, what makes you keep coming back?
10. Thinking about (the learning community), what position would you say you are in right now? Please mark with an 'X' on the diagram.



**Please explain why you choose this position.**

11. Many people have different identities for different parts of their lives (example..).  
How about you? Which identity do you have when you come to the LC?
12. Are you happy with the amount of time you spend in the LC? Is it too much, too little, or just right?
13. Do you think you will continue attending the LC as much next year, or the year after? Do you think your role will change in the future?
14. What do you want to do in the future?
15. Have your feelings about using English changed since coming to the LC?
16. Have you changed at all as a person since you started coming to the LC? How?

**\*\*\*Well, I've asked all my questions. Thank you so much for the very useful information. I hope it will help us to help students. Do you have anything else you want to say about (the learner community) or anything else? Thank you very much for your time.**

## **Appendix H: SAC staff initial interview protocol**

**Preamble: Expressing thanks, signing forms, explanation of research.**

**“Okay, today I’d just like to get your perspective on the LC, your role in relation to that learning community, and how you see its future development.”**

1. So, how would you describe the LC to someone new to this university?
2. Please give me a short history of the LC from your perspective.
3. What has happened in the LC so far this year?
4. How do you see your role in relation to the LC? Has this changed at all over time?
5. What do you feel are the main issues or challenges you face in your role?
6. (Regarding participation in the community) Why did you decide to do this? What was your impression of the session as a participant? Did you learn anything? If so, what?
7. Are there any tensions that may affect the LC within the SAC?
8. What do you see as the main challenges facing the LC as a community? Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges can be approached?
9. What role do you think the LC has in the SAC?
10. To what extent do you think that the LC fits into the mission of the SAC? Why do you think so?
11. Do you think the LC is valuable for the SAC? If so, why?
12. What do you see as the primary role of a leader in the LC?
13. What advice would you give to a new leader of the LC?
14. How do you think the SAC can best support the LC?
15. How would you like to see the LC develop in the future?

**Ask if there are any extra comments/questions and thank them for their time and insight.**

## **Appendix I: Research notes excerpt**

### **Riri interview notes (July 9th 2020)**

Okay so first of all, I'd like to talk a little bit more about the role of slang, or casual language in the LC. She also said she wants to sound like a native speaker, so I could ask her maybe about who her linguistic role models are. Does she want to sound like a native speaker? Is that important to her? Why? Does she ever study casual language in class? Does she only study it in the LC? Apart from conversation, is there any other reason she would want to learn casual language? What does she think about DMM eikaiwa?

So then, so she said that she just wants to improve daily conversation. Not anything specific, just talking in English, and also getting along with each other. Um, I could ask her, does she enjoy speaking in English, in itself? She says that compared to her regular classes the LC is not strict. I also need to ask her what she thinks about the English only policy. Does she think that's a good idea? Does it have a role? What's her opinion on that? She says that she feels more relaxed when there aren't any teachers. Does that affect her language learning in any way?

I would also like to confirm in a different way whether she sees any difference between an LC member and a [university] student. I need to think of a way to answer that without it being too leading. Um, yeah, I need to think about that. She said that LC members have like goals like clear goals or targets and they actually act, rather than talking about it. So, the idea of him being very proactive and yeah, actually acting on their desires.

So she talks about “makerarenai” in terms of her sister and also in terms of Mizuki. So this kind of competitiveness comes up twice. I might ask her about that does she feel like kind of competition with other members in terms of English or related to her studying?

She also talks about how LC members and, in particular, leaders helped her with other things outside of the LC, like, Natsuko talked about this too, helping them with homework and helping them with ideas for other classes. And, yeah. Yeah, helping them in a more kind of general way.

She says the freshmen she feels are really good at speaking English, and she feels like they are not treating her in a strict sense as a senpai, does she think that's good or not? I need to confirm that. So I also need to confirm, she says like when she's in a breakout room, she wants to, like, cut the silence, as much as possible. Also, she wants to speak friendly, in a friendly way, kindly, and she feels like she wants to make sure students come back so she doesn't want to give them too much pressure. And I'd like to ask her, does that come from her experience in the past, or why does she feel that way?

So she says that she respects the leaders, not necessarily because of their English level, but their general communication skills like they said she says, “kabe ga nai” they have no walls, so it's more, not just in English, it's more general. So, just in terms of personality, the kind of aura they have. But yeah, so it's not really about English she said, it's about them being proactive.

So she said she feels stressed or panicked in class sometimes when she gets asked a question. And everyone was paying attention to her and she kind of panicked. But then in the LC, she

said she never feels that, she feels that everyone would help her, rather than judging her, maybe, so I need to kind of confirm that.

### **Appendix J: Interview transcript excerpt (Tenka, November 19th 2020)**

Researcher: Okay. All right. Yeah. So, um, I read your interview from last time and I've got a few things I'd like to ask you. So, first thing, um, how, how do you think the LC is going at the moment?

Tenka: Uh, LC, maybe you can understand, but situation is strange. So yeah, maybe I'm not sure about last year's this semester, but I think recently we can't, we, we couldn't see a lot of people online. Of course, core members are participating in the community, uh, however participants, other students or sometimes a few. I sometimes couldn't participate in, yeah.

R: Because you have like assignments and...?

T: Yes.

R: Okay. What assignments do you have at the moment?

T: Uh, of course English classes, assignment, and also other, um, I'm like, I'm studying Japanese and English teaches uh, for English or Japanese teachers. So I have some language, for language classes. Those classes have a lot of assignments for students.

R: Are you writing your research paper?

T: No research paper, but I have to write report or essay every, every class.

R: Okay. Wow. Sounds busy.

T: Yeah.

R: Okay. So how about the atmosphere in the LC? Has it changed or is it kind of the same?

T: There's no big difference. Between last semester and this new year, but when new students or first, first time students coming to the LC, everyone seems happy to talk, or yeah, glad to meet them.



R: Have there been lots of new freshmen students?

T: Yeah, almost half freshmen.

R: Okay. Wow. Okay. Interesting. So how comfortable do you feel in the LC now?

T: Comfortable, um... Uh, especially, uh, Riri, uh, Riri san or Sara san talk a lot so when they talk to you, they ask themselves or maybe they tried to, um, ask questions everyone. So, I feel comfortable when they talking with the happy smile, smiling face.

R: Okay. How about compared to last year? Do you feel more comfortable or less comfortable?

T: Maybe you feel, sounds kind of strange, but I, I feel now is sometimes now it's comfortable because yeah, so for online for maybe it's very easy to contact the others because everyone has every screen. So maybe it is easy to start conversation for me.

R: Yeah. You kind of mentioned this last time, the little, some of the kind of good points of Zoom.

T: Yeah.

R: 'Cause you said that in the first year, sometimes it was difficult to communicate because you know, like people were already friends.

T: Yes. Yeah. And they have the same interests or part-time job. Disneyland or Disney Sea.

R: Sure, sure. So nowadays people don't talk about Disney as much you feel?

T: (laughs) Yeah.

R: Okay. That's interesting. So, like you said, last time you feel it's more kind of equal, do you still feel the same way?

T: Yeah. Yeah. I think so kind of equal, but awkward. Yeah. Yeah. I, I agree but sometimes yeah, maybe you can, understand, some people don't want to show their faces every time. So sometimes people not willing to show their faces. So no, not totally equal.

R: If you were a freshman this year, would you show your face on camera or not?

T: Yeah. Yes. Yeah. My answer is yes, because, uh, every core member and also the students who continue to participate in the community, uh, all of them are very kind. So, and I wanna remember them, my faces, my face, my face, so I change, yeah, I show.

R: All right. Great. So, um, you said last time also, you felt there was still like, even on zoom or still kind of community seishin. Ima demo? Onaji da to omou?

T: Yeah, we, we, we have same communities.

R: Okay. So, what makes you feel like there is community spirit?

T: Um, so for me, if everyone can enjoy their talking or conversation and also they can share their opinions very easily or anytime. So that's important, I think.

R: Yeah. Yeah. That's important. Yeah. Okay, great. Thank you. So, um, last time you told me you felt like the balance between, like, English practice and friendship was, like, 50, 50 still. How about now?

T: Um, yeah. I, I'm not sure. It's only for myself, but recently I, yeah, of course I, we practice. It's a conversation in English, but sometimes I can, no, I don't search what I want to say, because a certain phrase, I remember certain phrase, so or through (English) classes, maybe I can remember what I want to say when this time. So recently I don't learn new things so much.

R: Okay.

T: Yeah, so maybe 60% and 40%, friendship and studying.

R: Oh, wow. Okay. So, you, you said that you're, you're, you don't feel you're learning so much new stuff.

T: Yeah. Not so much. But last time, the LC (we) are sharing, share the new vocabulary words. So yeah, when I check it, I can, sometimes I can find, oh, that's a new thing for me, so that's great.

R: But like, you know, your vocabulary has increased?

T: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: So, there are fewer words that you don't know.

T: Uh huh, yeah.

R: How does that feel for you?

T: Uh, I feel, I want to use those, every vocabularies or slangs, yeah, when I participated in another English classes, but so far I can't use all of them, but I remember the phrase. Sorry, in Japanese... inshoutekina?

R: Oh, yeah. Impressive. Yeah.

T: Yeah, impressive phrase. I can remember. So, I try to use them.

R: Okay. Do you ever, do you think that in the future, like, if your English improves even more. Do you ever think the LC will be too easy for you?

T: Uh, too easy? Um, I don't, (laughs) it's a good question. Maybe in the LC, there is so many freshmen now. Yeah. Yeah freshmen, so maybe, and also the aim is to continue conversation in English. So yeah, sometimes I feel easy, but not too easy because LC member always thinking about new or, uh, rare topics, or interesting topics. So maybe not too easy so far.

R: Do you think that, like, for example, for, like, a really, really fluent speaker, the LC would be suitable for them?

T: Uh, if I could be very fluent speaker?

R: Yeah. Or anyone. So, so for example, if someone had like, wakaranai... nanka, eiken ikkyuu, like would the LC still be good for them, do you think?

T: Um, I think some, maybe those people feel a little bit easy maybe...?

R: Okay.

T: Yeah.

R: Okay. So, do you think the LC is mainly for kind of like lower level or like not, not low level, but like more beginning students?

T: Yeah. Yeah, because I think so, 'cause, um, a student can use not only English, but also Japanese. So maybe it's very easy to start from using conversation, uh, in English.

R: Okay, great. Thank you. It's interesting. So, um, so, oh, you've kind of told me what the purpose is. So, the purpose is kind of spending time with friends, communicating, learning some new words.

T: Yes.

R: Okay. So, let's have a look at this. Hold on just a second. Um, maybe you can guess is just a second. My computer is very slow to buy a new computer. My computer.

T: Oh, really?

R: My work computer is even slower. Okay. So let me share my screen. You remember this?

T: Aha, yes! (laughs).

R: So, this is from, uh, last year. Um, this is from spring. So where would you put your batsu now? What do you think your position is now?

T: Uh, excuse me. What is the difference between batsu and circle?

R: Okay. batsu is genzai. Maru is kore kara, nanka, dou ni naru to omoimasuka?

T: Ah, hmm... I think now is the green circle...

R: Is batsu?

T: Yeah, now.

R: Okay. And where is your next maru, do you think? Next year?

T: Next year? Um, next year, same position or more inside? Maybe?

R: Okay. So almost the same.

T: Yeah.

R: But, a little more or same. What do you think?

T: A little more?

R: Okay, so maybe, let me choose a different color, wakaranakunattchatta. Okay. So maybe like... here?

T: Uh huh, yeah, yeah.

R: Kono gurai?

T: Yes.

R: Okay. Could you explain why?

T: Uh, cause, uh, I, I try to participate in the community, so I want to continue. So, so maybe not, not, uh, far, far away, I think.

R: Okay. So, but you, you don't feel you're right in the center.

T: (laughs) Yeah, maybe it's because I can't understand. I always, uh, I always choose kind of difficult situation. So, for example, I, I took a lot of classes. And this semester I thought I should decrease the number of classes because there are so many assignments.

R: Okay. So, you always kind of push yourself.

T: Yeah. (laughs)

R: I see. Okay. Let me see if I can, I can't take a screenshot. Hold on. Sorry. Sorry. Cool. Cool. Let me stop sharing. Let me check. Okay. Maybe I'll, I'll, I'll check later. It's okay. All right. Thank you for that. Um, okay. So, do you feel that you are still shoushinmono?

T: I think I changed. I changed. Yeah. Very, maybe this is because of it's online classes. Yeah. In many, not only the LC. So, in many classes, I have to say my opinion, tell opinion, because yeah, we can understand sometimes, some students don't say a lot, it's difficult to meet or start, start conversation. So, yeah. But I, maybe I could train these start conversation or communicate in the LC or from high school. So, I often start it or continue to keep conversation in various classes so I could get more confidence now.

R: Yeah. Yeah. I like when I, when I've observed the LC, I feel like you're very much like a leader now.

T: (laughs) Thank you!

R: Yeah. I felt like, "Ah, nanka, sugoku seichou shimashita na..." Yeah. Yeah. I was really impressed actually. Yeah. Yeah. I can't remember when it was, but I was recently I saw you and I thought, wow. Look at Tenka, so yeah, it's great. I think. Okay. So, um, okay. It's kind of similar, but, um, do you think you are contributing to the LC at the moment?

T: Yeah, maybe I, yeah, I can do now. Uh, yeah. I do it.

R: How, how are you contributing do you think?

T: Uh, for example, I, not every time, but um, every time I answer the survey, survey and also, I can do start conversation, if, uh, in a group new student or, yeah, new students are coming so I can start. And also, I can explain how we start conversation.

R: So, um, you said that you answer the survey, um, what kind of feedback do you give usually?

T: Ah yeah, I, I, give my feelings during the conversation, so maybe one, from one to five point that I can choose and also, uh, I can write my feelings in text, so now I, I try, uh, and also, I thank, I thank core members. So, I appreciate you guys. And also, if I have a topic, what I wanna talk, so I write, yeah.

R: Have you given any topic ideas that they used?

T: Yes. Yes. But it's kind of, not so fun maybe?

R: Really? Could, could you tell me which topic you chose?

T: Yeah, so yeah, I wrote, uh, what subject and what classes or what teaching do you recommend everyone?

R: Oh, I remember it. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I thought that was really good.

T: Oh, really?

R: It was a good idea. Cause everyone knows, everyone can participate, right?

T: Yeah. So, yeah. And also, maybe that was the start or maybe, uh, for freshmen, they can use this information next year.

R: Uh, so they can get information from, like, senpai...

T: Yeah.

R: Ah, I see, that's a great idea.

T: Thank you!

R: Yeah. Yeah. Um, have you offered any kind of suggestions to the group? Like something that maybe they should change or they should do a little differently or...

T: Um, I forgot, but maybe last, uh, last semester when I have a trouble for the internet or I can't see something. So, I tried to contact and please show again or something like that.

R: Okay. I see. So just kind of technical problems. Okay. Great. All right. Thank you. Cool.

Um, so, okay. Yeah. Okay. Well, speaking of senpai and kohai, do you think that, so last time you said, um, maybe it was not so strong, like, the relationship, but you know, still some, some people use keigo to like Yuki and Ryoya, and everyone, and sometimes freshmen used like desu/masu or keigo to you. How about this semester? Has there been any change or is it the same?

T: Yeah, maybe changes. Yeah, cause, yeah, maybe for freshmen, especially freshman it's very, very easy? Well, yeah, because, uh, younger people talk with keigo with older people. It's very common thing in Japan. Yeah. And maybe they feel comfortable with keigo, compared with, without keigo conversation.

R: Do you feel that using keigo is a really important thing? Like for example, if people use keigo to like you or Sara or Ryoya, does that mean that senpai kohai is strong or, chotto kankei nai?

T: Not, not so... Yeah. No.

R: Not so much?

T: Not so much.

R: So nanka, keigo, nanka, senpai ni keigo wo tsukattemo, nanka, senpai kohai wa kibishii to iu wake nai...?

T: Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah! True.

R: Okay. So, nanka, keigo wo tsukattara kara to itte, sonna ni kankei nai...

T: Yeah, yeah, it's kind of custom...

R: Yeah, yeah. Sure. Okay. So, do you feel the relationship between older and younger students is flat or kind of, nanka, level mitai?

T: Yeah. In the LC, I feel flat. Everyone talk to me rough, roughly? (laughs)



R: How about in another group that you know, is it different?

T: Yeah. Uh, yeah, I was, I was a member of a circle, for a very short time, but I feel a lot of senpai kohai relationships, but totally different from the LC.

R: Okay. In, in what way?

T: I don't know, the atmosphere? The atmosphere.

R: Okay. Okay. Great. That's interesting. So, um, let's see. So, well, I, yes, I was going to ask you, um, I, I watched you guys in the LC once and I think you were in a group with Natsuko and you, before you started talking, you checked her gakunen.

T: (laughs) Yeah.

R: Could you tell me more about that? Why you did that?

T: Uh, cause... I'm so sorry, (laughs) I forgot, Natsuko's a freshman, or second?

R: Uh, a sophomore, ninensei da to omou.

T: Sophomore, okay. Uh, because, uh, the reason why I check the grade, if freshman, if student are freshman, it is possible to participate in the first time. So maybe I can share, ano, yeah, I can share experiences or I can lead them.

R: Ah, so you wanted to check if you, um, needed to support her or guide her a little?

T: Yeah, yeah.

R: Ah, see, because when I was watching, I was like, heee, nanka, senpai ka kohai wo, nanka, kakunin shiteiru ka na... to omotte...

T: (laughs) Ah, yeah. But also other, other reason if the people are sophomore, the same grade, maybe we can talk more, hmm... not easily, but how can I say that? But I feel closeness.

R: Yeah. Yeah. Ja, nanka, sannensei dattara dou ni naru to omou?

T: Ah, maybe it's my, kind of my unconscious habit, unconscious custom, maybe I use keigo.

R: Okay. Ja, yappari aru ne? Jougekankei ga... ma.

T: Yeah, it's kind of... maybe that's in my case, because, uh, as you know, my high school experiences and junior high circle, no, no, no, the club activities are very, very strong relationships between senpai and kohai.

R: Sure, sure. Yeah. You can't just turn it off, right?

T: Yes. Turn it off, it's very unconscious thing. So, I adored the people who can speak without keigo like Mizuki.

R: Okay. So, you, you have, ma, not, akogare ja nai ne... You have kind of...

T: Yeah, a little bit. A little bit. Yeah, yeah.

R: Interesting. So like, are there any times when you feel that, sou iu..., you know, like that unconscious habit, nanka, jama ni naru toki... arimasuka?

T: Now I, I accept my, this habit. So, using keigo. Yeah. But yeah, for example, maybe last year or when I was, high school student, some students have conversation with teachers or senpai without keigo. So, at that time, I was so surprised, but I could feel, uh, they have good relationships because they don't use keigo and also senpai or teacher accept them. So, I thought, yeah, they have more stronger relationships. However, now I don't mind those things. Yeah, maybe I could accept myself. Yeah. Better than last time and um, past time. And also, I, maybe I realized, uh, some people don't care about using keigo. So, if people use keigo or not use keigo, that's okay for them, or maybe those, those senpai or those teachers don't, nevermind.

R: Yeah, sure. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, I remember you telling me, uh, like over a year ago in maybe our first interview that because you were kind of shoshinmono, like you felt like, nanka, chuui shitakatta kedo, nanka, ah... dekinakatta, chotto, nanka, nanka, bariyaa ga atta...

T: Yeah.

R: Have there been any other times where you felt like you wanted to say something in the LC or you wanted to do something, but you couldn't?

T: Hmm... No, I don't have those time now.

R: Oh, I'm glad to hear it. Good. Yeah. I personally, I don't think senpai kohai is good or bad personally. I feel like it's just different. Like I think like jougekankei has benefits, like, you know, taking care of younger people to ka...

T: Maybe. Yeah. From, depending on people's mind or people's perspective, maybe it's kind of different. So maybe in that case I, yeah, in that case what happened to me, maybe for me, that keigo was kind of, uh, bad things for past me because, yeah, keigo make sometimes barriers, but I realized that's no. Yeah, it depends on time and also keigo has good points.

R: Sure. So, you mean in the past you were kind of, you had, ma, chotto akogare for, like, people who didn't use keigo.

T: Yeah. Because of that...

R: Yeah. It's interesting. Yeah. Maybe I ma I we've already talked about this, but I think I'm kind of more similar to you in terms of personality. So, uh, boku nara zettai keigo tsukau to omou. I think so. Okay. Thank you. Um, all right. So, let's see. Okay. We've done that. Ah, okay. Here we go. So, in the LC, what do you think is the main source of knowledge?

T: Um, main source of knowledge? I think DMM eikaiwa...

R: Is the main source of knowledge?

T: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Why do you think so?

T: Yeah, because uh, Ryoya, or other core members always, uh, use as example, so don't use dictionary, but you can, you should use those DMM eikaiwa. So always use it, and also I use them, I use it. So main knowledge, I think.

R: Okay. Do you trust the knowledge from DMM eikaiwa?

T: Yeah, I trust, but no, it's not trustable.

R: Oh, is it not?

T: Yeah. I mean, I trust.

R: Okay. Why, why, why do you trust it?

T: Because I can, check very, ano, many answers from the various countries. Of course, there are some Japanese, but yeah, foreign, yeah, other people.

R: Do, do you trust certain answers more than others? Like, for example, like if you had like, um, I don't know, a British or an American person, would you trust their answer the same as a Japanese person or...?

T: Ah... good question! Yeah. There are so many answers, so... but I don't know the background of those people, but I, I tend to choose British or American people because I could feel those are, um, native, native speakers. Yeah. It's very easy to judge. Yeah, I choose them. But however, compared with answers, there are same answers.

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

T: Yeah. I watch the many times the certain answer, I choose them.

R: Okay. So, it's kind of, like, in general you will trust kind of native speaker answers, but it depends on the situation?

T: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Okay. Okay. So, if DMM eikaiwa disappeared, how do you think this would affect the LC?

T: Um, maybe the LC has to, uh, find or have to show good source for everyone, every student or share, share the source. For me I'm not familiar with SNS so far. Maybe it's difficult to find

a good source. But I know other students have, are familiar with SNS, so maybe they know a good source from YouTube or other, Instagram. So yeah.

R: Do you think it would be possible to do the LC without any outside source?

T: Um, maybe...

R: For example, learning from each other. Do you think it would be possible?

T: It's kind of difficult. I feel, yeah. I know some students experienced the studying abroad, so they have a lot of knowledge and good phrase, daily phrase. However, almost all students are not experienced or not so much, because they want to learn in the LC. So, it's kind of difficult without any other sources.

R: Okay. So, you mentioned, um, well, okay. How about, so for you, Tenka, do you learn anything from other LC members?

T: Oh, you mean, uh, what do you...

R: Yeah. What, what kind of things do you learn from other LC members?

T: Um, of course the phrase, or useful phrase, or English language, but also sometimes people share their favorite things. For example, dramas or CDs or, of course YouTube channel. And the last time we checked the people who can speak various languages.

R: Yeah. The old guy? Yeah. My, my wife watches him as well sometimes. Yeah. What did you think when you watched that video?

T: Yeah, I was surprised. I didn't know him, so, but maybe it motiv... stimulate me, and my motivation was a little bit improved.

R: Yeah. Yeah. It was pretty impressive. So, what did you think about his Japanese?

T: I think it good, yeah, of course not, compared with native speaker, yeah, I can find out he is Japanese learner. But, yeah, very good, I think.

R: Okay. So that kind of links to my next question. So, you said that guy was really motivating, but of course he didn't sound like you, he didn't sound like a Japanese native speaker. So, what do you think about native speaker as a target for language learning?

T: Native...

R: Uh, native speaker ni naritai, nanka, mokuhyou, mokuteki toshite, dou omoimasuka?

T: Uh, people who want to be like native speaker?

R: Yeah, yeah.

T: Maybe, uh, for my feeling, but those people are very, very wanna, ano, those people adored, uh, the foreign countries' culture or lifestyle from dramas or TV shows or movies. Among myself there are so many students who love dramas or movies.

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

T: Yeah, and one of my friends bought a shirt, shirt with an, uh, actor, actress, actress in her favorite drama series. So, and maybe she want to approach, not approach, she wanna be, yeah, of course English speakers and also appearance or lifestyle. Uh, chikaduketai...

R: Uh, okay. Yeah. She wants to get closer to that image or so this is kind of akogare as well, right?

T: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes.

R: So, I know you like animation and drama, right?

T: Yeah.

R: How about you Tenka, do you have like, kind of akogare for like foreign things or?

T: Of course, I have a lot! I love comedy, so, and also maybe before I told you, but my mother really loved those American old movie stars.

R: I remember you told me.

T: Yeah, so sometimes we pretend foreign people with jokes. (laughs)

R: How does this influence your language learning?

T: Uh, now?

R: Yeah.

T: Yeah. Sometimes I record myself because sometimes assignment, but, um, not so good.

Yeah. I, of course I can, I can, uh, think I have to, excuse me, I have to more get close. Uh, not have to, I wanna have, I wanna get close to the native speakers.

R: Okay.

T: Yeah, because maybe I like sounds, sounds of talking. How can I say...?

R: So, you mean like pronunciation?

T: Yeah, pronunciation and rhythm?

R: Okay, sure. Yeah.

T: Maybe Japanese sounds kind of separate, sounds.

R: Yeah. It's a different, different structure.

T: Yeah, yeah. Um, but yeah, other language is kind of melody or rhythmical, so I like that.

R: So, you mean, you think that, you know, having, um, for you, like having a native speaker target is a positive thing for your motivation?

T: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. For me, positive thing.

R: Hm. Are there any times when you feel it's not positive?

T: Um, get close to native speaker? Ah, but it's kind of bias, it's kind of bias in Japan sometimes for example, do you know 'Ojamajo Doremi'?

R: No, what's that?

T: It's my favorite animation. And you can see... (shows picture) It's too small.

R: Okay. Oh, okay. I can see it. Okay.

T: Yes, she is one of the members of Ojamajo Doremi animation, Japanese animation for kids. But since I was a kid, I love this animation. And recently the movie was, uh, broadcast. So, and I see, I saw the movie and in that movie, one Japanese girl was kind of native speaker, even she is Japanese, she lived in, um, maybe US.

R: Oh, so like kikokushijo or something?

T: Yes, kikokushijo, yes. However, in the movie. Uh, she was described as very rough people, not rough. So, for example, she didn't care about feelings of people. If you said something directly. Like, maybe you can understand Japanese, uh, try to, tend to avoid saying directly. Sure, sure, sure. So maybe in Japan, some bias kind of other countries, people say that without thinking or care, caring about others feeling.

R: Oh, you mean like, um, some Japanese people have a stereotype about like Western people being like, nanka, wakaranai... nanka, omoiyari ga chotto, chotto migatte mitai...

T: Yeah. And I can, no, I don't think, but I can feel some people feel so.

R: Sure, sure, sure, sure.

T: Negative, I think, yeah.

R: Okay. That's interesting. So, would you, would you call kikokushijo a native speaker?

T: Yeah, kikokushijo is native speaker.

R: Da to omou?

T: Yeah, I think so.

R: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Because they can speak the language fluently, naturally?

T: Yeah. And maybe those people living for a long time.



R: So, so your goal is to get kind of close to that native speaker standard.

T: Uh huh.

R: How will you know when you've achieved it?

T: Uh, so like difference between kikokushijo and other people?

R: Mm. So Tenka no baai wa, nanka, native speaker no, nanteiu ka na... kijun ni chikaku naritai deshyou? Dou yatte, nanka, tassei shita ka mada tassei shiteinai, dou yatte wakaruru to omou?

T: Well, for me, um, for me maybe like pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, like speaking style.

R: Yeah. So, if you listen to yourself and you think, "Ah, chotto Amerikajin mitai."

T: Or so, uh, yeah. Or, "Amerikajin mitai." or "Japanese down"

R: Uh, okay. So, when you realize you're like, "Ah, dekita!" mitai.

T: Maybe I'm so happy!

R: Okay. Okay, great. Great. All right. Thank you. Okay, so, um, how do you, so obviously you're speaking to me, this is kind of a strange situation, right? This is research, but usually how do you feel when you speak with a native speaker of English?

T: Um, so fun, and I always enjoy talking. Yeah. But now, I, yeah, 'cause I have some small worries because I, yeah. I'm, you know, I sometimes making pause or quit talking because I'm thinking about, yeah, my grammar is correct or not, incorrect. So sometimes worried about my mistakes to talk.

R: Okay.

T: So especially, um, my English teacher, are from (various classes). I've never seen in person. So, um, so I kind of, um, now not, not so much, but I feel sometimes nervous because they don't know much about me, and of course I don't know too.

R: So you mean just like, kind of, hito toshite.

T: Yes, yes true. Yes, that too.

R: Also, you said like you worry, like, do you think you need to speak using kind of perfect grammar or...?

T: Sometimes, yeah. It's kind of my, nandarou, kind of stereotype. Yeah. Maybe because I, I took (another class) and I could learn, we can, we can contact each other and communicate with people without perfect grammar or talking, yeah, I learn, I learn, but (laughs) I, I care about that.

R: Okay. Thank you. All right. So, do you have any advice for new members of the LC?

T: New advice..., Uh, don't, don't hesitate to start, uh, participate in this community because we can make friendship and we can practice with joy.

R: Excellent. Okay. That's very positive. And, um, do you think anything in the LC needs to be changed in the future? Maybe next year.

T: Next year if we could, if we could meet in person maybe... uh, difficult questions. (laughs) Difficult question. I'm thinking about how we can improve the community. Um, how about, yeah, we, we always do same thing, talking in English and Japanese of course, and searching vocabulary and how about adding more activities? Last year we, uh, for me, once I explained that game with snacks, like party. Yeah. So, if we do more other activities with cards or anything.

R: Nice. Yeah. I think it's yeah. Yeah. I thought kind of something similar, but yeah. I guess it would have to be when you guys are face-to-face again, it's quite difficult on Zoom, right?

T: Yeah, yeah.

R: Yeah. That's a good idea though. Okay, great. Thank you. Um, in what ways do you think you are similar or different to other LC members?

T: Um, same thing is, yeah, we, include me, everyone tries to improve, uh, English skills, talking skills and also try to make good relationships. Yeah. And that's fun, um, and enjoy, I can always enjoy. So that's same feeling and different point. Yeah, of course it's not only LC, but yeah, maybe, you know, we have different interests. Yeah. I can meet people who like Johnny's or other band members, but sometimes I not familiar with those.

R: Sure.

T: Yeah. So, yeah, I could get new information or new interests, but sometimes I get maybe my favorite are Japanese or foreign animations, or playing video games are kind of rare in KUIS, I think.

R: Okay.

T: So yeah, sometimes I feel, however, it talk a lot my favorite things, but yeah, of course, but I can enjoy others interests. That's no big problem for me.

R: So, kind of, you guys have similar purpose, but your interests are different.

T: Yeah. Maybe there are so many ways to reach goals or like that. (laughs)

R: Okay, great. Thank you. Um, so Tenka, since you first started coming to the LC, have you changed at all as a person?

T: Yeah. Yeah. I, I changed a lot of things. Yeah. Maybe before I told you maybe I, my mind was changed. So maybe I, I became more positive person, more positive person, so I can enjoy joking with various types, various characters people. Yeah, yeah.

R: So, you're more kind of outgoing?

T: Yeah, sort of. Yeah. Yeah. And also, I can accept now, accept myself. I am kind of positive, outgoing, but I like, for example, I have drawing pictures, reading books, it's kind of not so outgoing, but I accept now and not compared with people negatively. Yeah.

R: Oh, great. Yeah. That sounds like a positive change.

T: (laughs) Yeah, positive change.

R: Okay. Here is a kind of strange question. Um, can you imagine a situation where someone, nanka, LC ni awanai hito wa dou iu hito da to omou?

T: Uh... hmm...

R: Nanka, konai hou ga ii hito to ka...

T: Maybe for example, they wanna, they wanna talk in Japanese every time or they want, they don't want to try to use English. Maybe it's kind of, um, difficult for them, for them. Of course, maybe some members feel, uh, difficult because they wanna talk in English, but they answered Japanese, all Japanese.

R: Okay. Have you ever experienced anything like that in the past?

T: Um, in the LC? I haven't. Yeah, but yeah, maybe I told as well, but yeah. Sometimes in English class.

R: Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. I I've experienced it too, so yeah. It's difficult. Okay. Thank you. So, do you feel the LC has changed since when you first started it?

T: Um, yes. Yeah. Well, that's because of Corona virus. It's just my feeling, but really core members are like, shuushoku katsudou, seeking job. So maybe they look kind of, they look kind of easy, kind of tired. So, or of course we didn't, we don't meet in person maybe. Kind of relaxed, maybe relaxed, or I don't know but... less cheerful? Not less cheerful... yeah.

R: So, you mean like when it was face-to-face it was, there was more energy and...

T: Yeah, yeah, energetic.

R: Hmm. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It could be many different things, I guess. Yeah. Okay. So fine. That's all of the questions I have for today. Um, so this is our kind of final interview. Do you have any kind of comments about the LC or any final things you would like me to include in my study?

T: Yeah, it's okay.

## Appendix K: Language learning history guide

### My Language Learning History

Write a paper about your language learning history from when you began learning English to the present. Feel free to write as much as you like. You can write in English or Japanese (or a mixture). Please don't worry about any grammar or spelling mistakes. I am more interested in your ideas.

Please send it to me by email.

Some questions you *may* want to answer in your story (you don't have to answer all of these questions – some of them may not be relevant):

- Have you ever written your language learning history before?
- When did you start learning English?
- How did you learn English in elementary school, JHS, and HS?
- Did you learn English in eikaiwa schools or in juku?
- What positive and negative experiences did you have and what did you learn from them (in and out of school)?
- What were you expecting before you came to university?
- What were you surprised about in your university classes?
- What were you surprised about in the SAC?
- How have you changed your ways of language learning since coming to the university?
- What are the things that you found especially helpful?

- What are the areas that you still want to improve in?
- How do you think your next three years will be?
- What are your language learning plans and goals after graduation?
- What advice would you give to this year's first year students?

### Appendix L: Language Learning History Sample (Harumi)

Researcher: Okay, well, thank you for coming. Well, let's start at the beginning. When did you first start learning languages or learning English?

Harumi: Maybe when I was elementary school, I went to the, like, eikaiwa school.

R: *Ah, sou...* okay. *Nan sai gurai kara?*

H: *Shougakkou ichinensei...*

R: Okay, so you were maybe six.

H: Six or seven, maybe. Yeah.

R: Could you tell me more about the *eikaiwa gakkou*? How was that?

H: I think it was like more... *nandarou...* um... *nanka, tanoshii basho, nandarou? Asobu kanji...* not study...

R: Lots of games?

H: Yeah, so, yeah, maybe I just feel like fun (laughs), yeah.

R: Did you have a Japanese teacher or a foreign teacher?

H: Japanese teacher.

R: Oh, okay. And did you want to go to the eikaiwa school or did your parents want you to go?

H: Ah...

R: Do you remember?

H: May... uh... Actually, the English teacher is my friend's like, uh, *nandarou, shinseki*.

R: Oh, relative!

H: Yeah, relative. So the friends was recommend to me. Do you want to come? Like, uh... *sou*.

R: How long did you study there?

H: Since, uh... for all elementary school.

R: Oh, so six years.

H: Yes, six years.

R: So, until, what... you were junior high?

H: Yes, yes, yes.

R: Ah, okay. *Dou datta?* How was that experience in the eikaiwa school?



H: Heh... Actually, I didn't remember clearly (laughs) but *tanoshikatta kana... hontouni, nanka*, just the book and uh, play a game, maybe just, uh...

R: *Ja, bunpou to ka wa...*

H: *Zenzen...*

R: *Shiteinakatta.*

H: *Shinakatta.*

R: Okay. Okay. How was elementary school? Did you have English class in elementary school?

H: Yeah. I had.

R: Could you tell me a little about that?

H: Maybe...

R: I know it's a long time ago! (laughs)

H: (laughs)

R: Take your time.

H: *Nandarou...* maybe just play the game?

R: Ah, okay.

H: With classmates to use, uh, English. Everybody use English.

R: What kind of memory do you have of that? Was it, was it fun? Was it boring? Was it...

H: Fun. Yeah.

R: Yeah?

H: Just... I... *nandarou... nanka, jyugyou tte yori mo, hontouni, nanka, asobu jikan to iu imeeji nan.*

R: Did you have a foreign or a Japanese teacher?

H: A foreign teacher.

R: A foreign teacher, okay.

H: He is ELT? A...

R: ALT. ALT. *Sou, sou, sou.* Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. How about junior high?

H: Junior high school... junior high school, I, it was first time to study English like grammar or listening, so... speaking, so... I think it was so hard for me.

R: So you said Junior High was the first time for you to **study** English.

H: Yeah.

R: *Shougakkou no hou wa benkyou to... ja nai...*

H: *Ja nai kanji de.*

R: Ah, okay.

H: *Dakara... dakara... I, I didn't, nandarou... ah, nanka, chuukan tesuto to ka, kimatsu tesuto yo ne...*

R: Yeah.

H: *Zenzen dame dame datta na...*

R: Ah, really? Uh, you mean it was difficult or...

H: Yeah.

R: Or it was...

H: Difficult... So I don't like grammar (laughs), grammatic...

R: Sure, sure. Right, okay.

H: So I don't...

R: So in junior high, so like *ichinensei, ninensei, sannensei...* it was kind of the same?

H: Yeah, like... (laughs) But the first time, *ano, eto*, first, first time *tesuto*, like, junior high school, first uh, *no chuukan tesuto... sore wa*, there were just, um, abc, uh, not...

R: Ah, you could choose, right?

H: Not grammar, so I could take, took a good, *nandarou*, good point?

R: Yeah, a good score, yeah.

H: But after that, I didn't do... (laughs)

R: So, did you feel that your *eikaiwa gakkou* experience or elementary school experience, did that help you at all in junior high?

H: Uh, not actually (laughs), just first time.

R: Because it was quite... quite different?

H: Yeah. Different, yeah, so actually when I was junior high school I don't like to study English (laughs), yeah.

R: How about high school? How was that?

H: High school was also, I don't like it! (laughs) Studying English.

R: Were the high school classes, uh, similar or different to junior high?

H: Eh... depends on the teacher. But when I was third (grade) students, in high school students, uh, *sannensei*... I think that, that some teacher is, *nanka*, the teacher is different to another teacher. Uh, *hoka no sensei to nanka zenzen chigau kanji, de nanka*

R: *Ah, sou... dono you ni?*

H: *Nanka... sutto, nanka, oshiekata ga, nandarou... nanka sutto haittekuru, uh, wakariyasui...*

R: *Uh, setsumei shikata wa, nanka, sugoku, uh, koukateki...*

H: *Sou, sou, sou! Sono kanji dayo.*

R: Ah...

H: *...to iu sensei ga ita.*

R: *Demo, nanka, jyugyou... koukou mo, jyugyou no naiyou wa... nanka, daitai.. bunpou? To ka...*

H: *Uh... bunpou ga ookatta.*

R: Okay. Did you have any classes where you would speak?

H: Yeah. They, it has but maybe I didn't speak many time in class. (laughs)

R: Okay, just a little.

H: Yeah, just a little.

R: Okay. So you, you said before you didn't enjoy studying grammar or... *nanka, chuugakkou to koukou no eigo no jyugyou wa, nanka, nanka, atai ga atta... to omou?*

H: *Atai?*

R: *Nanka, yaku ni tachimashita, nanka...*

H: Ah... *yaku ni tatta...* (laughs)

R: *Ma... tanoshikunakatta kedo... demo... ma.. boku wa wakaranai da kedo... (laughs) Dou omoimasuka?*

H: Heh... *yaku ni tatta no ka na...* Maybe, maybe *chotto wakaranai...* just base.

R: Okay, okay.

H: ...English skills.

R: Okay. *Nanka, kihontekina...*

H: *Ah, sou., sou, sou*

R: *Bunpou to ka...* ah, okay.

H: Just, *ka na.*

R: So you, you said that you didn't enjoy junior high, high school? Why did you decide to (this university)?

H: (laughs) Yeah. That's why when I was in high school I want to be a... I want to work at airports. So I think if I work at the airport, I have to study English. So I think (this university) is the best to study English. So I had to study English when I decided to come here.

R: So you said you wanted to work in an airport.

H: Yeah.

R: When did you decide that you wanted to?

H: When... maybe high, when I was in high school? Second? Or third? Maybe just...

R: Could you explain the reason why you...?

H: Reason... that I... Ah, when I choose the university... I think what, what do you want to be? Then I just think, *nandarou*, I like airplane, just, and airports place, so just come up with this.

R: Did you travel overseas when you were younger?

H: Yes, I went to the, Uni... uh, *sou iu koto*, England and the United States, just... when I was in high school.

R: How were those experiences for you?

H: Eh... it was so, uh, uh, the US *wa, ano*, just, I went to the America just to, uh, just, *ano*, sightseeing. So, uh, just fun (laughs) experience but just England is to, uh, study abroad.

R: Ah, you did study abroad, okay.

H: But just too short, just one week.

R: One week.

H: So, but I, *nandake*, did, I did homestays at the, for England person's house so...

R: How was that?

H: It was so, *nandarou*, excited. So, *nanka*, I feel a little scary. That's why I couldn't speak English well. So sometimes I couldn't understand what did they say.

R: Which part of England did you go to?

H: *Eto...* *nandake*, Cotswolds.

R: Ah... nice, nice area, right?

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, so good experience for me.

R: Would you like to go overseas again in the future?

H: Yeah.

R: Well of course, you want to work in an airport right? (laughs)

H: (laughs)

R: Okay, good. So um, did you ever learn English in *juku* or...?

H: Yeah, when I was junior high school student I went to *juku* to enter the high school, just for...

R: For exams.

H: Yeah.

R: Okay. Was that useful or...?

H: Yes, useful.

R: It helped you with, like, the test?

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Okay, great. Thank you. Very interesting. Okay, what positive experiences have you had so far with learning languages?

H: Positive experience...

R: Some good experience or positive event...

H: Ah, *demo*, when I was, ah, *chigau*... Last year I went to the Spain to join volunteer, that, it was first time to go abroad by myself. So...

R: Eh? You went by yourself?

H: (laughs) It was so scary. And also there are no Japanese people so, in, I could communicate with foreign people like uh, Spanish, yeah, Taiwan, Taiwanese maybe there so...

R: Great.

H: It was good... *nanka, motivation ga agatta*.

R: Ah, yeah, your motivation increased. Yeah. Yeah. Because you could communicate, like, you could use English?

H: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

R: Okay... Okay, how about negative experiences?

H: Negative experience, uh... Negative *ka*... Uh, just same situation. The place I went to, the Spain... The place, I, the people who lived here... couldn't speak English

R: Oh, Spanish people?

H: Yeah.

R: Yeah.

H: So I couldn't communicate with local people. So, so I was so scary. Yeah. A little... weird? Nervous?

R: Yeah, yeah, like stressed?

H: Yeah. It's not like, maybe...

R: How about you know, in your, your life in Japan? Have you had any negative experiences while learning English?

H: Ah, just, uh, TOEFL test. Yeah. I have to took the, over 400

R: Yeah.

H: Yeah, I already took but, yeah but... (laughs) So last year I, these, this, I took that one, TOEFL test. It, I think it was, *nandarou*... it was the most, most? *Nanka, ichiban yoku dekita*...

R: Yeah, you thought it was gonna be your highest score.

H: Yeah, yeah. But the score actually don't, didn't, *nandarou*... *Nanka, sono mama*... it just, it didn't go up.

R: Yeah. It just, what, decreased? Ah, right, okay. Sometimes it happens.

H: Yeah, so... negative *to iu ka, ochikondekita*.

R: Yeah, I understand.

H: (laughs)

R: Okay, great. Thank you. So what were you expecting before you came to (this university)?

H: Heh... I expect...?

R: Mm.

H: ... to use more English. (laughs)

R: Okay.

H: To speak with foreign person.

R: Mm. So, just, so foreign people you wanted to speak with...?

H: Foreign person and also in a class or a teacher or... like that.

R: So, what was your impression when you arrived here?

H: I was so surprised. The, also, building and class.

R: Okay.

H: Yeah.

R: Why, why the building?

H: Why the building? It's of course the (SAC) building, it's so, like, Instagrammatic?

R: Yeah.

H: Yeah, like that! (laughs)

R: Yeah, I guess it is! Yeah, *tashika ni!*

H: (laughs) *Oshare to iu ka, nanka...*

R: Mm, yeah. How about the classes?

H: Classes? So, I have never experienced to use, speak, use English in, for class. So first time I'm a little nervous or scary. Wow, like... (laughs)

R: So, *nanka, ichinen, saisho no...* freshman year, *dou datta, sou iu English dake, eigo dake no style wa dou datta?*

H: *Saisho wa... cho...* little nervous but I, little nervous but, *nandarou, nanka, eigo benkyou shiteru na to iu* (laughs), *nanka, sou iu kanji...*

R: *Juujitsukan, sou iu...?*

H: Mm, *sou*.

R: Okay.

H: But sometimes I couldn't understand (laughs) what teacher said. But a little fun.

R: Okay, that's good. Okay, uh, were you surprised about anything in the SAC?

H: SAC... Chat Space...

R: What about the Chat Space?

H: I surprised about there is place to use English. So, *nanka, nandarou...*

R: Do you ever use the Chat Space?

H: Yeah, when I was just freshman. (laughs) Yeah, so...

R: But, now you don't use it?

H: (laughs) Yeah.

R: Is there a reason why you stopped using it?

H: Not reason, just... I think the Chat Space is difficult to use. That's why...

R: Could you explain more?

H: Every, every time there are already some people to come...

R: You mean students?

H: Yeah, students. And so they're already commu... community?

R: Ah...

H: And so it's, *nandarou... ikinikui...*

R: It's a community?

H: Community. Like a community so maybe...

R: Okay. Like...

H: *Ikinikui tte?*

R: Ahhh! *Nanka, "mou tsukutta" to iu kanji?*

H: Uh... *nanka, kuukikan (atmosphere)*, so every time is same people so...

R: Okay.

H: *Sono toki... chotto...* (laughs)

R: Okay. When did you join the LC?

H: *Eto...* this year maybe.

R: Why did you decide to go?

H: That's why... (Yuki) is facilitator...

R: Ah, (Yuki), yeah, yeah, yeah.

H: I met (Yuki) the second, last year.

R: Okay.

H: Then she went to the LC, but so she invited me, but I didn't go to the LC, that's why, *nandake*, that I, I, ah, last year the LC maybe held on Friday? So I had a class after third koma, so... (laughs)

R: It's a bit difficult.

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I joined this...

R: So you said you went to the Chat Space in your freshman year?

H: Yeah.

R: *Sore wa dou datta?*

H: Hmm... fun.

R: A little?

H: A little fun but, *nandarou...* it's difficult, hard to say my opinion that's why I don't have confidence to say, to say my opinion for, by using English so maybe... there... Uh, *kiiteru jikan ga ookatta.*



R: Ahh....

H: *Dochika to iu to...*

R: Okay, listening to other people...?

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: *Ja, nanka, the LC to Chat Space... kuraberu to, nanka, dou yatte setsumei sureba ii desu ka?*

H: Uh... LC *wa*... we can use English to communicate the, and... so before using English we can, there are time to think about what did you say. What say to English, uh, search on Google...

R: Ah, you can kind of plan?

H: Yeah, yeah.

R: *Dou? Nihongo mo tsukaemasu ne?*

H: *Nihongo mo tsukae... saisho ni*, first, *nandarou*, first we discuss the topic by using Japanese and so, and research some sentence then we discuss same topic by using English so it's...

R: *Sono system wa dou omou? Nanka nihongo wo tsukatte, chotto nanka keikaku shite, soshite eigo wo... Dou omou?*

H: *Nanka*, useful *da to omou. Sou*. I can study some grammar or words or idiom. So, good and also like, slang *mi teki no tamani shireru kara*

R: Okay, so it's good for vocabulary?

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Okay, good. Alright, so, have you changed your way of learning language since coming to (this university)? Compared to like junior high or high school?

H: Junior high... *dou darou...* Maybe. But... eh... *nandarou...* *konpontekina tokoro wa...* not changed. Uh... just difference, the textbook.

R: Okay.

H: Maybe.

R: Okay. Right, so just textbook but *kihontekini mada, imademo, nanka, bunpou to ka... ni shuuchuu...*

H: *Shuuchuu shiteru, sou iu koto*, for, for TOEIC test. (laughs)

R: Ah... *sou ne...* Ah, okay. All right. So, what kind of, what things have you found helpful for helping you learn English?

H: Hmm...

R: *Sakusen to ka, houhou to ka...*

H: *Houhou*, to increase?

R: Mm, to improve your English.

H: Hm... *sakusen...*

R: *To ka... benkyou shikata to ka...* What have you found useful?

H: Ah! When I was freshman, I, *nandake*, uh... *hamatteita*. What's that...

R: Yeah, you were... you were into....

H: Uh, Descendants, do you know Descendants? Disney movie. Uh, like Disney Channel's movie. So I always watch Descendants music on YouTube, their script, uh, their subscription.

R: Oh, okay.

H: So, yeah,

R: It's like, uh, a TV show?

H: Uh, no. Movie, movie. It's a musical one. There are music, so...

R: Ah, okay.

H: Yeah, watching same music many time. After, after that I took the TOEFL test, the TOEFL listening skill is so improved...

R: Oh, really?

H: So maybe, ah, it was good! (laughs)

R: Oh, nice. Do you ever watch movies or videos in English now?

H: Hm... sometimes. (laughs) Not many.

R: Okay. Good. Alright, so what are the areas that you would like to improve in terms of your English. So for example, speaking, listening, reading, writing, *hatsuon*, *bunpou*, like, what would you like to improve most?

H: Speaking! (laughs)

R: Why?

H: Why? I think speaking is important to communicate with foreign people. So, yeah...

R: So, in what situation do you want to communicate with foreign people?

H: So, like when I work part time job or... sightseeing? When I go sightseeing.

R: What's your part time job?

H: Uh, restaurant and at Disney.

R: Ah... you're Disney as well?

H: (laughs)

R: *Ooi ne! Datte Hinako mo!*

H: (laughs) Yes. *Hinako mo. Ryoya mo.*

R: Yeah, *Ryoya mo ne. Ato dare dakke?*

H: Maybe *Masumi, Masumi mo.*

R: *Sou ne.* Maybe a few people. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you get lots of foreign visitors?

H: Yeah, yeah.

R: Have you ever used English at work?

H: Yeah.

R: Yeah? How did that feel?

H: It feel good?

R: Yeah?

H: But maybe sometimes I couldn't tell the, clearly, so uh, a little...

R: So, speaking, okay. And you want to continue traveling around the world?

H: Yeah, of course.

R: And if you work at the airport, you will have to travel.

H: Yeah.

R: Would you ever like to live in another country?

H: No, no, I have never.

R: Okay, would you like to?

H: Yeah.

R: Why would you like to live overseas?

H: Eh... why, I want, *nandarou...* I want to live foreign country to use English, just purpose, to live.

R: Oh, to, like, to study you mean, to learn?

H: Uh, yeah, maybe or just to, I, now I like to use English so, yeah, just, not study, also, *nanka...*

R: Use?

H: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: *Nanka, eigo tsukau toki ni, nihongo wo tsukau toki ni kurabete, nanka ga chigaimasuka? Kimochi to ka...*

H: *Kimochi... Nanka, more, more friendly. (laughs) English no hou ga.*

R: Eh... sorry, could you tell me more. What do you mean by friendly?

H: *Nanka, in Japanese there are also things like tameguchi, keigo, so we use it depends on the person who talked, it's, I think it's, it is a little stressful for me. So in English, there are no, like...*

R: *Ma, sou ne.*

H: Maybe there are some, like Mister or something... but English is more, *nandarou... kyori ga chikaku naru, kanzu wa suru.*

R: *Sonna ni, nanka, kyukutsu ja, ja nai desu ne.*

H: *Sonna...*

R: *Wakarimashita. Omoshiroi desu. Arigatou.* Thank you. Okay. So, how do you think your next three years will be?

H: Heh... Just hope?

R: Mm,mm.

H: I hope, I want to, I can speak English more fluently and, *nandarou...* I hope to help some people by using English like, *nandarou*, Olympic no volunteer to ka...

R: So Harumi, nanka, *kokusai na koto ni kyoumi ga arimasuka?*

H: *Arimasu. (laughs)*

R: *Itsu kara to omou?*

H: *Itsu kara...? Itsu kara... tabun daigaku ni haitta kara.*

R: *Ah, sou?*

H: *...to ka, kaigai ni itte kara... Nanka, I want to communicate with many people, not just the Japanese people. Nanka, irona hito to, nanka, communication toritai na. Saisho no iriguchi wa English ka na tte iu no...*

R: Do you want to learn more languages later?

H: Yeah.

R: Yeah?

H: (laughs) If I can do that. Yeah.

R: Great. That's good. Um, so, what are your language learning plans or goals after graduating?

H: After?

R: *Sotsugyou shitara...*

H: *Sotsugyou shitara... nandarou... ah, demo*, I don't want to forget so, grammar *to ka...* So, skills.

R: So kind of, like, maintain?

H: Ah, yeah, yeah, maintain my skills.

R: Okay, great. And okay, so you are third year now, junior?

H: Yes.

R: What advice would you give to next year's freshmen?

H: I recommend to use SAC facility, there are good facility, for example, learning, Learning Advisor?

R: Mm. Do you ever talk to a learning advisor?

H: Yeah. Maybe to, for class.

R: How was that experience for you?

H: Oh, good, good one. I think first thing I taught it, it's like more formal. But after that, I went to after, I think it's more casual. Yeah, so we can use this one more casually.

R: Okay. Thank you. And last question. Yeah. Have you ever talked about your language learning history, your story before, or is this the first time today?

H: Have you ever...?

R: Have you ever talked about your history, uh, like, *kyou mitai na...*

H: Ah! Uh, first time.

R: First time? *Nanka, dou?* (laughs)

H: (laughs) *Eh, nanka, omoshiroi* (laughs). *Nanka, furikaerareru. Sonna furikaetta koto wa nai kara...*

R: *Ah, kikai ga amari nai desu ne! Tabun, nihongo no baai wa zenzen yattenai desu.*

H: *Sou, tashika ni. Zenzen, eigo mo shaberanai to...* (laughs)

R: No, no, it's fine. No, *jyugyou ja nai!*

H: (laughs)

R: Yeah, so... Yeah, that's fine. Okay. Well, before I stop recording, do you have any other comments or questions?

H: No.

Appendix M: LC vocabulary share document

## Vocabulary Share

✿2020. 06.16

*“Let’s share your ideal of your future residence!”*

Phrase	Meaning	How to use (Example sentence)	Note
neighborhood	近所	there are lots of cars in my neighborhood.	
sun bathing	日向ぼっこ	sun bathing	
Just because	なんとなく	Just because	
atrium	吹き抜け	atrium	
futon	布団	futon	
quilt	掛け布団	quilt	
nothing	別に、(怒ってる)	nothing	
single story house	平屋造り		建物の個々の階→floor ～階建てという建物全体の高さを表す→story
double height	吹き抜けの	double height ceiling	
drafty	隙間風の入る		
scent	香り		smellと比べて悪い匂いで使わない

## Appendix N: Meeting minutes sample

**Date:** 5/14 Thu.

**Time:** 15:00-16:00

**Participants:** Sara, Yuki, Ryoya

**Agenda:** - Feedback from the last session

1)Host / Co-host

2)unstable connection

3)delayed participants

4)chat / broadcast

5)time management

- How can we improve LC for the following sessions?

-Decide a situation for the next session

-About Google Form (Keiko's suggestion)

-Google form answers

If it is possible, I would like to discuss " To do list after covid19 is completely terminated ".

I have a question. If I want to join only 30 minutes, could I leave the meeting free?

-Vocabulary share(のちのち考えよう)

+If you have any other topics that we have to talk about, please add here.

### Free taking notes:

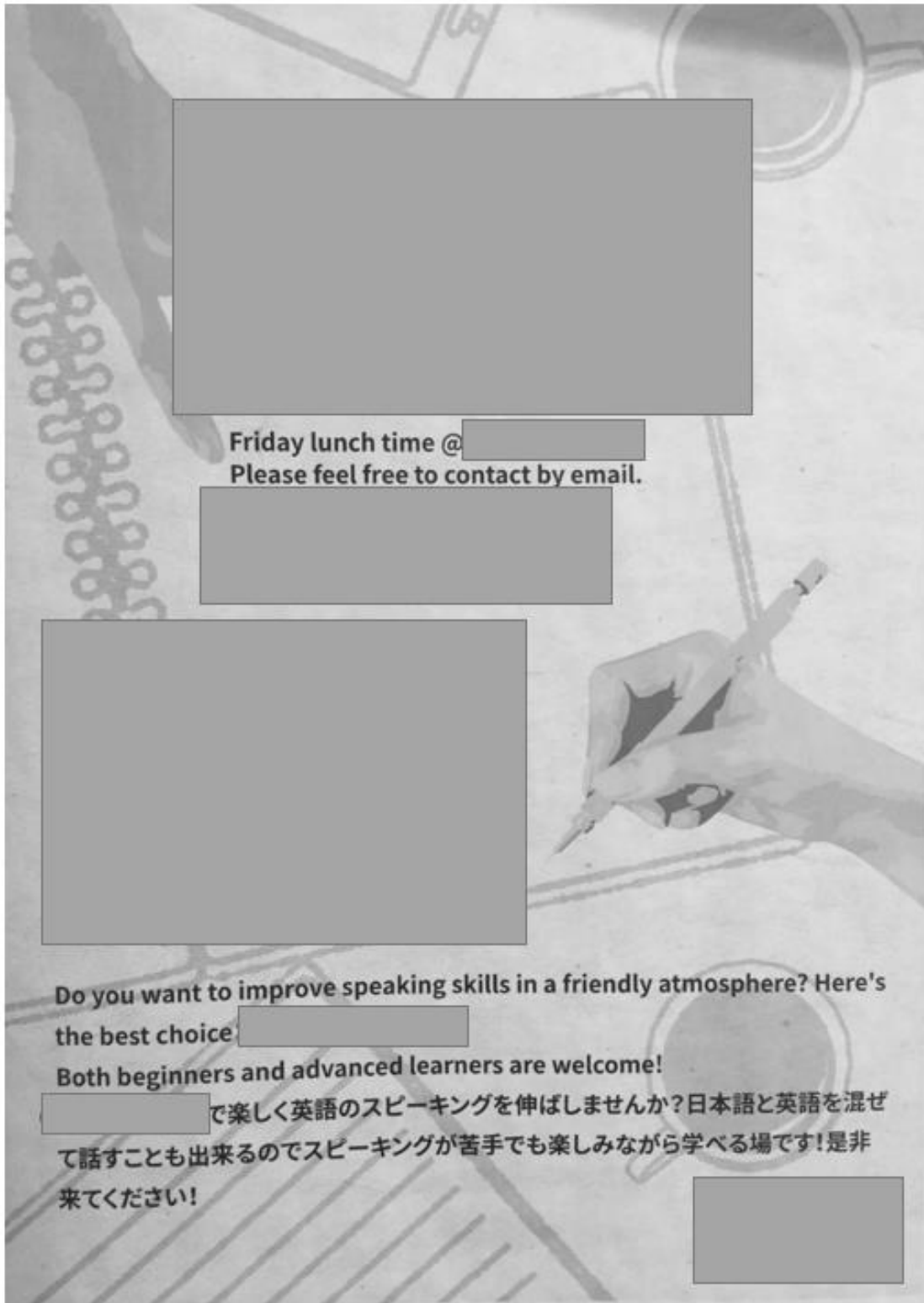
- メインセッションに戻ってきた子がいたらすぐ誘導する
- 来週の開始時に、Google form のフィードバック(30分だけの参加もOK)
- 12:30以降に入ってきた子はメインセッションでうちらとトーキング
- タイムマネージメントは、ブロードキャストで。(みんなに事前に言う)

- Google form のアンケート→アクティビティの項目ごとに分ける
- 日本語で話してたのを英語に変えてみる。英語で話しててわからないところを調べてもらう。
- 英語に変えてやってみて、どっちがよかったかアンケートを取る
- ブレークアウトセッションしたあと、入ってきた子はみんなメインセッションでやる
- “What” question は避けたい、“Do you ...and why?/why not?”

“Where do you want to go the most after covid 19 goes away?”



## Appendix O: LC promotional materials sample



[Redacted]

Friday lunch time @ [Redacted]  
Please feel free to contact by email.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Do you want to improve speaking skills in a friendly atmosphere? Here's  
the best choice [Redacted]  
Both beginners and advanced learners are welcome!

[Redacted]で楽しく英語のスピーキングを伸ばしませんか?日本語と英語を混ぜ  
て話すことも出来るのでスピーキングが苦手でも楽しみながら学べる場です!是非  
来てください!

[Redacted]