

A language learner's target language-mediated socializing in an affinity space in the host country

An autoethnography

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The number of international students keeps increasing worldwide. This is partly attributed to their expectation of improving their language skills by actually using the target language (TL) in the host countries. However, past studies show that such opportunities are not automatically given to them. Perceiving himself as one English learner, the author conducted an autoethnography to explore the processes of availing of opportunities to use the TL in Hawaii during his sabbatical. By recording observations and informal interviews in a diary of his own TL-mediated socialization, the author found that he could engage himself as an active social agent within a type of social space called affinity space which greatly promoted his situated TL-learning in naturalistic contexts. The author discusses how his own case can be applied to other learners studying abroad and presents some educational implications.

Keywords: study abroad, target language learning, socialization, situated learning, affinity space, cultural capital, Discourse, identity, affective states, agency

1. Introduction

I am a Japanese professor whose specialty is applied linguistics. I have been teaching since 2002 at a Japanese private university from where, after ten years (when I was 40), I was granted sabbatical leave (April 9, 2012 – March 31, 2013). For one year I stayed at a university in Hawaii (Honolulu, Oahu) as a visiting colleague to conduct research under the guidance of an American professor whose specialty is critical ethnography (Davis, 2011).

I moved to Hawaii with my Japanese wife and son (4 years old at the time). We stayed at a condominium near Waikiki Beach. I commuted to the university by bicycle, three to five days every week, to audit this professor's graduate courses and to collect research data. Holding status as a visiting colleague, I gained opportunities to socialize on campus relatively easily. However, opportunities to socialize off campus were not automatically given, and I realized I needed to use my agency to do so. People are assumed to learn and grow through participating in interpersonal activities within communities (Rogoff, 1994). This is called situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the theory has also been applied to language learning (Gee, 2004). As an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker, however, I had difficulty accessing target language (TL)-mediated socializing opportunities with local people, especially off campus, even though my English skills were at an advanced level. Against this background, I decided to conduct an autoethnographic study (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013) to investigate in what kinds of naturalistic contexts I could really engage myself in English off campus in the host country.

2. Literature review

TL-learning through engagement in socialization in naturalistic contexts can be analyzed as 'situated learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to these authors, people can acquire knowledge or skills by engaging themselves in social practice or interaction (either of which are described as socialization throughout this paper) where the knowledge or skills they are learning are embedded, and actually using the knowledge or skills through engagement with others. Gee (2004) proposed that "humans understand content, whether in a comic book or a physical text, much better when their understanding is embodied: that is, when they can relate that content to possible activities, decisions, talk, and dialogue" (p. 39).

Many language learners have studied abroad (SA), especially in English-speaking countries (Institute of International Education, 2013), seeking the opportunities of situated TL-learning in naturalistic or real-life settings of the host country. Many of them are expecting to improve their skills in the TL through meaningful socializing with local people in different naturalistic contexts of the host country (Jackson, 2012). Consistent with this expectation as well as with the theory of situated learning, numerous authors (e.g., Barron, 2006; Golonka, 2001; Isabelli, 2000; Kinginger, 2011; Meara, 1994; Mizuno, 1998; Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009) have suggested that the key to international students improving their TL skills is TL-mediated socialization with native speakers while they stay in the local community.

According to Kinginger (2009), there are three major settings where international students are thought to have access to TL-mediated socializing opportunities while living abroad: (1) educational institutions and classrooms (some programs also offer work placements including language assistantships), (2) places of residence, and (3) service encounters and other informal contact with expert speakers. However, Kinginger (2009) also asserts that language learning during SA is not “an inevitable, effortless, or osmotic process” (p. 114). While international students find themselves present among many TL speakers during SA, it is not simply this presence but the engagement with them that is necessary for developing proficiency (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009).

The extent of international students' engagement during socialization with local people is influenced both positively and negatively by many factors, which can be roughly categorized into (1) socio-cultural and environmental factors of the host country, and (2) international students' internal factors. While I separate these factors into only two categories for convenience sake to cover a broad range of factors concisely in the limited space of this paper, it is worth noting that these two groups of factors do not exist in a vacuum but mutually interact (Block, 2013). In addition, they are not static but temporal, fluid, and dynamic, affecting each other. That is, the two groups of factors can be perceived as coexisting within one ecological system.

With regard to socio-cultural and environmental factors of the host country, Jackson (2008) found that it was the living environment in the host country, host citizens' support or acceptance, and SA planners' support that most promoted international students' socializing with locals. More specifically, Churchill (2006) reported that international students' social engagement as well as learning with local students in school or classroom contexts was strongly affected by the reception of the host school or teachers, teaching style adopted, and arrangement of tables and chairs within the classroom. In this vein, certain educational treatments or tasks – e.g., volunteer and service-learning (Goldoni, 2013); language-related projects (Kinginger, 2009) – were found to especially promote international students' engagement in the local communities. Such support or arrangements can be of significant help, especially in the school or classroom context, since international students tend to face difficulty in adjusting themselves to the host country's different culture of learning (Jackson, 2013; Kinginger, 2013).

Various internal factors can also have a strong positive impact on TL-mediated socializing. Numerous internal factors can be related to the students' and even to the locals' dispositions. One important internal factor is intercultural sensitivity. Based on multiple case-studies, Jackson (2010) found that international students with high intercultural sensitivity were found to use their agency for “‘stepping outside’ of familiar ways of speaking and [they] experimented with new ways of

interacting” (p. 161). Also, Isabelli-García (2006) found that the attitudes of international students towards the host cultures had a strong relationship with their social networking in the host country.

Some studies also found that subject positioning positively affects international students’ creation of TL-mediated socializing opportunities with local people. Churchill (2009) found that a Japanese high school student created socializing opportunities with American high school students by joining in the cross-country team, and positioning himself as an intermediary for his teammates who were interested in meeting his Japanese female peers. Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2013) present another successful case of a Hong Kong student studying in Australia, who taught her host family about Hong Kong and developed a good relationship with them. Goldoni (2013) also reported that an international student taught her own mother tongue to local people during volunteer work, which secured her socializing opportunities and strengthened her engagement with them.

Affective or emotional states (Dewaele, 2010) can also be considered critical in acquiring opportunities to socialize with others. Jackson (2010) showed that international students “who experienced higher levels of acceptance and engagement generally developed more confidence to take an active role in communicative events” (p. 183). Consistent with these results, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) found that international students’ TL-mediated socialization in the host country was promoted when their sense of security was maintained.

Some socio-cultural and environmental factors as well as international students’ internal factors are also found to negatively affect their TL-mediated socializing. Some researchers have noted the negative impact of socio-cultural and environmental factors related to host families on international students’ TL-mediated socializing. Jackson (2010), for example, stated that “in some cases, hosts were so busy with work and other responsibilities that they had little time or energy left to chat or go on outings” (p. 184) with those they are hosting. Iino (2006) notes that unequal power relations (where the host family was positioned as care providers and international students as care receivers) make it difficult for some international students to maintain good relations with their host families. Pryde (2014) showed that the way host families interact with homestay students sometimes made it difficult for the students to expand their talk with the families.

Pearson-Evans (2006) notes the negative impact of other international students, who can also be perceived as another socio-cultural and environmental factor, on students’ TL-mediated socialization while abroad. Considering a study focusing on Irish international students studying in Japan, Pearson-Evans found that “the *gaijin* (foreigner) network, as a type of extended ethnic network, provided emotional support and information on Japan, but also blocked further adjustment if it became an end in itself, replacing the motivation to meet Japanese”

(p. 44). Jackson (2006) also found that comfort in using the mother tongue with co-nationals, peer pressure from other international students, and fear of being labeled by other international students as a 'show-off' or a 'teacher's pet', prevented international students from socializing with local people.

Some internal factors relating to the students' and the locals' dispositions can have a negative impact on TL-mediated socializing, too. Jackson (2006) and Lam (2006) both conducted studies focusing on (Hong Kong) Chinese students, and they identified various differences that made it difficult for the students to socialize with host people and also with international students from other countries, including communication style, preference of conversation topics, sense of humor (Jackson, 2006); and worldviews, values, life goals, preferences of topics for conversations, and socioeconomic and academic levels (Lam, 2006).

Another internal factor negatively affecting international students' socializing is lack of intercultural sensitivity. Goldoni (2013) points to problematic features of international students who were not able to engage themselves in local communities: "students who expected the host culture to be similar to the home culture" (p. 365); those who "maintained an ethnocentric perspective (a position of national superiority) with respect to the host culture, and interpreted events and situations from this perspective" (p. 365); and those who took refuge in co-nationals' cohort groups – all of which seem to be attributed to international students' lack of intercultural sensitivity.

About international students' subject positioning, Gao (2010), who conducted an ethnographic study focusing on mainland Chinese students studying at an English-medium university in Hong Kong, reported that some mainland Chinese students found it difficult to find opportunities to communicate in English with Hong Kong students, and that their knowledge, skills, or ideas were not valued as capital by the local Hong Kong students.

With regard to students' affective or emotional state, not being able to have a sense of belonging in the host country can cause difficulties in socializing with the local people. This was also observed by Ayano (2006) in the case of Japanese international students studying in Britain and Hong Kong Chinese students studying in Canada (Jackson, 2013).

Against the backdrop of these two factor categories, socio-cultural and environmental factors of the host country and international students' internal factors, it can be shown that TL-mediated socializing is not necessarily a panacea for improving TL skills. DeKeyser (2007) also suggests certain psycholinguistic limitations on TL-learning through socializing in SA: in some cases, international students do not receive appropriate feedback necessary to improve their TL skills from local people during their socialization; socialization which is formulaic in nature is limited in its scope to help students improve their TL skills; and students

with insufficient grammatical skills or knowledge of their TL tend to find it more difficult to engage themselves in socializing with local TL-speakers.

Although TL-mediated socialization does not occur automatically, it can promote international students' TL learning in various aspects. Churchill and DuFon (2006) note its role in developing international students' fluency and proficiency. Regan, Howard, and Lemée (2009) found that socialization with native speakers in naturalistic contexts promoted acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, the competence necessary to communicate in socially appropriate ways. Similarly, Kinginger (2011) pointed out that SA positively influenced international students' sociolinguistic, discourse, and pragmatic abilities. The positive impact of socialization during SA is not limited to oral aspects. Sasaki (2011) showed that SA helped international students improve their writing abilities as well.

Furthermore, SA positively impacts international students' perception of the self, which greatly affects their learning and socializing. For instance, Jackson (2013) found that SA could develop students' intercultural sensitivity and competence. Minegishi-Cook (2006) also notes that socialization during dinnertime talk with host families was an excellent opportunity for the students as well as the host families, who could "reexamine their own cultural assumptions and learn to see things from different perspectives" (p. 148). Similarly, Tan and Kinginger (2013) showed that homestays provided students with opportunities to get familiar with cultural practices and shared values, offering the chance to practice the TL in real and consequential communicative settings. Shiri (2015) found that international students were able to learn about political and religious perspectives, and other local values and traditions, through socializing with the host family as well as with their extended family.

Some researchers have highlighted the positive impact of SA on international students' growth beyond language skills and in more holistic terms. Jackson (2006) reported that, while the extent was varied, international students made some achievement in (1) linguistic improvement, (2) greater connections across cultures through social discourse, (3) positive shift in attitude and appreciation of differences, (4) growth in independence, self-confidence, and a sense of adventure, and (5) increased curiosity and openness. Benson et al. (2013) also report that international students succeeded through SA in building what they call personal development, which includes personal independence, intercultural competence, and academic competence.

Notwithstanding, the above studies illustrate a large gap between situated TL learning theories and international students' or language learners' actual TL-learning practice through socialization in the host country: while TL-mediated socializing is effective to improve TL or other skills or knowledge, having such opportunities is not necessarily easy. Although TL-mediated socializing opportunities

are often more available with other international students with high English proficiency (Gao, 2013), as Pearson-Evans (2006) points out, socialization with local people is more difficult. This study therefore focuses on socialization with local (American) people.

3. Conceptual frameworks

As briefly mentioned in the last section, TL-mediated socialization with local people in the host country can fall within the framework of situated learning. Wenger (1998), one of the proponents of the theory, calls the places where situated learning occurs "Communities of Practice (CoPs)." The members of CoPs consist of old-timers and newcomers, both with different types or levels of experiences, skills, and knowledge, and their ways of engagement in socialization are varied. Old-timers take a central position in engagement. Newcomers, on the other hand, observe old-timers' engagement from a peripheral position, and gradually move themselves to the central position to increase their learning of embedded knowledge or skills via the old-timers' scaffolding. In a CoP, all members, including newcomers, have potential access to socialization through either old-timers' scaffolding or the CoP's physical environment. For newcomers, socialization is the key to acquiring their necessary knowledge or skills.

While the concept of CoPs helps to illuminate the mechanism of people's learning through socialization in various social contexts, one problem of perceiving situated learning as happening within a community is the difficulty of defining who the members and non-members of the community are, as Gee (2004) points out:

.....the key problem with notions like "community of practice" is that they make it look like we are attempting to label a group of people. Once this is done, we face vexatious issues over which people are in and which are out of the group, how far they are in or out, and when they are in or out. (p. 78)

As a solution, Gee suggests that we analyze situated learning by focusing not on the CoP but on the social space within it. He calls this space the "affinity space" (Gee, 2004), and defines it as "a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender" (p. 73). While people in an affinity space often have different backgrounds and experiences, they are bonded together through their shared activities, interests, and goals.

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Gee (2004) emphasize that situated learning means the acquisition of new identities through engagement in socialization within the affinity space. That is, people learn the ways of "speaking/listening, writing/

reading” as well as “acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies” (Gee, 2012, p. 152) that are shared within the social space through engagement. Gee (2004; 2012) holistically calls these aspects “Discourse [big D],” differentiating it from “discourse [small d]” which refers to “language in use or connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays, and so forth.” (Gee, 2012, p. 151). Gee asserts that ‘discourse’ with a small ‘d’ is just part of ‘Discourse’ with a capital ‘D’ (Gee, 2012).

According to Bourdieu (2005), in analyzing people’s social interactions or other social phenomena, we need to take account of the social space in which the people are situated. In the analysis of my own English-mediated socialization with local American people in the host country, I attended to the social space where the socialization occurred, and also my interlocutors’ backgrounds, the content in which I engaged them, the Discourse shared, and also the power relations between myself and my interlocutors, which need to be taken into account in analyses that follow the concept of CoPs (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

4. My epistemological standpoint

In this autoethnographic study, I analyzed social space and other related factors from postmodern and social-constructivist points of view. Each type of social space is not static, but is co-constructed through people’s situated engagement in socialization. This perspective is consistent with Wenger’s (2010) assertion that a CoP’s border emerges or disappears with the participants’ (dis)engagement.

Taking postmodern and social-constructivist points of view, I perceive that valuation of knowledge or skills that people possess are not fixed but change fluidly depending on the types of people involved and the way socialization is engaged with (Dewaele, 2016). Depending on the people’s experiences and backgrounds and their common goals and interests, what is valued or perceived as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is different in each type of co-constructed social space. This means that the power relations between international students and locals can change dynamically (Iino, 2006) in each type of social space of the host country. If their own background, knowledge, skills, or possessions are useful for central participation in their engagement, they may have a power equivalent to or greater than those they are engaging with, regardless of the student’s level of proficiency. The present study is based on this epistemological standpoint.

5. Methodology

I decided to conduct an autoethnography focusing on my English-mediated socializing. This was because, similar to many international students reported in the past studies introduced above, I myself also found it difficult to create English-mediated socializing opportunities. "Autoethnographies [...] follow the tradition of ethnographic research" (Duncan, 2004, p. 29). While ethnographers conduct their studies targeting other people with exotic or similar cultural backgrounds in distant lands or closer to home (Duncan, 2004), autoethnographers conduct their studies focusing on their own "personal experiences and dialogues regarding [themselves] or [their] interaction with others" (Gurvitch, Carson, & Beale, 2008, p. 249). Holt (2003) describes the characteristics of the research methodology, referring to Reed-Danahay:

Reed-Danahay explained that autoethnographers may vary in their emphasis on graphy (i.e., the research process), ethnos (i.e., culture), or auto (i.e., self). Whatever the specific focus, authors use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions. (p. 19)

Autoethnography, in which the researcher him/herself is the only data source, tends to be criticized by some scholars as "self-indulgent" and "narcissistic" (Coffey, 1999). Proponents of autoethnography assert, however, that the goal of autoethnography is not to explore the "objective" truth but to reveal the voice of the insider [the researcher him/herself] (Dyson, 2007, p. 46). Through autoethnographic studies, researchers themselves can reflect on the research subject and "step outside their immediate personal constraints to examine their social world through new eyes" (Glowacki-Dunka, Treff, & Usman, 2005, p. 30), which promotes their taking actions to make better changes in themselves (i.e., personal transformation) or in their living society (i.e., social change). The process has been described as "pedagogical metamorphosis" (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2008, p. 93) or "conscientization" (Austin & Hickey, 2007), and is highly evaluated as a strength of the research approach (Belbase et al., 2013; Beňová, 2013; Choi, 2012; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2005). With this strength, autoethnography has been adopted in various fields (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), including education (Beňová, 2013; Belbase et al., 2008) as well as applied linguistics (Canagarajah, 2012; Choi, 2012). I determined to adopt autoethnography as the methodology of the present study, expecting it to enable a critical analysis of my TL-mediated socializing and my taking actions to expand my TL-mediated socializing opportunities.

In writing an autoethnography, Holt (2003) was once requested by a reviewer of a journal to include extracts from a research diary in order to increase the narrative depth of the autoethnography. Therefore, I decided to utilize diary writing

as a main research method for the present study. Diary writing is an accepted research method in the field of applied linguistics (Carson & Longhini, 2002; Casanave, 2012; Churchill, 2007). While the records kept in diaries are a subjective or mimetic description of one version of a symbolic world (Flick, 2013), “diary studies can provide us with important missing pieces [on language-learning] in this incredibly complex mosaic – pieces which may not be fully accessible by any other means” (Bailey, 1991, pp. 87–88).

I kept diaries focusing on an English-mediated affinity space, which I call the skimboarding affinity space, and in which I happened to engage myself when staying in Hawaii, to collect data and also reflect on my own socializing experiences within the space. Skimboarding is a water sport of sliding on the water’s surface (on the skim of the water) by standing on an oval-shaped board of approximately 130 centimeters in length. Having easy access to others within this affinity space was a remarkable eye-opener to me. The surprise motivated me to conduct an autoethnography focusing on my own English-mediated socialization within this space, aiming at elucidating the process of what factors promoted my entering and socializing within this social space. In each of my diary entries, I tried to describe in detail the processes and factors promoting my socialization, based on my observation, and also my dynamically changing personal or affective states, including the level of agency, confidence, and comfort, and my emerging identity or identity positioning (Block, 2007). For supplementary data, I held informal interviews with several American skimboarders, which were also included in the diary records, as well as a record of the schedule of my skimboarding practice and other related incidents (see Appendix 1). Additionally, I took pictures of my skimboard as well as other skimboarders’ skimboarding practice to deepen my understanding of the affinity space.

The diary came out to be 14 pages long in English (single space, 12 font size, 5,594 words). I analyzed the record within the frameworks of affinity space and CoPs, referring to some of their key concepts such as old-timers / newcomers and scaffolding. I repeatedly read and coded the diary data without a pre-set coding frame, which allowed themes to naturally emerge.

6. Findings

The findings of this autoethnography are presented under the three themes that emerged through the analysis of the diary data: (1) my active English-mediated socialization while skimboarding; (2) my sense of becoming a skimboarder; (3) factors promoting my English-mediated socializing with American skimboarders.

6.1 My active English-mediated socialization while skimboarding

Belonging to a university in Oahu, Hawaii as a visiting colleague, I did not have any difficulty to find opportunities for English-mediated socialization on campus. I was permitted to share an office used by a Japanese American instructor. Everytime I visited the office, he offered me soft drinks or tea and local snacks. Conversations with him naturally ensued while enjoying these refreshments.

An American professor advised me in my research. I learned more about her speciality, critical ethnography, by auditing her graduate courses throughout the year. I read many research papers and engaged myself in class presentations and group discussions with graduate students taking the courses. In addition, the American professor kindly met with me outside of class for further discussions whenever I requested.

Collecting data for this study also helped me to socialize on campus. An American ESL instructor kindly allowed me to observe all of his ESL classes throughout my stay in Hawaii. After the classes, I often had a chance to talk with him about our common academic interest, second language teaching and learning, and he shared with me a lot of ideas for class activities.

Also, I had permission to collect data at a student-centered organization, International Student Association (ISA), which consists of over 100 international and American students. Attending all of the general meetings that were held once a week, I had many opportunities to socialize with local students in activities such as ice-breakers and group discussions. I also had informal interviews with some of them after the general meetings.

With the acceptance of the students and the educational institute, I was able to have English-mediated socializing opportunities in different contexts (the office room, graduate courses, ESL classes, and ISA) on campus. I felt much confidence and comfort while positioning myself as a resource (Benson et al., 2013; Churchill, 2009; Goldoni, 2013), where my knowledge of the Japanese language and culture, research, or applied linguistics was valued.

Off campus, however, I found it more difficult to find such socializing opportunities. The local people with whom I could socialize frequently were limited to my landlord, living on the same floor as my family and me, and a retired firefighter living next door. Neither of them were familiar with or showed much interest in my academic speciality, although they showed some interest in my cultural or educational background. My skills and experiences relating to my speciality were not perceived as something important to either of these people (cf., Dewaele, 2016). In relations with them, I felt I was just a middle-aged Japanese ESL speaker having a long stay in Hawaii.

Early in August, however, I unintentionally found a social space where I could feel at home, more empowered, and become extroverted. At the Moana Surfrider Hotel in front of Waikiki Beach, I visited my Japanese university friend, Hide, who was staying there with his family. We were looking down on the beach from the room's balcony and we saw young American males sliding smoothly on top of the water at the shore, standing on their skimboards.

Although Hide and I were both in our early 40s, we were fascinated by this sport for young people. I recalled seeing some skimboards at a nearby sports shop, and I bought a wooden one there the next day. It was reasonably priced, costing me 47 dollars. As soon as we came back to the hotel in the afternoon, we ran with our kids to the beach, in front of the hotel, carrying the skimboard (see Diary data 1).

Diary data 1, August 7 (Tues) 2012: At the Waikiki Beach in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel

We found a couple of young American skimboarders [...] They were the skimboarders we saw yesterday! They were all teenagers or in early 20s, and were good at skimboarding. When one skimboarder (young male American in early 20s wearing a red surfer-style swim suit) came close to us, I talked to him to get some advice. He kindly taught me that I needed to put more wax on the board. I learned in the conversation my skimboard was slippery because not enough wax was put on the board. I also found through the conversation that he was from the mainland and had been skimboarding for about 7 years. The skimboard he was using was different from mine. He said that it was made of carbon fiber, the same material used to make surfboards. He mentioned that it costs more than 500 dollars!

I talked with this skimboarder without hesitation. I also talked to all of the other several young skimboarders and became more familiar with the sport through English-mediated socialization. Being shy, I had rarely spoken to others off campus. However, my newly acquired skimboard helped me become active in getting access to American skimboarders on the beach. By skimboarding with others, I was able to directly experience being more confident as an ESL speaker, and furthermore as a person. Regardless of my different racial, ethnic, and age-related features, with my skimboard in hand, I felt directly connected with the others through our shared sport.

6.2 My sense of becoming a skimboarder

Through socialization with local skimboarders in Hawaii, I gradually became familiar with the ways of being a skimboarder. For instance, I learned that skimboarders tend to speak simply and directly together even if they meet for the first time. On my first day skimboarding, I also spoke with two other skimboarders in

a relatively formal register, but the conversation did not go smoothly. So I quickly switched to speaking more informally, realizing a formal style was not appropriate (see Diary data 2). I became familiar with appropriate ways of communicating with American skimboarders through socializing with them.

Diary data 2, August 7 (Tues) 2012: At Waikiki Beach in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel

.....there came two other skimboarders near us (Hide and me) [...] I talked to them, but the conversation did not go well. Maybe it was because my way of talking was too formal. I said, "Could you show me how to skimboard?" They both frowned at me a little bit. Realizing that was not an appropriate way to talk to them, I switched my conversation style, and said, "You guys are so good. How to do that?" Then I managed to continue the conversation with them.

After this, I spoke informally with any skimboarder I met, and my socialization process proceeded more smoothly (see Diary data 3).

Diary data 3, September 6 (Thur.) 2012: At Waikiki Beach in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel

.....two local skimboarders (short hair, dark skin, early 20s, one of them wearing a tattoo on his arm) showed up near me [...] When one skimboarder came out of the water, I talked to him. I said to him, "You are really good!" Giving me a smile, he came to shake hands with me, openly saying "Aloha."

Skimboarders' fashion was exactly like that of surfers' (actually, I found that many surf as well). While females wear a bikini or short pants with a rash guard, males, who were in the majority, wear surfer swimsuits. Skimboards are specially designed with an oval-shaped wooden or carbon fiber board, but many skimboarders in Hawaii use bodyboards as well. Simply from their looks, behaviors, and boarding techniques, I became able to distinguish skimboarders from bodyboarders. Skimboarders' hairstyles and fashions were more like those of surfers, more casual or laid back, while those of bodyboarders were sporty. Bodyboarders tended to enter the water straight away. Skimboarders, on the other hand, carefully watch the waves before going in, figuring out their timing to run into the water (see Diary data 4).

Diary data 4, August 25 (Sat.) 2012: At North Shore Beach

Walking towards the water, on the beach, I found one guy (late 20s?, long hair, dark skin, wearing red surf pants and teardrop sunglasses) who carried a bodyboard, approximately five meters away from me. I was almost certain that he would use his bodyboard for skimboarding. As I guessed, after watching the wave for about five seconds, he started running into the water with his bodyboard and slid on the surface of the water, standing on the bodyboard. He was good at skimboarding [...]

I asked this skimboarder why he uses a bodyboard for skimboarding [...] He said that he uses a bodyboard because he is a little bit heavy, tapping on his stomach several times. He said that bodyboards float more.

[...] I also asked him which beach is good for skimboarding. He mentioned that the sandy beach is good, and the turtle beach nearby (where you can see some turtles) is also good.

I told him that I am quite a beginner and just started skimboarding three weeks ago. He said that I am doing good, and gave me some advice on the timing of running off the beach and sliding into the water. He told me to look at the waves pointing out of the water. The wave comes and goes. When the wave goes, he said that that's the time I should go.

By situating myself and socializing with American skimboarders, I became familiar not only with their vernacular, fashion, behaviors, and boarding techniques – including the careful observance of wave features; the postures they adopt while doing this; the timing of entering the water; the postures while standing on the board – but also other knowledge, like how to wax the board and find beaches popular among skimboarders. I could not have gained such knowledge from books or websites.

The acquisition of ways of being a skimboarder was reflected in my clothes shopping. I started favoring the skimboarder's or surfer's fashions. I recognized this transformation in myself when observing an ESL class for my research, which involved participating in a class activity (see Diary data 5).

Diary data 5, August 21 (Tues) 2012: In an ESL classroom

Since this was the first day of class, the five ESL students and I introduced ourselves in the first class activity [...] My conversation partner and I came to the front of the classroom, and we introduced each other to the class. After she introduced me, Joe [the ESL instructor] asked our classmates if they had any questions about me. The first question I had came from a Korean student was “Are you a surfer?” I was a little bit surprised to have such a question, but felt happy. Wearing denim shorts and a yellow T-shirt, I maybe looked like a surfer! I am getting an identity as a surfer or a skimboarder.....

6.3 Factors promoting English-mediated socializing with American skimboarders

The skimboarding social space at the beach may be hard to recognize because it is not located in a fixed institutional building, such as might be more readily visible on campus, where each field of study typically converges within a building. However, situating myself in the social space, I was able to recognize its invisible border (Wenger, 2010) emerging between the social practices of skimboarders and

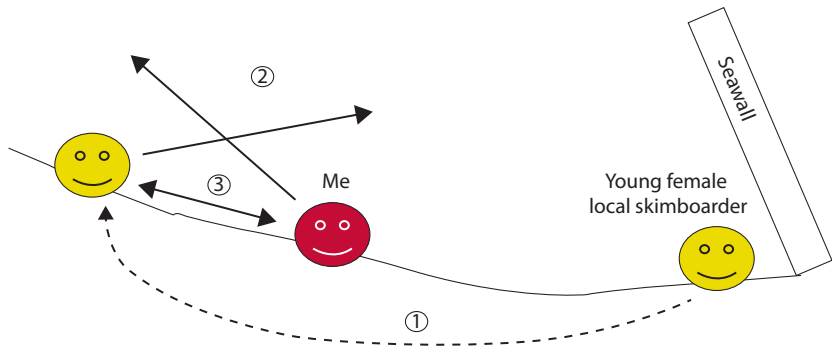
non-skimboarders. I began to see where the borders were by observing who was doing what with who, such as chatting, lying on the beach, swimming, and making sand structures.

The skimboarding social space tended to form naturally this way, which facilitated my socialization within it. Characteristics of the sport promote the formation of the space. First, skimboarders tend to gather in the same area. Second, short breaks on the beach allow skimboarders to search for the next wave to catch, quiet moments within which socialization was facilitated. Often two or more skimboarders stood side by side, chatting away freely while keenly watching waves. Third, the necessity of attending to other skimboarders' timing for entering the water, in order not to interrupt each other's practices, also promoted each other's socialization. This occasionally prompted both verbal and non-verbal communications, such as via eye contact and a movement of the head as a sign of 'you can go first'. The following encounter with one female skimboarder (see Diary data 6) helped me appreciate, on a meta-cognitive level, the process of forming such social space (Figure 1).

Diary data 6, September 3 (Mon) 2012: At Kaimana Beach

While I was playing with my son, Kai, in the water, I found one local female was skimboarding at the end of the beach near the seawall (about 30 meters away from me). She looked like a 13 or 14 year-old girl (long hair, dark skin). Holding a wooden skimboard in her hands, she ran into the water and turned around standing on the board . . .

After playing with Kai for a while, I asked him if I could practice skimboarding. He said, "OK" and I went out of the water to get my skimboard. I started skimboarding, attending to Kai. About five minutes after I started my practice, the female local skimboarder showed up near me on my left side and started skimboarding in the same area. We did not talk in the beginning, but started skimboarding, taking turns. I ran into the water from one way, and she did from the other way, our paths crossing safely in coordination. It was almost like non-verbal communication. After ten minutes or so, when she passed right in front of me to go back to her starting position, I asked her how long she had been skimboarding. She smiled and said that she had started skimboarding just one month previously. After talking with her for a couple of more minutes, we resumed skimboarding, taking turns. Kai also came out of the water and joined in our skimboarding practice.



- ① Once I started skimboarding, she came near me.
- ② We skimboarded, taking turns (non-verbal communication).
- ③ We started talking with each other.

Figure 1. The process of forming a skimboarding social space with a young female skimboarder

Another factor promoting the formation of the skimboarding social space was support from other American skimboarders through their tutorials. I had been skimboarding for only about a month, and my skills were beginner-level: I still fell down frequently. But more skillful American skimboarders voluntarily offered me tutorials. The tutorials naturally created opportunities of socializing and through this we co-constructed a skimboarding social place (see Diary data 7).

Diary data 7, August 14 (Tues) 2012: At Waikiki Beach in front of the Honolulu Zoo
 Since it was the second try, I still fell down a lot. One time, when I fell down, my skimboard went into the water, and one young American guy who is in late 20s wearing surf pants came and grabbed the board for me. I thanked him, and asked him to show me how to skimboard (I was able to tell from his looks that he skimboards). With a smile, he said, “OK” and showed it to me several times.....

This skimboarder, who had just been passing by, ended up helping me to significantly improve my rudimentary skimboarding skills. As described earlier, many American skimboarders generously offered me help in various ways. The tutorials in particular enabled my development, such as paying attention to the board’s condition, my posture when holding the board, and my running speed and timing for getting into the water. The advice I received was neither more nor less than what I needed to learn at each point.

Another factor promoting the formation of the skimboarding social space was the skimboard itself. My skimboard drew in other American or local skimboarders (see Diary data 8).

Diary data 8, August 17 (Fri) 2012: At Kailua Beach

I put the board in the sand on the beach and got into the water. Finding my skimboard on the beach, one young American guy (probably a teenager) came to me and asked if he could use my board. I said, "OK" and let him use it. He took my board. He ran fast into the water and was skimboarding. He was good at it! He could stay up on the board for up to 10 seconds. Playing with my son, Kai, in the water, I observed the young American guy's skimboarding practice from a peripheral position, and learned how fast I have to run before releasing the skimboard and jumping onto it. Getting out of the water, the young American skimboarder and I started to talk naturally for about five minutes while he was taking a rest [...] (I was not able to talk long because Kai was still in the water). He was from Virginia and visiting Hawaii for sightseeing with his family (His family was also in the water). He told me he has been skimboarding since he was 13 or so, but he could not bring his board to Hawaii because it was too big to carry on the airplane. Going back into the water, I started playing with Kai again. The young American skimboarder's mother, who was just next to us in the water, said, "He (her son) is really happy (playing with the skimboard)." I used the skimboard after he finished using it. His mother was watching my skimboarding and said, "You are good!" with her thumbs up. His sister, who was also in the water, told me the timing of entering the water with my skimboard. She said, "You should go now!" I really enjoyed communicating with this young American skimboarder and his family.

My wooden skimboard attracted this young American skimboarder and prompted him to approach me. Sharing my skimboard with him created a socializing opportunity not only with him but also with his family. The conversation with them started so naturally that it felt comfortable. Actually, this was not the only time something like this happened when I was simply holding my skimboard at the beach.

After September began, I continued skimboarding at several beaches in Hawaii (from Kailua Beach on September 8, 2012 to Ala Moana Beach on January 20, 2013), but the waves became much smaller and the skimboarders disappeared. I realized that the season was over. And with this, the skimboarding social space retreated from the beaches of Hawaii.

7. Discussion

In this autoethnographic study, I analyzed my own English (TL)-mediated socialization in Hawaii. Through observing and reflecting on my own experiences, I realized that my strong English-learning motivation was not necessarily reflected in active investment (Norton, 2013) at certain times. While I was able to co-construct a multi-cultural, critical ethnographic study (a study separate from this present

one), and ESL affinity spaces on campus, acquiring such opportunities was not necessarily easy off campus, where my status as a visiting colleague was rarely acknowledged or valued.

However, I happened upon a skimboarding affinity space at Waikiki Beach about four months after I had moved to Hawaii. Situating myself in this space and engaging in socialization, and also by recording the experiences in a diary, I realized on a meta-cognitive level the processes of co-constructing affinity spaces and the mechanisms of my increasing agency, confidence, and of feeling comfortable and acting in an extroverted way. Through socializing, I learned more about how to do this sport thanks to scaffolding or tutorials generously offered by skillful American skimboarders. The tutorials enabled my practice of skimboarding “in a protected way so that deeper learning can occur through playing” (Gee, 2004, p. 70). Gee (2004) calls this type of tutorial a “fish tank tutorial,” because a fish tank can be, when done right, a simplified environment that lets one appreciate an ecosystem [...] by stripping away a good deal of complexity, but keeping enough to bring out some basic and important relationships” (p. 65). The easy access to the tutorials can be attributed to three of the features of the affinity space (Gee, 2004): (1) “both newbies (newcomers) and masters share common space” (p. 85); (2) individuals are encouraged to utilize distributed knowledge which belongs to those embedded in the situating materials or devices “in such a way that their partial knowledge and skills become part of a bigger and smarter network of people, information, and mediating devices” (p. 86); (3) “leaders are porous” and nobody including masters or more skillful skimboarders “order[s] people around or create[s] rigid, unchanging, and impregnable hierarchies” (p. 87).

Moreover, I found that my skimboard was validated as an objectified state of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and this promoted the formation of an affinity space with others. Holding and carrying my skimboard had helped me find a way to become more agentive when interacting with Americans. This result was consistent with Lantolf and Pavlenko’s (2001), Kayi-Aydar’s (2015), and Vitanova, Miller, Gao, and Deters’ (2015) assertions that language learner agency is not static but changes fluidly, moment by moment, depending on where and how they situate themselves in relation to others.

In addition, my gradually acquired skimboarding Discourse (skimboarders’ vernacular, fashion, behaviors, and boarding techniques, and other related knowledge) and concomitantly acquired identity as a skimboarder, facilitated my engagement with them. Some aspect of the skimboarders’ Discourse was “tacit knowledge – that is, knowledge players have built up in practice, but may not be able to explicate fully in words” (Gee, 2004, p. 86). Gee (2004) argues that any learning “is not all about skills, [but] about learning the right moves in embodied interactions in the real world or virtual worlds, moves that get one recognized

as 'playing the game': that is, enacting the right sort of identity for a given situation" (pp. 48–49). Analyzing my own TL-mediated socialization, I realized that communicating and acting appropriately could not be realized just by learning English itself, but by becoming familiar with how to behave with others in this affinity space.

The interplay of all of these factors was found to have strengthened my agency and confidence, helped me to feel comfortable, and brought out my extrovert side. These personal states of mind in relation to engagement with American skimboarders signify my empowerment and equal power relations between myself and them, and my social capital within the affinity space. This became an ideal environment for situated TL-learning in a naturalistic context within the host country.

After finding that the skimboarding season was over, my sabbatical leave was also close to an end and I did not have enough time to explore other English-mediated affinity spaces in the host country. However, this autoethnography enabled me to reflect on a meta-cognitive level about what kinds of social contexts I could feel more empowered and comfortable in during TL-mediated socializing. Also, on returning to my home country, Japan, I started engaging myself even more actively in TL-mediated collaborative research activities with faculty members from other universities. This co-constructed research affinity space is where my knowledge and skills with research are co-validated as cultural capital. Meta-cognitive reflecting and taking actions to change my situation in better ways are a form of conscientization that is realized as an outcome of this autoethnography.

Gao (2010) argues that international students' knowledge or skills are not necessarily validated as cultural capital with people overseas. However, considering this present analysis of TL-mediated socialization within a specific social space, (co-)validation of cultural capital in a host country is not likely to happen accidentally. Learners can make inferences of their interlocutors' historical backgrounds, as well as the kinds of knowledge, skills, or objects that would be co-validated as cultural capital within a shared social space. If this is an affinity space, it would be relatively easier for international students to make such inferences. It could be about skimboarding, knowledge of one's own country (Benson et al., 2013), skills in one's own mother tongue (Goldoni, 2013), or any knowledge or skills related to one's own specialisms.

The findings of the present study also highlight how language learners do not need much cultural capital in order to generate socializing opportunities. Although I was a novice and my skimboard was inexpensive, just having it with me greatly helped me to create socializing opportunities with American skimboarders. I call such cultural capital that becomes co-validated within an affinity space 'trans-bordering cultural capital', because it helps language learners cross invisible (but surely existing) borders and gain access to interactions with locals. For example, my

interactions with the young female skimboarder show that I was required to cross multiple types of borders, including the readily obvious ones of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and age. These are not the only borders, however, that language learners need to cross. As past studies (Jackson, 2006; Lam, 2006) show, SA students tend to develop psychological rifts between themselves and locals. These borders are constructed socially, culturally, historically, and psychologically, and in combination, these borders can become huge. Thus, trans-bordering cultural capital helps language learners become active social agents in crossing these expansive borders.

I am not sure if I was able to become a formal member of the skimboarding and other CoPs in which I engaged myself both on and off campus, but I felt social bonding with many of the Americans situated within our shared affinity spaces. Gee (2004) states that, for his analysis of situated language learning, the difficulty of defining membership is the main reason of his deciding to not focus on CoPs but on affinity space created within the CoPs. This difficulty can be partly attributed to the connotation that the concept of community carries, that is, community as comprising “close-knit personal ties” (Gee, 2004, p. 77). This study helped me to understand how I found that sense of membership or belonging is not fixed and rigid, but subjective, loose, impromptu, and dynamic. My argument is consistent with the hypothesis of Mori (2014), that people’s ties in societies, especially in this contemporary era, are very loose, and are maintained temporally through their cooperation. Some of the skimboarders I met were locals, but they did not necessarily come to the same beach regularly, on the same day and at the same time. Some were even just visiting Hawaii on their summer vacation. That is, many of the skimboarders I encountered did not display fixed and stable memberships within the affinity spaces. They were “brought together through a shared affinity for a common goal, endeavor, or interest, not first and foremost because they [were] ‘bonded’ to each other personally” (Gee, 2004, p. 98). However, once I situated myself in an affinity space, I certainly felt a bonding with the others there, and I felt a sense of membership or belonging instantaneously from the first moment. I assume that the unstable and dynamic features of membership or sense of belonging make it difficult to grasp who the members of a CoP are, as Gee (2004) mentioned. What I would like to posit here is that, when situated in an affinity space, each individual, even though (s)he may be a newcomer, can develop a strong sense of membership or belonging, instantaneously, with strangers from different backgrounds, although the affective states may be changeable and temporal. Findings from this study imply that, for international students who perceive themselves as non-members of their host communities due to different racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-historical backgrounds (Jackson, 2006; Lam, 2006), there can exist social spaces where they can find, without much effort, a sense of membership and belonging in the moment.

8. Educational implications and conclusion

Although all of this discussion is based on my own case, the research findings can be applied to international students. Given the right circumstances and impetus, international students can socialize extensively with locals within a shared affinity space. Of course, their affinity space and trans-bordering cultural capital would be different from mine, because each student would have his/her own unique historical and sociocultural backgrounds and interests. When I conducted this autoethnographic study, I also conducted ethnographic case studies focusing on several international students. In one case concerning a Japanese female international student, for example, her Japanese language skills and knowledge of Japanese culture and society were found to function as her trans-bordering cultural capital within the private Japanese-tutoring affinity space co-constructed with her American tutee, and also within the intercultural affinity space of the university's ISA, which was co-constructed with multiple American ISA members who were learning or interested in the mother tongues and cultures of the international ISA members (Fukada, 2015).

In the case of a Korean female international student, her skills or knowledge of traditional Korean music instruments worked as her trans-bordering cultural capital within the traditional Asian music affinity space co-constructed with American graduate students who were music majors studying in the same music graduate program (Fukada, in progress). Participating in TL-mediated socialization itself was a process of learning her TL (Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, at a barbecue party she hosted at her home, an American PhD candidate explicitly scaffolded her TL-learning. They had co-constructed their affinity space through conversation about music and performance with traditional Asian music instruments. At one point, the American PhD student pointed out a mistake in her pronunciation, and helped her repeat the same English word three times, as he kindly explained that the mistake made it difficult to understand her (Fieldnote, July 29, 2012).

While both the Japanese and Korean international students did not have much confidence in their own English (TL) skills, they were able to engage themselves in TL-mediated socialization with American people with strong agency and confidence, feeling much comfort in each of their affinity spaces. They were able to find ideal places for their situated TL-learning in social contexts different from mine, although they were living in the same host country and attending the same university.

These two international students and I were able to find multiple types of affinity space on and off campus on our own. However, for international students studying abroad, especially those with rudimentary TL skills, finding their own

affinity space in a host country would likely be comparatively more difficult. They may not even notice that their knowledge, skills, or possessions they already have could be co-validated as trans-bordering cultural capital in certain social spaces. Therefore, helping international students first conceive and then access their own affinity spaces could increase their opportunities to develop relationships with locals in a host country. Instructors, language programs, and educational institutions could thus play a greater role in realizing the trans-bordering potential of their students. For example, as a class activity, students might discuss this potential, starting from prompts such as, “what kinds of knowledge, skills, or possessions that you have could become trans-bordering cultural capital?” and “In what types of social space would your knowledge, skills, or possessions be co-validated as trans-bordering cultural capital?” Following the discussion, they could make action plans to access and engage themselves in their possible affinity spaces.

While these understandings remain preliminary, the findings of this study might encourage language instructors to think about how they can help their students’ socialization with local people in a host country, or even within their own countries. By encouraging engagement in each learner’s affinity spaces, language instructors can help their students become more active social agents in their TL-learning and TL-mediated socialization.

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Appendix 1. Schedule of each skimboarding practice and related incidents

No.	Date	Content
1	August 6, 2012	Skimboarding at Waikiki Beach (in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel)
2	August 7, 2012	Buying a skimboard at a sports shop and skimboarding at Waikiki Beach (in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel)
3	August 14, 2012	Skimboarding at Waikiki Beach (in front of the Kapiolani Park)
4	August 17, 2012	Skimboarding at Kailua Beach
5	August 20, 2012	Buying a surf swimsuit at Old Navy
6	August 21, 2012	Participating in a class activity of an ESL class
7	August 25, 2012	Skimboarding at North Shore Beach
8	August 27, 2012	Skimboarding at North Shore Beach
9	September 3, 2012	Skimboarding at Kaimana Beach
10	September 6, 2012	Skimboarding at Waikiki Beach (in front of the Moana Surfrider Hotel)
11	September 8, 2012	Skimboarding at Kailua Beach
12	September 10, 2012	Skimboarding at Waikiki Beach (in front of the Honolulu Zoo)
13	December 27, 2012	Skimboarding at Lanikai Beach
14	January 17, 2013	Skimboarding at Kaimana Beach
15	January 20, 2013	Skimboarding at Ala Moana Beach

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