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## **Modes of Identification Within a Language Learner-Led Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Although the importance of communities for social learning within self-access centers has been recognized over the last decade, there has yet been little research exploring student-managed communities in a self-access learning center (SALC). This short pilot study investigates the ways in which members identify with the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) of a student-led learning community within a university SALC. Five members of the Learning Community (LC), an English conversation community, were interviewed three times over the course of one semester about their language learning histories and their experiences in the LC. This data was analyzed inductively and subsequently categorized according to Wenger's (2010) modes of identification - engagement, imagination, and alignment. The findings of the study indicated that members' identification with the practice of the LC was connected to a desire for an accessible learning environment, attaining membership in an international imagined community of English users, and the ability to negotiate sociocultural norms for their own purposes. This study highlights a bidirectional relationship between the "baggage" that members bring with them and the everyday practice developed over the course of the LC's two-year history. Additionally, the insights gained from this exploration of the LC CoP have practical implications for SALC staff aiming to cultivate and support student-led learning communities.

*Keywords:* communities of practice, learner identity, learning communities, autonomy, affect

An area of self-access learning that has attracted increasing attention over the past decade is social learning spaces (SLS) and, more broadly, the role of social interaction in developing and enriching learner autonomy. The growing recognition of the value of SLS is linked to the "social turn" in applied linguistics (Block, 2003) as well as the understanding that learner autonomy is often developed through interdependence and collaboration with others rather than acting in isolation (Benson, 2001).

The role of the social in developing learner autonomy has been recognized in a number of self-access learning centers (SALCs) in different countries as can be observed in the development of different SLS and learning communities (Acuña González et al., 2015; Balçıkanlı, 2018; Lenning et al., 2013; Murray & Fujishima, 2016a; Mynard et al., 2020a). A

more recent social learning system established in certain self-access centers are Learning Communities - “group[s] of students (and teachers) who share common academic goals or interests, and meet regularly to learn with and from each other” (KUIS, 2016). These groups are often conceived of and managed by students rather than SALC staff or teachers and this was an initial point of interest that drew me to conducting research in this area.

Following a recent study into the dynamics of SLS participation (Mynard et al., 2020a), in this study I examine the ways in which learners may construct identification through participation in the Learning Community (LC) (pseudonym) a student-created and managed SALC learning community that focused primarily on developing members’ English speaking skills. This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm in that I recognize that multiple, subjective realities exist and that these realities are shaped in part by historical and cultural forces (Avramidis & Smith, 1999). Furthermore, I assume that my researcher positionality plays an active role in co-constructing with my participants the findings and knowledge that emerge in this study.

In this paper, I will first provide some background information on learning communities within SALCs or, more broadly, within out-of-class learning environments, and examine some relevant findings from the extant literature. I will then move on to outline Wenger’s (1998, 2010) *modes of identification*, the conceptual framework for this study and discuss some studies in which this framework has been used to analyze learner identity. I will then explain the methodology I utilized and provide some examples of my main findings. Finally, I will discuss what insights can be gained from this study and the implications that this may have for those seeking to understand and foster learning communities within SALCs.

### **Self-Access Social Learning Spaces and Learning Communities**

Increased recognition of the value of social learning within SALCs has led to several studies investigating the constitution, dynamics, and roles of self-access SLS (Balçıkanlı, 2018; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016a; Mynard et al., 2020a; Rose & Elliot, 2010). Through the analysis of these social learning environments utilizing a range of theories and foci such as learner identity (Mynard, 2020), complex dynamic systems (Murray & Fujishima, 2016b), and communities of practice (Hooper, 2020; Murray & Fujishima, 2013), these studies have contributed to a more detailed understanding of how an SLS may function. Practice-focused

implications from these studies may inform SALC administrators and staff who are aiming to establish or sustain opportunities for social learning and help them address problematic issues that may arise in SLS (Fukuba, 2016; Hino, 2016; Murray & Fujishima, 2016b; Mynard et al., 2020b).

An emerging variety of SLS that merits more attention in self-access research is the student-created learning community (Lenning et al., 2013). These communities are sometimes language-focused (Kanai & Imamura, 2019) or based on other student interests such as pop culture (but conducted in the target language) (Watkins, 2020) and may be held face-to-face or online. Although not in a SALC, Gao's (2007) study of 'The English Corner', a student-created learning community for English learning in China, demonstrates how the group provided members with a nurturing environment for out-of-class language study. Apart from the practical element of access to a language learning community that did not require "native speakers", 'The English Corner' was also found to fulfill a variety of roles that stimulated active learner engagement. These included providing affective support, affording legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) regardless of linguistic proficiency, offering opportunities for identity development, and introducing viable near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998).

Within two recent studies, Kanai and Imamura (2019) and Watkins (2020) explored different facets of learning community participation that members perceived to be valuable. It was found that the structure and content of the community's practice, the presence of near-peer role models that motivated newer members, an environment based on mutual support rather than competition, and the scaffolding afforded by the use of students' L1 in conjunction with English all contributed to sustaining active participation in SALC learning communities.

### **Communities of Practice and Modes of Identification**

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the related concept of communities of practice (CoP) are fundamentally grounded in the notion of learning as emerging from participation in social contexts. Rather than conceptualizing knowledge as something finite and clearly defined being transmitted from an authority to a learner, Wenger (1998) conceives of developing knowledgeability as becoming a member of a community of practice, where participation "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 4). Put differently, learning is an act but also an identity. Wenger (1998, 2010)

conceptualizes how identity is formed through participation in a CoP as three “modes of identification” - engagement, imagination, and alignment. These are explained simply below:

**Engagement:** The most direct relation to the community’s practice. Engaging in activities and conversations alone or with others, creating artifacts that aid the community’s daily work, sharing stories, etc.

**Imagination:** Members creating images of where they are located and where they may fit in the broader community of learners (or language users). Through imagination, members may also draw on different tools (media, role models, stories, etc.) to envision new possibilities for themselves in the future.

**Alignment:** Coordinating members’ actions and following the rules of the community so as to maintain coherence in relation to the community’s goals and broader organizational structures. This, however, should not be seen as one-way compliance, but rather a negotiated process enacted so that actions lead to the results members expect.

Modes of identification has been used as an analytic framework to explore the identities of language learners both inside and outside of the classroom (Lamb, 2013; Teng & Bui, 2018; Zheng & Chai, 2019). Perhaps the most influential extension of this, analogous to Wenger’s concept of imagination, has been the widely discussed concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Norton’s (2001) groundbreaking research on non-participation of language learners highlighted how the ways in which learners perceive their possibilities for integration or marginalization in desired imagined communities can have far-reaching implications on their motivation and degree of engagement in their present learning environment. In a study of student interactions within an EFL writing class in China, Zheng and Chai (2019), demonstrated how learners provided examples of engagement (actively participated together in the practice of document revision - which in turn became a community-produced artifact). Imagination was observable as they linked their practice to that of a wider community of global English users and to their identities as competent members of their former communities in secondary English education. Finally, they posited that alignment existed via collaborative negotiation of their varied perspectives and opinions in order to succeed in their “shared enterprise” (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, it was argued that they were also aligning their practice to the wider English learning community as they drew on information from textbooks and their previous classroom learning experiences.

As can be observed from some of the existing literature on learner identity within various communities of practice, it is important to consider not only intra-group norms and practices, but also the influence of perceived relationships to other communities whether “real” or imagined. By investigating how learners identify or disidentify with particular community practices, I hope that this study provides insight that can deepen SALC educators’ understanding of the struggles and successes members experience within self-access learning communities. This exploratory study therefore attempted to address the following research question: In what ways are learners’ identities constructed within the LC’s community of practice?

## **Methodology**

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a SALC within a medium-sized private international university in Japan. Within the SALC, this project focused specifically on the members of the LC. Participation in the community was completely voluntary and had no bearing whatsoever on students’ grades within the university. The SALC has an English-only policy on the second floor, but on the first floor, students may communicate in any language. Partly for this reason, the LC continued to meet only on the first floor since its inception in 2017.

My interest in the LC was based on the community being bilingual and due to its lack of reliance on teachers or exchange students. From my experiences as a language teacher in numerous contexts in Japan, I gradually became interested in the effects of native-speakerism on learner self-efficacy and motivation. The fact that the LC’s members seemed to be relying solely on each other to develop as English speakers therefore stimulated my curiosity in the community. I firstly became aware of the LC through talking with SALC staff who then introduced me to the LC leaders. In this initial meeting, I explained my ideas and rationale for my study and why I was interested in the LC. I came to the LC to recruit participants at the start of the study in October 2019, but all subsequent correspondence was conducted online and research interviews were conducted in private study rooms in a different area of the SALC. Although the participants and I did not know each other prior to the study, we quickly built a sense of trust between us as we were able to converse bilingually and because I attempted to maintain transparency relating to my ongoing analysis.

## **Participants**

I selected the five participants via purposeful sampling based on their position and experience within the community based on an initial questionnaire (see following section). Two participants (Ryoya and Yuki) were community organizers and were in charge of running each session, promoting the community, liaising with SALC staff, and making learning materials. Ryoya and Yuki had been members of the LC for approximately two years. They took over the organizer role in April 2019 with another member, Sara, and had worked as a team of three since then. The other three participants, Harumi, Mizuki, and Tenka were relatively new members (they had all joined in April 2019) at the time of the study.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained based on the university's institutional requirements. Informed consent was secured from all participants to record their language learning histories and interviews and they were assured that their confidentiality would be guaranteed. All participants' names (and the name of the community itself) that appear are pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality and mitigate any risk of harm stemming from participation in the study.

## **Data Collection**

As previously mentioned, I selected the participants via purposeful sampling utilizing a short questionnaire designed to indicate each participant's experience, degree of participation, and sense of comfort within the LC. At the end of the initial sampling questionnaire, I gave participants the option to consent to participate further in the study. I explained that they would be required to give a written or oral language learning history (LLH) (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008), participate in an approximately one-hour interview about their experiences in the LC, and finally participate in a short follow-up interview. For each stage of the study (LLH, main interview, follow-up interview), in accordance with institutional guidelines, I informed the participants that they would receive a book voucher as a token of appreciation. All five participants agreed to provide their LLH and participate in both interview stages.

Each participant requested that their LLHs be provided orally and were conducted in English, Japanese, or both. I made audio recordings of each LLH that I later transcribed. I took guiding questions for the LLHs from an instrument utilized by Murphey and Carpenter (2008) and adapted them based on consultation with two expert senior researchers at my institution. The rationale underpinning my collection of participants' LLHs was that I wanted to gain a deeper

understanding of the individual historical experiences that they brought with them into the LC. Based on these insights, I hoped to examine what influence, if any, these experiences may have had on the social practice within the LC and, conversely, how their experiences in the LC may have influenced their individual learning trajectories.

The primary data source for this study was semi-structured interviews utilizing two different protocols. I conducted the interviews with the two community organizers utilizing a slightly modified protocol that focused more on their experiences of transitioning into the organizer role and their perspectives on leadership. The questions in each protocol focused on issues such as community members, purpose, changes, and participation. Just as with the LLHs, I informed the participants that they could respond either in English or in Japanese. I selected semi-structured interviews as they provide the ability to focus on a specific area of interest (participation in a learning community) while allowing me to dialogically explore unexpected points of interest and delve deeper into key issues via probing questions (Brinkmann, 2018). In addition, in this study I recognize the claim made by numerous researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016) that an interview is a co-construction of knowledge in which the interviewer is “a knowledge-producing participant in the process” (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 1002). This naturally means that claims to generalizable ‘truths’ are problematic. However, the strength of the researcher as an “adaptable, flexible instrument” (Seidman, 2008, p. 23) is that they are potentially able, through careful observation and probing, to get a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the multiple ways interview participants present themselves and their historical learning trajectories.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed all audio recordings of the LLHs and interviews upon completion. Although I am conversational in Japanese and conducted the interviews bilingually, I cross-referenced any unclear instances of Japanese used by participants with a bilingual Japanese/English speaker. In any cases where participants’ utterances were in Japanese, I transcribed and analyzed them without any translation into English. I reread the LLHs numerous times and examined them using thematic qualitative analysis, focusing on critical incidents such as positive and negative learning experiences, and broad themes such as learner beliefs, learning goals, and learning environments. In the case of the semi-structured interviews, I reread all of the raw interview data multiple times and coded inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) via QDA



Miner Lite, a free qualitative analysis program. Once the initial thematic analysis had been completed, I sorted the data into broad categories of engagement, imagination, and alignment based on Wenger's (1998, 2010) *modes of identification*, the conceptual framework for this study. Following transcription and coding of the interviews, I conducted follow-up interviews where I could explore any areas of uncertainty and member check (Creswell & Miller, 2000) my provisional analysis with each participant. In the following section, I will provide examples from participants' LLHs and interview data of how the LC members' identification with their learning community manifested itself through engagement, imagination and alignment. I will also highlight salient links between their participation in the LC, their historical learning trajectories, and how they perceived themselves to be positioned within wider landscapes of practice (e.g. the SALC).

## Findings

In the following section, I will outline some key findings of this study and how they relate to engagement, imagination, and alignment. As has been argued in previous research in this area, these “modes of identification” should not simply be regarded in isolation, but rather as interrelated themes (Burns et al., 2016; Kubiak et al., 2014; Wenger, 1998). As such, although engagement, imagination, and alignment will be presented below in separate sections, I will highlight how they are in many ways inextricably linked.

### Engagement

From the coded data, the most common expression of engagement influencing the identity of the community and its members appeared to be in their efforts to create an accessible learning environment where students could come to socialize and support each other in developing their English proficiency. This engagement took the form of the language policy (students were able to use both Japanese and English), established members actively welcoming new participants, trying to curtail strictly hierarchical *senpai-kōhai*<sup>11</sup> relationships, and giving members opportunities to speak with different people each session. Ryoya, one of the community leaders, and Mizuki, a regular member of the LC, both stated that creating an open

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<sup>1</sup> *Senpai-kōhai* relationships are vertical, seniority-based relationships commonplace in Japanese school club activities, sports clubs, and in corporate culture (Enyo, 2015; Haghirian, 2010; van Ommen, 2015). *Senpai* (seniors) offer guidance in terms of community socialization in return for respect and deference from their *kōhai* (juniors).

and welcoming atmosphere for new members represented one important tenet of the LC. This was based on the historical practices of the community that they both experienced in their trajectories from legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to full members. As Mizuki stated, this was also seen by some as linked to the concept of mediating *senpai-kōhai* relationships in order to lower barriers to active community participation among freshmen students.

And we, uh, we always keep the at home atmosphere and yeah. And we also, um, always welcome new participants.

Ryoya, November 26th 2019 (Interview 1)

M: Uh... hm... So, maybe there are many freshmen enter the university, but I want to talk them regardless of the *senpai* or *kōhai*.

D: Okay, so you don't worry about that so much.

M: Because my, uh, (peers) around me, they talked with (me) evenly.

Mizuki, January 17th 2020 (Interview 2)

Linked to the emphasis on creating a low-pressure environment for each other was the idea of the LC acting as a place to socialize with friends rather than being solely for developing English proficiency. Many members stated that socializing with the other members was just as influential to their engagement in the community as speaking English. However, this, along with the very liberal language policy, sometimes created tensions for members with conflicting expectations or motivations within the LC.

T: So sometimes, uh, there were silent time or just Japanese talking a little bit long so they can change that, they can switch the time.

D: Okay, so more English, less Japanese.

T: More English. Yes.

Tenka, January 15th 2020 (Interview 2)

This represented a disjuncture within the LC with members at times having different conceptions of what the “domain”—the shared competence or values (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015)—of the community was. This in turn led to a perception by some

members that others were proliferating “unaligned engagement” (Kubiak et al., 2014) - participation in the LC without community norms being adhered to. An interesting example of this was Yuki’s reaction to an activity previously introduced by another member that she felt reinforced *senpai-kōhai* power dynamics, therefore reducing opportunities for younger members to actively participate. Yuki regarded this style of community engagement as challenging one of the key pillars of the LC’s historically established domain and therefore unacceptable practice.

Y: And third grade, so junior, junior students tend to speak and suggest opinion. Yeah. So freshmen students tend to, don't speak English.

D: You mean they feel...

Y: Yeah. Just listen. Yes. *Senpai*.

D: Oh, okay...

Y: Mm. I think it's not good.

Yuki, November 29th 2019, Interview 1

Another form of identification through engagement that I perceived to be ubiquitous among the members I spoke to was tied to the community’s regime of competence - “what would be recognized as competent participation in the [community’s] practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 137). In the LC, competence in the community appeared to be largely based on spoken English proficiency and, in particular, the ability to engage in “casual” or “everyday” conversation. Almost all of the members I spoke to stated that their initial reason for entering the LC stemmed from their perception of it as a place to enhance their English conversational ability.

So the LC, the purpose of the LC is to improve our daily life conversational skills. So yeah, we always talked about uh, uh, how is, how, what kind of impression do you have for winter or yeah. What we do for the summer vacation or something. So yeah, we always study daily life conversational vocabulary or phrase.

Ryoya, November 26th 2019 (Interview 1)

As will be shown in the following section on “imagination”, this focus on “conversational” English appears to be related to how the LC’s members view their position within a larger imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of English users and how engagement in the LC is linked to their desired or ideal future selves (Higgins, 1987; Dörnyei, 2005).

## **Imagination**

Wenger (1998) described imagination as comprising images of ‘the world’, ‘possibilities’, ‘the past and future’ and ‘ourselves’. Within the LC, I observed imagination manifesting itself in how they framed their community and its practice in relation to other groups, members’ views of an imagined community of English users, and how some students looked to near-peer role models as possible future selves.

In many ways the LC members' engagement overlapped with the way in which they imagined their community in contrast to other groups in the SALC. One of the main themes that I noticed from their interviews was a framing of the LC as contrasting the English Lounge (also known as the Yellow Sofas), an English-only social learning space within the SALC. Many of the members had previously unsuccessfully attempted to study at the English Lounge and these negative experiences appeared to lead them to describe the LC as a more caring and open alternative.

Y: Because I tried to go Yellow Sofa, but I don't like the atmosphere because...

D: What kind of atmosphere was there?

Y: It's like, um, professional English. (laughs)

D: Okay. Could you explain what do you mean by professional?

Y: So there are many people who speak English well, so I don't, I'm not good at English, speaking English. So I hesitate to join the conversation at the Yellow Sofa. But, but [in] the LC anyone don't, don't care the level.

Yuki, November 29th 2019 (Interview 1)

This positioning of themselves in contrast to the English Lounge is congruent with Wenger's (1998) perspective on identities of non-participation. Wenger (1998) states that as we come into contact with multiple communities of practice throughout our learning histories, non-participation is inevitable. Through contact with these different communities, we get “some sense of what it is we are not, what we wish we were, what we would not dream of being, or what we are glad not to be” (p. 164). A perceived sense of marginality stemming from the LC members’ brief contact with the English Lounge within their language learning histories may have led them to embrace a community domain and identities of non-participation that sought to counter the elitism and closed atmosphere that they felt the English Lounge represented.

However, the picture is arguably not as simple as a straightforward rejection of the English Lounge. A number of the LC members also appeared to orient their participation in the community and the desire to improve their English “everyday” conversation skills as part of a learning trajectory towards active participation in an international imagined community of English users. This was often visible through an international posture (Yashima, 2009) apparent in several statements from the LC members.

Yeah, um, I went to open campus a lot when I was in high school so I expected that [the university] you know, would be, um, [the university] would provide us a lot of, um, kind of practical materials to study English or, yeah, [the university] would have a lot of great teachers or foreign teachers, Japanese professors or something. So I maybe, um, if I go to [the university], I will be very, very globalized person or...

Ryoya, LLH

The perception of English Lounge users as having extremely high English proficiency as well as the presence of predominantly foreign teachers on duty there may therefore have had a deeper significance to the LC users in relation to their desired “global” identity. Existing studies have found that the English Lounge and other similar social learning spaces are regarded by students as a kind of “foreign country” (Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020a). Therefore, due to some of the LC members’ inability to enter this foreign country, an additional reason for engagement in the LC may have been its role as a more accessible bridge to members’ desired imagined community. This can be seen in Tenka’s claim that the LC is oriented towards building communication skills that will later allow them to converse casually with “native speakers.”

T: Because maybe the LC, one of the goal or goals of the LC is to talk with native speaker very casually. Maybe.

D: Oh really?

T: Maybe, maybe, maybe because we can search the slangs or phrase...

D: So did someone in the LC say the goal, one goal of the LC is to talk with native speakers?

T: Ah, not directly, but I, I feel.

Tenka, January 15th 2020 (Interview 2)

This desire to gain entry to this international imagined community was, however, also colored by certain ideological assumptions. Rather than viewing themselves as legitimate peripheral participants in a global English speaking community, several of the LC members regarded themselves as using incorrect or flawed English in contrast to “native speakers.” This also represents an example of alignment in that several members essentially measured English skill against a broad “native speaker” standard. Ryoya seemed to frame the LC’s practice in deficient terms when comparing the knowledge and competence that they collaboratively produced to a “native speaker” standard. When international students visited the community, they were perceived as the source of “real English” and “correct information.”

D: Do you feel the atmosphere changes if an international student is there?

R: Atmosphere. Yeah. Um, (pauses) maybe a little bit, but I, I don't feel so much, but maybe kind of a little bit changed 'cause yeah, we can, um, get some, you know, the real, you know, um, real English? I don't know but, you know, they are English native speakers so we can get the correct information from them.

Ryoya, November 26th 2019 (Interview 1)

These beliefs are congruent with the “native speaker” model for English use prevalent in almost every sector of Japanese English education and the problems associated with it (Hiramoto, 2013; Konakahara, 2020; Lowe, 2020). Viewed in dichotomous “native” and “non-native” terms, beliefs that monolingual and native-normative models of language education are the ideal have arguably become “common sense” (Lowe, 2020), leading to many learners in Japan subscribing to the notion that anything short of “native speaker” English represents failure (Honna & Takeshita, 1998; Kitano, 2020; Matsuda, 2003).

However, despite these concerns, there were also positive signs that both current and former core members acted as linguistic role models for some within the LC. Some members stated that having regular contact with these successful language learners increased their motivation in their own studies.

Yeah. Um, as participants, I always respect Hiro, the previous leader of the LC. Yeah. He was an Indonesia major, but he can speak very, you know, good English and he knows a lot of vocabularies, phrase, of course academic words or slang or casual words. Yeah. So

yeah, we learned from him a lot of various vocabularies or phrases. So yeah, I always think I want to be like him.

Ryoya, November 29th 2019 (Interview 1)

Some members also remarked on how having *senpai* (seniors) to help them in the community, rather than teachers, created an atmosphere of closeness and commonality where they could communicate with each other more directly.

T: Uh, in my opinion, the leaders, the leaders have experienced the university life, this, at this university and other students. So I'm also student so we can share the same, same opinions or something, different thing. And I can learn how to, how to organize the class or I want to, uh, no, no, no... I could, I could ask them how can I improve my skill? Or what did you do in a, when you are freshman.

D: So they've actually experienced the same thing as you, whereas teachers haven't maybe.

T: Yes. Not as a student.

Tenka, January 15th 2020 (Interview 2)

These examples showed that, just as in previous studies on student-led learning communities, groups like the LC can prove to be fertile ground for producing near-peer role models for other members. The value of near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998; Walters, 2020; Wang, 2020) - role models “close to [one’s] social, professional, and/ or age level” (Murphey, 1998, p. 201) - is partly grounded in Bandura’s (1997) work on self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) claims that “vicarious experience” allows people to measure their own self-efficacy based on the achievements of others. Near-peer role modelling has been argued to be an effective source of motivation due to Bandura’s claim that “seeing or visualizing people similar to oneself perform successfully typically raises efficacy beliefs in observers that they themselves possess the capabilities to master comparable activities” (p. 87). Put simply, due to their comparable status, if the LC members regard their near-peers as successful and legitimate English speakers, they are more likely to believe they can become one too.

## Alignment

My analysis suggested that alignment within the LC manifested itself mainly in internal alignment related to the CoP's history. However, as Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2014) state, alignment does not equate to prescription and blind acquiescence to established norms. Instead, it is “a two-way process of coordinating enterprises, perspectives, interpretations, and contexts” (p. 21) aimed at satisfying the community's goals.

One of the most common forms of internal alignment that I noticed was related to the Japanese hierarchical *senpai-kōhai* system. As previously discussed, some members regarded the strictly top-down *jouge kankei* (hierarchical relationship) that came with the *senpai/ kōhai* dynamic to be antithetical to the open and casual environment that they believed the LC was grounded in. Community artifacts, such as a questionnaire for member feedback and the willingness of the organizers to directly approach other members for their opinions on the LC, also represented signs that the leaders were trying to create a more democratic environment. Yuki revealed that she attempted to mitigate the influence of her *senpai* status on younger members by framing herself as a friend and de-emphasizing her seniority.

Y: Heh... if *senpai kōhai* is strict, hm... communication, they might be difficult.

D: So do you think other members of the LC see you as *senpai*?

Y: Um, I think they see me as *senpai*, but they can talk to me. Uh, without *senpai*.

D: Is there anything that you do to make it easier for them?

Y: Hm... I don't like *senpai* and *kōhai* relationship so, um, *nanda, kanji sasenai you ni...*

**(like, I try to make it so they don't feel that...)**

Yuki, November 29th 2019 (Interview 1)

Beliefs regarding the constraining influence of *jouge kankei* were also, in turn, tied to an alignment with the history of the LC as the philosophy of Hiro, the previous leader and founder of the community, was also seen to be more egalitarian and autonomy supportive.

Um, [Hiro] always asked, uh, a student, uh, uh, how did you feel about [the LC] or yeah, yeah. Yeah. And we had a session at lunchtime, so we have to eat lunch. So they always ask, um, could you guys eat lunch or yeah, during the session? Yeah. He always asked us and yeah. And we answered honestly. Yeah. This time I didn't eat cause um, we had a lot



of conversation and so next time I want to eat lunch during the session. So, um, yeah, please can you improve that kind of thing?

Ryoya, November 26th 2019 (Interview 1)

Although this area of Hiro's leadership style seemed to have largely endured within the LC, I also noticed a number of instances where the influence of a *senpai-kōhai* hierarchy remained and was at times viewed as a potentially facilitative presence stemming from how individual members framed *senpai-kōhai* relationships. Ryoya's drew on his individual learning history when he considered the value of *senpai-kōhai* relationships in the LC. This arguably represents an example of an individual's perspective and agency potentially shaping and innovating a community's practice rather than simply reproducing historical norms (Billett, 2007).

But when I was freshman, I thought that *senpai* students or junior, senior students, uh, have, uh, more vocabularies or phrases than me. So if I, uh, if I have a problem to study TOEFL, TOEIC or to study vocabulary phrases, uh, I can ask to them. So this is very positive, uh, mind for *senpai-kōhai* relationship. Yeah. So like sometimes *senpai-kōhai* relationship is, can be, uh, you know, um, measure, like measure, like, uh, I'm, uh, I'm in this position but *senpai* maybe in this position. So if I have problem, I can ask to them because they have more experience than me. So, yeah. Um, so yeah, we have to use some, this kind of *senpai-kōhai* relationship positively.

Ryoya, November 26th 2019 (Interview 1)

Another way in which *senpai-kōhai* appeared to manifest itself within the LC was in the tensions that existed related to the language policy. As previously mentioned, some members stated that they sometimes felt frustrated over what they regarded as overuse of Japanese within the community. However, when discussing this issue, one member claimed that her position as a *kōhai* or *shoshinmono* (beginner) in the LC prevented her from urging other members to honor the language policy during the times they were supposed to be conversing in English.

D: Why do you feel like you are *shoshinmono*?

T: 'Cause sometimes I couldn't, I can't, I can't say or *chui* (**remind**), Japanese *chui* (**remind**).

D: Okay. Oh, you couldn't tell them to not speak Japanese.

T: Yeah, not speak Japanese.

D: Okay.

T: "Why, why do you speak Japanese?" is sometimes difficult. (laughs)

Tenka, January 15th 2020 (Interview 2)

Finally, congruent with the traditional *senpai-kōhai* model, I also noticed occasions where newer members showed an intention to help and socialize the next generation of the LC's members into the practices of the community.

T: One feeling is that I want to be a central person and I want to, uh, I want to lead young, yeah, freshman?

D: Yeah, yeah. New new students.

T: New students, like I, I experienced that.

Tenka, December 4th 2019 (Interview 1)

One theoretical perspective offering insight into how *senpai-kōhai* relationships manifested in the LC is Davies and Harré's (1990) Positioning Theory. Positioning Theory asserts that one's identity or 'self' is discursively constructed autobiographically within oneself (reflexive) and in conversations with others (interactive). A key focus within this theory that is relevant to *senpai-kōhai* is the notion of rights and duties. In the varying perspectives in the potential utility of *senpai-kōhai*, we can observe the LC's members' differing autobiographical experiences affecting the way in which they position themselves as either *senpai*, *kōhai*, or simply members of the LC. Also, based on their interactions with others in their LLHs and within the LC we see how different members adopt or resist the relational rights (I can be guided by my *senpai*) or duties (I must guide others to speak English) that fit into the "storyline" (Harré, 2011; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) they have internalized. In the following section, I will discuss the findings of this study, the interrelation of engagement, imagination, and alignment, and what they can tell us about how the identities of the LC members have been colored by their participation in the community.

## Discussion

The different members of the LC highlighted how engagement, imagination, and alignment were indeed overlapping and interrelated concepts. The tenets underpinning common practices in the community of supporting each other, welcoming new members, and learning “everyday English” (engagement) were shaped by members positioning themselves in relation to the English Lounge and also within a wider international community of English users (imagination). In turn, they defined competent practice largely in relation to historical CoP norms and “native” standards of English use that they felt would afford them legitimacy within their desired imagined community (alignment). The interaction of the past, present, and future was also visible in the practice of the community and served to show how the practice of a CoP both shapes and is shaped by its individual members (Billet, 2007). The history of the community and the beliefs of its founder lived on in the current practice of the LC through the community’s values and aims, how its members interact with each other, and the tools it uses to function. However, the life phases of the LC are not merely reproductive. As the community lives on through new generations of members, they bring with them their unique antecedent conditions (Murphey et al., 2012), their “academic baggage,” which in turn stimulates change in what the LC represents and how its members interpret what membership in the LC means to them. We see this most clearly in how *senpai-kōhai* relationships are perceived by some within the community. Although participation in the LC may have been based more on a rejection of the hierarchical positioning of *senpai-kōhai* (as can be seen in Yuki’s attitude towards it), Ryoya’s individual experiences appeared to result in him framing these relationships in a more positive way. This represents a tension in the different “storylines” (Harré, 2011) that members are following as they participate in the LC and the resulting rights and duties they take on. Due to the seeming lack of a coherent CoP “domain” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), one could potentially view the LC as an “affinity space” (Gee, 2004, Chapter 6) or a “complex dynamic eco-social system” (Murray, 2018) where members of the LC may share a broadly-defined common endeavor but with different motivations or assumptions. This may then lead to tensions between a desire to build an egalitarian and relaxed atmosphere for making friends versus maintaining a venue to practice English conversation.

Another key consideration related to *senpai-kōhai* and to the notion of antecedent conditions of members in general is the impact of the wider institutional or sociocultural context

on CoPs. This has been discussed in Roberts (2006), who asserts that CoPs “do not develop and function in a vacuum” (p. 634) and that the environment surrounding the community has a profound effect on its nature and efficacy in terms of knowledge creation.

Membership in the LC appeared to be in part tied to an “identity of non-participation” (Norton, 2001) in relation to another SALC community, the Yellow Sofas/ English Lounge. Many members based the practice of the community (accessible, friendly, relaxed) on what it was not (Wenger, 1998) - i.e. their perception of the English Lounge as an inaccessible, elite environment reserved for high-proficiency English speakers. Whether this was in fact accurate or not is highly debatable as other studies have found learners of many levels of English proficiency at the English Lounge (Mynard et al., 2020a). However, the key point here is that this was how members of the LC *perceived* that space within their “storyline” and in turn positioned their own community partly in opposition to that *perception*.

On a sociocultural level, apart from the *senpai-kōhai* dynamic stemming from their experiences in secondary education and the professional sphere (Haghirian, 2010; Sano, 2014), the framing of “native speaker” English and “non-native speaker” English respectively as standard and deficient has also been found to be a prevalent discourse within ELT in Japan (Honna & Takeshita, 1998; Lowe, 2020). In this way, just as “academic baggage” has been brought into the CoP, I would argue that ideological baggage has also had an impact on members’ beliefs within the LC. This also seems to have had an impact on how the community’s daily practice has been molded by its members as they framed their own English as not “real” and stated their goal to be to communicate with “native speakers.” Although, just as in Gao’s (2007) study of “The English Corner,” the LC afforded members an opportunity to practice English without the need for “native speakers,” one could also argue that a desire for “native” English was still very much present in the LC. In a similar way to the discursive construction and negotiation of members positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) in relation to *senpai-kōhai* within the community, it could also be claimed that the LC acts as a “space of possibilities” (Murray, 2018) relating to how learners position themselves vis-à-vis “native” norms of language use. Although several members perceived “non-native” English to be deviant from the “real” language, we also see signs of this “storyline” being renegotiated through the presence of viable near-peer role models (Gao, 2007; Kanai & Imamura, 2019; Murphey, 1998; Watkins, 2020) - other Japanese students as plausible (and achievable) ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2005).

This recognition of the relationality between a CoP's practice representing a "space of possibilities" and the concurrent impact of members' predispositions formed through their participation in larger societal structures can be echoed in the work of Handley et al. (2006) and Mutch (2003). These researchers argue for a middle ground between the "fatalism" of Bourdieu's habitus - our predispositions determine our futures - and the "compartmentalism" of Wenger's CoP model (Handley et al., 2006, p. 10) - arguing CoPs can essentially shape their own destiny. What is clear is that the findings from this short pilot study suggest that learning community CoPs may be fertile ground for exploring how learners co-construct identities in self-access environments.

### **Conclusion**

Although this study suggested a range of potentially fruitful avenues for further research into SALC-based learning communities, there were significant limitations that must be addressed in future inquiry in this area. Perhaps the clearest limitation was the scale and depth of the study. The study was not longitudinal and was based solely on indirect accounts via LLHs and interview data, meaning that we were only given access to a limited 'snapshot' of the CoP. In the future, a longitudinal study with an observation component would both provide a fuller picture of the evolving practice of the community and also allow triangulation of data, thus enhancing the 'trustworthiness' (Loh, 2013) of the interview findings. Furthermore, the positionality of the researcher could be made clearer to foreground how their past experiences may affect how data is interpreted (Miyahara, 2019).

Despite these issues, this study highlighted a number of potentially useful implications for SALC staff. The practice of the LC CoP and the experiences of its members foregrounded the importance of affective states in sustaining language learning effort and motivation (Yamashita, 2015; Watkins, 2020). Tied to this consideration, this study suggests the importance of affordances for community participation or legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for students with varying levels of linguistic proficiency (Murray & Fujishima, 2016b; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014) in order to mitigate problems of marginalization or elitism within SALCs. Finally, I believe this research paints a picture of learners, if supported, with the potential to find their own solutions to enduring challenges that they face as second language

users. Providing students with more opportunities in SALCs to inhabit leadership roles can inspire those around them and play a part in cultivating new, empowered identities.

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