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Space Matters: Language Learning Environments Beyond the Classroom in the Post-COVID World

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Phil: Mayumi, we have known each other since 2015 when you came to Macquarie University for your higher degree research. You completed a Master of Research (MRes) thesis on students' conceptualizations of in-class and out-of-class learning and then a PhD on teachers' conceptions of students' learning environments. It was a privilege for me to be able to supervise your work and I learnt a lot from it. Without meeting you, I don't think my ideas on language learning environments would have developed as they did! I have a long association with the JALT Learner Development SIG (dating back to a one-day symposium in Shizuoka in 1995), and you are now working at Kanda University of International Studies. I am sure you agree that it is an honor to be asked to write a commentary on this issue of *Learner Development Journal* and entirely appropriate that we should write in the form of a dialogue. The theme of this issue—learner development beyond the classroom—is “right up our alley,” as they say in Australia. But if we are to begin by commenting on the theme, I think I would say, first, that learner development takes place both inside *and* outside the classroom and that it is difficult to separate the two. But at the same time learner development beyond the classroom is often neglected so the focus on out-of-class learning in this issue is justified. Would you agree?

Mayumi: I can't agree with you more, Phil! It's a great honor to be invited to write this commentary with you. I truly appreciate the editorial team for giving me this opportunity. When I started my MRes, your work on the concept of learner autonomy was particularly inspiring to me as I was curious about how teachers (including myself) can support learners to develop their degree of autonomy, especially by connecting in-class and out-of-class learning experiences, and how teachers can help learners make use of the ample learning opportunities and resources that they actually have outside of the classroom. Therefore, language learning environments beyond the classroom and teachers' awareness of them have become a major research interest for me, and I was very lucky to be supervised by you! Your immense wisdom and insights guided me throughout my journey to complete my degrees. As you said, learner development beyond the classroom is often neglected; in particular, the connection between in-class and out-of-class learning has not been given much attention. We should

remind ourselves of not only the richness of resources and the value of what the students can do for their learning outside of the classroom, but also that learning is seamlessly taking place both inside and outside of the classroom for individual students. The COVID-19 pandemic actually has reminded us of such a realization when physical classes were canceled.

In this dialogue, I would like to ask you about your views on the current world, more specifically, about language learning environments beyond the classroom in the post-COVID world. Hopefully this will contribute to the further discussion on language education in the field. Also, the work from the contributors in this issue shows that our continuous inquiry into language learning environments beyond the classroom is invaluable and should be paid more attention to, now more than ever. (It should be noted that we will use first names to refer to the authors in a friendly manner just as this dialogue-format commentary itself aims to create an open café-like atmosphere. Please prepare yourself a nice cup of coffee!)

First of all, I'm wondering how you would describe the current post-COVID world. In your book (Benson, 2021), you say, "For all of us, it has been a sharp reminder of just how much space matters" (p. 140) by pointing out "a very different world" that we live in now. Indeed, we have all experienced the global COVID pandemic, and a growing number of researchers have pointed out the struggles that language learners and teachers faced when classes were turned to exclusively online (Tao & Gao, 2022). Now, how do you perceive the influence of the pandemic on the concept of language learning environments beyond the classroom?

- Phil:** That's an interesting question, because although I wrote most of that book during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia in 2020, most of the ideas for it were already laid out by then. The comment that you have quoted was really an afterthought, and I was very conscious that the spatiality of language learning was changing around me in ways that I was too busy to think about at the time! I guess I thought that everything would go back to normal after the pandemic. But although we are now more or less "back to normal" in Australia, I have noticed two longer-term effects. The first is that video conferencing has been normalized—meeting by Zoom is now a matter of convenience, rather than necessity. The second is that remote learning has also been normalized for many students. Universities are doing their best to get students back on campus, but 10 percent attendance has become normal and lecturers now have to adapt their teaching methods to "hybrid learning," where some students are in class while others are online and some are not there at all. In a broader sense, COVID-19 has made me think that there are three "worlds" in language learning. We need, perhaps, to think of the online world as being additional to, and somewhat independent of, the worlds of in-class and out-of-class learning.
- Mayumi:** The idea of three "worlds" in language learning makes me think of another research possibility (of ours), of exploring learners' perceptions of and engagements with their language learning environments while traversing these worlds! I also experienced hybrid teaching, and it was a really hard task to deliver a lesson to the students in two different worlds. However, I found it interesting to see individual differences in attitudes and behaviors towards such

classes! That was the time I felt that the idea of our “language classrooms” is now different and challenging as a teacher.

When considering that we now have an additional world of online learning, how do you see this change of our recognition of language learning and teaching environments in the so-called “post-COVID” era? Van Lier’s definition of a language classroom, which is “the gathering, for a given period of time, of two or more persons (one of whom generally assumes the role of instructor) for the purposes of language learning” (1988, p. 47), sounds okay, but if “the gathering” refers to a particular physical space where a teacher and students meet face-to-face, it would be no longer applicable since we now have more choices and flexibility in ways of learning, for example, online/remote and on-demand lessons, in addition to face-to-face classes. When the physical location does not matter for formal language learning, and the border between a language classroom and outside of the classroom is less clear, the definition of language learning beyond the classroom becomes more complex.

Phil: Exactly! I don’t think van Lier was making a contrast between in-class and out-of-class learning in his definition; he just wanted to be as inclusive as possible, and I feel sure he would have welcomed online spaces into his definition of the classroom. Van Lier’s definition has always been important to me, though, as a starting point for thinking about how different settings (for him, different types of classroom) influence learning. For example, I recently taught an online class where the students watched a video recording of a mini-lecture and then discussed the content with me. But most of the students watched the video recording in their own time; some may have discussed the content with other students, and some would not have discussed it at all! So, the students only logged in to the class during class time if they wanted to talk to me, or perhaps wanted to have that social experience of attending class! Before the pandemic, I would have presented the content “live” in class, all of the students would have been there, and I would have orchestrated the discussion. I could have done that in the online class, but there has been a kind of deconstruction of the physical classroom that made me feel that I should not be imposing that on students in the online setting.

Mayumi: The complexity of online/digital learning environments is now obvious; formal learning can even take place in students’ bedrooms while they are browsing their Instagram stories or watching YouTube videos at the same time. It seems that students have experienced a lot of challenges both physically and emotionally. I believe that teachers have also found it challenging to adjust their working styles since their workplaces were not classrooms—it could be a living room or a café. But still, we had to make our online teaching “engaging” for students so that the quality of teaching could be maintained. As such, both students and teachers had to co-construct some particular “space” in the physically limited environments. Technology was a great survival kit for both students and teachers. In terms of teaching, Gretchen Clark in this issue demonstrates the use of digital resources for extensive listening as well as promoting learner autonomy of university students in Japan during remote teaching. Teachers’ navigation of efficient use of technology has provided students with support and in turn self-directed learning beyond the classroom.

- Phil:** Yes, this has actually been a challenge for teachers and Gretchen's paper is a great example of how teachers have been meeting that challenge. What her paper shows me, especially, is how online teaching can give teachers an entry point into students' online learning. We may think of online extensive listening as one of the main out-of-class activities that students carry out independently of teachers, but here is an example of how teaching can reach out into that part of students' worlds. This would be much more difficult, for example, in relation to offline extensive listening out in the city.
- Mayumi:** It's an interesting point that students' out-of-class learning has become more visible to teachers, while it used to be less visible. I believe that teachers' guidance in practicing extensive listening can also have a positive outcome, in that students' out-of-class learning can be perceived as the *extension* of their in-class learning. As such, teachers' creativity in utilizing technology to connect in-class and out-of-class learning experiences seems to enhance the development of learners! Chika Hayashi's innovative international online project collaborating with Finnish schools appears very energizing for the learners, which allows the students to realize the true meaning of learning a language through experiencing real communication in English. Her study also shows positive outcomes in increasing learners' motivation to learn English further. I think that this innovative online project demonstrates a great potential and through its implementation could create a new dimension of "a language classroom" at many schools around the world.
- Phil:** I think that we can learn a few things from Chika's project. It seems important to me that Yuki was a voluntary participant and that she had several motivations for joining the project. It also seems important that the two participants were collaborating on a task that they were both committed to.
- Mayumi:** Having said that the conceptualization of language learning settings and environments has become more complex, it seems that out-of-class learning for students means a lot: from something they do for their own goals and purposes (e.g., preparing for the TOEIC test, using mobile applications which suit their learning purposes) to informal and implicit learning such as watching movies in English, and formal classes. Since it seems to be happening at the same place and the same time, I feel that the locus of control, or how students engage with the space, seems to be the key to defining their space. In other words, learner agency plays a crucial role more than ever for individuals to manage a meaningful learning environment in order to survive the uncertain, changing, and complex world.
- Phil:** Well, you could say that teachers should not interfere with students' learning beyond the classroom, that they should leave that to the students themselves. But many students do not engage in learning beyond the classroom to the extent that they might because they lack knowledge of what is available in their environments or the capacity to use resources productively. The important point about Chika's COIL project is that it creates opportunities for learning beyond the classroom that learners might not be able to set up themselves. That is one thing teachers can do. But there needs to be a balance between the teacher's role and the students' agency. Jon Rowberry's paper in this issue also identifies selection of resources as a key area in which there needs to

be space for learner agency—if learners select their own resources then they will also need to make their own decisions about how they use them, what they will learn from them. But this also calls for skills that we associate with autonomy: Students will develop these skills in the practice of learning beyond the classroom, but teachers can also help. Here, I like Jon’s idea of “scaffolding” learning beyond the classroom. This is another thing that teachers can do.

Mayumi: I also really like Jon’s paper as it highlights the (new) role of teachers in supporting students to be able to have better control over their own learning. Nowadays, the learners have ample (or sometimes too many) resources out there, in particular, the rapid and seemingly endless development of new mobile or online applications. The students seem to be constantly updating or changing learning applications while not always having certain learning outcomes in mind. We cannot catch up with all those new learning materials; however, the learning skills, to select suitable learning resources for their learning purposes and needs, should be reconsidered, guided, and followed up on by the teachers in the course of language learning.

Another aspect of a teacher’s role beyond the classroom can be support for the learners’ emotional challenges. At my university, I’ve witnessed many students who struggle or fail to continue their learning or nearly lose (or have lost) their future career visions mainly because of this world change. I’ve heard students’ struggles firsthand with comments such as, *“Online classes simply demotivated me,” “I cannot focus on class if it’s online,”* and *“I couldn’t adjust myself when university switched back from online to face-to-face classes, and I could not communicate with people well. I kind of fell into depression, and it was hard just to come to university.”* Due to the cancellation of study abroad programs, some students had to give up their precious opportunities to experience studying and living abroad, which also forced them to change their future career plans. Aya Hayasaki’s investigation into the experiences of three female learners in rural Japan also argues that language learning outside of the classroom is certainly connected or is at least part of the learners’ life process. When students face an environmental change, in this case, a change of learning environment from a face-to-face, traditional sense of the language classroom to online learning in an isolated place due to the world pandemic, I think it’s fair to say that the majority of students experienced emotional difficulties in learning. The adjustment involves significant emotional challenges, and it seems to highlight the importance of social and emotional support (from peers and teachers) for the development of learner agency.

Phil: The need to adjust *conceptions* of in-class and out-of-class learning, and the relationship between them was really the original contribution of your Masters research, which we also highlighted in Kashiwa and Benson (2018). There you were talking about the transition from “study at home” to “study abroad,” but I agree that the changes in teaching and learning during COVID-19 represented another kind of transition, and it is interesting to think about what that transition involved. You make a good point here that this is an *emotional* challenge. In fact, this takes towards the heart of what we mean by a “learning ecology.” Space is one dimension—we can think of how a person’s language learning is distributed across a range of in-class and out-of-class spaces—but

then there is also the time of longitudinal dimension, which Aya captures in the notion of *trajectory*. When we use the term “ecology,” we are often thinking about the ways in which things fit together. So, in the case of language learning ecology, we are thinking about how spaces of learning fit together in the context of individual lives, but also how events and processes fit together over time, how one set of actions in space shapes not only the next set of actions but also the spatial field in which they take place. I find Aya’s paper especially valuable because it shows us how language learning can be transformational for the learner. In my view, language learning “widens horizons” in the literal sense that it transforms spaces of learning and opens up new spaces of possibilities for the learner.

Mayumi: That’s right. Such changes do show the dynamics of learners’ language learning ecologies; adjusting to changes in any aspect of a learning environment can result in a change of conceptions and lead learners to engage with resources they perceive. It reminds me of the importance of being a reflective practitioner/ researcher who is aware of the fluid and constantly changing nature of the language learning environments. Mizuka Tsukamoto’s practice-based book review, in which she reflected on her own teaching practice by relating to Donna Clarke’s (2019) classroom action research on a learner-centered approach to foster learner autonomy, is one example of reflective practice that we can do for our ongoing professional development. Also, as you pointed out, students’ engagement with resources in the environment matters for the learner’s development. This talk with you has made me realize that we have to be more mindful that our students are not experiencing one simple shift/transition from offline to online, rather, they are traversing multiple learning worlds, experiencing both benefits and constraints, and also figuring out how to make their learning more meaningful.

In terms of research design, the use of the learners’ own reflections proves to be a great data source for an in-depth investigation as well as a powerful tool for learner development. In this issue, the students’ engagement with resources, and how learners develop their agency beyond the classroom are examined through students’ self-reflection. For example, Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, Haingoarinjaka Fanaperana Rajaonaritiana, and Volatiana Olivia Rasoanindrina (two of them are students as well as future EFL teachers) employed language learning histories written by the authors themselves as research participants. They highlighted the importance of learner agency in creating their language learning environments beyond the classroom and the capacity of utilizing opportunities and resources in the given environment. They suggested implementing innovative classroom activities by linking students’ interests and learning strategies beyond the classroom, which, in turn, would boost the learners’ motivation. Ann Flanagan employed journal writing as a tool for high school students to self-reflect on their learning outside of the classroom. She points out the value of critical reflective practice among learners for raising their awareness of learning beyond the classroom so that they will be more responsible for their learning. Do you have any recommendations on designing a new research project?

Phil: Yes, these two papers take us into the area of learner histories in different ways. The first thing I want to say about Vola, Fanaperana, and Olivia's paper is that we really need more autobiographical writing of this kind in learner development. There is a certain kind of conservatism in academic writing and publishing that favors third-person research and writing and, therefore, a certain kind of perspective and insight. We need more experimental writing of this kind because it gives us different kinds of insights, coming from the multiple perspectives of co-authorship as well as the learner-teacher-researcher perspective. We also gain a vivid picture of the development of both a collective and individual learning ecologies over time in the Malgasay context. Ann's paper is an interesting one because it shows us how journal writing can be both learning beyond the classroom and a source of data for research. But beyond that it highlights the crucial roles of reflection and critical self-awareness in this view of language learning as a spatio-temporal process of "widening horizons." In fact, one can spend a lot of time learning a language at school without very much changing at all. Development comes from outside stimuli—and this is why a widening experience of language learning *beyond* the classroom is so important—but it also has to be driven from within. As Ann puts it, it is a matter of learners becoming "more involved in their language learning," and as learners become more involved, the spaces of their learning are also likely to expand. Critical reflective writing journals are an excellent tool to foster that kind of development. This is yet another thing that teachers can do.

Mayumi: The discussion with you, reflecting on the current language learning and teaching environments and our experiences over the past years, has inspired me to explore more about *space*, which both the learners and teachers co-cultivate in the process of language learning ecologies. I believe that we should keep in mind that learning involves both positive and negative emotions. It is also the fact that the learners are traversing complex learning environments, and their engagement with the resources is crucial in order to adjust themselves to the changes. In addition, it is necessary for the learners to reinforce reflective practice, and also our continuous inquiry into supporting the learners' engagement in learning is needed. I'd also like to ask your views about the points for a research agenda in the field of language learning environments beyond the classroom and learner development.

Phil: Well, this issue of *LDJ* points to a few directions for a research agenda on learner development and learning environments. The two main directions that I see are concerned, first, with what teachers can do in relation to language learning beyond the classroom, and, second, how we can move beyond a narrow observational view of learning environments. On the first question, I find that the papers in this issue are sensitive to the potential problem of "interfering in" students' out-of-class learning. As a matter of perspective, I believe we need to decenter our point of view as teachers. Language learners are not just the people we meet in our classes, and these classes are not necessarily the focus of their learning either in space or in time. On the contrary, we are people that learners meet at certain points in wider spaces of learning, and at certain points in their development over time. Language learning is also deeply embedded in their lives—lives about which only they can speak authoritatively. Too much

academic research treats the learner that we see here and now as the whole of the learner; if we shift the center to the spatio-temporal perspective of the learners, we will understand that our influence is limited. The contributors to this special issue understand, I think, that we can nudge learners in certain directions in language learning beyond the classroom, but the rest will be up to the learners themselves. On the second question, I welcome the range of perspectives, research methods, and writing styles in this issue and, especially, the willingness to experiment and explore new areas and dimensions of language learning. This is what the Learner Development SIG in JALT has always been good at, and long may it continue!

Mayumi: Finally, I'd like to thank you again for sharing your views and experiences. Having the opportunity to write a commentary with you has been a real honor! I really enjoyed the chance to exchange ideas in this format, and I appreciate your contributions to the field! I really hope to see you in person (and work with you) soon!! I also look forward to your future publications!

Author Bios

Phil Benson is Professor of Applied Linguistics and former Director of the Multilingualism Research Centre at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. His research focuses on language learning environments and informal language learning beyond the classroom, and he has recently published the book, *Language Learning Environments: Spatial Perspectives on SLA* (Multilingual Matters, 2021). He is also author of *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning* (Routledge, 2013) and has co-edited several collections of papers on autonomy and out-of-class language learning.

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