

## Shifting Identities in a Social Learning Space

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In this paper, we explore the impact that a social learning space has on the identity construction of six regular users. The context is an English conversation lounge which is part of the self-access center in a university in Japan. The purpose of the lounge is to provide students with an environment in which to practice speaking English, which is one of the languages which they are learning, in a relaxed and supportive space. Viewed through a poststructuralist lens (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000) that considers social conditions to have a profound influence on identity, we take a multiple case study approach. We also explore emergent themes, and attempt to shed light on phenomena that affect identity construction in this context. Findings include evidence in interviews in year 1 and year 2 showing examples of *reflexive*, *projected*, and *imagined* identities (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013) shifting over time as the participants engaged in participation in the English Lounge. In addition, we found that both positive and negative views of the lounge influenced these shifts in identity.

本稿では、ソーシャルな学習空間がそれを頻繁に使用する6名のアイデンティティ構造に与える影響について分析する。本研究の調査は、日本のある大学に設置された語学学習のためのセルフアクセスセンター内にある英語ラウンジで行った。このラウンジの目的は、学生の学習言語のひとつである英語を、くつろぎながら安心して練習できる環境を提供することである。本研究では、このラウンジにおける複数の事例を取りあげ、アイデンティティに基大な影響を及ぼす社会構造と考えられるポスト構造主義 (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000)の視点を通して、アイデンティティ構造に影響を及ぼす現象の解明と新たに浮上する課題について考察する。分析の結果、調査開始後の一年目と二年目に行った研究参加者に対するインタビューの中にreflexive, projected, imaginedアイデンティティ (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013)の例が確認されており、これらのアイデンティティの変化に影響を及ぼす英語ラウンジの正と負の側面が明らかとなった。

### Keywords

Social learning spaces, identity, self-access, conversation lounge

### キーワード

ソーシャル学習空間, アイデンティティ, 自律学習, 会話ラウンジ

**T**he context of this study is a self-access learning center (“The SALC”) at a small, private university specializing in languages near Tokyo in Japan. As self-access learning centers are being reimagined as social learning communities (Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2015), it is becoming common to include a space within the center where students can practice using the target language. On the surface, a conversation lounge may appear to be relatively straightforward to understand—users come and converse in English. However, when examined further, aspects of the lounge and its participants reveal what happens there is more than simple conversation. Drawing on multiple sources of data, such as observations and interviews, we explore some of these dynamics as part of a longitudinal ethnographic study within the SALC. This paper represents a small part of the overall study by Mynard et al. (forthcoming) which draws not only on identity as a framework, but also communities of practice, beliefs and other individual difference factors in order to understand the interconnected dynamics of a social learning space. The case studies that we examine here differ from those in the larger study, which also included students who were not regular users of the SALC. In the present paper, we describe one portion of the ethnography and focus specifically on the identity development of six students who we identified as regular users when the study began. We define a regular user to be someone who uses the lounge at least three times per week, but is not a member of the core Community of Practice (Burke et al., 2018; Mynard et al., forthcoming).

Our interest in regular users of the English Lounge emerged from many of us having mandatory weekly duties there as English teachers and seeing nervous, reticent learners develop into more established language users within that space. At the same time, we were also aware of students who for a variety of reasons struggled to engage with other people in the area and chose to stop using the English Lounge. In a way, we viewed the regular users as representing an important bridge between outsiders and the extremely motivated, core members of the community. We wanted to investigate the experiences and multifaceted identities of six regular users of this space in order to better understand the complex factors influencing learners' participation. By learning from the insights gained from speaking to these learners, we hoped that we could support the development of the English Lounge into a more accessible and stimulating environment.

The first section of this paper consists of a brief literature review related to social language learning spaces, and from there we describe the approach we have used to examine identity construction within that space. This is then followed by an overview of how we conducted the research and summarized the findings from the data related to our participants. We take a multiple case study approach, but we also explore emergent themes that explain the phenomena in this particular context. In our last section we will briefly summarize all six cases in relation to some emergent themes relevant to the exploration of identity in the English Lounge.

We started the overarching ethnography in June 2017 with the aim of understanding the social and psychological processes occurring in our learning environment. The project is gradually developing to incorporate several themes and is being analyzed from different perspectives (See Burke et al., 2018 for a summary). For the purposes of this paper, we will only look at identity construction within the space over a period of, on average, about 18 months from the time of the participants' first engagement with the English Lounge.

## Context

The university where the study takes place was established just over 30 years ago and has 4,000 undergraduate students all majoring in languages and international cultures. In order to support learners' language study and use outside of the classroom, and to promote the development of language learner autonomy, the institution has a prominently situated self-access learning center called the SALC. Although there have been two previous versions (the first one was established in 2001), the current SALC opened in April 2017 in a large two-level space designed specifically as a social language learning community. The philosophy of the SALC draws on social constructivism and promotes interaction with others as a key way of facilitating learning by negotiating meaning and incorporating ideas into existing schemata (Adelman Reyes & Vallone, 2008; von Glasersfeld, 1989). The mission of the SALC is to foster lifelong language learner autonomy as an international community by empowering learners to engage in reflective practice and to take charge of their language learning (SALC, 2019). Within the large SALC, there is one area named the English Lounge which operates as an English-only conversation lounge where students can find teachers on duty with whom they can converse or can practice using English with other students. The English Lounge is also referred to by students as the "Yellow Sofas" due to the color of some of its furniture. The English Lounge is an example of a social learning space (Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016) that provides opportunities for promoting interactions with others in order to foster learning. Language conversation lounges not only aim to provide a comfortable space for people to come together and engage in social activities, but the space may also provide opportunities for users to develop a sense of ownership and to feel part of a community (Bibby, Jolley, & Shiobara, 2016; Kimura, 2014; Thornton, 2016). We know from previous research in the area of self-access and social learning spaces

(e.g., Hughes, Krug & Vye, 2011; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014) that one of the most important components of a self-access facility is the opportunity for users to make friends. In fact, even if students initially visit because of a learning need, they become regular attendees mainly for social reasons (Hughes et al., 2011).

### *Investigating Identity Construction in Our Context*

The approach we take to investigating identity is broadly poststructuralist (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000) which allows for a nuanced and multi-levelled framing. This conception of identity is expressed as a collection of “socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project” (Block, 2007, p. 32). In short, a poststructuralist approach examines social conditions and the impact they might have on identity (Block, 2007), but also takes into account the impact of individual constructions. Language learners are members of complex and overlapping social categories which impacts their identity as individuals. Taking this conception of identity allows us to see the impact of a particular environment, in this case the English Lounge, on identity construction. We take the view that environmental conditions can change and our research is likely to influence the context and the individuals within it either intentionally or unintentionally. For example, by participating in the interviews, participants are likely to reflect on their roles within the space and this is one way in which the interviews might impact the individual English Lounge users. Furthermore, the researchers have been made aware of ongoing issues within the Lounge and have disseminated this information to other stakeholders who may have acted on it. In other words, the nature of this research is dynamic and bidirectional. In addition, identity is discursively constructed (Miller, 2014; Weedon, 1997) which is particularly relevant to our context and the ways in which we approach the research. Gee (1996) writes that identity research needs to incorporate a broader interpretation of not only linguistic but also non-linguistic features such as bodily movement, clothing, gestures, values and so on. He notes that this forms “a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (Gee 1996, p. 127). Identity can also be investigated from the point of view of a performance (Goffman, 1959) or day-to-day acting (Butler, 1999). It is also important to understand the different facets of identity which is one of the reasons we decided to draw upon the framework used by Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2013) as six facets are explored which are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Facets of Identity (From Benson et al., 2013, p. 19)**

Facet 1	Embodied identity	The self as a mobile point of perception located in a particular body
Facet 2	Reflexive identity	The self's view of the self, incorporating self-concept and attributes and capabilities
Facet 3	Projected identity	The self as it is semiotically represented to others in interaction
Facet 4	Recognised identity	The self as it is preconceived and recognised by others in the course of interaction
Facet 5	Imagined identity	The self's view of its future possibilities
Facet 6	Identity categories and resources	The self as it is represented (by self or others) using established social categories and semiotic resources

Benson et al. (2013) utilized this framework to analyze identity shifts in learners as they studied abroad. We also deemed this framework appropriate in relation to our research as users of the English Lounge often refer to it as akin to being abroad. This is related to the fact that in Japan there are generally not many places or opportunities for students to interact in English and with people from overseas. The research conducted by Benson et al. (2013) used a narrative inquiry approach drawing on data collected from interviews before study abroad, regular correspondence through blogs, email, MSN, and Facebook, and interviews after returning from study abroad. The first three facets draw on work by Harré (2001) and relate to conceptions of the “self”. (1) *Embodied identity* is the self that is located within our physical bodies. Conceptions of one’s embodied identities draw upon interactive sensory processes and may contribute to one’s sense of self. (2) *Reflexive identity* represents the self’s view of oneself and is constructed through experiences and inner dialogues that affect one’s conceptions of ability to use another language. A context such as the English Lounge provides opportunities to use a language and test out one’s conceptualizations of capacities and often challenge them. (3) *Projected identity* is a form of conscious and intentional construction of identities and self-presentation (Goffman, 1990). These constructions often attempt to influence others or create a public identity. Imagined identity draws on possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and incorporates conceptions of our past and possible future representations. (4) *Recognized identity* is how others perceive someone and these insights can be investigated through interviews with peers. In order to explore an L2 *imagined identity* (5), we draw upon work by Yashima (2009, 2013) who makes a distinction between identifying with a target language group and having a more general international posture. The English Lounge does not associate itself with any particular target language community but is deliberately intended to be an international space where people use only English to communicate. Finally, (6) *identity categories and resources* is the pool of possible selves after considering the various social categories and experiences that define a person. Categories that could be ascribed in this case for example are Yellow Sofa group members, Regular Users, and Non-Users. As will be seen in the results section, we were not able to uncover insights into all of these facets.

## Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry as a methodology is often used in identity work in the field of applied linguistics as it can be effective at helping researchers to understand experiences of participants. Narrative inquiry makes the epistemological assumption that human beings make sense of random experiences by imposing story structures (Sinclair Bell, 2002). Research is resituated as a social process and “...narratives are not simply stories of individuals moving through and reflecting on experiences in isolation. Narratives, by their very nature, are social and relational and gain their meaning from our collective social histories” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 5). As researchers, we undertook an analytic examination of our data in order to uncover insights and assumptions in our context. Conle (2000) notes that “What counts in narrative inquiry is the meaning that actions and intentions have for the protagonist. This emphasis is in stark contrast to researchers approaching ‘subjects’ with instruments, such as checklists and scales, followed by statistical manipulations and comparison” (p. 52). As the purpose of the research is to understand how our learners construct and reconstruct their identities, and what potential role the English Lounge played, narrative inquiry was an appropriate methodology.

## The Present Research Project

The full research team was comprised of seven educators who have close contact with the English Lounge and the students visiting the lounge. The overall purpose of the research was



to understand more about the psychological dynamics within the English Lounge in order to ensure that students' needs are being met (Burke et al., 2018; Mynard et al., forthcoming). We framed this portion of the research project through the following overarching research question:

Does the English conversation lounge play a role in the identity construction of six of its regular users?

In order to investigate this, the following sub-questions were formulated to shed light on how identity is constructed and how it shifts:

1. How do regular users view the role of the lounge
  - 1.1. in interview 1?
  - 1.2. in interview 2?
2. What observations can be made about the participants' identities:
  - 2.1. in interview 1?
  - 2.2. in interview 2?
3. What observations can be made about shifts in participants' identities?

We included a specific focus on how users viewed the lounge as it allowed for further insights into participants' identities as they made sense of the experiences afforded by the English Lounge. The *reflexive identity* facet in particular became apparent when participants detailed their views of the lounge.

## Methods

The research project employed the use of observations, initial one-on-one semi-structured interviews, written language learner histories, and follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interviews. In order to determine how the English Lounge space was being used, the research team conducted an initial set of ten observations (Burke et al. 2018; Lyon, forthcoming).

After the observations, the findings were thematically coded via the qualitative data analysis software, HyperResearch (Version 3.7.5, 2017). Through this analysis, we identified three distinct sub-groups according to their exhibited behaviors: a core group of highly frequent users, and "others", which consisted of both regular users and non-regular users. Based on the observations alone, it was not possible to distinguish the regular users from the non-regular users. This distinction emerged during our subsequent one-on-one interviews and in fact there are three groups of participants involved in the larger study outlined in Burke et al. (2018):

- Group 1 – Central Group: These students are extremely frequent users and form part of a community of practice (Mynard et al., forthcoming).
- Group 2 – Regular users: These students use the lounge several times per week, but are not members of the Central Group.
- Group 3 – Non-users: These students never use the English Lounge.

The interview participants were initially recruited via a flyer left on tables in the English Lounge. Participants applied online via a short application form which allowed us to screen the applications to ensure that they were actually regular English Lounge users. Each participant was given the option of being interviewed solely in English or in both Japanese and English by a bilingual researcher. The individual interviews were all conducted in a semi-structured format, and consisted of two interviews of the regular user sub-group. A semi-structured format allowed us to investigate the important identity facets during the interviews, but still left opportunities for participants to express their own contributions and ideas related to their use of the English Lounge. We conducted the first round of interviews during the first year of the research project, and the second round of interviews approximately one year later. An inquiry was sent to the six regular users requesting follow-up interviews to determine whether changes, if any, in their identity and lounge use had occurred. The replies came from students whose circumstances were in flux; some students had changed their frequency of using the English Lounge significantly, one student was studying abroad, and one student did not respond to the request. Additionally, prior to the second round of interviews, we contacted participants via email and requested they complete an optional written language learner history (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008) where they described their past learning experiences and how they had contributed to their current learner beliefs.

The interviews for both the first year of the project and the subsequent follow-up interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. All the interviews were transcribed immediately afterwards together with a summary of any interpretations which could not be captured through the audio recordings, such as the students' demeanor, and the themes occurring in any conversation before and after the recording period.

For the first year, a total of six interviews were conducted consisting of first and second year students. All of the students were Japanese and were all learning English, but this was sometimes as an additional language as they were majoring in Chinese or Spanish. A summary of all of the participants is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Summary of Participants**

Name	Gender	Major	Year at the university in year 1	Interviews	Notes
Ryunosuke	M	International Communications (English)	Sophomore	July 2017 (in person); July 2018 (in person)	
Rintaro	M	Chinese	Sophomore	July 2017 (in person); July 2018 (via Skype)	Was studying abroad in year 2
Ririka	F	Spanish	Freshman	July 2017 (in person)	Did not respond to the interview request in year 2 so only the first interview is included in our analysis

Kaede	F	Spanish	Freshman	July 2017 (in person); July 2018 (in person)	
Mei	F	Spanish	Freshman	July 2017 (in person); July 2018 (in person)	
Yuki	F	Spanish	Freshman	July 2017 (in person); July 2018 (in person)	

## Data Analysis

Three members of our team initially analyzed the interview transcripts using typological analysis (Hatch, 2002) in order to uncover participants' identity facets. We utilized the framework provided by Benson et al. (2013) to guide this process and thematically coded the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a team of three. Throughout the process, we were engaged in analytical discussion. We focused mainly on three of the six identity facets, (2) *reflexive*, (3) *projected*, and (5) *imagined*, in the interviews and subsequent analysis. This was decided as a result of our piloting of possible interview questions where we realized that it was difficult to uncover the facets of (1) *embodied*, (4) *recognized* and (6) "self" as represented by others through interviews. This process was completed after each round of interviews. Although we used the identity framework to guide the analysis, we also allowed for some exploration of other emergent themes through a general interpretative analysis.

## Findings

After the first round of interviews, we interpreted the interview data and found that there were several reasons why the students chose to frequent the lounge, which included:

- English practice
- Improving English
- Engaging in self expression
- Relaxing
- Having fun
- Meeting / Making friends
- Talking to others

However, analyzing the data in more depth, we found that in their first year all six regular-users saw the English Lounge as a place with a functional use where the main purpose was to interact with "native speakers". In terms of identity, these users had a variety of perspectives on how they viewed themselves. Table 3 includes a summary of the findings from each student-participant regarding their view of the English Lounge and their identity in the first interview and then in the following interview a year later. As can be seen, not all facets of identity given in Benson et al.'s (2013) framework were evident in the interviews, but the data collected was very rich. Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is not always possible to neatly collect data in all categories of a research framework such as the one we chose.

**Table 3. Summary of Views of the English Lounge and Interpretations of Identity Facets for Each Participant***Identity facets: Reflexive:(R), Projected: (P), Imagined: (I)*

<b>Ryunosuke</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improve communication.</li> <li>• be motivated by active users.</li> <li>• have English conversation</li> <li>• have a transactional experience</li> <li>• make friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A place that he sees much less value in the English Lounge.</li> <li>• Attained target TOEFL score so less desire to use the English Lounge.</li> <li>• Feels like it's a place with superficial relationships</li> <li>• Considers it less suitable for him now due to the perceived superficial nature of it</li> </ul>
Identity	<p>Assumed others were better than him (R). Didn't feel any particular feeling at the yellow sofas (R). Felt the need to become a different person in order to speak English well (P). Desired to use English in his future (I). Wanted to work in the US or UK (I).</p>	<p>Identity in Japanese and English was mostly the same (R). Claimed not to be active (R). Thought he was lazy as he didn't go abroad or volunteer in his first year (R). Wanted to use English for a job overseas possibly in a developing Asian country (I). Wanted to work in a really big company (I). Wanted to leave Japan and experience other cultures (I).</p>
<b>Mei</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• practice English</li> <li>• enjoy herself</li> <li>• improve English communication</li> <li>• use for practical purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is comfortable in the lounge</li> <li>• It is a familiar place</li> <li>• Can go by herself</li> <li>• She feels autonomous</li> <li>• A practical space</li> <li>• She can enjoy spending time there</li> </ul>



Mei	Year 1	Year 2
Identity	<p>Was nervous and shy when she first started going to the English Lounge (R). Gradually became more comfortable in the English Lounge (R).</p> <p>Had goals and ideas of future direction involving English (I). Wanted to be able to communicate well internationally (I). Wanted to live in North America (I).</p>	<p>Saw herself as lazy (R). Thought she was seen as someone who couldn't speak English (R). Was able to go to the English Lounge by herself (R).</p> <p>Wanted to be seen as friendly to new freshman students (P). Had a desire to be a Spanish, English and Arabic speaker (I).</p>

Kaede	Year 1	Year 2
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• talk with teachers and International students</li> <li>• make friends</li> <li>• communicate in English</li> <li>• use only English</li> <li>• not feel pressure</li> <li>• express herself in English without feeling judged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If teachers there are interesting, she wants to go</li> <li>• She likes the “topic cards”</li> <li>• She wants to talk to foreign people</li> <li>• It is like studying abroad</li> <li>• She can practice what she has learnt in textbooks</li> <li>• She feels pressure as a Sophomore</li> <li>• She feels like she wants to and also needs to go there</li> </ul>

Kaede	Year 1	Year 2
Identity	<p>Shy, didn't speak English well, lacked confidence (R). Felt happy when she was understood (R). Claimed to be passive (R). Someone who was not comfortable around others (R).</p> <p>She wanted to be seen as someone who could speak English (P). Wanted to continue using the English Lounge more than now (I).</p>	<p>Very shy, wasn't comfortable in social situations (R). Lacked confidence especially in English (R). Someone who was not comfortable around others (R). Felt pressure to speak English well (R). Realized her test score wasn't as bad as others (R). Desired to be someone who could communicate well in English (I). Wanted to be able to speak Spanish (I). Wanted to go overseas for work (I). Thought she must speak “fluently” as a <i>senpai</i> (senior student) (I).</p>

Ririka	Year 1	Year 2
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• practice and improve speaking English</li> <li>• functionally use English</li> <li>• meet “native speakers”</li> <li>• meet friends</li> <li>• experience something “<i>like another country</i>”</li> </ul>	Did not respond to interview invitation.

Ririka	Year 1	Year 2
Identity	Was confident and motivated (R). Saw herself as diligent (R). Wanted to be seen as friendly (P). Had hopes of being a flight attendant in the future (I).	Did not respond to interview invitation.

Rintaro	Year 1	Year 2
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• practice and improve English conversation</li> <li>• “<i>use English expressions</i>”</li> <li>• generate ideas</li> <li>• not be afraid of making mistakes</li> <li>• play “Go”</li> </ul>	N/A

Rintaro	Year 1	Year 2
Identity	Was shy (R). Said he was not good at expressing himself in English (R). Someone who was not afraid of making mistakes (P). Someone who can talk without worrying (P). A mentor for other students in his department (P). Desired to work for a trade company and use English (I). Wanted to use English and Chinese and to possibly live in China (I).	Desired to work in Education for a trade company (I). Wanted to be able to communicate with people from different countries (I). Wanted to be more “aggressive” (i.e., proactive) at using English (I).

Yuki	Year 1	Year 2
View of the English Lounge	<p>A place to go to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have fun</li> <li>• talk to English teachers</li> <li>• improve English speaking</li> <li>• improve conversation and pronunciation</li> <li>• only use English</li> <li>• feel as her natural self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talks with friends and teachers there</li> <li>• Feels a little like she is part of a community</li> <li>• Improves her English communication skills in the space</li> <li>• Learns new words</li> <li>• Learns about other cultures</li> </ul>

Yuki	Year 1	Year 2
Identity	<p>So shy (R). Felt “cool” and “excited” when using English (R). Felt she could speak more fluently at the English Lounge than in class (R). Didn’t have a different personality in Japanese compared to in English (R).</p>	<p>Embarrassed because her English was not as good as some Freshmen students (R). Felt like the English Lounge helped her improve her English and gave her confidence (R). Thought her speaking had improved a little (R). Felt her pronunciation and listening had improved (R).</p> <p>Imagined speaking English smoothly and with correct grammar like a “native” in the future (I). Wanted to travel to somewhere where English is spoken (I). Wanted to continue using the English Lounge (I).</p>

In utilizing the framework from Benson et al. (2013), we discovered that the facets of *reflexive*, *projected*, and *imagined* identities that emerged in our findings show a shift in confidence, social interactions, group identification and roles, as well as a view of the lounge as an international space for some of the participants. As can be observed in Table 3, there are individual differences between each of the participants, though some similarities can be identified. In the case of their views of the English Lounge, in the first year many participants viewed it as a place to “improve English communication”, a place to “make/meet friends” and a place to “use English only” for “practical purposes”. In the second year, there was more variation in responses. However, viewing the English Lounge as “like studying abroad” was a recurring theme, and this was also observable from one student in the first year who did not participate in the second interview. Noteworthy positive responses related to participants’ views of the English Lounge in the second year were that it was seen as a “comfortable/familiar place”, somewhere you can “go by yourself” to “communicate in English” and possibly “feel part of a community”. There were also negative changes to some participants’ views of the Lounge. One participant saw it as somewhere with reduced value as it fostered only “superficial” relationships, and another felt more pressure as a sophomore student to be a competent English speaker.

Regarding identity facets, some salient themes can be identified. For *reflexive identity* in the first year, the participants said they felt “shy”, “nervous” or “not confident” expressing

themselves in English. Some participants also provided references to their *projected identity*, stating that they wished to be viewed as someone who could speak English or felt they needed to become like a different person in order to speak English well. *Imagined identity* is observable in responses where participants discussed being “international”, “working overseas”, and “using English in the future”. In the second year, many participants still held negative reflexive views of themselves although there were noticeably more responses referring to their *imagined identities*. In the second year of interviews it seemed that participants had more specific and clearer ideas of themselves using English in their futures.

## Discussion

In answer to the question posed at the start of this paper, our findings suggest that the English Lounge does in fact play a role in identity construction of these six regular users. We were able to identify changes in their perspectives of the English Lounge and changes in their perceived identities as English language learners and users. It was crucial to investigate participants’ shifting views of the English Lounge as these views directly relate to identity constructions. This was particularly true with regard to *reflexive identity*, a facet shaped by ongoing experiences, views of one’s own competence, and the interplay between the *projected* and *reflexive* identities. The role that the English Lounge played in constructing these learners’ identities was quite different among each of the student-participants, however we were able to identify some recurring themes: confidence, practical benefits, social interactions, international posture, and group identification and roles.

## Confidence

The theme of confidence appeared as something that had changed over time among our six participants. We observed a positive shift in confidence, for example, in the way in which Mei went from being shy and nervous when she first experienced the English Lounge to being able to go by herself as she explained in the second interview.

“Today I went to the yellow sofa only me” —Mei, Interview 2

Another student-participant who indicated a gain in confidence as a result of using the English lounge was Yuki. Yuki had explained in the first interview that the difference between the classroom setting and the English Lounge was that there were fewer people at the English Lounge and that this enabled her to feel more comfortable.

“... in class, seriously, English language, I can’t speak English more than yellow sofa. I’m shy. I can’t speak in front of lot of people, but if there is two people, so I can speak in front of them.”  
—Yuki, Interview 1

The English Lounge was perceived to be a casual setting that was less stressful than the classroom, thus enabling Yuki to feel more comfortable and confident to express herself in English. Conversely, one student participant who appeared to have lost confidence in the English Lounge was Kaede. For Kaede, the shift in confidence mostly related to her transition from being a freshman to a sophomore student. She perceived her presence in the English Lounge as a sophomore student coming with the perceived moniker of “competent English speaker”. As a freshman student she felt happy when someone understood her at the area and also looked at her *senpai* (seniors) with admiration as they seemed to be able to speak “fluently”, something she aspired to achieve. However, a year later, her view of her new status as a senior had contributed to increased anxiety and self-doubt.

*“I feel less confident. Last year, as a beginner, it was okay that my English wasn’t so good. But this year, I cannot make excuses that I don’t understand the grammar. I had a full year studying at (the university).”* —Kaede, Interview 2

The fact that Kaede continued to use the English Lounge in her second year seemed positive. However, her confidence level also appeared to be negatively affected by self-imposed pressure from her perceived *senpai* role.

### **Practical Benefits**

An additional salient theme identified from the interview data was the way in which several participants valued the English Lounge in terms of the practical benefits they perceived it to have offered their development. One potential explanation for some students’ perceptions of the practicality of the English Lounge was a dissatisfaction with the English study methods they had experienced in high school. Mei and Kaede stated that in their secondary English education they had primarily focused on developing declarative grammar knowledge or had studied only for tests and felt that this had either been ineffective or demotivating.

*“Yes. Chugakkou kara roku nenkan kakawarazu yomeru kedo mattaku hanasenai de no ga chotto yokunai na to omoimashita. (In spite of studying for six years from junior high school, I could read but I couldn’t speak at all. I thought that was not very good.)”* —Mei, Interview 1

In this way, Mei and Kaede saw the English Lounge as an “antidote” to these experiences as it focused on social interaction and the development of practical English communication skills. In their second interviews, Kaede stated that she had managed to create a workable balance between language knowledge and language use whereas Mei added that, in addition to the “*jitsuyousei*” (practicality) that she valued in the English Lounge, she valued the autonomy that it afforded her. She stated that the English Lounge provided her control over the focus and pace of her learning rather than the “*judouteki*” (passive) learning in class. However, despite exhibiting a level of autonomy by attending the English Lounge, Kaede and Yuki both explained that the presence of a teacher was still a crucial factor in them using the space.

Ryunosuke also framed the English Lounge in practical terms as he explained that it was a place he could visit to “steal knowledge” from students from the Central Group he perceived as “active” or skilled English users. Ryunosuke acquired not only test-taking strategies and linguistic knowledge from English Lounge users, but also viewed the area as a place he could visit if he wanted to boost his motivation.

*“...the person who stay at the yellow sofa, the people is really active and they’re really have a good skill of, of English, so then I am motivated by them, yeah, so that’s why I went to there. And I go there.”* —Ryunosuke, Interview 1

However, in his second interview, Ryunosuke revealed that, due to having achieved the test scores he needed, the practical value of the English Lounge had decreased for him. This was exacerbated by the departure of a key role model for Ryunosuke from the English Lounge and he claimed that for most of the last year, he had ceased attending.

Ryunosuke’s desire to gain motivation from accomplished role models was, in fact, a recurring theme in other participants’ interviews. Kaede stated that she was greatly motivated by one sophomore student and member of the Central Group who had reached an impressive level of fluency in English and who tried hard to include Kaede and her friends in conversations in the English Lounge.

*“...she go to yellow sofa every day. Ryugaku shita koto ga nai no ni sugoi pera pera kara... (Because even though she’s never studied abroad, she speaks so fluently...)”* —Kaede, Interview 1



This positive example of a Near-Peer Role Model (Murphey, 1998), a successful peer similar to a learner in some way, such as ethnic group, age, background, etc., may represent a further valuable role inhabited by some of the Central Group members.

### *Social Interactions*

Social interaction with not only role models, but also regular peers was identified as another contributory reason for attending the English Lounge. In his first interview, Ryunosuke highlighted the social aspect as one of the main purposes of attending the English Lounge and that he enjoyed talking with others rather than it being solely a means of language study.

“...you can make friends, foreign, foreign students, and you also can make Japanese friends”  
—Ryunosuke, Interview 1

However, in his second interview Ryunosuke claimed he gradually became increasingly disillusioned with the social side of the English Lounge and grew to see the interactions there as “superficial”. He stated that he sought deep, long-lasting relationships with people in the English Lounge and from other countries but over time came to believe that this would not be possible. After some uncomfortable experiences trying to interact with English Lounge users outside of that setting, he concluded that the relationships he had formed in the English Lounge were contrived and shallow. As a result, he decided that participation in the English Lounge was incompatible with his social needs.

Mei also stressed the importance for her of interacting with others but perhaps for more practical reasons. She stated that she wanted to speak with many different people in the Lounge as possible as it would move her closer to her *imagined identity* of someone living outside of Japan with strong oral English skills. Mei had a clearly-defined *reflexive identity* of someone who had a strong longing for foreign cultures and who wished to leave Japan. She claimed Japan was “stressful” and revealed that partly due to the influence of her mother, who also had a strong affinity for different cultures, she had been drawn to the world outside Japan ever since she was a kindergarten student.

### *International Posture*

Mei’s imagined internationally-oriented identity highlights the role that the English Lounge may have played in participants’ identity construction. Many of the student interviews included make references to the English Lounge as a kind of “international space”. This view further added weight to the practicality of the English Lounge as Kaede described it as somewhere that afforded her opportunities to interact with non-Japanese people and that she could use in lieu of actually going overseas. She also valued the role of non-Japanese teachers as cultural resources and stated that the cultural component of exchanges with teachers was an important motivator for her. For Ryunosuke also, the international nature of the English Lounge was influential as his *imagined identity* was tied to a strong international posture (Yashima, 2009, 2013). His uncle was American and was an extremely powerful role model in his life who influenced his future language and professional goals. He also expressed a desire to build long-term friendships with international students at the English Lounge that could continue long after they returned to their home countries just as he had maintained regular contact with the American members of his family over the years.

“And I wanna have the, like, talking to each other in English, friends, so...  
...Yeah. Like, how can I say that, if, uh, the students, like, how can I say that, to go back to his or her country, like, we can contact each other.” —Ryunosuke, Interview 2

He stated that he was interested in moving overseas after graduation and that he was interested in gaining a “wider view” by experiencing various lifestyles in different countries. Finally, Yuki spoke about how she would speak to one of her Spanish-speaking English teachers at the English Lounge and that he was a motivating influence by providing cultural information on Mexico, a country that she was interested in.

Yashima’s (2013) definition of international posture is comprised of three concepts: (1) an intergroup approach-avoidance tendency (i.e., the desire to interact with people from other countries/ ethnic groups), (2) an interest in overseas work/activities, and (3) an interest in global affairs. Although we cannot confidently make any claims about the third strand of Yashima’s model due to a lack of evidence in our data, the participants frequently exhibited evidence of the first and second concepts, leading us to believe that an international posture was a salient facet of their learner identities.

### **Group Identification and Roles**

Over time, several of our participants formed or joined communities in the lounge and started to view the space as having a purpose which went beyond just being functional in terms of language learning.

As time went on, some regular users developed confidence in using English and began to take on the identity of being “role models” for younger students. In her first interview, Mei showed an understanding of a group identity in the English Lounge as well as her trajectory within that community (Wenger, 1998). When asked what her plan was for the following year in the English Lounge, she expressed an intention to take on a senior (*senpai*) role and help new students in the same way she was in helped her freshman year.

*“Toriazazu, senpai ni shite moratta yori, ano welcome na funiki wo tsukutte, tomodachi ni narou to omoimasu. (To begin with, like my seniors did, create a welcoming atmosphere and try to make friends.)”* —Mei, Interview 1

Mei and other regular users also appear to develop a well-defined *projected identity* which is in line with their changed *reflexive identity*. Specifically, they wanted others to regard them as confident and approachable English language users. As previously discussed, this sometimes had the unfortunate side-effect of creating increased anxiety as in the case of Kaede who doubted that she was able to provide the same positive *projected identity* that her *senpai* did. The literature on the *senpai-kohai* dynamic relating to language learning paints a mixed picture of this social construct both facilitating and constraining social interaction and community building (Ishikawa, 2012; Murray, 2008; Thompson & Mori, 2015). However, when our participants raised their transition from *kohai* to *senpai*, it was predominantly framed in terms of pressure and anxiety.

*“Senpai dakara surasura hanasanai to... tte (I’m a senpai, so I’ve got to speak fluently.)”* —Kaede, Interview 2

Mei and Yuki also revealed that they lacked confidence in their new *senpai* status and that they felt that the new freshman students may judge their English ability to be lacking.

*“There, there are a lot of freshman students, so, and their speaking is very well, so I’m embarrassing.”* —Yuki, Interview 2

This lack of confidence could stem from these English Lounge users comparing their *reflexive identities* to the positive identities that they had ascribed to their own *senpai* -fluent, active, and friendly core members of the English Lounge community.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we analyzed interview data of six regular user case studies to explore the role an English conversation lounge plays in identity construction. The participants viewed the English Lounge as a valuable resource and an international space where they can speak to non-Japanese people to not only practice their speaking skills but to also increase motivation or imagine their future selves in an international context. Through this study, each of us came to realize the multitude of ways in which students' past learning experiences, their current participation in the English Lounge, and their conceptions of their future possible selves interacted with each other while constantly evolving over time. Our increased awareness of identity as a profoundly complex and dynamic construct was, therefore, one of the key benefits for us as researchers and educators. Furthermore, in terms of the running of the English Lounge, we became cognizant of a far wider scope of learner needs than previously assumed such as issues of anxiety relating to transitioning to *senpai*/senior roles and the desire for active membership into a social international community. This has led us to start considering ways in which we can develop scaffolding for new users and facilitate enhanced participation in the English Lounge community.

It should be noted that this study has been primarily concerned with the identities and experiences of a small group of regular users of a social learning space within a university self-access center. While our study revealed some interesting themes related to the development of learner identity and the perceived value of a social learning space, the specificity of the setting and the small sample size means that our findings should not be over-interpreted. Further research in this area will have to continue to explore the potential role of social learning spaces in the construction of language learner identities.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study does suggest that the social structure of the English Lounge encouraged investment in a community which in turn influenced identity construction. Over the course of their engagement in the English Lounge we see a number of ways in which participants' negotiated identities are being mediated by their L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2014) within that community. Further investigation into this process could focus on Miyahara's (2015) concept of a "discursive space", "the spatial and temporal space formed as individuals explore their imagined ties with the future" (p. 22). Part of the attractiveness of Miyahara's model is that it stresses not only the present learning environment but also the significance of past experiences in the development of learners' ideal L2 selves. As Miyahara (2015) argues for further longitudinal research into developing learner identities and in order to broaden understanding in this area, we plan to continue this study of the English Lounge with further data collection to understand this type of social learning space and how it can shape learner identity.

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## Review Process

This paper was blind peer-reviewed by members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (Contributors have the option of open or blind review.)

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