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SOCIAL SPACES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Stories from the L-café

Edited by

Garold Murray and Naomi Fujishima

Social Spaces for Language Learning

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0001

Also by Garold Murray

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DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0001

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DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0001

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978–1–137–53009–7

First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500 New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN: 978–1–349–70841–3
E-PDF ISBN: 978–1–137–53010–3
DOI 10.1057/9781137530103

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library

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Notes on Contributors

The administrators and teachers who contributed stories to this volume, along with the editors, currently work or have worked in the Language Education Center at Okayama University, Japan. While the students were enrolled at Okayama University when they wrote their stories and would have studied English or Japanese in the Language Education Center, most of them have since graduated and joined the workforce or moved on to other educational endeavors.

Thomas Fast has taught secondary and post-secondary English and Spanish. He has been a founding faculty member of two charter high schools in the United States and Japan. His research interests include study abroad, global education, and 21st-century skills in language education. He was awarded a Best of JALT 2012 Award for his talk entitled 'Global Issues in Language Education' by the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT).

Masumi Fujimoto is the manager of L-café. She has accumulated two years of hands-on experience working with Japanese and international students. One of her goals is to make the L-café a popular and friendly place for all Okayama University students. She also teaches a course on Japanese pop culture and anime. Prior to managing the L-café, she worked as an academic advisor for study abroad programs for over 20 years.

Naomi Fujishima has been teaching English at universities in Japan for over 20 years. She has been at her current

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0002

position at Okayama University since 2006. She is an active member of JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching) and has been on the JALT International Conference planning committee for the past ten years. Her research interests include learner development and student motivation. She enjoys collaborating on research projects with her colleagues, but her real love is teaching.

Saburo Fukuba graduated with a degree from the Faculty of Literature and is now working for a major Japanese manufacturing firm.

Yosuke Hino is currently a graduate student of Okayama University studying English education.

Kelly Marie Ho was an exchange student from October 2014 to February 2015 studying Japanese language. She is currently studying English Language and Linguistics at York St. John University in the United Kingdom.

Masumi Igarashi holds a PhD in Art History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Having specialized in modern art, she is a former curator at an art museum. Utilizing her experiences at graduate school, she now helps Japanese college students improve their academic writing skills in English. Her current research interests include politics in culture and language education.

Kazunori Kuwada is majoring in English literature and has studied in Australia for one year.

Bob Lamitie has taught in Japan and the United States. He has lived in Japan for 23 years and taught in many different Japanese educational niches, ranging from conversation schools to English cafes, from English clubs to informal small groups and from large medical universities to community colleges. He has enjoyed the experiences these positions have offered and relishes the chance to learn new things every day here in Japan.

Yu Miura is currently majoring in literature and will graduate in March 2016. He will work as an English teacher in Japan.

Kanako Miyake will graduate with a degree from the Faculty of Law in the spring of 2016 and will work for a consultant firm in Tokyo.

Garold Murray has taught EFL courses in undergraduate, graduate, and teacher education programs. In addition to having established two

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0002

self-access centers in Japan – one of which was open to the general public – he has served as president of the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (2005–2010) and convener of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning (2005–2011). His recent publications explore learner autonomy in relation to imagination and the social semiotics of place.

Naoko Nakamoto is a student in the Faculty of Literature and is currently studying in the United States.

Daniel Tangonan was an international exchange student from April 2014 to February 2015 studying Japanese Language. He is currently completing a degree in Cultural Studies and Education at the University of Guam.

Makoto Tahara holds an MS and a PhD in Plant Genetics from Oklahoma State University in the United States and has firsthand experience of what it is like to be a Japanese student living in a foreign country with only school-taught English. Therefore, he knew that setting up a place on the Okayama University campus where Japanese students could meet and speak English comfortably with international students was quite an important project.

Yuya Tanimoto graduated with a degree from the Faculty of Education and is now working at a high school in Okayama as an English teacher.

Claire Uchida is interested in collaboration and learner autonomy and has been working with Web 2.0 tools to try to better understand how interactive technologies can support differentiated teaching and learning styles, enhance personal learning environments, and foster more rewarding collaboration. She has been exploring how digitally enhanced learning, offering a great variety of modalities and media, can make learning more effective and more fun.

Mariko Uzuka's background is in management and marketing. She established and managed the English Café, which, under her direction, expanded and transformed into the L-café, a multilingual, multicultural social learning space. Currently she works in the Center for Global Partnerships and Education where she is in charge of international student advising, and maintains close ties with the L-café. In addition to the management of social learning spaces, her interests include peer teaching and global education.

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0002

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Exploring a Social Space for Language Learning

Garold Murray and Naomi Fujishima

Abstract: *This chapter chronicles a narrative inquiry comprised of a collection of sixteen stories about how students, teachers and administrators experience the L-café, a social space for foreign language learning located on the campus of a large national university in Japan. Adopting a narrative style, this introductory chapter begins with a description of the L-café and a brief outline of its history, after which it tells the story of the five-year ethnographic study leading up to the current inquiry. It then provides an account of how the theoretical perspective informing the interpretation of the stories expanded from a focus on community of practice to encompass constructs from human geography, mediated discourse analysis and complex dynamic systems theory. It concludes with a synopsis of the participants' contributions.*

Keywords: complexity theory; foreign language learning; learner autonomy; narrative inquiry; out-of-class learning; social learning space; space and place

Murray, Garold, and Fujishima, Naomi, eds. *Social Spaces for Language Learning: Stories from the L-café*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0003.

This book embodies a narrative inquiry in which students, teachers and administrators tell the story of how they experience the L-café, a social space for language learning located on the campus of a large national university in Japan. While social language learning spaces (SLLSs) may somewhat resemble learning commons – a recent addition to libraries around the world – or self-access centers, what sets them apart is their defining feature: a focus on language learning through informal social interaction. The L-café at Okayama University was created as a place where Japanese students could practice their English language skills in a relaxed environment.

SLLSs similar to the L-café are starting to pop up at universities across Japan primarily because they address two major foreign language learning problems. First, they offer a solution for learners who have difficulty finding opportunities to practice their target language in their home country. Second, they provide international exchange students in study abroad contexts with possibilities for integrating into the host society and, subsequently, opportunities to use their target language. SLLSs serve as places where these groups can come together in order to learn with and from one another.

Because they are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is very little published research on SLLSs.[1] In response to this gap in the literature, this book aims to provide administrators, teachers and researchers with an unprecedented comprehensive examination of an SLLS – one of the first in Japan. Administrators share their experiences related to establishing the facility and operating it on a daily basis. Teachers discuss their involvement, the support the facility offers to the foreign language curriculum and the impact the SLLS has had on their professional lives. Students, Japanese learning foreign languages in their home country and international students learning Japanese, discuss their experiences in the SLLS and how these experiences have shaped their language learning and identities. The final chapter in the book presents a thematic analysis of these stories. Overall, the book provides practical information for teachers and administrators developing or managing an SLLS, insights into the theoretical aspects of language learning beyond the classroom and directions for further inquiry – especially for researchers intrigued by the interplay of space, place and autonomy in language learning.

In this introductory chapter, we tell the stories leading up to this collection. We begin by describing the SLLS and briefly outlining its history. We then recount the story of the five-year ethnographic study, which

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0003

gave rise to the current narrative inquiry. In doing so, we relate how our investigation into the social learning space as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) expanded its theoretical focus to encompass constructs from mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001), the field of human geography and, eventually, complex dynamic systems theory. In the final section of the chapter, we discuss this book as a narrative inquiry and provide a synopsis of the stories documenting the contributors' engagement at the L-café.

From English Café to L-café

The social learning space at Okayama University came into existence as the English Café (EC) and over five years evolved into the current facility, the L-café (LC). When the EC opened at the beginning of the academic year in May 2009, it was one narrow room of approximately fifty-nine square meters. The space was created by partitioning off the corner of a large café on the ground floor of a building housing student services and club activities. The EC's proximity to the café no doubt inspired its name – although there was the possibility of having a cup of coffee or tea, the EC was not a café per se.

In retrospect, a key feature of the English Café was that the walls and doors were mostly glass. They let in a lot of light, making the EC a bright and perhaps even cheerful environment. They also helped create a sense of openness and spaciousness. This was important because the EC was anything but spacious. The room was not so small, but it was narrow. There were tables and chairs, a large screen TV, bookshelves for materials, a cabinet to store laptop computers, a cupboard for tea-making things and eventually a small sofa and a couple of small armchairs. There was also an administrative area where the full-time manager and her student helpers could work. However, the light and sense of openness made it possible to overlook the cramped quarters. The glass walls and doors also made it possible for curious students, passing by on the outside, to see what was happening on the inside.

On the inside, the EC was often a busy and noisy place. Japanese and international exchange students came to relax, chat with their friends and have lunch. Noontime was always busy. Students came to do homework and to get help from others with language course assignments. Others came to study on their own. However, most students came to the EC to

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0003

participate in the small-sized, peer taught language classes. These classes, which were offered in the late afternoon and early evening, proved to be very popular. Because they were non-credit bearing, there was no homework or grades to worry about; hence, there was little pressure. Lessons, which focused on basic conversation or test preparation, were delivered in a relaxed, friendly manner. These classes drew many students to the EC.

In addition to the classes, the EC offered a series of special social events throughout the academic year. These events marked cultural occasions or turning points, such as the arrival of the new international exchange students, the departure of these students, as well as Japanese students who were graduating, cherry blossom viewing season, summer festival, Halloween and Christmas. In addition, students were encouraged to propose and organize events, and the EC staff made arrangements for students to participate in events held in the local community. These special occasions provided opportunities for language practice, intercultural exchange and social networking.

As the classes and special events drew more students, the EC gradually outgrew its space. Three years after its opening, the university moved the EC to a much larger location. It was transformed into a spacious and open split-level facility. On the lower level, there was the main entrance and reception area, an administrative area, a kitchen area as well as areas for the students to gather. The upper level provided space for classes and for students to relax or engage in activities. There was also a large room used for more formal gatherings such as classes or meetings. However, the space was not the only aspect that changed. To reflect the increasingly multilingual character of the facility, the name was changed to the L-café. (For photographs of the EC, the LC, the people and the events, visit the websites listed in the endnotes.[2])

Change has been a fairly constant feature of both the EC and LC. From the outset, students come and go. The international exchange students arrive and several months later return to their home countries. The Japanese students tend to come regularly in their first and second years and then, because of an increase in coursework, part-time job hours and/or club activities, they stop coming. The Japanese students, who do continue to frequent the social learning space, eventually graduate. This means that at the beginning of each academic year there is a turnover in the student workers and peer teachers. A change with major implications, which will be discussed in the next section, was the move

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to the much larger location. The year following the move, the manager, who established the social learning space, left the position to undertake new challenges. A new manager with a different management style and priorities took over the position. As a result of these major changes and countless smaller ones, the LC has not been static, but in a constant state of becoming.

Investigating the social learning space

Constant change presents a challenge for researchers investigating social learning spaces and reporting on their inquiries. However, when we began our five-year ethnographic study a year after the EC opened, we were unaware of this. For nearly a year, we had been going to the EC once a week to hold regularly scheduled, yet informal, small group conversations with interested language learners. In effect, we were doing participant observation. What we saw was a community of learners. We were interested in knowing what language learning opportunities were available in this community of learners and how these opportunities might support the English language curriculum at our university.

To explore these questions, we designed a small-scale ethnographic inquiry, which we carried out during the second year of the EC's operation. In this study, we had eleven participants: five Japanese and four international students as well as the EC manager (Uzuka, Chapter 3) and the Vice Director of the Language Education Center (Tahara, Chapter 2) who played a key role in establishing the EC. Our data consisted of interviews with the participants and our observations. At the beginning of the following academic year (the EC's third year of operation), we received a grant, which enabled us to extend our inquiry for another four years. Our initial inquiry served as a pilot for this 'new' study, which maintained the original ethnographic design.

However, there were three major differences in the extended ethnographic inquiry. While our focus remained the same – the learning space and the opportunities available for language learning – we decided to track the language learning trajectories of Japanese students from their first year to graduation through their engagement in the EC. In addition to writing language learning histories at the outset and being interviewed at the end of each semester, the participants would also take the TOEIC once a year. A second change was that we now had funding to hire senior

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students as research assistants. Their main task was to do participant observation. They wrote up their field notes and sent us observation reports each week. We also interviewed them at the end of each semester. As we analyzed the data from the pilot study, our theoretical frame of reference began to evolve. Our shifting theoretical perspective was to have a major influence on how we came to see the data, the learners and the learning space.

From community to complexity

When we began our study, how we saw the learners and the learning context and interpreted the data was strongly influenced by the community of practice construct. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 4) define communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.' We learn by becoming a member of a group, starting out as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or newcomers. Through engagement in the group's activities with the more established members, we acquire the knowledge and expertise of the group and gradually work our way into full membership. At the EC, we saw a group of students who shared a common goal, that is to say, learning a foreign language, and who deepened their knowledge and expertise as they interacted, exchanged information and participated in a wide range of activities. We witnessed newcomers arrive and through their participation gradually work their way into the group to become valued members of the community.

In our very first round of interviews with the participants in the pilot study, we wanted to confirm our impression that a community of learners had developed; therefore, we asked them how they would describe the EC. They all began their answers with 'It's a place…' For us as language teachers and researchers, the significance of this was not immediately evident. The EC was, indeed, a place. It would be several months before we were led to the literature on space and place through a random decision to attend a conference presentation on linguistic landscapes, the study of language on signs in public spaces (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Our subsequent interest in the literature on linguistic landscapes introduced us to the field of human geography with its focus on space and place.

DOI: 10.1057/9781137530103.0003